

## An Airman's Diary: Lt Norman Retchin

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March 1<sup>st</sup>, 1943

1. Flying down here from Salina, I decided I will keep a record of my entire overseas. At first I was hesitant as I don't like diaries + dates mean nothing, other than my wedding anniversary + payday.
2. Nevertheless, I will keep one as long as my present ambition holds + upon my return, with conscience free, hand it over to my Everlovin<sup>1</sup> as written document of what a Galahad I have been.
3. Morrison<sup>2</sup> is muddled. It is a constant wonder to me how anyone ever gets across. Yet they seem to manage pretty well. Colonel Harris, the little wonder boy, got us out of Salina in record 11 days; he will get us out of Morrison in three + at the present rate, the war should end in approximately 3½ weeks.
4. We got our usual briefing about the route down. They (the briefers) take it as a matter of course + run thru the entire thing as if it were no more to them than a shuttle trip from Philadelphia to New York. They finish the briefing + ask for the usual questions. I never have any questions. That frightens me. There must be something to ask about. I keep quiet + hope my luck holds out. In this business you are either a fatalist or neurotic.

This is the day prior to leaving. We are sunning on the roof of our hotel. The Manns, Walkers, + Everlovin are making pleasant small talk. I have the feeling that I am going to remember this warmly for the next half year. My attitude now about the whole set up is to get drunk. I quench my attitude as the bars don't open up until 4:30.

My head hurts . . . 4:30 has long since passed on. If we stay here any longer, I shall have ulcers before my time. Champagne at night, water in the morning + so on to hell. We are DEFINITELY scheduled to leave tomorrow, which means another delay of two days.

Tomorrow at 8AM we shall be airborne out of continental U.S.A. It is so strange that only a short while ago there was a bill in Congress that none of our boys were to be sent out of continental U.S. Our congressmen probably smoke bad cigars. What else could cloud up their thinking? Last night with wife. Going to miss her much. Had great fun these past seven months. Mrs. —Dopey<sup>3</sup> will be a mother when we get back. Dopey had few, too.

Called the Petchin's tonight. Dad wished me luck, mother cried + I laughed. We have a call in to Mom + Pop Mervis in Tuscar<sup>4</sup> —not collect either. Forgot to write brother Jackson. Will do!

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<sup>1</sup> —Everlovin": One of Retchin's pet names for his wife along with —Mrv" and —Mervo," the latter two in reference to her maiden name, Mervis.

<sup>2</sup> Morrison Army Airfield, Palm Beach, Florida.

<sup>3</sup> Nickname of fellow pilot —Dopey" Mann.

<sup>4</sup> Tuscar, Kansas.

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Was really drunk out last night. No one seems to think about going into combat. Seem to take it as a matter of course. Outwardly I do, too. Inwardly I'm nervous. Merv did not drink, only spilled a few on various people.

At exactly 0931, 3-3-43, we were in the air. Intended to run the props thru to Merv, but was busy watching 100 octane flowing out of the two filled wing tanks. Went thru a little ceiling + into the clear blue. Atlantic behaving gentlemanly; ship acting like a real lady. At exactly 1131, with the ship on auto-pilot, Simeral herded Dahlman + Reynolds into a blackjack game. In record time of 43 minutes, Simeral had extracted \$25.00 from Sad Apple + Reynolds. Sad Apple is our Class B finance Officer with \$1500 on him. Think I'll confine him to the bomb bay + out of shark Simeral's reach.

Spotted two heavy cruisers (U.S.N.) an hour or so out of Nassau. They didn't challenge us. We, being in exceptionally good moods (the Navy aren't such awfully bad guys) decided to let them get away unscathed. A few minutes off the Florida coast, we opened our secret orders.

London, England, it is! Simeral's are the same only he is scheduled to return to the States before us. Most of us wanted North Africa, but Berlin isn't a half bad target.

Flying a loose formation now of six ships at 6000 feet. Navigator Peterson really on the ball. Have confidence in the kid. One of those methodical Norsemen with a Hell of a lot of brains.

E.T.A. at Borinquen<sup>5</sup> [see *fig. 1, ed.*], 1937 GCT. Everything Roger!

Left Borinquen exactly 0831. What a place to settle down in + drink planters' punches for the duration. Nothing about that in our orders tho, so on to London via Atkinson Field, Georgetown, British Guiana. Merv would like Borinquen, too—tremendous frozen daiquiris, only 25¢, Hon! Hope Mike Mervis doesn't think his kids are drunkards. Mr. Lester would like this trip. He could speak Russian to the Spaniards + raise Hell with the boys.

Dopey Mann got here at the same time + I would have been disappointed had he not been able to make it with us.

Puerto Rico, British Guiana, Natal our first three stops. It is strange taking off from one place, landing 1000 miles away into different land, seeing + hearing natives with different languages. Hollywood has made it all too unreal and glamorous. Traveling is great fun.



**Figure 1.** The route followed by Lt. Retchin from Morrison Field to RAF Bassingbourn.

<sup>5</sup> Borinquen Field, Puerto Rico. Note: The map, above, is not included with the author's original manuscript but will help illustrate the crew's flight route. Likewise, the other illustrations/figures are not found in the original which was a handwritten manuscript on lined paper.

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Reynolds just got the idea of taking sun baths with the Aldis signal lamp. Ingenious Americans!

The crew behaving very well. All seem interested, capable + eager.

Semeral's turn to land + take off today. Dahlman to get his chance to land at Natal. Have four pilots aboard: Sem, Sad Apple, auto pilot + myself. Think we are overworking poor auto-boy.

Going to settle down to a sun bath + sleep in the nose. What a luxury liner this is! Wrote wife + both families today. Guess I'll have to start corresponding again.

Passing over island of Trinidad. I'm hungry. Walker Field located here - we continued on to Atkinson non-stop. Trinidad, like most islands, is surrounded by nothing. There is an enemy submarine located somewhere around here taking pot shots at passing planes. As we are not prepared to engage the enemy, we are looking forward to not seeing the sub + vice versa. Trinidad looks like an animal covered with kinky green fur.

Just sighted coast of South America. Can think of nothing momentous to day, except that —Eetes good to be in America again.”

Atkinson is a not too generous clearing in the jungle where planes are supposed to land. The jungle is cleared just enough on either side for us to taxi. This is a Pan Am stop as well as Army. As we landed, a Pan Am ship took off in a shroud of secrecy. I asked the officer of the Pan Am if either of the Roosevelts had been there recently. He played dumb, so I guessed that they had. It is rumored that we may have to remain here as there is no gas in Belem, Brazil. No gas; no flight. This is the last on Atkinson—it is really an out-house of civilization. I shall take quinine, play poker + have many home thoughts of a broad.

Luckily, we got cleared to Belem + forego the privilege of remaining at Atkinson another night. This jungle stuff is alright where taken in small doses from the rear of the Rialto. At Belem, the situation is worse, but it means we get another leg closer to England in the Spring. Still no gas at Belem, + not enough for all of us to make Natal on this last fill up.

The Colonel's tentative plan is to take gas out of some ships + transfer it to the others. The empty ones wait at Belem for the “C” cards.<sup>6</sup> Hope to be able to continue on to Natal.

Left Woodrow Wilson Thomas, alias the Mugger, alias the Duck behind with bad throat. They may clear his throat, but no telling what else he may contract. The Mugger, I am afraid, has finally succumbed to the Grape. You can never tell if he is drunk or sober until he passes out.

Played poker last night. My luck was moderate, Simeral's amazing + Dopey lost as usual. Mrs. Dopey's Dutch frugality does not coincide with her husband's expensive frivolity.

Airborne 0131<sup>7</sup> this morning; up at 0500. Putting these times down in order to remind me to make up for them back in the States.

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<sup>6</sup> A reference to the C gas ration cards which offered a generous (but not unrestricted) number of gallons of gas per week to those with war-essential travel requirements. See, <http://www.worldlingo.com/ma/enwiki/en/Rationing>.

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Hugging the coast of South America, flying 1000. Will pass Devil's Island soon. Weather conditions not too good with forecast of becoming worse.

Passing Devil's Island now. The French Government evidently isn't too proud of the institution, as they make us fly around it. Nature is in cahoots with the French today as poor visibility due to fog + mist shrouds that miserable island. Impossible to believe that men actually live there + inconceivable that they try + escape. Entire South American coast thickly jungled for miles opposite the island. A good argument for capital punishment, Devil's Island.

Will cross the Equator today + join the holy order of the shell-backs<sup>8</sup>. Upon crossing, according to legend, Father Neptune is supposed to encounter the traveler + ask him what the devil he is doing on this side. Usually the old gent lets everyone pass without too much of an invitation. If the Mugger sees him, I swear I'll never drink again.

I miss the good influence of my wife + am reverting back to old, where King Blue Chips reigned. Even out here in Nowhere, money has not lost its value + there is nothing else to do.

Visited Belem last night + it is quite a place. The size of Racine in area with a population of 340,000. Fifteen + twenty people live together. Cozy, but unsanitary. We sat drinking Tom Collins, which takes on the aspect of a strong mixture down here. We made a tour of the town + it is much like a Spanish Norfolk. Sex is a salable commodity but it is strictly *—caveat emptor.*" As for myself, a few glasses of wine + a loaf of bread were sufficient.

We are delayed here. The Japs sunk a tanker with our 100 octane, so we will remain until —Gas ~~ca~~ Day." As far as dress is concerned, we are becoming Typical Tropical Tramps. The heat hangs very heavy, even tho' the sun is hidden. Like a piece of cloth, we can almost feel the humidity.

