

Memories From the “Bunched Buddies of Old Buck”

By Milton R. Stokes, (V.P. 453rd Bomb Group)

Some of you may have wondered where the phrase “Bunched Buddies” came from. As you know we assembled a heck of a lot of airplanes in the air over East Anglia in preparation for a combat mission. There had to be a fixed point for assembly to begin. It was a radio beacon. The 2nd Air Wing used Buncher Six. There may have been more than three Groups; i.e., the 453rd, 445th, and 389th, using this buncher. At times it seemed as though every Group in the area circled Buncher Six. Planes would climb up through the funnel of the beacon, keeping the radio compass as close to 270 degrees as possible.

When new combat crews were introduced to this assembly method for the first time bedlam broke loose. Strange planes would zoom through your formation. When flying formation, one couldn't hit the panic button and dive or climb to a safer altitude. No altitude was really safe! So you held your position while your mates caught up. You will remember, also, that we flew in some of the worst weather conditions imaginable. Snow, rain, clouds and the half-light of the early English mornings kept the crews' stomachs churning. Further adding to the discomfort was the sluggish feeling of the controls of an unstable aircraft. When fully loaded with bombs and gasoline, the B-24 responded reluctantly to rudder, elevators and ailerons. She was a lady though; she moved when she was ready. One couldn't force her or she answered with the first shudders of a stall. Take your time, watch the air speed indicator, angle of attack, keep the manifold pressure up, watch cylinder head temperatures, fly good formation and, eventually, the planes would break through the clouds. Sometimes, quite rarely, one would fly into bright-blessed sunshine. On occasions, when coming out on top, the entire coast of occupied Holland could be seen, boldly outlined in the gray waters of the North Sea – what a sight – what a thrill! The battle of Buncher Six had been survived one more time.

I can still remember the cold, damp air that greeted one upon raising your nose beyond the protection of seven wool blankets on the bed. They were dusty, dirty blankets too. If you struck them a cloud of dust arose to tell you that they should be washed. No one in our hut ever washed the blankets during cold weather and it was always cold in those unheated huts in England – so they were unwashed. We did send the sheets out to be washed. They were an off-white color (far removed from bleached white) so the dirt was not to apparent to tired red eyes on getting into bed most nights, and never seen in the black of long nights when arising on mission mornings or on training hops. A clean bed was put out of your mind until you completed your missions. It seemed that most things were put on hold until you “finished.”

Yes, we did sweep out the place when the Colonel threatened, but he knew the circumstances and was too close to us not to know how we felt, so we went unwashed and dirty. The dirt was not too apparent unless one looked closely. The underwear was washed weekly (if you desired and had the money). Our dress uniforms were never cleaned on schedule. Once I sent my "pinks" out to be cleaned and never got them back. Oh, I got someone's pants but not mine. After three trips to our dry cleaner to straighten out the mess, I gave up and bought a new clean pair. On our base, we never did solve the problem of getting our own clothes back. All of our clothes had name and serial number stamped with india ink to identify each piece, however, that made no difference – they were lost anyway. It took some of us longer to catch on but there was a way to eliminate those problems. The local English women would wash and iron our clothes for a reasonable sum. In trips back to Old Buck after the war, some of our men still called on the people who washed and ironed their clothes. Of such small things were lasting friendships made.

On this job of Group Vice President, one gets the feeling of taking off, climbing to altitude, breaking free of dark clouds, flying into golden sunshine and blue skies – but no one else is there. There is no formation, no buddies, and no one breaks radio silence. In this ethereal silence we fly on. There is no “Cabin in the Sky”, “Choo Choo Baby”, “Je Reviens”, “Rumblestiltskin”, and thousands more. They are all there. They fly on, they make no noise, no wing moves as air flows over the famous Davis creation. You know who is at the controls of these ships, but no one mans the turrets or the waist guns. There are no bombs in the bellies of these ships. There are no targets to obliterate, no thoughts of destruction, they fly in peace now. They leave us silently as they came – they must have a new type of engine because they are fast, very fast.

My crew has seen this unusual formation but no one says anything. We know we shall see it again. The landing back at the base is smooth, even the wheels make no sound as the rubber touches the tarmac, We taxi in, cut all switches, set the brakes, but never fill out the “Form One”. The ground crew chief and his buddies ask not why.