

June 11, 1990 This is just a start on a chapter about my primary flight training in the 63rd AAF-FTD at Douglas, Georgia during July - September 1942.

MARCHING THROUGH GEORGIA

I was quite young in 1921 when our parents bought us a Victor phonograph. In the collection of records which was soon acquired there were several of the John F. Sousa Band. One which quickly caught my favor was "Marching Through Georgia". Twenty-one years later I was much delighted to receive orders to proceed to Douglas, Georgia from our Aviation Cadet Air Corp Pre-flight Training at Maxwell Field, Montgomery, Alabama.

It was a hot summer day when we boarded the Pullman cars at Montgomery, I think July 3. (I have no copies of orders concerning these early days in the cadet corps.) I don't recall whether the train was parked within the gates on a siding or whether we were transported to a railroad yard. All I recall is that they were very warm, having sat in the sun for several hours. It was to be an overnight trip and we were expected to get some sleep in the berths, once we set them up aided by a porter. We drew lots to find out who would sleep with someone else on a lower or singly in an upper. It was doubtful which was better. The lower would have to be shared but the upper was sure to be warmer. My luck was that I got to sleep "downstairs" with another cadet, E. J. Wiesmann, who came from the vicinity of Boston, as I recall. (Sadly, he was killed in October in a mid-air collision at night while flying in the landing pattern at our Basic Flying School, Greenville, Mississippi.)

We pulled out of Montgomery late in the afternoon and were happy to see the sun go down, expecting we would get some relief from the heat. Although the Pullman cars had some sort of air-cooling system created by forced air flowing over cakes of ice in a compartment somewhere in the chassis, there was little relief. Consequently, the windows were kept wide open. This did help, to some extent, once the train was moving. It also meant that cinders, smoke and other light debris drifted through the cars.

At sometime during the night, possibly around 11:30 p.m., we had already gone to bed, lying in our skivies on top of the sheets, when the train slowed down and finally stopped. We raised the shade in our compartment to try to find out where we were. If recall correctly, it was in Thomasville, Georgia, discovered by reading the station's sign. Our car, however, seemed to have stopped directly on a street crossing, not that it mattered much at that time of night in a sleepy, wartime, southern town. Nevertheless, we

were greeted by a host of negro lads probably in the ten-year stage of life. They apparently took great delight in meeting all the troop trains which passed through their place so they could talk with the "soldier boys". They were offering to run errands for cold drinks and fried chicken. Being thirsty and hungry and not knowing how long we would be detained, it sounded like a very welcome offer to most of us.

Everything worked out all right and before the train got underway again, we had our midnight snack. I know we tipped the lads lavishly, we were so happy for the service and the hospitality.

We stopped at other times during the night, never for very long. Not much sleep was accomplished either, although I must have dropped off from time to time. What I do remember was watching the sun come up in Waycross, Georgia and realizing we had come to the end of our journey on the train. It had been announced that we would be met by GI trucks and taken to Douglas. We just did not know when this would take place.

It was still night to most of the other sleepers. The morning was reasonably cool with the promise of a good day. Perhaps because the train had quit clacking and rocking they were going to get some additional hours of honest sleep. However, I was ready to get up. I had raised the curtain to get a little more light. I felt my bunk mate stir so turned to look at him. His face looked as if he had been made up for a minstrel show. Because his eyes had been closed some of the night, his eye sockets glowed white. There was also a white area around his lips because he had licked them, apparently, in his sleep, and his lips glowed a healthy red. He was looking at me in astonishment. We both began to laugh, knowing each had a similar appearance. We had been under the sheet which now had a gray and gritty appearance. Our bodies would have been covered by the same grime if we had not had that protection. As quietly as possible we rolled out of the berth and made our way to the lavatory to try to clean up. We were in for a disappointment for the place was close to filthy, with dirty basins, and paper towels all over the place. We decided to look over the station nearby to try to find a clean washroom.

We had little success so decided to sit down on one of the benches which was in a little park next to the station. The town was just beginning to stir with a car driving by now and then. A few people walked along the sidewalk across the street as if they might be going to their employment places rather early. We noticed a line of shops including one very welcome barber shop. We strolled over to find out when it would open and found we would have to wait for over

an hour. Luckily, there were some benches in front of the shop so we decided we could be first in line by occupying them. My buddy, Ed, decided to go looking for something to eat while I maintained our favorable position. It was sometime before he returned with some coffee and egg sandwiches. He had been able to find a restaurant around the corner which was already beginning to fill with other cadets from our train. He told some of them about the barber shop so we were soon joined by others waiting for it to open.

By the time the barber shop opened it appeared there would be enough customers for the entire morning. However, our favorable position got us in and out first. The shop was well equipped with a number of wash basins and several shower stalls as well. We got our shower after our shave and haircut. As long as we stayed in the shop we saw a steady line of grimy cadets troop through the place. Once refreshed and feeling clean again, except for rumpled uniforms, we went out to sit in the park until the trucks came. This must have happened about mid-morning.

It was a rough ride in the six-by-six army trucks up to Douglas, a distance of approximately thirty miles, taking over an hour I'm sure. However, the sight we found upon arrival was well worth the uncomfortable trip. My first impression was that of a country club which had been just completed. There were areas of brown dirt which would soon have grass growing on them. There were buildings still getting finishing touches.

