

Chapter Five :

The War Years

It was a clear Monday morning when Oralee and I drove to the Baltimore train station. It was a time for mixed emotions. I was glad that I was getting the opportunity to learn to fly and sorry to be leaving home. We arrived at the station at eight o'clock and the train was schedule to leave at nine. Having a hour to kill, we decided to have breakfast. After breakfast it was getting close to boarding time so we walked towards the train gate. As we got close to the train track we saw that the train was on the track and it was being boarded by passengers. Oralee and I said our goodbyes, we kissed and I boarded the train for Biloxi, Mississippi.

The train was old. It looked like a relic left over from the First World War. The steam locomotive pulling the train was throwing out so much soot and smoke that we had to close all the windows in the train. As we approached the deep south it got so hot with the widows closed we were forced to open them. So you might guess that with the heat, the soot, the smoke and the windows closed, it was not a very pleasant trip. The trip to Biloxi Mississippi by rail would normally take about twenty hours. Due to the war emergency we were traveling at the lowest priority of use of the railroad tracks. So whenever there was a troop or military material movement, we were shifted onto a side track clearing the main track for them. We spent a lot of time on the side tracks making our journey to Biloxi the worst train ride I have ever experienced. After twenty-four hours we got to our destination. I was wearing a white shirt and you would never recognize it when I arrived at the train station in Biloxi. The shirt was as black as the ace of spades from the smoke and soot the train produced. You can imagine how clean our bodies were when we arrived at Kessler Air Field, Biloxi, Mississippi.

We were met at the train by army personnel and they loaded us all in one truck and drove us to camp. Once we got into the camp, we were told to get into a formation of two and then the sergeant marched us down the road to the supply depot. We were then told to enter the building single file. As we entered the building, the sergeant close to door looked us over and shouted out our frame size, small, medium or

large. From the sergeants observation we were fitted up. The men distributing the clothes would fit us up accordingly. The first thing they gave us was a barracks bag and then the clothes that included under garments, work clothes, and uniform. All of the clothes were inserted in the barracks bag. Further down the line they would ask you what your shoe size was and they tossed you two pairs of shoes. The last items were our bedding materials, They tried to fit us up the best they could. Some of us were fitted up perfectly and others looked like they were in a burlap bag. With the bedding and clothes they took us to our home away from home.



Fig 29. Gene in the Air Corp

You would never believe the place they took us. It was a building that had a roof and four walls with some windows. The floor was full of knotholes. These were temporary quarters for the recruits taking their basic training. Our furniture consisted of a wood folding cot and a wood footlocker at the foot of the cot. On the back wall behind the cot, they provided us with a shelf and a hanger rod to hang our clothes and uniforms.

They called these buildings huts. The latrine and showers where located just outside our hut in a

separate building. Whenever you saw a G.I. running out of the hut in his raincoat and the sun was shining, he either was going for a short arm inspection or he was on his way to the shower. A Short Arm Inspection was a practice of the Army's to inspect each and every soldier for venereal disease. This inspection occurred every month, a day or two before payday. Whenever the inspection was due, we had to report outside the hut with the rain coat covering our naked body and line up in a formation of two. We were then examined by the doctors. That's as far as I am going to go on this subject except that you can be sure that with my religious training it was safe that I would not be tempted. Abstinence is the best preventive.

For the next thirty days of our basic training we were introduced to Army life. Rise early in the morning, hurry up and wait seemed to be the norm. We would always rush to the mess hall and stand in line for an hour or so before we could smell the food. This occurred at all our meals. Our normal day started by us rising early in the morning by the sound of the bugle. We got dressed in our fatigues and assembled outside in a column of two and stayed at attention. The First Sergeant would then put us at ease and then proceed with the roll call. After the roll call we would double time to breakfast. With breakfast over we were marched to the orientation hall and acquainted us with the general rules of the Army and what they expected from us. On the firing range we were required to fire the M2 rifle and a 45 cal. pistol. That 45 cal. pistol had some kick. With that much kick, you had to be close to the victim to ever hit him. All we had to do was fire the guns and get a feel for them. Being in the Air Force we would only be issued a 45 cal. automatic pistol.

In the afternoons we were required to attend the exercises at the parade grounds. The exercises normally lasted about one hour. After the exercises, we ran a three mile cross country hike at double time speed. This hike took us up and down some very high hills. At the beginning most of us had a problem completing the hike. Within a short time we were all at the finish line. Not all of us at the same time, however. After the exercises we returned to our huts, took showers dressed in our class A uniforms and waited for our call to supper. When supper was over we were on our own. We were not allowed to leave camp but we could go to the local Post Exchange where we could purchase all kinds of goodies. Beer was available but after the last time I drank beer, beer it didn't appeal to me.

In addition to having the evening free we also had Saturday and Sundays off. Most of the weekends I reserved for writing home and catching

up on my reading if the other guys in the hut would let you. It was on one of these weekends, most of the GI's were sitting on their footlockers writing letters. The GI's were just boys, their average age was nineteen and they were the cream of crop of our generation. To get into the cadet training each one of us had to pass a rigid mental and physical examination. You had to have perfect eyesight with no other defects. As I looked at them I thought "They will become men before their time, what a shame that many of these boys would not be returning home!" I hoped and prayed that it would not be wasted for nothing. Myself included.



Fig. 30. Gene and Friend in Uniform

This was the first time most of us had been so far away from home. It was also the first time most of us from up north were in the deep south. Our Squadron was made up of fifty percent from the north and the other fifty percent from the south. All fighting the same war. Most of the Southerners talked with a soft deep drawl whereas the northerners were loud and boisterous. It was strange for both of us. As soon as any one started to talk it was very easy to determine where they came from. From my point of view the boys from the south were still fighting the Civil War. They usually started the debate as to who really won the Civil War. The debate always began every Saturday mornings. I guess it was because we were not required to exercise on Saturdays. Without the exercises, we were all fired up for a fight. The debate never had a winner, ending in a wrestling match. It was usually a friendly encounter. No one got hurt except the cots. We busted about two cots a week. It was really fun. This is how the south and the north got acquainted during the big war. In the end we all became buddies and we called each other Yankees and Rebels. Of course the Rebels insisted that the word Yankee be preceded with the word damn.

