

## A FARM BOY'S FLYING ADVENTURE, continued

By Robert Wieman

This was my first B-26 flight. I learned a lot about why the B-26 had the reputation it had, but I also learned that it was a very good airplane. The flight was a little more exciting than expected, given the smoke, the fire and the single-engine landing. However, I couldn't wait until I would take the B-26 up by myself. During the next several months we had many hours of instruction on learning the right, and only, way to fly the B-26 if you wanted to stay alive and be around when the war ended. Included in our training were formation flying, night flying, cross-country flying, navigation and, as important as any of the others, instrument flying. We had to satisfy all the instructors that we were qualified to fly a B-26, and capable of doing so under adverse conditions. This was not always easy, but we were determined to see it through, and most of us did.

One sunny afternoon two of my friends, Lt. Parker and Lt. Simodi, each in a B-26, thought they would have a little unauthorized fun. As they were flying they noticed a corral with as many as fifty horses in it. In close formation they buzzed the corral at under 100 feet altitude going about 250 MPH. The horses went wild, stampeding in the corral, almost killing a veterinarian who was in the corral with them. The vet managed to get the number on one of the planes and reported it to the base. Lt. Simodi was the pilot of that plane. Not knowing who the second pilot was, but knowing who else was flying that afternoon, the base commander arbitrarily picked one of the other pilots and set up a Court Martial proceeding for the two pilots. As the base commander suspected he would, the guilty pilot, Lt. Parker, came forth and said, "I was the other pilot who buzzed the corral." He could not allow a friend to be punished for something he had done. After all, he was an officer and a gentleman. The Court Martial hearing resulted in a \$1,000 fine and three months restriction to base for Lt. Parker and Lt. Simodi. Their punishment could have been much worse — they were lucky.

On July 30, 1944 I was scheduled for a night mission. I flew my B-26 from Del Rio to Uvalde to San Antonio and back to Del Rio. All had gone well. It was a perfect flight. The moon appeared to be full, which improves one's night vision a lot. It was 3 AM as I approached Laughlin Field just outside of Del Rio. I called the tower as I entered the downwind leg of the landing pattern and got permission to land. I heard my friend Lt. Paul Phillips call in for landing instructions a minute after my call. He was behind me. I called the tower on the cross wind leg and again on the final approach and got my OK to land. After each of my calls Phillips called the tower so I knew he was right behind me. I assumed everything was ready for a normal night landing. As I approached the end of the runway at about 100 ft. altitude I snapped on my landing lights. To my surprise, instead of two bright light beams coming from my airplane, there were four. I looked to my left and there was another B-26 wingtip within inches of my left wingtip. It was Phillips. Instead of following me, he had cut in on me and we were both about to land on the same runway with our wingtips touching. We were both doing 160 MPH, normal final approach speed for a B-26 at night. At that instant the tower 16 operator screamed into his mike, "Planes on the final pull up and go around. Without contacting the tower, I pushed the throttles to full power, pulled up the wheels and went around to the right. Phillips did the same to the left. After several minutes of flying around the area I re-entered the flight pattern and came in for a very normal landing. Phillips came in about five minutes later. He wanted to make sure I was on the ground before he entered the flight pattern. It was a very close call. Had we locked wings at that altitude, and at that reduced airspeed, neither of us would have been able to recover. Both of us would have crashed on the runway and the record of lives lost learning to fly the B-26 would have been increased by six.

At least three people were required to be on each B-26 flight. The pilot, the copilot and a mechanic. The B-26 airplanes on our base were having so many minor mechanical problems in flight, it was thought that if one of the mechanics was required to be on board every time one of the B-26's left the ground the maintenance might improve. That was a good directive. The maintenance of the airplanes improved 100 percent overnight. The mechanics were very much more thorough in their mechanical inspections once they knew that one of them was going to be on board every time that plane left the ground.

The next day, July 31, was a special day, at least for me. That's the date my fiancé and I planned to be married. She and her mother had come down to Del Rio from North Dakota for the occasion. My pal, F.K. Williams was going to be my best man, and his wife Jean was going to be my wife's matron of honor. As we gathered at the base chapel for the wedding, F.K. showed up by himself. He said Jean felt she didn't have the proper dress to wear so she stayed at home. At the



The newlyweds, July 31, 1944

last moment my wife's mother filled in as matron of honor. The wedding took place with many of my flying pals in attendance. Between my flying schedule, planning the wedding, arranging housing for my fiancé and her mother and meeting them at the depot, I forgot one very important thing: informing my folks of my wedding plans. They heard about it up in Minnesota some days or weeks later — not good. They were not happy with me. I had always been on good

terms with my folks, so their displeasure was very short term. They forgave me, partly because they loved my new wife.

The morning after the wedding, F.K. and Jean showed up at our apartment at 9 AM. F.K., one of the few guys that had a car, took the new bride and groom on their honeymoon trip. We went across the Rio Grande river into Ciudad Acuna, a small Mexican border village. We were able to browse through a number of shops on the main street. I don't think we bought anything. It was a short honeymoon. FK and I both had to be back on the base at 1 PM for a training flight. When anyone asked us where we went on our honeymoon, we always said "Mexico" — and that was the truth.

