MY LIFE

(The Way I Remember It)

Just in case someone may, someday, be interested, I'll try to record some of the events of my life. Maybe my grand children and their children will find something interesting to read. Some of the earlier events in my life were told to me by older members of my family and I have to assume they're accurate. I also must admit that my memory isn't as perfect as it once was. Now, with these feeble excuses out of the way, let's get started.

I was born, June 2, 1923, in Lincoln County Mississippi. As most people were in those days, I was born at home, with no attending physician. My father was John Wesley Alderman and my mother was Minnie Wactor Alderman. My paternal grandparents were William Thomas Alderman and Frances Laird Alderman. My maternal grandparents were Samuel Bluett Wactor and Jane Burt Wactor.

I had one older brother and two older sisters. We lived on a farm about ten miles from the nearest town, Brookhaven, Miss. One sister lives on part of the old home place now, and the other one lives in Brookhaven. My brother has passed on to his reward.

My father was a horse and mule farmer, so we weren't wealthy. We had no electricity and no "running water", no inside toilet, no telephone, no radio and no TV. The only light we had at night was coal oil lamps and a wood fire place. My mother, and all other women in the area, cooked on a wood stove, using black iron cookware. (the stove was made of cast iron and used wood for fuel). Our house was built of solid heart pine and was put together with wooden pegs. There wasn't a nail in it. Nor a knot hole.

In those days, and under those conditions, it took a united effort from the whole family to survive. My mother, bless her heart, would place me on a quilt pallet, in the shade of a tree, while she helped out in the field. She, and my two sisters would keep an eye on me to make sure ants, or other insects, didn't harm me. By today's standards, that sounds like child abuse, but it was necessary and I, along with countless others, did survive. That kind of start in life didn't turn me to crime as an adult. It helped prepare me for some of the less pleasant facts of life.

When I was two years old, we moved from the old home place to live with, and take care of my father's parents. They also lived on a farm, about four miles from the old place. They were getting well up in age and my father felt it was his duty to care for them so long as they should live. Nothing heroic here, that's just the way it was in those days.

Believe it, or not, I remember some things about that move. I remember riding with my grandfather from our old place to his home. He had a bed on a wagon and I remember riding on the bed. I also remember that grandfather was a mite hard of hearing and that I took advantage of this to do a little jumping on the bed.

I also remember an incident that my whole family has verified. After everything was unloaded at our new home, I did a little investigating. There was an old sea trunk in the hallway and I climbed on top and was about to jump off. My foot slipped on the rounded top and I fell, biting my tongue almost completely off.

Shortly after we moved, I contracted typhoid fever and was near death for a while. My mother and sisters nursed me back to health, with some advice from our family doctor. I guess I never thanked them for that. But then most family members don't often get the thanks they deserve for deeds of love they perform within the family.

My life was rather uneventful, compared to life today, but I think everyone enjoyed life more then. I remember how elated I was when I was allowed to get "bare-footed" for the first time every spring. I would feel like I could jump over the house and out run a deer. Usually I would be brought back to normal quickly, after stubbing my toe on a tree root or some other solid object.

When I was four or five, father, or papa as we called him, came down with double pneumonia. He was terribly ill for quite a while and had to have his right lung removed. He was unable to do any kind of work and we had to plow our fields and plant our crops so we could have food for us and the animals. My brother and I couldn't handle the job; I was too young to be of much help.

In those days, I think far more than now, people helped people who needed help. Friends and neighbors got together and plowed our fields and planted our crops. My brother helped with the plowing and planting but I was too small. I was about the right size for a "water-boy." I carried water until my arms felt as if they would fall from their sockets. Keep this in mind when visualizing this: there were no tractors involved, only horses and mules. Another thing worth noting is that no one was paid a dime.

Our farm land and pasture land was protected by rail fences. The rails were hand split from small, fresh pine logs, picked by size to produce four rails when split into quarters. The reason I bring up this subject is because it brings back a memory of my grandpa. I don't have many memories of him but this one is vivid.

I remember that grandpa was a gentle and God fearing man who had worked hard all his life. I never heard him utter an off-color word. But back to the rails. Grandpa made mauls and wedges from hickory wood and he had made a small maul for me. With the help of my brother, he had cut the logs to the proper length and was ready to split them into rails. He asked me if I wanted to help and I eagerly accepted.

Everything went well for a while. Grandpa had the first log partially split in half with the iron wedges, used to start the splitting job. He was in the process of getting the large hickory wedges, or gluts, started in the crack. He had a glut in one end of the log and one in the middle and was setting one in the other end, standing straddle of the log. Something inspired me to lend a helping hand and, with my best effort I delivered a blow to the glut in the middle of the log.

Guess what? The log sprang open from the middle to the end grandpa was straddling, and with some force. It whacked both of grandpa's legs and brought him down on top of the log. He gave me a look of utter surprise and asked me a pointed question, "Why did you do that?" I don't remember what my answer was, or if I answered at all. We both were lucky that nothing was broken, neither grandpa's legs nor my behind.

I still remember the first movie I ever saw. We went to Crystal Springs, Miss. to visit some of grandma's relatives and the young ones were going to see a movie. They insisted that I go along and, even though I didn't really want to go, I did. The word "movie" hadn't been coined yet; it was then "picture show."

Anyway, it was a cowboy picture and, I think, either Tom Mix or Hop Along Cassidy was the star. What I do remember about that movie was that we sat on the front row and that there was a train robbery. The train rounded a curve and headed straight for me. I was not about to just sit there and let that train run over me. I got out of there before anyone could catch me. No, I don't remember if the other kids laughed at me or not. It didn't matter. I got out of the way of that train.

When I turned six, I started to school. That was quite an event! We had to walk a mile to school, but thought nothing of it. Everyone attending that school had to walk, all twenty five of us. It was a two room school and we had a principal and an elementary teacher. The principal taught grades nine through twelve in one room and the elementary teacher taught grades one through eight in the other room.

The foundation of my life was formed in that small school. We learned the three R's and discipline. If someone got out of line the teacher would give him the dimension and number of switches to go and get. There was a patch of woods across the road from the school. The offender would go to the woods, bring the specified size and quantity of switches back to the teacher. The culprit would then get soundly thrashed before the room full of students. That left a long lasting impression on some young minds.

The official name of our little school was "Cross Roads." It was known better, however, by the nickname given it by my grandfather. The building was on blocks and the floor was about two feet off the ground. In those days some people let their hogs run wild and they would find refuge from the heat under the school building. Every autumn, when we began school, the building would be infested with fleas from the hogs. My grandfather chose "Flea Hop" as the appropriate nick-name for the school. The circle drive in front of the principle's house, until recently, was identified as "Flea Hop Drive."

I have a few memories of that little school, some fond and some not. My teacher was crippled from birth and could not walk without her crutches. When I was in the third grade I found that using crutches all ones life results in some very strong arms. I don't remember exactly what I was guilty of but do remember, well, the thrashing she gave me. Years later, after World War II, I apologized to her for causing her so much trouble. She told me she had forgiven me before the thrashing, but had to do it because I deserved it. Miss Myrtle Dixon: I love her to this day!

One winter we had a big snow. I'm not sure what year it was, 1932 or 1933, but I remember the snow; we walked to and from school in it. There were six or eight inches on the ground and it didn't melt for about a week. We had a big red sow that was "with pigs" and she didn't show up the night after the snow. Usually all of the hogs, we had twelve or fifteen, would come to the barn when they heard papa call, but the sow didn't come.

Papa, my brother, and I started looking for the sow. We knew that if she had given birth to her pigs, they wouldn't live through the night, unless they were well protected from the snow and cold. If we could find them we planned to bring them to the barn, if the sow would let us near them. Hogs, like most animals, are very protective of their young and can be vicious in their defense. Our search was confined to a twenty acre wooded area but it would be like looking for a needle in a hay stack.

Luckily, papa spotted the sow in a grove of pine trees and let out a yell. My brother and I ran as hard as we could, through the snow, to get there. What we saw was amazing! The sow had gathered a huge pile of pine straw and underneath it was her newborn pigs. We couldn't see them but we could hear them. We didn't know how many there were, but judging from the sow's teats, papa said there could be over a dozen. They were "snug as a bug in a rug."

Every day we carried food for the sow and tried to find out how many pigs there were, to no avail. One afternoon, after most of the snow had melted, my brother and I were on our way to feed the sow when we saw her coming toward us. At first we wondered if she had deserted her pigs. When we got closer we saw a beautiful sight! Right behind the sow, in a straight row were the pigs. Fifteen beautiful little pigs! We stayed with them until they were safely in the barn. One little fellow got tangled in some underbrush and my brother watched the sow while I helped her baby free. Mother didn't seem to mind at all.

We gave the mother sow plenty of clean hay to make a new bed for her babies. I was sure that there was a look of appreciation on her face, my imagination of course, but a young boy's imagination is sometime inventive. By the way, all of the pigs survived, all fifteen of them. Pretty good record for a litter of that size.

Another memory I have of that winter was the small pond, or more accurately, puddle of water near the school house. It was frozen solid and we had lots of fun skating on the ice during recess. I remember one boy, about my age, who would remove his shoes and socks and skate barefoot. Why he did that, I don't know.

When I was in the ninth grade. a new school building was built and "Flea Hop" became a "consolidated" school. Several two-room schools in the area, Byrd and R.E.Lee are two that I remember, were consolidated into the new school. Along with the new building and consolidation, came a new school name: West Lincoln Consolidated High School. The grammar school was included. We had grades one through twelve in one building but there were more than just two rooms.

Every summer all the country churches would have a week long revival meeting. The summer I was fourteen I joined the Church, Gum Grove Baptist Church. I was baptized in a swimming hole in Panther Creek. The creek was fed by natural springs and the water was like ice water. Before I got through the baptism my lips were purple.

The preacher was a small man and one of the converts was huge with an abundant stomach. When the preacher tried to lower his head under the water the man lost his footing and a furious struggle took place. Finally a large man waded in and helped finish the job. I'll never forget that preacher and that man. The preacher was Brother Canzanaro and the huge man was Mr. Otis Keen.

While the construction of the new school was going on, we went to another school, "Arlington High School." That was about an hour and a half ride, morning and afternoon, on a school bus with very stiff springs and no shock absorbers to speak of. The seats in the bus were wooden benches and had no padding. We had to walk half a mile in the morning to catch the bus and half a mile in the afternoon to get home. After riding that bus, the half mile walk home was a relief.