Last night, I slept on what they optimistically refer to as a bed. A three degree turn of the head is my quota for today. I have lost track of the day + date. Will look forward to dinner at Madame Gare's tonight. The Madame feeds well + accepts American money. Dopey + I argued last night about who would get what after we exchanged American money for Brazilian *mil reis*. Dopey got the best of it, Clara will be glad to learn.

We are starting short snorter clubs in every country we come to. Everyone sits at their sidewalk tables affixing signatures to bills; great expensive fun.<sup>9</sup> —We got sixpence, jolly, jolly sixpence."

The people here are friendly enough + work like the W.P.A. The children are amazing—they speak foreign languages . . . + so young, too. When I was 17, it took me four years to pick up basic Spanish - these kids speak Portuguese with no trouble at all.

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<sup>7</sup> Whether for good luck or whatever, takeoffs seem to occur at 31 minutes after the hour. In this case, Lt Retchin may have accidentally transposed the hours; i.e., up at 0100, airborne at 0531.

<sup>8</sup> In the Royal Navy, those who cross the Equator for the first time are initiated into the Order of the Shellback; this tradition has been incorporated into the USN and its sister services.  
<http://www.history.navy.mil/faqs/faq92-1.htm>.

<sup>9</sup> The point being that if you later ran into your clubmates at a bar, anyone who could not find his short snorter dollar bill would have to buy the others a round . . . even years later.

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Going to write Mervo, Jack + Shel.

Madame Gare's incredibly good. Began dinner with cocktails of local origin. A perfect setup for what came after. Delicious asparagus souffle, wine, soup, more wine, chicken, wine, steak drooling with mushrooms, more wine . . . finally *demi-tasse* +, naturally, wine. The French really drink their dinners + occasionally take small doses of food between *vins*. Can't blame them: wine wonderful.

The, the evening really started. Met the Colonel, Simeral, Todd at Madame's + then went to Hotel Grande for a few —~~short~~ snorters." Place filled with rich American soldiers + we all ended up singing nostalgic American songs. Those things mean so much more in a foreign country.

Bill Wheeler, Dopey, myself, already happy by this time, as we were the Colonel's party. The Colonel drinks well + has wonderful recuperative powers. Everyone complimented everyone all evening.

Dopey + Bill promised to recommend the Colonel for something-or-other . . . he was extremely appreciative. I asked him, straight-faced as I could, if I could send for my wife. He thought that very, very funny + played good audience for me (which Dopey accused me of trying to seek). He's correct—I do! Kept telling me to —~~have~~ her catch the next Pan Am down." Will do!

Bill Wheeler told the Colonel how he envies me having such a wonderful wife as I have. We all agreed - take a bow, Everlovin, but don't let it go to your head. On second thought, I'm not so sure. Think I'll speak to the Provost Marshall tomorrow!

Finally kidded A.P. into writing Grinsky.<sup>10</sup> A.P. is funny when high. Good boy. Think hanging over today, but he is good company.

We leave here day after tomorrow. Was delayed five days. Am tired, hungry + refuse to write another line.

Enroute from Belem to Natal at 5000 above overcast. Weather threatening; visibility good. Pass thru front at Sao Luis. Had to leave Simeral behind as he will lead second flight to Natal. I was one of the first ships gassed, so joined the Colonel in the first flight. Simeral not too happy, but he'll catch us there.

Spent last day in Belem. Brazil MUST NOT be judged by Belem say Brazilians. It would be like judging United States by Las Vegas, say I. Vultures flock all over the town, perched + drooling, waiting for a Brazilian to stumble, fall, or just plain die. There were hundreds of them, so I guess they had good pickings in Belem.

None of our stumbling group were victimized . . . possibly because the vultures don't operate at night.

We play poker all day. Anyone reading this will gather that the greater portion of our conscious hours are spent behind a full house. When stuck in the jungle for five days, one loses desire to pursue the arts - such arts consisting of a phonograph machine + a stack of old life ways

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<sup>10</sup> Probably Peterson, the nav, and his wife.

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- so we resort to the only alternative that is . . . if one hasn't lost too much to one's friend the night before.

Reynolds won \$245<sup>00</sup>, Simeral lost a few, I was 180<sup>00</sup> out, came back to 150<sup>00</sup> ahead, finally broke even. These next few lines comprise an obituary for Pitty Poor Ditty Dopey:

Oh, Pitty Poor old Ditty Dope  
Has lost all his Jack.  
I nitty know that kitty he is sitt-y-o-sad-sad.  
His wife will kitty-curse him when he gets back,  
And tell him he is a Pitty-o-card-cad!

We had a final luncheon at Gare's again + left with bloated bellies + pleased palates.

I also bought a watch. I only wanted a cheap one to hold me over until mine comes from home. Was having a devil of a time trying to get that across, + the transaction was starting to look like Simeral's game of Charades. A major finally saved the day by introducing me to two of the most important words in Portuguese—viz.: *mais* + *barato*, respectively: more + cheap. These two words, said together rapidly for any length of time by a foreigner, should produce results.

For me, they worked wonders. I got a watch for 100 *mil reis* (\$5<sup>00</sup>) which has only stopped twice in 24 hours.

The subs got a plane along this route last week, so I think I'll oil up my —Roscoë + get on the look-out.

Natal is hot. Terrific contrast between the wet jungles of Belem + dirty dry sand at Natal. Town itself restricted because of some epidemic. Too tired to go anywhere anyway. Notice that enlisted men are sloppier, lazier + more woman-hungry the further we go from U.S.A.

—Jesus, a white woman. If I could just look at one, that's all, just look at her." Wonder what happens when [[one word illegible]] boys return to the States? The government will have to take care of them. They have lost the ability to do so alone.

Food miserable here. Have not eaten since 5:20 P.M. yesterday, + it is 6:00 A.M. now. Couldn't stomach the breakfast. Have sandwiches, coffee + cocoa aboard. What! No hostess?

Got up at 3 A.M. to start our cross-Atlantic try. First stop Ascension Island, a 5x10 piece of land 1300 miles away. I hope we don't miss it, as I am in no condition for rowing. Weather clear, bucking headwind, altitude 9000; going to sleep. Simeral back with us today, sleeping in the catwalk.

Just sighted the navy. Up until now there was a question in my mind, but it is a relief to know the truth—they don't just operate out of the Great Lakes Area. One aircraft carrier, two cruisers, + a destroyer.

The Isle of Ascension could probably have served well as a Devil's Isle had they not made an army post out of it.

It is with great pleasure that we leave this picturesque little isle, standing as a lonely fortress in the middle of a school of shark, barracuda, where 1200 wild-eyed enlisted men +



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officers slowly have their brains softened, + where civilized convention is as good as a stone in Africa.

It has just become daylight. Planes are warming up inside their own dust storms in preparation for a 1000 mile hop to Africa's mainland. Our flight destined to go to Roberts Field, Liberia. Wonder where my brother is now?

Ascension is the most uncivilized spot we have been to yet. The food can barely be classified as edible garbage. Fortunately, it belongs to the British. There are some British women in town, but apparently they don't get on well with our boys. After all, because we are Allies is no sign that we have to talk to each other.

Have to start Duffer Merv now.

Life, he is a strange old fellow. About 1½ hours out of Ascension we receive radio instructions to return there.

And, so, it is with many misgivings that we return to the little isle of wild-eyed wombats to await another 24 hours. Two things responsible for our return. It can be that the weather is poor at our destination, or a wire from the Colonel at Natal. The Colonel was supposed to fly with Dopey, but couldn't get the plane off the ground due to a flat tire wheel. I imagine they will pick us up today, + then we will go on as a group again.

It is strange that no matter how primitive any place may be, there are always bouncing baby Jeeps to carry us on land. As tho' they were born out of the jungle and harnessed for use by man.

Al Williams was lost last night but finally homed in via radio compass. Was thinking about the letter I would have to write [[name illegible]] in such a case. Two others, Slatery + Wilcox, unaccounted for last night. We hope they didn't take off from Natal but don't know for certain.

Everything running smoothly. Crew's health + morale excellent. Looks like more people on Ascension to while away the lazy hours. First I shall write some letters.

Once again on our way from Ascension. Our return to the field yesterday proved to be unnecessary as the weather at Roberts, Liberia, was adequate. SNAFU!<sup>11</sup> However, it proved to be a good thing as we spent the day on a beautiful clear, white sand beach + cleansed our greying bodies in the ~~a~~aquamarine Atlantic." The rest, sun, + exercise readied us for a huge meal which later became an ordeal rather than a pleasure. Wish I had Mr. Lester's ability to eat anything. If Ghandi did it for 21 days, I shall be able to make England with no trouble at all.

Intended to write Everlovin + home, but they have forbidden letter-writing by transients.

The rest of our bunch caught up with us, Dopey carrying the little Colonel with him. Dopey kindly allowed him to land at Ascension. Pretty big of him, no?

Had to leave Bill Wheeler behind because of a flat tire wheel. Hope to meet him at Dakar.

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<sup>11</sup> Euphemistically: -situation normal—all f----- up," an acronym just then coming into vogue.

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Heard that —“Red Ace” is on his way and will pick us up at Dakar. Old Rogers \_twill be good to see. Besides, he carries gifts from my wife. Camera, glasses, kisses, etc.

Headed for West African coast. Altitude 5500; ceiling + visibility—CAVU.<sup>12</sup> Will catch up on some sleep.

Just completed one of the best meals I have had since Hudgins in West Palm Beach. I got pretty hungry, so we opened some emergency rations. Cold bouillon a [[one word illegible]] Vichy, France, pork + beef mixed happily together, topped with crackers + Phillip Morris cigarettes. Only hope I don't live to regret opening those. They are supposed to be used upon landing the ship for several weeks where land, food and cigarettes are merely taunts that haunt men's dreams.

