



The Ragged Irregular

91st Bombardment Group (H) Newsletter

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Flying The Atlantic - A Tribute To Baskin Lawrence

BY COL. GEORGE P. BIRDSONG (Ret)

Editor's Note: Col. Birdsong was one of the original members of the 91st B.G., a pilot in the 323rd Sqdn., whose Delta Rebel II was one of the first 8th Air Force planes to complete 25 missions, and one of the rare members of the Rigid Digit Club at Bassingbourn. Subsequently he was operations officer of an air photo unit at the Bikini atomic bomb test in 1946, flew B-29s in the Strategic Air Command, and in 1953 he set the B-47 trans-Atlantic record from Maine to England. He was the first SAC pilot to check out in a B-52. In 1968-69 he was commander of the 633rd Special Operations Wing at Pleiku Air Base in South Vietnam and flew 189 missions, including 104 in the Al-E. He retired from the Air Force in 1970. He has just returned to the U.S. after living in Canada for several years. His new address is 5375 Springdale, Pleasanton, CA. 94566.

I was saddened to read about Baskin Lawrence's death following a heart attack 2 Feb., 1980. Lawrence was the deputy commander of the 91st Bomb Group when I got to know him back in 1942-43. I remember him, in particular, as an outstanding instrument-instructor pilot. He had flown with the airlines between military duties before World War II, and



This shot of the crew of Delta Rebel II was taken in January, 1943. They include, left to right, Lt. George P. Birdsong, pilot; Lt. Joseph Reynolds, co-pilot; Lt. Ernest Miller, navigator; Lt. Bob Abb, bombardier; Sgt. Eugene Remmell, engineer; Sgt. B.Z. Byrd, radio operator; Sgt. Randall Peterson, waist gunner; Sgt. Carter, waist gunner; Sgt. Cowherd, tail gunner; Sgt. Harry Kulchesky, asst. radio operator; Sgt. Steve Perri, ball turret.

passed along to many of us greenhorn pilots the techniques of instrument flying he had learned when he was flying civilian. He showed us how to "box" a radio range station, for example, when we were training in B-17s at McDill Field in Tampa, Fla. This type let-down was useful for mountain country flying because the high and irregular terrain tended to distort the radio signals, and this procedure kept you close to the station, so less chance for error. I was able to put this method to good use when we moved west in the summer of '42 to Walla Walla, Wash., Pendleton, Oregon, and Boise, Idaho.

The most remembered experience I shared with Baskin was our great adventure of flying the Atlantic Ocean enroute to England, October 1942.

Lawrence was accompanying Bill Clancy and crew, and with me as wingman, we were going to make the big leap out of Gander Lake, Newfoundland, to Prestwick, Scotland. We were the last two B-17s of the 91st not yet in place, and were anxious to join the outfit.

We spent a few days in Gander waiting for the weather to be compatible, but the Atlantic skies in October can be formidable and challenging, especially to a minimum time pilot like me. The plan laid on in briefing had Lawrence taking off first with me right behind, and he would pass along weather and flight conditions on interplane frequency. A splendid plan and I liked it!

The next night we attempted to execute, but had to abort back to Gander because of a raging snow storm. J.J. Sanders, who was flying co-pilot for me, had read somewhere when Lindbergh had flown the Atlantic in the "Spirit of St. Louis" he had maintained his energy by periodically munching on candy bars. J.J., figuring if that helped that famous flyer across the pond, that was good enough for him! He then proceeded to eat an entire box of twelve units, all during the two short hours of our aborted flight! On the let-down back into Gander, J.J. became unbelievably ill and let it fly all over the cockpit! Nothing was spared! A chocolate covered cockpit! Ugh!

We spent a large part of the next day in cleaning up the mess. As a crew, we were indeed proud of our brand new B-17F, christened the "Delta Rebel II." "Delta Rebel I" had met with an unfortunate ground accident at Mitchell Field, New York, but that is another story.

By the time we had gotten our nerve up to try it again, the 303rd Group, with the majority of their thirty-six B-17s, had joined us at Gander and would follow us across. I was to relay Lawrence's flight reports to the 303rd bird behind me.

