

Beyond A Doubt, Heroes

I often think of what the daily life would have presented to a member of the 14th AAF serving in the CBI theatre based on not only the stories from my grandfather, but from the many books I have read. I have come to the conclusion that "The Forgotten Theatre" was interesting and complex yet not well known nor understood by many. It is a well-known fact that the 14th AAF activated at Kunming, China on March 10, 1943. This outfit kept the flying tiger as a source of emblematic pride, and proud they should be, carrying on the traditions begun with the establishment of the AVG (Air Force Historical Research Agency). However, what most do not realize is that these men remain quite humble reminiscing their service, yet they should be hailed as heroes because so many willingly volunteered before being drafted, put their lives on the line, and did not brag or cry about it.

During WWII approximately 10 million men were drafted, and another 6 million enlisted to increase our fighting forces from 458,365 in 1940 to 12,055,884 in 1945. The 6 million who enlisted would have been drafted, but understood that by enlisting they would be able to choose what service to enlist in (Gill 2). Many, like my grandfather, chose the Army Air Corp. My grandfather told me that a man pulled a group of boys at the high school to share the advantages of enlisting. As a gung ho young American male, he enlisted, and went through the trainings stateside, and then embarked on a voyage that he believed he was prepared for, but discovered that the reality did not set in until he was in actual combat. They moved to a strange land, adjusting to the wildlife and local tribes while at the same time trying to always be combat ready. I heard many stories including having to shoot a tiger on the runway coming at them, monkeys watching movies in the clearings at night, snakes in their pathways and outhouses, and riding animals that I only rode at a circus, trained. He reported that he felt combat ready until flying his first mission, when the first bullets whizzed by. He thought, "Holy shit, this is for reals." His crew became his family and they struggled together through every passing day faced with enemies, strange terrain, unfamiliar cultures and languages, and violent weather. Was he scared? Yes! They were all scared, but they managed to find humor, beauty, and camaraderie daily within an unbearable environment.

Rarely a day passed that they did not face possible death by not only combat, but wildlife, dangerous terrain, extreme weather, and faulty, or lack of, equipment. My grandfather flew various planes, but spent most of the war flying missions in the B-24 Liberator of the 308th Bomb Squadron which was assigned to the 14th AAF. They flew "the hump" over the Himalayas to get both gasoline and needed supplies to the troops. Fighter jets provided the defense for the air transport route, flying against the Japanese while having to move base to base to find a safe zone. Flying in the common monsoon weather alone, these soldiers put their lives at risk. In addition to the normal obstacles, the trained Japanese pilots proved to be worthy opponents, even though General Chennault's hit and run tactics proved effective. Very few outfits were able to complete the required missions to be allowed to return stateside. As planes were damaged in combat, and soldiers parachuted or crashed, fatalities occurred daily, and many went missing in action. My grandfather experienced this first hand, and feels blessed to have survived, and especially blessed for the camaraderie of his outfit.

For example, on one mission, a “brother” of his crew was hit. According to grandpappy, “Bennie was hit, and yelled for me to help him. I pulled him up, laid him down, and saw lots of blood. I didn’t know what to do, but knew I had to do something. I rolled him over, pulled down his pants, poured my sulfa powder on his butt, and sat on him until we were able to land.” He would chuckle as he shared, “They literally blew his left butt cheek off, and as they took him away on a stretcher, Bennie said, ‘Hey, Burkett, thanks for saving my ass.’ I guess I really did, but never felt like he owed me anything. Just like everything we did every day. It was our job, and we did what was expected.” Another example was when my grandfather’s crew was shot down. A few were killed in the plane, but my grandfather and another went MIA. He shared stories like head hunters helping them. Wandering in a foreign land, among foreign cultures, they just prayed that wearing that blood chit would attract those who would get them back to their outfit. Interesting enough the plane with the remains of the crew were not recovered until the early 70’s, so even my mother can attest to the emotion evoked in my grandfather at the time, as they buried the remains of his crew in a common grave in Arlington Cemetery. Yet another time my grandfather was held prisoner by the Japanese. He always laughed as he told of the Japanese officer singling him out because he was from Riverside, CA because that officer had gone to school there. That connection earned them an extra bowl of rice, and my grandfather mentioned a British soldier told him that he wished he had been captured months earlier. Conditions were horrible, yet they managed humor among comrades always (Burkett).

Knowing that my grandfather’s experiences are fairly common, coupled with my readings of others’ personal accounts, I realize that they lived with fear daily, yet managed to be optimistic and still see good in all their surroundings. Death was definitely a daily fact of life, something civilian experience on a much smaller scale. My grandfather always told us that God gives us the ability to forget the bad and remember the good, and following that statement he could share about those who died with a tear, but times spent while alive with both a smile and a gleam in his eyes. He, like most of the WWII vets that interact together down at the local American Legion Hall, never seem to share about their experiences unless asked. And, I have yet to meet one of them, or read one account where they describe themselves as a hero. What they endured, the sacrifices they made, and especially serving in “the FORGOTTEN theatre”, members of the 14th AAF Flying Tigers definitely qualify as unsung heroes.

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Note: Recovery of his plane was written up in The Press Enterprise, but I do not have the date.