We just pulled to a stop in Africa.

It is big + black.

The natives have crowded around the Big Bird—they are little and black. They stand around naked giving us toothy grins. We stare at them . . . each equally peculiar.

When I step out of the plane, I will have traveled 8500 miles from Salina, Kansas, to Dakar, Senegal, Africa.

Dopey + the Colonel were forced down on the African coast 100 miles out of Bathurst. No one hurt. We'll probably search for them tomorrow. Dopey will have some tall Georgian tales of this.

Night came, + with it the sensational. Dopey + the little Colonel, flying heavy with three engines, were forced to crash land on a beach in Portuguese Guinea on West African coast. The ship was ruined but, luckily, no one was injured. Portugal, however, is a neutral country which means internment for the entire group apprehended. Roney followed Dopey down + reports that natives were running toward the ship as soon as it landed. That means that the Portuguese authorities will know about it.

The thing that irks me about the whole affair is the pathetic attitude of the officials here. They are only too willing to turn the incident over to the diplomats. They promised to leave here at daybreak with a DC-3. It is an hour past day-break, + still no one has left. The major in charge does not seem to care whether they remain there or not. Right now it looks pretty hopeless for them, but the Colonel may be able to pull some strings + get out. At any rate, they won't see combat unless Portugal decides to become friend or foe + get off the fence.

Fortunately, Dopey has 12 cartons of Phillip Morris aboard + a case of Scotch. That should hold for the duration with careful rationing. All Dopey need do now is send for Clarabelle + they can make beautiful music together in Portuguese Guinea slapping mosquitoes—while, if the little Colonel does not get out for the duration, he undoubtedly will become governor of the place.

The rest of us are pushing on to Marrakesh via Atar, [[one word illegible: “Fuidouf”?]]. We left one ship behind today to see what develops with the colonel.

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<sup>12</sup> —“Ceiling and visibility unlimited.”



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Visited Dakar for an hour or so. The French we saw were degenerate civilians or drunken soldiers + sailors, so it is unfair to pass any comment on the French. We had a few aperitifs at *Madame Tout a vec* or something + went home to our straw mattresses for five hours. Sure saw some disgusting sights in Dakar + had a few laughs with some British Merchant Marines who were —aving a piece to sing about —itler—wot?”

It was dark in Dakar, so we could see nothing except a white sheet passing in the shadows out there.

The natives were swarmed around the ship this morning. They are a strange, happy, filthy lot. We took pictures with them + gave them a few trinkets to cement international relationships. For hats, they wear tin cans, salad bowls, shawls, any darn thing in sight. Their skinny fingers + bone are covered with copper rings + any other metal they can twist into shape. They were extremely curious about the ships + tried to peer inside. But we kept them back, not wanting their numerous open sores to contact any part of the ship. Africa for Africans, I say.

Marrakesh is 132 miles from the famous Casablanca. We hope to get there, but it may be impossible.

I hope Dopey + the Colonel (sounds like a comic strip) are able to make their escape from the Portuguese. Will they? Or won't they? Send in three bomb sight tops, kiddies . . . + we'll send you the answer in [[one word illegible: Sifko?]].

We arrive in Marrakesh. This is something entirely new for me + I allow myself to be amazed by life. Marrakesh is in French Morocco + is really old-world-Allah-be-praised-stuff. The French are good colonists, + the city appears to be well run.

The Army billeted us in a barn-like building falsely named the Casino. Bill Wheeler has a powerful bargaining agent with him, + we carried it to the El Mohgret where the French man in charge gave us two rooms.

I think of buying New York a few years back for a case or two of Johnnie Walker (Black) from the Indians. Among other things, a great medium of exchange.

After a delicious French *dejeuner* (100 francs - two dollars) four of us—Bill Wheeler, Hal DeBolt, Simeral + myself—got a taxi, consisting of two horses, one guide named Mebzou'ou, one driver + a four-seater open-air cart. The driver, a non-descript character, just came along for the ride, but Mebzou'ou was a real character. He lost little time in bumming cigarettes + kept us amused all evening with his witty mixture of Arabic + English. On the other hand, we kept him amused, too.

Bill + I drank deep of the Grape + had a wonderful time driving thru the alley-like streets chanting that old Arab melody, —The Road to Morocco.”<sup>13</sup> Finally, Bill took over the reins + the horses brought us to the Hotel Mouinein and where we sat and philosophized about —Lif” over several —peritif,” a handy word to know.

Everything closes rather early, so home to bed.

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<sup>13</sup> A song from the Bing Crosby and Bob Hope movie, —The Road to Morocco,” popular at that time.

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At ten A.M., we were briefed for our trip to England by the RAF. Nice chaps. I know darn well I'll come home with a broad —A”!

Playing is a thing of the past. For the first time since Dec. 9, I realize this IS war + I'm in the thick of it. The RAF warned us of the Hun off the coast of France + gave instructions on how to meet them. Now I hope I can get angry enough to kill a man, Hun or otherwise. Later, when they fire at me, I know I shall be.

I gave the crew instructions this morning after the briefing. Unfortunately, I heard myself talking and, truthfully, I scarcely believed what I was saying. —Only 300 rounds of ammunition, Eh? Put 50 rounds at six posts, won't use the ball turret. If they attack from below, I'll dive . . . etc.”

The crew took it like gentlemen, tho', + seemed to realize the full import of the situation even more than I.

Confidant in that crew of mine. If anyone will pull us thru, they will. I'll try like the devil because of my Wife. Naively enough, I am very much in love with that gal!

Today, Sunday, we found our friend, Mektoub,<sup>14</sup> and he took us on a tour. Three taxis (horse + buggy) filled with american American soldiers traveled safari-like into the Arab quarter. Wheeler, Newberry, DeBolt + myself in the lead; Reynolds, Dahlman, Paulson (my crew) in the second; + Buster Peek + Co. bring up the rear.

Mektoub brought us to the market to various places. I'm certain there was a strong resemblance to Mektoub + the shop-keepers . . . and when they asked for thousands of francs, I knew there was.

We laugh at the Arabs, + they take our money. Had I only a camera to depict what I saw today. Suffice it to say that we encountered many native characters. They are filthy, bearded + mercenary.

We visited the Sultan \_o Gottal, the Arabic + Jewish quarters. All are un-American.

We visited the Market (Arabic) and bargained with the shop-keepers. All are american

I tried to distinguish between a Jew and an Arab. I failed. Unless one wears a black skull cap + the other red!

We tired of sight-seeing. Back to the grape + hotel Mournlin. Our fellow drinkers were French. I played ping-pong with a charming French girl. Unchivalrously I beat her three times, but she was one of the best I ever played. After the game, she said something in French + shook my hand, which amounted to wishes + the best of luck in combat. Would have given anything to be able to thank her + say a few appreciative words in French. I smiled and said, —*Merci*.”

Dinner with Wheeler, Newberry, DeBolt + a few bottles. Alcohol + philosophy are closely akin.

We make plans for tomorrow. Yet we know not whence we came, nor where we go, nor why! (Slightly misquoted.)

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<sup>14</sup> Previously referred as —Mebzou'o.”

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French women not very attractive but dress magnificently.

We leave tonight at midnight. Dopey + the Colonel interned at Portuguese Guinea we learn. Portugal lenient; they may be able to get out - Poor Popui - Will write to Clara, but don't know exact address.

Will write Everlovin + family from Eng.—mail service here doubtful!

thinks it a wonderful idea that I write this + wants a copy. I am flattered but am writing only for something to look back on + show to the children. What children? I must speak to my wife about this.

After an all-night hop from Marrakesh, French Morocco, we sight England + land at St. Eval<sup>15</sup> (*fig. 2, right*). This is the district of Cornwall (by the sea, of course), + very scenic it is. My hungry stomach blinded me to all else but a plate of ham + eggs with a dreg of tea (also of course). A dreg is a dinking vessel that, if it had beer in it, would be called a mug.

The English countryside is very much in order + gives the impression of peace and quiet. However, gun emplacements, barbed wire + soldiers serve both as a reminder + bolsterer to the civilian people. The towns, like the people, are clean + quiet . . . save for some American soldiers who see fit to spread orange peels, etc., about. The English soldiers are far more polite than our boys, which is a dubious asset in wartime.

We ate and took off again +, at present, are flying low over the countryside.

Three ship formation with Dahlman doing a nice job of —~~holding~~ her in.”

As far as I can see, the island is drenched with fog + haze, extending as high as 3000 feet.

I'll be alright as soon as I become acclimatized.

The field at St. Eval has evidently taken quite a beating (from Jerry) as there were hangers, planes + debris all over.<sup>16</sup>

Will be stationed near London + foolishly enough are looking forward to a bombing raid. I'm certain that will make me fighting mad . . . I think!

Bought Everlovin a pair of homemade shoes (native) in Marrakesh. We were told that the Arabs love to bargain. It goes something like this: —Howmuch for the shoes?” “Six hundred franc.” —Giv you 100 franc.” —Okli!”

So I got a beautiful pair of native-made slippers for 600 francs.

Simeral returning to the U.S. soon. Will have him call the Duffer + the family out in L.A. Also send the shoes + some mail.

Bill Wheeler delayed in Marrakesh. Hope he catches up with us, but is doubtful.

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<sup>15</sup> RAF St. Eval, an RAF Coastal Command base in Cornwall.

<sup>16</sup> RAF St. Eval suffered numerous bombing raids. See, e.g., [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/RAF\\_St\\_Eval](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/RAF_St_Eval); <http://www.bbc.co.uk/ww2peopleswar/stories/38/a5955438.shtml>.