The weather was unbearable. It was 100 degrees in the shade and with the humidity being in the eighties, we were forever changing our under

garments and heading for the showers. The hard part was when we sat down to write letters home, we sweated so bad that that it was difficult to finish a letter without having the sweat fall on the letter smearing it. At night we had a problem with the mosquitoes which ate you up alive. In order to survive at night we had to sleep with our G.I. blankets over us. Imagine how hot it was under the blanket. It was that or be eaten by the mosquitoes. When we got up the next morning, the sheets were soaking wet. It is surprising what you can get used to when you don't have a choice.

During the basic training we were limited to our base and were not permitted to go into town. Adjacent to our hut there was a hut that was equipped with a pool table, a few card tables and three coke dispensers. They called this hut the recreation palace. The Coke dispensers required exact change and were not equipped to make change, so if you had nickels in your possession you were very popular. It was a sad day when you were out of nickels. During the war years coke was very scarce and the Coke dispensers were empty most of the time. We were lucky to have the Coke in camp. The poor civilians at home had to do without this commodity. To make sure we would get our Coke, we all made it our business to be at the dispensary at the time they were being replenished.

On payday the recreation hut was full of activity, the poker tables were full of players and the pool table was turned into a dice table. The gambling continued throughout the night. The next morning it took us all day to clean up the mess of the night before. The floor would be littered with cigarette and cigar butts.

The other activity we could engage in was going to the nearest post exchange to drink some of that good 3.2 beer. The exchange was open from nine to eleven in the evening. This was a place we could relax for a couple of hours. At the post exchange we got to meet some of the permanent based soldiers. Most of the nights were spent by drinking beer, discussing the latest gossip and ending the night singing some of the army songs. Eleven o'clock we all headed for our home away from home.

After basic training we got our shipping orders. The orders read that we had a two-week delay from the time we departed from Biloxi and the time we were to report to our next assignment at North Carolina State College. It did not take us long to pack and start our trip to our next destination. I spent one week with Oralee and the other week with my family.



Fig 31. Gene with Durso Family on Leave



Fig 32. Gene with Sarah on Leave



Fig 33. Gene with, Lena, Jose, Oralee and Sarah on Leave

The two weeks went fast and here I was on the train to my new adventure at North Carolina State.

It was a warm Monday morning in June 1943 when I got off the train at Raleigh station in North Carolina. We were again met by the army personnel and escorted to a truck. We entered the truck with our barracks bag and we drove about an hour before we stopped and got off the truck. As I looked around, I was shocked at what was in front of me. A beautiful landscaped area with a U shaped building in the middle. The building was three stories high and was constructed of red brick.

We were met by fellow Cadets and they took over. They kept us at attention as they introduced themselves as upper classmates and our commanding officers. We were advised that for the first month, we would be under classmates subjected to harassment by the upper classmates. For the first month of our stay we would be considered Dodo's. They explained that a Dodo was a bird with wings but couldn't fly. As a Dodo we were not permitted to walk beyond the perimeters of our room. If and when we left our room we had to double time to our destination. Whenever we visited someone, went to the toilet or were ordered to assemble in the courtyard we were to make sure we complied with the double time rule. We were given our room assignments and dismissed.

Here we were all double timing up the stairs into the dormitory thru the hall and finally to our room. Once in our room we sat down and relaxed. The building we entered was neat and clean. It was made up of individual rooms. Each room was equipped with four bunk beds stacked two high, two lower and two upper. The room was set up to accommodate four cadets. In addition to the bunks

each Cadet had his own personal desk and bureau. In the center of the room there was a window. When you looked out you could see the Blue Ridge Mountains in the distance. The landscape was breath taking.

The showers washbasin and toilets were located outside the room at the end of hall. It was a by far an incredible improvement over the facilities we had at Kessler Field. At Kessler Field the toilets and showers were laid out with no privacy. There was a old saying "Don't get caught picking up the soap". The showers and toilets here at North Carolina State College were all enclosed giving us privacy we lacked at Kessler Field.

After taking a shower, I went back to my room and started to unpack and put my clothes in the bureau and hung up my uniforms in the closet. In the process of making up the bed we got a visit from one of the Cadets unknown to us. He introduced himself as a upper classmate and ordered us to get to attention and shouted at us "You all should know better! Whenever a upper classmate enters a room, the Cadet who sees him first is to shout attention and every one in the room is to come to attention!" This was our first encounter of being hazed. He had us running through the halls waving our arms and shouting: "I am a Dodo and I can't fly!" We did this for a while and then he ordered one of my room mates to open the window in the room and shout at the top of lungs "I am a Dodo and I likes it here!" He then told all of us to go to the window and yell out as loud as we could "I am Dodo and I like it here!". They made us do it over and over again and each time he shouted, "Louder, louder!" We were very grateful for the warm welcome we received from the upper classmates on our first day. We were harassed throughout the first month. If you were from the North, you were lucky because most of the upper classmates were from the North and they were concentrating on the men from the south making up for the time we were harassed by the men from the south.

It wasn't unusual for us to be roused out of our beds early in the morning and ordered outside in the hall. Once in the hall they would haze us. There was one incident where a cadet was told to march through a glass door. Would you believe it, he did it. It was a bloody mess. One of our roommates was from the south and he couldn't take the hazing and all the upper classmates knew it and they never left him alone. It was pitiful to watch. There was nothing we could do to help him.

