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“Grandpa, you’re too fat to fit in there!” They all laughed.  
“Where all did you go, Grandpa?”

The fields of Nebraska were all white with snow except for the North Platte River meandering through the plains. Our bomber group, the 484th Bomb Group, 827th Squadron, was sent to Harvard, Nebraska, on November 21, 1943, for overseas combat training. We made simulated bomb runs on many of the major cities within a radius of a thousand miles. Some of our training missions lasted over twelve hours, and this time was spent mostly above twenty thousand feet. There were no pressurized cabins in those days, nor was there any heat. Our faces were raw and callused from wearing our oxygen equipment for such long periods.

After hundreds of hours in the air, we were becoming familiar with the airplane and our jobs. It was a great adventure, and we all felt absolutely invincible and cocky in mastering our new skills. I believe we all forgot we had a war to fight. I don’t think it sank in that we were becoming a lethal machine to do misery to our enemies. For the time being it was all fun; big boys with expensive, dangerous, toys, designed only for the purpose of administering death and catastrophe. I loved every second of it. Learning the electrical, hydraulic, and mechanical systems of the airplane was an intense, and cherished experience.

Our B-24 Flight Commander saw to it that each crew member could land the plane in an emergency, and that I could take charge if necessary. I learned to fly formation from both seats, and to take off and land, which I did on many occasions. It was grueling work but we thrived on it. Even now as I think about this old bird, I can hardly believe that the most destructive machine of World War II was only twenty years removed (nineteen seventeen to the first B-24 produced in nineteen thirty-seven) from the Spads, and Nieuports of Captain Eddie, and the Fokker Triplane, and Albatross of The Red Baron; from the wood and fabric biplanes of World War I, to the B-24. Who would believe that I learned to fly in a biplane, wore a leather helmet, goggles, and a long white silk scarf? Although I was a navigator, I went to the first phase of primary training, flying in the bright blue and yellow Stearman biplane, the last of the real airplanes. That is it had two wings, a round black engine in front, and a tail wheel in back.

My first flight as a co-pilot came on an air to ground gunnery range near Idaho falls, Idaho. We were flying at an altitude of fifty feet so the gunners could practice strafing tactics. The co-pilot went to shoot the waist guns, and I was sitting in his seat. We came upon a herd of wild horses, and the crew opened fire on them. Our pilot left his seat, and rushed back to the waist to stop the mayhem, totally forgetting that I was sitting next to him. That was one of our first flights together, and I hadn’t yet sat at the controls. I didn’t know what to do other than stay on the course, maintain the fifty foot altitude, and continue the tight turns with very steep banks. I soon became familiar with terror as I racked the bird around the tight course in trail with other planes of our group. The B-24 had no power boost on the controls, and it required considerable effort to muscle the sluggish bomber through the tight maneuvers. My hands cramped, and I was soaked with sweat. When I couldn’t hack it any longer, I peeled up in a violent turn to gain altitude, and allow a little margin for safety. The crew nearly had a stroke when the two pilots saw each other at the waist guns. Who was flying the airplane?

All this, just twenty-six years (nineteen seventeen to nineteen forty three) from the World War I aces, Captain Eddie Rickenbacker, and Manfred von Richthofen, the German Red

Baron. These great old fighter pilots were my boyhood heroes, whose planes still hung as balsa wood models from my bedroom ceiling at home.

As my combat training came to an end, I found myself hopelessly in love with the gorgeous blonde I met in Pocatello. I couldn’t think of anything but her with only days left before time for overseas departure. I persuaded her to come to Harvard, Nebraska, where we had a couple of days together--just enough time to get engaged.

“Yes, my little grandkids, it was real fun.” Real fun indeed. Until the good-byes were said; until I saw the Florida coastline disappear from view under my navigator’s window. From then on, it wasn’t any fun at all.

My heart sank in lonesome despair, and I finally realized that this wasn’t for fun; that some of us were going to get killed, and maybe I wouldn’t live to marry my beautiful Delaine, or have children. Maybe I was standing in my own coffin

“Daddy said you had a monkey, Grandpa.” Said one little cherub.

“Yes Honey, we did. His name was BB eyes--a big spider monkey we bought from natives right out of the jungle of Natal, Brazil, in South America. His eyes were so close together they almost touched. He didn’t like us too much, and made a lot of trouble. He yelled at us constantly, and never did tame down. When we took off for Africa, he escaped and crawled out into the wing, and stayed there the entire flight. He tore up some wiring, and broke the sending unit of my flux gate compass about half way across the Atlantic ocean. Between my magnetic compass, and the Astro-compass, which used the shadow of the sun, I was able to stay on course. He wasn’t used to the cold weather we ran into, and died a few days later. “

My first real test as a navigator came on the initial leg of the journey to North Africa. The flight was from Florida to Trinidad, a small island off the coast of Venezuela near the equator. It was a world of my dreams as a small boy, of pirates, tall ships, mutinies, and plunder. The weather was good, and there were no problems. It was an easy flight by any standards, but nevertheless, I was proud, and elated when the tiny white cloud over Trinidad lay dead ahead on the horizon. I made my first real voyage, along the ancient course of the pirates, and I didn’t get lost at sea. Radio silence was mandated, so I did celestial navigation using lines of position from the sun and the moon.

Trinidad was my first visit to a foreign land. It was hot, ten degrees North Latitude, and still steaming from a tropical rain that deluged the island almost every day for about five minutes. We landed on March 13, 1944; then on to Belem, and Natal, Brazil. We left Natal for Dakar, in French West Africa, on March 25, 1944. Our next leg was to Marrakech, Morocco, again a fantasy of my boyhood---The French Foreign Legion. We stayed in the same barracks that I saw in several movies of the early thirties. Those guys must have been midgets, because the beds were too short, the shower hit the middle of my back and my knees rubbed against the table in the mess hall. The barracks were from the French Colonial times, very old, and very hot. The next day, we left for Djedia, which was near Tunis, in Tunisia, North Africa. We stayed there until March 28, during which time I visited the Casbah in Tunis, and saw a civilization that had not progressed in three thousand years. We had to go in groups of six, with the lanyard of our pistol tied to our wrist, a round in the chamber, and the hammer at full cock. It was a scary place, but