

M. Sgt. James N. Bracewell  
Allerton, IA Aug. 16, 1941-Aug. 1946  
97<sup>th</sup> B.G. 414 Squadron  
Ser # 17029363

After the droughts of 1934-1936, Jim made up his mind he didn't want to farm. His girlfriend, Mildred Fenimore, who lived a few miles away, said she would not be a farmer's wife. So Jim decided to join the Army Air Corps.

Jim went to Ft. Des Moines to enlist. The officer asked Jim what he wanted to do and Jim replied, "Be a mechanic." The recruiter wanted to know what his qualifications were. Jim said from repairing farm machinery and working around tractors. The recruiter said OK.

Jim spent 45 days at Jefferson Barracks, Mo., for basic training. One day in basic training while they were marching, they did an about-face. Due to his size (5-foot-2) Jim's bayonet caught the throat of the guy behind him. He had no serious injuries but they moved Jim to a different spot in formation. Jim said in the mess hall you learned not to "short stop." When someone asked you to pass some food, you didn't take some and then pass it or you had extra duties.

Jim was sent to Chanute Field, Rantoul, Ill., for training in the mechanics school. There he met Chester "Bob" Cummings of Oskaloosa, IA. He had enlisted the same day Jim did.

Cummings had a car and they were about 290 miles from home so they would get home occasionally. Mil's folks had moved closer to Jim's and they would go to each other's house for Sunday dinner. The weekend of Dec. 7, 1941, Jim and Chester were home. About 2:00 in the afternoon, someone turned the radio on and they found out about Pearl Harbor. The announcer said all military personnel were supposed to return to their post immediately. Jim called Chester's mother and she said he was at his girlfriend's house. Jim told Chester's mother to call him and meet at their rendezvous point in 2 hours. Jim's brother drove him there and the two headed back to base. Before the attack, security was pretty lax. When they returned, the car was searched, their pockets were emptied and they were searched.

They finished their training in mid-January 1942. They were then sent to McDill Field, Tampa, Fla. Because of his size and having a hard time filling flight crews, Jim was assigned to tail gunner on a B-17. He went on a round-about trip by train up to St. Louis, Denver, Salt Lake City and back down to Las Vegas. At Indian Springs, he went through paratrooper school and gunnery school for B-17s. He learned to shoot at a towed target with a 30-cal. machine gun from an A-T6 airplane. They were strapped into the planes during practice. They hit down drafts once in a while and would have been thrown from the plane if not strapped in.

Then Jim rode the railroad in reverse order to Sarasota, Fla. They began their training missions flying day and night. They went on practice bombing missions to the Yucatan Peninsula and were on submarine patrol along the coast. Jim thought he saw a sub one day but it was a giant sea turtle.

When they got their orders to go overseas, Jim and Mil had talked about getting married. Jim said if Mil would wait they would get married when he returned. She said OK. They had a code name for different places around the world. Jim sent Mil a

letter with the word "ancestor" in it, then she knew he was going to England as both of their families had come from there.

They were staying in Presque Isle, Maine, getting ready to go overseas when the Japs attacked the Aleutian Islands. They flew to McChord Field, Wash., where they patrolled the west coast for three weeks. They returned to Presque Isle, Maine, refitted the B-17s with new engines and left for England. Stationed at Grafton-New Underwood, they practiced for their daylight bombing missions. All the crewmen were taught to fly the B-17s well enough to get them back over friendly territory, not necessarily to save the plane but to have the crew be able to bail out over friendly territory.

Their living quarters were quonset huts with pot-bellied stoves. Their line chief was Arja Smailes. He would wake them in the morning by banging on the pot-bellied stove. He retired as a lieutenant colonel in San Antonio, Texas. The R.A.F. issued everyone a bicycle as they were one-half mile from the planes. This was when Jim learned to ride a bike.

On August 17, 1942, they made their first daylight bombing mission on the rail yards at Rouen, France. When Jim was tail gunner, he had his parachute tied farther up in the plane as he could not crawl out from his position with it on.