Our day started with reveille at 0600. We had thirty minuets to get out of bed, shower, get dressed, make our bunks (hospital corners and white sheet folded at pillar end to a width of six inches),

and be at formation in the courtyard. We marched to breakfast, finished breakfast and marched to our classes. Our classes ran from 0800 to 1200. Our courses in math were equivalent to the first year of College. The math they were teaching us was required for the next stage of our cadet training. After class we would march to the mess hall and have lunch. With lunch over we would attend the required army orientation and then finish the day with our physical exercises. At 1700 we would return to the dormitories and get ready for retreat and supper.

There were 200 cadets at the school at one time. We were divided into flights consisting of forty men in each flight. Each flight had his captain. Each of the five flight captains had to report to the Wing Commander who held a rank of Major. All of the officers were made up our fellow classmates. At retreat it was required that we march in review. We did ourselves proud as we marched in view of all the town people of Raleigh who attended all our retreats. Once a month we were required to perform guard duty. During our tour of duty at the college we were restricted to the college grounds.

It was the fourth of July 1943 when we were permitted to go to town and march in the local parade. When we arrived it started to rain. The leader of each flight asked the cadets if they wanted to cancel the march due to rain. In unison we all shouted "We will march no rain is going to stop us!" When we finished the march, we were all soaked to the skin. I don't think I ever felt so proud to be an American as I did that day.

The cadets were self governed. The leaders were selected by the Cadets in the flight. The honor system was in affect and we were responsible to live up to it. Our rooms, uniforms, shoes were subjected to a daily inspection. These inspections could occur at any time without prior notice and they could be conducted by the upper classmates or the leaders. Your clothes should be neatly laid out in the bureau, the uniforms hung properly and all your shoes had to be highly polished to a point you could see your reflection. Also all the shoes had to be stacked in a straight line under the lower bunk. The cadet in the upper bunk would line up his shoes on the right whereas the cadet in the lower bunk would line up his shoes to the left. During the inspection if defaults occurred, Gigs would be issued. If it was a room default such as the room being dusty etc, all four cadets would be punished equally.

Then there was the personal Gig. Each Gig had equal weight. If you attained more than five Gigs a week, you were required to walk a one-hour tour for each Gig over five and it had to be done on your free time.

Within the three months it was also required that we put ten hours of flight time. We reported to the local airport and boarded a piper cub aircraft. It was a one-engine monoplane, room for a instructor and one student.



Fig 34. Piper Cub Trainer (1943)

The instructor took us up and flew us over the city and taught us the fundamentals of piloting. We practiced power on and power off stalls. Then there were the tailspins. When the pilot instructors got bored they would show us how good they were by dog fighting on our time. On my ten-hour check it was a requirement that I complete a flight forming a rectangle. It was a very windy day and the piper plane was being thrown off its course. I had all I could do to fight the wind. I tried my best and when I got done my instructor complimented on the perfect circle I made. It was a far cry from the rectangle I was supposed to make.

During my flight training I got very close with a fellow cadet. His name was George Burton and his home was in Baltimore, Maryland. He was five years my junior and was a very smart cadet. We did many things together such as study and play sports. We liked to play ping-pong. We were evenly matched and we never knew who would win the game until the final point. If we kept a record of each of the games we won, it probable would be a tie

When we became upper classmates hazing was outlawed and we were told that we were to be guided accordingly. Some of the cadets were disappointed. As for me I was glad. I never liked it. Being upper class mates we were informed that a party was being planned for our graduation and we could invite one person to it. There will be a dance and a live band will be supplied. Oralee was invited and to my surprise she wrote and told me she would be happy to attend. Most of the cadets invited the local girls. For the dance we got permission to visit the local tailor and have our uniforms fitted for the occasion. The shirts and blouses fitted with a "V"

shape look. This is the first time we tailored those sloppy uniforms we received at Biloxi.

The graduation party was a great success. Oralee made it down and I introduced her to all the Cadets in my Flight. The party was held in the school gym. It was decorated in blue and gold. The band was excellent and we danced all night. Like all good things it came to an end. I ordered a taxi for Oralee. It was a sad night when I put Oralee in the cab and saw her off. It was a good time as long as it lasted. The next step of my cadet training was ahead of me.

After Graduation we were advised that we would be given a two-week furlough before we were to report to Army Air Force Qualification Center located in Knashville Tenn. I made arrangements to go home and on my way I stopped at Oralee. I found Oralee in the hospital recovering from her appendix removal. During my visit with Oralee, I saw the whole USA Army that night. All at Oralee bed side. It made me jealous and angry and I made Oralee aware of it. Her reply was: "I had to do something it was lonely without you!" I left the hospital and went back to Mrs. Stockslager house. Marie and her girlfriends happened to be there and they invited me to go out with them. Having nothing else to do I went out with them. I guess Oralee heard about it and she was mad. She made me know about it the next day when I saw her at the hospital. When I left for home I guess we were not in the best of terms.

I had a nice time at home with my family. I did get to see Jim's girlfriend Marge and her girlfriend Mildred H. With Jim and Sal away, I spent most of my leave with the family. My family and I took advantage of the warm weather of the summer, we packed a lunch basket and went to the local beach for the day. The family at time consisted of Mom, Pop, Lena, Frank, Josie, Raymond and our darling niece Sarah. It was on this leave that Pop and I thought it would be a good idea to sell my car. The car was stored in one of Sal's Garages. I was paying rent and we decided it was a waste of money. I got a good offer, more then I paid for it originally, so I sold it. I got \$650.00 for it. I gave the monies to Pop and asked him to put it away for me. You know Mom had the nerve to tell me "You going to trust your father with all your money!" My reply was "If thats all I am worth to my father, he is welcome to it!"



Fig 35 Gene Home on Leave (1943)

Time flies and before any one realizes it, it was time to leave.

