

The Flying Tigers of World War II

Walking into Don Harader, my great grandpa's house you can tell that an elderly couple used to live here, now just him. It is silent in the house. He sits in his rocker chair with the TV on mute, flipping between baseball and the weather channel, with banjo music on. There are many pictures of the family, deer and turkey heads and stuffed birds that he has shot. His wife, Elsie's, chair sets empty since she died two years ago. It is a solemn feeling in the house. An old man, in his mid-ninety's, is sitting down in his plaid shirt, trousers, and suspenders. Wrinkles line his face and he looks like a man who has been through many years of hardships, joys, and pains. He was part of the Flying Tigers unit: 69th Depot Repair Squadron (DRS), 301st group, 14th Air Force. I never knew what the Flying Tigers were, what they did, or even what war they were a part of until I finally got this chance to sit down and talk to him.

According to Riley C. "The Flying Tigers were officially called the American Volunteer Group" (C.) They were founded in 1941 after the attack on Pearl Harbor (C.). Mr. Harader said "I do not know how I would explain what the Flying Tigers were. We were there to attack the Japanese by Air Force but the one we were in was to keep the air force flying and repair the planes" he explained. "I was drafted. I did not want to be in the Army so I chose the Air Force." He showed me his draft notice: 2nd floor, Post Office building, Blackwell, Oklahoma, 10:00 am, September 26th 1943.

When he left for basic training he had a wife, Elsie, and a son, Walter. I had never really understood what an "army man" was. They had never been such an effective part of my life until my boyfriend was part of the army and was told he was probably going to go to Afghanistan within the next year. All they were to me were little green plastic men, not real

people who had real families and lives that they left behind to defend our freedom. When he talked about leaving his wife and son you could see the sadness in his eyes. The army life style is not something we can understand until we live through it. And he had. "I had basic training at Wichita Falls, Shepard Field, Texas. I went to Chanute Field, Illinois for sheet metal training and had fuel cell repair training in Akron, Ohio. When we were at basic we were training to go overseas, but we did not know it." When he said that I got a heavy heart for him, being young and going through basic then all of a sudden being shipped overseas without knowing that is what you were getting ready to do would be difficult.

Mr. Harader had a little black book filled with dates and times of when he left and arrived at different places throughout the war. He left Kelly Field, San Antonio, Texas: February 16th, 1945, he said "when we left Wichita/Kelly Field Elsie and Walt were both down there." He named his truck "The Elsie" after his wife. The ship, WS Benson, crossed the equator March 6th, 1945, by ship, "We got a Shell Back certificate when we crossed the equator. Also, the boat had meal tickets. There were ten thousand soldiers on that ship. Fifteen men were selected to sweep the decks and I was one of them."

He arrived in Melbourne, Australia: March 14th, 1945. He left March 16th, 1945, "We did not even leave the ship," he said. He arrived in Bombay, India: March 27th, 1945

He left same day and got onto the train to Calcutta, India. The camp name was Kamcharapara: March 30th, 1945, "Riding the train in India is one of my strongest memories, it is something that you would want to forget, but just cannot. We had nothing but wood benches to sit and sleep on. We had nothing to drink except hot tea and it was about one hundred degrees outside. We were on it for about 5 days and never got to get off. There was no space and no

restrooms,” he said with a sad look in his eye. “That is one of the things I try to forget about but never can.” When he described the train ride it reminded me about how the Jews were transported by Hitler and the Nazi party. I could not believe that we would put our own soldiers through that same thing.

He left Calcutta to start on the Burma Road: April 21st, 1945, “The convoy on the Burma Road took about twenty-nine days to go eighteen to nineteen hundred miles. One day there was a stupid Japanese zero fighter plane flying low. We had a Jeep with a fifty caliber machine gun on it in front and a weapons carrier with a fifty caliber in back. The last I saw he was trailing black smoke,” he explained to me with a chuckle. When he said this I asked him if he ever got into any trouble with his officers. “I was never in jail. In Shepard Field, Elsie came down for a couple weeks. One day I was taking a shower and I hung my dog tags on a nail and forgot them. We had an evening retreat and the captain said get out your dog tags, so I grabbed for them and they were not there. I about broke out and ran to the shower to get them but I knew I could not do that. But the captain walked right by me and did not say a word. This was good because I would not have been able to leave and see Elsie for those weeks. There was another time I left a pair of socks in my shoes under my bed, and you are not supposed to leave anything in your shoes. I got two hours of close drill for that,” he said.