After 11 missions, Jim was in the hospital with pneumonia. As the planes were not pressurized, it was 30 to 40 degrees below zero at 20,000 to 25,000 feet with only fleece-lined clothes to wear. The second day he was in the hospital, his plane, called "Hell's Kitchen," went on its 12<sup>th</sup> mission. It took a direct hit and blew up in mid air with no survivors. Jim told the CO he was trained as a mechanic and he would not go back on another bombing mission.

The day after Jim got out of the hospital, he went to the maintenance officer and said he wanted to get back on the ground crew because he was trained as a mechanic. The officer said he couldn't let him back on as a buck sergeant. Jim told him to bust him back to whatever.

They got word of a badly shot up B-17 coming in. Jim watched it land. The pilot made a beautiful landing. The hydraulic system was badly damaged so the plane had no brakes. There was a road across the end of the runway with a 1- to 1-1/2-foot-deep ditch. The B-17 flipped up in the air and landed on a passing truck (lorry), killing the driver.

Jim told the maintenance officer to give him one man and they would strip the plane. It took about two weeks and they had all the parts tagged and cataloged and put back in the maintenance shed. The maintenance officer put Jim back on the ground crew as a corporal.

The two guns in the bombardier compartment were the responsibility of the bombardier and navigator. On the bomb, the navigator chose which 50 cal. to man. After the bomb run, the bombardier would man the other on E model B-17s. They mounted a single 50 cal. straight ahead as the German fighters figured out they couldn't be shot at effectively in a frontal attack. Most B-17 losses were from this form of attack because the pilot and co-pilot were usually killed and because the single 50 cal. wasn't enough firepower. The B-17 G model came out with the twin 50 cal. turret under the cockpit. The G models came before they left for Africa.

After being reassigned to mechanic duty, Jim met Hank "Hog Eyes" Heyland, Wadsworth "Buck" Jackson, Ernst "Knobby" Knobloch and Paul "Big" Howe (or "Pisser" as he was sometimes called because he complained a lot). An Englishman came up to Jim one day and asked to borrow his spanvor. Not knowing what he meant, Jim took him to his tool chest and the guy picked up a crescent wrench. Other slang was "wireless" - radio, "air screw" - propeller, and "lorry" - truck.

In the invasion of North Africa, Jim left England Nov. 9, 1942, and they had to stop at Gibraltar to refuel. They had a short runway there. If you landed too soon, you hit the Atlantic Ocean; too late and you crashed into the mountain. One B-17 crashed into the mountain; all crew was lost. A mechanic had to go with each plane. The crew chief didn't like to fly, so Jim said he would go to keep his flying hours up.

They flew to Tafaroui, Algeria. They nicknamed it "mudhole deluxe." The second night at Tafaroui, about a dozen German paratroopers dropped in on them. They destroyed two B-17s; one with flares in the gas tank, another with hand grenades. The Americans captured them and were wondering what to do with them. The Americans wanted to send them back to be interrogated but the French said they were theirs because the Germans were on their territory. The French got their way and Jim watched the French line them up against a wall and shoot them with rifles. They were only strafed once at Tafaroui.

After three or four days at Tafaroui, the French wanted help finding a bunch of civilians the Germans had taken in Oran. They went to Oran and found them in a warehouse and all were completely naked. They were all women, ages babies to old grandmas, with a little water but no food. Word was sent back to the high command in Washington, D.C., of this situation. In three days, a C-54 full of bolts of cloth was sent over so clothes could be made for them.

At Tafaroui, Carl Esinger and Jim were standing under the wing of a B-17 putting a turbo on. They had a couple bolts in it when there was an explosion. A chunk of shrapnel went through Carl's arm above the elbow and into his chest. He died on the way to the hospital.

After a couple weeks, it started raining and kept raining for two weeks straight. The ground army was taking a beating without air support. The B-17s were drug by a Caterpillar to the fighter airstrip and flown to Biskra. The first fighter group of P-38s flew escort missions with the B-17s.