Our B-26 training at Laughlin Field was coming to an end. Some of us went to Barksdale Field, La, to pick up a full B-26 crew and then on to Shreveport, La, for the crew training flights. My Minnesota pal, Loy Young, went right from advanced flight training to a few weeks of flight training in a C-47 transport plane, and before he knew what happened, he was flying the "Hump" between India and China. He was flying barrels of gasoline in his C-47 to Clare Chenault in an effort to keep his Flying Tigers in the air. These were dangerous missions, given the mountains, the weather and the Japanese fighter planes. He did this until he had accrued enough flights to come home. Several of my friends went from Del Rio to Harlingen, Texas to fly tow targets. Fighter pilots shooting real bullets at a sleeve being towed behind a plane sometimes resulted in the tow plane being hit. To the best of my knowledge, a tow plane was never shot down.

My new crew of seven included pilot, copilot, navigator, bombardier and three gunners. I took a lot of good natured ribbing from my fellow pilots because my copilot was a reject from B-17 (Flying Fortress) training. He had lost control on landing a B-17 and went into the parking area and totaled four B-17s. They said if he gets one more of our planes he becomes an ace in the Luftwaffe. Our crew training in Shreveport mainly concentrated on getting each crew member fully comfortable with his job and totally at ease with the crew as a unit. We were progressing nicely, and we were all ready for the orders that would send us either east to the European theatre or west to the South Pacific to fly some real combat missions.

While at Barksdale Field I attended two weddings. My friend Lt. Wally Schrontz married his girlfriend from back home (Michigan). Wally lives in North Carolina now and he and I talk on the phone frequently. We're also in contact by email. Another friend, Lt. Bill Napier, asked me to be best man at his wedding. This was the second time, within six months, that I was best man at a military wedding. Bill's marriage, sadly, lasted only a few months. He and another pilot locked wings flying a low-level A-26 training mission. Both planes crashed and everyone on board died. That sort of thing is one of the by-products of war and training for war.

Instead of orders for my crew to move out to a combat area, I got orders to go to Columbia, SC, to pick up a new crew for an A-26 attack bomber. A fleet of A-26's was being readied for the invasion of the Japanese mainland. The A-26 would be a major player in that invasion. My new crew consisted of pilot, navigator and one gunner. The A-26 was lighter and faster and had up to 14 forward-firing 50 cal. machine guns, plus an upper and lower turret, each with two 50 cal. machine guns. This was more firepower than any plane the military had at that time. It had two 2000 HP Pratt & Whitney engines; its normal cruise speed was 250 MPH, which was equal to, or faster than, many fighter planes of that era.

Our training site was Mariana, Fla., just west of Tallahassee and north of the Gulf of Mexico. The training flights started at once. Since the

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A-26 had only one set of flight controls, pilot training consisted of a single orientation ride with an instructor at the controls. After that, we were on our own. This wasn't a major problem since all the hours flying the B-25 and the B-26 prepared us for flying almost any twin-engine airplane. Our training consisted almost exclusively of low-level flying missions. This airplane was designed for supporting ground troops during an invasion. Strafing and skip-bombing were therefore a big part of our program. Our gunnery range was on St. George Island in the Gulf of Mexico, where we fired our 50 cal. machine guns at stationary targets on the ground. We never fired at moving targets in the air. The A-26 was not a fighter plane. The training for skip-bombing consisted of trying to place a bomb in a cave on the side of a hill without flying the airplane into the hill. The bomb had to be dropped at very low altitude — always under 50 ft. — so it would hit the ground and bounce or skip into the cave and then explode. The bombs were equipped with delay fuses so they wouldn't explode on initial contact with the ground. This was a tricky maneuver and took a good bit of practice to perfect. On my 23rd birthday, May 5, 1945, I practiced skip-bombing all day long. Finally, I was able to place a bomb in the cave on three out of four attempts. This satisfied the instructors — it was my birthday present.

While all of our flights in the A-26 were fun — it was the best airplane we'd flown — there were some sad moments. Three of our pilots made fatal mistakes while flying low level over the Gulf. They apparently misjudged

how close to the water they were flying when they made a sharp turn and dipped a wing tip in the water. The planes cart-wheeled across the water at over 250 MPH. There were no survivors. Judging distance above the water while flying is difficult, at best, and it becomes extra demanding when you're traveling at the high speeds that an A-26 flies.

During June of 1945 we did a lot of night flying. I was always comfortable flying, night or day, with Whitney, my navigator, in the jump seat beside me. He was the best navigator I knew and he was one of the smartest people I'd ever know. We always knew where we were when he was plotting the course. Whitney was 28 years old, as was my gunner, Hugh Dunwoodie. Both of them were five years older than me. Age wise, I was the junior member of the crew. Whitney and I thought it would be fun if we took my bride of 11 months on one of our night flights. This would be against regulations but we thought we could pull it off under the cover of darkness. We could put her in a flight suit and tuck her hair under a helmet, and in the dark we didn't think anyone would be the wiser. She was anxious to do it. She had never been in an airplane. She especially thought it would be fun for her first flight to be at night with her new husband at the controls. As the date of the proposed flight approached, I became more apprehensive concerning the advisability of the plan. If any problem developed during the flight which required the airport brass meeting us upon landing, I'd be in big trouble, which I didn't need or want on my record. Having an unauthorized civilian on board a military flight was not acceptable. The more I thought about it, the more I thought it was a bad idea, so the whole plan was scrubbed.