The trucks took us through a rather fancy main gate with its guard house where the first stopped to be identified. Once inside, one could drive to the left or right around an oval track which enclosed a set of tennis courts, I think six in all. Near the main gate was the headquarters for the school. On the far side of the tennis courts were rows of gleaming white cottages which were to be our quarters during the next nine weeks. I kept looking for a swimming pool but none was ever installed while we were there. The road or track which circumscribed this campus ran behind the cottages, separating them from a line of large metal hangars. Through the spaces between hangars we could see the shining blue fuselages and yellow wings of the Stearman PT-17s we were to learn to fly, our first introduction to the real Army Air Corps. It was all a far cry from the huge but growing Maxwell Field we had left the day before. For a while, at least, we would live in the luxury of a civilian-operated detachment of the regular military establishment. There would be a few officers and enlisted men around, of course, to keep us indoctrinated in military practices, but our flight and ground school instructors would be, for the most part, civilians. This was also true of such personnel as the dining room cooks and waiters.

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The main road on which we arrived ran from a general westerly direction into the town of Douglas to the east a mile or two. The campus paralleled the road, more or less. At the eastern end was the dining hall, at the western end the classroom buildings and athletic fields. The cottages or barracks were on the inside of the road which encircled the campus like a racetrack. Very few cadets had cars so there was little danger of getting hit by any on the road. The cottage in which I was quartered with eleven others was just to the west of the north-south axis of the campus. To its east was another cottage which served as a cadet recreation center, making it very convenient for us to use. In fact, every building on the campus was east to get to.

We met formations on the road behind the cottage from where we would march to meals or to classes. As the flight line was just on the other side of the hangars along the road, we generally walked singly or in small groups to our flying lessons. Flying and classes were divided into morning or afternoon sessions. If we were assigned to a morning flying section, we went to classes in the afternoon. These changed back and forth but I'm not sure with what frequency. PT (physical training) was held after classes, if I am not mistaken. Although we conducted marching drills and formation, there was still an air of great relaxation around the place. Upper classmen were too intent upon flying and going to groundschool to spend much time harassing the under class. As far as I can remember, we did not march from meals back to our cottages.

PT was mostly a joyful activity with the exception of mass drills and pushups! There were a number of sports such as volley ball and soft ball. Wade Heard and Robert Formanek conducted the athletic drills and supervised the games. We kept wishing an outdoor swimming pool would be installed but it never happened during our stay.

The airfield started its construction in August, 1941, the first buildings going up in October. The flying field was more or less a 2,000 foot square of dirt and grass. The first class came in with the first buildings. In November the second class of cadets arrived, the first hangar was completed and one volley ball court had been set up. By the time of our arrival in July, there had been nine months of operations, the planes were tied down on a 2,000-foot paved ramp so that the dust had almost entirely disappeared. Two auxiliary fields for practicing landings and takeoffs had been constructed. Seemingly, it had become the country club. Captain John T. Stickney was the Air Corp Commanding Officer while the civilian owners were Wesley Raymond and Robert Richardson, owners of the Raymond-Richardson-Brinkerhoff Aviation Company.

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I don't know how many days went by before we got our first instruction in the Stearman PT-17 but it didn't take long. My log book shows that I began dual instruction on July 8. Because I had gotten my private pilot license in 1940 I was assigned, along with other students who already had learned to fly, to N. I. Hasell, the commander of one of the squadrons. I think he was given nine or ten of us. In short order we also flew with his assistant squadron commander, Wendell A. Holmes. Both were personable individuals, soft spoken and easy going, unlike some of the other wildmen instructors about whom we heard horror stories. After almost 10 hours of dual instruction I was able to solo on July 20. As Watson Coffee, the chief dispatcher, kept all the records, I do not have the signature of the instructor who soloed me but I think it was Holmes.

Soon after soloing, however, I was assigned to a new instructor fresh from having gotten his rating through a Secondary Civilian Pilot Training Program somewhere. He was very demanding but fair in handling us. He wanted to set a good record with his first class of pilots so made sure that we did everything "according to the book"! He even made us keep notebooks in which we described in our own words what particular maneuver he had us practicing.

For a while I thought he didn't have any humor whatsoever for he was always highly serious. It was with great surprise on our last day of flying, September 2, that he got in the rear cockpit when we were ready to take off. He said very seriously, "Now, I'm going to be the student and you are going to teach me how to fly." It is now all very hazy in my mind but I do remember that while I was demonstrating a chandelle for him to perform I turned the controls over to him to repeat the maneuver. One he began to exercise the plane began to go through all sorts of gyrations. I looked in the mirror to see what he was doing. There he was waving his hands up in the air and shouting over the noise of the engine, "What do I do now?" If I had not been strapped in the cockpit I might have fallen out, I began to laugh so hard. It was such a reversal of his normal sober self that it threw me completely off guard! I suppose the relief of flying my last flight at Douglas had something to do with his and my elation.

Although the log book records every minute of flying time, dual and solo, it is void of any explanations of what happened on any particular date. The dispatcher had written in "cross-country" for August 26 and 28, which included both dual and solo. Of course, there were no night-flying hours, our aircraft not having any radios or lights. Those were to come at our next school, basic flight training. I had forgotten that we were also introduced to instrument flying through Link trainers, but I only logged a total of six hours which I suppose was the minimum requirement.

HILLARD?