

U.S. ARMY EXPERIENCES, Harry L. O'Neal, T/Sgt. , ASN 19028070

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Part 4

I was nearly always assigned to the alert crew. We generally had the C-4 wrecker by the control tower and got to see all the take offs and returns close-up. Everyone else was forbidden to be in the area when these occurred. On one mission a pilot took off and his wheels were still rotating in the wheel well after he'd put his landing gear up so he pushed real hard on the brake pedals to stop them. The brakes were bronze and steel rings, the bronze turned with the wheel and the steel ones were stationary with the axle. They were extremely hot because the pilot had had to taxi the plane almost a mile to reach the bottom of the runway for take off, and they fused together. When the mission returned I was sitting between two guys in The wrecker beside the control tower. The minute we saw the plane land we saw smoke coming from the right hand tire, and of course it blew out right away. The pilot shoved the throttle forward and tried to take off. The sudden acceleration caused the plane to veer to the right as a result of the propellor torque, and the pilot might have made it except his propellor chewed the top off a Cletrac caterpillar that three or four guys had been sitting on watching the landings. The minute they saw the smoke from the tire they scrambled. The plane, a P-51, flopped over on it's back a ways beyond the Cletrack and pinned the pilot inside the cockpit. The C-4 driver started the motor and drove across the runway because the landings rarely ever slowed down or stopped for anything unless the tower ordered them to. We nearly got hit by the next plane to land. When we got to the plane we stuck a long pry bar thru the lift hole at the rear of the plane and were lifting the plane when a fire broke out in the wheel well. We stopped what we were doing, grabbed a fire extinguisher and put out the fire, and then lifted the plane up so that we could get him out of the cockpit. He cursed us every way he could for not getting him out first and then putting the fire out. We figured if we didn't get the fire out he'd have burned to death.

Since we were in a war zone and flying only daylight missions our base didn't have landing lights. When lights were required they'd call all the squadrons and have them bring all their vehicles to the area beside the runway and use the vehicle lights to light the runway. On one such occasion we heard a P-51 fly over as though he was in a standard landing pattern. On the next pass he flew the length of the runway and landed in the lake. Of course everyone figured he was dead and they were all standing around feeling sorry for him. Just as we were ready to leave the pilot came walking out of the lake. He was a black pilot from one of the squadrons in our fighter wing.

Occasionally we'd see a pilot come in for a landing that had forgotten to safety his guns. About in the middle of the runway he'd accidentally touch the trigger and the guns would fire. The recoil from them made the airplane appear to stop in midair, until he got his finger off the trigger.

Something else that we occasionally saw were pilots that for some reason or other couldn't get airborne while they still were on the steel

matting runway. Just as they reached the end of the matting they'd release the outer wing tanks and the airplane would shoot about a hundred feet into the air. The tanks, which each held sixty five gallons of aviation gas, would slide clear across the roadway and it's ditches spewing the gas which usually caught on fire.

Our whole tour of service in Italy was on the eastern side so that the fighter units had the most direct route into Germany while flying cover for the bombers. This was the side where the British 8th Army did it's fighting and the western was covered by the American 5th Army. As soon as the Germans had been pushed back far enough from Rome for it to be safe to visit, we started shuttling back and forth. We were supposed to get only one three day pass at a time. Any thing longer than three days was supposed to come out of your furlough time. My outfit always gave us four three day passes at a time with the understanding that if we were needed they'd send after us.

My friend Rollin had a friend from his college days that had a ten room house up in the general officer's area on the hillside above the Bay of Naples. Once or twice while we were visiting him we got to see Mt. Vesuvius erupting. It would shoot molten lave several hundred feet into the air and then the lava would fall to the ground and run down the mountainside.

I requested and was granted permission to fly as Engineer on the old B-17 bomber they gave us at one of the salvage depots. It had been hit by flak but all the holes had been patched and the plane was serviceable. By the time I came home I'd piled up 65 hours of flight time. I had just started in this capacity when the Commanding Officer came to me one day and handed me boxes containing over two gross of condoms and several dozen prophylactic kits. After explaining that venereal disease was on the increase he ordered me to give each man that got off the plane at least six of the condoms. Then he had second thoughts and expanded the order to include any that even got off to pull the propellers through and then got back on the plane.

