

# Air Force Story

General Comments.

The book “Coffee Tower” tells the history of the 459th. Bomb Group from it’s inception in late 1943 till the end of WW II.

Joe Nenning’s diary accurately describes the missions of the original crew.

J.R.’s (JR was Group Navigator) description of our last mission is a little different from my recollections but he was in the nose compartment of the B-24 while I was on the flight deck.

But first – “How did I get there?”

I graduated from Clark University in June, 1942. Since I had not yet been drafted, (my draft number was fairly high) and I owed Clark \$200.00 for my last year’s tuition, I got a job at Campbell’s Soup Co. in Camden, NJ at a salary of \$25.00 a week in the Quality Control Lab. This was the lab I had worked in previous summers and where I developed a dislike for raw tomatoes. When I had earned enough to pay Clark, I almost made the biggest mistake of my life, I tried to join the Marines, not the flying Marines but the Tank corp. I could have become a 90 day “wonder” 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt. Fortunately, I was not ready for “instant duty” since the Medical Officer found I had a Pilenoidal Cyst, which would require surgical removal before I could go on active duty, so I was rejected.

I then went to the Army Air Force recruiting office where I was accepted for the Aviation Cadet Program after a physical where the Doctor said that the cyst would be removed while I was waiting to go to flight school, assuming I could pass the written exam. I passed those, and was told to tell the draft board that I had been accepted by the Army Air Force.

I was immediately drafted with the explanation that an enlistment did not reduce their quota but that when drafted which would count in reaching their quota, the Army would transfer me when I reported for duty. This did eventually happen but only after I was on a troop train bound for basic training from Fort Dix, NJ. Just as the train started to move, an Air Corp Lt. in a jeep roared past the train shouting “Private Singer get off the train”. The train was so packed that I was passed overhead by the other guys to the door and my baggage went thru the window.

From Dix I went to Fort Mills, a small camp within walking distance of Mitchell field in Long Island where I was sent to the hospital so that the cyst could be removed. I was only in the hospital for about a week when I was released. I visited my room-mate who also had a cyst about a week later. I asked one of the doctors why he was still there and was told that he was being treated the old fashioned way but that I was just sewed up and given a new drug to prevent infection. PENICILLIN.

When I was sent back to Mills, I was given a note stating I was to have “limited service for a week”, I gave it to the Captain who ran the camp and he gave me the job of taking care of the hot water heater in the boiler room attached to the officers latrine. Someone else supplied me with coal and lugged off the ashes. He equipped me with a cot and left. The camp library was just across the

Street, so I loafed and read. A few weeks later, on a Saturday morning inspection, he looked into the boiler room, saw me and said "My God, I forgot about you". The next morning I was awakened at 5:00 A.M. for KP. The mess Sergeant asked if anyone knew how to take care of the stove. I said I did and was given the job of keeping the cook happy. Apparently I did because I was asked later in the day if I wanted the job permanently. I said yes after seeing the rest of the KP group getting ready to scrub the floor (on their hands and knees). The mess Sergeant said the fireman's day started early but ended when the cook finished preparing supper. I was then told that I had to report to the mess hall by 5:00 AM every other day and that the rest of the time I could use the pass he would give me when I went to his office after supper. His only comment was to be sure to check the bulletin board every day so as not to miss shipping orders. So much for the old adage of, "never volunteer for anything". Normally, unless you were permanent party, you were confined to the camp and drilled or on occasion went to the rifle range to "police" (clean up) the range not to shoot !

While waiting for class assignment at pre-flight, a friend who was a Chem. Engineer and I got ourselves a "job" in the dispensary pharmacy and talked the Medical Officer into giving us week end passes. The rest of the future cadets were confined to base with make work drills etc. It didn't take long before a lot of them also found jobs. One day the Squadron CO (Commanding Officer) asked why there were so few Cadets drilling. When told they had jobs in other areas, he posted an order saying that no Cadet could leave the area without a pass, which of course they couldn't get from the CO to go to the jobs they had. Fortunately for us, the Dispensary was in the Squadron area. When he found that loop hole, several days later, the Squadron doctor made an impassioned plea and we kept our jobs because he really was shorthanded and we did help.

Eventually, I was in the Class of 43-I Southwest Training Command. Pre-flight at San Antonio, Texas; Primary at Sikeston, Missouri (PT-19s); Basic at Independence, Kansas (BT-14s, BT-13s & BT-15s); and finally Advanced Twin Engine at Brooks Field, San Antonio, Texas (AT-17s, AT-7s and AT-10's). The AT-7 was an all metal, fast, unforgiving aircraft.

I had a few "interesting" experiences.