While at Arlington I met some people who would be my long-time friends. Two of these friends didn't come back from the war. There I met a pretty, petite brunette and kind of claimed her as my girl friend. I say "kind of" because that is the way it was. You didn't see girls and boys hugging and kissing in plain view of the public in those days. A girl who did that was not well thought of, to say the least.

However, I did manage to carry her to a few movies, if we could manage to meet up in town. Not often did either of us get to town and it was a hit-or-miss proposition. And I didn't have money to spare then either, even though I could pay our way into the movie and buy a huge bag of popcorn for twenty seven cents. Eleven cents each for the tickets and five cents for the popcorn. The tickets were good for a double feature and a fifteen minute "serial" and so was the popcorn. I'll mention that pretty little brunette again some time later.

Our new school house was built of concrete blocks and the original building is still there, much as it was before WWII, when I was in school. The original building consisted of two wings of classrooms with an auditorium between them. Since that long ago time, several classrooms have been added. When I was there the sports program consisted of track, softball and basketball, all outdoor sports to us; we didn't have a gymnasium. We practiced and played basketball on a dirt court. When we played a city team we would get to play in a "House." West Lincoln now has a gymnasium.

I grew up during the great depression. The banks failed in 1929 and everyone who had any money in a bank, lost it all. In those days you could put money in the U.S. Post Office as well as the bank. We were a little bit lucky; papa had a few dollars in the Post Office and it was safe. He and my grandfather lost what money they had in the bank. We had very little money but we were never hungry.

President Roosevelt started several programs, during the thirties, trying to get us out of the depression. All of the programs were identified by a three letter abbreviation like WPA and NYA. I am very familiar with the CCC program. The three C's stood for Civilian Conservation Corps. This program was intended to help, primarily, inner-city boys but young men from every section of the country were accepted.

I don't deny that some of those programs did some good for some people but that was the beginning of the "What can I get out of the government" syndrome. When World War II broke out we had more unemployed in this country than we did in the early thirties. That's a matter of record. In all honesty, we must give Hitler, not President Roosevelt, credit for getting the USA out of the depression.

I enlisted in the CCC program because they were sending some boys to California and I thought that would be great. I was assigned to a unit at Meadville, Miss. and worked with the road gang, loaded gravel in the gravel pit and with the Forestry division. We surveyed most of the Homochitto National Forest while I was there. We were paid $21.00 per month but we got only $7.50 of that. The rest was sent to our parents, or a guardian.

After six months at Meadville, they asked for volunteers to go "out west" for a year. I was one of the first to grab the opportunity. After about two weeks of preparation we were loaded on a train and were on our way west. We weren't told where we were going but we assumed we were on our way to sunny California. About a week, more or less, on the train and at four o'clock in the morning we were unloaded at a railroad water tower, in about a foot of snow.

The train conductor announced that we were at Tabor, Idaho and that some CCC trucks would pick us up shortly and carry us to our camp. This wasn't exactly what I, or any of the other seventy nine boys had envisioned. I had a sudden longing for dear old warm Mississippi.

Before long the trucks arrived and carried us to our destination. Our new home for the next year was to be at Midway, Idaho; elevation 544Ø feet; population three. The only sign of civilization was a very small store with one gas pump, operated by a man and his wife and a small daughter. The name, Midway, was appropriate enough. The store was 34 miles from Blackfoot to the east and 34 miles from Arco to the west. Nothing but sage brush, jack rabbits and coyotes in between.

We got adjusted pretty quick. We were so busy we didn't have time to get homesick. Well, maybe a little at night but we were too tired to give home much thought. The hardest thing to get used to was the lonesome sound of the coyotes howling at night. And every morning between four and five o'clock a long freight train came through. It had two steam engines in front and two in back to get it through the mountains. The railroad's closest point to Midway was twenty miles but early in the morning it sounded more like one mile. The train made me think of home and mother's good cooking.

It was early November, 1939 when we got to Idaho and I left for home at the end of October, 194Ø. Shortly after I got home, papa told me that there was a new training program called NYA (National Youth Administration) and they were looking for young people. I found out that the program was training people in metal crafts, machinist, sheet metal work and other trades.

From a small boy I had wanted to be a civil engineer first and a machinist second. After my experience with surveying in the three C's, being a machinist became my first choice. I jumped at the opportunity.

The training course was a year and, upon completion, we were to be placed in a job. My job was in Bridgeport, Conn. with Alcoa Aluminum, so I got everything in order, told my family good-bye and lit out for Yankee-land.

On December 7, 1941, early in the morning, I was sitting in the train in the Memphis railroad station when the announcement came over the radio that the Japanese had bombed Pearl Harbor. Needless to say, everyone was in a state of shock. I didn't know what to do, but after some serious thought, I decided to go on to Bridgeport and check in with the draft board there.

It turned out that soon after starting to work, my job was classified. That meant that I was exempt from being drafted into the military. My job was in the rough trim department, preparing aluminum cylinder heads for aircraft. I worked very hard at my job for a year, but my conscience began to bother me. I knew that, back home, just about all the boys my age were already in the military. So, I gave the company two weeks notice and notified the local draft board that I was going back to Mississippi. I gave them my new draft board number and address so they could transfer my file back home.

To make a long and monotonous story a little shorter, I got home a few days before Christmas, 1942 and reported to the draft board. I was told that it probably would be two or three weeks before they would receive my file and they would notify me as soon as they could get things in order.

Things dragged on until August of 1943, when I finally got my notice to report for induction. I don't remember the exact date of the notice but I do remember the wording; "Greetings:You have been selected blah, blah, blah." By this time, the only people of my age left around were a few 4-F's and me. So I was ready to go.

Anyway, I reported to the induction center, Camp Shelby at Hattisburg, Miss., on the appointed date. There was quite a group of us, but there was only one boy that I had ever seen and I was the only one that he had ever seen. Unlike the rest of the group, we were young and the same age. I think, under the circumstances, it was quite natural that we were drawn to each other. During conversation we decided that we wanted no part of the Infantry. We were both farm boys and thought that we had done enough walking. We wanted to ride SOMETHING for awhile. We weren't too picky, anything would beat walking.

When we arrived at Camp Shelby and got off the bus, we were herded to a long building and told to line up in single file and wait. We had just been introduced to the army adage, "hurry up and wait." You double-time to get somewhere and then you wait, and wait, and wait. we finally found out that the building was loaded with doctors(?), from one end to the other, and we would pass by each one of them. One had to be in real shabby condition to fail that physical. The old army saying is pretty close: "A doctor looks in one ear while another looks in the opposite ear. If they don't see each other, you pass the physical."

One of the group almost failed the physical. He was hard of hearing. You could hear the doctors and first-aid men yelling at him from one of the building to the other. He got almost to the "you go home" point before his act was uncovered. A doctor finished examining the man and yelled to him to "Go through that door" and pointed to a corner of the room where there were two doors. The deaf man started to one of the doors when the doctor said, in a very soft voice "The other door." The man turned toward the other door and the rest is history. He heard the old refrain "You're in the army now, you're not behind the plow."

After completing the physical exams we were herded into another building, filled with desks. On each desk was a test packet and a new pencil. We were seated and told to be ready but not to start the test until given the signal. The test had a time limit and we were to finish as much of it as we could within that limit. Those conditions didn't sooth our nerves.

After all the test were graded we were herded (I can't think of a better term) onto the parade grounds. Until this time, everything we did and every where we went was in alphabetical order, A to Z. But this time we were introduced to a PFC (Private first class) and told to line up in front of him as our names were called. He was to be the guide for the rest of the day, for his group. Only six names were called for the first group, including my friend, Smitty, and me. We had no idea what was in store for us as we nervously "fell in" in front of our guide. Naturally, since only six out of about ninety names were called, we assumed that we were the culls.

Our guide was given our files, which contained our test results and life history to that moment. He then lined us up, two abreast, and marched us to a large building where he told us to - wait. He took our files into the building and after awhile he returned, inviting us to enter the building and from a single line to the left, just inside the door.

We did as we were told, all the while anticipating the worst. We saw several Officers, ranking from Captain to full Colonel, pouring over our files. All the time we were getting more nervous. After what seemed like an eternity, the silence was broken by a Captain. Without even looking at us he commanded us to line up, single file, by his desk and in alphabetical order. That meant - me first. Oh! Boy!

I stopped in front of the Captain's desk and he, still without looking up, asked me to state my name. I think I almost forgot what my name was, but I managed to get it out. He then looked at me and asked if I had learned to ski while I was in Idaho. I answered that I had tried to ski a couple of times but didn't really learn much about it. He told me that the Army had placed a requisition for two men for the ski troops and wanted to know if that interested me. Fearing what might be in store for me if I said no, I said that I thought, with instructions, I could learn to ski and would be interested. He marked something in my file and told me to stand aside.

What a relief! No infantry!

It turned out that the six of us had the highest scores on the mental exams. That gave us the privilege of choosing the branch of service we wanted, if anyone was needed for that service. Smitty and I chose the ski troops, not knowing that this outfit had the highest mortality rate in the military. And giving no thought to the fact that we would spend the rest of the war in sub-freezing weather. We had evaded the infantry!

After getting our assignments we were told to go home, get all of our business in order and report back to Camp Shelby on the 13th of September. That would give us three weeks and two days at home.

Smitty and I were elated about our assignment to the ski troops. When we got home we began telling our family and friends about our good luck. We couldn't understand why most of our friends seemed a little befuddled. You must remember that there was no television then and some of our friends had never heard of the term - "ski." I realize now that they must have thought we were a brick or two shy of a full load.

Plans were made for a farewell party and I didn't have a date. I asked a girl I had known in high school if she would come to my party and she agreed. She was a pretty, petite brunette, and seemed to tolerate me very well. She's the one I claimed as my girl at Arlington High School. Everything was just fine. Until a couple of days later when I was introduced to the prettiest girl in town and her younger sister, who was the next prettiest girl in town.

Before realizing what a predicament I was getting into, I asked this girl to come to my farewell party. She said yes she would. Now I had a date with two girls. I couldn't bring them both to the same party! How in this world could I get out of this jam?

I struggled with the problem, knowing that one of these pretty girls would probably never speak to me again after this. If they both found out what I had done, neither of them would ever speak to me again. Ever!

