

Reunion Memories

By Sally Clement #2262

It is Thanksgiving 1943.

Thousands of young men are arriving in England by ship and by plane. Some are as young as 18. They are all eager to defend Britain in her struggle against Germany. Ever since Pearl Harbor it has become our war, too. These are the B-24 pilots, navigators, bombardiers, engineers, radio operators, gunners and those who make up the ground crews of the 446th Bombardment Group (Heavy) of the 2nd Air Division, US Army Air Corps. The British people of Bungay, East Anglia, welcome them with open arms. Their airfield is officially designated as Station 125.

So begins World War II for the Bungay Buckaroos.

This is the story of one group and the role it played in World War II. It was activated on April 1, 1943, at Davis-Monthan AAF Base in Tucson, Arizona, and received overseas training at Lowry AAF Base, Colorado. Upon reaching combat strength, the group was equipped with new B-24Hs and transferred to the command of the Eighth Air Force in England.

The first combat mission was flown on December 16, 1943. (Crew photo.)



HARRY W. CLEMENT
2nd person from bottom

June 6, 1944, D-Day

Seared into our memory are newsreel pictures of GIs struggling up the beaches as the Allies landed on the European continent. In the air, the 8th Air Force launched over 2,000 bombers and fighters to provide strong support for the ground assault along the Normandy coast of France. It was the task of the 446th Bomb Group to lead the 20th Combat Wing, which in turn led the 2nd Air Division. The B-24 bomber, “Bungay Buckaroo,” led the entire 8th Air Force on this historic mission.

The last combat mission was flown on April 25, 1945, scarcely one year later. During a total of 273 combat missions, 16,819 tons of bombs were dropped on enemy installations, and 36 attacking aircraft were destroyed. Sixty-five B-24s assigned to the 446th were lost while 447 men were killed in action, 237 were taken prisoners of war, 28 evaded capture, and 50 were interned in neutral countries.

The group returned to the United States in June 1945 and was deactivated in September 1945.

May 2006

Less than 100 veterans, all in their 80s, are gathering to celebrate the 21st annual reunion of the 446th Bomb Group Association. This year the reunion was held in Tucson, Arizona, to revisit the Pima Air and Space Museum at Davis-Monthan Air Force Base, where one of the last of their beloved B-24 aircraft is housed.

The occasion is especially nostalgic because Davis-Monthan was the birthplace of the 446th, where 63 years ago eager young men trained for one of the most meaningful experiences of their lives.

They remember, also, the reunion of May 1994, when the Museum was the site chosen for the 446th Memorial Roll of Honor dedicated to the members killed in action. Today, faces light up and steps become swifter as the nose art of “The Buckaroo” greets us in the World War II hanger.

Each year fewer and fewer veterans of the 446th Bomb Group are able to make the reunion trip. Some have “folded their wings” and passed on to the great Station 125 in the sky, while others are no longer able to travel.

They come alone or with their wives and sometimes their adult children and even grandchildren. A few are in wheelchairs, many use canes, two or three even tote their oxygen bottles. Numerous hearing aids are in evidence because ear protection on the flight line was not mandatory in those days as it is today.

Though their bodies are aging, the World War II experiences about which they reminisce are as sharp in their minds as if the events happened yesterday.

Memories

Listen and you will hear echoes of the past as Buckaroos exchange war stories

...how the local kids stood by the fence watching aircraft take off. As the planes returned, they counted to see how many were lost.

...when there was a major mission to bomb an important target such as Berlin, an armada of over 2,000 planes would fly over. The thunder of 8,000 engines would be deafening and would literally shake the ground.

...remember “Fearless Freddie?” She was the discarded, stripped-down old war-weary B-24C painted brilliant yellow with flashing lights of all colors. Though she never flew any more missions, dropped bombs, or fired on enemy aircraft, she served as a brilliant beacon in the sky as each mission was formed.

...a few former POWs can be heard reminiscing about their doomed flights being shot down over enemy territory. After bailing out, some temporarily evaded capture, eventually becoming prisoners of the Germans. Life as a POW included forced marches and often mistreatment, lack of warm clothing, and insufficient food. Their greatest joy was finally being liberated by the American Army.

...then there was the first liberty run for GIs after working around the clock for six weeks at Flixton Airfield. Trucks took them to Norwich, about 45 minutes away.

The pub scene was fun but soon it was time to leave. Unfortunately, it was so dark outside they couldn't find the trucks to return to base. Telephone operator to the rescue; a soft feminine voice guided them as they called from each bright red phone kiosk while trudging along the 11-mile road back to Bungay. It took the GIs an hour-and-a-half to finally make their way back. A fun evening!

...another time some of the guys, on a lark, broke into a hothouse at Flixton Castle, home of the local lord, to eat some fruit. Just boys being boys!

Over 60 years later as these aging airmen relive the exciting but dangerous missions, they have not forgotten the lighter moments of their time in England.

The current 446th BGA president is the niece of a Bungay Buckaroo who was killed in action during one of their missions. Little by little, as members pass on, dedicated descendants are assuming the tasks of running the organization. The 446th BGA is determined NOT to become a last-man organization. The 2007 reunion will take place in Savannah, Georgia, so the Bungay Buckaroos

can visit the Mighty 8th Air Force Museum to commemorate the B-24 and its place in history.

Never Forget

The spirit of the Bungay Buckaroos and all the others who fought so proudly on the ground, on the seas, and in the air during World War II will never die as long as their stories are remembered by their children, grandchildren, and generations to come.

May the deeds and history of the 446th Bomb Group never again have to be repeated.

Till We Meet Again

Sally wrote this story for her husband, Harry W. Clement. Harry was a 22-year-old pilot in the 446th Bomb Group in 1943 to 1944. He was assigned his own crew after the crew photo was taken. He made the Air Force his career, retiring as Lt. Col. in 1963. Today he is a "retired" RVer who still loves to travel.