

Some Memories of Arizona Harris by Allan B. Richardson Major USAF Ret.

Historian Arthur Bove wrote in his account of the 306th Bombardment Group, ~~entitled~~, FIRST OVER GERMANY: "The Group's first Distinguished Service Cross was awarded to this boy from Arizona whose name was never forgotten at the base". Not much is known about Arizona Todd Harris from available records except that he lived in Tempe, a Phoenix suburb, at the time of enlistment. No pictures of him have turned up to date. Yet, he figured in my life for seven months.

In the early days of the 306th Bomb Group's organization at Wendover, Utah, I was assigned to the 369th Squadron. One of the pilots was Charles W. B. Cranmer whose engineer and ~~later~~ top turret gunner was Sgt. Arizona Harris. I was billeted with Cranmer and stayed with his crew more or less from Wendover to Thurleigh until the ~~3rd of~~ January 1943 when Cranmer's plane was shot down over the English Channel while returning from a bombing mission to the German submarine pens at St. Nazaire off the French coast. T/Sgt Arizona T. Harris ~~dis~~ distinguished himself for posterity that morning by staying with his top turret gun and firing at the attacking enemy FWs as his plane sank beneath the waves. None of the crew survived. After 38 years it all seems long ago and far away, but I'll try to share what memories I can leading up to that fateful day.

Among our little quota of officers from the Harrisburg Intelligence School to arrive at Wendover on ~~the first of~~ July 1942 were Captains John B. Wright and John A. Bairnsfather, who became the Group's S-2s. Lt. Col. Charles "Chips" Overacker was Commanding Officer. For a brief stay before he was shipped out, Lt. Col. ~~*S-2 Combat Intelligence.~~

Curtis E. LeMay acted as executive officer. Captain D. R. Coleman became Overacker's first adjutant.

Our S-2 contingent bussed into the base on a typical hot, dry afternoon. The day bombers were returning from practice missions and new crews stood by to take over their planes for the evening run and later the night instrument ~~practice~~ runs. A month of intensive training and maintenance had kept the precious few 17s flying night and day. Crews were tired and tension ~~was~~ high. Living quarters and space were critical. However, we were assigned to reasonably comfortable barracks. After a shower and supper I looked over the desolate but fascinating salt flats that extended to the horizon where the Humboldt range to the west rimmed this desiccated lake of a distant era. When darkness covered the scene and the take-off roar of the 'nightowls' subsided, I turned in.

One crew was retiring. They explained that the boys at my end of the barracks were on the night run and probably would not get in until about 2AM. My cot was next to the entrance. The opened flap revealed some blinking beacons, a few stars and summer lighting over the distant peaks. I thought about my wife and the dolce vita I left back home. Sleep came quickly.

When shots rang out just a few feet away I literally jumped out of bed. In the entrance stood a youth in somewhat disheveled gear about to holster his spent revolver. "Sorry, lieutenant," he grinned, "just blowing off steam". I muttered something best forgotten and stumbled back into bed. His team filed in and made for their beds. In the morning introductions were in order.

"I'm pilot Charlie Cranmer," said the one who had fired the shots. Pointing to the others; "Al Brunsting, is my co-pilot, Paul Dwyer here is my navigator and Johnny Reed over there is our bombardier.

I'll let the rest of the boys in the room introduce themselves. You must be our S-2. Sorry about the noisy welcome last night. So I shook hands with a lot of nice kids.

In a few days Cranmer took me on a night run to the Pacific coast. The flight gave me a chance to meet the rest of the crew and to observe their functions; ~~By~~ Byer, ~~the navigator,~~ Lt Reed, bombardier, Arizona Harris, ^{ll-}engineer and ~~later,~~ top turret gunner. The gunners were Cpl. Charles Taylor, Sgt. Charles Wall and Pvt. Harry Meyers. Sgt. Kermit Constantine operated the radio and Sgts. Joseph Maire and ^{Glen} Wyly took care of air craft mechanics. Concentrated training during July gave us some time to work into our assignments. New planes and crews arrived. Few, if any distractions diverted us from our appointed tasks except, perhaps, the Stateline Hotel at the edge of the base. This unique building straddled the Utah/Nevada state line right down the middle. The Nevada room on the right permitted liquor and gambling while Utah's parlor on the left offered refuge for the innocents. Weekend passes meant occasional trips to Salt Lake City to admire the Mormon culture and the city's beauty, both architectural^y and femⁱⁿe. Finally, orders came through at th^e end of the month when we were declared mission ready. On ~~the~~ ¹ ~~first of~~ August the ground crews entrained for Richmond, Virginia, and the air eschelons flew, with one stop in Illinois, to Westover Field in Massachusetts. ^{etts,} ~~ts.~~ I was assigned to Cranmer's plane. Breezing over the Rockies at an intimate peak to plane altitude, we watched the wildlife scatter among the pines. Charlie Cranmer could not resist playing tag with regulations, sometimes. His crew were ever loyal to their personable, easy going pilot who privately had a

reputation for leaving a pretty face where ere he roamed. But Lt. Cranmer could fly.

Crossing the continent, we beguiled the time with reminiscing about family, friends, hopes and dreams. Arizona, like a true chamber of commerce ~~PR~~^{MAN}, pictured his town in warm colors. He spoke of his mother and dad, reminisced about his high school sweetheart, and described the rugged beauty of Arizona and the desert where he and his pals ranged for fun and game. In turn each boy told his story. They were typical American youths prompted by old fashion^{ed} patriotism, a desire for adventure, and perhaps subconsciously, a ~~an~~ chance to know and prove themselves. A few were married, some with expecting wives, and the Air ~~Force~~^{Corps} did mean a sure income.

