

957 Days in the AAF

World War II

Harmon Diers

Enlisted December 1942

Discharged August 1945

Prologue

Here at the outset some explanation is due. While every war is horrible, a failure of human societies to solve their differences peacefully, World War II was for me the most exciting, exhilarating time of my life.

To the 17 year old that I once was, joining the Air Force, learning to fly an airplane, a small fighter plane, if possible, was far and away the best of all alternatives I had for serving in the WW II. Could I possibly be lucky enough to actually become a pilot!

Twice as a boy I had been taken for rides in a plane. The first in an old Ford Tri-motor which took people for short rides at the local airport, and second, a ride in a two seat open cockpit biplane flown by a former World War I pilot. Both planes, noisy and old as they were, gave me my first view of my home town from on high and that sense of “escaping the bonds of earth” written about by Saint-Exupéry and others. So for me an interest airplanes began, not as an obsession with flying, but as only a remote possibility, that I might some day become a pilot. Years later, when I had learned to fly, the war was more about airplanes and flying than about guns, bombs and combat.

In the simplest of terms, in 1943, I did believe, and still do, that World War II was a necessary war. And yet I harbor a degree of guilt that I had the luck and good fortune to serve in the Army Air Corps, (later, the United States Air Force). Every night I slept on dry cots, showered under warm water, ate nourishing foods (if not haute cuisine) and eventually experienced the thrill of flying solo in a powerful (2800 HP) P-47 fighter at up to 350 mph or more, often very close to the ground. I was nineteen years old, turning 20 in Italy, a Lieutenant in 64th Squadron of the 57th Fighter Group of the 12th Air Force, a “Tactical” Air Force consisting of Fighter planes and smaller bombers.

Perhaps more important, I was spared most of the horrifying experiences of war that so many other young men endured. We lost planes and pilots to anti-aircraft fire, to guns shooting at us, sometimes from a distance, sometimes at close range, but since we were alone in our P-47 “Thunderbolts” we had only

ourselves to worry about. Bomber pilots had the responsibility for a crew of nine or more. We were alone; we piloted the plane, navigated our course, maintained radio communication, fired the eight 50 caliber machine guns, dropped the 500 or 1000 pound bombs, and we were young. I was the youngest in my squadron - a high school kid with super sports car that could drive in three dimensions with no speed limits!

We were also spared, and perhaps shouldn't have been, the horror of killing human beings face to face. The nature of our air war was depersonalized - it was me and my plane against a German tank or a ground gun emplacement shooting at me or others, rather than me against a fellow human being with a face. Germans behind their guns probably felt much the same way. I never saw anyone die, just the exploding bridge, the disabled tank, the truck carrying munitions, or anti-aircraft gun. I knew people died, but I saw no blood. No Combat Distress Syndrome for me. In fact, on each of my eighty-two combat missions, all the planes came home safely, no losses. I thus became the squadron "good luck" charm. Pilots jokingly said, "Diers is flying on this one, We'll be all right."

My good fortune, the fact that I was spared, was brought home to me at a family reunion after the war. Of four Diers cousins who saw action in the war, one, Stan Allen, was a PT boat Captain in the navy. Don & Buzz Diers, were army infantrymen, and I, an AAF Fighter pilot. Stan and I could talk about the war, whereas Don & Buzz who had engaged in man to man combat, were quiet, unable to regale the elders with bright war anecdotes - they had seen a different war, one of wounded men, suffering and death, the kind of war I had been spared, and they simply could not talk about it.

So if you read what follows, keep the above in mind. It is not my intent to glorify war, even the flying of war planes, but rather show you how a nineteen year old boy saw war from a totally different aspect from that of this eighty seven year old man now reminiscing about those distant years when he flew high (or more often, low) over Italy in the Air Force, and had the camaraderie of young men doing exciting things.

While no war is a "good war," W.W.II was waged in response to Hitler's invasion of Poland and the threat he posed to countries of Western Europe and the USA in his quest for world domination. American entry into the war in 1941 was triggered by Japan's surprise attack on Pearl Harbor, which was carried out even as Japan's envoys were supposedly negotiating for peace in Washington. It seems fair to say that W.W.II was thrust upon us, that we had no alternative but to defend ourselves and our country.

Joining the AAF

It all began in the fall of 1942 when I was a freshman at the University of Nebraska. I had thought of attending West Point, (I should say that my mother had this thought). She liked the idea that, as a cadet, I would likely be out of the actual war for three or possibly four years until I graduated. However, I failed the physical examination, a possible heart murmur. Secretly pleased, I really wanted to fly so at age of seventeen I joined the Enlisted Reserve Corps of the Army Air Force. By doing so I ensured that I would not be drafted but would join the Air Force in some capacity and not the Army, Navy, or Marines. At semester's end I transferred to the State University College of New York in my hometown of Fredonia where my father was Dean of the School of Music. In less than a month I was called into service.

Basic Training, Keesler Field Biloxi, Mississippi

My memories of basic training are incomplete, but the few isolated memories I do remember are vivid. A troop train left Buffalo, N.Y. on a cold snowy March day, filled to capacity with other new recruits. We had no idea as to our destination; the train took an erratic meandering course but in a generally southerly direction. Seven interminable days later we arrived in Biloxi, Mississippi. The temperature must have been in the high 80's or low 90's. I remember how the sweltering tropical heat of Biloxi, contrasted with the frigid cold snow we left behind in Buffalo.

Here we fledgling cadets completed essentially the same basic training all service men endured. We were transformed from happy-go-lucky civilians into disciplined uniformed military beings. (At least that was the theory). The day began at dawn (or before) and was filled without a break, with physical exercise, calisthenics, and long cross-country runs; (We had a semi-pro boxer in our troop who was used to roadwork. He led the cross-country runs at *his* accustomed pace, not *ours*. We all hated him because he set such a fast pace), military drills and faux parades around the grounds. We "policed the area" i.e. picked up debris and small stones, cigarette butts, then when finished, started all over again. There was K.P. (kitchen police), peeling potatoes, washing huge kettles, endless mopping and scrubbing, starting 4:30 a.m. Interspersed were physical examinations complete with a variety of shots and vaccinations. We learned how to clean and fire rifles, run obstacle courses - all the things you have seen in movies. Speaking of movies, one memorable training film dealt with venereal disease featuring "Sad Sack," Bill Mauldin's cartoon character. It couldn't have been more graphic. It was effectively gross!

We were under the tutelage of the stereotype loud barking heartless drill sergeant. One thing helped me keep going, fantasy revenge! I thought, if I ever became an officer, I'll return to Keesler Field and find that drill sergeant and tell him what I thought of him! I'd probably just say, "hello". Eventually the endless month passed and we were off to Springfield, Missouri.

Springfield State College Springfield, Missouri

We left Biloxi and Keesler Field for training and schooling at Springfield State College where we attended classes that had at least some application to flying, basic navigation, aircraft identification, Morse code (which was fun). In hindsight, none of this was ever put to serious use. Life became more bearable. We had been officially sworn into the Army Air Force as "Aviation Cadets," We sported new insignia, a little winged propeller pin for our shirt, and a new cap, identifying our exalted cadet status, a significant promotion in our eyes - no longer inanimate serial numbers good only for regimentation and dull make-work.

Unfortunately, the day we arrived in Springfield State College, my bunkmate called attention to my mottled red complexion. Without a chance to even unpack I was whisked off to a Springfield army hospital with confirmed German measles. There I languished for over a month, perhaps longer. While recuperating, I was placed in a ward full of streptococcus germs and my measles trans-mogrified into an extended case of sinusitis. Aside from the daily injections of sulfanilamide solution into my sinus cavities, via a horse-sized needle, life was easy. I made friends with a fellow sufferer from California. His main worry was that he was losing his tan (or, "glow" as he called it.). We learned songs from a jukebox (*Paper Doll*, *Don't Sit under the Apple Tree*, etc.) and drank chocolate milkshakes, really quite a nice life. But sinusitis was a dreaded affliction in the Air Force, second only to leprosy, and usually grounds for dismissal. In all subsequent physical examinations I always denied ever having anything of the sort. I got away with it because my hospital records showed only that I had entered the hospital with measles. (six or eight weeks for measles?). However, this hospital episode put me weeks behind my class, which, in my absence, had completed the class work mentioned above. I think the army just didn't have my sinusitis episode on record and assumed I had been attending classes. In any event, we all shipped out for Texas.

Classification San Antonio, Texas

The next stop was a classification center located in San Antonio, Texas.

We were given more mental and physical tests to determine where we would be placed. How would we be classified? What training we would receive? Would we be navigators? Bombardiers? Pilots? I remember most vividly a few manual dexterity tests. One required us to keep a hinged stylus in contact with a brass spot on a rotating turntable; another had us hold a thin metal rod, also hinged at the “handle” end, inside a metal ring hanging from a string. A bell rang every time the rod touched the ring. This was difficult and not made easier by a sergeant shouting at high decibel level, “Hold it still! Now remember these numbers, you will be required to write them down later.” as he reeled off a random sequence of numbers. Then there were general tests in math, science, history, English, etc.

At the conclusion of all these tests, Surprise! I was called into an office and asked what I wanted to be, pilot, bombardier or navigator. “Pilot, of course!” Most cadets were denied this choice and were assigned per their test results. (Or by the current need for more pilots, navigators or bombardiers). I was more fortunate. I scored high enough on all the tests to be able to choose (or more likely, the AAF just needed more pilots at that given time).

Learning to Fly Uvalde, Texas



Taylor “Cub”

The die was cast, a pilot it was to be, so I was sent with a few others to Uvalde, Texas, home of John Nance Garner, F.D.R.’s Vice President, for my first flying lessons. We flew those little yellow Taylor Cub planes. According to my

records, I was not an apt student (nor was my instructor a patient teacher) but I did fly solo after eight hours, or so of lessons. And therein lies a small tale of now minor importance, but major importance at the time.