Finally, I made a decision. To keep from having to decide I would simply flip a coin. I was too much of a coward to choose between them. I flipped the coin and it came up heads. Into my life entered the beautiful little brunette now known to our grandchildren and their friends as -- Granny! I don't know, whether or not, the other girl would speak to me again. When I got home from the war she had married and moved away.

There is one small item that maybe I shouldn't mention here, but I'll do it anyway. It's very important, only to me. My soon to be, girl friend and her sister looked so much alike I wasn't sure I would know which was which. I had to see them smile to be sure. My heart throb had a small blemish on one of her front teeth. If I could see that I could be sure. Otherwise it could be rather embarrassing. It worked out just fine.

When we got back to Camp Shelby, we were in for a surprise! There was a note attached to the foot of my bunk. It said that Captain Abercrombie requested my presence in his office immediately. Oh! Oh! He was the Captain who enlisted us in the ski troop outfit. Smitty's bunk had a note with the same request. We hurried to see the captain, saying to ourselves "Lookout infantry, here we come."

The Captain, very regretfully, explained to us that the requisition for ski troops had been canceled. I looked at Smitty and he looked at me. Now what? After a short pause the Captain told us that we still had our choice, so long as that branch of service needed men and at present the Marines were the only exclusion. Smitty chose The Navy and, since I wasn't a good swimmer, I chose the Army Air Force.

They never told us what our scores were on the mental exams. But, as I found out later, my score was good enough to qualify me for Aviation Cadet Training. I'll never know why my score was that good. I had not finished high school yet, and only the very top scores were chosen for the Cadet training. Usually, only graduates from college were accepted.

Everything in the army is done alphabetically and in this group only Aaron and Abbott were ahead of me. Before I left Camp Shelby I did K.P. (Kitchen Police) duty in every mess hall on the base. I peeled mountains of spuds, scrubbed train loads of huge pots and put in many, many hours on the "China Clipper." That's a machine which washed the steel trays and flat ware. It used scalding hot water and there was no time to be wasted. If you hesitated for more than a sneeze, there would be a terrific pile-up. That would make the Mess Sergeant very, very unhappy and unpleasant things were apt to happen to the culprit.

There was a fellow named Zumo who never, or very rarely, caught K.P. duty. He gave us poor unlucky souls cat calls and made derisive remarks when we were assigned to KP. He was a first class agitator, but we got back at him. When we had vaccination, Aaron, Abbott and I were the first three in line. Zumo was last in line. What made this situation so juicy was the fact that Zumo was prone to faint when the needle pierced his skin.

Since Aaron, Abbott and I were at the front of the line, and Zumo was at the rear, we had plenty of time to agitate him. We would groan and moan about how dull the needles were and how much our arms were hurting. By the time the poor fellow got to the injection station he would be a basket case. Before long, we were not allowed to linger after we got our shots. We still managed to get him thinking about the shot, and that seemed to do the job.

After twenty one days at Camp Shelby, the Air Force contingent was shipped out to Keesler Field at Biloxi, Miss. It took me almost two weeks to figure out that I was in over my head. The class schedule brought it home to me. I was scheduled for trigonometry class the next week. I didn't know what trigonometry was. I had suffered through algebra and some geometry in high school but this frightened me. I had to discuss this with someone.

Luckily I had made friends with a fellow who had been there before. He had washed out of Cadet training earlier, when requirements were far more stringent than now. I told him of my concerns and he listened very courteously. He told me that he didn't want to influence my final decision but that he intended to volunteer for career gunner and leave the Cadets because of his age. He was thirty two and that's a ripe old age in the Air Force.

I quickly made up my mind that I would have some control over my military career if I volunteered for career gunner. So, that I did. And since things turned out as well as they did, I don't regret that decision. Straight forward, after resigning from "Pre-Aviation Cadets", I went into the Basic training phase. There isn't much to tell about basic training except -- it's tough.

One thing that was interesting, though, and kind of humorous in a sick sort of way. We had a man who was intellectually brilliant, but had no physical coordination to speak of. When we were marching, he would invariably be a half step off, his head would be up when everyone else's would be down. We couldn't do close order drills, with fixed bayonets, if he was present. Too dangerous. It was a shame. I would have trusted this man with my life.

No man ever tried harder and he never complained. He was in his late twenties and he was an inspiration to us young squirts. The whole squadron tried to help him any way we could, but our training was so disrupted by him that he was finally given a discharge from the Air Force. We all hated to see him go because he was so sincere in his efforts. He didn't give up though and finally, with political help, he got back in and was assigned an office job.

(This man, and he was a man's man, would have been a great roll model for President Clinton)

After what seemed like a lifetime, we finished basic training and shipped out, most of us going to Tyndall Field in Florida. There we went through gunnery training, first with common shotguns and working our way up to machine guns.

After the shotguns, we worked with the thirty caliber machine gun, shooting live ammunition, in short bursts, at a stationary target, then at a moving target. Next we used the fifty caliber machine gun, which would be our weapon in aerial combat. There would be no stationary targets for us in combat.

The final phase of gunnery training was in flight. There were some old, beat up bombers equipped with waist guns. They had placed some rafts in isolated coastal waters and we used these planes to fly low over the rafts and fire at them. I did fairly well on those targets, but I probably hit as many sea gulls as targets.

Before I finished gunnery training, my uncle Martin died. He was a favorite of mine and I wrangled an emergency furlong to attend his funeral. Only immediate family is considered for emergency leave and uncles aren't usually included. In this instance, however, our Sergeant Major was from my home town and he knew my uncle. He persuaded the commanding officer to approve my leave and I was on my way home.

Sunday night, after the funeral, I went to see my new girl friend. She was prettier than I had remembered and I fell like a ton of brick. Just before I had to say goodnight, and out of the clear blue sky, I blurted out, very unromantically, "Lets get married." She won't know until she reads this that I was stunned when she agreed. Back then, that was called a "jumped up" wedding, but it took.

Just a blurb about the wedding. First, let me remind you that we're in the middle of World War II when it took place. Nothing was easy to get. Only people with essential occupations could get automobile tires and gasoline coupons. My father had a 1936 Ford sedan but it was jacked up on blocks because he couldn't get tires and gasoline.

My brother-in-law was a carpenter and was working a job classified as essential and he had a model-A Ford. It was a work car,no beauty by any means, but it did have tires. And I weaseled some gas coupons from an old friend who drove a school bus. I removed the tools and cleaned up the old lizzie a bit to make it a little more respectable. On the way to pick up the bride to be I put in five gallons of gasoline; that's all the coupons would allow.

About a mile from her house the left rear tire blew out. Luckily there was a spare, so I jacked the wheel up and installed it. The spare was for a truck and was six inches bigger than the other tires and had boots that made it look almost square. I was afraid to drive over fifteen miles an hour and was just waiting for the tell-tale bang that would spell big trouble for the beginning of our marriage. That must have been an ungainly sight, but it held together long enough for us to get married.

By the way, I remember that the left rear glass was broken out. My brother-in-law, being a carpenter, had fitted a piece of plywood into the window. I wish I had a picture of that old car. It got the bride and groom to a marriage that has lasted forty nine years. That's better than a lot of limousines have done.

As of this date, February 14, 1993, we're exactly one month short of our forty ninth anniversary, and counting. If people would only put more value on their pledges to others, and to God, we wouldn't have so many broken homes and unguided children. By-the-way, today, Valentines Day, is my bride's birthday. She'll have to tell which one.

Back to the story of my life. We had no honeymoon. I had to report back to my outfit. Soon after getting back, gunnery school was completed and we shipped out to Westover Field in Mass. to be assembled as a crew, four officers and six enlisted men. The officers were: Pilot, Co-Pilot, Navigator and Bombardier.

The six enlisted men had multiple duties but their primary positions were, beginning at the rear of the plane: Tail gunner, Waist gunner, Ball turret gunner(underneath the plane), Upper turret gunner(on top of the plane), Radio Operator(just behind the pilot compartment), and Nose turret gunner(that's me, right out front).

From there the crew went to Charleston Air Force base at Charleston S.C. There we trained solely as a unit. We were getting down to the nitty-gritty. We were preparing to do our bit to end the war.

When our over-seas training was completed we were soon to be on our way to war. We went to Mitchell Field in New York, where we were assigned a B-24 bomber to fly across the ocean. We went from Mitchell to Lancaster in New Hampshire and from there to Gander Lake Air Field in New Foundland.

Next day we took off from Gander and flew to the Azore Islands. From there to Tunis and then on to Italy. At last we know our destination. You see, until now our journey had been under sealed orders. The pilot would receive orders from base to base and couldn't open them until we were airborne. Italy wasn't much to look at. By this point in the war she had been ravaged, by land and from the air. We had been assigned to the 15th Air Force, 49th Wing, 451st Bomb Group, 727th Bomb Squadron. Our group was located at Castellucia, near Foggia, Italy.

Let me explain what a Wing, Group and Squadron consist of. A Squadron, in flight, consists of six planes. A Group, in flight, consists of four Squadrons or 24 planes. The 49th Wing consisted of the 451st, 461st and 484th groups. That comes to a total of seventy two planes if the whole Wing is in flight. Actually, there are more than six planes in a Squadron but only six were in flight with the group. The same thing is true of the Group and the Wing.

It didn't take us long to get settled in. We were assigned to tents just vacated by the crew we replaced. Next morning the Group Commander briefed us about some security problems, when we probably would see action, and general information pertinent to the overall operation.

The second day we began flying simulated group missions, group take-off, group rendezvous, and group landing. During these practice missions, each crew member was getting accustomed to his combat position and duties.

With the entire crew fully acclimated to the procedure, we were ready to take our place in the rotation of combat missions. Every crew didn't fly every day or every mission, there had to be a period of relaxation, to un-wind.

Sometimes we had a free day when we would have nothing to do except play football or softball. We had a pretty good soft ball team. Our shortstop was on the scouting list of several major league baseball teams. We had a good infield, outfield and catching. Only our pitching was a mite weak. I was it.

Occasionally we would go to town and get doughnuts from the Red Cross. Our Navigator, Lt. Conti, was of Italian extraction. He spoke the language fluently and had some relatives near our base. When he went to town or to visit his relatives he insisted that some of us enlisted men go with him. He was a good fellow to be around. He maintained that we protected him on combat missions and he was indebted to us.

