

Recollections of the War and Letters Home

from the memoirs of Edward Clinton Knapp, Jr. (777th)

The US was preparing for the possibility of involvement in the war in Europe, so men were drafted for one year of training and then being part of the reserve. My brother George was drafted in December 1940 and I was drafted in February 1941. When George's one year was up, the US was in the war.

George had been training for a year and soon was sent to North Africa to fight against the Germans led by Rommel. I was sent to Fort Benning, Georgia for my basic training with the 8th Infantry. I was assigned to the 4th Division Quartermaster as a truck driver. We continued to train for war and that included marksmanship, parade marching and 30 mile hikes with packs and rifles. I had enough of this and decided to try for pilot training again.

Our outfit was transferred to Fort Gordon in Augusta, Georgia, which was a newly constructed base, and near a nicer town. As a truck driver, I would make trips to Atlanta with dirty laundry and pick up clean laundry. I kept my truck in top condition and would tune it up myself. Other drivers asked if I would tune up their trucks so the word got out and I was sent to a mechanics school in Aberdeen, Maryland. This was great because I would hop a train home on weekends.

At home I got engaged to a high school sweetheart. When the course was over I was transferred to the vehicle maintenance shop. I had brought my 1938 Buick to Georgia. On one trip to town I went to Woolworths to get a birthday card for my fiancée. At the counter, there was a cute Georgia Peach. She was being helpful and said "didn't we have a good time last night." I had been at the USO the night before but I didn't remember seeing her. I made a date to see her again.

On 19 August 1942 I married the "peach," my million dollar baby from a 5&10 cent store. Of course, things weren't so good at home but I had been upset with my fiancée because I'd heard that she had been seeing other soldiers and I wasn't getting mail from her.

My mother and George's wife came to the wedding. Our honeymoon was a three-day pass and we stayed in the nicest hotel. The next morning my wife told my mother that Eddie is really the stuff. Down south that would mean that she loved

me. My wife's middle name was Evelyn, I called her Eve. She was really the stuff.

28 September 1942 I was transferred to the Air Corps. 14 October they sent me to Nashville, Tennessee for physicals and indoctrination. Then to Maxwell Field Alabama for pre-flight school. There we were cadets, similar to West Point underclass and upperclass. This was tough. I passed over 90% and we were sent to Carlestrom Field in Arcadia Florida for Primary Flight training. We had to learn how to fly the single engine biplane in eight hours of instruction or we would washout. All flight courses were nine weeks.

Then to Basic Training in a single wing, single engine, much more powerful plane in Bainbridge, Georgia. The plane flew at 140 mph - 210 top speed and landed at 100 mph. Next, it was on to Columbus, Mississippi for twin engine flight training. This is where I got my wings and became a Second Lieutenant on 28 July 1943. I applied for fighter pilot, but I wound up as a 4-engine bomber pilot and was sent to B-17 school in Columbus, Ohio. 20 October I was sent to Salt Lake City, Utah for more physicals and assignment. I was told that I would be a B-17 pilot.

They would make up a crew of two pilots, navigator, bombardier, radio operator, engineer and four gunners. To find out who would be first pilot we were to flip a coin and so I became a co-pilot. Then things really got screwed up - which is normal army routine. They changed our assignment from B-17 to B-24. The pilot designation remained the same and I was a co-pilot on a B-24 with a newer crew.

I was very upset but now I know that what happened was for the best. We were then sent to Mountain Home, Idaho for more training as a crew. Then to Pocatello, Idaho for phase training which we completed in three months. I was then assigned to the 464th Bombardment Group, 778th Bomb Squadron. Next the war.

My family kept all my letters home - so most of the information to follow is taken from those letters. We flew as a crew to Topeka, Kansas on 7 February 1944 for more training. The navigator's wife and Eve followed us there. 16 February we flew to Lincoln, Nebraska and the wives had to leave us. 21 February we flew to Morrison Field, Florida. 23 February we flew to Trinidad, 25 February to Belem, Brazil. We developed a gas leak and flew to Fortalaza, Brazil for repairs. We had nice accommodations and the freedom to go to town and the beach. The natives

were out with their wares to sell to the soldiers and we had the money. I did buy a few trinkets as souvenirs.