When I arrived at the base in Nashville, I was taken to my quarters and given written orders covering my one-week stay. The orders outlined three days of physical and mental examinations and the remaining days were spent taking examinations and answering written questions. The mental examination was very extensive and involved interviews with three psychiatrists. In the physical examination they were very concerned of the condition of our eyes and heart. The Cardiologist checked our heart at rest, doing work and then after work. He had me on the treadmill to my limit. To check for your capabilities to be trained as a pilot they put you through various tests. To test you for dizziness, they would whirl you around on a rotating platform. After a short time, you were told to jump off. They then recorded the time you recovered from your dizziness. They tested you for depth perception by positioning you about twenty feet from two objects and they handed you two strings. From that distance you were told to line up the objects so that they were side by side with each other. After I completed all the required tests I was informed to report to one of the psychiatrists. This was normal since all of the cadets were required to have this last interview before the results would be listed on the bulletin board. I entered the psychiatrist's

office and sat down in front of his desk. He introduced himself and told me he reviewed all my tests and he was going to recommend me highly for the navigation training. He could see from my face that I was disappointed, and he continued by saying "We all can not be pilots!" I had surmised that my excellent math scores and my age would work against me being chosen for pilot training. After a lengthy discussion he ended our meeting suggested that I change by preference from pilot to navigator. My reply was "I don't want to be a back seat driver!" Before I was dismissed he did said he would do his best. When I got back from my interview George was waiting at the barracks curious as to what occurred. I told him the whole story and he felt really sad for me. He turned to me and said "Maybe he will change his mind and change his recommendation."

George was told that he was going to be recommended for pilot training. You can imagine how disappointed I was. The wait for the placement of the results on the bulletin board was very painful. The outcome was not what I expected. It was a black day (although the sun was shining). That Saturday morning I received the news of me failing to make either the pilot, navigator or bombardier listing. George made the pilot training. The notice ended stating your orders will follow.

George received his orders to report for preflight training before I was notified. We hugged and wished each other the best of luck in our new adventure, he in his pilot training and I unknown at the time. We promised we would write to each other. It was sad to part from a good friend but I was happy George made it. Before I received my orders.

It wasn't long after George shipped out that I was ordered to report to the commandant of the base. He was a tall and thin man with eagles on his lapel. As I entered the room I came to attention and saluted and said "Reporting as ordered sir." His reply "At ease and sit down soldier." Its been brought to my attention that you refused to be a navigator. Before we reassign you, we would like you to consider our gunnery training. We do not offer this training to all our men. This is a great honor and you may not get this opportunity again. I almost laughed in his face. I turned down the navigation training and he is expecting me to take a gunnery course. My reply was "Thank you very much but I feel that with my education and background I would be an asset to the Army as a airplane and engine mechanic." He responded by saying "I will advise the board of our conversation and the you will be notified later of their decision." Two days later I received my orders to report to Lemore Air Force Base California. They put me in a baggage car modified for troop movements.

The car was full of bunk beds stacked two high providing accommodation for forty men.

During our trip we were served hot meals for breakfast and supper and sandwiches at lunchtime. It took us two weeks to make the trip. We were put on side tracks whenever we had to make way for a freight train moving war materials. It was at this time we would get out and do our exercises. Some times we were at these sidings for a couple of hours. When ever these sidings were near a town some of the GI's would sneak into town. It was dangerous since you never know when the train would leave the siding. It was funny to see the GI's running to catch up to the moving train after they visited the town. What saved them was that the train moved at very slow speed going from the siding to the main track. All in all it was a good trip. We got to see the mountain landscape of the western states.

Lemore Air Force Base was a separation center for the Army Air Force. At my arrival I still did not know what the Air Force had in mind for me. The base was large and I had never seen so many GI's in one camp. The accommodations were excellent and all the barracks had window air conditions. It wasn't long before I found out why air conditioners were standard issue. The average temperature day and night was 100 degrees Fahrenheit. The camp was located deep in the heart of a desert. The only grass I could see was around the barracks and orderly buildings. I was curious as to where they procured the grass. With the weather being so hot, the army did away with our normal exercises. In lieu of the exercise we were required to keep the grass wet by hosing it down three times a day. When we were not watering the grass we were trucked outside the desert to a nursery to, load the grass sod, return to base and install it around the barracks. It was a sorry day when I found out where the grass came from. Maybe in 100 years and five more wars we could cover the whole desert with grass. This was not a permanent camp since everyone was here for reassignment. Everyone including myself was waiting for their orders. There were two things I was sure of, that I was no longer a cadet and that I was still in the Army Air Corp. So my orders could only read that I was being sent to gunnery or airplane and engine mechanic school. Two weeks later I received my orders. The orders read "Report to Gulfport, Mississippi for Airplane and Engine Mechanic School." This made me happy and it made it easy for me to accept the disappointment of washing out of the cadet program.

I was put on a cattle car (not the official name) similar to the car that transported me here from Nashville. Up to this time it appeared to me that I would spend most of my Army career riding in these

cattle cars. Gulfport was the next town from my first camp Biloxi. We were told that we would remain at Gulfport until a opening for the next class would be available. Our accommodations were similar to what we had at Kessler. At Kessler we experienced the heat of summer. Now at Gulfport we were experiencing the winter months. Picture the hut we were staying in. Bare 2 x 4 stud walls, no insulation and the floor full of knotholes. We had two belly stoves one on each end of the hut. There was two ways to keep warm, one was to get in bed and cover yourself with a blanket and the heavy woolen coat issued by the army. The other was to stay close to the belly stove. The temperature was not that low, it was the high humidity that made it so cold. No matter how many clothes you had on it seemed that the cold always managed to seep in. Thank God we only stayed at Gulfport two weeks before we were told to report to Kessler field for our school training.