Once we flew into Rome and went into town to party. Expecting to return to our base the next day we spent nearly all of our money. The next morning when we went through the preflight routine and were checking out the engine magnetos we found that one of them needed replacing. We took the plane to the Air Transport Command to get the magneto replaced and on the way started discussing ways to refinance ourselves. One of the guys from Air Corps Supply pointed out that if we had travel orders for five or more days we could draw rations from the P.X. We went to the Officer's Club and borrowed a typewriter and some paper and he typed us up some travel orders. We were going to go outside and sign them when we happened to find an Officer from our outfit and he signed them for us. At the P.X. we each got a carton of cigarettes, a bar of face soap, a bar of laundry soap, and four candy bars for \$1.24. We still had enough cash to take a hansom cab outside the P.X. and two blocks from there found a street vendor selling watermelons. We stopped to get one and one of the kids on the corner spied the merchandise we had and started trying to buy it from us. We finally arrived at a price of \$24.00 and went on to have another night on the town.

In the year that we were in Italy I managed to spend thirty days in Naples, ninety days in Rome, seven days in Venice, and a couple of days in Milan. While in Rome I must have spent fifteen or more days in the Vatican admiring all the goodies there. There were so many things to see, the huge mosaics on the walls, all the statuary, the paintings on the ceilings, and the Treasury Room. In there they had all kinds of gem stones, rings, medals, oil paintings, and eight golden candlesticks made by Benvenuto Cellini. The room was just filled with all these things.

One day while I was there they had an audience with the Pope for all

service men only. We made our way to the altar and when the Pope came to us we knelt and kissed the Papal ring he wore. He gave each man his special blessing, asked what his name was and almost before the man could answer, he'd gone on to the next one. When I was asked that question, I answered "North Hollywood, California". He gave me his special blessing and had started to turn to the next man when it must have sunk in what I'd said. He turned back to me and said "My very special blessing on you". So far as I know I was the only G.I. there that got two blessings, one special, and one very special from Pope Pious the 12th.

Something that always seemed funny to me were the hundreds of hookers outside the Vatican working the crowds of visitors. While speaking of hookers, one afternoon we went to see the Coliseum which is situated right behind the Victor Emmanuel Memorial at the foot of Via Roma. As we strolled along the hookers were out of sight in the passages around the walkways and were going psst, psst, to get our attention. They were also on all the main streets and in every bar. I think the money they brought in was all that kept them and their families alive. I never was able to figure what they did in peace time, before the war, when all the soldiers came.

Right along in here we got a new Engineering Officer for the Squadron. He came from New York where his family ran a small hotel. He wasn't universally liked but for some reason the two of us got on well. One day he called me into the line office and asked me how the second plane in the line of planes we were working on was coming along. I told him I hadn't the slightest idea, that I wasn't working on it. It turned out that he'd been reading the Tables of Organization and noticed that I was listed as both an Assistant Mobile Repair Unit Crew Chief and as an Air Inspector and had the rank of Staff Sergeant. The Crew Chief was a Tech. Sergeant and actually a parachute rigger they'd wanted to keep so they listed him as a Crew Chief.

I'd been to aircraft and engine school and he hadn't so he worried along with the administrative problems and I got to worry along with the mechanical aspects of repairing damaged aircraft. Anyway the Engineering Officer told me to think it over and if I wanted the job of Air Inspector to tell the wood shop to make me a desk and to get the paint shop to paint me a shingle to hang outside the line shack along with the other occupant's.

I wondered how in the world they'd come up with my name for Air Inspector and finally decided that the decision must have been made back in Africa. When we didn't have any planes to repair life got extremely boring. You can only spend so much time in the sack, and we were always miles from any town. When I needed something to pass the time I'd go to the Paint Shop and help them paint signs, until the Shop Chief stumbled across me and ran me off. Then I'd head for the machine shop, the weld shop or wherever it looked like I'd most likely get caught for a while. I spent a lot of time working with Oscar Ferrin, a good friend, patching bullet holes, him on one side of the plane and me on the other. It was useful, something to do, we could talk to each other, and the time passed pleasantly. I don't know how many patches we put on but it was a lot.

My new job got me an automatic full time assignment to the alert crew. We were always at the departure end of the runway for take-offs and when they were returning we usually sat by the control tower at the center of the runway in the C-4 wrecker. We were there to provide whatever assistance was necessary to make the mission and return in an orderly fashion. On take-off time was extremely critical, as the planes only took off one at a time. With maximum effort missions there were always 120 planes on the taxi strips while they taxied to the end of the runway and waited to take-off. Any delay used gas that they needed to allow them to complete their mission with a bit more margin of safety.