8 March we crossed the big pond to Dakar, North Africa. Then to Marrakech and finally to Tunis where we were temporarily based until our field in Italy was ready. Here we lived in tents and that would be for all of my duty overseas. Training continued and we flew practice missions.

Before we left the states, the other pilot's brother had given us a puppy which we called "Putt-putt." We named him after our small generator on board the ship - the one used for emergency electricity. The puppy stayed with us and usually would hang out in the shade underneath a nearby truck. One day it happened that the truck moved and poor little Putt-putt was killed. We felt that this was an omen of what could happen to us.

I missed breakfasts since milk and eggs and coffee were powdered or ersatz. The Arabs would sell us eggs - fifteen for \$2.00 - which we cooked on our stove in the tent. This was a treat. About the stove, it was made from half of a 55 gallon drum with the open end at the bottom. We got some parts from the mechanics so that we could run a tube, with a valve to adjust the gas, to flow as a drip. This kept us warm and could also be used as a stove for cooking.

Moved to a temporary base at Goia, Italy and started our missions on 2 May 1944. The first one was to Spezia, Italy and our Group lost one plane in a mid-air collision. 25 May our other pilot flew as co-pilot on our plane with a higher ranked officer - it was hit by flak and fighters. They were forced to crash land and we found out later that he was captured and a prisoner of war.

The crew and I would go on missions as replacements for other crews. I was offered the opportunity to take over as first pilot but I decided to keep things as they were. Who knows how it would work out as all crew members returned to the states with no disabilities.

We finally were moved to a permanent base at Panatella, Italy. Still in tents. We were on a hill on one side and the 465th was on the other side with the runway in a valley in between. Usually they would wake us at 5:00 AM when we had a mission. We would have breakfast, then go to a briefing where we would get info on the target - enemy fighter, flak, our fighter cover and escape route in case we

had to bail out or crash land. On return we would be interrogated about all we observed. By that time, we were ready for sack time.

At briefing the chaplain would say a prayer. This is one of them.

An Airman's Prayer
Lord guard and guide us as we
Fly through the great spaces in the sky.
Be with us as we take the air
In morning light and sunshine fair.
Eternal Father strong to save
Give us courage and make us brave.
Protect us wherever we go
From shell and flak and fire and foe.
Most loved Member of our crew
Rides with us up in the blue.
Direct our bombs upon the foe
But shelter those who Thou dost know.
Keep us together on our way
Grant our work success today
Deliver us from hate and sin
And bring us safely down again.
Oh, God protect us as we fly
Through lonely ways across the sky.

The end

And I wrote "There are no atheists in the air."

On 7 July the Red Cross notified me that my brother George was killed on 17 June. He was a staff Sergeant in the 9th Division Recon Troop at St. Lo, France. His squad was hit by artillery fire. I was told that I would not have to continue in combat but I decided to finish my missions. I had 27 more to go and I wanted to get revenge.

I got a break between missions and was allowed to get some R&R in Rome. I took the tour and especially enjoyed the visit to the Vatican. We went to an Italian restaurant, "Broadway Bills," and had the works - including all the wine we could drink.

Back to complete my missions and, as it turned out, the 50th was the one that scared me the most. We were hit with flak which tore a big hole in the rudder and damaged a tire. Made it back to base without a mishap by the grace of God.

On a letter home, dated 22 August, I expressed my relief that the stress was over and I would be waiting for my return home aboard a troopship out of Naples. After each mission the Red Cross would offer us a shot of whiskey if we wanted. We decided that we would let it accumulate so all finished with our missions could have a celebration party. So, on 24 August we had the party but suffered the next morning. Two of our crew weren't there. One was missing in action and the other was a prisoner of war. We did a toast to them.

On 26 August I got my silver bars when I made first lieutenant. 4 September I went to the Isle of Capri for R&R. Had a wonderful time, first class accommodations, wine and untouchable women. I went to the beach and the Blue Grotto. We listened to music while we ate, had waiters to serve us, went to movies and dances. Sometime after 27 September I must have been enroute back to the states. We landed in Norfolk, Virginia and then went home on leave.