Lt. Conti, was a graduate of the University of Rhode Island, where he played football. Judging from the looks of his nose, he must have played center without a face guard. He told us that his ancestors were of Royal blood and after meeting his relatives, I believe him.

Once the whole crew, all ten of us, was invited to have a spaghetti dinner with his relatives. We did and the meal was delicious. What sticks in my mind above the memory of the meal is the manner in which it was served. One great big bowl of spaghetti, with rabbit and chicken, in the center of a huge table. Each of us had a plate and fork and we served our own plate from the bowl in the center of the table. Us short ones had to stretch a bit.

The dining room was about thirty by forty feet and the table must have been ten feet in diameter. One side of the room had a large fireplace and on the opposite side were the stables. The whole time we were eating, two horses watched. The partition between the dining room and the stable was not closed in. It was high enough to keep the horses out and no more.

While I'm talking about Lt. Conti let me jump ahead to an incident that was interesting. Our Wing participated in "Operation Combat Express" to Lyon, France. The objective was to fly in supplies of gasoline, bombs, and ammunition. The roads and bridges were demolished and there was no other way to get supplies to our forward forces. B-24 Liberators were stripped of guns, except for those in the upper turret. The stripped down planes were dubbed "Libforts" and let it be known that they "delivered the goods."

782 gallon tanks were installed in the bomb bays and we could squeeze in eighteen 5Ø gallon drums. Cases of 5Ø caliber belted ammunition were sandwiched in wherever possible. When bombs were part of the cargo, no tanks were installed in the bomb bays. These runs may sound like "milk runs" but you can rest assured they weren't. The German Air Force was never very far away and we had only the two guns in the upper turret to ward them off.

Those supply runs were alternated between the groups, the squadrons and from crew to crew. Captain Palmer's turn came and he asked our Bombardier, my ball turret gunner and me to go along (someone had to help load and unload). The trip was uneventful until we got to the Bron Airdrome in Lyon. Traffic was unbelievable. Bron had only one runway and one taxiway and it was a mad scramble to get in and out. When we landed we had to taxi off the pavement to clear the way for planes landing and taking off.

The weather had been pretty bad for a spell and those big planes were getting stuck in the mud, one after the other. The place was crawling with cle-traks and other lifting and pulling equipment to get them back on the pavement. Another problem was to keep those planes, loaded with gasoline, bombs and ammunition, well dispersed. The German fighter planes were close and that situation would have been like shooting fish in a barrel to them.

We unloaded our wares and were waiting for the papers to be signed when two men ran up to Lt. Conti, jabbering wildly and gesturing like crazy. Lt. Conti finally got them settled down enough to figure out what they wanted. It turned out that they wanted a lift back to Italy. I never got the story straight, but somehow they had been stranded in France and all they wanted was to get back to Italy. They would be forever grateful, and all that good stuff.

Anyway, Lt. Conti, after quizzing them for a while and looking at their papers, agreed to take them back with us. He told them what would be expected of them, and that we didn't have a parachute for them. I wonder if they understood the bit about the parachutes but I never saw two happier people. I asked Lt. Conti how they could have known that he was Italian. He pointed to his nose and gave me a wink.

The two men were positioned just behind the bomb bay and told to put their backs to the bulkhead and to stay there. Things went smoothly until Captain Palmer announced that there was a severe storm just ahead and we would have to go through it because we didn't have enough gasoline to avoid it. He told us to be ready to hold on to something and not to talk on the inter-com. He said that the storm would require the undivided attention of the co-pilot and him. That was an under statement.

We hit the storm almost before the Captain got off the inter-com. I can't really explain what began to happen then. We would hit a down-draft and the plane would drop like it was lead. Then we'd hit an up-draft and instantly we'd be throw upward like a dry leaf in a whirlwind. The poor Italian fellows were scared out of their wits. They were thrown around like empty paper bags.

Eventually, we got through the storm but not before the pilot and co-pilot were both exhausted. When we got back to our base the two Italians didn't wait for the plane to come to a stop. As soon as the plane slowed down and we opened the camera hatch they jumped out, scrambled to their feet and disappeared from sight.

I have some treasured memories of Italy. Not many, but a few. One memory is of that spaghetti meal and another is of our mascot, a small dog brought to Italy from Africa. African Pete was his name. After we got in our sleeping bags at night, Pete would wait until I was asleep. Then would crawl under my covers and squirm to the foot of the bunk. He would be there when I awaked the next morning. I was Pete's favorite.

Pete knew when our plane was about to land, he recognized the sound of our planes engines. We had a revetment, that means parking place, assigned to our plane. Near by was a small mound of dirt. When he heard the first sound of returning planes, he would listen intently until our plane entered the approach run for the landing strip. When that happened, Pete would light-a-shuck for the mound of dirt. There he would stay until the plane left the landing strip and turned into the revetment.

Once we were safely on the ground the waist gunner would open the camera hatch, located near the tail turret. This hatch was about four feet off the ground. Just as soon as the plane got positioned, Pete would make a dash for the camera hatch and try to jump into the plane. He never made it but he never gave up trying.

Pete was a very privileged character. He even had his own flak jacket and heated jacket. They were in his name. Sometime when we had what was classed as a "milk-run", we would carry Pete with us. I would check out his heated jacket and his flak jacket. We'd place the flak jacket and heated jacket on the cat-walk and Pete would settle down on them. If we flew at high altitude Lt. Conti would see that Pete was tucked in. No matter how high we flew, Pete never had oxygen, but it didn't seem to affect him at all.

One memory of Italy that I do not treasure is that of the army food. I promised myself that I would never, never, eat French toast, orange marmalade or Spam again as long as I should live. I have broken all of those promises. But I was sincere at the time they were made.

When the time came to go on our first combat mission, we thought we were ready. We were in for a rude awakening. And we learned, real quickly, to respect our escort, P-51 and P-38 fighter planes. As soon as we reached enemy territory, we were attacked by enemy fighter planes. The enemy pilots had their hands full with our fighters but a few of them got to us.

I have been asked many times if I was ever scared. That is not a sensible question. Of course I was scared. With enemy fighter planes coming at you from every direction, and shooting at you on the way in; who wouldn't be scared. I was scared stiff! But no matter how frightening it got we had to fight back. The gunners were equipped to fight back but the officers were, in effect, unarmed. They had to depend on the gunners to protect the plane.

When we got close to our target the enemy fighters usually would fade away and the anti-aircraft guns on the ground would take over the fight. We couldn't fight back at the flak shells bursting all around. We could feel our plane lurch from the explosions and there was nothing we could do about it. That's when we had a helpless kind of fright. We had to fly through miles of flak getting to the target and miles of it leaving the target. As soon as we got out of range of the ground fire, the fighters would swarm all over us again. At least, we could shoot back at the fighters.

Many times we had planes from our Squadron and Group seriously damaged. Some actually exploded in mid air leaving us to think that no one got out alive. I learned later that a few did. We had several planes that had to "ditch" in the ocean and some that had to crash land before reaching home base. In these emergency landings, on land or in the ocean, most of the crew usually got out alive. Bunged up maybe, but alive.

My crew was lucky in this regard. We took some hits but none were serious enough to hinder our return to base. Not until November 17, 1944, my last combat mission. We bombed the railroad marshalling yards in Vienna, Austria that day. We didn't meet the usual fighter resistance on this mission but I remember the flak as being particularly heavy.

We successfully dropped our bombs on the target and were well into our departure when we caught a small burst of flak to our fuel transfer system. The hydraulic transfer pump was knocked out and we were near the point where fuel must be transferred from the auxiliary tank to the wing tanks.

The plane we were flying that day was a brand new model. Our regular plane was a B-24, Model-J and this one was an L. The fuel transfer system was different from the older planes. Our Engineer/Upper turret gunner had been checked out on the hydraulic operation but ignored the manual system. We were running out of gas, with 65Ø gallons in reserve and could not get any of it to the engines.

Only one engine was running, and that one only in spurts, when the Pilot gave the order to "Bail out". So, we grabbed our parachutes, latched them on, and started scrambling for the bomb bay doors. All but our Pilot got out. We think the plane crashed into a hillside before he could get out.

We'll never know exactly how he died but we do know that he did die. The Germans showed us his dog tags. He was a good man. He was married to a very lovely woman but they had no children. I heard from his wife a couple of times after the war. The last time she said she was getting married to a wonderful man. I hope she was right for she surely lost one.

It was mighty cold flying at high altitude. How cold was it? It was so cold that we had to wear electrically heated suits, gloves, cap, and boots. Over that we wore sheepskin lined pants, coat, cap, gloves, and boots. All of this over our uniform. Not a good outfit for hiking! To remedy this, we were told to fasten our G.I. shoes to our parachute. Then, if we were shot down we would have a good pair of walking shoes.

We used the chest-pack type parachutes. Unlike the back-pack, the chest-pack had a separate harness which was worn at all times while in the air. The harness was equipped with sturdy clasps, one on each side, and the chest-pack had matching rings. In an emergency the chest pack could be snapped onto the harness easily. We didn't wear the chutes all the time, but we made sure they were handy in case we needed them.

The foregoing description will help clarify, I hope, some of the things that happened to me, in just a few, very hectic, moments. I had gotten a brand new pair of shoes and fastened one, securely, to each mounting ring on my chest-pack. Just in case, I was prepared.

When I heard over the intercom system, "This is Captain Palmer. We are unable to transfer our auxiliary fuel and we have to bail out. Good luck. I'll see you on the ground." I grabbed my chest-pack, snapped it on my harness and headed for the open bomb bay doors. By the way, our officers made sure that all of us enlisted men got out before any of them jumped.

Just as I jumped, the plane lurched and my head struck the side of the bomb bay. I was dazed but remembered to say "One thousand one, one thousand two" and then pull the rip cord on my chute. When the chute opened, those brand new shoes hit me in the face. Both of them! I do not know how to determine the force involved but it was sufficient to knock me goofy again.

The next thing I was aware of was the sound of bullets hitting my parachute. Enemy troops, on the ground, were shooting at us. I'm not sure they were trying to hit us. Maybe they were just shooting at our chutes. Either way, it didn't make us feel welcome.