At Primary, while on my check ride with an Army pilot (instructors were civilians working for Parks Air College) I noticed that the wind sock (actually a wooden Tee in the center of the big grass field) at the Sikeston airport was being turned around indicating a wind shift. When that happens you leave the traffic pattern and re-enter in the new direction. I started to turn and got my knees rapped by the instructor for "drifting" off course. The PT-19 didn't have any radios or intercoms and the instructor either shouted thru a hose to your ears or rapped your knees with the control stick. He put the plane back on the old course and I started to turn again. This time I got raps, as well as some unprintable language. I finally pounded the fuselage, waved my arms and got his attention. When I pointed to the wind sock, he shouted "I've got it" and we made a quick landing to avoid the resulting traffic jam since we were now first in line. When we stopped, he jumped out of the plane without saying a word and went to the squadron office. A few minutes later my instructor came over and said "well, you passed but he was the maddest most embarrassed man I've seen in a long time". The cadet ahead of me didn't see the change and was "washed out" for making a "down wind" landing. I shipped out to Basic in Independence, Kansas a few days later.

In Basic training I had three "incidents".

The first was when our over-worked instructor with six students, instead of the normal 4, put two of us up for check rides before we soloed in the BT-14. It was a much “hotter” airplane than the PT-19. The check pilot was the captain who was the Squadron CO. After flying around with him for about 2 hours we landed and he told me to “take it around for a few landings”. When I finally landed, I found the whole squadron lined up for “Cokes”. It seems that if you soloed out of a check ride you had to buy everyone a Coke. Since there really was an overwork problem, he became my instructor since an instructor who put a student up for a check ride never got him back even if he passed the check ride.

The second incident was one day when I started to ground loop on landing. Standard procedure was to give full throttle and take off in whatever direction the plane was pointing. Unfortunately the field was being improved with a new runway and there was a crane, bulldozers and a lot of workmen digging ditches. I missed the crane and bulldozers but a lot of workmen dived into their ditches. When I landed I was trailing a lot of surveyor’s pegs and strings. Fortunately, examination of the plane showed that there was a defective O-ring in the landing gear oleo and the plane was on its first flight after maintenance, so I got a compliment instead of a bawling out and a check ride..

The third incident was when I taxied into a wet concrete taxiway after a night landing. I was flying the Captain’s shiny airplane - his pride and joy. I made out on that one too because an investigation showed that the new taxiway had not been marked or obstructed and the regular lights indicated it was useable. I didn’t get off “Scott Free” though. My records listed the fact that I had taken a lot of Cartography courses at Clark, so the Captain had me make a scale map of the field. This was posted on the wall of his office. About a week later I was told to make another. It seems that the Field Commander saw it liked it and took the Captain’s copy - so I had to make him another.

Other cadets had their problems too. One was killed when he flew into the ground at night and another was washed out (failed) when he took off at night, saw the yellow flame from his exhaust pipe (effect of full rich carburetor setting for take-off), thought the plane was on fire and bailed out.

Everyone had to have a final check ride before they could go to advanced flying. The schedule had been posted and everyone had their ride except me but I had not been posted. The Saturday before we were supposed to leave for Advanced, I went to the Captains office to see why I didn’t have a check ride. He was surprised and asked if I wanted a check ride. I said yes and he said that this was the first time anyone had asked him for a check ride but if I wanted a check ride, I would get one! After we were in the plane he told me that I had gotten my ride the last time we had flown together but he had forgotten to tell me. We then flew for about an hour and did just about every acrobatic maneuver the plane could do - he even had me do a caged gyro instrument recovery from a spin. I shipped out the following Monday.

Advanced was ordinary except that I had to ferry a plane once to the Texas Panhandle to avoid a hurricane. The storm was sudden and we were just told to fly north and keep the plane out of harms way - then to Brooks Field where we were and then to come home when we were ordered. In those days they weren’t very good in forecasting where hurricanes were going to go. I landed at San Angelo, Texas for gas and was immediately surrounded by armed guards. It seemed that San Angelo was the “secret” home base of the WAAF and no men were allowed on base overnight or in the daytime without escort..!!! From some tales I’ve heard since it was not the women that needed protection!

It was now September, 1943 (the I in 43-I means the 9th. month) I got leave and was then to report to an assignment center at Salt Lake City. It was still warm enough to swim in Salt Lake - a weird experience since you can't sink in Salt Lake City. I and most of my Brooks Field Squadron mates were sent to Davis Monthan Field at Tucson, Arizona where the 459th. Bomb Group was being formed. All of my class mates from Brooks that went to Salt Lake City were assigned as Co-pilots in new crews in a new Group - the 459th. At the time, the Group had 2 B-24-D's, one of which was destroyed in a tornado that hit the field just before I got there.