Our A-26 training was completed by July 1, 1945. Our orders sent us to the west coast and then to Barking Sands Air Base, Kauai, where our final training for the invasion of the Japanese mainland would take



A-26 flight crew, Robert Wieman on right



place. I helped my wife pack for her return trip to North Dakota, where she would live with her folks until I returned when the war was over.

July in Kauai is like any other month in Kauai — beautiful. The temperature was always perfect. It never seemed to be too hot, and it was never cold. The temperature was always in the range of 78 to 82 and the humidity was low so it was very comfortable. Coming from the Minnesota extremes in temperature, Kauai seemed like paradise. We had bananas and coconuts growing behind our barracks, and pineapple juice flowed like water in both the mess hall and the Officers Club. The locals said I would tire of pineapple juice in a couple weeks, but I never did. Most of us had never even dreamed of a place like this. The food in the mess hall was regular American fare that we were used to.

However, training for the invasion was another matter. No time was wasted. My crew and I were assigned a new A-26 and the training we had started in Florida was continued here. Emphasis was placed on long over-water flights, ditching procedures and air-sea rescue. Although the Japanese invasion wasn't openly discussed, we all knew that plans were being developed for a giant land/sea/air invasion of the Japanese mainland. The timing was thought to be November, 1945. We were scheduled to be part of it. We were now officially part of the 5th Air Force, 319th Bomb Group, 90th Squadron.

We were lucky that our training schedule gave us enough spare time to explore the island. We could check a Jeep out of the motor pool for the day and drive anywhere there was a road. Kauai was only 550 sq. mi. in size which means it was roughly a small, square, island about 23 miles long and 23 miles wide. It was easy to drive around the whole Island in a day, taking time to stop and look at the sights. The roads were mostly of the small, two-lane, unpaved variety — just made for a Jeep. There were many very small villages, no motels and no buildings over two stories high. It was very rural, but everywhere we went we were right next to the beautiful, blue Pacific Ocean. The little towns had interesting names, Hanapepe, Waimea, Lihue, Kilauea and Waimea. The Waimea Canyon was especially beautiful. It's very difficult to describe its beauty. It was the Garden Spot of the Garden Island. Beautiful trees, flowers, vines and waterfalls were in evidence everywhere we looked. One couldn't have designed a more gorgeous place.

At Lihue we stopped by the side of the road and got into our swimming trunks. Lihue had a very inviting harbor. We just had to go for a swim. There were four of us, and nobody else. We had the place to ourselves, four young U.S. Army Air Corp pilots enjoying the best nature had to offer. I was swimming by myself, perhaps 50 yards from the others. I swam near a large harbor buoy, where I apparently disturbed a sting ray. I saw it just as his stinger struck my leg. It really hurt, and I could feel the leg going numb. I managed to crawl up on the buoy. I wanted to rub that leg, but the numbness seemed to be spreading to the rest of my body. I laid down on the buoy and my friends said I didn't move for an hour. Apparently I had passed out. When I came to I had no memory that I was lying there for so long. I remembered the sting ray, and climbing up on the buoy and then I went blank until I woke up. I was very lucky that I was able to get onto that buoy. Had I been in open water by myself, I'm sure I would have drowned.

One day in mid-July my crew and I got into our new A-26 to check out the various Hawaiian Islands. From Kauai we flew southeast. The first island we saw was Oahu. It took very little time to circle it. We saw Pearl Harbor, the site of the Japanese attack some four years earlier. It had been rebuilt and there was almost no evidence of the carnage, with the exception of a couple of battleships mostly underwater. The next island was Molokai, followed by Lanai, both of which seemed to be very small, rocky and tree covered. There didn't appear to be many villages. Maui was the next island. There were signs of farming here, pineapples and sugar cane. Large herds of cattle were spotted at several locations so agriculture must have been an important part of the economy there. Every island had wonderful beaches. The white or tan sand would go for miles along the shorelines. The big island was next, Hawaii. It was considerably larger than the other islands. It was more rugged and mountain-like with a number of peaks, two of which were almost 14,000 feet high. There was evidence of Lava flow in a number of areas. One thing was prominent around the whole island — beaches everywhere. On our trip back to Kauai we passed all the islands again, in reverse order. It was a short, but wonderful, flight. The best news was that our new A-26 worked flawlessly — we had a wonderful airplane.

On August 6, 1945, a B-29 dropped an A-Bomb on Hiroshima, Japan. On August 9, 1945, a second A-Bomb was dropped on a Japanese city by a B-

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29, this time on Nagasaki. On August 15, 1945, after some hectic meetings between the Japanese military leaders and the Emperor, Japan surrendered, and accepted the unconditional surrender terms set forth by the United States. The big news was that the war with Japan was officially over. It was received with mixed emotions by me and my pilot friends. On one hand, it was wonderful news — that the killing and everything related to it had come to an end. But, on the other hand, when something you've been training for — the invasion of the Japanese mainland—for over two years is suddenly called off, it makes you think of all the training that would not be put to use. But, deep down, we knew that the end of the war was the best thing that could have happened and we celebrated.