## An Airman's Diary: Lt Norman Retchin

I am trying to grow an upper lip like Bill's. Little results. It is coming out blond alright, but, as yet, no one - save myself - can see it. I shall rub Scotch on it every night before retiring. After all, I must look my best when house hunting.

Been in England 30 hours now + have ended up at —Boingdon-on-the Chicken Giblet.<sup>17</sup> We flew from Bassingbourn here to attend school for two weeks or so. After that time, we return to Bassingbourn to take up our permanent headquarters.

England belies the war. Almost impossible to imagine the country has been fighting for three years. Peaceful, green, rolling.

Weather has been bad from a warring aspect. However, now that April's coming, the bombs should fall faster and more frequently. The countryside will be in full bloom + the fragrant smell of lilacs + bomb-smoke will fill American + English nostrils.

Have heard many stories about combat + all in that same pseudo-jesting mood. They try + make light of the whole set-up, but it is obvious what they are thinking.

Had a few laughs with Smokey Lindsay at Bassingbourn. Got to Bovingdon + was heartily cracked across the back by George Stalling. He is leaving soon. Dunbunch, 17 crews follow us tomorrow. We are the only ones of the Harris group that got here today. We get a pass to London for the week-end. From what I can gather, London girls are on the loose, + it's dangerous. I imagine this is quite a happy hunting ground for single men—I am married, so shall request police escort thru Piccadilly.

Lost 100 dollars tonight but don't mind it too much as it was in English pounds. It was the same I had won from my very good friends, Simeral + Reynolds. I feel badly about that.

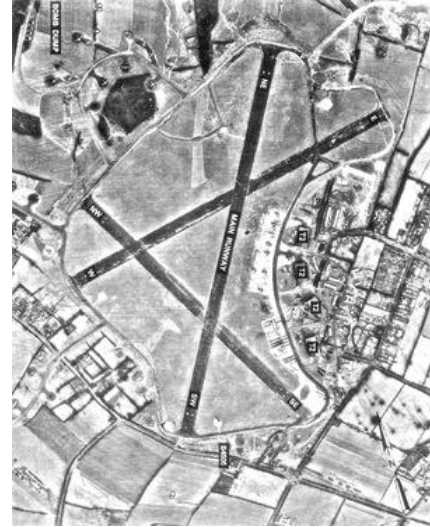
This morning, we exchanged our good green American dollars for the soggy English pound. Our first step toward acclimatizing.

The pound at present is worth 4.035 dollars. There are 12 pence to a shilling; 20 shillings to a pound. I hope the English are honorable chaps, at least until I can remember the value well enough to be dishonest together.

Everything is of a secret nature here. In fact, even writing this log is not exactly recommended . . . + I will do my writing in a dirty, dark corner, giving furtive glance now + then to determine friend or foe.

Cabled Everlovin + the folks this morning. Told Everlovin to catch first boat out.

Been hearing many more tales about venereal in London. Seems the war has done much to decrease English women's morality + increase American venereal percentage.



**Figure 2.** RAF Bovingdon, seen in 1946. Royal Ordnance Survey. Copyright expired.

<sup>17</sup> RAF Bovingdon, Hertfordshire, near Watford Junction. Also known as AAF Station 112. See *fig. 2*.

## An Airman's Diary: Lt Norman Retchin

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Expect the rest of the crews in today or tomorrow, + their school days once again.

Not used to the English way of traffic yet. They drive on the wrong side of the street from the wrong side of the car. Fortunately, everyone does it or there would be a beastly mess over the countryside. Everything around here is camouflaged. Houses + buildings are built to resemble hay stacks, rolling countrysides + enlisted men's latrines.

Have not yet encountered black out in town. Will do over week-end. Search lights can be seen in the nearby towns, + from a distance looks like nothing more than a Hollywood premier.

Taking a train into London now with Reynolds, Dahlman + Paulson. Tomorrow sight-seeing; tonight a few short snorts in the black out + a flop at the Savoy. Will pick up my 21 coupons tomorrow + ferret out a pair of Scottish brogues.

Everything here strictly rationed - more so than in the States. In the U.S.A., someone immediately knocks off a catchy tune about it - here they pull their belts in a bit tighter.

After a few hours in London. No space at the Savoy (I think they were being snobbish) so we ended up outside of West End in a terribly rugged place.

Last night (with apologies to Sax Rohmer)<sup>18</sup> we stepped out of the train + disappeared into the thick London fog. There was a moon out + 'twas a beautiful night for an air raid.

No raid, however, with the exception of the —Piccadilly Commandos,” who are always on duty. They swarm the Circus, plucking the bass string of degradation. In no mood for that kind of music.

Had a devil of a time locating a bed. Finally managed, + Dahlman, Reynolds + myself set out. Paulson, unable to find a glass of milk, retired. We searched for food. What we found is hardly describable in print.

The English deserve credit for going hungry so long. I'm too hungry at present to jest about the lack of food. Tomorrow, after a big juicy chocolate bar, I'll try again.

In the pleasantly dim semi-consciousness that befell us at 4 A.M., the piano player - he was no pianist - played —As Time Goes By.” When he finished, I dried my tears, + we left. Something about that song that reminds me of The Merv. What a gal!

Next morning, the sun broke thru the barrage balloons, + we started out. Paulson woke Ed + me disgustingly early, but we refused to budge. That pillow was the only sight I was interested in.

We awakened. Chance meeting with Simeral American Embassy where he picked up his passport + I could not.

Browsed in a nearby book shop where I rescued Clare Boothe<sup>19</sup> from the second hand department. Also some short stories by Laughlin.<sup>20</sup> Representative Boothe dedicates her book

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<sup>18</sup> English mystery writer and creator of arch-villain —Dr. Fu Manchu.”

<sup>19</sup> Playwrite, author, journalist, two-term Congresswoman.

<sup>20</sup> Journalist, author, editor; very popular at this time for his short stories on life in the Army.

## An Airman's Diary: Lt Norman Retchin

—d H.M.L. who understands why I wanted to go.” HML would probably have taken up the Pipe if those damned clever political conversations hadn't ceased soon.

That evening came Noel Coward. He again plays tricks with the normal marriage relationship with very funny results.

How differently he + Herr Freud treat the same subject.

Back to Bovington! Had a huge meal at the post in preparation for our London week-end. Simeral with us; leaves Monday from Bristol via Clipper.

Return to London. I shall only come in at rare intervals hereafter. Every week-end means a stone or two lost, to say nothing of the pound situation.

The Astor Club was jumpin' last night. The English look arabesque in their Harlemaesque to American swing. It's a wonderful show.

There was some sort of Queen's some . . . King-or-other, + the aristocratic younger set were out en masse. All seem extremely inhibited + virginal. They try like Hell to impress everyone with their station. They fail.

George, our waiter, will be a great leader in England's post-war revolution. He has a deep, beautiful + profound hate for the young aristocrats. They bounce around stiffly. Their effervescent youth out distances my slowly ebbing vitality, so I take a vitamin pill + hang on.

Hungry + beaten, we leave London for the base + a square meal. If the Germans ever did get here, they would boil in their own stew - the English have none left.

Hit the Astor Club again (our official drinking room) + met many boys out of [illegible abbreviation]. Harry Benson was there with seven raids + as many Scotch under his belt. All the military seem to be living like mad while they can in preparation what is to come.

London - dangerous place to be. If the Germans don't get you, there is the black out, hunger + cold, perched like eager vultures thruout the town, waiting.

Took in the London Philharmonic last night. Veddy excellent. Elgar, Bach, + Tchaikovsky. Sir Henry Wood waving the wand.

Surprised everyone, including myself, + turned in early last night. Just can't enjoy myself without my Everlovin wife.

Simeral leaving Tuesday instead of Monday. Plan to beat him about the head with blunt instruments Monday night. That should get me home in time for Spring.

The war can't last too long. The *Times* devoted more space today to the post-war period than to the present war.

Everyone tells of the social changes to come after the war. I don't think there will be anything revolutionary. Everyone so disgusted with ~~doing~~ without” now that they will only be too happy to return to what they had before the conflict. Besides, the money + control still remain in the same places, only more so now.

Forgive the sociological touch. Hereafter I shall leave all that to such as Clare Boothe + Co. They will lead us to green pastures. Hang on - here we go!



## An Airman's Diary: Lt Norman Retchin

Just heard Mr. Churchill. He spoke of the post-war as tho this one was something that needed only a few weeks more to go + there were more important things to consider. He spoke of a four-year post-war readjustment period. He spoke of more education. He spoke of great social changes to come. He spoke of increasing the size of families. He spoke like the Honorable Ed. Kelly<sup>21</sup> stumping for reelection. All uncomfortably familiar.

In my one-man fact-finding committee, I find the common British people thoroughly disgusted with the whole business. They disparage of the rich with that hopeless, futile resignation to something they have no control over. They want change but will be satisfied to have a job after the war. They want opportunities for their children but realize that war or no, there will always be the public school + old school ties running the show. They aren't very happy.

Simeral said good-bye this evening. Good-bye—sorry to see him go. He will see Merv soon . . . I may never see her again. I'm not very happy. She is all I think about.

Life has settled down to the usual routine that schooling means. Hard seats; long talks; straining to stay awake. Eight hours of this a day for two weeks or so + then . . .

I do stay awake, tho - feeling that these sad sounding words spoken here might later save the lives of myself + my crew. Haven't thought too much about my ~~—getting it~~ in this war, but hearing of friends spoken of as ~~—hēs~~ today + ~~—hēvas~~ next day sets me speculating. Frankly, there isn't much sense in it. After all, I am here, more or less by my own volition, so I can't ask ~~—Why?~~

There is a huge job to be accomplished + it seems that a requisite for doing it is blood. To manufacture things, certain raw materials are combined, processed + finally molded into the finished product. The same applies here. Millions of quarts of red plasma, mixed with machines, oil, bombs, hunger, *et al*—stir well for many hours + finally form of Peace is manufactured. And like all things manufactured, its durability is limited. It may soon break down, get lost in the shuffle or forgotten. So what happens to me, my crew, to other crews is unimportant. We carry out our orders never once thinking the Why of all this.