The new group was assigned almost immediately to Westover Field in the Springfield, Mass. area for training. This was less than 50 miles from my old home near Worcester, Mass. (While I was at Clark, my parents moved to Collingswood, New Jersey.)

At Westover, we got delivery of new Ford made B-24-H-15s. Ours was named "Texas Lassie" and ultimately we got a picture of a Cow Girl (with clothes) standing on a bomb with a "six- gun" in hand.

We flew out of Westover to early January, 1944 at which time we flew first to Mitchell Field, Long Island, NY to get side arms, survival gear for the trip and other miscellaneous equipment, then to Puerto Rico, South America, Africa and Tunis via West and North Africa coast line.. While we were waiting for our Italian base to be enlarged ( it was an old Luftwaffe airfield) we explored some of the old Roman ruins. Some were still equipped with old German machine guns and skeletons. There were a lot of unexploded munitions lying around and once while walking in a field we were yelled at by some soldiers to stop and return using your old footprints@. We had wandered into a suspected mine field that hadn't been completely checked and cleared.

While visiting a local farmer I was nipped by his dog, but he turned out to be a good source of eggs which were rare and wine which the fellows appreciated. He loved the big cans of corned beef hash which I gave him and which we hated. The mess sergeant would give me all I wanted for a few fresh eggs. All army eggs were powdered.

Once we reached Italy we did a little practice flying and then started real missions. In the 15<sup>th</sup> Air force, 50 missions were considered a tour. In England 25 missions were considered a tour. The thought was that missions from Italy were "easier" than those from England. This really wasn't so and therefore a "tough" mission was credited as two. A so called "milk run" was one. There weren't many milk runs. "Tough" was defined as a mission during which you were attacked by enemy aircraft or were shot at by medium to heavy flak. We never knew who decided when the flak was medium or heavy!

Joe Nenning's diary is well written and accurate.

Near our field was a P-38 Group whose pilots used to buzz us regularly. To them we were truck drivers. One day while on a practice flight our B-24 squadron in close formation buzzed their field at about 50 feet altitude. We blew down all their tents. They never buzzed us again. On another practice flight we were at a very, very low altitude in formation when the squadron leader suddenly pulled up. Dead ahead were high tension power lines. We didn't have room to pull up so we went under them. That put an end to low altitude formation flying.

When practicing formation flying, the only crew aboard were the pilots and engineer. Our normal position in formation was to the left of "A" flight leader and a little lower. He would then be to my right and a little higher. In a close formation our right wing would be overlapped with his but a little lower. I think the only time we flew that close on a bombing run was at Bad Vaslo when we were attacked by FW-190s. Everyone really got close, the lead bombardier was right on and 99% of our bombs were on target. We got a Presidential Citation for the best bombing to that date. Fighters made you close up. Flak made you spread out, but most of the time we were in between. I liked formation flying and as copilot was in the best position to see. I did most of the close formation flying. B-24 flight controls were "stiff" and it wasn't difficult to be sweating at 40 degrees below zero.

After 38 missions, we were given an R&R (Rest & Recreation) leave. Half the crew went to the Isle of Capri and half to Egypt. Just before I went to Capri, I and the rest of our crew, except Clyde Lake our regular first pilot, flew on a mission with a 15<sup>th</sup> Air force check pilot. At the time I didn't know why, but when we returned from Capri, Clyde was relieved and shortly thereafter returned to the States diagnosed with "battle fatigue". I learned later that I was to take over the crew but while waiting for the other half of the crew to return from Egypt I was scheduled to fly with a Group pilot (Capt. Hank Reed) in the deputy group lead position.

The B-24 we used was a "Mickey Ship", a plane equipped with radar bombing capability, borrowed from a Group which supplied both the plane and the radar bombardier. Unfortunately, the bombardier was on his first mission and did not follow JR's ("JR" was the nick name of the Group navigator J. R. Bloom) instructions to wear his parachute when over enemy territory. His chute was a "clip on" which was stored on the floor by his position at the radar equipment at the rear of the flight deck. When we got hit, gasoline wetted his chute and I understand that when he jumped the fire ignited the chute which flared when it opened. He was the only one killed.

Our mission was to bomb an oil refinery at Vienna. In our area Vienna was the second most heavily defended city next to Ploesti. It was counted as 2 missions. Except for the Group pilot, the radar bombardier and me, all the rest of the crew were on their 50<sup>th</sup> and last mission. I was on my 40<sup>th</sup>. The Group had never lost a lead or deputy lead plane and it was considered a relatively safe position.