### PART 3

On August 24, 1945, my squadron (12 A-26's) departed Barking Sands Air Base in Kauai on the first of a series of inter-island flights that would eventually take us to Japan, where we would be part of the U.S. occupation forces. The A-26 didn't carry enough fuel to make it all the way in one trip, and therefore the shorter trips, from island to island were a necessity. Our very first, very short, trip took us to Pearl Harbor, where we stayed overnight. A short night I might add. We were called into a briefing at 3 AM the next morning. Our first long overwater flight to Christmas Island, about 1,600 miles southwest of Hawaii, would start at daylight. We lost our first pilot at that briefing. Lt. Iten had demonstrated a fear of flying over water during our training, but we had no idea how serious it was. I remember on one of our target shoots on St. George Island in Florida, tracer bullets were flying past my A-26 as I pulled up and away from the target range. Lt. Iten was behind me with his finger frozen on the trigger, guns blazing away. He couldn't release the trigger until his view of the water was out of sight. At the briefing he started to shake and his face turned the color of a green desk blotter. Nothing could be done to snap him out of it. The thought of flying over 1,600 miles of water was more than he could handle. The medics hauled him off to a hospital, and from there he was sent back to the mainland. That's the last we ever heard of him. Fortunately we had an extra crew so our squadron of 12 planes departed at dawn.

The weather was great for flying. There were a few puffy cumulus clouds at high altitude. We flew at 8,000 ft. altitude and the ride was perfectly smooth. For 1,600 miles we saw nothing but blue ocean. Every now and then we spotted a ship on the water. We were too high to make any identification. We had minimum communication with the other planes — just a nice quiet 250 MPH ride. Our A-26 performed perfectly. From take-off to landing at Christmas Island we logged six hours and 20 minutes of flying time. No one had to go to the bathroom during the entire flight — good thing, because there was no bathroom. We were belted into our seats, with no room to get up and go anywhere. Whitney was seated to my right with his charts, sextant and other navigation equipment. As long as he was in that seat I wasn't worried. If we got slightly off course, he contacted the navigator in the lead plane. We spotted Christmas Island, dead ahead. It was a long single landing strip on coralsurrounded by groves of coconut trees. We landed and were picked up by the local people, given a good dinner and shown to our quarters for the evening. We had our first experience with a saltwater shower — not the best I might add. A very brief fresh water rinse ended the shower. Fresh water was a precious commodity on the Island.

On the morning of August 26, 1945, our 12-plane squadron took off from Christmas Island. We flew southwest, logging four hours and 20 minutes of flying time on our way to Canton Island. We crossed the equator flying between Christmas and Canton. There was no distinct red or blue line in the ocean below us showing the equator's location, as usually shown on most maps. Canton was a larger island with a Navy base in addition to the Army Air Corp base. There was much more to see on Canton, and we had an extra day to see it because weather kept us from leaving the next morning. We examined the "President Taylor," a navy ship that had run aground in an effort to avoid Japanese submarines. It had been bombed and shelled repeatedly. I even had time to do a little fishing with the natives.



Robert Wieman at the controls of an A-26 over the Pacific.

The weather had improved, so on the morning of August 28, 1945, our twelve A-26s took off from the Canton Airstrip and picked up a heading for Tarawa, an island about 1,100 miles northwest of Canton. Once again we crossed the equator and a little later we crossed the international dateline. First time ever that I lost a whole day in an instant. After landing we were taken to our quarters, thatched-roof huts that were simple, but comfortable. There was still evidence everywhere we looked of the fighting that had taken place here. A number of small Japanese tanks were parked on the water's edge between the pill-boxes that had been used to repel the Marines during the invasion. There was a small cemetery nearby where the remains of hundreds of our Marines were left as the fighting moved on.

The next morning, August 29, 1945, we fired-up the A-26s, getting ready for our flight to Eniwetok, 1,000+ miles to the west. My left engine instruments indicated zero oil pressure. I reported this to the squadron leader. He said, "Stay here until you get it fixed. The rest of us will take off." He said he wasn't worried about us since I was a flight leader with the best navigator in the group.

Two hours later the problem was corrected and we took off. The rest of the squadron had taken a route around a tropical storm which was located directly between the two islands. Whitney and I decided that since we were flying by ourselves and didn't have to be concerned with the other planes, we'd save some time by flying through the storm — the most direct route. We would find out very soon that this was a very bad decision. One hour after we left Tarawa we flew into the worst weather I had ever encountered. I was trying to hold 8,000 ft. altitude but violent vertical air currents carried me back and forth between 17,000 ft. and 2,000 ft. and I was helpless to do anything about it. Nature held all the aces in this situation. We just had to ride it out the best we could. Another problem that concerned me greatly was that we carried no oxygen on the plane and Army Flight Regulations require the use of oxygen above 10,000 ft. altitude. Again, there was nothing we could do about that. Savage turbulence, heavy rain and constant lightning continued for over an hour. I developed a serious vertigo problem. It felt like the plane was in a steep bank and/or dive, and at times I thought we were upside down. The flight instruments indicated that we were flying straight and level — that is, as straight and level as could be expected under the circumstances. My instrument flight training taught, "always believe your flight instruments — no exceptions." I was trying to do this, but it wasn't easy. I didn't know how much longer I could hang in there. I wondered what Whitney was thinking — he said nothing. There was nothing he could do in any case. About an hour and 20 minutes after we hit the storm we broke out into bright sunshine. We were flying straight and level, just as the flight instruments indicated. My vertigo disappeared instantly. The rest of the flight was easy. Lessons learned: (1) Never, NEVER, fly through a tropical storm and (2) Always, ALWAYS believe your flight instruments. After a few minutes of checking all the flight instruments and making sure everything was back in its normal place, Whitney took a reading on the sun with his sextant, did a few calculations and then gave me a heading to fly. I wasn't at all surprised when 2 1/2 hours later Eniwetok was dead-center in front of us. A radio call to flight control gave us landing instructions and told us the rest of the squadron had landed 30 minutes earlier.