We tried it again the next night, taking off at one minute intervals. I latched on to what I thought was the tail-light on Lawrence's plane for about five minutes but it turned out to be a star in a break in the clouds. Ernie Miller, the navigator, seemed awfully upset for this easy mistake; heck, we were only fifty degrees off heading! Both J.J. and the radio operator tried to establish communications with our leader, but not a peep. We hoped for the best, and that it was just a radio failure, which to me was bad news of a lesser dimension as we were now on our own in this venture.

Now is probably the time to mention that we were honored to have a staff officer assigned to our group flying with us as a passenger. He was WW I pilot vintage, an old fellow around forty, and not qualified in Flying Forts. He stayed in the radio room on our first attempt for a crossing, but on this flight he took a crouched position between the pilots seats, and remained there like a statue. He remained silent except for occasional raspy, growling sounds which led me to believe the poor man must have a chest condition. I noticed it was especially bad when the airspeed indicator bled down to sixty mph when we were in a climb. I snappily switched on the pitot tube heat switch to thaw the pitot tube, and the airspeed indicator returned to normal. Oh well, there's a first time for everything!

By this time we were on solid instruments. That snowstorm, which had been waiting out there to take us on, had embraced us with typical north Atlantic fervor. All of the de-icing and anti-icing equipment had been activated, and J.J. read the procedures to me again from the Dash One just to double check our steps. Gene Rimmell, our flight engineer, found it difficult to give me information on the fuel status, because our passenger was physically blocking him out. By peering at me, under the staff officer's arms, which were riveted to the armor plate behind the pilot's seats, Gene was able to communicate. In listening, I had to wiggle down in my seat and turn my head sideways, which gave me a slight case of vertigo when I straightened back up. This caused me to make some silly

attitude adjustments in leveling the airplane, which kept J.J. quite talkative and generated more throaty noises from you know who.

The situation was approaching the zippy stage. The "Reb" was loading up with ice, and when I turned on the wing lights to check the de-icer boot operation, I was amazed at the way it was snowing. Like flying into a white wall. The chunks of ice peeling off the props and banging into the fuselage made real bumps in the night. Added to this, the eerie red glow of the cockpit lights, the turbulence and noise of the storm, and the cocoon-like effect of the iced-over windows, made one weird scene, and some positive action was in demand.

At 7000 feet, our flight plan altitude, the outside air temperature read minus 5 degrees Centigrade, just perfect for structural icing. We had proof. To get out of the temperatures conducive for icing, you have to either go up or down. I elected to climb. This decision was based on the fact that Boeing had put superchargers on the engines and installed an oxygen system to make this a high flying machine. At 10,000 feet we donned oxygen masks.

We leveled off now and then to check conditions, but finding little difference continued our labored climb. The 303rd Fort trailing us had been in contact with us since shortly after takeoff, and we had been giving him the weather and our flight progress on his query about every fifteen minutes.

At around 20,000 feet we nudged through the overcast. Dawn was breaking, and the sun literally popped out of the eastern sky like a warm friend. Our plane had changed color from green to white, but the sun soon melted that uncomfortable coat of ice. We had it knocked!

As the top of the overcast gradually descended, we did also, following its contour. In awhile we were back down to 10,000 feet and off with the oxygen masks. Coffee and a Luckie tasted delicious, and soon we were homing in on the Prestwick radio signal.

Establishing contact with Prestwick tower was sweet music even though the responses were not in American vernacular. However, the let-down instructions were precise, and as we broke out of the low undercast there rolling down the runway (HURRAH!) was Lawrence and company in Clancy's "Careful Virgin." It was a beautiful sight! As I taxied in I could see the first 303rd plane landing, and soon they were coming in like homesick Scots.

I met Baskin and Bill Clancy in the metrological section of operations. After greeting them enthusiastically (was sure glad to see them!) and as we were getting around to the lack of communications enroute, a mean-looking bird colonel stomped into the room. Spotting Lawrence, he said, "That was a helluva bunch of ice out there," and in the same breath "and what a stairstep chase you led us on!"

