

This was Dad's story

(Ernst F. Knobloch, Army Air Corps, Jan. 12, 1942-July 21, 1945)

ser-no 120475 33

After the bombing of Pearl Harbor and war was declared, Dad and Uncle Albert talked and decided they would enlist to stay out of the infantry. Dad enlisted Jan. 15, 1942. Uncle Dick tried to enlist and was refused, but was drafted later.

Dad went to Ft. Snelling for basic training then to Pensacola, Sarisota, Miami and Tampa, Florida. He first worked as a carpenter. They told them to watch for snakes. If they came across a log, they were supposed to step on it and jump over it as a snake may be laying on the other side.

One day they were short one man at formation. Their search found him dead, sitting against a tree stump. There were bite marks on his back and they figured when he leaned against the hole in the stump, the snake bit him and left.

Another day they were going into a building and there was a Water Moccasin in the entry. He was black as coal and his mouth was snow white. A fella from the South said, "I can get rid of him." He started jumping up and down on it til he smashed his head.

Dad said the base must have been built in a low spot 'cause every time it rained, they walked through water. Actually, the base was located in a Palmetto grove in a swamp. If there was a cigarette butt on the ground, you were expected to pick it up whether it was yours or not. If you didn't and an officer saw you, they would find things for you to do. They would give you a shovel and tell you to dig a 3-foot square and 3-foot deep hole then come back and measure it. Then you would fill it back in. Not that you did anything wrong, but to see if you could follow directions.

They wanted volunteers for mechanics. Dad told the CO he would try it and started training. Everywhere they traveled was all by train.

Over 12,500 ground crew personnel left in a blackout for England June 4, 1942. Dad sailed on the Queen Elizabeth, having a fairly smooth ride over. They arrived in Clyde, Scotland, on June 10.

The people in England were hard to understand with their slang and using different words for the same thing (for example: loo-latrine). The weather was usually foggy and drizzly. Driving on the "wrong" side of the road was hard to get used to. There were bicycles everywhere as they were easier to get around with on the narrow roads. They used their bikes to get from the barracks to the air fields — a distance away in case they would get bombed. They would get passes to go to movies in town.

Their group was the first to do daylight bombing in Europe and over Germany. They would bomb deep into Europe then fly to Russia to refuel and arm and return to England. These were called "shuttle missions." Some of the B-17s would come back from missions with holes in the wings big enough to jump through. The engineers from Boeing looked at some of the damaged planes and said they should have fallen out of the sky. One plane returned with one side of the tail completely missing. Another came in with a direct flak hit just ahead of the tail. The only thing holding the tail on was the catwalk in the floor and the cables controlling the rudder. (Flak are the black puffs you see exploding around the planes.)

There were usually 88 shells below plus 150s overhead. They armed the bombs before takeoff until a couple crashed, causing great damage to runways and disrupting the takeoff of other planes. After that they armed the bombs once in formation. When a plane would crash, you were lucky to find a foot in a boot or dog tag.

If you've seen the movie "Memphis Belle," that B-17 was ^{NOT} in Dad's group but ^{91st B.G.} he did not work on it. The plane of rookies the German fighter shot down was also from his group. ^{but he remembered it from his time in England}

The name of Dad's plane was "Kwiturbitchin II." It was taken out of combat after 89 missions because there was always something wrong with it when it got back. The CO asked Dad if he wanted to be the crew chief, knowing the good work he did and would get a little more pay. Dad said no. Dad said he wasn't afraid of the work he did on the plane, but if someone else goofed up and it crashed, he would blame himself.

The engines had a magneto and spark plugs ignition system. Dow Corning made a compound the ground crews put over the ignition and other electrical wires to help with the moisture problem in England. Depending on the damage to the plane, they may have had to work all night to have it ready the next day. They would pump 1500-1600 gallons of gasoline from 55-gallon barrels by hand for each plane. They had few replacement parts so they made them or took them off a plane too damaged to fly. They cut new pieces of sheet metal to replace holes in the plane.

Each engine was equipped with a 37-gallon oil tank. When an engine used 20 to 25 gallons of oil in a mission, they replaced the engine as they had no overhaul kits. The mechanics didn't socialize with the flight crews as they were higher officers and thought they were a few rungs higher than the mechanics.

The hardest guys to get along with were the 2nd Lieutenants as they just came from officers' training and were bucking for that next stripe. If they thought you didn't salute them correctly, they would call you on it and you visited the CO. After awhile, the noncoms got sick of this and went to the CO. He said "don't come to complete attention and salute." He talked to the 2nd "Louies" and told them to ease up: "This is a wartime situation; some things don't have to be by the book."