JR's account of the mission is mostly correct but the fire originated with a piece of flak shrapnel going thru our fuel transfer valve system. The fuel was under some pressure and sprayed into and on the radar equipment which set it on fire. The fire was in the back end of the flight deck, not in the bomb bay. The bail out order was given when the flight engineer reported that all the fire extinguishers were empty with the fire still burning in the cabin by the bomb bay bulkhead. I was the last one out because I had trouble detaching my oxygen mask. I finally got rid of it by tearing off my helmet with my right hand by the chin strap. After I landed I found some blisters on my forehead and a deep scratch on my chin. Later when I got out of the POW camp, and had an old helmet available I found that I couldn't break the chin strap on the helmet using both hands but in the plane it was easy with one hand.

Life in a POW camp is another story but two interesting things happened. I landed just outside a small Austrian farming village. I landed hard and sprained my ankle because I was drifting towards a grape arbor and was steering the chute to avoid the poles. After I landed two townsmen helped me up and with my arms over their shoulders we started walking to the village which was only a few

hundred feet away. A man got in front of me and punched me in the face. Others pulled him away and when I looked back, I saw them beating the daylights out of him. One of the men helping me who could speak English, told me to forget what I saw, that he was a German, they didn't like him, he should not have hit me and they were only "restraining" him.

Later in the village jail, I became the main attraction. The villagers had never seen an American airman. Many came to the jail to look and some of the women brought bread, cheese and sausage and some of the men gave me tobacco, cigarette papers and schnapps. They definitely were not anti American. Later when I was at the railroad station a German (Austrian?) soldier gave me more tobacco and cigarette papers and when he was being bawled out by a civilian who my guard said had SS connections, the soldier told him that after he had spent some time on the Russian front he could then criticize.

The motion picture "The Great Escape" is, to all intents and purposes, a documentary. Except for the motor cycle chase it is 99% true. In the first tunnel scene the "diggers" are using candles made of British margarine. Later a tunnel scene shows electric bulbs. The camp did have some of the James Garner types. One day, 3 German electricians came into the camp to do some maintenance work. One Garner type prisoner quickly made friends and invited them into his barracks room for some real coffee, chocolate and cigarettes (from Red Cross food packages). The Germans hadn't seen these for years. While they were enjoying their treat, their supplies were being stolen. When they realized what had happened they were in a quandary. They finally decided to say that they had not requisitioned enough materials for the job and got more. Later when the tunnel was discovered by the SS, the wire and bulbs were found, traced back to the electricians. When I was in the camp, a notice was posted on the bulletin board by a POW, who translated local newspapers which said that three men (the electricians) had been executed by firing squad for collaborating with the enemy,

In January of 1945, in the middle of a snowstorm, the Russians were getting close to the Stalag Luft III camp in Sagan between Breslau and Berlin, we could hear their artillery. We were marched to another camp at Moosberg in Austria, about 20 miles NE of Munich. This was a long, cold, hungry march. We did about 20 miles a day when we marched. There were some detours and delays. Some of us went thru Dresden not too long before it was bombed. Dresden was a rail center and was full of German troops. It deserved bombing. The people who have been criticizing the bombing weren't there.

The camp we stayed in till Patton's army rescued us about a week before VE day was formerly occupied by Polish and Russian POWs. Most died in a typhus epidemic which occurred just before our arrival. The few that were left did the dirty work at the camp.

A week or so before the war ended, the Air Force established a 24 hour air watch over the camp. There had been rumors that Hitler was going to hold US POWs hostage and we got word (over radio receivers which some POWs had made - we always got BBC news and could make transmissions in an emergency) to set the camp on fire if there was any attempt to move us. One day, one of the patrolling planes (P-47's) flew low to waggle his wings at us and was shot at by one of the German machine guns in one of the guard towers. That was a "BIG" mistake for he shot back and the eight 50 cal machine guns he carried made kindling of the tower. Shortly thereafter a parade of hay wagons arrived and the guards piled hay around the bottom of the towers. Any time, any of the airplanes pointed its nose in the general direction of a tower, the occupants jumped into the hay. As soon as the

pilots noticed what was going on, the guards got jumping exercise several times a day.

Just before Patton's people came, the German SS which was the rear guard killed off most of the Luftwaffe guards who had orders to surrender. The SS wanted them to join up and fight, when they said "No" the SS started firing on them. Patton's people killed all of the SS. The GIs said that they never took a prisoner who wore a black uniform. The SS, who always wore black, had killed their men at Malmedy in the Battle of the Bulge. It took some time before the GIs realized that German tank crews also wore black.