The island of Eniwetok was a series of long narrow strips of coral surrounding a deep harbor (an atoll). The single runway was on the largest strip. Coral reefs surrounding a harbor is the definition of an Atoll. As I was descending over the island I noticed puffs of white smoke around my plane. I found out after landing that the white puffs were anti-aircraft shells exploding. I had flown through an anti-aircraft target practice. I had not seen the tow plane pulling the target sleeve above me. The gunners on the ground didn't think it was necessary to stop shooting just because we were in the target area. After all, we were Army and they were Navy — good enough reason to keep firing. The entire base was Navy — we were their guests and, except for their shooting at us, we were treated very well.

Once again, the weather kept us from leaving the following morning, but on Aug 31, 1945 the weatherman gave us the all clear sign and we took off for Guam, 1,200+ miles to the west. Our flying time was

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a little over five hours. The trip was uneventful — nothing unusual happened. There was a typhoon a little west of Guam so we knew we'd be there at least one extra day. Guam was one of the Marianas Islands, a territory of the U.S. It covered an area of about 200 sq. mi., and had a population of 67,000. This was the largest island we'd seen since the big island of Hawaii. They put us up in comfortable quarters and fed us well — we had nothing to complain about.

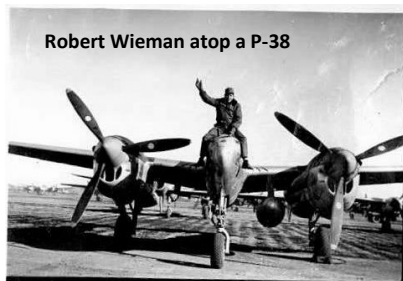
On Sept. 2, 1945, we departed Guam. Our destination was Tacloban, Leyte, in the Philippines. Flying time was 5 1/2 hours over nothing but water. As we approached the Philippines I tuned in to the official Japanese surrender program that was taking place (real time) on the deck of the USS Missouri battleship in Tokyo Bay. General McArthur was in charge. General McArthur was born to be in charge. Japan had surrendered and had accepted the surrender terms the United States had given them. Now, Sept. 2, 1945; it was official. While we knew before, now we knew for certain that there would be no big invasion, the thing we had been in training for. Our mission, therefore, would be drastically changed. We were young, we were flexible, we were well trained and we were ready for whatever our new orders called for.

There was a single landing strip on Tacloban. As our wheels touched down, I thought all hell had broken loose. This was my first landing on a metal, jointed strip. It made so much noise I thought I had lost my wheels and was coming in on the struts. We got used to the noise. It was better than landing on the bombed out strip that it covered.

Finding housing on Tacloban was interesting. We were told to walk into the jungle that surrounded the base and find an unused tent and claim it for our own. Whitney and I found a vacated tent. We had no idea who had lived there before us. Perhaps some Japanese soldiers when they occupied the island. We hauled our stuff in and laid claim to the place. It had two cots, a canvas roof overhead, no windows and no door. We made it our home for the next 2+ months. We had some initial concerns over security, but nothing of ours was ever taken that we knew of. The mess hall, the officers club, the flight line and other official buildings were just a short walk from our new home.

During the next two months I flew combat-weary airplanes from Tacloban to Manila's Clark Field, 500+ miles over jungle and ocean to the north. This was a collection point for no-longer-needed U.S. bombers and fighter planes. They would be salvaged at some later date. Parked between the bombers at Tacloban were 12 Lockheed P-38 "Lightning" twin-tailed fighter planes. We didn't have a P-38 pilot on the base. One morning after breakfast I checked the schedule board and found that six of us were flying P-38's to Clark Field, leaving in an hour. Having never been near a P-38, and certainly having never been in the cockpit of one, I thought this might be interesting. We were 23-year-old U.S. Army Air Corp pilots with much more confidence than common sense, so we gladly accepted the challenge. I placed my parachute in the cockpit of the P-38 assigned to me, strapped myself into it and buckled my seatbelt. I studied the cockpit layout for about five minutes, trying to establish in my mind which lever and which switch did what. This was a fighter plane and everything was different from the bombers we'd been flying. When I thought I knew what I was doing, I called the tower and asked for take-off instructions. I started the two inline engines. They were very quiet, unlike the big noisy radials on the bombers. The take off was very normal. The plane's controls had a very light touch, when compared to what we'd been flying.