Lawrence cleared his throat in his characteristic manner and calmly replied, "I don't know what you're talking about. When we started icing, I chose to descend, and we flew the rest of the route at low altitude." When he also commented that the radio transmitter on his plane had gone on the blink right after take-off, the colonel gave me a cold stare.

He really looked fierce, and saying, to no one in particular, "Do you mean I followed this lieutenant all the way across the ocean, and with my group right behind me?" I didn't like the way he downgraded "lieutenant"; it was First Lieutenant, nor the tone of his voice. I thought what a rude and ungrateful bastard!

Then Baskin Lawrence made a statement that endeared me to him forever. He quietly said, "They're all on the ground, aren't they?" Old sourpuss just muttered, "Well I'll be a son-of-a-bitch." I agreed. He wheeled around and galumphed back through the door.

Everything was pretty quiet, and glancing back at Baskin, I could see a twinkle in his eyes, then a grin, a chuckle, and then an out and out laugh! After a second or two I joined in along with Clancy and then with the RAF metro office staff who had been observing this American exchange of amenities.

Yes, I remember Baskin Lawrence well. He was one great guy with a good sense of humor, who stood up for me once, when I was in need.

Don't Forget Your 1981 Dues

323rd's "Flying Carpet" (Almost)!

BY CWO WHITMAL W. HILL (Ret)

Ground personnel duties were at times long and tedious, and as a result many incidents happened, occurred, or were brought about which broke up the strain of waiting for victory. There were some physical clashes, lots of "horse play," pub crawling, personal feuds and other devices and methods designed to pass away the time waiting...waiting...and waiting, while sweating out the return of a mission.

One such time killing incident that nearly ended in a disaster was caused by the lack of transportation from the hangers to the dispersal areas where the squadron aircraft were parked. For the men of the 323rd this was a good mile hike. The sheet metal crews were assigned jeeps to pull their portable sheet metal shops, which consisted of a workbench with vise, an electric generator, and an air compressor to operate the rivet guns. The engine mechanics, prop specialists, electricians and others had to hitch hike, walk, or ride their bikes to get out where the action was.

As the American Indian said about the bicycle, "Paleface lazy. He want to sit down and walk," the men of the 323rd were going to do one better than the bike. They planned to make up their own transportation means. After a "midnight requisition" to several of the other squadrons a B-17 auxiliary powered electrical energizer engine and a four wheel bomb carrier cart showed up at the 323rd Sheetmetal Maintenance Shop in the possession of Chuck Galian and Anthony Ryan (electricians), Ed Boisvert (welder), James Murray, Harold "Bumps" Elliot and Ed Malachosky (sheet metal men), and Sam DiGristina, the prop specialist.

After a concerted effort the group modified the gasoline engine so that the speed could be controlled, fitted it to the front of the bomb carrier cart, carved a three-foot propeller out of some scrap wood, and attached it to the engine. Their object was to develop a propeller-driven vehicle to take the electrician and prop specialist out to the dispersal area.

The plan nearly worked, but also almost turned out to be a real disaster. During a test run of the engine and propeller combination things got out of hand. The hand-carved prop, while looking good, was not balanced, and as a result when the engine was run up to full speed a vibration developed which caused the bolts holding the prop on to the engine fly wheel to shear and the prop to fly off and hit two by-standers. The prop blade put a severe vertical gash down the side of the shin bone of Pete Hoffman, and the hub hit Lewis "Suitcase" Simpson on the thigh and put both men in the hospital. Suitcase wound up in the base hospital and was the first to return to duty. His thigh, however, was swollen to nearly twice the normal size, and where the hub had hit him we could read raised letters of A-E-R-O that were on the head of all the stress bolts used on the stress parts of the B-17 such as engines, landing gear, etc.