My young instructor, bitter because he was stuck in Uvalde teaching instead of flying in combat, told me to shoot ten landings (i.e. fly the airfield traffic pattern and make ten simulated landings). Well, after five successful pseudo landings, the airport tower changed the traffic pattern. The wind had switched direction; the windsock now indicated that all planes should use a different runway, 90 degrees to the one I was using. All planes using the N/S runway must change to the E/W runway. My concentration was 100% on making perfect mock landings and so I persevered for my final five attempts, totally oblivious that the traffic pattern had been changed and that I was now flying directly across the path of all the other planes landing and taking off.

You can only imagine the wrath of my instructor! “There goes my Air Force career. It’s over!” I thought. This was the instructor who, when displeased, thrust the speaking tube used to communicate between student and instructor, out in the slipstream when he was displeased or angered. . The resulting blast of air terminated with considerable force against my ears in my headset.

But I passed, though not with honors. I had soloed! For every young aspiring pilot, his first solo flight is transformative, an event one never forgets. It is at once a bit frightening, in that for the first time no instructor is sitting behind you to take over the controls should you make a mistake, and yet this maiden flight is also heart-poundingly liberating. For the first time I was able to maneuver freely, to experience the miracle of flight, the ability to soar high through a new dimension totally alone. What a feeling! Men had been yearning to fly since mythological times, when Icarus with waxwings flew too near the sun, and look! “Here I am! I’m Flying!” Climbing and gliding through thin air! Can anything be better than this!

Having completed the fundamentals of flying, i.e. getting the plane off the ground and safely back down again, we were ready for a bigger, more rugged airplane.

Our numbers were diminished as result of cadet “washouts”, those who had failed too may flight tests. Most of these went on to train as navigators or bombardiers. Of course we hated to lose these newly made friends, and secretly felt sorry for them, that their pilot days were over.

We then graduated from the yellow Cubs and learned to fly the Fairchild PT-19, “Cornell”, a blue and yellow colored monoplane, open cockpit, two seats

in tandem, a more powerful plane than the yellow Cub we had flown previously. The PT-19 was much more of an airplane. It was faster, stronger and able to withstand the stress of acrobatics. So we learned to maneuver through barrel rolls, snap rolls, tail spins, loops etc.

I had a new, more tolerant instructor who put up with my ineptitude without complaining. I do remember on one acrobatic flight check that after a quarter of an hour of acrobatics, he asked me to fly “straight and level for a bit,” giving his nausea a chance to subside. airsickness affects the passenger more than the pilot, and he had had his share of it.



Fairchild PT-19

Winter was approaching, November and December. We were cold in that open cockpit despite our heavy boots and gloves. In early January, after six weeks of “primary “ training in Uvalde, most of us moved on to Basic Flight training in Waco, Texas, for the next stage of our program.



Leaving Primary Flight School

Two of us were "fillers", or "supernumeraries," who joined three instructors relieved from their duties, to be sent on the next stage of training. The one in the light suit was my instructor and not my favorite person. His smile is deceiving. I am the one, upper left.



Vulture BT - 13

Basic Flight Training Waco, Texas

I remember very little about the six weeks I spent in Waco and of “Basic Training”. The plane was ungainly, a Vultee BT-13, a heavier plane with a radial engine, more powerful than the PT-19’s I had flown in Primary Training, and a bit more complicated. It was not our favorite plane; it throbbed and shuddered so we dubbed it the “Vultee Vibrator”. In hindsight, I think we all could have skipped Basic Flight training and to gone directly to Advanced Training in the AT-6.

Of course we still attended ground school classes, learned about navigation, and instrument flying in a Link Trainer, flight simulator. One experimental trainer was so realistic that an experienced British pilot jumped out of the cockpit to avoid a simulated crash. Then we had aircraft recognition, more Morse code, etc. (I actually grew to like Morse code and got up to 25 words per minute, which wasn’t bad for a beginner). We practiced shooting with pistols, rifles and even a sub-machine gun. They taught us skeet shooting with a shotgun, to aim where the target (“enemy plane”) would be, not where it was. When I finally got a perfect score of 25 in skeet, beating Duffy, my duck hunting friend from Maine, I tried not to gloat. He boasted that he had hunted ducks ever since he was a kid and did not need further instruction. We seldom had to use any of these skills. (Except Morse code to identify light beacons on night cross-country flights in Texas). This is not to say skeet shooting and Morse code were worthless. I might well have had put these skills into practice had my situation been different, i.e. had I eventually

flown a different airplane flying escort for bombers instead of supporting ground troops in Italy.

Cadets were moved to each stage of training in groups of specified numbers. If 25 cadets were scheduled to move on to the next stage of training, but only 24 were ready, a “supernumerary” was drawn from the following group to fill in. By chance, and through no virtue of mine, I was a “super” three times with the result that I concluded my training three months ahead of the cadets who started with me back in San Antonio. When they arrived in Italy I had completed forty missions of combat. This was the good aspect of the system. The unfortunate aspect was that I no sooner got to know a group of fellow cadets before I moved on to a new group. Friends I had made were thus lost to memory.

Advanced Flight Training Foster Field, Texas



North American AT-6

We completed Basic Flight Training and were transferred to Foster Field, near Victoria, Texas. Here we flew a much better plane, the North American AT-6, which had a 650 HP engine, retractable wheels and more instrumentation than planes we had previously flown. We all really liked this airplane (It was also used by navy air cadets). At Foster Field we brushed up on our flying skills (I would like to say “perfected” but won’t) and we did a lot of formation flying, usually four planes in a group, typically a “leader” and his wing man, and an

“element leader” with his. This was like “follow the leader” flying with just a few feet between each plane.

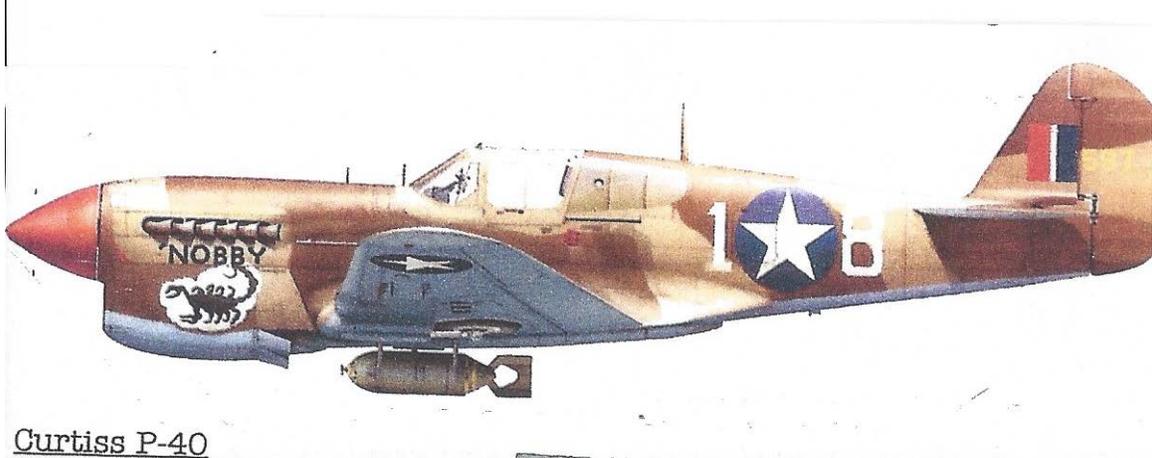
Not far from Foster Field, but several miles away, was a very similar airfield, Aloe Air Field. Our allowable flying areas were tangent, though the actual fields were some distance apart. I mention this because it was easy to mistake the two fields when returning home from wide ranging practice flights (More on this later).

A word about physical examinations and tests: I have never been fond of blood. In fifth grade I nearly fainted when learning about the circulatory system, with those the red and blue veins on a body chart, so for me the periodic Air Force physical exams were a problem. Every time my blood was taken, save the final time at my discharge, I scouted out a good place to briefly pass out. It was embarrassing to fall forward on to an officer’s desk or crumple into a heap in the hallway. The only time I did not faint was the final exam before discharge; the medics ran out of syringes and handed us each a glass test tube to collect the blood draining from our arms. I must have figured that it was now my responsibility, my life was at stake. I could not faint and let my body be drained of blood.

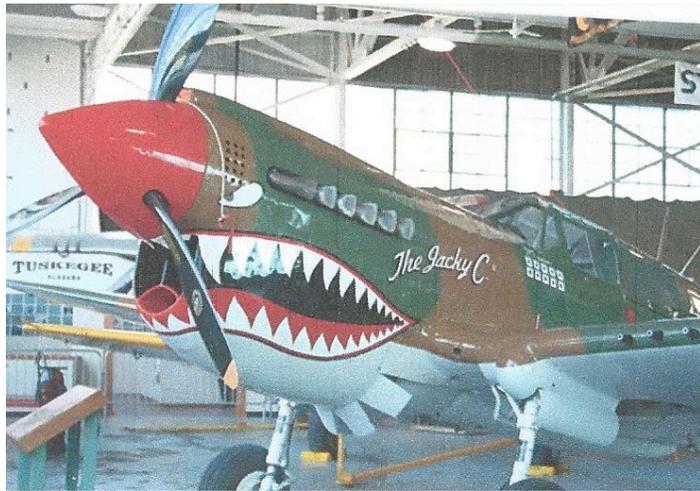
All of us needed to know what anoxia felt like, the fainting (and possible death) caused by lack of oxygen at high altitudes. We were put into a large pressurized tank, sitting on two benches facing each other. An instructor had us all wear oxygen masks, except for one volunteer. No one jumped at this opportunity, so I raised my hand and was told to remove my mask and duplicate the instructor’s movements. As we were taken to a simulated 38,000 ft or so, the pressure in the tank gradually fell and the corresponding amount of oxygen, I began to feel more and more silly clapping hands and copying the stupid motions the instructor was making, all the time denying that I needed oxygen. I finally continued making motions and laughing like a drunken sailor even after the instructor had stopped. They put my mask back on and I quickly came around and was told what foolish things I had said and done.

