

Memoirs from Molesworth, England – Eugene J. O'Brien (358) Aircraft Mechanic

Submitted by: Jennifer M. Wellink (grand-daughter)

My Grandfather started writing his memoirs in January 1995. He handwrote his life-story in pencil and probably stopped as his health declined. Unfortunately, he didn't manage to complete his recollections, but a good percentage of his memoirs cover his time serving in the Army Air Force in Molesworth. I am proud of my Grandfather and found his stories very interesting and descriptive of what it was like to be in Europe defending the world from the Nazis. Lucky for me he was not a pilot as he would have taken an even higher risk and I might not have even been born. I managed to type out his memoirs for better clarity.

August 1942

The time came when we were told we're shipping out. We boarded our train and headed eastward which indicated we were heading for the European Theater of Operations.

Leaving Texas, we passed various States and on going through the State of Iowa, I couldn't get over its beauty. After living in sandy soil a month or so, the greenery of the farms; the beautiful size of the animals (especially cows) was a sight to behold. The corn was as lush as could be. It was easy to then understand the title that the Midwest was the "Agricultural Capitol of the World". I wonder if even the people of the above areas realize how important our farms and farmers are to the world!

We finally came to Chicago and our train stopped to pick up more soldiers. The car I was riding in stopped at 66th Street and Indiana Avenue. I lived at 6936 Indiana and if it wasn't for the tall trees, I would be able to see my home. Getting off the train to stretch my legs, I mentioned how close I was to home. The Captain on guard said if he were that close to home, he would take off. He was wearing "side arms" and I didn't want to give him the chance to use them (on me).

As we headed eastward, we finally passed through Pittsburgh known as the "Steel Capital of the World". From what I saw, being a steel worker, I was somewhat disappointed. Where I had worked, our outfit was gigantic compared to theirs. Most of their systems appeared to me to be comparable to a "Ma & Pa" outfit.

We finally reached our destination; the latter part of August, 1942. A good number of our outfit were from the East Coast area and, when they were given passes, headed for home before shipping out. Two other fellows and myself had a four hour pass and went to New York City. Stopping off for a few beers, the locals were very friendly to us and asked us where the Air Corps were headed. We had our Air Corps insignias on our collars so it was easy to identify us. Being tight-lipped we informed them we were just passing through. Little did they realize that we were telling the truth.

The time finally arrived where our orders were to ship out again. Because our outfit had a number of men on pass that lived in the East, we were detained until they returned. It wasn't long before our time came. We reached the point of departure at 1 a.m. It was very dark and the ship we were to board was the biggest I had ever seen. One of our members, Orladovich, was from New Jersey and he said it was the "Queen Mary". We all figured, "Oh Boy, we'll probably have an escort because the German Navy was creating havoc throughout the Atlantic

area. There was a giant U.S. battleship moored near us in Hudson Bay and, as we pulled out, all heads were waiting for the Navy to lead the way. It turned out the only escort was a P-12 biplane with British markings. It left us after going 50 miles out.

From what I can recall, we had 18,500 Air personnel on board. It was September 1, 1942 and Labor Day. The first day was like an ordinary cruise then, after that, the ship took evasive action.

All duties were taken by other Air Corps outfits due to our late arrival. We had nothing to do but sweat out our enemy's action against us.

Due to the evasive action we were taken; i.e. seven minutes one way and seven minutes another way, the ship had to have our "B" bags in the hold arranged for better ballasts. Our outfit gladly applied. We were down in the "hold" about 3 stories and "B" bags were piled sky high. I noticed one bag on top of the pile split on the side and I mentioned this to my teammates. They said, "Forget it, if the guy couldn't secure it better than that, he deserved to lose the contents." I agreed, then, my conscience got the better of me. I climbed up the 3 stories with rope to tie it and whose do you think it was? Mine!

The ship was so crowded that half slept in cabins and the rest slept on the deck. My first night was on deck. It was cold and we wore our long underwear; our O.D's (Dress Uniform) and heavy overcoats. After much searching, I found one vacant spot and settled down for much needed rest. Just about fell asleep when I got kicked in the head. It happened several times so I put on my steel helmet. Still got kicked in the head but did manage to doze off. I was sleeping in a walk way.

The first nights deal was "Child's Play" which was to be repeated. The original place I found was a "walk way". My next night sleeping out was a disaster; even the walk ways were loaded. My extra bag called the "A" Bag had my personal daily belongings. I found a spot outside the railings of the Life Boats and tried to sleep. Due to our changing course every seven minutes, the ship would swerve up to 30 degrees. I tied my "B" Bag to my ankle and on one occasion, it went overboard; me clinging on to the safety rail. This action was not to be repeated the rest of the voyage.

When the time came to again sleep out on the deck, yours truly used his smarts. When the bath tubs were not in use, that's were I got a decent nights rest.

The reason we took evasive action every 7 minutes was because that's what it took for the German submarines to lock in our position to fire their torpedoes.