Pete Hoffman spent nearly six weeks at the Cambridge Hospital while his leg recovered. While in the hospital one of the patients drank Pete's after shave lotion. Later during his hospital stay a group of civilian dignitaries and military generals were brought in to meet Pete, the man who had been hit with a propeller. Fortunately no one asked how he got hit in the shin. Perhaps to this day they are wondering how an aircraft propeller got so low, or whether Pete was a peace time acrobat.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Pete and Suitcase, as well as DiGristina, Galian, and Malachosky, are well and happy members of the Memorial Association. If anyone knows the whereabouts of Murray, Ryan, Boisvert, or Elliot please notify our secretary, George Parks. Also, if you know of any other interesting stories concerning the Ground Personnel please send them in for publication.

Don't Forget Your 1981 Dues!

Memphis Mini-Rally Honors Crows

A mini-Rally Round combining 91st members and representatives of the Memphis Belle association was held in Memphis October 24-25 to honor David and Valerie Crow of Steeple Morden, England. David has been an associate member of the 91st for a number of years and was a key member in arranging the Bassingbourn Prop Memorial in 1978.

The Crows had visited the Paul Chrysts in Pennsylvania before coming on to Memphis. Hosts for the event were Frank Donofrio, Mary Gagliano, and Madeline Henders.

Activities centered at the new 91st Bomb Group Headquarters Restaurant at the International Airport in Memphis. The recently completed restaurant is decorated as a WW II headquarters in an English farmhouse. The walls are covered with photographs and memorabilia of the 91st during their stay at Bassingbourn. Outside the structure are parked a WW II ambulance, 2 jeeps and a 2½ ton 6-wheel drive truck, and a P-40, a P-51, and a P-47, all operational.

91st members and associates attending included Gen. & Mrs. Stanley T. Wray, Col. & Mrs. Frank Kamykowski, Mr. & Mrs. Joe Franke, Mr. & Mrs. Paul Chryst, Mr. & Mrs. Joe Giambrone, Mr. & Mrs. Charles Kirkham, Dick Weitzenfelt, James Bedwell, John Allen, David Tallichet (president of Specialty Restaurants Corp.), Frank Donofrio, Mary Gagliano and Madeline Henders.



The exterior of the 91st Bomb Group (H) Headquarters Restaurant at the Memphis International Airport. In the foreground is Chuck Kirkham, followed by Anne Kamykowski and Dorothy Kirkham.

W.W. Hill reports the sale of 322 Shoo Shoo Baby T-Shirts to date, with \$3258 collected. He has presented \$300 to the 512th Antique Aircraft Restoration Group and plans to present \$1450 to the 512th in early spring.

Contributors have come from all over the world, including such places as Belgium, Holland, Steeple Morden, England, Philipine Islands, Okinawa, APO New York, APO San Francisco, Bassingbourn, the US Coast Guard Loran Station, Maine; the USS Eisenhower, USS O'Brien, USS Constellation, USS Lyspear, St. Vincent de Paul, PQ, Canada, and Wee Waa, NSW, Australia.

For a \$10 contribution and your shirt size (S, M, L, XL, adult's or child's) you will receive the unique B-17 T-Shirt. Contributions should go to W.W. Hill, 4002 Brad-dock Rd., Alexandria, VA. 22312.

From The Editor's Desk...

Paul C. Burnett Box 909 Auburn, Al. 36830

Because of heavy Reunion coverage in the October R/I we did not have room to report the July 26-27 Rally Round held at Dayton, Ohio.

There were 33 in attendance, including M/Gen. Stanley T. Wray, President Emeritus, and Mrs. Wray, and their guests, Col. & Mrs. Royal Frey, Curator, Air Force Museum. The highlight of the Rally Round was visiting the Air Force Museum at Wright-Patterson AFB.

Among the outstanding exhibits were a collection of 91st Bomb Group equipment and photographs on display. Joe Giambrone became an instant hero when some of the visitors learned that Joe was the Crew Chief painting a mission bomb on the nose of the Memphis Beelle in one of the photographs.