During their second night at Biskra, Jim and Buck Jackson were in the plane listening to the radio. Suddenly they heard the sound of the out-of-sync engines of a German plane as he began to strafe. They ran from the plane and laid on the dark runway until he quit. A P-38 tried to take off to shoot him down, but crashed on take-off as there were no lights. The next day, fox holes were dug. Digging a fox hole in the hard-packed sand and rock at Biskra was a major and hand-blistering task using picks. Jim and Buck Jackson dug an L-shaped trench about 4 feet deep covered with armor plate from crashed planes then covered with dirt. They left a small hole in one end just big enough to squeeze through as they were bombed a strafed a lot and occasionally had paratroopers dropped on them.

During one bombing and strafing run, Jim stuck his head out to see what was going on. The 55-gallon barrels of gasoline stored near their plane had caught fire and the fuel and flames were heading for their fox hole. Jim hollered at Buck to get

The cat had been dismantled and hauled to the base in a transport plane  
They hooked onto a B-24, drug it about 50' and pulled the nose wheel off.  
Since the fighter strip was shorter they put just enough fuel in to get them to the next base.

out and they found a place to hide. When the attack was over, they went back to check damage and the gasoline had run to within 30 feet of their fox hole.

Until the railroad could be used, everything had to be flown in by plane. Putting 1,700 gallons of gasoline in a plane using 5-gallon cans was a chore. They were given one canteen of water a day, lived off Spam, dehydrated eggs and oxtail soup. They seldom shaved and had to wash their clothes in 100 octane gasoline, let them dry and put them back on. They lived in two-man tents under the date palms which was better than the mud of Tafaroui. The 97<sup>th</sup> and 301<sup>st</sup> B-17 groups were joined by the 94<sup>th</sup> P-38 fighters, the 17<sup>th</sup> B-26 bombers and a group of A-26 fighter bombers. The A-26, which stood for "attack," was a good, low-level bomber and good for straying as it was pretty fast. The name of Jim's plane was "Our Baby" and Hank Heyland crewed on the "All American." Buck Jackson crewed on the "Snoozin' Susan." The All American was rammed by a German plane with severe damage but made it back to Africa.

Not long after they were at Biskra, Jim saw a guy with two camels leaving the area close to his plane. It looked like he had something tied on the one camel. Jim hollered at him to stop but he kept going. Jim grabbed his Thompson machine gun and told the guy to stop. He kept going so Jim shot him. He had Jim's tool box tied on the one camel. The mechanics had to shoot several guys trying to steal their tools. While working on the planes, someone guarded the perimeter with a machine gun and carbine.

One day, Jim, Paul Howe, Hank Heyland and Buck Jackson signed out a 1-1/2-ton truck to go out on the battlefield. They came back with five BMW motorcycles and a German staff car. They also had a generator and a bunch of electrical wire. They came up with a light bulb and were the only tent to have electricity. They made three operating motorcycles out of the five. On an eight- to nine-hour mission, they would take their motorcycles and go swimming for four hours in the Mediterranean Sea until the B-17s came back. They got to take their motorcycles and staff car to Italy also. They were allowed to keep the staff car as they could haul 12 to 15 guys to the flight line. So they got all the gas they wanted.

Jim and another guy were standing in chow line when a German plane suddenly appeared out of one little cloud in the sky and began strafing. They took off running and, as Jim heard the plane getting closer, he hollered "hit the dirt." The other guy, M. Sgt Bill Oyster, peeled all the skin off his nose right down to the bone. This happened to several guys. On another bombing attack, a guy named ██████████ "lost it," crawled out of his fox hole and began running around. They finally wrestled him to the ground and held him until the attack was over. He was sent home with combat fatigue.

They had to stand on 55-gallon barrels to work on the engines as their work stations were lost at sea. They also had to check for scorpions before pulling the chocks from the wheels. Dust storms were constant at Biskra, causing the mechanics to change and piece together engines constantly to keep the B-17s in the air. They tried plugging the intakes, to no avail. In chow line one time, a guy got a scoop of canned cherries and by the time he sat down, they were covered with sand and dirt.

Jim had to work 36 hours straight one time to get his plane airworthy. If your plane was ready, you would help someone else. They sometimes helped the

armament crews crank bombs up into their racks. The armament crews serviced the 50 cal. guns and put the ammo in them. Jim was leaning up against a wheel of his B-17 doing some paper work. About one-fourth mile away, the armament crew was bombing up a B-17 for the next day's mission. Something happened and the plane blew up. The concussion rolled Jim about 10 to 12 feet. Two other B-17s caught fire and a lot needed patches.