Weeks later, at another stage of training with a different group, I was again placed in a large tank, but this time I were taken up all the way and then told to remove my mask. Almost immediately I felt dizzy and failed to function properly. When asked if I need oxygen, I said, “yes, yes!” to the surprise of the instructor. He wanted to know how I knew I needed oxygen, and I told him I had had a similar test once before. “Why didn’t you tell me?” he asked, but said, “Good, now you see why this is a valid demonstration of anoxia.” I wondered to myself, “Why don’t they use anoxia for capitol punishments?” On both occasions I felt gloriously intoxicated, happy as a clam!

After nine weeks flying the wonderful, friendly AT-6, we graduated from flight training school, It was a surprise to learn that we were then technically discharged from the Air Force as enlisted aviation cadets, and immediately sworn in as new commissioned officers, 2nd Lieutenants, the bottom rung of the commissioned officer ladder. Big day! (Now we *received* salutes, not just *gave* salutes). We purchased new officer's uniforms, silver wings, imagine, an "officer and a gentleman" at 18 years of age!



Curtiss P-40



Curtiss P-40

Most importantly, we learned to fly the Curtis P-40 Warhawks, real combat airplanes, planes that had seen service in China with Claire Chennault's "Flying Tigers" and had been returned to the States for use in pilot training. They still had the shark face of the Flying Tigers painted on their cowlings*.

*The same type of planes the 57th Fighter Group flew from a small aircraft carrier, landing in North Africa (long before I joined that group). The 57th was the first contingent of American planes to see action in combat.

My first solo flight in a tiny Taylor Cub back in Uvalde, Texas, was an awesome experience (despite the fact that I goofed on the landing pattern), but soloing in this P-40 was an even greater thrill. For one thing, it was the first time we had to make our maiden flight in an airplane without an instructor along behind us, only room for one person in the cockpit (me). The P-40 had about twice the HP of the At-6. A long inline engine stuck out in front blocking one's vision, the thunderous roar under full power required for takeoff which caused the plane to veer seriously to the left (had to practically stand on the right rudder pedal to keep it headed on track down the runway). A glorious macho feeling that, though this plane had a strong-willed personality, it was under my control, at least for the moment; I'd know better when I had to bring it down for my first landing! But for an adrenaline boost, this was it!

Landing was not easy for the novice. The plane's two wheels were quite close together and rather unforgiving of an off center landing, also the plane was much heavier and landed at a higher speed than any of the training planes we had flown before. All this created a nervous tension felt in the pit of the stomach until one was safely rolling down the runway.

Another aside: A friend I had made, named Diefenderfer, joined us for this stage of training. He had flown a full tour of missions in England as a pilot in big four engine bombers, but he wanted to be a "fighter pilot." He took off in his P-40 all right, but bounced and bounced so badly on his landing attempts, just couldn't get it to stay on the ground, so that after three or four tries, he radioed, "I'm not coming down!"

Well, a slow talking Texan instructor took over the radio, and with calming southern drawl, had Diefenderfer make a few simulated landings in mid air, etc. and talked him down to a perfect landing. But when Diefenderfer got out of the plane and had his feet on the ground, he shouted, "Back to bombers, I'm never going to fly that plane again!" And he didn't.

One beautiful day another friend of mine, named Dickey, and I took off in our P-40s for an hour or so of fooling around, dog fighting, chasing each other through clouds and such. The P-40 being much faster than our previous training planes, we covered a lot of ground. The time came to fly home but we were lost. West Texas looked much the same in all directions. Dickey and I differed as to the homebound direction, so Dickey went his way, and I went mine. I flew south thinking the worst I could do was to fly to the coast of the Gulf of Mexico and locate Foster Field somewhere to the north. After twenty minutes or so I saw water, then turned north, and eventually spotted an airfield. Being low on gasoline, I decided to play it safe and land, admit that I was lost, get some gas, and ask the directions to my home field.

I had no radio contact with this “unknown” airfield and so had to fly down low as if to land, signaling my intent by wagging my wings. Several small primary training planes shooting landings scattered as I approached, clearing the way for me. It turned out that this was Aloe Field, and that, had I flown just a few miles farther I would have reached Foster Field, my home base. The Aloe tower radioed Foster telling them I was there and sought instructions. I was ordered to stay where I was at Aloe and that someone would come for me.

It happened that my flight instructor was in the air with three other students on a formation training flight. The four of them landed in their P-40s with their shark painted cowlings creating quite a stir among the young Aloe cadets, who I dare say, had never seen warplanes such as these. My instructor signaled me to join his formation at the rear, fifth in line. Within minutes we were approaching Foster Field. My instructor motioned me to come forward, to fly off his wing where I could see him. When we were directly over the center of the airfield he pointed straight down. I was dismissed and landed, humiliated. Dickey was right. He was sitting the pilot’s ready room.

“You should have followed me. “

“I know, I know.

At some point in our P-40 training we were transferred to Matagorda Island off the south shore of Texas for gunnery training. This consisted of firing our machine guns at a long sleeve target, which was towed about 500 feet behind a plane. Each of us had our bullets painted with red, blue or yellow colors so that a score could be kept of hits. This zooming in on a mock enemy aircraft was fun for us, not so much fun for the pilot of the tow plane. He was hoping we would hit the sleeve target 100% of the time and not send a stray burst in his direction.

Pocatello Air Force Base, Idaho

Having by now flown a “real” combat fighter, the Curtis P-40, we were ready to move on to the big, heavy “Jug”, the Republic P-47 “Thunderbolt”, which we would eventually fly in combat. It had a big powerful Pratt & Whitney 2800 hp radial engine, approximately twice the power of the P-40 so we needed a few weeks of added training, which we received in Pocatello, Idaho.



P-47D H Harmon Diers, 64th FS Grosseto Main, Italy, Late 1944

Once we had become comfortable in this big new fighter, Dickey and I went off on our own “dog fighting” and generally fooling around, each of us wanted to be the first to do a loop. Our P-47s were red lined at 250 mph, a speed we were not to exceed because the planes were old. I figured that if the maximum speed allowed was 250 mph, this should be fast enough to do a loop. It wasn’t. Fortunately we were very high, perhaps 20,000 feet or more, fortunately, I say, because the more altitude one has, the more time one has to make corrections should anything go wrong. The heavy P-47 did not “glide” when it stalls or loses power, but rather heads for earth at about a 45-degree angle. (“Free fall” or worse).

I picked up speed to the 250 mph limit, pulled back on the stick, and was headed straight up, but when I tried to get over the top of the loop, up side down, the plane stalled, dead still in the air, and began to fall out of the sky. It must have been tumbling end over end because all I saw through the windshield was ground, then sky, then ground, then sky. After I don’t know how many flips, I just pushed the stick forward, hoping to stop the flipping and get the plane to dive. (As we were taught to do in any emergency). It worked. I was screaming toward earth, faster and faster, reaching well over 500 mph, I’m sure. I gradually, slowly, pulled back on the controls to pull out of the dive. It had to be a slow recovery to avoid a secondary stall caused by the centrifugal force of the pullout. With great relief, and I do mean, “great”, I was now controlling the plane, slowing down to normal speed as the ground flashed by beneath me. I was not going to crash after all!

Dickey remained aloft, watching. He said that my plane and its shadow on the desert floor below were identical in size. So I must have been very close to the ground when I managed to pull out of that dive. Need-less-to-say, I learned important lessons, “Never exceed the red-line speed”, and, “Do not attempt

maneuvers in a plane until you know the plane well.” Looking back now, I think that this stupid escapade was the nearest I ever came to a fatal crash.

One other stupid but non life-threatening event happened. As part of our training we had to accumulate a certain number of night flying hours. I completed my assigned one-hour. But by landing time, the night had become totally dark. I turned on the instrumental panel lights. No light! I had forgotten to bring a flashlight for just such an emergency. Big mistake! All was black. I couldn't tell how fast I was going. The P-47 normally landed at about 100 mph with very little leeway from that speed. I came in very fast - too much speed is better than not enough - with my face pressed against the air speed indicator trying to read it. I did land, but because of my excess speed I came to the end of the runway, still moving right along. What now! I had seen a demonstration film about a P-47 months earlier in which the pilot had intentionally ground looped the plane, i.e. stomped on one rudder pedal causing the plane to spin around - not a recommended maneuver. This was the time to try it, and it worked! So there I was off the end of the runway trying to find my way back in the dark when the tower called, “What's happening down there?” “Nothing, I'm OK,” I replied, afraid to admit that I had no instrument lights or flashlight.



L to R: Mitchell, Kinsel, Diers, Adams, Worley, Moran Diefenderfer, Peters, Kershaw
 An odd bunch of graduated pilots and former instructors ready to be sent to???
 (Not known for our proficiency in spelling)

Our flight training now came to an end. We were well trained, if inexperienced, fighter pilots ready to go overseas. To China? To Europe? None of us knew. Almost a month had been given over to equipping us, issuing the clothing we would need, leather and fleece lined flight jackets, boots, and a very business-like appearing 45 caliber Colt automatic hand gun. The gun made me realize that wherever I was headed, there would very likely be people who might shoot at me. I had shot skeet, rifles and a sub-machine gun at targets, but this Colt 45 was now mine and I might have to actually use it to defend myself. This was “for real.”

Crossing the Atlantic

We were sworn to secrecy. “Loose lips sink ships.” No one knew for certain where we were going, what port we would be sailing from, or the exact departure date. My folks guessed that we would be going to Europe and, most likely, leaving from New York City so they went to New York, sat at the window of a coffee shop on Times Square, and asked any Air Force person they saw for information. I had no way of telling them I was in Newport News, Virginia.