The order came out that all were to wear life preservers. Whenever they loosened them from the outer ceiling decks, they were picked up immediately. I was always at the other end of the ship and, when I got there, all were gone. When asking the Lieutenant in charge, he said if I'm not there on time it my tough luck.

After 2 1/2 days on the high seas, an order came out, "If you don't have a life jacket, you don't eat." This was a serious deal with me; the more the ship rolled, the hungrier I got. I then went to an English sailor who was a member of the crew.

I asked him "Who is in charge of this boat?" (This was a cardinal sin to refer to a ship as a boat, which I knew). With his English accent he said, "I'll have you know, this is a ship and not a boat." He did, however, tell me how to get up to the captain's quarters, but said I probably would be stopped.

I followed his directions and after climbing about three stories, headed for the Captain's quarters. I was surprised at the wonderful decor which would rival any of our hotels in the U.S.

In my journeys to locate the Captain, a gentleman in civilian clothes approached me and asked me what I wanted. I told him it was a personal matter with the Captain of the Ship. He looked like Adlai Stevenson, Governor of Illinois in later years). He said, "You can tell me!" Explaining the situation to him he said, "How did you get up here? Did you meet anyone?" I told him, "No." and "If the Army couldn't supply me with the necessary Life Vest, maybe the Navy could."

We walked down the way I came up and when we opened up the hatch door he said, "See that Lieutenant there, tell him you are to get a life preserver." I went over to the Lieutenant and said "Lieutenant, I want a Life Preserver. Again he was adamant then I told him, "See that gentleman standing at the hatch door? He said, "Who is he?" I said, "I don't know but you better give it to me." "You ask him." I got one.

I can still remember the evasive action we took before our destination. Fellows playing "Craps" would roll the dice on the deck and when the time would come to change our course, the dice would roll back in the opposite direction. If I didn't see this, to this day, it would be hard to comprehend.

Arriving in Glasgow, Scotland harbor, we disembarked to small landing craft a bright sunny day. The seagulls were probably happy to see us because they were all over the place and one of them "greeted" me with a direct hit. I wanted to shoot him but the Captain in charge, laughingly forbid it. Seconds later he received the same "greeting" and then it became a different matter. Still we had to obey his order. Had all I could do to retain my laughter. The train trip from Scotland to England was uneventful. Each compartment held about eight of us and had a sliding door to the through isle. I stood up a good part of the way during the night taking in the silhouette of the darkened countryside and towns we passed through.

After many hours we finally arrived in Thrapston, England. There were English trucks waiting for us to take us to the field we were to operate from -- Molesworth. As we started out, we discovered the English drivers were driving on the wrong side of the road. Guys were pounding on the rear window and stamping their feet trying to get the driver's attention. In short notice, we learned that "we" were the ones who drove on the wrong side of the road.

Molesworth is located in the "Midlands" part of England. It is a quaint picturesque village and each house and barn units would be a painter's delight. The people were friendly in a reserved sort of way.

There was much for us to learn in the short period since our arrival. Our new enemy had over three years experience over us and it didn't take too long for them to discover our weaknesses. We in turn learned to counter their successes as we learned their tactics and reciprocated.

This field was originally erected in World War I and still had the same buildings. Little did we know we were to spend three years there.

There were additional barracks built and the English referred to them as "Quonset Huts". They were made of corrugated metal and half round. Windows were few and there were two doors to enter. Due to the black out orders of the day, on entering, no lights were exposed and the door behind you had to be shut tight so as not to shed light out into the darkness. The rules for such were very strict. All openings were covered with black curtains. One could be "locked up" if he didn't follow the Black-Out-Orders. The reason for this is our field position would be visible to enemy bombers, disclosing our position.

Our airplanes (B-17 Bombers-Heavy) hadn't arrived as yet so our duties were scarce. I was put in charge of a small brick enclosure containing possibly a hundred pipe valves. These were used to control the amount of fuel in ground tanks for our planes and trucks necessary for our operations. My work was only temporary till our planes arrived. One of the things to do was to put a measured dip stick into the openings of the underground tanks, take a measure and record the gallons in the morning. Did the same procedure in the evening. Our charts showed there was more "Petrol" in the evening than in the morning. This was due to "expansion" due to the warm build-up of the ground during the day.

Being one of the last men assigned to my new outfit, I didn't know too many of the guys but it didn't last for long to get acquainted. We all realized we had a major job to do and would have to depend "on the other guy" when the time came.

Slowly but surely, our airplanes arrived. My first plane was "Leapin' Liz". John Simpson was ground crew chief and I couldn't have been assigned to a better one. Even with the Aircraft School in Kansas City, Mo., John made a good mechanic out of me. The experiences I received were far too limited due to the complexities of our Bombers but I will detail some later on as my memory dictates.

There are four Squadrons to a Group and our field was eventually called "Hell's Angels". Each squadron had eight aircraft. Each aircraft had ten flying men and the ground crews numbered 4,5, or 6 men.

