

Harold Talmage (Dick) Bennett was born on July 11, 1921 in Browningsville, MD. He volunteered for the U.S. Army at age 21 and served in World War II for 3 years and 1 month attaining the rank of Technical Sergeant Grade 2. He served with the 451st Bomber Group as Radio Operator and Waist Gunner on a B-24 bomber from Dec 1943 to July of 1944. His awards include: Air Force Gunnery School Wings, Air Medal with Oak Leaf Clusters, and Good Conduct Medal. Here is his story:

I don't recall how we got to Washington, but we went to Ft. Meyer in VA where I was inducted into the Army, and then put on a bus to Camp Lee, VA. We were sent to Biloxi, MI where the first day was very hectic. I recall that it was very hot, and the first thing they did was read us the Articles of War. I hardly knew that I had a drill instructor; all I can remember is that he was very young and very loud!

After basic training at Keesler Field in Mississippi they sent me to radio school in Scottfield, Illinois. After radio school we went to Laredo, Texas to aerial gunner's school where we were trained on using aircraft machine guns. From there we went to Boise, Idaho and were assigned to a B-24 aircraft crew. The crews were assembled in Boise, and then sent to Fairmont, Nebraska for two months of phase training. It seemed like we rode through the entire Middle Western U.S.!

The scariest thing was one night during phase training in Nebraska. I don't know why but we flew a lot at night; we'd take off at 8PM and come back at midnight. The plane had "tricycle" landing gear, which means you had one wheel in front, and two in the back. You land the plane on the two wheels in back, and as the plane slows down it settles on the one wheel in the front. Well, when the plane slowed down and settled on the one wheel in front, the landing gear collapsed. There was a lot of noise and sparks, but the pilot was pretty cool-headed and he allowed the plane to slow on its own, and got it off the runway and onto the infield grass.

We stayed in Fairmont for about two months, then deployed to Italy where we went over as the 451st Bomb Group. We flew the planes down past Puerto Rico and Africa, past Algiers, then onto Italy. Once we got to Italy were we flew missions dropping bombs on Rumania, Hungary, Yugoslavia, and France. We did not have any "near escapes" that I know of, but sometimes the anti-aircraft flak was very heavy; we were very lucky.

I spent most of my free time going to town on days off, mostly didn't do much. We played cards, and I never lost a single dollar gambling! Payday came and some guys stayed up all night after getting paid and could hardly stand up in the morning. But as we breathed pure oxygen in the plane it helped sober people up. For food and provisions the Army provided us all the C-rations and D-rations we could eat. We were flying over North Africa in Dec 1943 when Christmas came on our way over to Italy so we didn't celebrate it, but after landing we did get a very good, special meal. Memorial Day was known as Decoration Day back then, but we didn't have a special celebration.

Our plane was named "Three Feathers", and was named by the crew who ferried the plane over to Italy, not us. When an engine loses power you have to "feather" the engine which stops the propellers from spinning freely so that they won't cause excessive. Well, on the way over the crew lost three engines, and had to "feather" them. Luckily they were over Trinidad and were able to land with one engine. So they had a lady painted on the plane with three feathers painted strategically over three places of her anatomy. While in Italy we wanted to get the lady with 3 feathers painted on our flight jackets but the guy we went to couldn't do it. When we told him that the Italian word for feathers was "piume", decided he could do it after all.

One day our mission was to bomb submarine pens in Southern France. We were over the Aegean Sea and one engine started throwing oil, so we had to feather the engine. We pulled out of formation and headed back when another engine started to go, so we landed on the island of Corsica. They had a fighter plane base but they also had a runway long enough for us. We needed engines replaced so they found quarters for us to live in town. We stayed 10 days with nothing to do. The base was supposed to notify our bomber group that we were there. So we found a little bar close to waterfront. We each had \$50 "escape money" in our parachutes, so between the 10 of us we had \$500, most of which went to buy Crème de Menthe and Cognac. After they got the engines fixed we headed back to Italy and the control tower asked 1st Pilot Bill Slater: "Where have you been?" It seems that Corsica never notified our group that we were there, so our bomber group had us missing in action. Someone had taken over our tent and our dog Vino. I was actually back to the states and was home before word reached my family that I was no longer missing in action.

So how did we get the dog? We were at a café in Constantine drinking wine and a little Arab kid came along with a puppy in his arms that he wanted to sell. We bought the puppy for 3 dollars. The puppy started to whine and someone said to give it a little wine. So we poured some wine into one of those little coasters that you put under a glass. The dog took a few laps of the wine and then went right to sleep. So naturally we named her Vino, and kept her the whole time we were over there. The mother of one of the crew members, who lived in Missouri, said that after our squadron completed their 50 missions we should bring the dog home.