On takeoff, the B-17s left every 30 seconds. Jim stood close to Margaret White, a writer for "Life" magazine, while in chow line. Also saw a USO Show with Kay Francis, Martha Ray, Carol Landis and Mitzi Mayfair.

They first bombed the oil fields at Ploiesti, Romania, from Africa, suffering heavy losses and didn't return until they perfected the Norden bombsight. On the first mission, they sent a B-17 with spare parts. John Sekena went along with the overloaded plane. Because the plane was so overloaded, the engine burned up and all bailed out. (Jim saw John at a reunion in Dayton, Ohio.)

On a mission from Maison Blanc, Jim's plane was heavily damaged and landed near Foggia, Italy. They loaded an engine and other spare parts on a C-47 landed at Foggia. Put the parts on a truck, drove up and fixed it. After fixing his plane, Jim and the other guys were going to town to blow off some steam. An infantry officer asked where they were going and they said to town. He ripped off their Air Corps badges and had them put them in their pockets. He said the people were made as hell because the Air Corps had bombed their town. He told them not to say they were Air Corps personnel as they may be hurt.

Having the plane fixed, Jim called for a pilot and he flew back with the plane. Upon landing at Chateau Rommel, North Africa, the left strut broke. The wheel went back up into the wheel well and the wing caught on the corrugated runway, ripping it from the B-17. It caught fire but didn't explode. Jim and the pilot got out of the plane, running through flames 6 to 8 inches high. The co-pilot jumped out of the plane, breaking an ankle. Jim and the pilot ran back, picked him up and got him to safety. Jim lost two teeth when he flew against the armor plating on the back of the pilot's seat. Before leaving Africa, the B-17s found a convoy of German ships and began bombing them. They received a call to stop bombing immediately as the convoy had American POWs on it. Jim's brother-in-law was on one of them but was not hurt. Some weren't so lucky.

From Maison Blanc, they went to a base outside of Polermo on the island of Sicily in the fall of 1943. They were there for a couple months before going to Italy. While there, Jim watched locals catch octopus in the rocks on shore. They would cut the tentacles off then beat them on the rocks til they turned white. Jim ate it several times and said it wasn't bad.

They sent a C-47 to retrieve a load of the "lost 500" airmen from the Ally-friendly Yugoslavian underground; the plane only came back with 12. They sent 12 C-47s at one time and brought the rest back.

The 97<sup>th</sup> then moved to Amendola, a base outside Foggia, Italy. It was a huge base with the 97<sup>th</sup>, 301<sup>st</sup>, 94<sup>th</sup> fighters and a squadron of two-engine R.A.F. Wellington bombers. They also got to move into six-man perumal tents. They were getting the bugs out of the Norden bombsight so they could see through clouds and smoke. They made many missions to Ploiesti, Romania, suffering heavy losses. They

bombed ammunition plants, rail yards, plane and other war supply plants and refineries in Germany, Austria and southern France. Didn't have the heated seats until late 1944.

The B-17s were covered in different sized pieces of aluminum. If you put a patch over the hole, it would cut the plane's air speed. If you "flush patched" it (taking out the whole piece with a hole in it and replacing it with a new one) the speed was not reduced. Robert Day was in charge of the patch fabrication department. The B-17s came with a light green paint on them. They stripped all the paint on one and it flew 12 miles per hour faster.

One day, the CO told Jim to go to the mess tent. The cook told them to take some cases of c-rations to a village up in the mountains. As they had their German staff car, they loaded up the c-rations and headed for the village. They started throwing cans out to the people when a woman came to see what was going on. She told them to bring the stuff to her house and she would get it to those who needed it the most. She and her husband were Americans and had come to the village to visit his relatives. The war broke out and he, being an Italian national, was drafted into service and she had no idea where he was. She wanted them to get her back to America but there was nothing they could do. They managed to get her some winter clothes and blankets. They made several more trips to the village with c-rations. Jim and some other guys hired locals to do their laundry. Heyland or Jackson was driving the motorcycle when he and Jim went to get laundry. He was going too fast, lost control, went through a ditch and hit a manure pile. The lady gave them a funny look when they got to her house.