To maintain a Group, there were many, many operating personnel in addition to the above. These consisted of an Engineering Department, Supply Department; Cooks & Helpers; Truck Maintenance Department; Sheet Metal Workers; Armament Dept. to load the bombs; Weathermen; Hospital and Medical personnel; Office Personnel (they saw we got paid, thank goodness) and many others too numerous to mention.

Our initial operations against the enemy began by bombing the sub pens of St. Nazaire, France on November 17, 1942. Clouds covered the target area so the planes came back to Molesworth with the full load of bombs.

The main reason for bombing the Sub Pens was to cripple Hitler's Submarine Fleet which was plaguing havoc on all Allied shipping and especially trying to hinder us sending men and supplies to the war zone. It was a real relief to see all the planes return without a casualty.

When our "overseas mail" from home reached us, I had a letter from my sister, Winifred, stating that an Italian Court in South America notified the German Navy that the Queen Mary was leaving New York. She said she hoped I wasn't on it due to the Submarines from the German Navy causing endless trouble. Needless to say, we arrived safely after weaving back and forth in our 4 1/2 day trip to elude them.

After many missions, our planes were pretty well shot up. Holes from flack covered a good part of the exploding shells and there were many engines to replace. Our work carried on all through the night for repairs. We did everything possible to get the work done to get the planes ready for the next mission. When the "Purple Alert" was on, all lights were turned off because this meant the enemy planes were headed in our direction.

This alert was followed by a "Red Alert" which indicated that our base was the "intended target". Every night at 7 p.m., we could hear the drone of a German airplane overhead. If one's watch did not indicate 7 p.m., we would automatically reset them because we knew how punctual our enemy was. We would not turn our spot lights on him even though he was taking pictures of our activity. If we had opened fire to shoot him down, our doings would indicate there was something important we didn't want him to know.

Coventry, England was directly east of our airfield and received a good amount of Air Raids. They were about 40 to 50 miles east of us so, when they were getting bombed, many times we would wait for explosions there to see what we had to do on the repairs to help complete our job because we couldn't use our lights.

The hours we put in were endless. If we had finished our repairs on our plane, we would then offer help to another crew who still had not completed their repairs. One of our main thoughts in getting all the planes possible in the air was because it might be that one plane that had a direct hit on the target and would not necessitate our going back a second time with more loss of life.

It was seven months overseas when I received a Cable Gram saying: "Congratulations Gene on a new baby son; Mother and baby doing fine."

I was so relieved that the event went along so well. It didn't take too long before receiving pictures of Therese and Jimmy. Incidentally, this also increased my allotment in pay.

Our first heavy bomber plane was a B-17-D and it was named "Leapin' Lizz". I forgot how many missions it had. On one occasion, I had mentioned to the Navigator I'd like to take a "Milk Run" mission (a short one). This one day he said the next mission would be a "short one" but I didn't feel like going on it due to the time it took by time they rendezvoused with the other groups. "Lizz" was to be the stand-by "Tail End Charlie"; to fill in if another plane aborted for mechanical reasons. As fate would have it, the plane pulled in behind to formation and, in doing so, flipped over on her back due to turbulence of the planes ahead. One of the "Waste Gunners" (he handled one of the side guns) was a former Aircraft Mechanic. (We mechanics seldom wore our parachute harness due to many things being checked in flight. As the plane flipped, he jettisoned the side door to escape. He just about had his chute clipped on one hook when someone behind him kicked him out. He landed safely but eight members of the crew were not saved. The navigator managed to bail out and also landed safely. On talking to him he said, "See, if you did go on the flight, you would probably have made it. I told him

"Sure but if I were in your compartment, you might not have made it because I'd be out before he ever thought about it. He said, "My Gosh! I didn't think about that."

Our replacement plan was to arrive and my Engineering Captain told me the time it was to arrive. I don't recall why he didn't contact my Crew Chief because he was to be in charge.

Upon landing, I was introduced to the pilot Lt. Jack Watson. When I asked him if he was "The" Lieutenant Jack Watson he laughed and said "I guess, I am 'The' Lieutenant Watson if you put it that way."

The reason I mentioned the above was during the World Series Baseball Championship of 1942, the radio announcer was talking about buying War Bonds. He mentioned that the Bonds helped our government in building ships and also airplanes. This B-17 flying above tuned in on the game and when the announcer mentioned B-17, the Lt. said he threw out his chest forward and pushed the stick forward buzzing the stadium. Still talking about how their War Bonds helped pay for the B-17. "I buzzed them again. The mayor of New York tried to have him 'busted' but he was shipped overseas. Lt. Watson and I became friends and I flew with him a number of times. He was an exceptional pilot.