So after we did our 50 missions they gave us an old, outdated, desert-painted B-24 to use to get back to the country. Vino came back to the states with us, and when we landed in Puerto Rico somebody there said we had better get that dog some shots or they won't let it into the country. So we found somebody on the base who gave the dog its shots and then we came to Homestead, FL where they paid no attention to the dog whatsoever. The mother in Missouri wanted the dog, so we took the dog home to her. We didn't know at that time but the dog was pregnant. How she got pregnant by those big Italian dogs we don't know because Vino was a little thing.

Upon leaving for the U.S. it was traditional to buzz the area on the last flight. I didn't know it at the time but there was a guy out there who just happened to take photos. Now the "Ad Lib" is the newsletter for the 451st Bomber Group. I wrote to the editor and mentioned that

we buzzed the area as we were leaving Italy, and that I heard we blew somebody's antenna off his tent. Some guy at the reunion stood up and said: "So that's who it was!" You see, it wasn't until 50 years later, after I wrote to the editor that the guy realized who it was. He gave me the photos he took of the plane. And if you go to the museum at Wright Patterson in Dayton, OH there's a plane way over in the corner that has the name "Strawberry Bitch" painted on it. That was the plane that we brought back, and that's the plane in the photo. It initially went to the plane graveyard but for some reason the museum decided to refurbish a B-24, and that was the plane they chose.

I heard rumors that after you came back from Europe that they may send you to the Pacific, so we decided that we would go to school because the Army wouldn't send you anywhere while you were in school. We signed up for pilot training, but they didn't have school openings then so the Army put us on what they called "on-the-line" training. We went to Lancaster, CA for primary flight training. The Army made a wise decision and determined that they shouldn't trust me in the air in an airplane by myself. I did what is called "washed out" solo. One of the problems they found was that when I came in for a landing I had a hard time figuring out how far above the ground I was. The war was still going on so I decided to take navigation training in Monroe, LA which is where I was when the war ended.

While I was in Monroe, LA I had accumulated enough points to get out of the Army, but I had to go to Randolph Field in San Antonio, TX to be discharged. So a friend of mine who lived in Michigan hitchhiked home and got his father's car and drove back to Monroe. We then drove to San Antonio and were discharged on Oct 20, 1945. After discharge, he and I headed back towards Michigan. We stopped in Springfield, MO overnight where one of the aircraft crew lived, and then we went on to Michigan and stayed overnight. The next day he took me down to Route 30 where I hitchhiked home. A little old lady stopped and picked me up. She said: "The first thing they tell us is that we shouldn't pick up boys like you." I said that that was probably good advice but she picked me up anyway.

.Additional Questions & Answers:

Q.What skills and lessons did you learn in the service?

A. I learned a lot about dealing with people because you're constantly around people. But the skills I learned as radio operator was never useful as an occupation

Q. In combat were there specific things that stick out in your mind?

A. The first time we ran into flack over Southern France. That was scary!!

Q. Who was your best buddy?

A. Didn't really have a best buddy. We simply relied on each other to be there.

Q. Did you have any heroes or someone in particular you looked up to?

A. I most admired our plane captain, 1st Pilot Bill Slater. We flew out of Italy over Northern Italy, The Balkans, and Southern Europe. He was always very calm and competent. We never worried about him.

Q. What influence did the Army have on your life?

A. It's one of the best things that happened to me. Let's you know there's more to the world than what you've see.

Q. Why did you join the American Legion? What do you think on being the last charter member?

A. I joined because it seemed like a good organization which it has proved to be over the years. It's hard to believe I'm the last charter member; it was not something you try to do; it just evolves.

Q. Did you leave a girl behind?

A. Yes I did, and I came back and married her. Referring of course to his lovely wife Carolyn.

Q. Did you use the GI Bill?

A. Yes. After I got home I made arrangements and enrolled at the University of MD, majoring in business and finance administration using the GI bill. I started night school in Feb 1946 and finished in May of 1949. .

Q. What was your most happy moment other than the end of the war?

A. Getting back to the USA.

Q. How were you treated at home after the war?

A. In a word, Great!

Q. Did the government treat you fairly after the war?

A. Yes, they paid for my education

Q. What is your most vivid memory? Why?

A. During Gunnery School training we shot machine guns at a target sleeve that was pulled by another plane. For some reason the memory of the pilot pulling away from my first target sleeve shooting after I shot my guns stands out.

Q. Did you see any buddies after the war?

A. We had never met up after the war. We went on for 50 years and none of ever heard from anyone. I was curious about our navigator Dick Herron, so I did a name search on the computer and found Dick living in PA, so I called and spoke to his son who gave me Dick's phone number. We met up after that. I also saw Leone Stone our bombardier, a scrawny kind of guy. Over the years I've been in touch with Bill Slater and Bill Green. I also met with Joe Capelca who I accused of being a henchman of Al Capone because he came from Cicero, IL

Q. Sum up military service and what it means to you today.

A. It means a lot to me, and it did a lot for me. I never would have gone to college without the GI Bill. I have two sons and am sorry they missed military service because the world doesn't revolve just around you. There's a whole lot more about the world.