We had been instructed to, if we ever had to bail out of our plane, use the shrouds to maneuver our chute so that the wind would be to our back when we hit the ground. We could then pull the lower shrouds and cause the chute to collapse. I was too dazed to do that and landed facing the wind, which was about twenty miles an hour. My chute gathered wind, and dragging me across a corn field. I couldn't stop it. The Hungarian troops finally stopped my chute and got me out of it.

The Hungarian soldiers rounded us up, loaded us on a truck and took us to their headquarters in Gyor, Hungary. We were interrogated for hours, one by one. Our instructions were to give our name, rank and serial number. Nothing more or less. Our bombardier gave his name, rank and serial number and then announced that he was the bombardier. He was beaten and interrogated far into the night. I'm not sure why he did that.

It just maybe that he was trying to divert attention from the rest of us. Some of the crew were bunged up pretty bad. Our engineer had a broken leg and I didn't look too healthy. I looked as if I had been dragged through a corn field. But my wounds were only superficial.

Next morning a German officer showed us Captain Palmer's dog tags. He wouldn't tell us if he went down with the plane or had tried to jump. We'll never know for sure, but I think he didn't get out of the plane.

About 7:30 that morning we were loaded onto trucks, officers on one truck, and enlisted men on another. I don't know where the officers went. It was policy to separate non-coms from commissioned officers. Anyway, our engineer was taken to a hospital and the rest of us went to Vienna where we were fed and bedded down for the night, on wooden benches.

Next day they loaded us into a boxcar where we sat for a long time before a train hooked onto us and we were on our way. We didn't know to where, but we'd take our chances some place else. It was getting along about the time our planes might start dropping bombs on the Vienna railroad yards.

Our destination was Frankfurt, Germany where we were kept in isolation and interrogated every day for a week. Then the five members of my crew, along with fifty five other POWS, were loaded into a "forty or eight" box car. That was sixty of us in a box car designed for forty men or eight horses. That was our home for three days and they let us out for ten minutes the second night. I won't describe the sanitary conditions in that car. I'll leave that to your imagination.

Late, on the third day, we were unloaded from the box car. With great haste, we were lined up, two abreast. We were told, in perfect English, that we had three kilometers to go and the ones that couldn't keep up the pace would be shot. There were some seriously injured men in the group and I wondered if all of them could make it. Little did I realize what was ahead.

We weren't told that the pace would be double-time. Some of us could barely walk, let alone run. There were sixty of us and fifteen guards, each with fixed bayonet and a dog on leash. That was the longest three kilometers of my life but with the healthy ones helping the crippled ones, we all made it. Some had dog bites and some had a few bayonet pricks, but we made it.

The German sergeant in charge of the detail was one of the biggest and, without a doubt, the ugliest men I had ever seen. I'll mention that man again later. We were now in prisoner of war camp Stalag Luft #4, located near Danzig, in what used to be Poland, and near the North Sea.

Our new home away from home had "suites" that measured 14 X 14 and each suite housed 24 guests. I was the newest guest in my suite and only the third rebel. One from Texas and one from South Carolina and me. I was also the only one from the 15th Air Force. The others were all from the 8th Air Force.

The second youngest guest arrived two days ahead of me. He had an interesting story. When he came through the gate one of German guards asked him to step out of line. Chester was a mite unsettled until he realized that the guard only wanted to talk to him. You see, the guard recognized Chet. He had been Chet's family butcher back in Chicago before the war. It seems that he was visiting relatives in Germany when the Germans needed more soldiers. They revoked his visa and forced him into military service in Germany. Sounds good anyway.

Stalag # 4 didn't serve good food, or much of it. In fact, what they did serve bordered on not being related to food. We were on a very strict, weight reducing diet consisting of the following:

A half cup of boiled, unseasoned barley for breakfast.

A cup of greenish looking liquid for lunch.

NOTE: Sometime the liquid would have a floating leaf similar to a mulberry leaf.

For supper, a cup of the left over greenish liquid.

Once in awhile a thin slice of black bread for lunch or supper. There was no evident nutritional value to the greenish liquid but it was loaded with gas producing elements.

I checked into this condominium in early December, 1944. I think it was the second week but I'm not sure. My room mates accepted me as their peer and all were very helpful. There was one stipulation:I would be called Tom. They filled me in on the do's-and-don't's and told me what to expect from the guards. One of the best friends of my life was a fellow from Newton, MA. His name was James Joseph Martin. Another close friend was from Chicago, Chester Augustine, the butcher's friend. We were together on the Black March. I'll get to that a little later.

I've seen some movies and TV programs about POW camps. It would have been nice if Stalag # 4 was like the shows I saw. It wasn't. Not even close. I was only there for the winter months but I don't remember my room mates bragging about the fun they had in the spring and summer. The only recreation we had was some dog-eared decks of cards and some home-made checkers. We played poker for toothpicks, I wondered where they found those toothpicks. They sure didn't come with our meals. We didn't need to pick our teeth anyway.

American soldiers are creative. Remember the greenish liquid they served us? Well, it was not completely useless. In just a little while after we ate it we would begin having gas pains. Rather than waste all that gas, and to break the monotony, we would have a "Blue Blaze" contest.

When someone had to have relief from the gas one of us would hold a match in the path of the expelled gas. Gas is lighter than air, so it always traveled upward from the point of discharge. Whoever produced the longest blue blaze was the champ of the day and got to hold the match until someone took his championship away. Stomach gas produces a beautiful blue flame. The champion was declared by acclimation.

Once, about the middle of January, the guards came in and dumped everything we had in a pile on the floor. They would do that at random and without any warning, hoping to catch someone with what they called contraband. Anything that could possibly be used as a weapon or to move dirt. If they thought that someone was attached to an item, no matter what, it was confiscated.

The leader of this wrecking crew was "Big Stoop", named by the POW"S, after a character in a popular comic strip. I don't remember the title of the strip, maybe it was "Smiling Jack", but I remember the Big Stoop character and this guard could have been the inspiration for that character. He was one of the guards who escorted us from the railroad station. He was huge, about six feet-eight and had hands that looked about the size of half grown ham hocks. Big Stoop was one of Hitler's elite, a Storm Trooper of good standing and repute.

On February 6th, 1945 the Germans marched us out of Stalag 4. The Russian army was getting pretty close and the Germans didn't want to be captured by the "Ruskies." We had no idea what was in our future but we were fairly sure that it would not be nice.

We were divide into groups of five hundred each, more or less. The man in charge of our group was an elderly sergeant of the Luftwaffe, the German Air Force. It was his responsibility to secure food and lodging for us while on the march.

The lodging turned out to be barns, infested with lice, and the food was potatoes. The sergeant didn't do a bad job of it, under the circumstances. Every day he would get on his bicycle and peddle on ahead in search of food and lodging. Sometimes he would be short on food but he usually found a barn for us to sleep in.

Once we stopped in a small village and some curious folk gathered around to see the "Luft Gangsters" and the guards turned their heads while we did a little bartering. I had a Hamilton wrist watch that I traded for half a loaf of black bread. Martin had won the state championship in a swimming meet in Boston and the award was a nice 24 karat gold ring, engraved with his name and set with a cat's eye stone. He also had a nice watch, given him by his parents upon graduation from high school. He traded both for a loaf of black bread and a stick of polish sausage.

Let me back up here. Our Lager chief had advised us to form partnerships of two or three and preferably three. It would work out better when, and if, we received any Red Cross packages because they would have to be divided. That's why Martin, Augustine and I were grouped together. I might say here that it was lucky for me that we were.

Martin spoke fluent French and Augustine spoke Polish well. The Germans had a lot of French and Polish "servants" and Jim and Chet could talk with them. If we ever had a chance to escape, that just might mean the difference between getting caught, which would mean death, and getting home.

We walked about 1400 kilometers between February 6th and May 8th, 1945. We slept in barns and had very little to eat. All of us, at one time or another, had very severe cases of dysentery. Some got so weak they had to be carried by their partners. Chet and I carried Jim for almost a week. He would nearly freeze at night and we would sleep with him between us so we could share our body heat with him.

When we bedded down for the night, the situation became even more serious. We had to make sure that we had a clear path to the door, from every section of the barn. On first thought, a spot close to the barn door might seem like the choice spot. Think again! A spot near the door was too dangerous. Just one night near the door was enough. Having someone, in a frantic dash for the door, step right in your face is not a pleasant experience.

The only medication we had for dysentery was charcoal. A British Doctor had jumped into German territory to offer his services. He had the trust of our captors and they helped him secure the charcoal. Often, they would gather the material for him to burn into charcoal. Our teeth were coal black from chewing charcoal. Many of us wouldn't have made it if it weren't for the good Doctor.

The winter of 1944/45 was a cold one. I still remember the frozen cobblestone streets. Keeping your balance on those ice covered stones was, in itself, a victory. Almost all village (Burger) streets were cobblestone and a result is a lot of broken bones. Our march started very near the North Sea and in the coldest part of the winter. We walked all day, every day, in the miserable cold. Our feet were wet most of the time, but we couldn't pull our shoes off at night. If we did, we couldn't get them on next morning because our feet would swell overnight. Imagine walking 1400 kilometers under such conditions.

One day, along toward the last of March, we didn't march out early in the morning, as we usually did. About midday an International Red Cross truck pulled up outside our barn. A beautiful sight that was! Finally we were going to eat some good food. We received one box for each three men. Each box weighed ten pounds but there was not ten pounds of food. The container was constructed to withstand lots of abuse and was heavy. The individual containers inside the box were rugged too. We figured four pounds of container and six pounds of food. That was still a God-send.

Our parcel was from New Zealand and had some of the best cheese I ever tasted, or so it seemed. We opened one can of food at a time and divided it three ways. I'll never forget the can of sardines. We opened it first. Inside we found six midget sardines. We decided that we could mix them with our potato soup and stretch them out a bit.

We did that and the thing that did the most stretching was our stomachs. All three of us looked like we were eight months pregnant. And we suffered all night with severe pain. Next day, though, we managed to continue on the march with our group. There is a moral to this story: never, never mix sardines with anything but crackers and always eat them just as they come from the can!

Later, when it began warming up and on sunny days, we would get on the sunny side of the barn and pick body lice from each other. How's that for getting in touch with our monkey ancestors. Remember now, we have gone since Feb. 6 with no chance to even wash up, let alone take a bath. We were infested with fat, and saucy lice.