Our new plane had to be named and name we picked was "Yankee Doodle Dandy." The first part 'Yankee was painted red; Doodle was white, and Dandy was blue. For each mission I painted a small bomb insignia on the pilot's side; for each enemy plane shot down, a swastika was painted above the bombs. We had a total of 48 missions on her and I don't recall any other B-17 on our field that had as much battle damage as her. I lost track of the number of engines and super-chargers we replaced because of battle damage.

Yankee Doodle was scheduled to have an additional gun installed in the nose at the Bombardiers station. This was a venerable place that the German pilots discovered was a weak spot of the Fort. They would fly in dead level towards us and wiggled their tail from side to side while firing their 20 mm guns at us. The upper guns could not lower themselves low enough and the ball turret gunner could not shoot higher. Our one tactic was the pilot would ask which gunner was available to take him on. If the upper turret was available, the pilot would drop the plane's nose to get him and vice versa for the ball turret. The German fighters then developed a countering manoeuvre by flying upside down; firing their guns then goes into a steep dive. This was due to the increased speed they gained in the dive.

Before the new guns were installed, the tactic of lifting or lowering the nose made us a bigger target.

While we were on the field having the new gun installed, we pulled the necessary inspections which were routine. This field, Snederthin Heath, was a goldmine for spare parts. Because of the rubber strikes back in the States, it was really difficult getting especially rubber products. If a plane was shot up and much work had to be done to get it back in flying condition, anyone needing a part not in stock would literally "cannibalize" another plane.

Many times we had to put the plane on jacks because someone needed tires. (They would take the whole wheel.) We in turn would have to do likewise when our plane was repaired. All this caused double work for repairs.

Seeing all the spare parts so wonderfully catalogued made us feel like kids in a candy shop. Two of our air crew had a tandem bicycle and they pedalled back to our field to see what parts the Supply Shop and Crew Chiefs needed. We packed our plane with so much supplies that there was barely enough room to get in.

When all our work was completed, two other B-17s stopped off bringing us a flying crew. We unloaded 1/3 of what we had into one of the other planes.

As the new relief crew approached us, one of them was a radio man. When I saw him, I told our crew we were going to "crack up". The reason for my prediction was he was in several mishaps in which he escaped unharmed. The gang laughed and we took off heading back to our field in Molesworth. I was in the Bombardier's position and as we approached our field, I was watching our ball club down below with binoculars. Thinking it might be a rough landing, I removed the binocs and prepared to be ready. As we came in, we "Pan caked" coming straight down breaking our right landing gear. I bounced up to the ceiling and down again. The new gun was stabilized but still bounced all over the place. The propellers of No. 3 and No. 4 engines were bent back like rubber bands. One piece came through the right side and struck 12" from my head.

We were doing 94 miles per hour and Lt. O'Connor did a good job of keeping the damaged side up. We were heading directly for the plane "Hell's Angels" and it looked like curtains for us. Just about 50 yards from Hell's Angels, our right wing lowered and we hit a 55 gallon paint drum and spun completely around before coming to a stop. Both No. 3 and No. 4 engines were ruined and the inner and outer right wing was demolished.

I came up to the Pilot's compartment and told everyone to leave by the rear entrance. As they left, I cut the main-line switch to prevent a fire, then grabbed a fire extinguisher. Went out the front escape door hoping the left landing gear would hold up. Each engine had its own fire extinguisher, but I decided not to use them due to the ruptured gas tanks and possibly causing an explosion.

Lt. O'Connor sat on the damaged wing with his hands on his head. I told the investigating officers it was due to our over-loading the plane with our newly discovered parts.

Two Colonels were discussing whether "Yankee Doodle" could be repaired. To a man, the Ground Crew said it could.

The next big step was to jack the plane up for removal. We used small hydraulic jacks first then installed 2x6 pieces of wood to set another set of jacks on.

After jacking the right wing up about 2', we had a huge rubber coated balloon to spread out under the damaged wing. It was my job to drag it under as far as I could then flop out the "guy ropes" towards the wings trailing edge. It had occurred to me the wing could have collapsed any moment. When the balloon was properly positioned, air was pumped into it to raise the wing high enough to install wing jacks. This being accomplished, we removed the damaged right landing gear and replaced it with a new assembly.

Yankee Doodle was towed to the hanger for repairs because the damage was extensive. Number three and four engines were removed then; the outer wing and inner wing panels were next. This was a giant project because all the electrical lines; fuel lines; hydraulic lines

etc. had to be dismantled before new work could be done. Aside from making the necessary repairs, we had to guard our ship against others seeking hard-to-get parts to repair their planes. Any item removed from our plane had to be written down on the Mechanics Form 1-A. Then in turn, we had to reserve the job of replacing same from other damaged aircraft.

When all the required work was done, the plane was towed out of the hanger. We started engines and taxied back to our disposal area to make further minute checks before releasing the plane for flight inspection. This being done, the next step was a request for a flight as a final test before releasing the plane for combat.

We taxied toward the main runway and took off for the final check. I was the flight engineer and we had to "slow time" No. 3 and 4 engines before releasing the plane for combat. The reason for this procedure was to "break-in" the engines for normal wear and it also extended the life of the engines.