We boarded a big Liberty Ship and eventually joined other ships in a slow Convoy line crossing the North Atlantic, headed for Europe at between ten and thirteen knots per hour (I could visually count the turns of the ship’s propeller). Twelve days on the Atlantic, headed for North Africa, then three more days on the Mediterranean to Naples, Italy, aboard a small old cruise ship converted to troop carrier. I was glad it was Europe. I had no desire to fight the Japanese, I might even pick up a bit of Deutsch!

Life aboard the Liberty ship soon became dull routine. Many became sea sick, not from a stormy sea, but from the slow rise and fall with swells. At night in my bunk I felt the slow ascent of the ship, a brief pause at the apex, then the slow descent. Over and over, endlessly. We did have some weather later on.

We could write home via “V mail”. Here are two written aboard ship early on our voyage.

October 21, 1944

Print the complete address in plain letters in the space below, and your return address in the space provided on the right. Use typewriter, dark ink, or dark pencil. Faint or small writing is not suitable for photographing.

TO: *Mr. Francis H. Diers*
4 Lowell Place
Fredonia, New York
U.S.A.

FROM: *Lt. Henry H. Diers, O-215229*
APO # 16643-LT-23
20 PM. New York City, N.Y.

(CENSOR'S STAMP) SEE INSTRUCTION NO. 2 (Sender's complete address above)

Dear Folks, Oct. 21, 1944

I am now officially "on the high seas" "somewhere in the Atlantic". We're on board ship and very comfortable. This won't be mailed until I arrive wherever this convoys going but I know you aren't going to worry. Dad assured me of that. I know I'm not the least bit worried + if any one of us should worry, I'll be the first. The food is excellent, beds are swell + in all, I think I'm going to enjoy the voyage. It will be a lazy one for me, I hope to do some reading. I'll be thinking of you all constantly. My love,

H. Diers

HAVE YOU FILLED IN COMPLETE ADDRESS AT TOP? *Yes* **V...-MAIL** HAVE YOU FILLED IN COMPLETE ADDRESS AT TOP?

U. S. GOVERNMENT PRINTING OFFICE : 1943 O-95140-6

Another V mail written fourteen days later. : November 4, 1944

Print the complete address in plain letters in the panel below, and your return address in the space provided on the right. Use typewriter, dark ink, or dark pencil. Faint or small writing is not suitable for photographing.

TO: Mr. Francis H. Diers
Four Lowell Place
Fredonia, New York
U. S. A.

FROM: Lt. H. H. Diers O-2059239
APO # 16693 - Lt. 23
70 Pl. New York, N. Y.

(CENSOR'S STAMP) SEE INSTRUCTION NO. 2 (Sender's complete address above)

Dear folks, November 4

The ocean voyage is losing its novelty but I still enjoy it. Our quarters are excellent. Food is delicious, and I haven't been the slightest bit seasick. I am supply officer. All of us were given some job. My job of supply is easy and I spend a good share of my time censoring the enlisted mens mail. 98% of the fellows are married and most write to their wives every day, so you see I am kept busy. It's sort of interesting work, but at least I feel so guilty opening other peoples mail..

Lt. Wenger, a fellow I met on board, is teaching me German. It's very interesting + I'm working hard on it. There is also a N. Western college prof (a prof) who know Dean Beattie well and who also helps me with my "Deutch".

Of course I miss you all and will be glad when I can receive mail from you.

Love,
Francis H. Diers

HAVE YOU FILLED IN COMPLETE ADDRESS AT TOP? **REPLY BY V-MAIL** HAVE YOU FILLED IN COMPLETE ADDRESS AT TOP?

U. S. GOVERNMENT PRINTING OFFICE : 1944 12-3844-5

As one might expect, after a few days at sea, the convoy ran into one of those famous North Atlantic storms. High winds and rolling waves caused much discomfort to those prone to seasickness, and a degree of anxiety for all. The storm increased. Someone from a ship ahead of us in our line of Liberty ships was washed overboard and was floating with a life preserver ring as we passed him by. We waved, he waved. We hoped he knew that we were not leaving him behind and that in a matter of minutes an accompanying navy destroyer escort would circle back to pick him up after the convoy had passed.

Time passed slowly. We played cards (Russian Bank) and worried that a German submarine might torpedo us. One was reported to be in the area, so we Air Force 2nd Lieutenants quickly unpacked our Colt 45 automatic handguns, just in case. The presence of a sub was probably just a rumor, but we were ready to defend our ship!

One irony: I chatted with a middle-aged private, also en route to Europe. In civilian times, pre-draft, he had been a Professor of German at Northwestern University. Now, drafted into the army, he was leaning on the ship's rail with me, an 18-year-old college freshman, and an officer, helping me with my German. But for the fortunes of war, our positions would have been reversed (see V-mail above).

We left the Liberty ship and boarded a Mediterranean cruise ship for the final leg to Naples, Italy. It was a touch of posh early 20th century luxury class travel, a nice finish to our transatlantic journey.

“Repple Depple” Near Caserta, Italy

Before leaving America, we had spent almost a month preparing to be shipped over seas, all ground duty, no time in the air. Added to this were nearly two weeks of flightless days at sea, crossing the Atlantic. My point here is that none of us had flown for a seemingly interminably long time. When we finally arrived in Italy and found that we had yet more days to wait before being assigned to a Fighter Squadron, we were bored, depressed, and impatient, loafing around in a “Repple Depple” (Replacement Depot) near Naples and Caserta. We occupied ourselves as best we could. One of my friends and I taught ourselves to throw hunting knives at an overturned wooden platform, (and became quite adept). Why, I don't know. Young Italian boys watching us from behind a chain wire fence were amazed. “Crazy Americans!”

One hot day we frustrated pilots were all standing around in an open athletic field engaging in calisthenics, there must have been about fifty or sixty of

us. Suddenly a P-47 Thunderbolt came roaring over us, very fast and very low. Well, we brand, spanking new replacement pilots were ecstatic! We jumped up and down, threw our hats in the air, waved and shouted! “A real combat plane!” We were absolutely thrilled at the sight. Then and there I promised myself that if I ever had a similar chance to buzz this field, I would (as a morale booster, of course).

Months later I had my chance. Headquarters in Caserta wanted photos of rocket damage. I was assigned to fly them down, which I did. But when I left Caserta to return to Grosseto, I first wanted to locate that “Repple Depple” where I had been months before. It took a bit of time, but I did find it, and sure enough, there they were, fifty or more newly arrived pilots on that same athletic field. I buzzed down across the field; reenacting the flight of my predecessor, only this time I made *three* low passes. Hats flew in the air, everyone waved, but then on the third and lowest pass I flew through some treetops. Leaves came blowing into my cockpit through the cockpit air intake. “That was low enough,” I thought, and I headed for home.

My crew chief, checking the plane after I landed, said in his slow southern manner, “My Lieutenant, the trees sure do grow tall down there, don’t they.”

“Flak” (anti-aircraft fire)

It may have been my first mission over northern Italy. I, the new kid on the block, was flying tail position in the formation, the last in line. All of a sudden in the clear blue sky appeared small puffs of smoke - tiny clouds right there around me, just a few at first, then many, many more I was fascinated. I didn’t notice that the other seven planes in my flight were weaving, climbing and diving. I heard a shout over the radio, “Diers, wake up. Get your ass moving, that’s flak they’re shooting at you!” I complied at once!

I learned later that the little white puffs were from the 37-mm. guns, which could shoot more rapidly, and the large gray puffs were from the bigger 88 mm guns, which had greater range. What amazed me was the ability of the gunners to get the exact altitude of our planes, but not so accurately, the direction we were flying. The puffs invariably exploded at just our altitude, but often off to the right or left. This realization didn’t prevent me from dancing around in all directions, climbing and diving.

Of course, once we were over our target and began our dive to release our bombs, all evasive action ceased. We just dove down as fast as possible from about 4,000 feet to a few hundred, pulled release lever, and dropped the bombs on our target, a bridge, a railroad marshaling yard, or whatever. During those few

seconds I felt no sense of danger, no fear of the guns, just concentration on my dive. Bravery was not a factor. Being young and feeling immortal was. But, post dive, I'll admit to a bit of anxiety as I climbed upward out of range and out of the area as fast as possible, full throttle!. All of our planes would then reunite, check for damage, and head for a secondary target, or home.

Piacenza Bridge over the Po River

As I have said, an important mission of the 57th Fighter Group in Italy was "Operation Strangle", to cut all the transportation routes and facilities leading north and south used by Germany to supply its army with material (e.g. gasoline and ammunition). Trains, marshaling yards, and all bridges were to be destroyed. They were bombed repeatedly, because the German engineers were amazingly adept at repairing and rebuilding bridges and rail lines in a very short time.

It was on the 15th of December (from my log book), my ninth mission, we were assigned to destroy a major bridge near Piacenza. Over the Po River we began our bombing run at about 3,000 feet, peeling off to the left into a single file as we dove down. The sky was filled with puffs of smoke from the anti-aircraft guns. As I pulled out of my dive after releasing my bombs, I saw a gun emplacement on the ground to my left (rather, I saw the flashes of fire from the guns) and swerved left to strafe it. . Well, the pilot who preceded me in the bombing run had missed the bridge with his bombs. They had fallen to the left and exploded directly under me - I flew through the fragments. Luckily, the plane seemed to be flying normally. The sturdy P-47 prevailed and I arrived back home safely in Grosseto. The crew chief counted well over a hundred holes in the metal skin of the plane. Fortunately no fragment severed any interior cable or control, and none had struck me!