The first 1 1/2 hours of the 2+ hour flight went very well. I was enjoying being a fighter pilot. The P-38 seemed like a toy plane compared to the bombers we'd been flying. It was fun and I liked it. About 50 miles from Clark Field, the P-38 whose right wing I was flying off, rolled over on its back and started a gradual descent toward the ground. We were flying at 2,000 ft. altitude — no time to be doing aerobatics. The pilot, one of our



Robert Wieman atop a P-38

group with no P-38 experience, made no effort to bail out, did not answer my radio calls to him and made no attempt to right the airplane. I pulled up alongside of the up-side-down plane to get a better view of inside the cockpit. The pilot was hanging from the seatbelt with arms extended. He obviously had a medical emergency of some kind — the plane was flying very normally, only up-side-down. I followed it all the way down to its point of impact--there was a big explosion and resulting fire. There was nothing I could do but fly on to Clark Field, land and report the incident. I never saw the accident report — that is, if there was one. My own theory was that the pilot had a stroke, heart attack or something of that nature. He was a little young for something like that, but in the field of medicine unusual things sometimes happen.

Two days later I was in another one of the P-38s and again on my way to Clark Field. Almost from the beginning of the flight I had a problem with the left engine— it would cut out and run badly until I made some adjustments. This continued for 30 minutes, then it started running smoothly. I seemed to have solved the problem. The thought of coming in on one engine, while very possible for a P-38, was not something I wanted to do, given my limited flying experience with the airplane.

The plane worked perfectly for the rest of the flight. The landing pattern at Clark Field was a long, straight-in approach. The planes ahead of me were coming in very low so I followed them. I had to use full flaps and quite a bit of power to drag it in. Just as I crossed the end of the runway that left engine cut out — dead. The thrust from the good engine plus the drag from the dead engine created a rolling situation which was corrected only when I cut the good engine. I managed to get the plane down on the runway, but pointing 45 degrees to the left, and still going about 130 mph. I shot off the runway and through a deep ditch. The impact tore off my nose gear, my left main gear and the left wing tip. The plane continued on, spinning wildly across the open field, finally coming to rest in a left side down, right side up position. A gas tank had been ruptured and gasoline was running across the floor of the cockpit. My shoes were soaked. I had difficulty getting out of the cockpit because the hatch above me was jammed from the twisting action, but I finally managed to get it open. Luck was with me because the gasoline running through the wings and cockpit didn't catch on fire, and I wasn't injured in any way.

After things settled down and I convinced the medics that I didn't need a ride to the hospital, I had to write a report to base engineering regarding the condition of the airplane — a routine thing after each flight of a military plane. Knowing, before the accident, that the plane was headed for salvage, I carefully worded my report to engineering as follows: "Check landing gear — last landing was rougher than normal." I turned the report in to engineering and caught a ride back to Leyte. I thought I might hear from Clark Field engineering, but I didn't.

In two days we ferried all 12 P-38s from Leyte to Clark Field — not exactly according to plan — but we did it:

- Ten planes delivered intact
- One plane destroyed en route
- One plane badly damaged but delivered
- One pilot killed

It was an interesting experiment — ferrying 12 war-weary, complicated twin engine fighter planes over 500 miles of jungle and ocean by bomber pilots who had received zero" instruction on how to fly the aircraft. I'm glad I was one of the pilots chosen for the job — it added to my total war experience. I never had the opportunity to fly the P-38 again.

This may be a good place to introduce a bit of P-38 history. The P-38 had a great reputation as a WWII fighter plane, however its record against the Japanese Zero was pretty dismal during the first part of the Pacific campaign. The P-38 was bigger, heavier, and faster than the Zero but in combat the Zero's lighter weight and greater agility gave it a great advantage. The P-38 was losing the battle in dog fights with the Zero. Someone brought the famous Col. Charles Lindbergh out to the Pacific theatre to see if he could show our pilots how to fly the P-38 to better advantage against the Zero. He did just that, and in showing them how, he actually shot down several Zeros. This is not common knowledge, but it's the truth. After Lindbergh's instruction, the P-38 started holding its own against the Zeros.

Our time at Tacloban, Leyte, was coming to an end. On Nov. 10,

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1945, we received orders that we were to report to Atsugi Air Base, Japan, 11 miles from Yokohama. Along with a number of pilots from my squadron and a few navigators, we boarded a Merchant Marine ship and set sail for Japan. It was a wonderful, two-week cruise through tropical seas. We enjoyed the best food we'd ever eaten for the entire two weeks. We ordered from freshly printed menus at each meal — unheard of in the military. I had heard that the Merchant Marine sailors ate better than almost anyone — now I knew that to be true.

Our new living quarters at Atsugi Air Base, in Japan, were old Japanese barracks that served our purpose very well. I was surprised to find my old friend, Paul Phillips, in the room next to mine. Paul and I had gone different directions when we left Del Rio, Texas a year earlier. Now we were together again. My room here was a great improvement over my tent in Leyte. It had two windows, a wood floor and it even had a door. That's what I call progress.

I received an early Christmas present. The U.S.A.A.C. promoted me to 1st Lt. U.S. Army Air Corp.

We were now part of the U.S. occupation forces in Japan. Our job was to fly reconnaissance missions and to report if we saw anything that didn't look right — troops, tanks, planes, etc. During all the missions I flew I never saw anything that looked suspicious. The Japanese were very happy that the war was over. They had lived through many months of B-29 bombing raids that destroyed most of their cities — at least the industrial cities. They never seemed unhappy that we were everywhere. We never carried firearms, and we never felt that we were in any danger. They preferred our presence to that of the B-29s flying overhead. When we weren't flying missions, we were free to go anywhere — we had no restrictions. None, that is, except the Imperial Palace Grounds. We could walk around it and look at it through the fences, but we could not go in. Not even the Japanese people could go in. Not even Gen. McArthur could go in, and he was "God," at least he thought so. And he convinced most of the Japanese people that he was.