During this four and one-half hour of slow-timing, the pilot said, "Well O'Brien, I suppose this will be a 'jinx ship'." This didn't go good with me because we were sure of our workmanship. I asked him to release control of the stick and the "Yankee" flew straight as an arrow.

I don't recall how many missions she had since repair but the usual battle damages were repaired and taken in stride. All in all, I think she had completed 48 missions and 28 enemy aircraft destroyed.

In due time, our Commanding Officer, Major Mitchell was being sent back to the States after finishing his tour. He could pick any aircraft on the field to fly back over the ocean and he picked the "Yankee Doodle Dandy". Of course, it was a great honor to have him take our plane above all others because he had faith in our workmanship but, we were losing and old lovable friend we worked so hard on to survive.

I've had other close calls but this was one of the wildest 50 yards to eternity I hope never to repeat. Bouncing up and down, I saw "stars" which later was determined to be aluminium filings when the nose gun was installed. My final thoughts were of my wife and little son I had not yet seen.

The following day, Lt. O'Connor and I received a promotion; he from 2nd Lieutenant to 1st Lieutenant and me from Corporal to Sergeant. When we both met again for the next mission, Lt. O'Connor said to me, "O'Brien we have to do this more often."

Lt. O'Connor was one great guy. I don't recall the mission he went down on, but the town Wiesbaden erected a monument to him and his crew. The plane was badly shot up and losing altitude. I was flying very low and, from what I heard, it was close to hitting a school house when he banked the plane enough to miss it but it also lowered the flying speed below 92 mph, which caused them to crash. I know he did not survive, but am not sure if any of the nine others had been saved. To this day, some fifty odd years later, I remember him and his crew in my daily prayers. I also learned later that he jettisoned his bombs over an empty field so as not to devastate the town.

The date of the above was August 15, 1944. The 303rd Bomb Group sent 20 B-17s joining a force of 200 B-17s from other Groups.

About 20 minutes after completing the strike, and with no warning, the low formation was attacked from behind by 20-25 German fighters and nine B-17s were shot down, 7 from the 358th Squadron and 2 from the 427th. With this severe loss, it was determined that there was a spy on our field. The "Flight Map", which showed the target area, was penciled in, the "358 Bomb Squadron Wiped Out."

Vosler, a radioman and the Medal of Honor Winner was hit badly. I cleaned up the blood which circled 3 ft. wide and about an inch thick. He was hit by a 20 mm bullet and they could not remove it for fear of losing his life. I met him 3 or 4 months later and he still had it next to his heart and eventually has to go back for another operation.

Lt. Mathis, Bombardier, another Medal of Honor Winner was critically wounded when a shell tore off the nose of the airplane and he was knocked backward towards the navigator post. They were on the target run and he was sighting in the target area on his bombsite. On the bombing run, the Bombsite controls the movement of the plane and the pilot stands by steadying the plane in its place of the formation. Lt. Mathis crawled back to his position and said, "Bombs....." and died at the control. The Navigator completed the sentence by saying "Away". The target area was devastated.

The following morning those who had not returned had all their personal belongings put out in front of their barracks waiting to be sent home. It was a sad day for all of us realizing our great loss of friends. We couldn't let this stop us because there was a War to be won so; we started out all over again helping the new replacements and sweated out the arrival of our new planes.

After our loss, orders came out that the pilots and men of the flight crews were not to mention the targets after interrogation to anyone including the ground crews. The reason was to try to catch the spy. I was coming back from lunch and I asked my Crew Chief John Simpson who he thought the spy was. He said he had no idea. I then asked him to answer some of my questions such as:

1. What time the English workers showed up for work on the field? Answer: 7:45 a.m.
2. When did we see them next? Answer: 10:30 a.m. - Tea Time
3. We next saw them when? Answer: 12 o'clock noon for lunch
4. When did we not see them? Answer: 2:30 p.m.-Tea Time

John was getting slightly peeved by this time so I told him only a few more questions.

5. We next saw them? Answer: 4:30 - Quitting Time

All his answers coincided with mine, then I asked about "Limey ", a short likeable Englishman, who was still at "Midnight Chow" which started at 11 p.m. Limey should have gone home with the rest of the workers and here he was sitting down and eating with us. On walking back to our ship or our barracks, he noticed the Armament workers loading the planes with bombs. If they were 500 lb or 1000 lb bombs he mentioned the likely target they were going to hit. This led me to believe that he might be the spy.

Both John and I hoped we were wrong but decided to mention it to Lt. Newell, our Engineering Officer. All was explained as written here. From that day one, we never saw Limey again.

Was he the spy? Who knows?! I have been asked several times if I thought by turning him in, it may have saved lives. My answer was if he was responsible for the loss of Airmen in a matter of several minutes, those who survived the war may still be among us now.

I've investigated with a father and son in England regarding "Limey" and they haven't been able to get information needed.