He arrived in Kunming, China: May 14th, 1945. His second son Kenneth Harader was born during this time. I wondered about communication, how easy it was for him to get the news about his new son. “By letter was about the only way, no telephone or radios. When my second son, Kenny, was born they sent a radio gram saying “You have a son. Anxiety unnecessary. Love you daddy.” I actually got a letter that told me my son was born well before the radio gram. It took about five days for mail. When they said secret, they meant top secret. Elsie did

not know where I was for a six month period of time. They read all our letters to make sure we were not telling what we were not supposed to. An old army Sargent in Calcutta was going to write a letter about Bombay and Calcutta and they censored it. They would not let him tell anyone where we were," he said in a stern voice. "I could have gotten out earlier, if Ken had been born when he was due. I would have come home about six months sooner. But he was born ten days late."

He left: December 24th, 1945 at 1:30 by air. He arrived in Shanghai: December 24th at 6:30. "We stayed in Shanghai for six months for occupation duty. I serviced air planes, and put them in storage." He stayed until April 24th, 1946. He left by boat to San Francisco: May 7th, 1946.

He left Camp Stoman in San Francisco: May 8th, 1946. "Coming into San Francisco on a boat, we could see Alcatraz. My friend Missina (Moose) was from Chicago and back then everyone was worried about the Chicago gangsters. Brown was always kidding about it with Moose and Brown said 'You see your old dad out there Moose?' And I think that made Moose mad," he said to me with a grin on his face. Watching him reminisce about friends and the good times they had made me realize that while he was in the Flying Tigers for so long he must have made great friendships with people. "They were buddies I guess, where would I start? I knew many people, Norman Brown, Dwayne Koshark, Raymond LaRoche, he lived in California. Jack Higby, Marty Oxenburg, Will Missina, Kraus, McClelland, Christian, Meaders. We called ourselves 'the crew'. We all had different jobs also."

He arrived at Fort Douglas, Utah, Salt Lake City: May 9th, 1946

Japan surrendered and signed a treaty at Tokyo Bay: September 2nd at 9:04. “Here is something almost no one knows, the Japanese had more territory occupied than Germany did. They murdered over 300 thousand people in Nanking, China at that time and very few people know that.”

Honorable discharge: May 13th, 1946

Total length in service (continental) one year, four months, fifteen days, total length in service (foreign) one year, two months, eleven days

He went home: May 14th, 1946

He arrived home: May 16th, 1946

Final rank was Staff Sargent

<u>Months</u>	<u>Grade</u>	<u>Military Occupational Specialty</u>
2	Private	Army air force basic training (521)
20	Staff Sargent	Air plane sheet metal worker (555)
4	Staff Sargent	Fuel cell repair man (665)

Badges received: China/Burma/Indian Theater, Flying Tiger, Staff Sargent, Air Force and Air Craft Mechanics.

Medals received: Fairly good conduct. Ribbons: Battle star indicating over sea service, European-African, Mid. Eastern, Asian Pacific, and Army and Navy occupation.

I asked him how the Flying Tigers changed his life he answered “The main thing is when I got home I had no idea what I was going to do. I thought about farming, but I didn’t want to do that. I went and saw if I could work on railroads, so I went and got a job. But the first thing they wanted me to do is go down to Oklahoma City, but I told them no since I was away from home for so long. So I decided to work at the local John Deere.”

Don Harader now lives in Arkansas City, KS. I am proud to be his great granddaughter and to now understand what and who the Flying Tigers are, were, and went through. Learning about history from someone who was actually there is the best way to learn about history, you hear the stories that are not talked about, and you get the personal emotions that you cannot get from a text book. We need to honor our soldiers, past, present, and future.

Works Cited

Harader, Don. Personal Interview. Nov. 03, 2012.

C., Riley. "Flying Tigers of WWII." A CECOM Historical Office. History Happenings, This Day

In History, 20 Dec. 2010. Web. 13 Nov. 2012.