Often, when we had bedded down for the night, our minds would wander back to our homes and our loved ones there. One centerpiece of these wanderings was home cooking. We would dream, usually in exaggeration, about food. A voice would ring out, from the far reaches of the barn reciting a recipe that he wanted when he got home. We even dreamed of food that we had never liked.

I remember one night; all was quite when a voice from some where in the dark reaches of the barn boomed loudly, "When I get home I'm gonna get my mother to make a banana pudding in a number 3 wash tub. I'm gonna put it on the floor. I'm gonna climb onto the table and dive, head first, into the pudding." Another voice rang out from a different section of the barn; "Where do you hail from buddy? I might come visiting."

We scrounged for some scraps of paper and a stub of a pencil so we could copy recipes. I had around fifty recipes. Some of them would take a lot of courage to even try. One night I was about asleep when a voice, which I recognized as a room mate from hotel Stalag 4, rang out Loud and clear, "Hey Tom, a fried chicken just flew over my head and it's headed that way. Catch it." He was talking to me. Remember, back at the hotel I was known as Tom.

The 8th day of May, 1945, we were liberated. We knew from the mood of our guards that it was just a matter of time and we were on the lookout for the tanks and weapon carriers to come get us. A jeep with one M.P. and a Chaplain was all it took, but there were no complaints. What joy! One must have the experience to appreciate the feeling. I don't think it can be described.

The M.P. and Chaplain who liberated us were from the British Second Army. An outfit known as the Scottish Highlanders. They told us that we must go to a bridge on the Odor River. The bridge was near Lubeck, which was about 28 kilometers from where we were. The M.P. gave us directions on how to get there and then he said; "As of this moment Yanks, you're on your own."

Before they left we asked if we could present them with an oral petition, since we had nothing to write on. They said they would hear the petition. Our group leader stated our petition, which asked that the Allies give consideration to this fact: the German Sergeant in charge of us had treated us fairly and that on more than one occasion he had shared his meager allotment of food with a POW who was in dire need. He then asked us to respond with a yea if we agree. There was a deafening roar. Then he asked if there were any nays. There was total silence.

Both the M.P. and the Chaplain promised that they would present our petition to their command and would testify on our behalf. I never learned what the outcome was, but I hope the upper echelon took our petition to heart. The Sergeant deserved a fair trial and a just fate.

Now, the mad scramble to get to our destination began. We all started out walking, but since we had been walking since early February, we looked for anything we could sit on that would move. We commandeered horse drawn wagons, horse drawn two wheel carts, bicycles, horses, motorcycles, military vehicles, and cars. The problem with any motorized vehicle was petrol. It was very hard to come by. Army vehicles were about the only reliable ones.

Seven of us lucked up on the grand prize. We confiscated a Dusenburg from a German soldier. It must have belonged to a general. Ever heard the term:it's a real doozie? That must be where the term came from. In those days, a finer car was not made. We tried to tell the soldier where we were going and that he could get his car there. We'll never know if he understood.

There was a "doozie" of a traffic jam at the bridge. We finally did find it, and just before running out of petrol (that's German or British for gasoline). Off to the side of the road there was a fire and the sickening odor of burning wool filled the air. We saw a stream of G.I. Joes, in their birth day suits, running across the bridge. As we got closer to the bridge, we could see what was happening. But why were they running across the bridge?

The POWs ahead of us were stripping off their clothes, even to their shoes and socks, and tossing them on the fire. Then, naked, they would go into a small shack and close the door. When they came out of the shack we could see that they were covered, from head to toe, with a dull gray powdery substance. We soon found out that this was part of the de-lousing process.

I pulled off my clothes, tossed them on the fire, and went for the shack. I was told to take a deep breath and hold it until I came out. I took a deep breath, went in the shack and closed the door. There was a cold blast that almost took that deep breath away from me. When I came out of that shack I knew why the fellows ahead of me were running across the bridge. It wasn't mandatory that we run across --- it was COLD!

On the other bank of the river, they had set up a row of showers. Boy! Were we ever glad to see those showers! But -- there was no hot water. Not even warm water! By that time I was so cold the temperature of the water didn't matter. All that mattered was the soap and water.

After that great shower, I was outfitted with a complete uniform. The uniform was the official, everyday uniform of the Scottish Highlanders. Now I know why the British soldiers have such a somber disposition. The uniform consisted of 100% wool pants and shirt, socks, and shoes that could not be bent, leggins and wool scarf, and no underwear. Who could smile while wearing that uniform, with no under wear?

Don't get me wrong here. I'm not complaining. I was real glad to put on those new, CLEAN clothes. They sure felt good compared to those filthy rags I had just burned. Its just that some underwear would have made the uniform so much more comfortable. Even without underwear though, I felt like a new man.

As soon as enough of us finished dressing we were loaded onto a truck and taken to an airport where British planes were waiting to fly us to Brussels, Belgium. American forces took charge here and carried us to a large hospital, where we underwent a thorough examination. I don't remember for sure, but I weighed either 110 or 112 pounds when I checked in. That was down from 147 pounds when I was shot down.

Later, we had our chance to thank the British Second Army. The commanding General visited us, in full dress uniform. He was sharply dressed in his kilts, knee socks and beret. His knees were sort of knobby, but overall, he was a sharp cat(a little WWII lingo).

The General accepted our thanks graciously, then told us that his mission was to thank us for our contribution to the war effort. He told us that we couldn't begin to comprehend what effect our efforts had on the outcome of the war. He said that the world should be eternally grateful to us. That made us feel real good.

He ended the session by asking a soldier right in front: "Why are you staring at my knees? The soldier answered: "Sir, I'm wondering how you keep them warm." The General had a good laugh and said that he understood that, to Americans, a man in kilts might look a little weird. But to him, cowboy boots and hats were ridiculous. He shook hands with every one of us before he left. He had made a good impression on all of us.

The third day in the hospital, I spotted an irresistible object;a Hershey bar in a candy machine. Even though we had been cautioned to avoid rich food, I couldn't resist that luscious Hershey bar. I used a nickle of the five dollar advance we had received when we were admitted to the hospital. About three hours after I ate that candy bar I was grabbed by a severe case of diarrhea. Now I believed the doctor! That lasted for about twenty four hours and left me so weak I could barely walk on my own. I eventually began to feel better, but I had lost my craving for chocolate.

If I remember right, I entered the hospital on the 10th of May and shipped out the 18th, bound for Camp Lucky Strike near Le Harve, France. There we lingered, with absolutely nothing to do, for twelve long days. Our patience was wearing thin by this time. We wanted to get home. Nothing else mattered. At the time, we thought our government was laying down on the job, but later realized that our problems were multiplied by many thousands.

The worst thing about the whole ordeal was that we couldn't find anyone who had an inkling. Period! There were no radios or any other type of communications. Nobody knew anything. We couldn't even get a good rumor started.

My tent, which housed eighty men, was about forty feet from one end of the landing strip. On the 28th of May, a plane landed and came to a stop near our tent. I never saw so much commotion in my life. The surge of the crowd almost collapsed our tent. Some body must know something or this crowd wouldn't be here. Finally I heard someone yell:"There he is." It turned out that the "he" was General Eisenhower. At that moment I could have cared less, unless he could get me home.

May 30th was the day. But we were still somewhat disappointed. We climbed on trucks and headed for the harbor. For twelve days we had waited for our ship to come in. We thought we were going to fly home. We flew over here, why not fly home. Now we knew that it would be at least another week or maybe two before we got home. Oh well, at least we are finally going to start the journey.

We didn't get the Queen Elizabeth. Not by a long shot! We drew the USS Admiral Buttner, a rather small Liberty ship, built for troop transport, and just for the war. The trip from Le Harve to Hampton Road, Va. took nine days. Nine long agonizing days. I was sea-sick the last seven days, even though the sea was calm, the gentle and continuous roll of the ship really got to me.

My bunk was somewhere in th bowels of the ship and all I wanted to do was cling to my bunk. A naval officer, I don't know his rank, kept after me for two days about not eating. He told me that I must eat something and that was the only way to overcome my sickness. I finally agreed and he escorted me to the mess. I got in line and grabbed a tray with one hand while holding to the tray slide rail with the other.

I found that the further you get from the bottom of the ship, the greater the rolling effect. Has something to do with angles. Anyway, I held onto the rail and my tray until a sailor dumped a glob of bright green powdered eggs on my tray. That was it! I made a lunge for the ship's side rail and polluted the ocean with stuff I ate back at Camp Lucky Strike. I lived on Coca Cola the rest of the way, a swallow at a time.

Late on the ninth day there was a terrific roar. Someone had sighted the United States of America and as the word passed down through the ship each bay lent their cheers. When the word reached throughout the ship you could actually feel the ship vibrate. The sound was awesome. We didn't get our feet on American soil until the next day but we could see it.

My memory is a bit fuzzy here. I'm not sure how long it was before I was on the train, headed for Camp Shelby. And I'm not sure exactly how long I was at Camp Shelby. We had to get new uniforms and have the stripes and insignias sewn on them but it was just a matter of a couple of days. Long ones they were!

I had to take the bus the rest of the way home. There is one thing I do remember though, I got home on the 26th of June, 1945. My orders called for "60 days temporary duty at home." No one at home knew exactly when I would be home. They knew I was back in the States and on the way home but I didn't phone them after leaving Virginia. I surprised them.

My wife had lived in Brookhaven, with her sister while I was gone so I made a bee-line for her house. It was just a few blocks from the bus station and I didn't have much baggage, so I walked. It was hard to keep from running. I was in sight of her sister's house when I saw a beautiful sight --- my wife coming down the sidewalk toward me. She didn't realize it was me until we were about fifty yards apart. We both did record twenty five yard dashes.

I spent sixty wonderful days at home. Everyone tried hard to fatten me up; good food every where we went. I had gained a few pounds before getting home but they thought I seemed a bit skinny. I worked hard on my pledge to never go hungry.

When my "tour of temporary duty" was up I went to Miami Beach, Fla. and checked in the hotel I was assigned to. What a deal! My hotel was right on the beach and it was one of the fancier ones. Before I could get used to the good life, though, the hotels were returned to their civilian owners by the government. We all were sent to Air Force bases through out the States for re-assignment or, if we had enough "points", discharge.

Twenty seven of us loaded onto a C-47 cargo plane and headed for Kelly Field in Texas, near San Antonio. About the time we got over land in south Texas our plane began to bounce around like a balloon in a whirlwind. At least twenty six of us came down with severe cases of air-sickness and I think we did it alphabetically. At least I was first. I was too sick to keep tally.