Limey, being out so late and not taking a ride home as other workers were, had to walk home which leads me to believe he lived in the same small village of Molesworth right outside of our Airfield.

I have written to the Postmaster there but received no reply. We didn't know Limey's real name which made our inquiries more difficult to learn.

A very large book, by Harry Gobrecht, researched and in print contains a complete history of the 303rd Bomb Group. Even the minutest missions are included containing the time; hours in flight; the targets; names of crew members; support fighters; enemy planes shot down; amount of damage; crew members injured and many other credits too numerous to list. When I talked to Harry at the Colorado Reunion, he said there was nothing in the records indicating the spy.

When we needed more planes, a new one arrived and Kirkendall, Simpson's assistant became its new chief. I was assigned to it and after consultation, named it "Bam Bam". We painted a head of a Disney-like rabbit. We had a number of repairs but nothing as bad as Yankee Doodle. It did blow a left landing gear tire which in turn bent number 1 and 2 engine props. Had to charge both engines and conduct the usual tests in breaking them in.

One cold November in the winter, we were pre-fighting it for a mission. I was in the pilot's seat and Kirk was in the Co. Pilots seat. Being cold out, the cockpit windows frosted up from our breathing. The window was well frosted when a glimpse of light caught my eye. It was coming from the area of one supply tent where we kept our tools and necessary equipment. Scraping off the frost, I told Kirk, "I think the tent is on fire." To get a better look, I slid the pilot's window open and said, "No." George's number 2 engine is on fire. Without looking, I reached for the throttles to get our ship out of there. They were not positioned where they were supposed to be. I quickly pulled the throttle back to the starting position and had to turn the magnetic switch on because they were turned off. Managed to get No. 1 engine going; the No. 2 and 4 engines cut off. My next move was to get the ship the H--- out of there. Not knowing whether Kirk went out the front escape hatch or reserve door created an additional problem! If he went out the front and I taxied out, I might hit him with my props. If he went out the rear and I taxied out I might blow him into George's props.

My thoughts? I thought of Johnny Bull, the cartoon character in the Tribune showing a small fellow in striped pants, tails and a top hat sitting on a keg of dynamite. There were 6000 pounds of bombs behind me in the Bomb Bay.

Finally I noticed Kirk's silhouette near the fire so decided to take the ship to the opposite end of the field. While getting the plane into position to move out, I noticed whoever was in the other cockpit, was trying to get the No .2 engine revved up to blow out his fire. He couldn't get the RPM up so just about where my tail cleared his plane; I felt the relief of the world taken off my shoulders. As I started taxiing out, I lined up my No. 1 engine with his No. 2 engine; put on my brakes and turbulence of my prop blew out his fire. I noticed he closed the local flap smothering any flame that might be present in the engine. I saw a hand extend out of the cockpit indicating the fire was out. Still not taking any chances, I taxied Bam Bam to the opposite end of the field to the 427th Squadron area. Walking back some 20 minutes later, I met Kirk and I let him know I wasn't too happy in the position he left me in. Kirk laughed and said, "O'B that was fast thinking."

When the Flight Crew came out I had to direct them to where I parked the plane.

This fire happened several times more and they managed to blow it out themselves, still it was a dangerous position.

Having a specialist rating in Carburetion, I mentioned it was monitoring too much fuel while diluting the oil with a gas mixture in cold weather. No one agreed with me including the Captain, the Colonel and flight chief.

Captain Newell, our Engineering Officer called me in and informed me that he was making me George Ham's Assistant Crew Chief. This plane was called "The Floose". It was named back in the States before it was assigned to us. It was yellow and a cross between a goose and a duck. None of us knew why it was named so. While at one of our 303rd Bomb Reunions, and officer I knew flew on the ship a number of times. He said he understood the "Floose" was assembled by women. I told him that they did one heck of a job because it had 102 missions on it. It cracked-up at another field on its 102nd mission. I wanted to check it and repair it but they said it was too old.

George Ham was a very good fellow and friend. He was easy going and when I was assigned to him I had certain reservations about working with him. The Floose was the dirtiest plane on the field and when I wanted to wash it down, George, in his nice way said, "With all that oil on it, it slips through the air better." He married an English girl so, when he took off on a 48 hour pass, that's when things were done that needed it.

When I took over as Assistant Crew Chief I was given 2 engines with all the trouble. J. J. O'Brien was in charge of it before me so I asked him various questions about finding the trouble. It still caught fire and I wanted to change the carburetor. Everyone in charge said, "No." Then, one sunny day as I was washing down my engine and inspecting it, I found the trouble. When the cowling was off, someone stepped on the carburetor metering valve leaving an opening of 1/4 inch. Just then, Sgt. Don Flaherty drove up in a jeep and I showed him the trouble. He said, "O.K. O'B, you said it was the carburetor, go ahead and change it. "Don", I said, "Don't want to change it now." He said, "You son of a gun, you were the only one on the field who said it was the carburetor now you don't want to?" I asked him to go to the hanger and take the metering valve off the Hanger Queen because I don't think Supply has one. Don came back in 20 minutes and when word got out that the trouble was found I had an audience of between 20 and 30 mechanics. After installing the part, I started the engine up and, "Lo and Behold", no fire. From this incident, I noticed respect in my judgement thereafter.