Members in attendance were: Mr. & Mrs. Sam Cipolla, June Bryant & her father Forrest Bryant, Mr. & Mrs. Luther Mitchell, Bell Eblen, Ted Wyzkoski, Mr. & Mrs. Frank Hartman, Whit Hill, John Parsons, Mr. & Mrs. John Flinn, Mr. & Mrs. Ed

THE RAGGED IRREGULAR

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In place of the traditional mug award for travelling the farthest distance to the Rally Round, Whit Hill presented a Shoo Shoo Baby T-Shirt to Joe Giambrone.

Vince Hemmings, of the East Anglian Aviation Society, who is Curator of the Basingbourn Tower Museum, has passed along the sad news that thieves broke into the top floor of the Tower Museum. The melinex protecting the displays was ripped down, models were smashed, and some of the memorabilia and personal effects of 91st and 355th Fighter Group personnel were stolen.

However, the EAAS has made many improvements and additions to the museum since, and security has been strengthened. Also they had their first exhibition outside the Tower Museum on November 2 when they took a part of the Museum's collection to the village of Aston, near Stevenage, as a part of the build up to the service of remembrance on Sunday, Nov. 9.

The mills of the gods may grind slowly, but sometimes it seems the paperwork mills of the armed forces can put them to shame... For example, the case of Cornelius P. Chima, ex-322nd pilot whose story is told in the Dayton (Ohio) Daily News:

Cornelius P. Chima finally has a Silver Star to show for his performance as a first lieutenant in the Army Air Corps in a mission flown in Europe in 1943.

The award came by mail to the Akron office of the 61-year-old businessman, along with appropriate military orders (6-21-80). The papers that came with the decoration gave no reason for the long delay beyond the notation that his medal was approved April 4 of 1980 by the Air Force Board for the Correction of Military Records.

The Silver Star is the third-highest medal a person serving in the Air Force, exceeded only by the Medal of Honor and the Air Force Cross.

Chima said he never made an effort to get the medal, even though one had been promised him during the war. He began

receiving inquiries about seven years ago from the Air Force, however, and was informed last month he would receive the award.

"I really don't know what happened, or if someone lost track of it. I brought it home to show my family," said Chima, who is president of Chima Travel Service and Chima Insurance Co., as well as other small business ventures in Akron.

The incident which brought him the medal also nearly gave him a court-martial, he said.

He and other flyers in the 91st Bomb Group had dropped their deadly cargo on the Kiel Canal in Germany, then headed back to a base in Bassingbourn, England, he said of the May 19, 1943, mission.

German fighters intercepted, and the right wingman's B-17 was hit and began to falter as 10 German fighters closed in on the crippled aircraft. Chima broke formation to drop back and help the endangered craft.

In the ensuing battle, two Nazi planes were shot down and the rest flew away. Both Chima's craft and the wingman's were able to return to base. But he had broken a rule about not breaking formation.

After nothing happened concerning the medal, Chima said he assumed the incident was going to be ignored.

It was-- but only for 37 years.

Another Life Member has joined the growing ranks of 91st life timers with a \$100 donation: Leslie R. Walshaw of Wright-Patterson AFB, Ohio.



A note from the 355th Fighter Group Assn. has this invitation for 91sters:

"Every member of the 91st BG is cordially invited to participate on the 355th Fighter Group tour, "Sentimental Journey" to England during 9-17 May, 1981, at our Stone Memorial Dedication in Steeple Morden and during all of the many special events to take place that wonderful week. We were your guests during "Operation One More Time" in 1978. Come join with us NOW! For detailed information write to: Gordon H. Hunsberger, Secretary, 355th FG Assn., 75 Congo Road, Box 71, Gilbertsville, Pa. 19525. Better still, mail in your reservation direct."

The 91st Strategic Missile Wing (SAC), at Minot AFB, N.D., which is the present-day offspring of the original 91st Bomb Group (H), has been awarded the Omaha Trophy as the best wing in the Strategic Air Command. They have recently established the Minot Air Force Base Heritage Center, which will feature photographs and other memorabilia to illustrate their heritage. They would like any memorabilia 91st members might contribute. Contact: Major Mike Selby, 91 SMW/DO22, Minot AFB, N.D. 58705.