The Generator Switch

A small tale of little significance, or so it seems now, but not at the time. It was on a winter bombing mission in northern Italy, the target probably a bridge. A few miles before our target, I noticed that my radio contact with others in the formation was fading. OK, I'll have to tell the crew chief about this when I get back. Then wishing for more air in the cockpit, I tried the cockpit cover switch, no movement. OK again, another malfunction to report. But soon the plane's engine began to speed up; the electrically controlled pitch of the propeller was flattening out! Now this was serious! I immediately put the propeller in "locked" position. OK! I can fly without radio or cockpit air, but not with a flat propeller, so I searched the instrument panel for solutions. My plane had an external belly

tank, which we were to drop once it was empty. The valve to switch fuel from belly tank to main tank was located down low on the right side of the panel. I saw there a toggle switch marked "Generator," just above the belly tank valve. It was in the "off" position. But since this is a switch we never used (who would want to turn the generator off?) I wasn't sure whether it should be off or on. Nothing to lose, I turned it on and soon began to hear voices on the radio, the cockpit cover moved, and when I returned the propeller switch to its normal mode, everything functioned. OK! What a relief! I had inadvertently bumped the generator switch with my heavy winter glove as I switched tanks. Back home, the crew chief wired the generator switch in the "on" position to prevent another scare. I learned that just about all of our planes had had their switches wired "On."

Cottage Living

The town of Grosseto in lies in southern Tuscany on the eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea. "Marina de Grosseto" is a summer resort close by with a beautiful beach; many stuccoed cement cottages with red tiled roofs, and walled gardens. Each of the three squadrons had to find lodgings for themselves. We pilots in the 64th took over several of these cottages for ourselves. Amenities were few, however, no heat, for example - the cottages, being designed for summer weather, had no need for stoves etc. yet the Italian winters could be very cold. And winter was approaching.

But it was late summer and when we were not scheduled to fly, we luxuriated on the beaches, swam in the sea. (I remember swimming with a hunting knife on my belt - to defend against sharks that lived solely in my imagination). There were chameleons scurrying on the garden walls or lying motionless sunning themselves. Life was good until late fall. Then we needed stoves. Each cottage occupant came up with his own unique design. The only fuel available was 180-octane gasoline (our aircraft fuel). I found a small oil drum, a length of copper tubing, a small tin sardine can and fashioned a stove. To provide openings in the oil drum for combustion, I shot several holes around the base of the drum using my 45-caliber Colt automatic. The coiled tubing, through which the gasoline dripped, acted as a "vaporizer", and the tin can, as an intended combustion chamber. A bad design! It blew up on the first trial.

There were other bad designs, most of them unsuccessful. One could hear an occasional explosion from other cottages - usually no serious damage and no injuries to personnel. Describing all this to my Dad back home, he wrote, "You mean to tell me that I can't get gasoline for my car because you are burning it to keep warm!"

We waited for clear weather. We wanted to fly, to add to our mission totals, but the drear days were long. Thankfully, crates full of soft cover books arrived along with many recent movies. And we ate! Soon after breakfast we asked, "What's for lunch?" One friend received a pipe tobacco sampler, so that day our group spent the afternoon trying out various combinations. My tongue was red for a couple of days. I quit smoking! Some gambled, if we had a recent payday, and some played bridge. The playing cards were the old "Bicycle Decks", red and blue. A friend of mine and I, not playing, stacked our decks in a separate room, and then switched decks with those in play. Those playing swore they had never had such a crazy afternoon of bridge.

Once or twice during the winter a bunch of us commandeered two or three jeeps and drove a few miles to a neighboring town where we could take hot natural spring baths. We sat in stone pits in aromatic sulfur-tinged water that rose up from the floor. Too hard for soaping up, the water served only to warm our bones. We paid the tab with a pack of cigarettes. (Our cost for the cigarettes at the base PX was five cents a pack).

On one trip to the baths, Ed Dorsner, the Philadelphia taxi driver, got very drunk. He drove one of the jeeps. No one wanted to drive home with him and he became angry, humiliated; they had insulted his driving ability. I finally agreed to ride with him and we took off in a roar, tearing down the narrow lanes and streets at top speed. I hung on firmly. But when we reached the edge of town, out of sight of the others, he slowed to about twenty mph and related his life story, his troubles and dreams. Even so, I decided that for me this would be a one-time experience.

Visiting an Old Church

On other days when we were not scheduled to fly, or when bad weather hindered, we were free to wander freely on our own. On one such day walking alone through Grosseto, I came across an old stone Catholic Church. From the outside it appeared dark, empty, but, too curious me, inviting. I entered to find that I had erred, not empty - a small congregation was seated quietly praying (I assumed). I sidled along the wall feeling very much an intruder observing an ancient religious service, possibly one harking back to the Middle Ages, to ancient days. And sure enough, soon a procession entered from without, led by an acolyte carrying a banner-draped cross, followed by a line of small boys with candles, dressed in robes and cassocks. All so solemn.

I pressed myself even closer to the wall, trying to appear invisible. The procession approached, brushing me as it passed. Totally immersed in awe of the ceremony-taking place before me, I felt I was interrupting an ancient rite. I was

quickly made conscious of the present when one small boy whispered as he passed, "Hey, Joe! Got any gum?"

Beating Jimmy Green's Record

Jimmy Green claimed the record for the shortest landing time between the dive to the runway and the wheels on the ground. I forget the exact number of seconds but it was impressively short.

A bit of background: Since planes are most vulnerable to attack from enemy aircraft while flying slowly at take off or landing, the landing process was to be as brief as possible. "Get those planes on the ground, fast!" Our practice was to practically dive at the near end of the landing strip, pull up in a steep left turn, dropping the landing gear when half way 'round the circle, and then rolling out lined up with the runway, with wings level just before touching down. We followed this pattern even though there were almost no enemy aircraft left in Italy at the time. It was the "hot pilot" manner of landing, and it was exciting. Yes, a bit crazy, but exciting. A matter of pride to see who could make the tightest circle and therefore get down in the shortest time.

One day, towards the end of the war, I was leading a four plane formation and so would be landing first and thus be expected to make a nice tight landing circle. In my excitement, I totally forgot that I had rocket tubes mounted under my wings, a recent and infrequent addition to the P-47's armament. These tubes jutted out in front of the wing's leading edges and so affected negatively on the wing's lift. We therefore had to land at a higher speed to compensate for the loss of lift. As I recall, our approach speed was about 170 or 180 mph.

All went well, nice approach dive, sharp pull up and circle, until I was half way around when the plane stalled (lack of speed and the centrifugal force of the tight turn) and I did a half turn spin before I hit the ground - crashed! But that wonderfully sturdy P-47 saved my life. The wings had folded, wheels punched through them, engine section detached, but, and it is a huge "but," the cockpit section remained intact and I was sitting there in the plane, on the ground, uninjured and cursing myself for smashing up a brand new plane. (It wasn't even my plane, but one that I had borrowed while mine was in for repair). I got out of the cockpit and was walking around the wreckage, still cursing, when an ambulance, jeep, and fire truck came speeding up. The flight surgeon jumped out of his jeep and shouted, "Get away from the plane! It might burn!" Then he handed me a shot of whiskey (I don't remember drinking it) and I, totally unharmed, was driven back to the pilot's "ready room."

I looked up Jimmy Green and with glee told him,

“Jimmy, I just beat your record, I got my plane down in less than thirty seconds!” “You didn’t!” “Yes I did!”



“Kit” Kitowski and I, two “hot pilots” on R&R, Nice, France

Later that same day they sent me on a “milk run,” a safe and easy mission, following the adage, “After a fall, get back on the horse and ride it.” I was sent off for three days R & R (Rest and Recuperation) leave with fellow pilot, Kit

Kitowski, to Nice, France, where we stayed in a posh “Majestic Hotel” and I remember visiting a Chanel perfume factory where perfume was made from rose petals. . Those in charge said that I would not have made the error but for the fact that I had been hit every time I flew on the previous five missions. I’m certain that I would not be here writing about this had I been in any other fighter plane than a “Jug,” my P47D.

Lucky Driver, Unlucky Horse

A primary task assigned to the three squadrons of the 57th Fighter Group was to destroy trains, trucks, and any vehicle capable of carrying supplies, ammunition, shells or gasoline needed by the German army. At one point we were instructed to “Clear the roads of any and all vehicles,” i.e. anything which might be used for that purpose, no exceptions, and that included horse drawn wagons.

One day on a solo “target of opportunity” mission I came across an old horse-drawn hay wagon driven, I’m sure, by a nervous Italian farmer. It all looked so normal and harmless, but orders were orders. So I feigned a strafing attack, i.e., I did not fire the plane’s eight 50-caliber machine guns. My attack must have looked frighteningly real, the wagon driver dove off the hay wagon into a ditch. I didn’t fire; I’d do that on a second run. When I did fire, the wagon blew up, flames shooting wide and high - it had been a camouflaged tank wagon carrying either gasoline or explosives. The driver was safe, but, alas, the horse could not have survived. I felt bad about that poor horse, an innocent casualty of war.

”Rover Joe” Missions

The American Fifth Army was fighting its way north through rugged mountain terrain, the Apennines in northern Italy. Forward progress was extremely slow. Our troops met with stubborn resistance, trapped in the narrow mountain passes. They called for help from the air. A small light plane, e.g., a “Taylor Cub” type of plane of the sort I had learned to fly in primary training was used. (See pg. 5). It was the slowest of planes, capable of almost hovering, unarmed, totally vulnerable, but far behind the combat zone and out of range of German antiaircraft fire. It carried “Rover Joe”, an observer who, with binoculars, could follow the action on the ground. His purpose was to receive radioed directions from the troops, spot the location of gun positions or tanks that were holding back the Fifth Army.