When Patton's tank destroyer outfit rolled into camp one shouted from the top of his cannon "Any one from Worcester, Mass.?" I shouted back that I was from Millbury. He then said that he was really from Farnumsville, Mass. He asked my name. When I told him he said "I used to work for a John Singer". I then said that if it was at "American Woolen Co." you worked for my father. He had and for as long as he was in the area he kept me supplied with fresh bread and all kinds of rations since we still hadn't got a food supply set-up.

Shortly after Patton's men arrived, a couple of the Russian POWs asked if I would lend them a knife which my father's former employee had given me. They were very friendly since we (the camp POWs) had fed them with Red Cross packages which the Swiss finally were able to truck in about 2 months after we arrived from Sagan. The Germans didn't have many trains left. I did loan them the knife and from then on a friend and I got a fresh chicken every day or so. The friend (Winfred Gredvig) had been my partner in a clock making business we had set up at Stalag Luft III. We had made a >prototype= and were just starting to take orders when we were moved.. One day he was cooking a chicken when a Red Cross Girl was making a tour of the camp. She saw him cooking and in a sweet young voice asked "Can I have a piece of your chicken?" Without thinking, looking or noticing that it was a woman's voice he roared "Go get your own ----- chicken". When he finally woke up he was more than a little embarrassed. I visited him once after the war in Oregon but we lost touch when he moved to California.

On VE day, some C-47s landed near Moosberg to fly us out. After we boarded the plane and were lined up for take-off, a Ju-52 flew over the field at about 100 feet waving white flags out of the windows. The British gunners who manned the AA guns put a lot of holes in the plane before they saw the flags. After the plane landed there was a conference with the Germans and the C-47s taxied to the side of the field. Shortly thereafter there were over a hundred German aircraft - everything from trainers to bombers landing to surrender. Bulldozers pushed them into a big pile. When we finally took off it was almost dark and when we got to Rheims, it was dark. Everyone on the ground was celebrating and shooting everything skyward. The C-47 pilots couldn't find the airport because their lights were lost in the flares, tracers and bonfires on the ground. We also took a few bullets thru the wings but no one was hurt. After landing, we were hustled to the hospital at Rheims, given a blanket and told to find ourselves a bush to sleep under and that we would be taken care of in the morning. Next morning, we were stripped, our clothes burned, deloused and showered (the first since February when I took a shower under a pump decorated with icicles) and given new clothes. I did manage to keep my A-2 jacket which I still have. We were given a complete medical and fed small meals 4 or 5 times a day - mostly eggs (fresh), steak and turkey. I had lost about 30 pounds during the previous year.

We were taken to Camp "Lucky Strike" in France in a Hospital Train and after a few days put on a Liberty ship (with the same diet) bound for Camp Kilmer in NJ. The ship had been converted to ship German POWs to the US. When we docked, we were given all kinds of ration coupons and gas allowances, told to check in at my local city or town hall (where I was given more gas and ration coupons) and then after 10 days >delay in route= to travel 60 miles home which didn't count as leave, to report to Atlantic City for an R&R stay. Once there, I was given the choice of either being discharged or making any choice of any assignment I might want if I chose to stay in the Army.

I chose out of the army, proposed to Naomi (Nome) Jane Brierly, she said yes. I was also admitted to graduate school at Clark University, moved back into the Dean's house at Clark until Nome and I married in July, 1946 at which time I moved in with Nome and her parents who lived only a few blocks from Clark. Actually I was still in the army using up accumulated leave and POW "sick-leave" during my first semester in graduate school and not yet eligible for GI Bill benefits - I had to pay my own tuition for the semester - but it was only \$ 100.00 and I was still collecting Army pay.

I can honestly say that the time spent in the Air Force and the POW experience during WW 2 was perhaps the most interesting and decisive time of my life. It certainly showed what you could and would do under difficult situations and it provided the opportunity to plan the beginning of your future life - providing of course that you had a future life! The Germans had threatened to hold POWs as hostages and kill them rather than surrender unconditionally.

A few months ago, I tried to get a copy of my Army 201 file. This is a complete record of your time in the Army. Unfortunately the big St. Louis fire in the record warehouse shortly after the war destroyed my file.

John J. Singer

Aviation Cadet Class 43-I 32361961

2<sup>nd</sup>. Lt. 0-692973, Discharged as 1<sup>st</sup>. Lt USAAF

Joined Reserve but never active. Discharged in 1951 on possible recall during Korean War when Air Force learned I was a former POW and had a Q Clearance for Oak Ridge. I was informed that both were grounds for no recall to active duty.