We have learned of the deaths of a number of 91st members since the last issue of the R/I:

Norman Manning, 61, who was with the APO unit at Bassingbourn, died November 22 in Miami after a long illness.

Lee L. Clem, 69, died October 19 at Leedey, Okla. He is survived by his wife, the former Betty May Shurey of Royston, England, two daughters and a grandson.

Jack W. Thompson of Canoga Park, CA, died August 25 after a lengthy illness. He is survived by his wife, Mrs. Jack W. Thompson, 19901 Strathern St., Canoga Park, CA. 91306.

Howard M. Dunham, one of the original members of the 91st, navigator on Ellis' crew of the Texas Bronco, died in March.

Two former members about whom details are lacking have also been reported: Milo W. Eagle, of Jeromesville, Ohio, and Ira M. Tiny Tillotson, former 91st pilot, who died in June, 1979.

We need you help to make the editor's column meaningful and complete. Please pass along any information about 91st members that should be shared.

Shoo Shoo Baby Progress Report

BY MICHAEL D. LEISTER III
Project Director

Editor's Note: The rebuilding of Shoo Shoo Baby to flying status is a complex, tedious and time consuming task which the 512th Antique Aircraft Restoration Group is undertaking at Dover Air Force Base, Delaware. The Group has already worked on the plane for two years, and has several more years of work ahead, depending on funds and available parts. Below is a progress report from beginning till July, 1980. Since this report was finished the fuselage has been bolted together and additional work completed.

After trying several times to decide the best way to list the progress made on Shoo Shoo Baby (SSB), I have decided to move on the inside from fore to aft by compartment, then on the outside from the stabilizers to the outboard and inboard wings. I may miss some items and possibly dwell too long on some minor accomplishments, but some of our hardest jobs have been on small or seemingly unimportant details.

Upon receiving SSB we found the fuselage was in four parts, the wings were cut into several pieces, the nacelles were cut off, and the engines were completely unserviceable. Less than 5% of the original interior fittings remained.

Bombardier's and Navigator's Compartment

The team sent to transport SSB back to the U.S. in 1971 cut off her entire nose compartment due to extreme damage suffered when another aircraft taxied into her during her retirement in France. We have completely spliced in place a nose section obtained from a salvaged B-17G obtained from the French National Geographic.

All the remaining furnishings were non-original and have been removed. The airframe has been stripped of paint and corrosion treated. Primer and the final interior green paint has been applied. New flooring has been cut and fitted. The left cheek window has been installed. The right cheek window frame is on loan to the 8th Air Force Museum in Barksdale, LA. in order to make a copy for their B-17. The astro tracker dome frame has been rebuilt and a repaired bubble is ready for installation. A few pieces of navigator's gear have been re-installed. We are beginning to restore and remanufacture brackets and mounts for the remaining radio equipment and navigator's gear. We still need a complete chin turret mechanism except for the outer cover and fairing. We have on hand a completely restored Norden bombsight and a plexiglass nose bubble in new condition.

Cockpit

The cockpit did not contain a single instrument when we received SSB. The instrument panels were of French manufacture. The bulkhead and side panels had been covered with several coats of paint and rock wool insulation was glued to most of the interior surfaces..

All remaining flight deck equipment has been removed. All paint and insulation has been stripped. All internal corrosion control is complete. A prime and finish coat of paint has been applied. The main instrument panel has been restored using gauges donated by supporters of the project. The only missing gauge on the main panel is the flap position indicator. The control pedestal is 50% rebuilt. No floor panels have been refabricated yet. We have no parts at all for the upper turret. A set of original windshields which were part of a trade with the 8th Air Force Museum have been obtained for future installation.

Cockpit Underfloor

The cockpit underfloor has had several pieces of damaged skin replaced. Due to the aircraft's long exposure to weather and the relative inaccessibility of the underfloor areas, most of the corrosion work was done by hand one section at a time. A coat of primer has been applied. The underfloor catwalk has been rebuilt. Some components such as a reverse current relay box and current limiters are ready for installation.

(To Be Continued in the April R/I)