The following evening we landed at Westover for a few weeks' stay before proceeding overseas. Families that could/ joined us for farewells. On August 14 we moved to Fort Dix for staging and on the 30th skeleton crews took off for Gander, Newfoundland, and Prestwick, Scotland. The rest of us boarded the Queen Elizabeth along with about 16,000 military personnel and the ship's crew. Life meant two meals a day and a bit ^{of a} crowded. We landed at Greenock, Scotland, with out event, although the Germans broadcast that the 306th had gone down to its grave at the bottom of the Atlantic. From Greenock we proceed^{ed} by train to Berford^d and Thurleigh. Crews and personnel were eventually united.

Preparation for the first mission to the Fives-Lille locomotive in France works^{got} underway with the valued help of RAF liason.

This first mission took a heavy toll. Enemy intelligence was good as evidenced by the swarm of FW190s waiting to greet us. Our popular CO, "Chips" Overacker lead the group with Captain ^{James W. J} Johnson of the 369th as co-pilot. Following the mission, bad weather set in. Operations worked on the answers, and briefed the crews on the German subpens off the French coast which were given priority at this stage. The enemy also considered these pens a priority for protection which resulted in more costly raids. The 306th Group's first Distinguished ^{Flying} Service Crosses were awarded to Capt. ^{Robert C.} Willie Williams and Lt. ^{Ernett} Ford for these missions.

^{November} In ~~mid-winter~~, members of the USO visited Thurleigh. Among them ^{performers} were Martha Ray^e, Carol^e Landis and a dedicated troupe whose names I wish I could remember. ^[Ed: Mitez Mayfair and Kay Francis.] Heavy casualties had put morale at a low ^{point.} The boys surrounded the girls and cried on their shoulders as they mourned their missing pals. This USO tour was too much for the lovely and sensitive Carol^e Landis who had a nervous breakdown after returning to the States. I met Carol^e after the war on a Martha's Vineyard ~~Island~~ beach. We talked about her tour and the many fine boys who would not come home. Carol's dreams were murky and disturbed and she could not find peace of mind. Not long after our meeting, she took her own life.

~~The second phase of the bomber activities began in late September of 42 with the increased range of fighter escort. Bremen and Kiel and the French coast south to Brest could be reached. However, the subpens still retained priorities for almost half of the targets until the summer of 1943. Twice I had ^{asked for} offered and received per-~~

mission to accompany the crews but had been ordered off the planes just before take-off. Both planes were shot down. On the 2~~nd~~ ~~of~~ January ¹⁹43 another subpen mission was scheduled for St. Nazaire. I talked with Cranmer's crew that afternoon to ask if they minded if I went with them. They tried to discourage me, but finally agreed, reluctantly. Arizona Harris had received the Air Medal for ^{the 8th center} a Nov ~~8th~~ ~~similar~~ raid during which he shot down an enemy plane, so he knew only too well what awaited, ~~them~~. From time to time the rosters of the crews changed. Meyers, Haire, Wyly, ^{Well} ~~Danna~~ and ^{Taylor} ~~Hanson~~ were distributed among ~~the~~ new crews to give them the advantage of their experience. New arrivals replacing them were William Musick, Robert Ransom and Edgar Whitaker. This now was the roster of ~~the~~ "Fitin' Bitin'" as Cranmer's plane was dubbed.

That night before the mission, Charlie Cranmer and I were discussing it all. "Why do you want to stick your neck out, Rich"?, he asked me. "You don't have to go and for Pete's sake, enough planes have been lost to turn off any guy in his right mind."

"You go", I reminded him.

"Well, maybe we are crazy, maybe. Believe it or not, I'm thinking of our country and the folks back home who depend on us".

Early the next morning I suited up and climbed aboard his plane. Arizona cast me a strange look. Engines were revved and ~~chucks~~ ^o removed. Then over the ^{radio} ~~intercom~~, Operations ordered me off. Each time the reason had been that intelligence officers were needed to meet the returning planes to debrief them. I jumped off and watched the 17s disappear in the dawn.

Thurleigh is a modest little village in the heart of the John Bunyan country of Bedfordshire. On our bicycles we would explore the country lanes, the green fields and gardens of the little cottages whose hospitality often offered tea and biscuits. Eight miles from Thurleigh was the town of Bedford, then a center of agriculture exchange. Its community is noted for fine schools. Among the town's historical attractions is the Bunyan Museum. All during the war, Bedford USO clubs entertained the military, and a Key Club held night life for the more sophisticated. Bedfordshire is on about the same latitude as Greenland, consequently in summer, daylight lingers quite late, much to the chagrin of the GIs. On night passes when they took their dates to the park, or sat on the banks of the river Ouse, any intimate affection was so obvious. Soon however, practicality overcame modesty.

On Sunday morning following that fateful ~~3rd~~ of January mission, I visited the Bunyan Museum to ponder the bard's philosophy in his Pilgrim's Progress, wherein he speaks of birth, death, Divine justice and the wages of sin. In all of John Bunyan's morality, I found no answer to the ubiquitous question from our boys: "Who ties the tickets on the bombs and bullets?" Perhaps no one can truly answer. In World War I, a young poet named Alan Seeger from New York who had joined the French Foreign Legion, was killed in Flanders Fields. In the trenches before he died he penned a verse which concludes, "I have a rendezvous with Death...And I shall not fail that rendezvous". Arizona and his fine companions merit such an epitaph.

The ~~End~~ 