Just give us good luck to get 25 complete combat missions under ye old belt + send us home to wives, fiancées + a decent steak dinner.

If you're ever in Chicago, look me up. I'll be the third apple cart on the left - world war vet, that's me—Applemister?"

The search lights stretched into the night; white, waving whips snarling at the enemy, Reminded me of H.G. Wells' *Things to Come*.<sup>22</sup> Something frightening + ominous. Turned out to be a false alarm. Shame, too - a beautiful night for a raid.

A beautiful morning today. A few of us will definitely swear, in writing, that we saw blue sky.

—That little tent of blue that prisoners call their own."<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Probably long-time Chicago mayor and Cook County power broker, Edward J. Kelly.

<sup>22</sup> Screenplay and 1936 movie which includes bombing raids on "Everytown" (London).



## An Airman's Diary: Lt Norman Retchin

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I rolled over again, but the thought of paying \$75<sup>00</sup> for missing a class yanked me from bed + I trudged wearily to school, \$75 the richer.

Slowly all our boys are winding up here. Wheeler, McCauley in Marrakesh, here in England + even Georgie Paris is en route. The northern route from the States has opened + the crews should start pouring in. This is an essential period, these next six months, towards the final outcome of the war. The air offensive will take on gigantic proportions with coming good weather + I hope we can soften them up enough to land an expeditionary force. Hope to see Italy drop out soon. Can't understand what they are doing in there now. Haven't a thing to gain from partner Hitler, + from all reports they are taking a terrific pummeling every night.

Most of the lads went into Walford for a dance, etc. My God, it's true what they say about English girls. It appears that they are releasing pre-war inhibitions on a national scope - to the complete satisfaction of all. So our boys are out ~~—dancing~~ "tonight."

Personally, I think it's the black-out. Can't imagine what will happen when the lights go on again all over the world.

This awful cigar has taken its toll + I can't go on any more.

Reynolds, I suspect, is a bit pinko. He talks of the revolution after the war + the various capitalists he will personally shoot. A box of good cigars will soothe + bring him over to our side, I think.

This is my second week-end in England. I have freedom to go into London. In fact, I can go as far as I like, so long as I answer "Heah" eight o'clock Monday morning.

Instead, I find myself in my cold little barracks, on my uncomfortable little bunk waiting for a reasonable time to go to sleep.

If it happens again next week, I shall report immediately to sick call

Dinner tonight reminded me of Chicago +, in particular, Hoe Kow's.<sup>24</sup> Had that hot English mustard that we used to eat with barbequed pork.

Received first letter from Everlovin today. I don't know which is the worst—not hearing from her or hearing from her. After all my big talk, I guess I'm a rank sentimentalist. In the same line, we read today that exactly 2000 bags of mail were sent to the bottom of the Atlantic. Probably an English trick to make us fighting mad, + that is exactly what it will do.

Many of the boys will probably never discover that their girls have run off with the local shoe-clerks, gas station attendants + rationing officials until the victors return.

There are three of us in the barracks tonight. We are either married or broke. All are cold. What comforts I have relinquished so that my country will be served well: bed sheets, warmth, food + my woman. What else is there? Wish I had a Bunsen burner. (Good nite.)

The more I see of Britain, the less I like it. Why they didn't banish Napoleon here instead of beautiful St. Helena, I'll never know. Made a point of contacting some of the native

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<sup>23</sup> Apparently quoted from memory from Oscar Wilde's "The Ballad of Reading Gaol," 1898.

<sup>24</sup> Hoe Kow's was an almost legendary Cantonese restaurant on Lake Street in Chicago.

## An Airman's Diary: Lt Norman Retchin

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serfs today, + frankly they don't like the whole set-up. Hardly in a position to comment on post-war economical/sociological problems, but, if any country is on the road to being Stalinized, this place is. And a good chance it will be.

At present, as far as most of us can discover, the British resent us + feel we have hopped on the wagon just as they are to preserve the democratic way of life. We are cutting in on their share of glory . . . a bunch of rude Americans making noise + not fighting.

Most of us just go along with all that, not wanting to be here in the first place, + getting them angry by agreeing with them.

The old bunch are straggling one by one. Paris, Logan here; Wheeler, McCauley on their way. We are to be graduated this week + baptized sometime next week. On first "Ops" we go along more or less as observers +, then if satisfactory to the boss, the crew is assembled on their own.

Had a long chat with Paris last nite over several brews + thru thick smoke (cigar). When it all cleared away, it was 11 P.M. + time to retire. Reynolds + Rogers, the —~~p~~rsuit boys," went out in search again. Imagine they made out as usual. SNAFU.

Getting sluggish; no exercise. Eat, sleep + poker. Food at post plentiful + good. England must be number one producer of cabbage, Brussels sprouts, etc. I hate the whole family.

Spent the wedding anniversary (eight months) listening to the clink of chips + the click of dice. Pay day coincided with anniversary, + a profitable occasion it was, too, if not altogether complete. I am one of the old school that holds to the theory that one's wedding anniversary ought to be spent with one's wife. However, times are changing, +, as the saying goes, —~~h~~ings are tough all over."

School ends in a very short time, + off we go, hand in hand to fight the Hun.

Oh, a Hunning we will go  
A-Hunning we will go!

Going into London this week-end with George Paris for a final binge. Never can tell when these binges might come to a sudden halt—The —~~M~~oving Finger writes, + having writ" + all that sort of thing. A good philosophy if satisfactorily tempered to one's own taste + not allowed to go to extremes.

Got up this morning in time to miss breakfast. Have had seven cigarettes + a can of peanuts + really feel great. Sitting in our cold, grey barracks, trying to keep warm, listening to Berlin's —~~A~~lone."<sup>25</sup>

Leaving here tomorrow for Bassingbourn. Learning great deal about human nature over the poker chips. Gambling an excellent escape + often a profitable one. Surprising how many bluffers there are. Made a Colonel's pay, in fact.

Arrived at Bassingbourn + feeling operational as Hell. Saw the boys take off with two-ton loads for Paris this morning. Hope they blast them good + proper.

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<sup>25</sup> Probably Irving Berlin's 1924 song, —~~A~~ Alone."

## An Airman's Diary: Lt Norman Retchin

Dopey walked in on me yesterday from Portuguese Guinea. He looked a bit wrinkled but none the worse for wear. Had a wonderful tale to tell about it all. His crew is still waiting for the next transport to England.

Hope he can get up here to the 91<sup>st</sup> to do a little raiding with me.

This place (RAF Bassingbourn), an old R.A.F. post, is the nicest in England.<sup>26</sup> We have learned to discern a good + bad post. The criterion: bed sheets. If a place has bed sheets, you can almost be certain of hot water, toilet paper + all other essentials. If not, cold water and any bad novel can be substituted.

Don't seem to know we are around here, so off to London we went. Saw Dopey + —Lé's Face It." No comment on Dopey, but —Lé's Face It" . . . very poor. The chorines looked as tho they had taken a new hours off from their duties at the Strand Palace Hotel and were more interested in returning there than the show itself. I'm certain Cole Porter was never treated more unjustly. There is nothing more unpleasant + unfunny than a group of English —artistes" trying to emulate American singers + dancers. They made it so.

Brash, off key, out of step, too loud. Bumped into a captain, Wharton, '38, knew [[one word illegible]]. Small world.

General Eaker + Company appear here this afternoon + everyone busy cleaning up + practicing salutes. Think my boys + I will sneak off to town + buy bicycles. Cambridge nearby. Could stand a bit of vulture. Will do!

The boys bombed the Hell out of Paris (Renault) + Antwerp very recently. Pictures of hits were excellent. Many civilian homes located near targets also gone. As they say here, —hey shouldn't live so close to the Germans." They got plenty of pay-dirt, tho, + all seem satisfied. Everyone extremely casual about combat duty. After an extremely bloody combat raid, they return, wash their hands, don dress uniforms + eat. The business of destruction, like any other business, is cold blooded and competitive. Its profit is figured in percentage of destruction.

After the war, investments in building materials look promising. Going to have a lot of repairing, rebuilding + remodeling to do over here.



**Figure 3.** Brick, steam-heated barracks at RAF Bassingbourn, the "Country Club" of the 8<sup>th</sup> Air Force.

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<sup>26</sup> Constructed for the RAF in 1937 – 1939, the base (also known as —AAF Station 121") was relatively new and temporarily unoccupied in 1942 when the 91<sup>st</sup> Bomb Group (Heavy) moved surreptitiously from their unacceptable base at Kimbolton whose runways could not accommodate the heavy B-17 bombers. Its —Class A" runways made it ideal for the heavy bombers flown by the four bomb squadrons of the 91<sup>st</sup>. It was known as the —Country Club" of the 8<sup>th</sup> Air Force because of its permanent, steam-heated brick barracks. Veterans from the 91<sup>st</sup> are nearly unanimous in their praise for Bassingbourn's facilities, especially in comparison to the Quonset hut buildings of other 8<sup>th</sup> AAF Stations.

## An Airman's Diary: Lt Norman Retchin

The war seems to have subsided of late. The high command is either in London on a binge or the weather is really too bad. At any rate, we are taking advantage of the temporary leisure in a sort of return-to-college movement. Poker, drinking, sleeping, cutting classes, and, oh yes, reading. We used to read at school, honest!