It was January 1944 when I attended the Airplane and Engine Mechanic School at Kessler Field. The base was laid out very well and all the structures at the base were built to out last the time. Kessler Field was considered to be a permanent base. The housing was excellent. The barracks were all built the same and they consisted of two story barracks. The showers and toilets were located on the first floor that was for the use of both floors. We were issued footlockers, shelves and coat racks for our clothing and personal belongings. There were no separate compartments. There were three rows of double stacked bunk beds. Two rows were up against each wall and the third row was in the center of the barracks. The area around the barracks was beautifully landscaped. One of our responsibilities was to make sure the landscape was kept neat and beautiful. I was assigned to the upper floor of the barracks. The footlocker at the end of our bunk was used as a bench. We would sit on the footlocker and read or chew the fat. One day while I was sitting on the foot locker, I took a good look at GI's on the floor and noticed the difference of these men from the boys I left behind when I washed out of the cadets. They were all much older and more matured. That was when I realized I was now in the regular Army.

The training lasted for five months. It was conducted similar to the school I attended in New York. Being familiar with most of the courses being taught, I was always ahead of the class. Many of the instructors noticed that I had previous training and they would let me help them in instructing some of the men who needed extra tutoring. The plane we were getting to be familiar with was the B-24. It was a four engine heavy bomber similar to the British

Lancaster. They both were referred as being a flying box car.



Fig 36. Example B-24 Bomber

We covered the periodic maintenance of the airplane, engine, hydraulics, and the propeller. I was impressed by the large number of extra safety features the engineers provided in the plane to insure safe flight. Many of its operating mechanisms for the safe operation of the airplane were equipped with one or two back up systems. This was done to safe guard the engine from ignition failures. In the case of the landing gear retraction system, in addition to the two hydraulic pumps a hand pump was also supplied. If both of these system failed you can lower the landing gear by physically kicking them down from the inside of the plane.

It was not long after I starting school that I got a Dear John letter form Oralee. It was a disappointment but I was more disappointed in my losing my chance to fly then losing her so I got over it quickly. In the meantime I was corresponding with Mildred H. of New York and Mildred Z. of Baltimore. To cheer me up, my sister Lena and her associates at the telephone company called me up about two to three times a night.



Fig 37. Gene with Sisters Jose and Lena

The men in the barracks referred to me as lover boy and wanted to know what my secret was. I never told them that it was my sister and her friends. I also never told them that they were all long distance telephone operators.

During my stay at Biloxi I got a chance to visit New Orleans, Louisiana. We were issued a three-day pass and Jack Cooper, Elmer DeSimone and I decided we visit the French Quarters in the City of New Orleans. The city of New Orleans was very beautiful. I never saw so many balconies enclosed with artistic wrought iron railings.

My understanding is that the railings were designed by the French. Therefore the name French Quarters. That was the first time I visited New Orleans and I promised myself that I would try to revisit this city in the future and try to make it for the Mardi Gras next time.

From time to time George Burton and I corresponded with each other. He kept me informed of his progress in his training and I in turn would write him of my progress. He sent me pictures of all the airplanes he flew during training. He shared with me all his accomplishments leading to his graduation. At graduation he was awarded his Pilot Wings. I was very happy for George and I wrote and told him so. It was so nice of George to make me share in his pilot training. After graduation, he was assigned to pilot a C53 cargo plane. He sent me a photograph of his airplane and crew. George was sent to the Asian Operation where he was assigned to fly over the hump of China delivering supplies to China. In his letters, George would describe to me in detail all the fantastic views he saw flying over the mountains of China. In addition to keeping me informed of his training, George was now sharing his adventures of flying his airplane in the Asian Operation. It was

great hearing from him and I always looked forward to receiving his letters.

The five months were over and what do you think, yes I was being sent to the west coast again. This time I was going to attend a special school at Northrop Aircraft Co. located in Hawthorne Ca. Northrop was in the process of releasing the first night fighter in the world to the U.S. Army Air Force and our Squadron was selected to maintain them and keep them flying state side. These planes were designed to scan the skies at night for enemy planes and destroy. The planes were equipped with the latest radar system. The radar system would search the skies for enemy airplanes. Once the enemy was sighted, the radar would automatically position the 20 mm cannons and fire them. The 20 mm cannons were located in the fuselage under the wings. This was the first time cannons were installed in an airplane. In addition to the cannons, the airplane was equipped with a top rotating turret having four 50 caliber air-cooled machine guns. The turret was manual operated by the radar operator. The crew consisted of the pilot and the radar operator. The airplane had the appearance of a P38 fighter but was much larger. To avoid detection at night the exterior of the airplane was painted black. Due to the airplane's color and its deadly firepower, it was nick-named "The Black Widow".



Fig 38. The P61 Black Widow Fighter

Los Angeles and Hollywood was close enough to Hawthorne for us to hitch-hike there and return the same day. On two occasions Emie DeSimone, Jack Cooper and myself hitch-hiked to Los Angeles to visit the sights and the local beaches.

On one of our trips we toured Hollywood and the Hollywood Bowl. During my stay in Hawthorne I never got to see the famous USO in Hollywood. I heard it was always crowded and it was hard to get in. In the city all the GI's had access to free movies. If you visited the local bars everything was on the house. If you wanted a good time and earn some money there always were the gays. The bars and gays were not my cup of tea.



Fig 39. Trip to Beaches when in Los Angeles (?)

Most of my free time was spent in the town of Hawthorne. It was a quaint town. I enjoyed taking in the sights during the daylight hours and after sunset I would go to the movies. One night I went to a local movie house and I was attracted to the usherette who directed me to my seat. She was very pretty and had blond hair and blue eyes. She was also slim and shapely. I never saw any one as pretty as she was. I made up my mind that I was going to date her before the night was over. My eyes were on her all night and I had no idea what the movie was all about. I got her attention a couple of times and before the movie was over we were acquainted. Her name was Jeanie and we made plans to meet the following week. We dated a few times and on one occasion I attended church with her. She was member of the Christ Episcopal Church. This was the second time I attended a protestant church. The first time was with Oralee.

