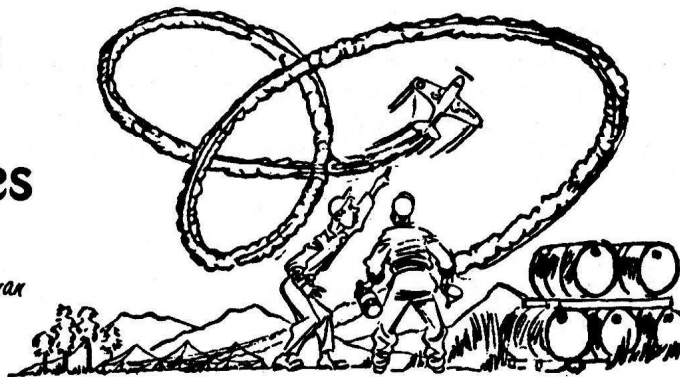


Pranks and Pastimes

By Roger A Freeman



Regulations were a challenge to many people who appear to have derived great satisfaction from flouting them in some manner or other. With an average age of 21, youthful nature undoubtedly had some bearing on this behavior. There was rarely any malice in this action, but if something was forbidden there was always a temptation to attempt it. For example, rules were strict about the use of rifles and pistols issued to specified personnel for guard duty and personal protection; but this did not prevent Nissen hut barrack rooms being perforated by bullet holes, nor did it prevent hunting expeditions. If apprehended the punishment could be a period of confinement or substantial fine. Although the tell-tale shot would bring the military police, the temptation to pull a trigger was often too great, as Marvin Speidel tells: 'During the period of the cross-Channel invasion in early June, we were told to wear sidearms around the base as there was a possibility of paratroopers being dropped as a counter move by the Germans. There were warnings about misuse but the novelty was too much for some people to resist. One evening our ball turret gunner exhibited his marksmanship by blasting a rabbit seen near our barracks. Needless to say there wasn't much left of the bunny after it was hit by a .45 bullet. The shot must have been heard by an MP, for we soon got word that the Provost Marshal was heading our way. The remaining evidence was quickly hidden but the ball gunner couldn't locate any gun oil with which he might clean the signs that his weapon had been fired. In desperation he grabbed someone's bottle of Vitalis hair oil and swabbed the barrel with that.'

When the Provost arrived he demanded to inspect each gun and sniffed the barrels. When he came to the guilty one, he made an

exclamation and barked: "What the hell did you clean this piece with soldier?" The ball gunner feigned innocence and said he didn't know. The Provost must have had his suspicions but with no smell of cordite for corroboration he couldn't nail the culprit.

The constitutional right of the US citizen to carry arms was instrumental in the 'no big deal' attitude prevailing among US servicemen when it came to the use of guns. The weapon issued might be Government property and intended for use against the enemy, but a little illegal hunting or unauthorized target practice was not viewed as the serious offense it would be in the British or other Allied services. The US authorities did crack down on offenders, particularly to

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placate the civilian population of host countries who tended to be alarmed by the casual use of handguns and rifles. Bullets whistling around the countryside were not appreciated, even in the sandy wastes of North Africa, as Ted Newby discovered: 'While in

Tunis, en route, a couple of us went out into the desert with a rifle and some bullets and engaged in some target practice. We found some old AA shells with no projectile in them. There seemed to be a detonation cap at the rear end but we knew if we hit the cap it should blow up or something. 'We got back a "safe" distance and took turns firing at it. Fortunately no one hit the bull's-eye. Who knows what might have happened if we had.'

'After we spent quite a bit of time shooting out toward the desert, an Arab came running over the hill in front of us yelling and waving his arms. When he got up to us he did a little pantomime indicating bullets hitting around his feet. We got the message and retreated before we started an international incident.'

For pilots, the ultimate snub to regulations was indulging in 'buzz jobs' -very low flying, often dangerously low, just above roof and treetops. An exhilarating experience but a grounding offense if apprehended. Many commanding officers tended to turn a blind eye to this activity, feeling that it built pilot confidence, particularly with fighters that often had to fly at hedge-hopping heights in the course of operations.

There was, however, no justifiable reason why a high altitude B-17 or B-24 should be skipping over the countryside at hedgetop height frightening (or thrilling) the inhabitants and scaring livestock. Thus, apart from the exhilaration of 'fanning the foliage', there was the gamble of being caught in the act and identified. Al Jones, a 44th Bomb Group bombardier, offers the reason and example: 'I think we were typical of most combat crews when we first arrived in England. We knew we were going into a situation from which we might not return but looked at it from the standpoint that it would probably happen to the other guy. We were therefore a little cocky and looked for excitement before combat had sobered us down. A favorite way of letting off steam was buzzing. Popular "targets" were other airfields. On one local flight we decided to give some of our fighter friends a thrill. After all, they were always buzzing the bomber fields. We picked out a field with a mobile runway control vehicle at the end of the runway and turned in toward it as if we were on a landing approach. As Pete let down, we turned to the fighter airfield radio frequency and listened. Almost immediately the tower is screaming at us that we had our wheels up.