Most of the mechanics were smaller guys like Dad — 5-foot-7 to 5-foot-9, 135-145 pounds. Dad's nickname was "Knobby." James "Shorty" Bracewell, Allerton, Iowa, went in 17 years old, stayed in 28 years; Leonard "Little" Howe, Shelby, Iowa; Angelo "Fiddle Dee Dee" Fedele, Philadelphia, Penn.; Carl Sieber, New Cornerstone, Ohio; Eugene Ballard, Noblesville, Ind.; George Gable, Cedar Rapids, Iowa, a college football player with a bad knee, and Paul "Big How" Howe of Idaho. The last two were over 6-foot, 200 pounds.

When they left England for Africa, Dad said anyplace there was room for a box of 50-cal. Ammo, they stuck it. Dad said they would have gone up like a Roman candle if a torpedo hit them. They sailed north for two days to get away from the u-boats before turning south for Africa. Every direction you looked were lines of ships. They hit a storm and took two days to get realigned. They landed May 12, 1943.

Dad was in the 8th Army Air Corps. After arriving in Africa, groups comingled and became the 15th Army Air Corps, 414th Bomb Squadron 97th Bomber Group (H-

Heavy Bombardment). Their motto was "Coming in on a wing and a prayer." Also was "Venit Hora" which meant "The Hour Has Come."

Once in Africa, the French, who had big farms, welcomed them with open arms. They raised flax, wheat, barley and also had dates and vineyards for wine. If they had trouble with their grain binders, the servicemen would help fix them. They would also help with shocking and threshing the grain. The servicemen would hire them to do their laundry and would buy fruit and wine from them. The French invited them over for meals once in awhile. One time they had chicken soup and there were a few feathers floating on top and if you stirred it too deep you could hear the gravel from the grit scratching on the bottom. Their meat was goat, lamb or beef.

One time the Air Corps was moving to another base and some mechanics from Dad's outfit came across some GIs raping a 16-year-old French girl. They grabbed the 1/2-inch breaker bars out of the tool chest and beat the tar out of them. Then they took the girl home.

If something wasn't chained, nailed, bolted or welded to something, the Arabs would steal it. They would work for both sides, trying to make a buck selling materials or information. One came up to Dad and asked if wanted to buy a watch. He pulled his sleeve up and had five to six watches on his arm.

The cost for killing animals was \$15 sheep or goats; \$50 burro or mule; \$100 camel. You had to watch the camels as they would bite or spit on you. When they found a place for a new base, all the animals were herded around to clear it of land mines. The people would get paid for their animals. If there was anything left, the killed or injured animals were butchered.

The air bases were only 150 miles from the front lines. The tents were away from the air fields and one-half mile from there was an irrigation ditch for cover.

Almost every night, Fritz would drop a couple bombs or strafe, then take off. One night he got pretty close and they took off running for the ditch. Dad lost one sandal and didn't remember how far he ran barefoot and never found it back. When they went to bed at night, they had to shake everything out so there weren't any scorpions in it. Then they had to tuck the blankets under them so a scorpion couldn't crawl in. In the morning, they had to shake out their clothes and boots as scorpions would crawl in them.

After they were in Africa awhile, Dad's neck would get sore from shaving, so he let it go a few days. The CO called him in on it. Dad told him his neck would get raw shaving every day. The CO told him to just shave his neck every three days or so.

Once in awhile an enemy plane would strafe during the day, but quit after a few times when the gunners hit him pretty good.

Dad couldn't figure out the British and their addiction to tea. It didn't matter if it was during takeoff, landing, moving or being strafed, they dropped what they were doing and made tea. Even if shells landed close to them, they kept drinking tea.

Dad said it was quite a lend-lease program. We lent them our trucks and when we needed them, they charged \$50 a day.

The engines had no air cleaners, so planes would take off four abreast and, after the dust cleared, four more took off. One time, two P-38s took off in a terrible dust storm. They collided and one pilot was killed. They pumped the gas over pieces of

cloth to keep out as much dirt and sand as possible. It also helped with moisture as it was cold and hot every day. Until supplies caught up to them, they had to refuel with 5-gallon cans.

All the ground crew helped with guard duty and kitchen duty (KP). Dad said guard duty was pretty scary because you only had a few lanterns under the planes; in case the enemy came they would put them out quickly. One night, something was making noise all night but he never saw an animal or person. You made sure the password was not forgotten.