Yesterday, for the first time in a month, we were airborne again. The mission was non-operational. Hollywood,<sup>27</sup> it seems, wanted some actual formation shots, + the Army, vainly enough, obliged. Here we are, parading before a camera, while the enemy, not 100 miles off, lurks ready to spring like a mouse trap.

Flying is much different in this country than at home. Mainly because, once the ground is left, you rarely ever see it again. You gave a vague recollection what is down, but that is all. It is in times like these that I am glad my navigator is a clean-living chap.

Last night, Reynolds, Dahlman, + myself sat down to some three-handed poker. Dahlman is just learning some of the finer point of poker: Like three-of-a-kind beat two pair. Entry fees were not too exorbitant: £10 for Reynolds; £10 for Retchin. At Rapid City, my entry fee was \$200<sup>00</sup>, but I learned, and, for the most part, have done quite well since then.

Bulletin: Gambling has been prohibited in our game room by the Colonel. I don't know the official reason for it, but it's probably because the old boy wasn't getting his cut.

The inveterates lounge around the room, hands quivering, with dreams of dice rattling + chips clinking haunting them. One or two decide on a checker game, but these are not so far gone as the others. A most pitiful sight to behold. A gambler with money + nothing to gamble on is like a woman with plenty of clothes + no one to take them off for. I sincerely hope for a change.

Reynolds, Dahlman + I bought bicycles the other day. It was sort of a back-to-our-youth impulse that did the trick, along with the necessity of getting around better.

We shall be going on our first raid very soon. We got our ship today: 657<sup>28</sup>—Duffer Merv II. I heard that Duffer I was attached and shot down in one of her first raids. Hope her successor fares better. This one has twin-.50's in the nose which look like they can handle any



**Figure 4.** Hollywood's famous director William Wyler's documentary, *The Memphis Belle*, the story of the first B-17 to complete 25 missions, was filmed at RAF Bassingbourn. Morgan was flying at the same time as was Norman Retchin. This photo shows Belle's crew watching as the bomb denoting her 25<sup>th</sup> combat mission is painted on the nose.

<sup>27</sup> Wyler's famous movie, *The Memphis Belle*—shot for Home Front morale—was not the Group's only association with Hollywood. Captain Clark Gable, USAAF, visited the base while filming *Combat America* and was featured in photographs with the crew of Delta Rebel II; see, for example, [http://www.91stbombgroup.com/scrapbook\\_memories/scrapbook.html](http://www.91stbombgroup.com/scrapbook_memories/scrapbook.html).

<sup>28</sup> Aircraft 29657 assigned to the 323<sup>d</sup> Bombardment Squadron 26 March 1943. Source: 323d Squadron Dailies, <http://www.91stbombgroup.com/Dailies/323rd1-1to3-30-43.html>, accessed 27 May 2010.

## An Airman's Diary: Lt Norman Retchin

Hun foolish enough to attack. Saw pictures of the Paris and Antwerp raids: The bombing looked pretty good, altho Antwerp civilians took a beating. This combat flying is really a science, + the 91<sup>st</sup> a great bunch of scientists. Hope I can master a few of the basic formulas.

After three engine changes and 14 (one a day) underwear changes, Bill Wheeler finally got to England. He was at Marrakesh for about two weeks +, within that time, had opportunity of visiting Warner Bros., Casablanca; He seems to have been unaffected by that and returns to us, Bill Wheeler, U.S.A., *sans* moustache.

We met in London this past week-end: Dopey, Bill, Paris, Retchin (good old boy, that Retchin) + really had a wonderful reunion. Scene of disaster was the Astor. We not only drank our quota, but passed her. We got home at six—stiffer than sticks—almost as brittle as plaster.

Reynolds + I were the enviable heroes of the evening (outside of buying the Scotch). We maliciously told of our harrowing experiences in the Antwerp raid + gave the novitiates our advice + information on how it's done. Of course, on that day, we were slightly N.W. of Antwerp - *London, in fact* - and got our experience from the *Express*.

Dopey + I inevitably told each other what wonderful wives we have for the better part of the evening. . . . and we have, too, only in a more sober state we are not so insistent nor vehement about them. Yet, as Fielding put it, —Drunkness reflects the mind of man as a mirror reflects his person.” And, if we were overzealous about them, we certainly meant it + no apologies—see?

We are still non-operational, + this damn waiting around is irksome. I shall take fiendish pleasure dropping bombs on the Hun for causing all this inconvenience. Damn nuisance + all that.

Eating in London is still an ordeal. Had real steak last night . . . which Dopey labeled —~~at~~ meat.” What I wouldn't give for a generous piece of cow. —*C'est la guerre.*”

Close for the first time since my arrival at 91<sup>st</sup>. Came in last nite + the major said, —~~Well~~, kid, you're going on a mission tomorrow.” Bravely, I cleared my throat + said, —~~Swell~~, sir.” Slept on that, +, in the morning, No! Disappointed as Hell. Hate like the devil to be a substitute anyway on any ball club, + that is what I feel like without any missions under my belt. However, the whole thing was called off prior to take-off time, so I may get my baptism tomorrow.

Drove to the 306<sup>th</sup><sup>29</sup> today to pick up my mail from Georgie Paris who had brought it there with him. Letters from Everlovin finally, from Jack + Babe + my gal Patsy. Wonderful hearing from them - feel almost human again.

Jackson + Babe remind me of how little experience I have as a family man. Jake's a lucky boy, but, even so, I wouldn't trade with him. Letters from wife remind me of a lot of things, little things, + I read then all in between her lines. You ought to meet my wife—whattagal!

Have decided to Christen my new ship —~~Everlovin.~~” Duffer I has had a rather inglorious past, + there is little sense trying the gods' sense of humor. Besides, now the crew can write their respective girls, fiancées, hat check girls + nurses that they named the ship for them.

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<sup>29</sup> The 306<sup>th</sup> Bombardment Group (H), which also flew B-17s, was based at RAF Thurleigh, Beds. (AAF Station 111), about 30 miles by road.



## An Airman's Diary: Lt Norman Retchin

**Ops. -1-** Today, never having been to France before, I decided I would take that trip. Most of us put off a thing like that off several times +, before we know it, we lose the opportunity altogether or become too senile to enjoy it at all. (For one must be in perfect physical condition to really enjoy France.)

My thoughts so arranged, I made the necessary plane connections + proceeded to pack. I took things with me that any normal traveler in normal times would take. A few .50 caliber machine guns, several very heavy bombs, oxygen masks, parachutes, knives, guns, flak suits + other trivia. And off we went.

It was a beautiful day, + I contented myself with thought of raising a little Hell in France + to come home. Sort of a week-end party, you know.

Very soon we arrived at the French coast. As I mentioned, it was a superb day, + it appeared that others had the same idea as myself. I found the sky literally filled with fellow travelers, all with the same purpose as myself, hell-bent for France. We decided that we should visit Lorient, +, as we were all going to the same place, we further decided to go as a group.

I was rather fidgety as I had never been to France before, + ack ack is a language totally unfamiliar. I braced myself + proceeded on to Lorient.<sup>30</sup>

The French countryside looks more like a jigsaw puzzle than anything else. Or if you have ever taken a test for color-blindness, it looks like a page out of that book.

As we moved ahead, we met with certain smaller aircraft whose purpose (I gather from their actions) was to prevent us from going to Lorient + to bring us down in another part of France they wished us to see.

I imagine they were sent up by an overzealous *Chambre de Commerce* + and couldn't help thinking —what a unique method of attracting tourists this is.”

However, I was of a single-minded mood + determined to go on to Lorient no matter how persistent those friendly little chaps might be. And I did. And so did my chummy group, with a few exceptions.

We had a joyous time there, raised our own pre-ordained Hell, + returned home to England. Our aircraft had digestive trouble + consumed more petrol than it was able to hold. And, like a man that has taken too much alcohol, it sputtered a bit + then fell to the ground. It fell in the right way + place, however, so everything was a complete success.

April 16, 1943 So ends my first binge in France. Tomorrow I intend traveling again but haven't decided where to go. And much depends on the weather.

The group went to Bremen today, + bloody it was. Sixteen of our aircraft are missing. Unfortunately, I didn't get to go but understand it was quite a show. Got a full report from Paulson who went as navigator for another crew + the kid now says, —Heil Hitler—let's go home.” They threw the book at us today with both fighters + flak. In our group, one entire

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<sup>30</sup> The 323<sup>d</sup>'s target was the power station at Lorient; bombing results were poor. See 323<sup>d</sup> Dailies, op cit.

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squadron was just about wiped out.<sup>31</sup> Replacements are coming in fast, tho, so we can keep it up all summer.

Smokey Lindsay, my [[word illegible]] buddy was beat up badly + when last seen was heading down over the sea. He may have been able to ditch her or even bring her back. Got my fingers crossed, Smokey, old boy. The 306<sup>th</sup>, where Paris, Cogan, Cook, *et al*, are lost ten ships, so I have to begin sweating out a few of them.

Going traveling again tomorrow + hope the devil I can go.

It's a damn strange feeling, flying over enemy country for the first time. There are people in the air + on the ground whose sole purpose is to kill you, + you don't even know them. At least if we could be properly introduced + know each other long enough to work up some sort of mutual distaste, the feeling might be altered somewhat. But, I don't suppose that is possible. And then being a pilot or co-pilot with no guns to shoot gives us a hopeless feeling. That glass enclosed cock-pit—it's like driving away in a station wagon + having people toss rocks at you. That analogy might not be too exact but will give the reader a vague idea of the sensation.

Almost took a short hop to Brest for a bit of Lilovsk<sup>32</sup> today. Mission scrubbed, tho. I was to have been my own pilot with my own crew, too. So soddy.

