THE MEN WHO SERVED ON THE GROUND

Story Contributed by Jack Gaffney

EDITORS NOTE: This article by an unnamed author appeared in the Summer 1999 newsletter of the National Capitol Area Chapter of the 8AFHS. The article is reproduced here as a quiet tribute to the countless men and women whose service in ground activities made it possible for the fighters and bombers of the Mighty Eighth to take to the air.

Many did not understand the relationship – or lack of it – between air and ground crews. Ground people, whatever their tasks, did everything they could to minimize the hazards faced by the air crews. Ordnance people toiled through the night to haul bombs from the dump to each hardstand, to select and assemble fuses, make certain they were properly safetied, yet ready to be quickly armed, checked bomb racks and shackles and hung bombs securely. Frequently, orders for bomb loads were changed after all aircraft had been loaded. This meant the old loads had to be removed and the new ones installed in short order. Many times two ordnance men loaded 500-pound bombs manually on the racks, above their heads, in order to save the time it took to use mechanical hoists. All of this was accomplished so each plane was loaded and ready before the aircrew arrived. Occasionally, they rode surreptitiously on a mission to check out a faulty shackle or other failure in release. Yet, the crews were hardly aware of their existence except perhaps when they saw the strange trucks and trailers used to transport the bombs from the storage dump to the hardstands.

Ground crews literally prayed for the safe return of every plane and crew and "sweated" until the end of every mission. They knew when a mission went off, there would be planes downed over Europe, men would be in POW camps, lives lost. When Chaplains came to the hardstand to give their blessing the ground crews knelt with them to give their spiritual support. After the mission, they would be fascinated by the stories, especially the vivid descriptions of flak and fighters accompanied by appropriate gestures.

Crew chiefs and their mechanics were respected and valued by the crews of each aircraft they serviced. What about the men in Supply who struggled to have spare parts available? The instrument maintenance people who made sure bombsights were effective, and the communications technicians who assured radios and navigational equipment were in first class order, that the VHF channels had the correct crystals for the frequencies designated for the day's mission. What about the armaments men who serviced and maintained the guns or the truck drivers who fueled the planes? The mess personnel who never failed to have nourishing food ready when it was needed and the medics who looked after the aircrews' health. There were men in Operations, Intelligence, Traffic Control, Finance, Legal and the all-important Postal Men so essential to the morale and support of the flying activities.

There was a touch of envy on the part of the ground crews. They marveled that men who had spent only a few months together as a combat crew, counting their missions, reaching the magic number and returning to the States, could look upon this relatively brief part of their military service and of their lives as having had such importance during an entire lifetime. The camaraderie of an aircrew was certainly understandable because of their obvious interdependence in tight situations.

Ground people had some memorable moments, but their life and service was entirely different. They can recall the night the Luftwaffe infiltrated the landing pattern and shot things up. They cannot forget the deep rumble accompanying their first close look at the V-1, the flying bomb, as it blew over the field at low altitude. There was no pilot in that contraption and it might have hit anywhere.

Occasionally, they heard the familiar putt-putt and saw a V-1 approaching the base, and the lighthearted flying control officer turning to those present and say, "Did you hear him call in for landing instructions?" With theV-2s – they saw the contrails, but never knew when or where they would cut out and explode.

Because aircrews were a smaller unit, usually together only for the few months it took for crew integration, fly 25 or 30 missions attached to a Group only during their months of combat, their tight little unit was the focal point for their nostalgia. Each man was concerned only with the men in his crew. You might say there was a connection of sorts with other crews who may have been on the same missions or gone through flight school together, but it was a loose one.

Those on the ground, of all ranks and military specialties, who remained with a Group for one, perhaps more than two years, from its activation in 1942 or 1943 to its demise in 1945, had a far different wartime experience than did the transient air crews.

The tasks of these "ground pounders" were often mundane and sometimes boring. They were fragmented into relatively isolated groups, defined by their particular functions. The intentional dispersal layout of the various facilities at the base fostered separation. The ground personnel have a nostalgic feeling for the base. After all, it was home – mud and all – for perhaps two or more years. Today, they enjoyed reading the Air Division Journals and the Group newsletters as they recall the exploits of the men who were with them a short while and went on their way. They often feel they participated only as interested outside observers.

Perhaps this reminder will help former airmen understand why many ground personnel do not share their enthusiasm for reunions. This perception is unfortunate, indeed. These ground bound airmen gave confidence to the air crews, and they were an integral element of the victorious air campaigns of WWII.

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