Our aircraft, "The Floose" was parked off the end of the runway. The fog was very intense and I thought the mission to Dresden, Germany was to be cancelled. We were waiting for our pilot to inform us when he was given permission to taxi out to the starting point.

I was standing approximately 30-40 feet from our craft when I heard a roar of engines. The plane was coming down fast, almost hitting the vertical stabilizer. It was within 5-10 feet over me and I froze where I stood. A long scraping sound was heard when they crashed. My first thought was to rush to the scene and see if we could save the men if they were hurt. George Ham, my Crew Chief, (I was his assistant) and I heard the 50 calibre machine gun bullets exploding indicating the plane was on fire. George said if we got there in time to help the crew the bombs may go off. It was good reasoning because that is what happened. One 500 lbs went off and George said "that wasn't so bad." I said, "Right. Only I hope the rest didn't follow suit." No sooner said than done, the rest blew up and we both were blown off our feet. I remember telling him to keep his chest off the ground to prevent chest injury.

Before the explosion, we motioned to the pilot of the Floose to taxi out fast.

Heading back to the Engineering office, our Engineering Officer asked us what happened and what airplane was involved. I mentioned the above and said it was Lt. Goering.

He said if the plane was above you, how could you see the markings? I mentioned previously to Lt. Goering that he was taking off from only half the runway and to take more runway. He told me, "Sgt, when the wheels are on the ground, the plane is yours. When it's in the air, it's mine." I said, "O.K. Lt., some day you're going to come down real fast." I didn't realize how prophetic I was because that's exactly what happened. Lt. Goering thought it was "quite a feat" to get the plane in the air with a minimum of runway. He got up there a number of times before this event. The only misconception this time was he was carrying a full load of 500 lb bombs. The extra weight caused him to lose flying speed on take-off thus the crash.

One of the carburetors (the size of a car battery) flew off and almost killed a crew chief of another squadron. He was resting on a table in his Engineering Office and it came through the roof and ceiling and landed one foot from his head.

After making the report to my Captain, the tower called our Engineering Office for us to go out to the line and check the Floose, the starting point for take-off. The instruments were out of whack. On checking them, they were all operating properly. They were "shook up" a mile away so I told the pilot everything was operating properly. The plane completed the mission and there were no reports of malfunctioning.

I enlisted in the Army Air Corp Jan 9, 1942. Going through Basic Training, I checked out with excellent hearing. At the time if one had defective hearing loss he would not be accepted. I passed with flying colors.

I took tests for Aircraft Mechanics and passed. I was sent to Kansas City, Mo. for schooling at Missouri Aviation Institute, a civilian aircraft school. Mine was among the top highest scores among a class of 65 being taught.

We were stationed at Kansas City airport and aside from our class studies; we worked on test stands with aircraft engines mounted on stands. I forget how many engines were installed on these stands and I guess there were 4 or 6 each. The instructors would "put a bug" in the

engine and we would have to determine the solution to repair same. When fully operating the noise was tremendous. We were not told to wear ear guards and if they were available we would probably not be able to hear our instructor's words.

After graduating, I was sent to several camps before being assigned to the 303rd Bomb Group and the 358th Bomb Squadron. Shortly, we were shipped out to the East Coast ready for Combat Status.

As our planes arrived, each one was assigned a crew. We were stationed in Molesworth, England. I had spent 3 years overseas from Sept 1, 1942 to Sept 1, 1945. Since then, my hearing went progressively worse. My age at the time was 27 years old.

One beautiful day (there weren't many in England) I let my crew off early and stayed around taking care of minor things. A young pilot came up to me and asked me if it was possible to save gasoline. I told him "Yes" but would like to arrange a flight to check him out. When the plane was at cruising speed I asked him if he was satisfied at the instrument settings. After replying in the affirmative, I as Co-Pilot readjusted the Super Charger settings to get maximum performance. Had him practice the maneuver several times and we brought the plane back to our dispersal area. About a week later, the same Lt. was assigned to our ship. He told me where the target was and weather details. When stating it, somewhere quite a distance, I told him I didn't think he would have enough gas to get back to England and if I was right, to land at the field closest to England to gas up. The distance was great and they had a headwind going into the target most of the way. All planes reached the target without incident and on returning, a member of aircraft had to ditch in the channel and some made the coast. As was usual, we were "sweating stout" for their return. No formation in sight, we were all apprehensive. Suddenly there was a small speck in the sky. One of the Ground Crew had binoculars and said, "O'B, it your plane." It was too far off to see the markings so I said, "How can you tell?" He said, "By the #3 engine. The wing had not exhaust markings because you always kept them clean." On landing, the whole field headed for our area to learn what happened. It was the only plane to return to our base. The gasoline truck pulled up and the crew was about to go to briefing. I asked the Lt. to stall off the meeting 'til we "gassed up". He did and on checking up how much fuel was put in, I figured he had only enough fuel (67 1/2 gallons) on his return and if he were to make another approach, he would have cracked up.

