

VERLE L. ROTH

I was sworn into the Army Air Force on May 22, 1942 at Portland Air Force Base and left for preflight training October 1942 and spent some time at Santa Ana, California. We were at Santa Ana longer than usual because of an outbreak of measles, which seemed would never end. As it was we were set back 2 classes and became 43-I and graduated that way. One of my classmates was Tim Holt [popular "cowboy" actor], another Robert Sterling [another actor]. Even when we were in quarantine, Tim Holt would be met every weekend by Bonita Granville [actress] in a limo and come back on Sunday. We were assigned to primary flight training at Cal Aero Academy in Ontario, California where we flew PT-17's and I soloed there. One memory was the first spin the instructor told me to follow him thru and I intended to but as plane stalled and he kicked it into a spin I suddenly felt very light and realized that I had not fastened my seat belt and found myself with a death grip on the seat. After recovery the instructor told me to do a spin so I quickly got my seat belt fastened and did a halfway satisfactory spin and never forgot to fasten my seat belt again.

From Cal Aero Academy we were sent to basic training at Merced Air Force Base at Merced, California. We were flying Vultee BT-13's and fun to fly. I had a check ride from Lt. Pinky Belfield, during the check ride he said do me a vertical

snap roll, so I made an attempt at it and wound up upside down, kicked it into a spin and recovered – he laughed and did a couple for me then warned me these maneuvers were forbidden and he would have my ass if he caught me doing one.

So from Merced we were sent to Ft. Sumner, New Mexico for advanced training in the UC-78 Bamboo Bomber or San Joaquin Beau Fighter. The UC-78's had wood propellers and planes didn't perform well on takeoff due to the over 4000ft. elevation, but we had a good time flying them. We used to hold the nose down on takeoff and keep it on the ground for as long as possible, then pull it off and try to do a half hearted chandelle then on to more flying.

The town of Ft. Sumner was the home of Billy the Kid and that was about all – had 2 drug stores, 2 movie theaters and 2 saloons. All of which were off limits except 1 movie theater and 1 drug store. They finally put 1 saloon on limits and we went in to have a drink one day. The bartender asked what we'd have and we all ordered. Then he reached under the bar, hauled out a bottle of whiskey and 4 glasses and said, "Help yourself boys". We finished our drinks and left for the base and a cold beer.

With the wooden propellers, if you lost an engine you couldn't maintain altitude on one engine. We had one crew who lost an engine during night training. They slowed and descended in a landing attitude till they hit ground. No one hurt but

the plane came to a stop at the edge of the mesa they had landed on – a few more feet and they would have gone over the edge. We were not allowed to buzz with threat of washing out but everyone did it and I think the instructors looked the other way.

We finally all graduated and received our orders. Mine were to Moses Lake AAF Base in Washington with 10 days leave. One of my friends, Frank Saxton, wife came to pick him up and he offered me a ride to Los Angeles, which I accepted. His wife had driven out from Los Angeles and was tired out so I drove. And except for gas and pit stops I drove to Flagstaff, Arizona. We stopped for coffee and a bite to eat – then Sax said he and his wife wanted to get a motel. Anyway talked them out of it and asked Sax to drive, at which he informed me that he had never driven a car in his life and his wife was too tired to drive. So I got behind the wheel and drove straight to the railroad depot where I boarded the train for Portland, Oregon. We stopped in Canby, Oregon and I got off the train to see Evelyn Matteson, my future wife. Ev and I were married October 7, 1943 in the Lutheran Parsonage at Vancouver, Washington. From there we drove to Seaside, Oregon for our honeymoon. Spent several days and then back to Camas, Washington where I caught a train for Ritzville, Washington and from there to Moses Lake by truck. I was assigned to the crew of John T. Kelly and flew as copilot with John. I went to Soap Lake, Washington and found an apartment, called Ev to join me there. She arrived and we spent the night in our new apartment and the next day we got orders to proceed to Sioux City, Iowa.

So Ev went back to Canby, Oregon to wait till I found something in Sioux City, which I did and we eventually wound up in the Jackson Hotel.