The first head cook they had couldn't boil water. He made the most bland tasting food you ever ate. So they bought some wine from the French and would take three to four swallows before they ate. Doing this, Dad gained weight and was up to 173 pounds. The next cook they had was a Russian. He had a scar from his left ear all the way across his neck. Dad asked him about it and he said he got it in WWI from a Japanese bayonet. He cooked good tasting food as he knew how to spice things. One day was hash — breakfast, dinner, supper. The next stew — breakfast, dinner, supper. Their water supply was a P38 belly tank hung under the shade of a tree. Once in awhile they would find a well and would hang wine bottles in it so they had cool wine to drink.

One time Dad was on KP peeling potatoes. Another cook was making something and laid down a butter wrapper. Dad reached for the wrapper and the cook nearly stabbed his hand. Thinking Dad was trying to steal some, he told him to keep his hands back. Dad said all he wanted to do was look at the wrapper so the cook let him pick it up. The wrapper was from the Hull Creamery. Dad told him Hull was about 40 miles from home. The cook didn't seem to care.

Most of the food sent to them spoiled because it took so long to get there. At Christmas one year, a buddy got a fruit cake. It was solid green so he sharpened his knife and started slicing off them layers til the green was gone. Then he cut it in half and there was a bottle of rum in it. He poured the rum over it and, after it burned a few seconds, they put it out and ate it while it was still warm.

Bob Hope showed up with his show to entertain the troops. They could get one-day passes at first. One guy in the outfit lost his stripes as fast as he got them. He said he was going to find out what an Arab woman looked like behind her veil. The MPs found him a few days later with his throat slit.

When they got to Algiers, Dad, Eugene Ballard and a couple other guys got a pass. They got ahold of a two-man raft and started floating in the Mediterranean Sea. They were busy talking and, pretty soon, were two to three miles out. Dad said he wasn't a good swimmer and another said he wasn't either. Dad asked what to do if they flipped over. Ballard and the guy from the west coast were good swimmers and said to stay calm because the salt water would help you float and just float and paddle your way back in. Just that quick, they flipped over. Dad swallowed a couple mouthfuls of water, then calmed down and started to paddle to shore. After he got closer to shore and, being more confident, he decided to drop down and see how deep it was. He landed on something big and round, saying it may have been a submarine or big rock. Dad was the first one to shore. About 10 minutes later, the other guy who couldn't swim well came in. About 15 minutes later, came Ballard and the guy from the west coast. They got into the same swell and looked for the

other two on the way in. A few ~~weeks~~^{months} later, a plane crashed and the propeller cut Ballard in two while in his cot.

While in Africa, Dad ran into Ervin Mogler who was in the Army Artillery. One day, Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower reviewed the troops and presented medals. He stopped and talked to a soldier just five guys away from Dad, but he didn't get a chance to speak to the future President.

The CO told Dad one day he had enough points to go home on leave. The guys that went home cried for two weeks after they came back from leave. Dad knew how bad it would bother him, so he elected just to stay.

The crews of the planes said they were really bothered when their bombs fell off target and they killed civilians. Dad said they felt bad, too, because they were the ones keeping the planes in the air doing the damage. There were crews that flew to Norway and Sweden, giving themselves up as POWs. The Germans would then bring the B17s up when the Allies were bombing. They would drop into formation and, when the German fighters showed up, they would shoot down other B17s. The Ploesti Romania oil refinery, called Flak Alley, always put fear into the crews with all the enemy fighters that would come up and all the anti-aircraft guns. They said the flak was so thick you could walk on it. Dad became esgt. 15-Sept-43 S.O.# 206

By the time the Allies had a foothold in Italy, the P51 fighter was in full production. The P51 was able to out-manuever the German fighters. It had fuel capacity to fly to the targets and back, giving the bombers protection all the way.

Their next base was a Foggia, Italy. They flew the personnel from Africa to Italy in cargo planes. You walked into the planes nearly touching the guy in front of you; then squatted down on the floor, sitting in your little spot.

In Italy the climate changed and the mechanics had to contend with mud and snow. They would have to clean the snow off the planes, making sure the controls were not frozen before takeoff. The cold weather made it difficult to work on the planes with bare hands.

They were close enough to the sea that seafood was available but Dad didn't eat very much of it. One little boy was out spearing fish one day and came back with the fingers missing on his one hand. He said he had speared a big shark that he couldn't pull in and having the line wrapped around his fingers, they were cut off when it escaped. The medics were able to save his hand and they took up a donation to help the family out. A couple days later, the shark floated in with the spear still in it.

