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Dear Paul,

Thanks and apologies; the thanks for opening a Pandora's box of nostalgic memories of the "good old days"; the apologies for my tardy reply, for which I have excuses, all of which leak.

Where to start? Where else but with Ashley W. DuPraw; who I remember as distinctly and fondly as I do my wedding day; who started my lifelong addiction to flying by taking me up on a breathtaking "demo" ride on New Year's Eve morning 1942; and who mothered me through primary in spite of myself. If you know his whereabouts, I would be delighted to know of it.

To the Class of 43-F, it was not the 63d AAFSTD, it was the RAYMOND-BRINKERHOFF AVIATION CO., a civilian flying school and a blessed relief from the spit, polish, and torture of preflight at Maxwell. As cadet wing commander I continued the practice of having the men sing, hum, and whistle while in formation - but cadence-counting was out. Captain Stickney, the Commandant, was particularly fond of the "Sixpence" song.

I have no roster, no travel orders, no class book that would identify the members of 43-F. But I do have a picture of Sqd. 6, Class 43-f (2-11-43). It is signed by cadets Bernard SCHACHTER; Jack K. SANSDM; Ed OLMSTEAD; and Wallace SCHIRRA? (last name is indistinct, could be SCHIERS). Aside from mine, the only other face I can identify with certainty is that of Jerry ROSENSTEIN, a loud, brassy, pain in the butt who became a close friend (I am 3d from left, middle row, he is - fittingly - on my left, barheaded). From memory, I recall Jesse SCHICK, who washed out before the picture was taken (he upchucked at the sight of airplanes). I have other documents of that era (Preflight Class Book, no roster; graduation orders, Class 43-F, SE, Marianna, Fla.) but no way of connecting the named individuals with Douglas, Ga., if indeed any connection exists. I now realize, sadly, that I have lost touch with all but a very few of the friends I made in the service, and they were not part of the "good old days" in rural Jawjia.

As for my military history, I was a sergeant with four years in the 3d Cavalry (Horse - yes horse) when I became a cadet, which explains my cadet officer rank. So: BT-13s at Gunter, Alabama, for Basic; AT-6s at Marianna, Florida, for Advanced; P-40Fs at Tipton, Georgia, pre-graduation. At graduation in June '43, I was assigned to a P-47 squadron at Dale Mabry, Florida, but never got so much as a cockpit-check. The whole class was re-assigned as copilots on B-24's and shipped (a never-to-be-forgotten seven day ride on a coach train) to Pocatello, Idaho; where Colonel Bierne Ley (TWELVE O'CLOCK HIGH author) was forming the 487th Bomb Group.

On 13 April 1944, ours was the first aircrew of the 487th Group to land at STA -137, Lavenham, England, having taken three weeks to fly from Herrington, Kansas. I flew 33 missions as first pilot: 17 in lumbering B-24s, 16 in agile B-17s. We were shot down on our 33rd mission, managing to land on an RCAF fighter field near Liege Belgium, where our radio operator left his right leg. By the time we got back to England, a replacement crew had been put in our slot and in November '44 I rotated to the United States: 1st Lieutenant, DFC, Air Medal with 3 clusters.

After months of R&R; then an unsolicited training course as a single engine (!) instructor; and finally a stint as squadron adjutant at Craig Field, Alabama, I managed a transfer to Wright/Patterson as assistant operations officer, on Aug. 14, 1945 (VJ-Day!). Put in charge of Administration & Transient Aircraft, I flew almost everything that had a propeller. Some I checked-out in; others I just flew: AT-16, AT-22, BC-1 (whatever that was), P-40, A-26, B-29, C-87, C-107/108/109, B-40/41 (?), LB-30, B-25, F-7, F-9, L-5, L-16, P-51, P-47, P-38... The drill was: multi-engine required a ride with someone who had flown it; single engine required you talk to someone who had flown it. Heaven.

Nonetheless, for reasons now not clear, a year later I joined the Army of Occupation at Furstenfeldbruck, Germany. That was on 7 August 1946, and that is the last record of my military service, except for the day of my discharge five years later, February 27, 1950. Somewhere and sometime during a full career as a pilot with Pan American Airways, the record of my activities between those two dates was lost. But not my memory of them.

So, from here on, I'm on instruments. Shortly after arriving in Germany, I volunteered to become a counter-intelligence agent, convinced I would be the one to find Martin Bormann (Hitler's aide, who to this day hasn't been found). I studied German and counter-intelligence at Oberammergau in 1946, and in 1947 I became Agent-in-Charge, 707 Counter Intelligence Unit, at Augsburg, in southern Germany. That same year, I was appointed Captain, Military Intelligence...but in the ARMY! (a result of the now-infamous Unification of Services). I continued my work in intelligence (interrupted to fly the Berlin airlift) until early 1949, when I returned to the States, and was assigned to Governors Island, New York - doing background checks; an occupation so dull and unrewarding that I transferred to the CIC Detachment of the 101st Airborne Division, Fort Bragg, North Carolina, in mid-1949.

I was still on flying status - but barely, having to plead with artillery units to let me fly an L-16 to earn my flight pay. When an opening was posted for helicopter training, I applied; a few days later came a posting for Japanese Language School, I applied for that, too. I was awarded both and chose the latter - as it turned out, a grievous error. Within a few months, in the midst of learning Japanese (which I was enjoying), I also learned that my primary MOS (Military Occupational Specialty) would be changed from "PILOT" to "INTELLIGENCE OFFICER," and that my flying status would be cancelled. With the airlines crying for pilots, I resigned in February 1950 and went to work as a third officer for Pan American World Airways on April 3, 1951.

My career as a commercial pilot was continuously demanding and constantly fulfilling. Since Pan Am had only international routes (then), there was always a new and exciting place to fly to and wander around in, and I did my full share of that. At various times I lived in such exotic places as Beirut, Berlin, Hong Kong, London, Bangkok (where I met my present wife); and less exotic but more philosophically comfortable places such as New York and San Francisco. Promoted to captain in 1966, I volunteered to ferry troops in and out of Vietnam for their R&R and did that until the U.S. left Vietnam in 1975. I retired after 27 years with Pan Am, at the mandatory age of 60, on October 3, 1978.

Since 1970 we have lived on our small five-acre ranch atop a mountain (well, foothill; 1200 ft. MSL) here in San Jose. My wife's name is Paranee (Siamese), and we have an eighteen-year old son who is moving heaven and earth to get an appointment to the Air Force Academy. I have two other sons from former marriages, both of whom live within a boomerang's throw. One is single, a nearly-recovered hippie; the other is married and fertile, having made me a grandfather four times; and one of his sons having made me a great-grandfather even before I was seventy!

Retired is the only way to live. I have never been so busy or so content. Working, reading, playing tennis, writing a novel (which I keep re-writing every time it looks like being finished). It hasn't been all beer and skittles, this seven decades of living, but the mystery is still there.

The enclosed you may keep, of course. I admire your pluck in taking on the monumental task of trying to revive so many ghosts of the past, but your letter tells me you are enjoying it. I wish you luck and - the good Lord willing and if the creek don't rise - I look forward to attending your next reunion.

Cordially,


Joe Ross



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