Most of my flying missions in Japan were "Milk Runs", meaning nothing unusual happened. We just flew the prescribed course, observed everything and made our report. On at least one occasion, however, bad weather created serious problems. The U.S. South Pacific Newspaper printed the following account of the incident:

### THREE DIE IN "BAD WEATHER" PLANE CRASHES

*Two Douglas A-26 Invaders crashed with a loss of three lives, a third plane was forced down and a fourth plane of a four plane routine patrol from Atsugi Airfield returned safely to its base yesterday in what the Fifth Air Force described as a "dirty weather" tragedy. The names of the dead were being withheld pending notification of next of kin. Japanese civilians reported finding the two crashed planes. The third plane, in which no one was injured, was forced down in a field near Kamezaki. The pilot of this plane was Lt. Arthur Lapman.*

*The fourth plane, which got back to Atsugi Airbase safely was piloted by Lt. Robert Wieman.*

In the above "dirty weather" situation, clouds suddenly descended on us. Given very few options, I climbed 1,000 ft. above the highest peak in the area and took a heading out over the ocean. There I slowly let down until I was flying just above the water. I did a 180 degree turn and flew just above the surface of the ocean until I spotted the shore line which I followed in a northerly direction until I ran into the Yokohama harbor, which was about 11 miles from Atsugi Airfield, and I was home free. I don't know what the other pilots did when the clouds settled in on them and they lost all visibility. Whatever it was, it wasn't thought out very well, and of course, you can't ask dead pilots questions so the true stories will never be known. We were lucky, in that this incident produced the only fatalities during my Japanese tour.

My pal, Bucky Walters, a California lad, was interested in gliders. He talked me into scouring the area around Atsugi in an effort to find an old Japanese glider. We covered a lot of miles, and we did find parts of gliders in various places. We hauled them back to Atsugi, and much to my surprise, in our spare time we were able to assemble a whole, flyable glider. It was a small, one place unit, so small that both Bucky and I had a problem getting our little larger-than-average bodies into it, but with a little squeezing and twisting we managed. Bucky asked me if I had ever flown a glider, and of course my answer was, "never." He said that he had flown one once. He,

therefore volunteered to be the test pilot on the maiden flight. I would drive the jeep which would serve as the tow plane. We found a long rope which we used to connect the nose of the glider to the rear bumper of the jeep. The time was set for the flight, making sure we didn't interfere with any normal flights, either taking off or landing. When everything was clear I powered that jeep down the runway with the glider behind me. By the time I was nearing the end of the runway, the glider had climbed to about 75 ft. altitude. It looked like we had a successful launch. Bucky unhooked the tow rope and put the glider into a slow, easy turn to the left, hoping to land on the same runway he had just taken off from. That was the plan, and that's exactly what happened. The landing apparently, however, was too hard. The wing center section broke on impact and both wing tips were on the ground. Bucky hurt his back in the landing, but he was able to get out of the cockpit with a little help. He limped around for a few days, but recovered without assistance from the medics. We managed to get pictures of the glider before, during and after the flight so our experiment with the glider was well documented. That was the only glider flight that took place while we were at Atsugi. The base commander heard of our adventure, and he issued a ban on any additional glider flying at the field. He was afraid we just might kill ourselves having fun. He was older than we were, and looked at things differently than we did, but that's life. We followed his orders to the letter.

It was noted in early December that the pre-Christmas supply of whiskey was getting low in both the officers' and enlisted men's clubs. There was a distillery at Osaka, a little more than an hour's flight away. An order was placed for 50 cases, and on Dec. 14, 1945, I flew a B-25 to Osaka to pick-up the booze. A special platform was built into the bomb bay so there was plenty of room for the load. Alcohol isn't as heavy as bombs, so there wasn't a weight problem. As a special tip for such a big order, the distillery gave me a case of the stuff for my personal use. When we arrived back at Atsugi, there was a truck waiting for the 50 cases, which were taken to and stored in the supply room between the two clubs. The extra case was taken to my room. Since I didn't drink, I planned to give it away to friends. The first bottle went to the guy who picked us up with the truck, and delivered the load to the supply room.

After dinner that evening, we attended a movie. Halfway through the movie the fire sirens sounded. The movie was stopped. A fire in our old, tinder-dry barracks had to be attended to, and quickly, or the whole place would burn down. As it turned out the fire was in the supply room building. We stood and watched as the fire consumed the building, and the 50 cases of whiskey that I had just flown in from Osaka. The only case that survived was sitting in my room — minus one bottle. Later that evening, the guy who drove the truck out to the flight line to pick up the whiskey from the B-25, was rushed to the hospital. After a number of tests, it was determined that he was suffering from methyl alcohol poisoning. He told the doctors that he had taken a few drinks from a bottle I had given him. I brought several bottles from that case to the hospital for testing. The test results were positive for methyl alcohol. The patient survived and the remaining bottles from that case were poured down the drain. Someone from the club or headquarters took care of the problem with the distillery. I had nothing further to do with it. All I know is that there was no whiskey shortage over Christmas.