Our fighter bases were always closer to the enemy than the bombers and so we were always the first friendly base they came to when returning

with damage to their plane. On one occasion we were alerted by the tower that a B-17 was in trouble, with one engine out, and the others overheating and losing power. They finally ran out of power about five miles from our base. and we got there just as they landed. The plane was badly shot up and they had dead and wounded aboard. The Flight Engineer had given the order to jettison everything overboard. They threw out all the guns ammunition and anything else they could dismantle. As The Flight Engineer was exiting the plane he saw portion of a belt of .50 calibre ammunition laying near the rear door. He promptly lined up what was left of the crew and displayed the piece of belt he'd pulled out of the plane. Then he chewed them out and told them when he said dump everything he meant everything. The plane was just so much scrap. The propellers were all curled up or bent, the engines that had been still running were damaged by sudden stoppage and the air frame was all bent out of shape.

Our next move was to Ancona. Here we finally had to move out of our tents, which were pretty threadbare. The fighters were using two drop tanks on every mission and they usually flew between 100 and 120 airplanes. At that rate it didn't take very long for a mountain of box sides to accumulate. The boxes were made of first class plywood and the woodshop drew up plans for a hut that would shelter six men as the pyramidal tents had. The tents were cut apart and resewn into panels that would serve as roofs. It didn't take very long to discover that our pup tent halves, that we hadn't had to use since Casablanca could be temporarily suspended over your bunk and make it more or less temporarily waterproof. We suddenly became aware that the permanent things in life are often times temporary and the temporary things are often permanent.

Along in here was where the British soldier used to come to the outfit and mooch different colors of paint. We finally inquired what he was using all the paint for. It turned out that his Commanding Officer had a lorry and was building a room on the back of it, (Making a camper), and needed the paint to decorate it. We asked if we might see it and were told we were welcome anytime. When we finally went we found out that the Commanding Officer, in civilian life, was a Vice President of the British part of the Lever Brothers Soap Company. He was quite a guy, he offered to let us take one of his tanks out for a joyride but we never took him up on it. Several positive things came out of the meeting however, We started swapping welding rod with them and worked out some kind of a deal whereby we got all the acetylene gas that we could use. When we asked if we might sometime ride up to the front with his courier we were told we were welcome to go anytime.

When the day finally came for us to go to the front the Shop Chief, Master Sergeant Farnum Lawson and I dressed in fatigue clothing and took our helmet and liner, a Thompson sub-machine gun and 400 rounds of ammunition each (Although since I always had more I took more). We each took a musette bag full of cigarettes, candy and soap. These things were better than money in most places. We had high hopes of trading them for war souvenirs or guns. We were picked up at our outfit and started off on our adventure. Eventually we noticed we were traveling on dirt roads and occasionally we'd see a small sign that said "UP" on it. It turned out that this was the only way you knew where you were going. Returning the way we'd just come the signs would have read "Down", and did. Soon I saw a sign that read "SHOULDERS HAVE NOT BEEN SWEEPED". When I inquired as to its meaning I was told that only the ruts of the road had been swept and that there were probably mines scattered along the shoulders. When I chanced to look backwards I discovered we were going fast enough that we were in the ruts and up on the shoulders. When I asked him to go slower and drive more carefully he replied "Hell Yank, you'll never know it if we hit one", but he did slow down a bit and stayed in the ruts from there on. Soon we came up on a sign that read, "DUST DRAWS ENEMY GUNFIRE, DRIVE 5 MILES AN HOUR" When I looked back

there was a steady stream of dust going up in the air. I might have worried about this more but right then we came upon a squad of British Tommies in battle regalia, laying off the side of the road, with bayonets fixed on their rifles. When we asked about this he told us that they had probably been out on patrol, maybe looking for a prisoner or two. A couple of blocks further on we came across a half a dozen soldiers that had a fire going and were barbecuing a full pork loin on a spit over the fire. We asked the driver to stop so we could talk to them. We asked if anyone had any guns or souvenirs to trade for our goodies and they told us they weren't allowed to take guns, medals, etc. from the prisoners. If they took anything from them it had to be turned in immediately. We were interested in how far we were from the Germans. One of them pointed at some trees about a hundred yards away. He told us that there was a stream or river just beyond the trees and the Germans were on the other side, that some mornings they could hear some of them bathing in the river.