The 91<sup>st</sup> Group officially took over this base today + our flag now winds about the flag pole where the R.A.F. formerly did. No special significance is attached to the move, + it only means more work for us.

Flew to Grafton-Underwood<sup>33</sup> today to see the good old 96<sup>th</sup>. Saw them all: Irish, Madson, Filler, Gig, Toni Hines, Lou Green, Latham, etc. They are the same darn old bunch with the same damn colonel confining them to the same damn post. It didn't take Col. Olds more than three days to confine the lads, but am hoping they can escape imprisonment + meet Dopey, Wheeler, Paris + myself at Astor. Gave them a few pointers in re: combat (a lot I know about it) and can only hope for them what I do for myself . . . that our luck holds out.

Today reminds me of Philadelphia: Grey + drizzling. A perfect day to sit by the fire with a good cigar + bottle of Scotch, which is what I am



**Figure 5.** Pilot mike Banta's copilot, Ray Darling, 324<sup>th</sup> Bombardment Squadron (H), in the window of their permanent brick barracks at RAF Basingbourn.

<sup>31</sup> Date: 17 April 1943; Target: Bremen Focke Wulf plant; 91<sup>st</sup> lost six (one crewed by 92<sup>nd</sup> BG), of the 16, all from 401<sup>st</sup> BS. Results excellent. See the four squadron Dailies, at <http://www.91stbombgroup.com>.

<sup>32</sup> Possibly play on "Brest-Litovsk."

<sup>33</sup> RAF Grafton-Underwood, Northamptonshire, AAF Station 106, was home to the 96<sup>th</sup> for a month.



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doing.

By the time I am finished with cigar + Scotch, my aspect of things will most certainly be changed + I will be, in that very short space of time, transferred to some Utopian garden in Southern California where all is peaceful, cheerful + lazy. It is fun to reflect on what an important role Nature plays in a war. Master strategists + technicians sit up for nights on end working out some new stratagem. Generals sweat + strain, evolving some new plan to surprise + disintegrate the enemy. Elaborate details born of endless red tape are finally settled; the dates of history making are set. And then, an insignificant 2<sup>nd</sup> lieutenant, who happens to work in the weather office, plots a few red + blue + green lines on a map + all is for naught. Game called on account of rain.

And look at the Russian Front. Things are so bad out there that a man can't even die of a natural bullet wound anymore. He gets shot + before the poor fellow can fall dead to the ground, why he has frozen to death. Almost seems unfair to the casual observer. Not exactly what one would call the Marquis of Queensbury.

Yet, most of us brave fighting men welcome the grey + drizzle. Smokey Lindsay would have welcomed it, that day at Bremen. His co-pilot—whose wife is about to become a mother - would have welcomed it, too.<sup>34</sup> And there are and will be others. And so, it is with us. A bad day is a good day, + a good day a bad one, + if you have sinus or rheumatism, you lose all the way around.

Heard from Brother Shel today who is serving with the Navy for overseas duty. With the two Retchin boys on the sea and in the air - God knows how long this thing will last.

Leaving for St. Nazaire in a few minutes + am writing now to test my nerves. I feel like a Camel ad: —Nba quiver in a smoke-load” says heavy bombardment pilot before mission. Going as my own pilot today with my own crew. Same co-pilot, Dahlman. He comes back to us after a few more raids. Expect things to be rough today. Just my luck to have started on a week-end party + be recalled. Hope most of that unmentionable stuff is out of my system or I'll really be up —Fenchmens Creek” today.

Bill Wheeler, stationed here with 401<sup>st</sup> is not going today + a good thing. He was as bad off as I was, + then came the woman. *Cherchez la femme*.<sup>35</sup> In fact, the 401<sup>st</sup>, *en masse*, is not going. They were so impressed with Bremen that practically all of them remained.

—May 1<sup>st</sup> date of raid #2 for O-791501. Wonder who we can blast up on my birthday?

**May 1<sup>st</sup> —Ops. #2—St. Nazaire.** Things have happened so swiftly the past two days that it is difficult to set values, proper values, where they belong. Where death will strike next, it's hard to say. Suffice it to say that it appears frequently + close by. Everyone is nervous today, + any laughter heard is either a mistake or the nervous, hurried laughter born not out of humor, but out

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<sup>34</sup> Nathan F. —Smokey” Lindsay, his copilot, George Slivkoff, and their crew aboard Short Snorter III were never found. See 91<sup>st</sup> Casualty List, [http://www.91stbombgroup.com/91st\\_info/casualty\\_list.html](http://www.91stbombgroup.com/91st_info/casualty_list.html), individual entries and MACR 16090.

<sup>35</sup> Literally, —look for the woman.” Said when a man acts totally out of character; see following two sentences referring to the ten aircraft and 60 MIA lost by the 401<sup>st</sup> on the Bremen raid.

## An Airman's Diary: Lt Norman Retchin

of a desire to shake some inner feeling off. That undesirable ~~to~~ butterfly in the stomach sensation.” We returned from St. Nazaire after an unsuccessful attempt to hit the target—weather the reason.

After what seemed like an age of time, the lead ship sighted land. I was flying #2 position + completely worn out. The crew was at ease, not at their stations. My navigator suddenly jumped up into the cock-pit, shoved his map in front of me + shouted, “That’s France!” I, assuming the lead ship knew his business, quieted him down + convinced him - altho now I was uncertain, too - that it was England. The lead, Dwyer, hugged the coast for a bit; they were uncertain, too, + we now know that the navigator in the lead ship, Ackerman, was also uncertain of his position at the time. A few minutes later, we spotted three fighters at about two-o’clock position high.

If it was England, they were P-47s. If not, we would soon know. We soon knew.

They peeled off and attacked. The whole thing didn’t last over a minute. The lead ship headed for a cloud-bank + I pulled in very close to him so as not to be left alone. They came + got —Pappy Rand. Must have killed both pilots as they went into the Channel direct.

Rand + crew dead; tail of Biggs shot to Hell; Birdsong, Dwyer + myself untouched.

Ackerman, obviously way off course, brought us over France for the third time that day, only this time we weren’t prepared for it.

The 306<sup>th</sup> Group, way off to our right - which means an even deeper penetration into France - took a terrific beating. They lost four ships, + when the balance landed, they had to pull out the dead like so many slaughtered cattle. In that group are Dopey, Maresh, Cook, *et al.* I hope they weren’t among those missing.

We landed finally in England, completely beaten. My hydraulics went out as I was parking the ship, + I tore up Dwyer’s + my own wing, unable to use the brakes.

Then came the briefing with the hundreds of questions + cigarettes that briefing are. We were exhausted, had dinner, several drinks, bed. Following morning we were flown back home.

As if that hadn’t been enough, we ran into something else. In this country, death works 29 hours a day, + today he was working overtime.

Rand dead, two of his friends went to his room to pack his belongings together. A Thompson sub-machine gun lay in the room. It was Rand’s. While Joe Reynolds was packing, Lathers picked up the gun. Several shots rang out. Joe, bleeding, was helped downstairs. As he reached the first floor, he died. Lathers, his best friend, is in the hospital now being treated for shock. Will probably never fly again.

Tragedy, things that change men’s entire lives, and end other, happen so quickly that full realization never comes until long after the act itself. Tonight, with two of our pilots dead, we sat around trying to figure it out. Why? Rand, yes; he was fighting. He got it like all of us might have, or still might. But Reynolds? Why should he die like that? So helpless, so unexpected, so unprepared to fight back. And at the hands of his best friend? What else can one be but a fatalist?

Death takes a holiday, + this is the country where it comes to take it. Tomorrow we go again for more of the same. Several can’t go, because they are too on edge + broken up.

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Fortunately, I'm like Mr. Lester + don't let things like that —~~e~~ me. Not that I'm hard or harder than the rest, but if I did I would be a nervous wreck like some of them are fast becoming.

This place is making men out of a lot of boys—old men!

And so tomorrow, when I come back, I'll write home. I'll say to my wife that nothing much happened over the week-end, + I'll say to my wife that I am well + taking the war easy. I'll probably mention the weather. I'll say I read a bit, ate a bit, slept a bit. Same old routine. And if she asks if anything different happened over the week-end, I'll say, —No, ~~not~~ much happened.”

### May 4<sup>th</sup> —Ops. #3—Antwerp.

Just returned from Belgium.<sup>36</sup> Everything went right today. Formation good; weather good; target annihilated; and this above all: we had fighter escort. First time I've seen them, + they certainly warm the cockles of a frightened pilot's heart. Did a wonderful job of protecting us, + we had no direct attacks.

A large enough piece of flak went thru #2 engine about four feet away from me + lodged in a cylinder. Meanest looking piece of metal I've ever seen. Four feet is a good long space, tho, and I'm here writing about it, so that's all I care about.

Tomorrow, we are alerted again. Another maximum effort job. At this rate, I'll get home to my Everlovin wife in time for our anniversary. Only 22 more raids to sweat out.

Mission scrubbed + nothing for tomorrow, so I'll wish myself a happy birthday right now. —Happy Birthday.” In retrospect, the past 24 years haven't been too bad. I can now safely feel well out of the adolescent stage. I kidded myself thru four years of college. I almost worked for a living once, + under the banner of patriotism, I have seen service on land, on sea + in the air. (Roll of drums + sound of bugles.) I have met many people, read many books + listened faithfully to H.V. Kaltenborn<sup>37</sup> + still don't know much of anything. I have lived thru a depression, gone around half the world in a plane + hope to live thru a war.

I have shot + been shot at!

To some people, it may be a glamorous life, to others, a dull one. To me, it is routine to commonplace.