The same pilots didn't necessarily fly the same plane always. There were exceptions of course.

One pilot reported the plane "shook extensively". Ground checking of engines showed no malfunction. It only happened when the pilot flew the plane. On asking him after many flights if it could be "in his mind" because no other pilots reported this condition. He said, "Ask the other nine men." I did and they all agreed with the pilot. I then requested a flight with him. I went along as Engineer and watched everything he did. Everything checked out O.K. on the take off and a short time, the plane shook so violently I thought the wings would fall off. I told the Lt. to keep it at that speed and I went down to the Navigators and Bombardiers compartment which is below and forward of the Cock-Pit. I looked out at #1 and #2 engines and they were responding smoothly. Next I check #3 and #4 engines and they checked out the same.

Under #3 engine is the right side wheel well which is recessed. The wheel was spinning backwards and I called on my microphone to the Lt. to put on the brakes. The co-pilot said to

the captain, "I think the Sarg flipped his lid." At 10,000 feet. "Put on the Brakes!" The pilot put on the brakes and the shaking stopped. Going back to the pilot's cockpit, they asked what caused the shaking to stop. I mentioned I'll have to check it out when we land. Previously, I had mentioned that the trouble sounded like gyro reaction but there was no gyro large enough to be the cause. I was wrong; the spinning is what acted as a gyro.

When we landed, I inspected the right wheel well and found a wheel stop was hit by flack. When the pilot took off, as the wheels receded, he applied the brakes. The purpose was to apply pressure to stop the wheel rotation. As soon as they were stopped, he again pressed on the brakes pedal to release the pressure to prevent leakage of the hydraulics fluid in the line in the event the lines were hit by flack.

It was possible having enough built up pressure to help slow down the plane on landing.

This incident proves that this pilot was the only pilot that followed the procedure to a "T" as mentioned above.

The humor part of the incident was displayed by the pilots when I was going to chow. They were walking the opposite direction and when they saw me, they said, "Hey fellows, if your plane was shaking like Hell at 10 thousand feet, put on your brakes!" It always got a laugh.

Another beautiful day in England (there weren't many) we were Slow-timing an engine and several of us mechanics (I was one) went along because there was nothing to do.

We had the waste sides open which housed 50 calibre guns. We were at about 3000 feet and admiring the countryside. All of a sudden, the plane shot downward and I ended up on my hands and knees on the plane's ceiling. I tried to pick myself off the ceiling to no avail until I "floated" off. It was a wonderful feeling until I floated to the side and my head struck the cables (for the elevator) which were anchored against the side area. We were still going down and my hair was caught where the mica guides up, which the cables passed through. The pilot probably trying frantically to control the plane. Luckily for me, Mike Gaich was standing next to me before the quick descent. He had probably gotten a hold on the 50 caliber gun to hold him down. As I floated, he saw the situation I was in and just before we leveled off, held my waist and got a hold of my hair and gave it a yank to free me.

If he hadn't been there to do what he did, I would have been scalped.

Going forward to the cockpit to find what caused the incident, was told that, as we were flying beneath the cumulus clouds, a British Lancaster bomber descended straight ahead of us on a collision course. The normal procedure would be to pull back on the stick and fly upward (which the other pilot did). Our pilot, in one-tenth of a second pushed the stick forward which sent us downward. When we leveled off, I know I said a prayer of thanks to Our Lord and St. Jude.

One day, a captured German airplane was flown into our field. I forget the type but it had 2 engines. It was smoking on its approach. Captain Newell, our Engineering Officer told me to go out and see what had to be done to fix it. I mentioned two things against us: I can't read German and I don't have metric tools. The Captain smiled and said it was O.K to use pliers or whatever. I marvelled at the plane's construction. It's been a long time ago and I did fix the trouble whatever it was.

We used to have Boeing and Douglas representatives come out to the line (our work area) and ask what improvements could be incorporated to ease our workload and cut the long hours we put in for repairs. I mentioned two things which could really help us: if the wiring could incorporate Cannon Plugs and not as long wire connectors between structures. I.e. when the wires were hit by flack or 20 mm bullets, dismantling the sections to repair was time consuming. They asked, "Do you know what the means?" I said, "Yes! OHMS Resistance." According to them, it seemed like asking too much.

The other thing I mentioned was to put a shut-off valve at the oil tank so when we had to change an engine, we wouldn't have to spill oil all over the place.

Neither of the above was installed in our Air Craft. Going back to the captured German plane: the above mentioned "was done" on their planes.