We were sent by rail to Kearney, Nebraska and from there ordered to proceed to England by B-17's flown by Ferry Command Crews. So we left Kearney about the 29th of December 1943 and flew to Romulus Field in Detroit, Michigan. Spent a couple of days there and then to Montreal, Canada where we spent the night and left the next day for Presque Isle, Maine where we spent the night and left the next day for Goose Bay, Labrador. We spent three days there and enjoyed the stay by skiing and ice skating – a lot of snow and ice. We finally took off and went to Iceland and due to the UK being fogged in, spent seven days there. The wind reached gusts of over 100 mph and blew three B-17's off the hard stands and would have blown more off if they hadn't sandbagged the wings. Anyway we finally took off and landed at a forlorn place called Stornoway, Scotland. We spent the night and then on to Blackpool, England and from there by train to Stone, England. We processed there, had orders cut the next day to go by rail back to Blackpool, then to ferry to Ireland for assignment. They didn't know what to do with us, so the next morning sent us back to Bovingdon, England, where finally we were assigned to the 384th Bomb Group at Grafton Underwood, England. So back on the train and eventually we arrived in Kettering, England and the 384th, where we were assigned to the 547th Squadron under command of Major Frink. Kelly was assigned to a crew as copilot for several trips and I was left in limbo. However, 1st Lt. Lavin put in a request for me to fly with him, which I

did, and after five missions Kelly got his crew back and requested that I fly with him, which I did and Lavin got his original copilot back. Their first mission was Schweinfurt where they encountered a lot of flak and fighters and had a direct hit in the cockpit – one enlisted man and Lt. Ashman got out and the rest of the crew were killed. So the good Lord was protecting me and I didn't know it.

The first trip I had with Lavin was to Oberpfaffenhofen, then Frankfurt – Berlin – Fraenhort, Germany and Le Grismont, France. Kelly then asked me to come back with his crew. So I went back with John and the crew I came over with. Then flew next three missions with John, La Tour, France, Dijon/Longvic, France and Sorau, Germany. A very long mission – 11 hours 10 minutes – a long time to sit in the cockpit with nothing to drink or eat. After three missions, Major Frink made a new crew instructor of me. That is take the Captain of the new crew as copilot and fly with them for up to five missions. Then turn them loose with rest of the crew, anyway it was an experience and such good enlisted men on crews that I flew with. Last crew had a ball turret gunner who wanted to leave the ball turret to pee and I let him until the crew came over one evening and informed me that he would stay out of the ball turret till after the bomb run, then get back in. So I had a talk with him and agreed on him leaving the ball turret well before the I.P. So the first mission I let him out and got back in. Then wanted out again – I refused him and so as luck would have it he got a burst of flak through the ball turret and took a fist size chunk out of his calf, besides that he did have to go and wet his pants while still in the ball turret.

I flew four missions to Berlin from March 22, 1944 – April 29, 1944 – May 19, 1944 – May 24, 1944. Starting on June 4, 1944 I flew nine missions in ten days, this included D-Day.

The day before D-Day we flew a mission to La Fosse, France. We let down under the overcast and came back across the Channel at 400–500 ft. You could have walked across the Channel on landing craft. The next day, June 6, 1944, we knew why they were out there. On the 20th of June I flew my last mission. This one to Hamburg, Germany, which gave me a total of 32 missions during my stay in England. When they cut orders to leave for the States, we were sent to Charley, England and from there by plane to Presque Isle, Maine and from there by train to Portland, Oregon. After a ten day leave, Ev and I went to Santa Monica, California to Redistribution Center. Stayed at the Del Mar Hotel on the beach at Santa Monica. Had a good rest there. Then went to Galveston, Texas and flew war weary B-17's and B-24's while there flying navigators who were training. Flew all over the country, New York, Alabama, Arizona. We were then sent to Sioux City, Iowa where I instructed crews going overseas in gunnery, bombing and plain old flying.

We had an Officers Call one day and the CO, Colonel Fisher told us that as the war ended, most pilots who had entertained thoughts of staying in the service as pilots could forget it and if we did stay in we would become Staff Sergeants or less. And if we still wanted to fly he would contact the Airlines and those who

were interested could sign up – so he brought United Airlines (UAL) to Sioux City and those of us who signed up could be interviewed and take the tests. They hired 17 of us and after receiving our discharge we went home and not long after United Airlines called from Denver, Colorado to start training. And so one career had ended and another was begun. So this ends my ramblings. Hope you all enjoyed it.