My friendship with Jeanie came to a rapid halt. One weekend Jeanie called me and broke our date. She advised me that she was not feeling well and she was going to rest at home. That same day I went to town and visited the local USO and spotted Jeanie dancing with one of the GI's. As soon as she spotted me she came over and started to explain that she started to feel better after she called me and she couldn't get in touch with me. I was pretty hot under the collar at that time and she knew it. She told me she could not break this evening date but she would make it up to me by seeing me tomorrow night. The next night I met her at her sister's apartment where she was baby sitting. The baby was sleeping and we were on the floor kissing and necking. It seemed to me that Jeanie had other ideas that went well beyond kissing and necking. This came to light when I called Jeanie for a date and she advised me that she wasn't going to waste her time with me again. That was the end of that romance.

The three months at Northrop went fast. Before we knew it we were being shipped to our

permanent base, Salinas Air Force Base, Ca. It was at this base that they were training pilots to fly the new P61 Black Widow fighter. The pilots selected for this training were men who had previous experience in flying twin-engine airplanes. Most of the pilots were experienced flying the B25 light bomber. This light bomber had a Co-Pilot. The Black Widow had no Co-Pilot, so the pilots from the B25 bomber had to be trained not only to fly the airplane but also to take over the duties of the Co-Pilots.



Fig 40. Example of a B25 Bomber Aircraft

The P61 was still in the production stage and none were available for training at this time. The Army substituted the A20, a light two-engine attack bomber similar to the P61 not requiring a Co-pilot to fly it.



Fig 41. Line of A20 Bombers

The flights were at night and they flew their mission using only the instruments and radar. The cockpit was covered completely preventing any light to get into the cockpit. Take off flight and landing had to be done using the instruments only. The most common mistake made by the pilots was to forget to lower the landing gear. The lowering of the landing gear was normally the responsibility of the Co-Pilot. We were very fortunate to have alert personnel in the

tower to warn the pilots. In all the time I was at Salinas we only had one belly landing. Thank God there were no casualties on this mishap. We did lose one pilot and airplane on one of the many training missions. The pilots flew the airplanes over the Pacific Ocean and then returned to the base. The pilots flew solo. The pilot or airplane was never found.



Fig 42. Gene in the A20 Bomber

At this base I was assigned as a crew chief and I was responsible for one of the A20 bomber. My duty was to make sure my airplane was ready for flight at all times. I was responsible for the normal maintenance and if it required major overhaul, it would be sent to the hanger. I stayed with the airplane at all times. After the overhaul was complete, the airplane was taken back to the apron. The airplanes except for the time they were being overhauled remained on the apron exposed to the weather. Every morning it was my job to preflight the airplane and made sure that it was ready for flying. The preflight also required me to make sure all the gasoline tanks were at full capacity. If not I was to contact the depot to send a gasoline truck out to the airplane. It was on one of these refuelings that I had the most harrowing experience of my life. I don't know how it happened but as I was refueling my airplane the 100 octane gasoline squirted into my eyes. For the moment I could not see. I shut off the nozzle and I shouted "I am blind, I am blind!" The men heard me and came to my rescue and helped me off the wing. The first thing they did was to take me to the nearest water hydrant, open it and sprinkle my eyes with water. This didn't help and I was driven to the hospital emergency ward. It was at least an hour before I got my sight back. You never saw a happier guy. It was an awful feeling to think I would never see again.

Of all the preflight inspections, I liked to check the ignition system on both engines the best. Each engine was equipped with two magnetos, one on

the right side and the other on the left. Each cylinder is supplied with two spark plugs, one in the front and the other in the rear. One magneto will supply the electric current for the spark plug in the front and the other magneto for the rear. To check the ignition system, it was required that I throttle the engines to a rpm of 2000 rpm one engine at a time. With the engine running at 2000 rpm I rotated the magneto switch from the both position (normal) to the right magneto position, wait a few minutes and then rotated the switch to the left magneto. After a few minutes I rotated the switch back to its normal position. During the switching I kept my eye on the rpm gage for any drop in rpm. If at any time the rpm varied 100 rpm, the airplane was grounded requiring the replacement of both sets of spark plugs. It was a great thrill when I was performing this inspection. It took all my will power not to roll the airplane down the runway and take off. "Ha Ha."

After two months at Salanis our squadron was ordered to report to Fresno Air Force Base located on the coast of California north of Salanis. When we arrived at the base they assigned us to our quarters. Our barracks were sandwiched between a large swimming pool in the front and six beautiful tennis courts in the back. Once we got settled we were given a tour of the base. The only airplanes at the base were P61 (Black Widows). Now I know why we were ordered to report to this base. Our specialty training we received at Northrop would be put to good use.

Our duties at Fresno were different then at Salanis. We had no specific airplane assigned to us. Instead we were assigned to a inspection dock. These docks were located away from the apron close to the main repair depot. The docks were staffed by twelve mechanics and one crew chief. It was the duties of the men at the docks to perform all the periodic inspections of the airplanes at the base. There were twenty such docks. During the inspection if replacements or repair of parts were required, they were done at the docks.

It was a strange situation at this point. I was a crew chief of one of the docks but only had the rank of private. At this time when going through my training the Army had a surplus of sergeants classified as airplane and engine mechanic classifications. Consequently, all promotions were frozen. If promotions were not frozen, they would normally be awarded following graduation of airplane and engine mechanic school. You would receive your "Private First Class", stripe, finish your specialty training and receive your "Corporal" stripe, report to a permanent base and receive your "Sergeant" stripe. Crew Chief's were usually a a minimum at least a

"Staff Sergeant". I must have been the only crew chief in the history of the Air Force having the rank of "Private". Two months later I was awarded one stripe "Private First Class". This was an insult. I never sewed them on my uniform. They threatened to take the stripe away and cancel the additional four dollars a month pay raise. I never sewed the stripe on and they never took it back.