I had R&R at Atlantic City, New Jersey either on my return overseas or after my discharge. My next assignment was to gunnery school in Ft. Myers, Florida to fly B-24's with gunners to practice shooting at targets. I had to take a transition course in piloting, link trainer code, physical training, lectures and orientation. Eve was with me and we had to find a place to stay since we couldn't afford the cost of a room at the hotel for \$4.00 a day. We did find a room in a house for \$8.50 a week.

I knew that my stay at gunnery school was temporary so I applied for instructor's, engineering school and instrument school but to no avail. I bought a 1941 Nash convertible because I was limited to using a taxi or bus to travel back and forth from town and around the airbase. There were no cars built for civilians from 1941 to 1946 - only military vehicles.

Some of my flight time was on a PT-17, making passes at a tower so the gunners could practice tracking fighters in combat. I really enjoyed it since it was the same type of plane that I learned to fly. After finishing my mission with the gunners I would get permission to leave the area to a location where I could do aerobatics. One mission on the B-24 was a night mission around the state for gunners to get

training. My co-pilot was one of the Firestones (of the tire company). I doubted that he would ever see combat.

We made a trip to Augusta and Eve stayed to wait the birth of our first child. I returned to base and was told that since the war was almost over I would get my discharge. It seemed like a good idea to me and so I was able to be at the hospital at Camp Gordon when George Russell was born on 2 August 1945. I worked a short time at Daniels Field in Augusta. This is where they were reconditioning military trucks. When Russ was old enough we moved to New Jersey and stayed with Mom and Pop for a while.

While looking for a story I came across my brother George's high school yearbook. One of his classmates was Robert Lewis. I knew "Bud," as I called him. He was active in baseball and football. He was also in the German Club and the Science Club. He became a man in U.S. history. Bud served time as a pilot during World War II. Toward the end of the war he trained as a B-29 pilot.

On 6 August 1945 "Bud" was the co-pilot of the Enola Gay with Colonel Paul Tibbets as first pilot and commander. The atomic bomb called "Little Boy" was dropped on Hiroshima, Japan. Robert Lewis' expression was "My God, what have we done?"

I write from the conversation on the flight recorder minutes prior to the drop.

"Col. Tibbits: 'Five minutes to target drop.'"

"Capt. Lewis: 'I don't like this at all Paul.'"

"Col. Tibbits: 'It's a little late for objections.'"

"Capt. Lewis: 'I don't care, we are Americans, we have the right to speak our minds. That is what makes us different from the Japs and Krauts.'"

(Some incidental conversation.)

"Col. Tibbits: 'Drop the bomb. Little boy is away. I'm losing control.'"

"Capt. Lewis: 'It's the shockwave.'"

Later Lewis would say, "If I live a hundred years I'll never quite get these few minutes out of my mind."

Lewis later became a hypnotherapy patient of psychology professor Dr. Glenn Van Warrebey of Sparta, New Jersey. The doctor has written about Lewis' case. Lewis and other crew members suffered feelings of guilt for the 140,000 lives that were lost in Hiroshima, but then found justification because of the many Allied lives that were saved. Lewis created a "mushroom" statue from Italian marble. He called it "God's Wind" - interpreted from Japanese as "God's Will." Lewis and many of his crew had gone to their graves seriously wondering if they had done the right thing.

I can account for 225 letters I wrote home. There were 60 to my wife and many to friends, brothers in the service and buddies in the service. So, from February 1941 (Fort Dix) to July 1945 (Fort Myers, Florida), I can justify at least 350 letters.

27 February (my first letter): "We are getting the works these first few days. I'm in a tent with four other fellows and they are all nice guys. Last night we got some good entertainment. The food is O.K. and we get plenty. Expect to be leaving soon for Georgia. Give my regards to all. Will write as soon as I get to the next location. Love to all, Ed"

1 November 1941: "On maneuvers in North Carolina. I met up with George, who was with another fellow who had a brother in my outfit, so we went to town had supper and went to a movie and took a shower where the town had arranged for soldiers in schools and recreation centers. We went to a church recreation room and are writing our letters. The people in town have been nice to the soldiers since they had heard stories about how rough the soldiers were. Time to get back to camp. Love to all, Ed"

17 August 1942 - "Dear Folks, (We had moved to Camp Gordon from Fort Benning, Georgia.) This is probably the last letter from Eddie as the next will be from Eddie and Evelyn. I have a few minutes before going on a 15 mile hike so I'll write a few lines. We are getting married in the chapel by a Catholic priest at about 8:00 PM on Wednesday evening. Afterwards we are having a reception at Eve's sister, Tweetsie's, house. I am glad to hear that Mom will be here with George's wife. Hoping you will like her as much as I do. Love to all, Ed"

6 May 1943 (from Bainbridge flight school): "Dear Mom, Sunday is Mother's Day and I know it is a hard day for you with three of your sons away for nearly a year. I know it will make you think of when we were all together. I hope it will be a comfort to know that on Mother's Day we will all be thinking especially of you.