We suddenly wondered what we were doing here. The Germans might capture us and we'd spend the rest of the war in a Stalag somewhere. While we were having these thoughts we began to notice how deathly quiet it was. You couldn't hear the birds, crickets or anything else. It turned out that this goes with front line warfare. Leaving there we ran across a sign that had a red line drawn down the middle of it. On one side in Italian and in English on the other it said that any civilian found on the orthern side of the red line would be shot, no questions asked. Now that we'd become aware of the lack of noise we did hear a machine gun fire a burst every once in a while and every so often one of the tanks would fire a random round from their gun. We left shortly and started back home. If we had tried this visit on the American side of Italy we would have been stopped by the M.P.s that were put in place to keep the up people up front and the rear people at the rear. They didn't succeed too well though, there were five thousand troops AWOL in and around Naples and Rome. We asked the driver what part of England he came from and were told that before the war he lived on the isle of Jersey. As the Germans landed on one side of the island he left alone in a small boat from the opposite side. When he finally made his way to the the English shore they put the Kings Shilling in his hand and inducted him into their service.

About here someplace they assigned me a new man for the tent. He was a Tank Corps G.I. that had been wounded and transferred tio the Air Force because he was slightly shell shocked. It sticks in my mind somehow that he was in the Battle of the Bulge, but this might not have been. Anyway he arrived at the tent about 10:00 A.M. The days mission had taken off at &:00 A.M. that morning. After lunch we were laying around in the tent when the first plane of the mission returned. The new arrival heard it long before we did. His reaction was to start tearing up the floor looking for a foxhole. We got him calmed down and went up to work the landing. When we came down he was gone. Where they sent him we never heard. While we were stationed at Ancona we spent most of our time out on Mobile Repair Unit Trips. The trips were to South African or British air bases to repair our aircraft that had landed there because of battle damage. We enjoyed being on these bases because we could dress the only soldier among us that was less than a Sergeant (A Corporal) in Sergeants clothing and eat at their Sergeants Mess. We gave them our food and ate theirs. It probably wasn't anymore nourishing than ours but it was different than the food we ate day in and day out. In the British and South African forces they have personal servants called strikers. When we landed on their bases we turned our mess gear over to their mess area and at mess time we went and sat at a table with them. The strikers assigned to the mess area would ask our names, go get our mess gear off the hook where they'd stored it , fill it with food, and serve it to us. When the meal was over they took your mess gear, washed it, and returned it to it's storage place. We were always invited to have tea with them mid morning

and mid afternoon. This they had wherever they happened to be, even if they were under shell fire, they got out the pots and brewed tea.

A Staff Sergeant in the American Army was paid slightly more than a First Lieutenant in the British or South African force. In a British unit there were eight Sergeants or Crown Sergeants. In addition they usually had four hundred Basuto tribesman (Blacks) traveling with them. In our organization there were eight Master Sergeants, sixteen Technical Sergeants, forty eight Staff Sergeants, fifty four buck Sergeants, fifty four Corporals, sixteen Privates First Class, and sixteen Privates. They had two things that we did not, the strikers and a regular booze supply. Each month they could buy either two bottles of whiskey and one of gin or vice versa. They were charged about three dollars and change per bottle.

One time just after we'd arrived and got our tent set-up I watched one of the guys get a one burner stove out and get it lit. Then he opened a can of boned chicken and set it on the stove to warm. I asked him what he was doing and he said he was getting set up for trading. He had a supply of canned chicken that he'd appropriated somewhere. As soon as the chicken started boiling the tent flap opened and a Limey walked in and asked how he was trading. He replied one for one, whereupon the Limey left and returned with a bottle of whiskey, which he traded for a can of chicken. My dad, with the 8th Air Force in England, used to write that he'd paid fifty dollars for two bottles of scotch.

We hadn't been at Ancona too long when the Engineering Officer called me in one day and said that he'd been at his girlfriends house the night before, that they'd made some hot chocolate, and in the process had burned out one burner on her two burner electrical hot plate. Was it possible for me to find him a replacement part? I hadn't the slightest idea of where to even start looking for such an item, so I headed over to Air Corps Supply to ask a friend what we could do about it. He got on the radio and called our representative at the Air Depot in the south. The next afternoon when the hot-plane landed we had a new two burner hot-plate delivered to us. The Captain thought all this was wonderful and a couple of days later called me in to say that he and his girl friend had been riding around in her Fiat and had blown out a tire. Could I take his jeep and find him a replacement someplace? I called my friend in Air Corps Supply and told him what I needed. He said get the jeep and we'd go visit the British outfit just south of us. When we got there we dug up the Clerk of the Works and told him we needed a Fiat tire and tube. He called one of his men and sent him out to the motor pool area to get one for us. In hardly anytime at all the fellow came back with a new tire and tube mounted on a wheel and complete with the wheel bearings. He'd just removed the axel nut and brought us the complete wheel assembly off one of the vehicles they'd impounded. When we returned with this the Captain must have figured he'd found a direct connection to Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves.

