
Essay

By Kit-Bacon Gressitt

Noble War Still Vivid In The Minds Of Its Aging Veterans

DAYTON, Ohio, they arrived from all points of the compass: from bucolic calm and frenetic cities, from sedentary retirement and the flush of new-found love.

The remnants of the World War II Army Air Corps' 484th Bomb Group, 49th Wing, 15th Air Force, no measly designation for these men who would reunite to pay annual homage to an honorable war. In they came, perhaps a motley crew today, but heroes all in their youth. Now in various stages of old, some were sprightly, some hobbled by age and infirmity.

Yet all were ready to drink to their own and the world's past, to boogie to the 1940s brass and reed voices of Joe Aceto and His Big Band, to make mirth of their fore shortened futures.

They gathered ostensibly to erect a memorial of black granite and brass: an investment in eternity, an edifice more solid than the fickle flesh God had bestowed. But in truth, they came to reclaim the intimacy that war had given them. An intimacy born in dark and frigid tents; in makeshift games of baseball; in pickup quartets of faithful, hopeful song; in the innovation of desperate necessity. Theirs was a camaraderie known only to those who have shared the brutality, the fear, the graphic imagery of war. An intimacy that peace took away.

And as they reminisced, they began to regain it, recounting common and solo moments that ultimately would define for each of them whom they would become when their 50 bombing missions were complete.

They juxtaposed stories of the war with tales of today, merging black and white with brilliant color—the unique vision of a generation soon to be lost to us. The last generation to know for certain both the horror and glory of going to war for a just and worthy cause to win the right for all to be free.

As we poked at our chicken dinners, the gunner, who 50 years ago served his nation so well, now rhapsodized over strange and fantastic conspiracies his government purportedly perpetrates. And while he was at it, he shared his certainty that the same had gone on back then, for sure.

Others talked of Hungarian girls, orphans of the war, who waved from their pockmarked window ledge to two downed fliers awaiting return to their Italian base. "Come up," they said, "tell us of America." On a piano that couldn't carry a tune and with the meager utensils of a war refugee's kitchen, the soldiers found the chords and rhythm of the tunes of Capt. Glenn Miller, the Dorsey brothers, Les Brown. And later, when the more innocent was plied with his first French kiss, he stammered to the girl, "We don't do

that where I come from!" It could have been the war cry of his squadron.

One couple, retired from the loving but short-reined demands of a Lutheran congregation, now travel a world the minister had known as his battlefield. On maps once sectioned into quadrants and marked with bomb targets and flak batteries, they plot routes to beautiful vistas and quaint villages where the scars of war have been covered by the detritus of 50 years.

Some spoke of the Italians, who loved the romantic heroes as only the Italians could and taught them their language. They used B24 Liberators as blackboards, imparting to the bombers—crew and bird alike—the critical phrases of communication: "Buon giorno." Good day, "Come sta?" How are you? "Quanta costa?" How much? And most important to the young warriors: "Volete venire a passeggiata con me?" Will you take a walk with me?"

Today, the fliers pool their funds, from slight and abundant sources, and send scholarships, to the descendants of their hosts, the grandchildren of the Torretta, Italy airfield. And the students say "Our grandfathers remember what you did for them during the war and they are very proud of having known such courageous and generous men. Loyalty, courage, friendship: This is the message we get from you and we want to continue."

But the bombardier-turned-actuary gives the 484th only another eight years or so to share their stories, to recapture their youth, to enjoy the contentment and peace for which they flew so bravely.

So they will continue their annual pilgrimages until the actuary's predictions come true, until the last crew member's valiant pilot-soul bails out, until World War II exists only in history books and on weathered memorials planted by the soldiers themselves, until they are gone. Except to those of us who knew them. For us, they will remain in our hearts, and when we look into the wild blue yonder we will sorrowfully miss those brother men who flew.

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Editors Note: Kit-Bacon Gressitt is the daughter of Tillman Gressitt 827 Sq