The observer in the Cub, moving so slowly, could pinpoint the exact location of the tank or gun emplacement that blocked our army’s advance. Then, with his maps and charts matching ours, he would radio us the coordinates of the barn or group of trees hiding the tank. We couldn’t find the target by ourselves at

the speed we were traveling. But now, having located it, we could bomb, or more often strafe it, and knock it out of action.

On one such mission, flying very close to the ground, I was hit by what must have been a 37 mm shell which apparently came straight up through the belly of my plane, just behind my armor protected head, as I passed over a rise in the ground, it missed me, fortunately, it had not exploded, but I knew I was flying a damaged plane. (The plane's canopy had been blown open by the shell's exit) and so I headed for home. Another plane was also hit. We flew back together. Since he didn't know where or how he was hit, I flew behind, over and under him, circling, looking for damage to his plane. No oil leaks or other signs of damage. As we approached our base, I told him to land first since his damage was unknown and my plane was flying normally. But when I made my landing, as I pulled back on the stick to land, just as my plane touched the runway, the stick became inoperable, disconnected, but I was safely down. Inspection by the crew chief revealed that the shell had all but severed the elevator cable, leaving only a few strands of wire, which snapped as I landed. Had it snapped earlier I would have undoubtedly lost control and crashed. Again, an angel on my shoulder!

Bad Weather - Close Call

On one four-plane mission we ran into a sudden thunderstorm. We were retuning to Grosseto, black clouds, almost zero visibility, lightning and extremely severe turbulence. Kitowski and I, his wing man, became separated from the two other planes so we headed off for home, flying ever lower to avoid the blackened clouds overhead, and more importantly, the buffeting wind. We dropped right down "on the deck" over the Mediterranean flying tight close formation so we wouldn't lose sight of each other. Even there it was difficult to keep the planes steady, nose up, nose down, fighting the storm all the way. Need-less-to-say, we made it back safely. Kit radioed me as we sighted our field; "The Lord was surely with us today!" We learned somewhat later that the two other P-47s had made crash landings short of the field, but the pilots were safe.

This reminds me to mention the guys running the radio direction finder stations. Although we pilots had learned basic navigation in our AAF ground school back in the states, we never had to use it in Italy. In this instance, we had no opportunity to put our meager navigation skills to use in any case. Instead, all we had to do when lost was to call in on the right radio frequency, count to ten forward and backward. Then, almost immediately were given directions back to our airfield. A welcome voice saying something like, "Head 185 degrees at 170 mph for 27 minutes." In the instance above, this service probably saved our lives.

Ann's Favorite - The Bridge Story

I did *NOT* fly under a bridge!

One of our planes needed a flight test after being worked on by its crew chief. I was just hanging around and available and so agreed to take it up for a test. The checkup took only a few minutes but of course I stayed up a full hour (our flight time was computed in number of hours). When I completed the tests, I still had perhaps 50 minutes to fly freely on my own.

At some point during my flight I spotted a jeep traveling the road, which led from Grosseto to the airfield, a road that paralleled an old unused canal. A small bridge took the road across the canal, and there it was, a jeep moving toward the bridge! Here was my chance, I thought, drop down to nearly ground level, fly down inside the canal, (the width was about 70 feet or more or less, and my P-47 had a 41 foot wingspan - plenty of room). I timed it so that I would be over the bridge at the same moment the jeep was crossing.

So there I was, flying slightly below the ground level at about 240 mph up the canal. The jeep stopped on the bridge and a man got out, stood beside it. "Here goes," I thought, "Not smart of him!" I buzzed over the jeep, skimming a few feet over his head, and did a barrel roll as I climbed higher, smiling, ear-to-ear. Then I continued on, cruising around for the minutes I had remaining.

Landing back at the airfield, I was met by someone who told me that I was to report to the ready room, the pilot's hang out. "Why?" I asked. He replied, "I don't know for sure, but did you see a jeep on the bridge?"

That was my squadron commander, Major Robert A. Barnum, in the jeep. He gave me the dressing down of my life. I stood before him, certain that my flying days were finished, that I would end the war in the infantry, or worse. However, Barney, only blasted me, sternly saying things like:

"Do you know how much that plane costs?
Do you realize that we need every last plane we have to fly?
Do you know that foolish stunts like you just pulled could cost
you your life, and mine?"

Then he turned his back to me and looked out of his office window. I was amazed. He was chuckling quietly to himself. Facing me again, he continued his "colorful" tirade, periodically turning his back to me and quietly laughing. I began to have hope.

Suffice it to say, my flying career was not ended, I wasn't even punished. I left his office, greatly relieved and thankful to have received only this reprimand, and also thankful I had a young understanding squadron C. O.

Addendum: A week or two later, a note appeared on our pilot's bulletin board:

“NO MORE LOW STRAFING PASSES!”

Planes had been damaged clipping trees etc. But after one mission which Barney himself had led, he returned to the base with telephone wires streaming from his wings. He then went to the bulletin board and tore down the notice he had previously issued. That was Barney, not a stickler for formalities. When I first arrived at the air base in Grosseto months earlier, he had driven out alone in a jeep to the plane to meet Kinsel and me, stuck out his hand and said, “Welcome to 64 squadron!” I, a lowly 2nd Lt., expected something much more formal when I “reported for duty” to my new commanding officer.

The Bombing of Bologna

The big bombers bombed big targets; factories, oil fields, munitions dumps. We small fighter-bombers went after small targets. Bridges, rail lines and army support. On this particular mission we were assigned the city of Bologna, not to bomb, but to distract anti-aircraft gunners by flying at low level over the city as the big B-24s high overhead bombed their targets. It was all a matter of timing. As the B-24s approached the city, we were sent in at rooftop level to fire our 50 caliber machine guns at random, to look as menacing as we could, to scare away the unseen anti-aircraft gunners from their guns, and to create general havoc. This we could do and I think we did it rather well. Then, precisely at the last moment, just before the bombers dropped their bombs, we were signaled by radio to get out of the way, to head for the suburbs, so to speak, and return to our crazy flying when the bombing run was over.

I'm certain we did no damage on this mission and am amazed that we didn't fly into each other as we went our crazy erratic ways. This was the only such mission we flew, but it was exciting to have the license to fly wherever we pleased with no specifically assigned target.

Black Scorpion Dance Band
Playing at the VE-day Squadron Party



(Lt.) Harmon Diers - trombone, Bob Holland, sax, (Capt.) Zane Amell, trumpet
 “Benny:”, tenor sax, “Squit” drums. Johnny Turnbull electric guitar & leader,
 “W.C. Taylor, guitar, Gowan, bass, (and a violin, not shown).

Winter weather in Italy could be dreary. On many dark overcast days no missions were scheduled and we unhappy pilots were left to fill our free time by loafing, playing cards or reading. I managed to read Tolstoy’s *War and Peace* all the way through. I also hoped to continue the one semester of German I had taken in college. My father sent me, by request, a German Language textbook, but he chose a Berlitz version, no English translations or instructions, one, which used the old illegible German script typeface. There were other activities for us.

One option appeared fortuitously and that was playing in a dance band. Our guitar-playing supply sergeant was organizing a band for the enlisted men. He needed a trumpet and a trombone for his otherwise brass less band, and so recruited, two pilots, Captain Zane Amell for a trumpet and me for a trombone. He even scrounged instruments for us. (My Italian trombone looked and sounded like an antique sackbut - thin bore and temperamental slide, but it sufficed). The guitars had been amped up by using taped on throat mikes.

As bad as it was, the band made a hit with the men. We played many of the Glenn Miller “big band” type dance tunes. These served as nostalgic reminders of home, I suppose, despite our very amateur renditions. One young man wanted “real American music” at his wedding, so the band was flown up to Florence overnight just to play at his wedding reception. (Our sole off base gig).

We did have a problem. In those days, officers and enlisted men were separated, not as sharply as in the Navy or Marines, and still are, Amell and I, wearing our officer’s uniforms were out of place among all the others in their enlisted men’s uniforms. Problem solved! The bandleader, being the supply sergeant, provided us with proper private’s uniforms with the result that, when playing with the band, we both were officers impersonating enlisted men, and buck privates, at that!

Somehow just before the war’s end, word got out that there was a dance band in the 64th Fighter Squadron, and someone high up in some Special Service Corps had a truckload of brand new instruments sent to us. New saxophones, clarinets, trumpets etc. So for our final month, I had a big bore American Conn trombone. I wish I could have kept it.

Lake Garda, Northern Italy The Brenner Pass

Lake Garda is a beautiful long narrow lake in northern Italy, walled in on its eastern bank by steep cliffs rising vertically, and pierced by highway tunnels, a part of the Italian Alps. Along the lake’s eastern edge ran the main route between Italy and Austria, the route leading to the famous Brenner Pass through the Alps. This was the principal thoroughfare for German military supplies intended for the German army fighting in Italy. Naturally, the Brenner Pass, though strongly defended, had to be closed if possible by our fighter-bombers. Each of the three squadrons in the 57th Fighter Group took turns bombing the pass every day, weather permitting. It was always a dangerous target because the Germans were waiting, counting on us to show up most every morning.

On April 25th, about a month before the war in Europe ended I was assigned an “armed reconnaissance” mission, flying with a wingman. He and I were supposed to fly up near Lake Garda looking for any form of transport, trucks, army vehicles, boats, etc. Just the two of us.

Flying over the lake I noticed a large oil or gasoline tank truck stopped near the mouth of a tunnel through the cliffs. Out of position to make a run at it, I called my wingman to “Go get it!” He claimed he couldn’t see it, so I got into position and, diving, strafed the truck, wondering why the truck hadn’t taken cover

in the tunnel opening. I soon found out. It was a trap, using the truck as bait. I had been drawn in. Antiaircraft guns fired at me from the tunnel's mouth, from the cliff above the tunnel, and from the ground, at least three locations. I was flying almost at water level over the lake when I was hit. I called on the wingman to come down and help me but he said, "They're shooting at you!" (As if I didn't know it) so I just radioed back, "Let's get out of here!"