**Figure 4.** The 91<sup>st</sup> Bomb Group (H): RAF Bassingbourn runway traffic on D-Day. Source: USAAF Photo.

<sup>36</sup> Target: Antwerp Ford Works; results: excellent. Six aircraft on raid; no losses. 323<sup>d</sup> Dailies, op. cit.

<sup>37</sup> Leading radio commentator of the era, known for his precise diction and knowledge of world affairs.

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The only one thing that escapes saneness is getting married. It is also the only thing of significance + worth I have ever done.

But even that can become habit forming after a ~~Man~~Manvillian" fashion.

And so, after 24 long, short, easy, difficult years, I have drawn no conclusions about life + can leave no words of wisdom for posterity. For the man who makes conclusions is a fool, +, as that in itself is a conclusion, I conclude I, too, am a fool unless proven otherwise.

As I said above, ~~Happy~~Happy Birthday." Last night is vague as the devil. I remember Dopey + Bill + their women. Bill especially. Unfortunately for him, Bill is too good-looking. With the Greek last night + he runs into Mary. Both madly in love with him; both veddy jealous + both using me as a sort of father-confessor + confidant. I fortified myself with The Black and proceeded to enjoy the proceedings. Told each that (Bill the Ripper) was + is completely no good, that they are beastly fools to think he would get serious + ended with a neat little sermon about how everything would turn out alright. Mary then relates that she is in a motherly way, already being heavy with Bill's child. Naturally, I informed her that that was preposterous + to change dentists immediately. I suspect she is trying to frighten Bill into it—at least I hope she is + does not really mean she is pregnant. This little serial will continue next week, kids.

Then there was Dopey with his 2<sup>nd</sup> lieutenant friend + two burly women pilots—ATA girls<sup>38</sup>—all busy affixing short snorter bills.

The rumor had circulated around that N. Retchin had been shot down over Brest. Therefore, in London, when encountered by an old friend from the other world, I would see an incredible stare, a gaping mouth, then a few seconds of eye adjusting, followed by a ~~what~~what the Hell are you doing here, Retch?" After this happened about 20 times, I began asking myself the same thing + almost felt a fool standing there stark alive. Even Jerry and the *Maitre d'* at the Astor + my waiter, George, had heard it + I got the same treatment from them. In fact, they must have been mourning my death by killing my bottle, because, when I got to it, there were only three drinks left.

I suffered myself to be pinched by the still dubious ones + am now fully reinstated into that great fraternity of flesh + blood + sweat + tears, mankind.

Dopey just called from London + insists I come back in. Don't know if ~~any~~any pore body" can stand it.

**May 13<sup>th</sup> —Ops. #4— + 21 more to go.** We were low group, low squadron + low element<sup>39</sup>— in short —Tail-end Charlie"— + today I have seen it. Jerry always attacks the low flights, + I have never seen—nor hope to see again—fighters come in at us like that. Head-on, blasting away, looking as tho their entire wing was on fire + ten two of our ships going down: One blowing up completely—Stark + Evins, the other just going down—Jiggs + Hayes. I saw them come + immediately pulled her up, then slowed her down + so went ~~glumpling~~glumpling" thru the sky, dodging

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<sup>38</sup> ATA: Air Transport Auxiliary. British organization similar to the American ~~Women~~Women Airforce [*sic*] Service Pilots" or WASP. Both nations used these women pilots for the vital task of ferrying aircraft.

<sup>39</sup> Target: Meault, France, aircraft plant. Two losses to fighters out of six squadron aircraft. Results not given. See 323<sup>d</sup> Dailies. Lt Neill Oakley, Photo Unit officer, also KIA on this mission.

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bullets + .20mm cannon. We took it + the nose was blasted away; no one hurt + another piece going thru the wing + lodging about four feet below me.

The old Retchin luck held + hope it continues to do so. And my wife wants me to write her details. She would pass out in a dead faint if I ever wrote what happened today. Tomorrow, #5. Old Dopey just called to check up on me. He was above us and saw us taking the attack. Rumor Hath it that we are going to —DeFaterland,” which should prove interesting to say the least.

### **May 14<sup>th</sup> – Ops. #5 — Kiel, Germany**<sup>40</sup>

— long + rugged — fighters, flak, fatigue; got them without any casualties, but ship is out of circulation—20mm cannon got my left wing which will have to be replaced.

### **May 15<sup>th</sup> – Ops. #6 — Williamshaven, also Germany**<sup>41</sup>

— More of the same, but this time brought crew + ship back untouched. Jerry is a bit ticklish about the faterland + always sends up plenty of opposition. Target was covered by clouds, so we sank the island of Helgoland instead. Three raids in three days is a bit tiring but everyone happy + uncomplaining. Must be that we are glad to be alive.



**Figure 6.** Coming Home: 91 Bombardment Group (Heavy) and RAF Basingbourn from 5000 feet in late 1944.

Sweating out Dopey + Paris as the 306<sup>th</sup> took a beating today. Will call him in a minute. The low-group always gets it, + they were low today.

Bloody Bill Wheeler went along today with only three of his 12 guns working. Bill always likes to give the boys a handicap. He's back tho, + that's what counts. It is rumored that we go again tomorrow, which I fervently hope is just a rumor. Three in a row is too damn tiring, + I'm not really in that much of a rush.

Only 19 more raids to Xmas! Tonight a big party to celebrate the first anniversary of 91<sup>st</sup> Bomb Group (Heavy). And the rumor was a rumor, so, tonight, with reckless abandon, I will sell my soul (or at least my stomach) to the devil hisself

Dopey Mann is missing in action. Just talked to George Paris, + Dopey was seen going down over Germany. The poor boy has had rotten luck ever since we left Morrison . . . + now this. I am hoping against hope that he got out in time + is a prisoner of war.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>40</sup> Target: U-Boat Yards at Kiel; results: —most successful.” See 323<sup>d</sup> Dailies.

<sup>41</sup> Weather divert to Helgoland. See 323<sup>d</sup> Dailies.

<sup>42</sup> I am unable to confirm 1<sup>st</sup> Lieutenant A.T. —Dopey” Mann's fate. The Mission Loading List for 367<sup>th</sup> Bomb Squadron (306<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group (H)) aircraft 42-29677 is annotated —Missing in Combat” for Mann and his ten-man crew on 15 May 1943. See [http://www.306bg.org/mission\\_reports/PDFs/may1543.pdf](http://www.306bg.org/mission_reports/PDFs/may1543.pdf).



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Wrote Mrs. Dopey. Feel worried about her as she is in no condition for anything like this— Those Goddamn Germans.

**May 17<sup>th</sup> —Ops. #7—** Took hop to Lorient where we met the usual.<sup>43</sup> Had no direct attacks like the other day but wore myself out as usual. One hour of combat takes more out of a man than any chorus girl could every hope to take. Now that the weather breaking, the raids are coming faster + hope not more furious. Have to sweat out 18 more. Will do!

Crew really doing great job. Don't get excited any more + call the attacks very well. Ball Turret, Meade, got a F.W. 90 the other day. We are no longer virginal.

**May 19<sup>th</sup> —Ops. #8—**

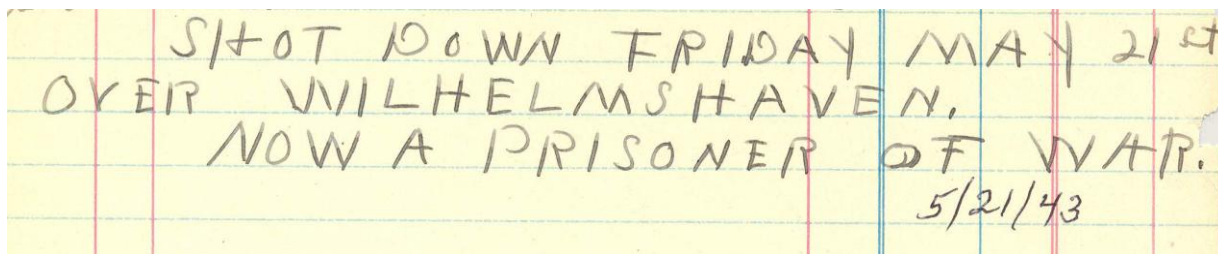
While my Everlovin wife was in bed last night, or at least should have been, I took off with a pleasant bunch of chaps to the Fatherland. Kiel again.<sup>44</sup> This time they were waiting for us with more flak + more fighters. However, we came thru alright + here I am writing again. Bill Clancy, squadron leader, gave us a terrific work out with his evasion tactics + most probably the reason we all came back. Have never worked so hard, sweated so much + wished I was home in bed more than I did today.

The "little men" were up there pulling the right strings + saying the right things today. A smattering of fate + luck with a dash of skill does the trick. A delicious concoction which is my favorite brew on raid time.

Boys are finishing their 25 missions every day, which makes us both envious + hopeful. My ambition is to get myself + my men thru intact. They are a wonderful bunch + I hope I can do them justice.

Bombed hell out of target again. Only 17 more, then home to Merv.

Funny the things you think about when in the thick of it. There was absolutely no room for Hon up there today — but there she was!



SHOT DOWN FRIDAY MAY 21st  
OVER WILHELMSHAVEN.  
NOW A PRISONER OF WAR.  
5/21/43

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<sup>43</sup> —Weather and bombing were good.” Four ships; all returned safely. See 323<sup>d</sup> Dailies.

<sup>44</sup> Bombing good as was the diversionary strike. See 323<sup>d</sup> Dailies.

<sup>45</sup> This “postscript” was added immediately below the last line in Norman Retchkin’s diary by an unknown writer. Image copied from page 53 of the diary.

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Transcribed and annotated by Dr. Greg Varhall