We worked two shifts at the depot. The early shift was from 0700 to 1700 with one hour for lunch. The second shift started 1700 and terminated at 2400. Saturday and Sunday was our day off. We were on our own and there was no roll call in the morning. When we were off duty we could sleep as late as we wished. The two shifts were required to maintain eighty percent of the airplanes available at all times for the pilots training. If the first shift worked hard and maintained the quota, this meant that the second shift would not have to report for work. Since we alternated the shift assignments, we all made it our business to work hard on the first shift to maintain the eighty percent quota. Therefore it was seldom we had to work the second shift. On our days off Elmer and I took advantage of the tennis courts and the swimming pool. We would play a couple of sets of tennis, shower and jump in the pool. We were about the same built and we were very competitive at all the sports. Whenever we competed at any sport, we never knew who would be the victor. The weather was excellent, warm during the day and cool in the evenings.

Fresno was a large city and it had many bars and restaurants. It also had a dance pavilion where the enlisted men and officers attended. Some of the women at these dances preferred to dance with the officers. Some of the officers were aware of this and they asked us to point them out. These women would then be boycotted by the officers. It wasn't long before these women got the message and danced with the enlisted men as well as the officers.

One of my other friends was Wesley Nelson. Wherever there was an army base there was sure to be more bars than you could count. Fresno Air Base was no exception. On Saturday nights when I had no date (which was not too often), Wesley and I would visit all the local bars. My drink at that time was Sherry. We would sit at the bar and drink. I remember one night I was feeling no pains and I was being picked up by a pretty girl at one of the bars. I was just about to accept the invitation when Wesley grabs my arm and stops me. I was mad but I took Wesley's advise and we headed back to the base. The next week Wesley and I went back to the bar. I being sober this time, Wesley pointed out to me the women I was ready to leave with that night he stopped me. I was shocked,

you have no conception of what a person looks like when you are DRUNK! I thanked Wesley and promised I would be more careful in the future.

Although Wesley and I enjoyed each other's company on Saturdays, he avoided me on Sundays. This bothered me and one day I asked why he avoided me on Sundays? His reply was "Gee Gene on Sundays I have dinner in town then I attend the evening services at the local Baptist church. Knowing you are Catholic I never thought of asking you to accompany me." From that day on Wesley and I spent some of our Saturdays and all our Sundays together. Saturdays (when I had no date) Wesley and I toured the bars. Sunday I started the day by attended mass at the base chapel. In the evening Wesley and I would go into town have dinner and then attend the Baptist Services. The people at the Baptist church made me feel at home. The services were much different than the Catholic Church. They did not celebrate a mass. Their services consisted of sermons and gospel music. The sermons were given by the people as well as the minister. I enjoyed the gospel music so much that I joined the choir. The choir was comprised of men and women. Maybe I was more impressed with the pretty blond hair, blue eye girl in the choir and not the music when I decided to join the choir. Her name was June and she was as sweet as she was beautiful.

After the church services, we all assembled in the recreation hall, played games and sang songs. There was no drinking of hard liquor or dancing. Both of which were forbidden by the church. At these meetings I got acquainted with June and all the young girls. Most of the young men were in the service. We met a lot of sweet girls at the meetings but neither Wesley or I ever dated them. Wesley and I were always invited by the parishioners to share their home with them at all the holidays. During the holidays, Wesley June and I would form a threesome and sing at the special services.

While attending the Baptist church I had a number of notable experiences. One was when after the minister spent about thirty minuets on the evil of drinking hard liquor, he advised his parishioners to pour all their liquor in the river. Right after the sermon, in a loud voice he shouts: "We will now sing the hymn LETS ALL GATHER AT THE RIVER". The other was when one of the parishioners approached me and said "you know last night when I was in town I saw some one who looked like you dragging himself from one bar to another, it couldn't be you. It most of been some one who looked like you."

One of my jobs at the base was to tow the airplanes from the apron to the dock. This was done by me driving a tug to the airplane, hitch it to the tug

and tow the airplane to the dock. This was fun. The wings stood out beyond the tug and it was a challenge to move the airplane through the other airplanes without hitting the wing tips. I was never alone when I was moving the airplanes and the soldier who accompanied me on these trips would be so frightened that he often had brown matter in his pants. I generally missed the wing tips by inches. What was fun for me was watching the horror on the face of the soldier who accompanied me. It seemed strange to me when I was told that I could not drive the tug without an official drivers license from the Army. I had been driving the tug ever since I was assigned to this base.

I was sent to drivers school. The training consisted of one week of class work and one day of driving in a caravan. During the caravan trip we were required to drive all the different size vehicles in the caravan, I started with a jeep and ended with driving a six ton four wheel drive truck. All this to drive a tug. The wisdom of the Army! Our tour took us up and down the mountains of California. We stopped and talked to the local people. On one of these stops we came to a fig tree orchard. I talked to one of the laborers and I told him that my dad had fig trees in his garden. No matter what I told him I couldn't convince him that fig trees could survive the winters of Brooklyn, NY. Another stop was at a walnut orchard. It was the first time I ever saw a walnut tree. To my surprise, the walnut is enclosed in a black round shell. To get to the walnut, you had to remove the outer black shell. I was so impressed of what I saw, I had to share it with my family. I sent a few of these shells home. Even after graduating from the drivers school, (would you believe it) I was still a "Private First Class".

Whenever the base at Fresno was closed down, the training flights would be transferred to Salanis. It was on one of the times that I got one of my biggest scares. Normally we were transported from Fresno to Salanis and back by trucks, but on this particular day Wesley and I flew back. We hitched a ride on a twin- engine trainer. One of Pilots was flying back to base and he offered Wesley and myself a ride. The Co-Pilot seat was empty and Wesley and I matched for it and I won. It was great to sit in the Co-Pilot seat. On one occasion the Pilot made me fly the air plane for a short time. As we were approaching Fresno, we were informed by radio that the area around Fresno was being closed due to heavy fog and recommended that we return back to Salinas. The Pilot had a date in Fresno and he paid no heed and continued on his normal course. The Pilot looked at Wesley and me and told us he was going in and told us that we would be OK. At the same time he told us to look for any mountain peaks that may be in our

flight path. As the overcast was dropping, the Pilot dived the airplane accordingly so that he did not lose visibility. It was real scary. When we got to the runway, we had only one approach to set the airplane down. Thank God we made it. Two minutes after we landed the base was shut down to all traffic.