At Christmas, Dad received no mail but sometime later got 27 letters and cards in one day.

They brought a German prisoner to the base one day. The CO knew Dad spoke German so he asked if Dad would interrogate him. Dad spoke High German and the prisoner Low German. Dad asked him how he sounded and the prisoner said it was like Dad was talking with his mouth full. He got no information from the prisoner.

Some guys on a pass went through a German cemetery and told Dad there were grave markers with Knobloch on them. They asked Dad if they were related and he said he didn't think so.

Dad got a pass to Rome and he got to see all the bones in the Catacombs, the underground cemeteries beneath the city.

This happened on 17-APR-44 Jim remembers a british wellington coming back from a mission and running out of fuel

The CO told Dad one day he had enough points to go home. Dad told him if they were going to fly them (knowing what condition the planes were in) he would wait until the war was over.

They had rough seas coming home on the Queen Mary. Almost everyone was seasick. As the war was not over, you could not vomit over the side or risk falling over. They had 30-gallon barrels around the ship to vomit in. The problem was you may be a step or two from the barrel, then the ship would pitch and the barrel would slide 20 feet down the deck. The smell was horrible but couldn't be helped. Dad didn't eat for over a week, only taking small sips of water to keep his throat wet. Dad say Roy Rockey from Kansas on the ship on the way home.

Somebody yelled "Land ho." They looked to the horizon, eventually sailing past the Statue of Liberty. They landed March 10, 1945. Dad bought a *New York Times* paper to remember the day he stepped back on American soil. Dad sent a Western Union telegram saying he was home.

They went to a big hall where they had any kind of food you could imagine. They would make you something to eat, if you wanted. Dad was so seasick that even the smell of food went against him. Dad told the people serving the food he appreciated their efforts but he just couldn't eat.

Dad had a 30-day leave and was scheduled to go back overseas. They extended his leave by 15 days and, by that time, the war was nearly over. Dad was stationed in Biloxi, Miss., after his leave.

On March 24, 1945, Dad and Mom were married. She went back home a few weeks later.

Dad was at Jefferson Barracks, Missouri. He was sent from Jefferson Barracks to AAF Redistribution Station #2, Miami Beach. He was also at Camp Davis, North Carolina. Dad was sent from Camp Davis to Ft. Snelling, Minn., for discharge on July 21, 1945. He weighed 136 pounds going in and 135 pounds coming out.

When Dad got home, the job he was promised he would have when got back was gone.

Ernst F. Knobloch was born Sept. 4, 1916, rural Alvord. He attended country school through the eighth grade, then worked for area farmers including Jake Schollerman, Ray McCarty and August Maurer. After his honorable discharge from the Army Air Corps, he farmed until his death in 1995.

Dad told how Uncle Albert would clean up after the horses, scooping the poop under a tarp so they could lay on it and stay warm in the winter. Aunt Wilma told how Uncle Albert cried, telling how the blood ran out of the trucks as they sent the wounded back from the front. Calling them "boys" as they were five to six years younger than him. Aunt Wilma also told when photos and stories of the Holocaust came out, Grandpa sat at the table with his head in his hands, saying, "Oh da Fatherland, how can they do that to other people."

Uncle Willy told how the Germans would honor the red cross badges but the Japs would use them as targets.

Uncle Adolph told how Uncle Dick and his buddies cut coconuts apart and put them back together with rocks in them to catch monkeys.

Rich Den Hartog lost his arm when the guy driving the truck sideswiped another truck.

When the Legion had projects, Dad always helped. When they got ready for Decoration Day, Carl Knobloch said he would carry a flag or anything else, but he would never pick up another M-1.

Whenever any of Dad's family came from far away, the work always stopped and they would visit to make up for the years he was in service.

These things I remember. "Lest we forget" the servicemen's and women's sacrifices, shame on us.

In a quote from Lt. Gen. Ira C. Baker, "I do not believe that any organization of equivalent size can, with justice, claim to have participated more definitely or extensively in the downfall of the enemy than the 97th Bombardment Group."

Dad received the following awards

Mechanics Badge

Presidential Unit Citation Badge GO #66 WD '44

Good conduct medal GO #30, 97th B.G, '44

European-African-Middle East Theater Service medal

5 over seas service bars

No time lost under AW 107. Lapel button

American Campaign medal

WWII Victory Medal

Campaign Ribbons

6 Battle Stars

Honorable Service Badge