The officers' club was busy most evenings, but on Saturday night it was a beehive. Besides the usual drinking, eating, poker, bridge and ping pong games, there was just plain talking. A corner of the room was set aside for chess. That was my activity of choice. I had never played it before, but it soon became my favorite game. There were at least a dozen of us who played chess almost every night. My navigator, Whitney, made lots of money playing bridge every night. On Saturday night he played poker and lost everything he had made during the week. This was repeated week after week. I believe he should have stayed with the bridge game, but that was his choice. Lots of money was made and lost in that club. One fellow who was known only as 3 for 5 Charlie had the best racket. Whenever anybody needed money badly, as they often did for drinks or cards or whatever, 3 for 5 Charley was always there to help out. From Sunday through Thursday he would loan you three dollars for a five dollar repayment on Friday. You might call that usury squared. He did that as long as I was there, and I'm sure he went home with a lot more money than the rest of us did.

It was noticed that I was one of those who was always sober Sat-

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urday night, and never had a hangover on Sunday morning. I wasn't the only one — there were a good number of us. As a result, guess who was always on the flying schedule for Sunday morning missions. Sunday was as good a day to fly as any other day from my standpoint. I enjoyed flying and never turned down an opportunity to do it.

Paul Phillips, a friend of mine since cadet days, always thought I was a bit too conservative. On a regular mission one afternoon, I was flying at 5,000 ft. altitude at the normal flying speed for an A-26 — 250 mph. I had a passenger that afternoon, a radar operator. He was flying with me to pick up his flying hours. Everybody on flying status had to fly at least four hours a month to qualify for his flight pay — 50 percent of base pay. We were just doing our normal thing for a patrol mission — looking around for anything unusual — when out of the blue from above and behind came another A-26 at about 350 mph. It passed by our nose like a blur, missing us by no more than five feet. It scared the living hell out of me and nearly causing my passenger to pass out. I found out it was Phillips trying to scare my passenger. He knew my passenger was slightly afraid of flying, and that he had indicated he wouldn't fly with Phillips. Paul thought he would use this opportunity to loosen him up a bit. I believe Paul miscalculated a little during his dive on me. He didn't take my forward speed into full account in his planning. He had no intention of coming that close. Had he clipped us, it would have been curtains for everyone. I can honestly say that during all of my flying, both military and civilian, only twice did I come close to packing it in, and Paul Phillips was involved in both cases — once flying B-26s in Del Rio and this time, flying A-26s in Japan. In spite of it all, Paul and I remained the best of friends. He died from natural causes almost 20 years ago.

May 5, 1946 was my 24th birthday. I managed to get a bottle of champagne from the club. We had a very low key celebration of the occasion in my room. My A-26 crew, Rex Whitney and Hugh Dunwoodie, were there. My fellow pilot friends, Paul Phillips, Bucky Walters, Don Watt, Dave Sansome and Hugh Jackson showed up. We opened the bottle and had a little taste of the bubbly stuff in my honor.

My tour of duty in Japan was mostly very pleasant. I enjoyed the flying and I earned a lot about the country and its people. Soon I would be heading for home. Considering everything I had seen, I developed several perspectives with regard to the country.

1) FARM BOY'S PERSPECTIVE — Japan is one large mountain range. It has very little flat land for agriculture. Every square foot of tillable land was planted

with some crop — alongside the roads, in the ditches, wherever. It's not surprising that they have to import almost all the food they consume. They just don't have enough farmland to feed themselves.

2) MILITARY PILOT'S PERSPECTIVE — From the air, the major industrial cities looked very much alike — the appearance of total destruction. The U.S.

bombing raids were very effective. Hiroshima and Nagasaki looked like the other industrial cities. The difference was that one A-Bomb was used on each of these cities while thousands of conventional bombs were needed to accomplish the same result in the other cities.

3) MILITARY STRATEGISTS' PERSPECTIVE — President Truman made the right decision to drop the A-Bombs. If we had been forced to invade Japan — and we were very close to doing that — the loss of life on both sides would have been in the millions. The entire area around Atsuge Air Base, Yokohama and Tokyo was one large interconnecting system of caves — caves large enough to handle trucks and other military vehicles. I imagine this was also true of other parts of the country. The whole of their military could have gone underground. Knowing the troop loss the United States suffered in routing the Japanese from the series of very small south Pacific islands, I shudder to think of what an invasion of the Japanese mainland would have been like. After inspecting mile after mile

of this system of caves, my only comment was, "I'm glad that there was no invasion."

In June of 1946 I received orders to report to Seattle, Wash. to receive my discharge from active duty with the U. S. Army Air Corps, and to sign on for an indefinite term as a pilot in the U. S. Air Force Reserve. On July 4, 1946, I became a civilian once again — four years from the time I enlisted in the pilot training pro-

**Bob and Shirley Wieman, Gustavus Adolphus graduation, June 1947**



gram of the U. S. Army Air Corp in July of 1942.

A lot happened during those four years. The impossible dream of a young Minnesota farm boy of becoming a pilot became a reality. From dreaming about flying around the windmill and the cottonwood tree with the birds, to flying a twin engine 4,000 HP bomber across the Pacific Ocean seems like a stretch — even today — but it happened. From that first ride in a WWI Curtiss Jenny, to actually piloting the eight U.S. Army Air Corp planes described in this story is truly an impossible dream come true — "A farm boy's exciting flying adventure."