

A Few Recollections of the 386th

Joseph H. Ross was a bombardier in the 555th Squadron from the time it was formed until he completed his tour in 1944. Joe kept an excellent diary of his missions and it helped him remember some of the things that happened along the way.

As I Remember:

The first thing I heard on arrival at MacDill in 1942 was "A plane a day in Tampa Bay, and nobody gets out." Sure enough one did go in shortly after I got there.

When the group of navigators and bombardiers arrived with me there were practically no pilots yet assigned. We flew Link trainers, shot skeet from machine gun mounts, and took classes in navigation and bombing. We really had to scratch around just to get our flying time that first month.

One Marauder hit a buzzard with the plexiglas nose. The carcass hit the bombardier on the shoulder and then spread throughout the aircraft. The smell was so bad they had to let the ship air out for a month.

At Lake Charles practically all our practice bombing was on the deck. We got pretty good at it but never used it in combat.

One pilot from the other group on the base at Lake Charles tried to do a slow roll in a Marauder. He didn't make it and only one crewmember got out.

When we did have time to get off the base at Lake Charles, the favorite hangouts were Bat Gormleys and the Green Frog. I remember that the local people were very friendly.

Our trip to Selfridge started out on a square wheeled troop train. Somewhere in Georgia we changed to a slightly better one and went on. The train stopped in the Chicago rail yards for a while and some of the guys got off and went into town. A few didn't make it back and had to play catch-up with the train.

While at Selfridge, Dick Tucker's crew stole the CO's jeep and rode all over the place.

On the way into Detroit a group stopped at a restaurant in Mt. Clements. Paul Sharding acted like he was mad at Pat Kelly and reached for his 45. Customers all over the restaurant hit the floor and went under the tables.

Our squadron moved its headquarters to the Book Cadillac Hotel for about a week when the weather was too bad to fly.

On the way from Selfridge to Savannah with our new airplanes, Bob Sands was leading a flight of six and ran into a terrible storm and had to land at Perry, Florida. The base was still under construction, only the runway was complete. There were some buildings but they had no doors or windows. We had to break out our sleeping bags and spend the night in the uncompleted buildings. The only people on the base were some M.P.'s and they took us into town in shifts so we could eat. We had just enough fuel to get up to Tallahassee the next morning where we refueled.

After leaving Savannah we stopped at Langley and managed to get paid. We hadn't been paid for a couple of months and everyone was broke.

The flight across the North Atlantic was interesting in spite of some terrible weather. We landed near Blackpool, England and were billeted in an old castle with beautiful grounds. Some difference from what we found at Colchester. We were a part of the 8th Air Force when we first arrived in England. It seemed that the 8th wasn't too worried about us and didn't send us any rations. For the first couple of weeks at Boxted we lived on "C" and "K" rations, eating from mess kits and with no good facilities to wash them afterward. Everyone wound up with dysentery.

Bicycles at Colchester took a far greater toll than combat. Our co-pilot, Louis Schrecengost came in one night looking like he had been through a paper shredder. He had stitches in his face, head, and hands and his uniform was ripped to shreds. He hadn't made the last turn into the base.

Will anyone ever forget riding a mile or so on a bicycle at Dunmow, in the cold of winter, to take a cold shower in a cold building and then riding back to the Nissen hut?

Or how we would put money in a can in the bushes outside the base and come back later and pick up a loaf of bread? Or the two fresh eggs we got every month or so?

Or the time the English girl sat on the hot stove at the Officers Club dance and burned out the back of her dress?

One night I went to the "Big Apple" restaurant in London with Bob (Preston) Meservey and got a steak. That was the only steak I had in England.

Our crew went to Keeville, a British base in the south of England, for a couple of weeks for some pre-invasion tests of bombs. They had set up beach defenses similar to those on the Cherbourg Peninsula and wanted to find out what kind of bombs would knock them out.

On one mission Tobin Underwood stayed in the nose for landing. The brakes went out and they couldn't stop on the runway. The Marauder went out through the stumps and the nose gear collapsed. Underwood wasn't hurt but he never landed in the nose again.

I remember the time Beaty's crew was having gear problems and decided to bail out. Ed O'Neill got stuck half way out the nose wheel well. They got him back inside just before they landed.

The Jules Club was a Red Cross club in London that had a few rooms and some open bays. We stayed there often and usually got our haircuts there. I remember the barber stopping in the middle of cutting my hair to have his tea.

There were some memorable landings by pilots of the 555th. Moe Elling landed on single engine and the only control he had was the trim tabs. J.T. Wilson made a beautiful landing on the nose wheel and the tail skid when the mains wouldn't come down. Bob Perkins totaled "Incendiary Mary" when the left main gear wouldn't come down. I was with him on that one.

One time we ferried some airplanes to North Ireland to the depot. I found out a few days later I was listed as AWOL. I wasn't supposed to go on the trip but no one told me.

I remember the flight when Chuck Thornton got shot down over Belgium. We ran into some real bad weather on the way home and were low on gas. The base called and told us they were having a snowstorm so we landed at a British fighter base near Dover, no runways, just a big sod field, up and down hills. We had to spend the night there but didn't get much sleep as the anti-aircraft guns barked all night.

When Willie Leirevaag got hit in the head with a piece of flak I got to lead the Group in his place.

It was an interesting year and a half and I'm glad Skip Young asked me to send him some of my experiences. It started me thinking about all the good and bad times I had during my tour with the 386th. I wouldn't want to do it again, but I wouldn't take a million for the memories.

