

Granddad and the Burma Road
Richard Warren Sommers, 1919-2000
By Emily Sommers Mannheimer

My grandfather Richard Warren Sommers was a very smart man, also pretty conservative politically, and very patriotic. Although his role in World War II was small, Granddad was very proud of his service with the Flying Tigers and his family considered him a brave man. In 1939 he graduated from Harvard University with a French major and he studied to be a French Diplomat at the International School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University. He had a gift for learning languages, and impressed our family by speaking in French, Italian, Spanish and bits of other languages. When my mom was little, Granddad taught her and her sisters a Chinese song he had learned when he was with the Flying Tigers during the war. My mom and my aunts can still sing it.

Granddad had finished graduate school when war was declared and he was drafted. The Army thought his language skills would be valuable in the war, so they sent him to Ohio State where he could use his proficiency in French to learn Italian! He learned Italian easily and became fluent. He also played some football with the other men in his unit. In one game he hurt his knee and it bothered him for the rest of his life until he had knee replacement surgery at age 80. That was his "war injury," which he used to joke about.

So, there he was with a bad knee and skills in French and Italian -- and the Army decided to send him to Burma, to join the Flying Tigers, and drive a truck! (His brother, who spoke no Italian, ended up stationed in Italy.) The purpose of his unit was to bring supplies for the Flying Tigers' pilots, one the most famous combat units in the War. As he described it, the officer in charge of his unit lined up all the men in front of large supply trucks, and told them that they would be taking these trucks over some very rough and narrow mountain roads. He asked for a show of hands of every man who had ever driven truck like this or any vehicle of similar size. My Grandfather had never driven a truck, and although he was from Indiana, he didn't live on a farm. He had a little sports car he drove in Indianapolis. Graduate studies in international diplomacy and French do not include courses in handling equipment, but might have made him quick thinking. The way he told it, he took one look around at the other guys who had no experience either and figured that if he didn't volunteer to drive then he would be riding along those mountain roads while someone else drove -- and that scared him more than the idea of driving himself. So he raised his hand and got promoted to "driver."

He and the guys in his unit made one trip, along the Burma Road into China to Kunming. A Burmese kid who spoke no English hung out the passenger side of the truck cab giving him directions and warning him of potholes and how close he was to the edge of the cliff. The trip was about 700 miles long and lasted over a month. He made the story very funny and nerve-racking. He was so relieved to arrive in China with his new buddy and the truck in one piece.

He made one trip and we don't know the details after that. I researched the Flying Tigers and the Burma Road to write this essay. After discussing it with my parents, my guess is that once a truck arrived in Kunming, it made no sense to try to drive an empty truck back along the Burma Road, and they probably needed the truck in China to help in the War against the Japanese.

The more I read about the Flying Tigers and the Burma Road, the more impressed I was with the entire operation, and the prouder I became about my grandfather's part in the larger effort. I realize that even though he didn't see combat, and driving a truck (even over narrow mountain roads) was not as dangerous as flying combat missions against the Japanese bombers, my grandfather's role did make a difference. He was so proud to be a member of the Flying Tigers and loved the friends he made.

I don't know what Granddad did in Kunming for those weeks. Somehow he learned that song that he later taught my mom. Apparently he hadn't known what the song was about, he just had a knack for language and picked up the words. Many years later, my mom and her sisters and parents heard that song on a TV show from China – maybe it was when President Nixon went there? – a children's chorus singing it. Much to everyone's surprise, they realized that this song he had taught them was "The East is Red," the Communist Chinese national anthem. My conservative Grandfather couldn't believe he had taught his little girls a pro-Communist song!