A volcano had erupted near a B-25 base in Italy. Jim and others were sent there to salvage what they could. The ash was 2-1/2 to 3 feet deep. It had melted the tires and landing gears. Later on, the B-25s were refitted with eight 50 cal. in the nose and sent to the Pacific for staffing purposes.

At Amendola, the CO pulled up one day and asked Jim if he wanted to go home. Duh? Hell, yes! Jim was told to pick three guys from each of the four squadrons in the 97<sup>th</sup>. They left Amendola under sealed orders in August 1944. They loaded on the "Darby," a brand new troop ship on its first voyage at 11:00 a.m. They sailed through the Strait of Gibraltar about dusk the next day. It took six to seven days to get to New Port News, VA., still under sealed orders. He was sent to Ft. Sheridan, Ill., still under sealed orders. Got a 24-day furlough and new clothes. Was sent to Great Bend, Kansas, for two weeks, still under sealed orders. Jim married Mildred Fenimore on Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>, September 1944.

Jim was sent to the Boeing factory in Seattle, WA., still under sealed orders. Buck Jackson went there, too.

Jim worked on the new B-29s, trying to get the bugs out of them as they created so much heat the engines frequently caught fire. After four months, Jim graduated from Boeing's training school. Jim and Buck Jackson were then sent to Tucson, AZ. At Tucson, he trained new guys to be mechanics on the new B-29s. Jim told Boeing they had to put longer cuffs on the propellers. The new cuffs were ferried to them. They towed the B-29s to the end of the runway and then started the engines. They checked the magnitos and then took off as it saved the engines from getting so hot taxiing 2 to 3 miles. They worked three shifts in the heat at Tucson. The CO called

one day about 10 a.m. and wanted to talk to Jim. Mil said Jim was sleeping and didn't want to wake him. Jim was sleeping on the linoleum floor as it was the coolest part of the house. He said to ask Jim if he wanted to be discharged. Mil promptly woke Jim up. The next day the CO took the sealed orders and threw them in the waste basket. Jim wanted to know what they were so the CO told Jim to open them up. They were orders for Jim to ferry B-29s to the Pacific. They drove to Ft. Leavenworth, KS, where Jim was discharged October 1946. His original signup was for four years but was extended two years because of the war.

Jim's uncle got him a job at TWA in Kansas City where he worked for two years. As he was still in the reserves, he was called up July 31, 1948, to help with the Berlin Airlift. Jim stayed in the service 28 years, fixing planes all over Europe and the Middle East and at several bases in the U.S. Jim talked with President Truman on three occasions as he serviced Truman's aircraft (both lived in Independence, Mo.).

Jim retired in 1970 at the age of 49, has traveled all over the world and now resides in California near his daughter, grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Jim turned 92 ~~and is in great health.~~

Jim had an aeronautic engine license but wasn't able to receive his air frame welder's certificate. Buck Jackson returned to Wadsworth, Alabama, to work in the peanut business

At Gibraltar a B-17 hit the ocean and all crew survived.  
They disassembled a caterpillar and sent it to JAF and on a cargo plane and put it back together. They tried to pull a B-24 out of the mud. They dug it about 50' and pulled the front wheel off.

As they were getting ready to leave Tucson Buck Jackson twisted the trunk handle off. Jim said now worries a little but my wire did the trick and Jim and Mil were off.

m. Sgt. Bill Oyster was in charge of the armament crew. Buys were never a problem overseas.

After he returned to the states Jim was transferred from the 97<sup>th</sup> B.G. to the 233<sup>rd</sup> Army Air Force Unit.

Enlisted Aug. 16, 1941 Ft. Des Moines, IA  
overseas departure June 4, 1942

overseas return SEPT. 1, 1944

departure from service July 31, 1945

once worked 36 hrs. to get their B-17 air worthy  
In England it took so many points to buy bacon. They quit buying it cause it took so long to get there it tasted bad ?