It was the month of December 1944 when the Germans had the Americans surrounded at the Bulge in the heartland of Germany. The weather in the battle area was so bad they could not fly any of the planes to support the troops or furnish them with warm clothing, food and ammunition. Our casualties were heavy and replacements were needed. Some smart General decided we were expendable and put us on alert. We were issued new clothing and were on stand by. One week later we were taken off the alert. It appeared we were not as expendable as they originally thought. It took a lot of time and money to train us for the job we were doing. We all resumed our duties after we were released from the standby orders. Being on a permanent base and having a rating below sergeant, it was required that I perform KP (Kitchen Police). Every one should experience KP. It starts with the sergeant waking you up at 0400 and you report to the mess hall kitchen at 0430. You help the cook prepare the three meals, breakfast, lunch and dinner. Your other duties during the day was to clean up after every meal, peel potatoes, wash all the pots and pans, and if you were lucky you served the meals. KP was over by 1900. It was a long day. The worst of it was getting up before dawn. Thank God KP only happened once every three months.

The meals served in California were excellent. We were fed fresh vegetables every day at each meal and steak three times a week. For breakfast fresh eggs were served and you had the choice of them being scrambled or sunny side up. When eggs were not being offered we were fed pancakes. On one of the times I was on KP duty it was my job to cook the pancakes and serve them. I really enjoyed it.

In was in the year of 1945, that the USA was mass-producing the new heavy bomber designated as the B29.



Fig 43. Example of B29 Bomber Aircraft

The first time I saw this airplane I was amazed at the size of it. It had four of the biggest engines I ever saw. Its flying crew consisted of a pilot, co-pilot, navigator and for the first time a flight engineer. It was the duty of the flight engineer to control the engines operation during flight and be responsible for the maintenance of the airplane in flight and on the ground. A training program was being set up by the Army Air Force to recruit men from their rank and train them to become flight engineers. They would be ranked as Aviation Cadets during training and after completion of their training, they would be commissioned as 2nd Lt. in the Army Air Force. I and many others were approached to volunteer and I who never volunteered for anything in the Army, did this time.

I was accepted for the training, and here I was a Aviation Cadet again. I received my orders to proceed to Maxwell Field Air Base. Maxwell Field was located in the deep south, Montgomery Alabama. Here I go again, heading back east. The base was not like any base I was in. It was fully landscaped and kept trimmed and clean. Our quarters were better than any Officers Quarters I ever saw. Our room was very large and housed only two of us. We had our private bath and shower. Our furniture consisted of two single beds, one for each of the cadets. Each of us had our own desk, bureau and clothes closet. The floors were spotless and shined brightly. All the rooms were joined together and they formed a long row of attached rooms. The base was equipped with a large recreation hall where they held dances every Saturday night. There also was a gym which had all the exercise equipment and in the same building there was three separate basketball courts and a Olympic size indoor pool. In addition to the indoor pool there was another Olympic size pool outdoors. Not to far from the outdoor pool, the six tennis courts were located.

We were given our work schedule and we were on our own. We were responsible to attend the classes as assigned and report for our exercises. Most of the classes consisted of learning the Morse Code and identifying enemy aircraft. We were already trained to maintain the airplane. Our final training would be at Dallas, Texas where we would get our flight training.

This was good duty, we had lots of free time. I attended the local USO that had dances every Saturday and Sundays. It was at one of these dances I met Mary Lou. She was a sweet girl and a very good dancer. At the USO the soldiers outnumbered the girls ten to one. So you were lucky if you finished a dance with one of the girls before you were cut in. Sometimes you were cut in more than three times before the music ended. Mary Lou was very popular on the dance floor and it was lucky if I danced two steps before someone cut in. I eventually gave up trying to dance with her at the USO. After the dance I would take Mary Lou home and we would sit around the fireplace and talk. It was a comfortable home and it was outside of town. I would leave early and then I would see Mary Lou on Sunday afternoon and I had to get her home before 1700. She and I had good times and we enjoyed each others company. On weekends we were allowed to invite guests to our swimming pool. Mary Lou and I spent many a Sunday at the base pool.

My training as a flight engineer came to a halt with the end of the war. On August 14, 1945 Japan surrendered to the Allies. I was just getting ready to go to dinner when the radio was blasting that Japan has surrendered and the war was over. We started to drink what ever was available and started for the main gate to go into town to celebrate. The guards at the main gate were ordered to shut the gates and let no one out. Within a hour all the soldiers were at the main gate and the crowd getting bigger and nasty as the minuets went by. The guards finally opened the gates. The rush of soldiers through the gates was worse then a cattle stampede. If by chance you lost your footing and you fell down, you would be trampled to death. There were no casualties, however. The people in town were outside the gate waiting to take us into town with their cars and trucks. All the liquor stores were shut down but there was no lack of whiskey and wines. The town people brought out all the liquor they owned and shared it with all of us. When I woke up the next morning I had no idea where I was or how I got there. I managed to get back to the base and I was informed that we all were issued a three-day pass. After the VJ day we were like a tribe gone wild without a chief to restore order. Thank God this behavior did not last too long.

With the war over we were told that our training program was cancelled and we would be on standby until the Army decides what to do with us. Maxwell Field was selected to be one of the many discharge bases, so to make room for the soldiers to be processed, we were discharged first. I tried to stay in the Army Air Force and finish my training but they advised me with the war over, they had more flight engineers than they needed. They did try to persuade me to join the reserves. This I refused. It was

December 8, 1945 when I received my Honorable Discharged from the Army Air Force. I was discharged at the rank of Aviation Cadet. My tour of duty with the States Army Air Force was two years and eight months. The highest rank I attained throughout my tour of duty was Aviation Cadet. My next stop...

...Back Home: Brooklyn, New York.