A week or two later we needed wheels to travel around the countryside so we went to the Captain to cash in on some of the things we'd done for him. He told us he was using his jeep that evening but to tell the Motor Pool Sergeant to give us a trip ticket for the flight line jeep for the evening and then to come in the following day for a permanent trip ticket. During the day the jeep had to be on the flight line but after hours it was all mine. He widened the area around camp that we could cover. Every chance we had we were out touring around.

Another time they called me in and said they'd decided to go underground with the electrical lines at one end of the outfit. They felt they were a hazard to flight and needed five thousand feet of three conductor wire to finish the task. Back to get my buddy at Air Corps Supply. We decided we'd never find any wire because we didn't know where to start looking. We did have to make some effort though and since the city of Bologna had just been liberated from the Germans we decided to go see it. We drove into town, looked around briefly, had a few drinks, and then

headed out of town on a different road than the one we'd entered on. About a mile outside of town we came upon twenty-five or thirty spools of three conductor wire. We piled five of the spools into the trailer we had and would have taken more but there was no more room and the bed of the trailer was resting on the axel. We were treated like royalty when we got back. When ever we needed anything all we had to do was ask.

Someone reported that we had several planes on another airfield to the north of us that might be reparable so I was dispatched to look into it. It turned out that when our planes had landed there the field was in German hands. The crews had evidently been sent to a German Stalag and the Germans had salvaged as many parts as they needed to keep their American Air Force aloft. When I examined the planes the guns were still intact and were still loaded with ammunition. They hadn't removed any of them, just the parts they wanted. They did however drain all the gasoline that was available. Gasoline was in very short supply in their army. By the time we got to Ancona the Germans had retreated from almost all of Italy. When we finally left Ancona it was to move to an airfield near Rimini del Miramare. This was as far north as any of our airfields got. We were much closer to Germany and our planes could accompany the bombers to almost any target that was selected.

We heard there was a big beer brewery in Trieste, Italy so we petitioned the Squadron Commander to let us take a truck up there to get a load of the beer. He finally said O.K. but the day before we were to leave I had a sudden tooth ache and the dentist pulled the tooth. He also told me to stay close to camp so that if I had any trouble with it I could get help. The rest of the guys went on and hadn't gone over a hundred miles when they started passing American and British Prisoner of War Camps. They had four hundred thousand Germans prisoners in these camps. The boys stopped to talk to the guards and heard how the Germans had been marched into the camps and disarmed. They traded the guards a carton of cigarettes for the opportunity to snatch a P-38 or Luger pistol out of the piles of weapons they'd collected. Here I'd instigated the trip and not one of them thought to get me one. While we were at Rimini I finally got my fifth stripe. I was promoted to Technical Sergeant. One night when I was on Charge of Quarters I snooped around through the paper work and found that I'd been poroposed for the rank sixteen times prior to them finally giving it to me. The reason, I guess, that I never got it before was that I never buttered up to any of the officers (Other than the Engineering Officer). I just did what I was trained, and liked, to do and kept to myself.

All of a sudden VE day, May 7, 1945, was upon us. The Commanding Officer called me in and told me that he'd been thinking about sending a truckload of the boys out sight seeing around the countryside. He figured that most of us would never return to Italy and we had nothing to do now that all the missions had stopped. I was to take a friend with me and lay out a sightseeing route for the boys. I took three friends with me and we headed for the city Of Milano.

When we got there we went into the Second Corps Area Headquarters and asked about quarters for enlisted men. It turned out that there were two hundred hotels and one hundred ninety eight were reserved for officers and the other two were for enlisted men. Leaving there we opted for heading for Lake Como. When we got hthere we had to find a place to stay for the night . We finally ended up staying in a hotel that had been requisitioned by the Polish Army. Apparently they hadn't filled it completely so they let us stay for the one night. We went out on the town, but being new to the area didn't know where anything was so consequently we didn't have all that good a time. Leaving there we returned to Milano and then turned east towards Torino. We had no luck anywhere making arrangements for quartering enlisted men so we just kept going. When we returned, and told the Commanding Officer about the trip and what we'd found out, He reluctantly gave up the idea of the trips.