We arrived at that point one day after a strong hurricane had passed over the area and the air was still turbulent. It wasn't as bad as the storm we flew into between France an Italy, but our physical condition wasn't up to par. Luckily there was an empty ammunition can in the plane. Most of us managed to use it instead of up-chucking all over the plane.

We lived through the flight though, and landed at Kelly Field and got settled in. There was no schedule set up for us to follow except chow-time. We were advised to check the bulletin board every day; morning, noon and night. We were on the honor system and could come and go as we pleased. There was only one problem with this set-up but it was significant. We had very little or no money and wouldn't get any until they finished processing us.

After about five days my name appeared on the bulletin board to start through the processing routine. They wanted to bring our records up-to-date before we were discharged or reassigned. That turned out to be quite a chore for most of us, some more than others. For one reason, or another, our records were incomplete. Mine were far from complete, but so what, I didn't see any need of my record, once I got that discharge paper in my hand.

The Army had worked out a point system to determine who would be discharged and who would be reassigned. Points were allotted for medals, action in different areas and so forth. I don't remember exactly how they were assigned but I do remember that the Purple Heart was worth two points. When my points were added up I was one point short of the magic number; ninety two I think it was. I had figured that I was one over the number.

A Corporal had been assigned to me and I asked him to go over my record again to make sure there was no mistake. He glanced over my papers and said there was no mistake. I asked him to let me check his list against mine and he got a mite irritated. Just then the Captain in charge of the whole operation came by and, seeing that something wasn't kosher, asked if we needed any help. The Corporal said "No sir" and I said "Yes sir", so he took my papers and asked me to come into his office.

He was an elderly gentleman and a very nice one too. He pulled up a chair for me and asked what the problem was. I explained that my calculation showed that I had enough points to qualify for discharge and the Corporal said that I didn't. We went through my file and found that the Purple Heart wasn't listed. That's why the Corporal's figures didn't check with mine.

I showed the Captain my wound, a tiny one in the palm of my left hand. He decided that, since our records were so out of date, he would just add the medal to my record and told me to go home to my family. He said the medal would be mailed to me later. I thanked him for helping me. On the way out I apologized to the Corporal and explained what had happened. By the way, I never did get that medal and when I got my final papers, it still wasn't listed. No matter. I got the main thing, my discharge.

Next morning we assembled in the auditorium and listened to some speeches about us being heros and how the country is forever indebted to us. Then we filed by and received that precious piece of paper, our discharge.

Very soon after being officially discharged I was on the way home. I started from San Antonio, on a greyhound bus, but by the time we got to Houston I knew that was too slow. I hitch-hiked the rest of the way and beat the bus schedule by eight hours. Happy days are here again!

One of the first things I did was buy a used car, a 1941 Plymouth. Then I taught Geraldine how to drive, and how NOT to drive. On our way to my parents, I stopped and turned the car over to her. She caught on real quick, especially how to press the accelerator. We had gone about a mile when I realized we were going at a pretty good clip. A glance at the speedometer shocked me. It was pointing to 75. That's when I started calling her "Lighting."

Gasoline and tires were still being rationed. We had to go to the ration board to get gasoline coupons and approval to buy a tire. New tires weren't available, only re-caps. It almost took an act of Congress to get either. Veterans were shown some sympathy, for the first visit only. School bus drivers were the best bet to weasel gas coupons from. They were very popular with moochers.

Just so today's young people will have an idea of what life was like during and after WWII, almost everything one had to buy was rationed. Sugar, gasoline, tires, rubber products of any kind, coffee, etc. If you were lucky enough to have a car, there were no parts for repair. The war effort was first. Everything and everyone fell in behind the war effort and no one seemed to mind. In fact the people were overwhelmingly behind the effort. Can't help but wonder if the same would be true today, given our present leadership, or the lack of.

Things plugged along a week or two before I began thinking about; down the road. I didn't have a job and didn't know what I wanted to do. One day I was getting a new re-cap tire put on my car at Kees Motor Company, and the owner asked if I had a job. When I told him I didn't, he offered me one as a mechanic, or to be more accurate, a chance to train as a mechanic under the G.I. bill.

That sounded to me like Manna from Heaven. He'd pay me 1Ø dollars a week and the government would supplement that with a monthly allotment of 3Ø dollars. "Lightning" went to work in a small dress shop and we got along pretty well. In early 1946 she had to quit her job. She became pregnant with our first baby and was beginning to have a few problems.

By that time I had gotten a small raise and we did pretty well. September 2Ø, 1946, the baby was born. A pretty little girl. And we named her Sheila. I didn't think a middle name was necessary since there were so few Aldermans around. And beside that, she would drop a middle name when she married. How's that for long range planning?

My specialty was operating the alignment machine. We did front-end alignment and frame straightening on cars. Kees Motor Co. had the only machine, between New Orleans and Jackson, capable of straightening bent automobile frames. Add that business to all the worn out front-end jobs, and we had more work than we could handle. My work week was from sixty six to seventy two hours; 6am to 6pm, Monday through Friday, and 6am to noon Saturday(if the job was finished by noon). Sometime I worked until the job was finished.

By today's standards, that would be twenty six to thirty two hours over time pay. I worked the extra time but there was no extra pay. If you asked someone to do that now, you'd be sent to the funny farm. You'd be a guinea pig for "Shrinks" and Ph Ds (Post hole Diggers). I guess I just didn't know any better. I worked hard and, frankly, I didn't mind doing it. The job fell somewhat short of my earlier ambition but it was interesting work, and challenging to a farm boy.

Early in the winter of 1949, Sheila and I came down with chicken pox. She had a light case but not me. I had chicken pox on the bottom of both feet, in my mouth, in my nose and in my ears. I had 1Ø4 fever and was delirious. I saw pink, purple and green elephants and snakes on the wall of my room. To make matters worse, my doctor showed sympathy when he examined Sheila but snickered when he looked at me. Chicken pox may be a child's disease but it'll bring a grown man to his knees. By the way, we didn't have to go to the hospital, the doctor came to our house. They'd do that in those days.

The place where we lived, when Sheila was three, had some oak trees in the yard. Those trees were Sheila's playmates. She gave them names, two of which I remember: Annie Jo and Piggy Jo. Those two were the biggest and were in front of the house by the sidewalk. In my mind, I can see Sheila now, wearing Geraldine's high heel shoes and with her doll, talking to those trees. If no one interrupted her, she would spend hours talking to Annie Jo and Piggy Jo.

Sheila did not like to have her picture made. I remember the ordeal we went through on her third birthday. Geraldine gave her a party with the usual trappings and several of her cousins and friends attending. Everything went well until picture taking time. Before the session was over, Sheila looked like she had measles or poison ivy. We never did get a picture without her crying.

I worked at Kees Motor Company until March 24, 1951. Then I got a job at the ESSO oil refinery in Baton Rouge. I told my boss about the job and that I wanted to give him two weeks notice. He asked me when could I start to work at the new job. I told him that I could start the following morning but that wouldn't be fair to him. He, Mr. Gerald Kees told me to forget about the notice and get to my new job. The sooner I got my name on the books, the sooner my seniority would start.

That hadn't crossed my mind. I thanked Mr. Kees and he wished me the best of luck. I checked in at the refinery at 7am, Monday, March 26, 1951. I started working as a machinist helper at $1.93 an hour and my work week was forty hours. Quite a jump from what I was used to. In June I was assigned to a four year machinist apprentice program. Upon completion of the program, I would be rated as First Class Machinist. That was a longtime dream of mine. I was in hog heaven.

During that first week, my wife's uncle helped me find an apartment and that week end I went back home to get my family. We moved to Baton Rouge on Sunday, April 1, 1951 and my dear wife cried all the way. She couldn't think of being that far from home; almost a hundred miles. Sheila would be five in September.

We lived in an apartment on Gayosa Street, between North 22nd street and North 21st street. At that time the neighborhood was clean and respectable. Take a look at it now. After a year there, we moved in with Geraldine's uncle, Rufus Price, and stayed there until we moved to Baker. All this time Sheila had no one her age to play with but she occupied herself quite well. Mr. Price's next door neighbor, retired Judge "Red" Womack, would give her some gum or candy if she was in the front yard when he walked by. You know what? He didn't have an ulterior motive. He was being kind to a child!

In July, 1953 we bought a small house in Baker, just in time for Sheila to start to school. Our little house was across the street from Baker High School. Grades 1 through 12 were taught at the same school. We didn't have pre-school and kindergarten until some time later. And at the time Baker was regarded as one of the better schools in the Baton Rouge area. Not true today.

When Sheila was six her grandfather, "Daddy Price", gave us a dog named Ponto. The man who raised the dog had mistreated the poor thing and he was so skittish I couldn't touch him. I wanted to train him to hunt squirrels but I couldn't get him in the car to go to the woods. Ponto would let Sheila pet him and she would hold him for me until I could get him in the car. Ponto finally decided that I wouldn't hurt him and we became friends, after about a year.

In the mid-fifties there were places near our house where we could hunt. I trained Ponto in a strip of woods just north of town, between McHugh Road and Highway 19. There was pretty good hunting in a large patch of woods across Highway 19 from, what is now, Greenwood Golf Course. That's where Sheila went hunting with me and caught a fine case of poison ivy.

I didn't have much time with Sheila while she was going to school. For the first four years my shift alternated between 3pm-to-11pm and 11pm-to-7am, six months each. My off days also alternated from Monday and Tuesday to Thursday and Friday. When I worked the evening shift I would get up early enough to see her off to school during the week. We had more time together on weekends and vacation.

When Sheila was 13 she and her friends decided that they wanted to play softball. They had enough players but they didn't have a coach. I was working the evening shift and couldn't go to the games. They really wanted to play ball so we worked out a plan. I agreed to coach them in the morning if one of the mothers would handle the games. Three of the mothers volunteered and we got down to serious training.

None of the girls had ever played softball, so I had my job cut out for me. We practiced every morning from 9 to 11, Monday through Friday, and finally got all positions covered. The infield was good, the outfield was good, our catching was fair, we had good speed and the pitching was great. Our first team was good and most were fast. Sheila was one of the fastest. The substitutes left something to be desired.