The P-47's engine is equipped with a water injection system, which boosts its horsepower considerably. (About 20%), but is for emergency use only. The system is intended for just such a time as I was having. But it has one negative draw back - when used, it creates a dark trail of smoke, which the German gunners see and interpret as evidence that they have made a hit. They thus assumed that I was really damaged and so concentrated their fire. Black puffs of explosions surrounded me, but that wonderful P-47 roared on. I gradually gained altitude, met up with my wingman, and made it back home safely, thanking the "angel on my shoulder" once more.

Eddie Howard

Eddie was a small, serious fellow from Maine. He wore a mustache well, and he did not like to waste time. On those days when weather prevented us from flying his practice was to go into town, stand around with the old men playing games of matching fingers, but more importantly, learning to speak Italian. I tried to contact Eddie after the war but failed. None of the other pilots knew of his current whereabouts either. He was somewhat of a "loner."

The war in Europe was almost over, just a couple of weeks before the German surrender. By this time the 57th Fighter Group had left Grosseto and was flying from a big square grassy airfield near Verona north of the Po River. (Villa Franca di Verona). The American 5th army from the retreating Germans just days before had captured it. It all happened so fast that a German Focke Wolf 190, a German fighter plane, came in and landed, the pilot, not realizing the field was now in American hands. The 5th Army with its many troops and guns had passed us by, leaving only us air force types behind on the ground. Crew chiefs, mechanics and armorers, they all went out to the FW 190 with their small arms, pistols and carbines, and essentially told the German pilot to, "Stick 'em up!" They "arrested" him, and then turned him over to the Italian Polizia (police) who put him in the town jail.

But this is about Eddie Howard. When the army passed through the Verona area it left behind small pockets of Germans, groups of one or two hundred, in the surrounding hills. Italian partisans were determined to get these scattered Germans. Villa Franca became a scene from a movie, black open touring cars

roaring through the city, filled with partisans, bandoliers of bullets swung from their shoulders, waving machine guns and Italian flags.

On this particular morning, having no mission assignment, Eddie said that he wanted to accompany the partisans who were setting off to “take care of” a couple of hundred Germans rumored to be encamped on a hilltop near by. We tried to dissuade Eddie from going, “You’ll get yourself killed - this isn’t just a game.” But he was determined; he wanted to see some real action, and went, promising that he would not go up the hill with the first wave of partisans. What an adventure he had to tell us when we returned from our flights that night!

He had ridden with the Italian partisans out to a small hill a few kilometers from town, The Italians jumped out of their cars and began climbing the slope, shooting as they went. Wisely, Eddie held back until he heard no more shooting. When he got to the top he saw that the Germans had been disarmed and lined up in front of the partisans and their chief. Quite obviously the partisans fully intended to shoot them.

Eddie, horrified at this prospect, protested as strongly as he could in his limited Italian, saying to the partisan chief, that this action was against all rules of war, that it was inhumane, etc. The chief, a large burley man, would not listen, He replied, “They would do the same to us if they had caught us!” Eddie told him that, yes, but the American army had only temporarily gone on to the north, and that it would be back. - That the American general would want to question these (shivering) Germans, that the chief would be a “big man” in the General’s eyes if he could turn over 200 Germans to the American army. There followed an interminable pause while the chief considered this, a pause that must have seemed unbearably long to the frightened Germans. Fortunately, the chief finally agreed to Eddie’s plan and marched the Germans back into town where they were put in the local jail under the guard of the Villa Franca police.

Two days later, Ed Dorsner and I visited some of these Germans in the jail.

Conversations with the “Enemy”

Neither Ed Dorsner, a former taxi driver from Philadelphia, nor I had to fly this particular day, and after hearing Eddie Howard’s story, we wanted to see some Germans, first hand, for ourselves. We took a jeep into town, to the police station, and asked the Italian officers there if we could interview the prisoners recently brought in by the partisans. Keep in mind that Ed Dorsner was about 20 or 21 years old and I was barely 20 myself. We descended into a large locked basement holding cell, which housed the prisoners. The Carbinieri officer in charge commanded them to rise and stand at attention, (an action that made us,

two young Lieutenants, rather uncomfortable). As soon as the police officer left we had all the Germans “to be at ease.”

Both Dorsner and I were wearing our leather flight jackets with our very German names sewn over the pockets. Dorsner took it upon himself to tell the Germans that he was born in Berlin, (totally false) and that I was born in Hamburg, or some other German city. (Also totally false, of course), but the Germans believed him and could not understand why we would be fighting against them! They were a rather sorry looking group, either quite old or very young, in their worn powder blue Luftwaffe uniforms. We knew that in the German military, both the flying personnel and the antiaircraft gunners wore the same gray blue uniforms, so we knew that these men (and boys) were flak gunners, which undoubtedly had been defending the very airfield from which we were now flying.

We could not help but notice, upon our arrival at this airfield, the wreckage of a few P-47 Thunderbolts which had been shot down by the German flak guns. It was natural that these Germans denied most vehemently being antiaircraft gunners. ”You, you, you shoot flak guns, Jah?” Dorsner asked with appropriate demonstrative actions. “Nein, nein!” they replied, “We drive horses.” I was able to communicate just a bit with a young German boy who had about the same fluency in English as I had in German. (Not much). I tried to convince them that the war was almost over, just a matter of a few days or weeks, at most, but they just smiled, shaking their heads. No one would believe me.

Going Home

The final days of the war in Europe seemed very long. We spent several of them just flying two plane “Targets of Opportunity” missions, i.e. no schedule of assigned targets. I had 82 missions (75 was considered a “tour of duty”) when the war in Europe ended so I was eligible for a week of leave back in the States. Another pilot from one of the other squadrons was in the same situation. We were told to get ourselves down to one of the big bomber bases in southern Italy, perhaps Foggia - I don’t remember - and ask if we two could hitch a ride home on a bomber. The B-17, “Flying Fortresses”, and the B-24, “Liberators”, were being ferried back to the States.

We had a choice of planes, so we sat by the airstrip and watched these huge (to us) planes take off. The B-24s used almost the entire length of the runway before becoming airborne. We didn’t like that! The B-17s used much less runway and gained altitude faster. This was good! So we sought permission to make the trip home on a Flying Fortress. Permission was granted. All went well on take off. Our only worry was the age of the pilot. We found out that he was 31 years

old! Nine or ten years our senior! “Do you think his heart will survive this flight?” we wondered.

The Fortress first landed in Marrakech, Morocco in northern Africa where we spent the night, a bit disappointed that we were not allowed to go off base to visit the Casbah and Pepe La Moco. Then off the next morning to Dakar in West Africa, and the next day, to the Azores, an island archipelago in the middle of the North Atlantic. One more hop, the fourth day, to Gander Field in Greenland, overnight, and finally, our destination, Boston, MA. Five days to cross the Atlantic! The Fortress was not a fast plane - I think it cruised at about 180 mph.- but it got us home.

Peace at Last!

During my week’s leave, the war with Japan ended. VJ Day - Great celebrations! Even in my small hometown. I remember that it began to rain that night and that my friend, Lawrence “Wig” Williams, in the middle of all the partying, took his car home to dry it off. Under the circumstances I thought this a bit strange.

The situation was now thus, I was home in the USA and the 57th Fighter Group had left Italy. My orders were to report back for duty at Fort Dix, NJ and eventually rejoin the 57th. But as it turned out, war was over! The 57th was already en route to the Philippines when the Japanese war ended so that when I reported to Fort Dix I was asked:

‘Do you want to get out, be discharged?’

“Yes, Sir! I’d like to go home, back to college.”

And so I believe I was the first veteran to return to my small hometown where, as result, I was feted as a war hero. My name was in the papers, I spoke at the Rotary Club, and spent all of my mustering out pay taking family, friends and relatives for rides in a PT-19 at our local airfield, the same type of plane in which I had learned to fly years earlier. (See pg.7). All of these local flights were noted the local paper.

I entered Fredonia State Teacher’s College that September, lived at home, and was actually on the varsity basketball team even though I had never played in high school, so few male students were enrolled, fewer still were those fit for athletics, but the coach insisted we must field a team. One amazing coincidence:

I entered our game against the University of Buffalo at half time. In those days one always shook the hand of one’s opponent. To my astonishment, I found myself shaking hands with a fellow air cadet and friend, Torgy Fadum, whom I

had last seen in classification back in Texas. He had become a bombardier and flying while over Germany, had been shot down and spent the war in a prison camp. Well, we didn't just shake hands; we hugged each other, jumping up and down temporarily halting the game. My Dad, sitting in the stands with my Mother, asked her, "Isn't Harmon carrying this good sportsmanship thing too far?"

About Decorations and Medals

Although I have no data, I am quite certain that the vast majority of medals earned for bravery, courage or proficiency in combat are awarded pro forma. I say this not to diminish the significance nor the validity of those medals bestowed on true, real and honest heroes, but to put into perspective those awarded to the majority of us who were just doing what was expected of us in dangerous situations.

The most common medal in the Air Force was the "Air Medal." Reading the citations I received spark no memory whatsoever. The first one begins,

"For meritorious achievement while participating in aerial flight as pilot of a P-47 type aircraft, " and after a paragraph summarizing the mission flown, concludes,

"The proficiency in combat and steadfast devotion to duty displayed by Lt. Diers reflects credit upon himself and the Armed Forces of the United States."

The citations the second and third Air Medals, (1st & 2nd oak leaf clusters) begin and end in precisely the same way. The "meritorious achievements" are different in each case, but in hindsight, none stand out in the 82 missions I flew. My logbook simply lists the date, time, and place.

