
Tales From The Internet

The Old Soldier

By Bob Glasier

I like to go to the library at lunchtime sometimes, and today was one of those times. While walking amongst the books, I saw a small bent-over old man, hobbling along with a cane, ear piece, and assorted other body appendages visible beneath his shirt. He had on a "World War 11 Veteran" baseball cap, so I asked him which branch he was in.

"Army Air Force", was the reply. "Were you ever in the service?", he asked. Yes, I was a helicopter pilot in Vietnam", I replied. "Where were you stationed?", I asked. "Europe."

"What did you do?" He points to the tie-tac he was wearing. "Recognize this?" It was a B-24 Liberator.

"Sure, my Dad was in the Pacific. Who were you with?" He pulls a business card out of his decrepit old wallet. It says:

John F. Barnacle
450th "COTTONTAILS" Bomb Group, 15th Air Force
Air Forces Escape and Evasion Society
Air Forces Gunners Association
D.A.V - AM. LEG. - V.F.W
2207 Barrywood Rd.
Huntsville, AL 35810
256-852-4126

I asked John, "So, what did you do?"

He replied, "Ball Turret Gunner. I don't want to bore you, but, would you like to hear my story?" "I sure would." He then regaled me with his story, of how he enlisted in the Guard in '38, and got called to active duty in October. '40.

He started out in B-25s as a waist gunner. He was still in the States, out drinking with a bunch of guys. One night, one of them got drunk and told him about this special unit that Col. Jimmy Doolittle was forming up down at Eglin Field. John bummed a flight down to Eglin. He reported to the operations Major, and told him he wanted to volunteer for the special unit he heard about. The Major told him he had to wait for the Col. to come back. Later that afternoon Doolittle landed in his own personal P-40 that he flew. John reported to Doolittle and told him that he wanted to join his outfit. Doolittle told him to get the Hell out of his office. He already had more guys wanting to commit suicide than he needed. That's how John missed the Tokyo raid.

John returned back to his base, only to get disciplined with 120 days of KP and guard duty for running off to Jimmy. He then volunteered to train as part of the first two Heavy Bomber crews for the 450th. He was the small guy, so he got the ball turret.



*No #62 with the Sperry Ball Turret down :
Used by both the B-17 (not retractable) and the
B-24, it was cramped and cold and suffered the
indignity of being in line with the forward relief
tubes.*

John then told me; of the day -one of many days - in which he personally shot down 5 German fighters, a mixture of Me-109s and FW-190s; of how he was wounded three times; of the day his B-24 got shot down over Yugoslavia, and he spent 30 days in E&E (Escape and Evasion) with Tito's partisans before he was repatriated to the Allies; of how they refused to let him return to combat because of the rule that shot down and returned airman might reveal information about the resistance; of about how he went back to the States, and trained new crewmen for the B-29; and how they refused to let him volunteer to be a B-29 crewman in the Pacific - they said he had too much already. He then showed me his beat-up old "Caterpillar Club" card, that he received for having his life saved by a parachute in March 1944.

He had a gleam in his eyes, and that faraway look that warriors get when remembering. I know the look. I was silent, a little dumbstruck.

He then hooked his cane on his arm, and took my hand in both of his. He started shaking my hand vigorously, and with tears in his eyes said, "Thank you for listening to my story."

I was getting a little misty eyed too. I thanked him profusely for sharing it. This just happened within the past hour. I wrote this as a memorial to this great, and aged warrior. They are dying off fast.

I also wrote it because I saw myself - all of us - a few years down the road, as old men, (I mean really old men) forgotten by everyone. I hope somebody wants to hear my story someday. I hope somebody will stop and care.

I am a little misty eyed again.

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Greyhound 19, 240th AHC
RVN