Jack, in Texas, George in North Africa and me, here. We are thinking that we will get this mess over with so that you and millions of other mothers will not have those sleepless nights and never-ending worry. I know that it sounds like I copied this from other people's writings, but it's me, speaking from my heart. Just like what million's of other soldiers are saying today - 'I've got the best mother in the world.' Love always, Eddie"

7 July 1943 (Somewhere in Italy): "The Red Cross notified me this morning that George was killed in France on June 17th. I've been trying to write you all day but I haven't been able to put my thoughts in writing. It is shocking news and I can't help thinking how upset you all must be. I only wish that there was something I could do. Being so far away, I am lost. I know we should all be together at this time. It's been hard for all of us while George was in North Africa and Sicily. I know that you all had the same thoughts as I, expecting the worst and praying for the best. The uncertainty is what made it so hard. Then came the invasion of France and the odds were lowered."

"It's not fair. I see no reason why men should have to be subjected to so much when a rotation could and should have been affected. Those men had already had more than their share. They weren't hardened, I know. The more a person has to go through that hell, the more he becomes scared. He can see it happen to others too often. The only way an experienced soldier benefits is that he knows better how to protect himself."

"Sorry I seem so bitter, but I've always felt that way about the 9th Div. They are a great outfit and they've done a great job. They deserve a rest. Now I want to complete my tour as soon as possible and get home to you. It's been a tough war for our family. Let us get out of it and let some of the civilians in uniform back in the States take their turn. My thoughts and prayers are with you more than ever before. Please don't take it so hard. I know it is easier to say than to do, but it is something we will have to force ourselves to take and it hurts. I'm sorry. Your loving son, Eddie"

I flew the next day after and wrote: "It was one of our most successful missions. I was glad. Somehow I believe that more than one German paid that day because of bombs from our plane."

"22 August 1944 (Somewhere in Italy): "It's all over but the shouting. Finished today and now I'm a 'ground pounder.' Nothing to do but wait for orders to go HOME. I'm thankful for all the prayers and hoping I would make it. Seeing you soon. Your loving son."

During the war my father (Pop) loaned his Chris Craft 26-foot Cruiser to the Coast Guard to cruise New York Harbor to check for any signs of enemy action. I was away and not sure of his job. However, I know he had some duty since I have a picture of him in a Coast Guard uniform. He was a member of the Elks Club and active on the Crippled Kiddies Committee.

He had docked his boat in Staten Island and somehow got information about the soldiers rehabilitating at Halloran Hospital who were disabled and some who were paraplegics. Pop had a good heart and wanted to do something for these soldiers. He arranged to get permission to take them on a day trip fishing and cruising. To add to their enjoyment, he would have girls from our family go on the trip as they were all about the same age as the soldiers.

What could be better than cruising with drinks, food, fishing and pretty girls? In addition, Pop and his other Elks members would organize a night on the town - trips to a restaurant and theater on Broadway. Also, Pop was instrumental in creating a plan for the soldiers to get an award of money to help them buy a car with special devices installed so that they could drive themselves.

[Editor's note: Ed's grandson, Michael, not only helped Ed compile his memoir (this story is an excerpt from the memoir), Michael and the family also made a copy of Ed's flight diary available to you, our visitor. Please note that, in order to preserve the integrity of Ed's story and his flight diary, the family retains full copyright to both items, inclusive. Neither of these works may be used in part in any publication without the prior written consent of the family. The downloadable diary file contains a transcript, as well as scans, of the original flight diary. Photos and other items of interest have been included as well. You may access the Ed Knapp, Jr. Flight Diary using the link immediately following the link to this document.]