The Distinguished Flying Cross was not as common, but according to my records, was awarded at a ceremony on April of 1945 to me, Ed Dorsner, Ray Garcia, and Jimmy Green, all friends of mine in the 64th squadron, We represented the younger bunch of pilots. Several of the older ones had previously received the DFC. My citation says:

"For extraordinary achievement while participating in aerial flight as pilot of a P-47 type aircraft. On 12 April 1945, Lt. Diers flew in an eight aircraft attack on a rail line near Milan, Italy, executing a precision bomb run in the face of accurate anti-aircraft fire, Lt. Diers scored direct hits, which caused the destruction of eight railroad cars. Displaying great courage and superior flying ability, he then made repeated low-level strafing attacks on nearby

targets, destroying two motor transports and damaging six horse drawn vehicles and their contents.”

The citation concludes with the standard phraseology, “The proficiency and steadfast devotion to duty reflect.” etc. etc. All I have in my logbook for that day is: “Mission #67, marshaling yards, Pavia.”

So, while it is somewhat ego boosting to have received these citations, I know that my exploits were far from unique, miniscule, when compared to the feats of others who have received these and other decorations. We all wished we had had at least one chance at aerial combat with a German plane (Remember, this was 1945), but that was not to be our lot. We had the sturdy “Thunderbolts,” too short ranged for escort duty protecting long ranged heavy bombers. Other fighter groups had the task of flying escort with the bombers in their P-51 “Mustangs.”

When we met P-51 pilots we had to admit that they had a prettier plane, more maneuverable, more glamorous. But when we asked if they went down to ground level to assist the 5th Army or to knock out a train, “Well, no. We don’t fancy doing that sort of thing.” Our Pratt & Whitney air-cooled radial engine could survive far more damage than their liquid cooled engines. A fragment of flak could cut an oil or gas line on the P-51 and the engine would freeze, whereas we had planes return to base with cylinders shot off. We had pilots who, in a few instances, purposely crash landed, flying their plane as best they could right down to the ground rather than bail out with a parachute, putting their faith in the rugged construction of the Thunderbolts.

As a cadet, my dream plane had been the P-51 Mustang, but as a ground support pilot, I was thankful many times over to have my “Jug.”

I owe my thanks, and possibly my life, to the following fellow junior pilots of the 64th squadron. I have lost touch with a few, lost a few, and have forgotten the names of a few, but I am indebted to them all.

In no particular order:

Bob Hubbard; Ed Dorsner; Eddie Howard; Jimmy Green; “Luke” Harp; “Kit” Kitowski; Ray Garcia; Al Nickels; LeRoy Hall; and many others with whom I flew in Italy

Addenda



Occasionally one plane in the flight was fitted with a camera to make a second pass to film damage. These are four bad photos I took of some insignificant target. I am in No. 38 (below)



LOOKING BACKWARD

Being Briefs From
The Fredonia Censor
Issues of Past Years

10 Years Ago — June 22, 1945

The Distinguished Flying Cross has been awarded to Lt. Harmon Diers, son of Mr. and Mrs. Francis Diers of Lowell Place. This citation was given in recognition of the success of a mission of a flight of Thunderbolts, of which he led over Italy.

22nd TAC Planes Support 5th's Attack

MAAF HQ, March 9—Close air support of ground troops in the 5th Army battle area by Brig. Gen. Benjamin W. Chidaw's 22nd Tactical Air Command of MATAF Thunderbolts, Spitbombers and Kittyhawks helped pave the way for the advance of 5th Army units, it was revealed today.

The close air support in the central Apennines reached its peak during the period from March 3-6 when more than 400 fighters and fighter bombers were directed against enemy objectives facing the attacking doughboys.

German positions were well protected by nearly 200 light and heavy anti-aircraft guns, but the Thunderbolts, Spitbombers and Kittyhawks roamed the skies almost continually during the daylight hours and in three days dropped more than 100 tons of high explosives as well as hundreds of fragmentation bombs and incendiaries. At night the A-20 Havocs took off where the fighter bombers left off.

Thunderbolts flew a number of "Rover Joe" missions with enemy-occupied buildings, gun positions and other strongpoints taking the brunt of bombs, bullets and rockets.

NOTE LAST
PARAGRAPH

Lt. H. Diers Home Sunday From Italy

1st. Lieut. Harmon Diers, son of Mr. and Mrs. Francis Diers of Lowell Place, arrived here Sunday afternoon after being overseas since October 1944.

A year after we entered the war, in December of 1942, Harmon enlisted in the Army. Three months later he was called and sworn into service and received his basic training at Keesler Field, and, after a month's training there, was transferred to Springfield, Mo. for College Training. This part of his training completed he went on to Pre-Flight in June of 1943, at San Antonio, Texas. In May of 1944, after a great deal of studying and actual flying tests, he was given his commission in the Army Air Forces as a 2nd. Lieut.

This was followed by Replacement Training in Idaho. Lt. Diers put in 100 hours in a P-47. He was now ready for the war front.

He left for overseas in October 1944 and landed in Naples, Italy. Here he became attached to the 57th Fighter Group. Only two days after reaching his base, Lt. Diers took off in his P-47 on his first mission. His duties varied, sometimes he was called upon to go on a dive bombing mission, another time it might be "strafing. The most interferences was not caused by enemy planes, but by flak. This was "pretty thick."

In his 8 months in Italy, Harmon completed 82 missions, which were called a "Tour" for P-47 pilots.

On one of his tours, Lt. Diers was over enemy territory when flak exploded near his plane. The explosions came closer and closer until a terrific noise roared just behind his head. A shell had penetrated the fuselage just a short distance behind him and exploded. If an armoured plate had not been placed to protect the pilots, "I wouldn't have my head." He owes his life to that thin sheet of metal.

On July 11th he landed at Bradley Field, Conn. and started on his way home. He has E.T.O. Ribbon, Air Medal with 3 cluster and a Distinguished Flying Cross.

He expects to spend his leave by "staying around here most of the time. It's pretty good to be

57th Fighter Group - National Air Museum Bradley International Airport



TED S. SZURA DEWEY A. TALMAGE DELLYOUS C. TAYLOR	CHAMBERLAIN ★	RICHARD M. MALO EVERETTE L. MARC MICHAEL D. MARCU
ROBERT C. TAYLOR LEWIS A. THOMPSON RAYMOND C. TRIBOU ALLEN TUSTEN JOHN H. VALENTINE ELLIOTT P. VALMENBURG EARL T. VANN GRANT F. WALDROW GRANT F. WALSH EDWARD L. WAUFLE JOHN J. WEBER NORMAN E. WELLS LEONARD D. WHITE JOSEPH E. WILLIAMS THOMAS W. WOLFE	ROBERT M. COBLER ROBERT A. COHLER RALPH L. CROMMETT GLENN L. CROWELL JACK CROWELL JACK P. DANO MERLE R. DIARMIT HENRY H. DIERS ROBERT H. DOEHRING EDWARD L. DORSNER GEORGE D. DORVAL ROBERT K. DOUGLAS SAMUEL S. DURFEE ARTHUR E. EXON VERNON R. FARMER	SAMUEL A. MARTIN FRED W. MASON LOUIS A. MASTRIAN HAROLD H. MAXHIM C. E. MAY PALMIRO L. MAZZOLE MICHAEL C. MC CART RALPH D. MC DANIEL D. MC ENTEFFER JOSEPH M. MC GEHEA J. M. MC LAUGHLIN MAC M. MC MARRELL STEVEN C. MERENA LYMAN MIDDLEDITCH WYNN D. MILLER
BENJAMIN S. WOLFINGER WILLIAM H. YOUNG WALTER J. ZURETTI	RAYMOND A. FARO FORREST L. FEARS EDWARD C. FLETCHER EUGENE A. FRANCO	PETER D. MITCHELL SCRIVNER MIZELL GEORGE D. MOBBS EUGENE A. MOY

Reunions



The 57th held annual reunions for many years, the three squadrons met separately, then all together. The principal order of business was to determine the location of the next reunion. In the photo above, Jimmy Green is in the front row wearing a blue shirt, and Luke Harp is in a white shirt.

In recent years attendance has diminished. At the 2011 reunion at Bradley Field, only three pilots from 64 squadron were there. The organization now consists primarily of wives, sons, daughters and grandchildren of the WW II generation.



Here I am sitting in the cockpit of the P-47 in the museum at Bradley. I didn't jump up on the wing, and spring into the cockpit as I once did with a parachute strapped behind me. In fact, I needed a bit of help slowly swinging my leg over the edge of the cockpit. Age 87 in 2011.

Epilogue

After the war, as I have said, I attended Fredonia State Teacher's College (Now the "State University of New York, Fredonia"), transferred to the University of Nebraska for a year taking engineering courses, but returned to Fredonia to graduate with a B.Sc. in Music. I taught music for one year in Warwick, N.Y. close to New York City so I could sing in Robert Shaw's Collegiate Chorale. I undertook graduate work at Teacher's College, Columbia, received my M.A. And Ed.D. While there, I met my perfect wife-to-be, Ann MacDonald. She received her M.A., at Columbia on a full tuition scholarship. We were married in 1952. We both taught music in the public schools in Voorheesville, N.Y. and in Easton, CT.

Settling in Bethany, Connecticut, we built a house, had three wonderful children while I joined the music faculty and directed choirs at Southern Connecticut State University. Ann sang professionally as a soprano soloist. Thirty-three years later, we retired, built a second house on Cape Cod Bay in Eastham, Massachusetts, where we have lived now for more than twenty years.

(Writer's note: It is not easy for an eighty seven year old man to write or think like an eighteen year old. Opinions I held as an adolescent are not necessarily the ones I hold now. So much has changed in the intervening 70 years of a life, but it has been a joy, while writing this, to imagine one's self a young, carefree pilot once again. I thank my sister, Dorothy L. Naetzker, whose unrelenting persistency urged me to tell these stories and commit them to paper.).

February, 2012

Harmon Diers

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