

6 May 1945 At present somewhere in India. Time Morn.

Well, darling, I left on the 1300 Base Unit bus ... for another Base close by where my plane was waiting to take off at 8 o'clock. ...With the lightning and storming in the north, I thought the scheduled trip would be cancelled, but at 7:45 on the night of April 14th, twenty two of us entered the C-47 airplane and in 15 minutes we're high and dry, flying north and straight into what looks like a very bad electrical storm. Must be the pilot maneuvered around the worst of the storm...

So begins a series of letters my grandfather, Winfred Nelson, wrote to my grandmother from his posting in the China Burma India theater (CBI) during World War II. Even this very beginning of his affectionate correspondence gives a feel for the danger that those who "flew the Hump" endured. Winfred was a courier of intelligence to China and India at the time, although his exact position and duties are unknown and were not mentioned in his letters. Unfortunately, I was too young to fully grasp the significance of my grandfather's role during World War II, and I never got the chance to talk with him about it. When I was 12, he passed away of a stroke at the ripe age of 96 and had lost his ability to speak much even before then.

To understand more about what it was like to be flying in World War II, I decided to interview Bud Heiner, a Flying Tiger veteran of San Clemente, California. Mr. Heiner (who encouraged me to call him "Bud") was more than happy to answer my questions and give me facts about his amazing life. What intrigued me most about Bud was that he was both a pilot and an engineer. I've heard many people speak of the brave pilots of World War II, but often neglected are the men behind the pilots: the mechanics, messengers, and deliverers who kept the fleets in the air. In particular, I was struck by Bud's astounding memory and the fondness in his voice that emerged when describing his past; it made his patriotism apparent. In fact, I was honored to be able to speak with him in such depth. My conversation with Bud was lengthy and rewarding, and helped me grasp the sheer bravery of those like my Grandpa and Bud who fought for our country during World War II.

Bud started off by giving me a detailed summary of his time in service. Bud told me that was a Flying Tiger in the 69th squadron of DRS. He was about 20 years old when he joined what would later be known as the 301st Air Depot Group - just two weeks after the December 7th attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941. He arrived at Kelly Field in San Antonio, Texas with a desire to help protect the country he'd loved all his life, and had no idea what incredible journeys lay in store.

He and the rest of the Flying Tigers set off on February 16th, 1945, with the intention of aiding Chinese air sanctions to help the allies to victory. Bud told me that their squadron travelled for months without knowing their destination, and finally ended up in India. In Calcutta, the group formed convoys and loaded equipment onto 300 trucks. Bud himself directed one convoy carrying mechanical equipment and plane parts over the famous Burma Road to Kunming, China. He described seeing alarming evidence of previous efforts at crossing the dangerous road in the form of crashed trucks in the river below, and he recalled that

sometimes the wooden bridges were so unstable that they had to be crossed painstakingly, one truck at a time. At over 8,000 feet in elevation, I can only imagine how terrifying this month-long journey must have been for them!

In Kunming, Bud served as a test pilot for an air depot group that maintained planes for the Chinese air force. As Bud described it, his job was to “bring the new ones in and take the old ones out.” From previous research on my Grandpa’s service, I learned that flying over the Himalayas was extremely risky due to the lack of any maps, radio signals, or navigation systems, but when asked which aspects made flying the most difficult, Bud firmly replied: “the terrible weather.” Although Bud did not have to fly over the hump very often, when he did the monsoons awaited him. He described experiencing such poor visibility that it was common for him to fly for hours without ever seeing the land below. Bud stated, “Every time we took off, we were in the clouds without seeing the ground.” One time, when he was attempting to land in northwest China, he couldn’t see the ground even though he was only 50 feet above the runway! On that occasion, he wasn’t allowed to land and had to fly back to Kunming without completing his delivery.

Bud really enjoyed this job, since he got to fly planes as he repaired them to make sure they were worthy of combat. When I asked him what his all-time favorite plane to fly was, he replied, “A P-51 Mustang, because you can’t get better than Mustang.” He also was responsible for sending parts to different places in China where they were needed. He made trips between Kunming and Shanghai, sometimes carrying passengers and sometimes just transporting materials. Interestingly, he himself once transported the mayor of Shanghai and his family. Once, while delivering parts to Burma, Bud’s plane malfunctioned and he had to land with a flat tire, which was “as close to combat as I ever got!” Then he chuckled.

Serving with the air depot group for nearly five years and joining the reserves for fifteen years after that, Bud is truly a hero of our country. He and the rest of the Flying Tigers 59th Squadron worked hard behind the scenes to keep the Chinese flights in the air, often going to great lengths. Sometimes this meant creating plane parts out of scrap metal when supplies were running low, or sometimes it meant keeping broken planes in the air for just one last trip – anything to ensure the success of the allies. Many people I have spoken to are unaware of the fight as it happened in that part of Asia during World War II, and because my grandfather Win was sworn to secrecy, not many in my family know much about what he did. Talking to Bud Heiner has enhanced my understanding of what it was truly like to serve our country during World War II,