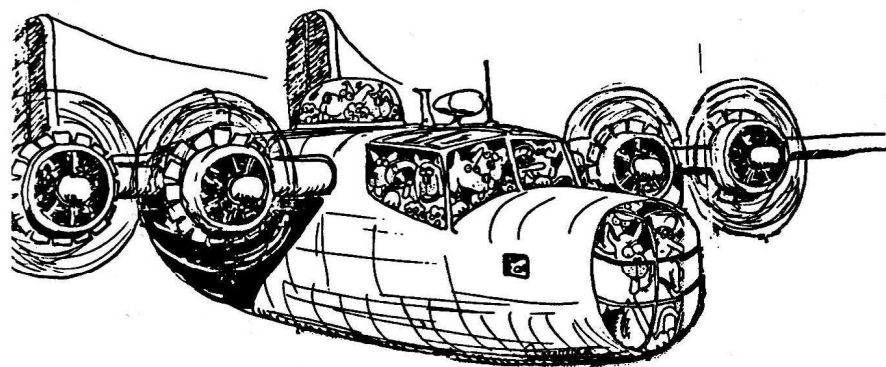


## Coming in on a Wing and a Paw

*By Robert F Pease 826 Squadron*



*Robert F Pease is a writer now retired in Hyannis, Massachusetts. He was a radar navigator sometimes called a "Mickey operator" along with his best friend Carl Norquest and has 9 combat missions to his credit. If anyone from the group is nearby, he would welcome a visit.*

In 1945 World War II was over and we began packing to go home. Group Headquarters was stripped. Documents and records were trucked away. All materiel around the flying field vanished, and the men, one or two crews at a time, left for deportation centers. My buddy Carl was among the first to leave. Then my two tent mates left, and I was alone in the shelter we called a hutch where we had lived through the winter between missions to Yugoslavia, Germany and Austria.

Some jokers took the canvas off my shelter, so that I had only the yard-high walls for protection. I slept in the open for five nights like that before moving into one of the squadron buildings that had a roof on it. During that time, I acquired Augie. Augie was a small mongrel bitch. She was black, brown and white, about ten inches high and smart in the way of all bastard offspring who grow up on their own in a world that gives them nothing without a fight. Augie was too small to be a very effective fighter, so she had learned to make a great show of ferocity, baring her white teeth and snarling and barking. She never closed those teeth on

anything bigger than a lizard, however. Augie was bowlegged, and her legs were not more than four inches long, but she could run and turn and jump like the combined rabbit and reptile she probably was. The only time I ever saw her get hurt was when she had eaten the remainder of a five-pound tin of peanut butter and was caught by the owners she licked her chops.

I was standing outside that hutch when I heard the disappointed howl of the man who had finagled the precious peanut butter. Then, I saw Augie coming through the window, but she got caught on a nail. She had already squirmed off the nail by the time her pursuer swung at her and tore his hand on the same spike. She had a bad leg for a week afterward, and I think the peanut butter must have sat heavy in her entrails, too, because she was not herself again for quite a spell.

Augie was one of the many misbegotten curs the squadron lightly adopted and then just as thoughtlessly abandoned. The pack was fat from eating Army garbage, and they were relatively tame. Augie attached herself to me when her previous owner left for the States. She came to live with me in the topless tent those first lonely nights, and her gentleness and her trust made it impossible for me to resist her.

That attachment, however, meant immediate complications for my trip home. When I learned who my pilot was going to be, I went to see him right away and told him I had a dog I intended to bring with me. Lerner was a tall, strong man with freckles. He stared at me for a long moment as if

thinking it over and then quietly announced that he had a dog, too, a little black fellow named Nate. Lerner was not leaving his dog behind either, but he could not take his and tell me to leave mine.

It might not have been a problem if it had ended there, but two days later, Lerner and I went to pick up the bombardier who had been assigned to come with us from another group. Hal met us outside his tent. He was one of those men you like immediately and want for a friend right from the start, but the first thing he said to us was, "Maybe you won't be happy to hear it, but I've got a dog, and his name is Moose."

We traveled by Army truck from Cerignola south to Gioia. A new B-24 was there waiting for us. Month after month we had gone into combat in battered and glued together clunkers, and when the war was over, they handed us a plane so bright and shiny and well-equipped we did not know how to operate half the instruments on it. Another passenger joined us there, a gunner who was going to Trinidad. He checked in with us the day we arrived. He was a lanky, awkward-looking, double-jointed man from somewhere back in the Blue Hills of Kentucky.

"Look, Cap'n," he told Lerner when he reported in, "I ain't asking but one favor, and this is it. I got me a dawg, and she got two pups, and they all are coming with me." There was nothing any of us could do about it. Probably we were all thinking that the other dogs would get lost somewhere along the way. But those crafty animals took no chances. They stuck close to us, and when we took off from Gioia, they were all on board. We did not lose any of them when we stopped to refuel in Marrakech either.

By the time we reached the Azores, we stopped holding our breath about our dogs, because we were confident then that we would get them into the States all right. It was fun to watch the ground crew as they came out to greet us there. They brought some bottles with them to welcome the returning heroes, but they stopped dead in their tracks when the bomb bays rolled open and Augie leaped out barking and Nate tumbled out after her and then Moose appeared followed by the fat old hunting dog with her two pups.

The End