The three mothers attended every practice and really got involved. I told them everything I could about game conditions. We settled on the starting line-up and the season got started with a bang. Our team won all their games coming up to the last one. They were tied with another team for the league championship. Two of the mothers decided that they should start the substitutes because they hadn't started all season. Before they could get the starters in the game, we were 11 runs down. The game ended 11 to 9 in the other teams favor.

Believe it or not, Sheila graduated without having to attend four or five different schools. The scatter-brained busing plan came into being after she graduated and we're very grateful for that. But I had to work nights throughout her school years. She was a cheerleader and I didn't get to many ball games. In fact, I had to take off from work so I could attend the homecoming game in her senior year. It was almost like being raised in a single parent home but that parent did a good job.

January 15, 1963 when Sheila was a junior in high school a little baby boy came into our lives. We named him Gerald Thomas (Gerald after his mother and Thomas after me). When I first saw him I wondered if they were showing us a little Japanese or Chinese baby. He was yellow as a pumpkin but he was a wonderful gift from God.

We thought we were going to lose Geraldine. The doctors worked over her all day long, trying to stop the bleeding. But being as tough as we all know she is, she came through like a champ, with the help of some good doctors. Sheila was sixteen the September before Tommy was born and a prouder, happier girl is hard to imagine. She now had a real live baby doll to play with.

Baker High boy's had a good basketball team in the 1963/1964 school year. They were district champs. The state tournament was at the Fair Grounds in Shreveport that year. I managed to have a week of vacation so I could carry Sheila and a load of cheerleaders to the games. Just north of the little town of Boyce, on the way to Shreveport, we hit a speed trap.

There were five cars in a group from Baker, two ahead of me and two behind me. Guess who got pulled over for speeding. That's right. They grabbed me. I accepted the speeding ticket and our convoy resumed it's journey to the state tournament.

The boys and cheerleaders did great at the games, until Sheila got sick. She didn't feel right on the way there but thought she would be alright. Instead, she became more ill and her fever kept going up. To make a long story short, our boys came within two points of winning the state championship and as soon as the game was over, we headed for home.

We got Sheila to a doctor as quick as we could and he diagnosed her case as being Mononucleosis. That requires medication and lots of bed rest. To make matters worse, Tommy came down with a high fever right after Sheila and I left for Shreveport. Geraldine had not regained her strength yet and she called her sister to come help her with Tommy. She didn't know that Sheila was coming home sick too. After a scramble we all survived.

Sheila started a beauty course while still in high school and completed it early the next year after she graduated. We made a down payment on a red Rambler sedan and she finished paying for it, even though she hated it. She had hoped for a Corvette. The first of May we drove her new car to Casper, Wyo. to visit her Aunt Libby and family.

Because of the TV program, Gunsmoke, we went through Dodge City, Kan. on our way to Casper. Tommy was just two in January and I remember him gagging every time we passed a cattle feeding pen. We thought it was because he saw the pens and all those cows, so next time we saw a pen ahead, we diverted his attention. That didn't work. It wasn't his imagination! The smell really got to him. He didn't vomit but he came perilously close a couple of times

It snowed on us from Denver to Cheyenne. That's quite a change from the eighty degree weather we left in Louisiana. We left Casper on May 13, Mother's day morning, and headed back to Baker. The weather report that morning said it was 13 degrees below Ø. That was the actual temperature, not the wind chill factor. However, the roads were clear and we didn't have any more snow. Shortly after returning from vacation Sheila started to work for Mrs. West in her beauty shop. After about a year, she went into business for herself.

Sheila and Louis Dunigan were married July 2Ø, 1968 and lived in a mobile home until August. The first week in July, Exxon asked me to go to Benecia, California and help in the start-up of a new refinery. After serious deliberation we decided to take the offer. The assignment was for only twelve months and I thought I could handle that. Tommy had made five in January and Sheila was afraid that he would forget her before he got back home. Needless to say, on the day of departure we had crying jags all around. Louis sold his Mobile home and they lived in our house while we were gone. And Tommy did not forget Sheila.

Geraldine had a ball in California. She had several nice ladies to visit with and on week-ends we would go sight-seeing. We went to Lake Tahoe, Virginia City, Squaw Valley and Reno. While at Lake Tahoe, we saw the Bonanza layout, the house and barn where some episodes of the TV series were filmed. We also went up the northern coast and saw the beautiful forests there.

We lived in Walnut Creek, and Tommy went to kindergarten there. We came home in August of 1969 so we could get Tommy in a private school. Louis and Sheila flew out and drove home with us. We showed them some scenery on the way home; Yosemite, Disney Land and the San Diego Zoo. Some mention was made of visiting the Carlsbad Caverns in New Mexico, which would add three days to our trip.

I remembered that Sheila was afraid of anything with wings and decided that she might save us from that detour. I asked Tommy if he had ever seen a bat and explained, in detail, what a bat looked like. I told him that bats lived in caves and that we would see millions of them in Carlsbad Caverns. That was all it took. Sheila made the decision for us. We came home.

We got Tommy enrolled in Trinity Baptist private school. As soon as we got him enrolled, I began making up for some of the time I had lost, fishing the Bayou Pigeon area. I had a few days of "comp" time coming, before reporting to work. Those few days produced some of the best fishing in my entire life.

Tommy's first grade teacher at Trinity was Mrs. Rogers. Her husband was one of my four instructors on the training program at work. We see them about four times a year, at annuity lunches, and she will asks about Tommy. Mrs. Rogers thought Tommy was something special and she saw to it that he got started off on the right foot. That makes her special to me and, I hope, to Tommy.

Tommy went to Trinity Baptist through the fifth grade, then we got him into Central Private. There he participate in sports, Trinity did not have sports. He played football, baseball and some basketball. He had played BREC football and softball before. I guess now is as good a time as any to talk about Tommy's BREC career.

When Tommy was eight, a friend of mine asked me if I would help him form a softball team with boys ten and under. I agreed and we began collecting a team. He had two boys, I had one and we quickly enlisted some friends of our boys. Pretty soon we had sixteen boys on our "team", none of whom knew anything about the game. We had to show them which hand to put their glove on, how to hold the bat and every detail about the game.

I have some fond memories of that first year. We didn't come close to winning a game. The other teams in the league were experienced and we were starting from scratch. This was fast-pitch softball and we didn't have anyone who had ever tried to pitch. We tried them all and Tommy was the only one who seemed to have any possibilities. So, we started to practice, and practice, and practice. Its a wonder he didn't get disgusted and give up, but he hung in there.

We practiced in our back yard, almost every day. It was a tough go for Tommy but we kept after it until he finally became a good pitcher. I have vivid memories of the bruises on my legs, caused by the pitches I missed. Later on, when he developed the knuckle-ball, it got to the point where I couldn't catch him any more, a sure sign of ageing. But let's get back to the earlier years.

With that age group, boys and girls, the best ball handlers must be played in the infield, catching, pitching, first, second, third, shortstop and short field. You hope your pitcher doesn't walk their batters and can make them hit the ball in the infield area. Usually there won't be many heavy hitters in that age group so that strategy will work. The second year it began to work for our team, we won more games than we lost.

The third year we were the team to beat. Tommy was humming the ball in there and most of the boys had begun to put their bat on the ball with some regularity. We still didn't have a good defensive outfield but the infield was air tight. Our forte, on offense, was running the bases. If the opposing team didn't have a good catcher, we'd run him ragged. We won many, many games with our running. Many times when one of our players got a walk he would end up at second base. Sometimes, if we could force them into an error, he might come all the way home. That wild running only works with the younger groups.

I often think back to those days with some nostalgia. Let me relate some of the things that happened. When we got a new player we tried to play him where the other team was least likely to hit the ball. Tommy was putting some heat on his pitches and that caused most batters to hit to the opposite field. Since most of the boys were right hand batters, our strongest outfielder would play right field. That became a problem if a team had two or three left-handers but that was rare.

One game I remember, we played two new boys. The other team didn't have any real good hitters so we figured this was a good time to play our newest players. We put one in right field and one in center. There was a spot of fresh dirt in center field where we had filled a hole. The batter hit a ground ball past second base that went through our infield. The young center fielder had forgotten about the game and was playing in the fresh dirt. When he heard everyone yelling, he looked up, watched the ball roll past him, and went right back to his pile of dirt.

In another game, with similar circumstances, a young player was playing right field. Suddenly, someone on the sideline pointed out that we didn't have anyone in right field. Just as I looked that way I saw the door to the porta-potty open, a little blonde head peeped out for a second and the door closed shut. We had to get some one in right field in a hurry. That little boy in the porta-potty went on to pitch baseball in Little League and in high school. He is one of Tommy's close friends today.

I was really lucky during my coaching career. No serious injuries and really only one close call. We always asked parents if their child had any physical conditions that we should know about. One boy was brought to his first practice by an older brother who said his mother or father would be at the next practice. The child seemed perfectly normal and we proceeded with practice.

When the new boy took his turn at bat, he took two called strikes right across the plate without flinching. It looked to me like he never took his eyes off the pitcher. He didn't follow the ball to the plate, so I told him to watch the ball all the way to the plate. The next pitch was a fast ball, high and inside. It couldn't have missed the boy's face by more than an inch, at most. He never blinked an eye. We took him out of the practice session and told him to make sure one of his parents came to practice with him the next day.

His mother brought him and I explained to her what had happened the day before and asked if his eyes had been checked lately. She said his eyes hadn't been checked, and suggested that maybe it could have been because of his diabetic condition. I still shudder when I think about how close that boy came to a bad injury or possibly death. He didn't flinch or dodge because he couldn't even see the ball. When I explained that to his mother, she decided that she would try to find something safer for him to do.

Now to my favorite episode. A fellow called me one night and asked if I had room on the team for his son. We had two places unfilled so I told him to bring his son to practice the next day. This man had played football and had been a football coach some years earlier, so I figured the boy might be a good athlete. I never was really good at figuring and that time was no exception.

Since we had been practicing for two weeks, the new boy was behind the rest of the team. To make up for that, we decided to devote most of our effort to him for a day or two. I have never seen anyone or any thing more uncoordinated than that boy was. When he tried to hit the ball, he would grip the bat with one hand at the end and the other half way up the bat. After the ball was in the catcher's mitt, he would hit straight down at it, or where it had been.

Finally, we got him to swing closer to normal and decided to let that rest awhile and work on base running and defense. I put him on first base, after explaining to him that if he hit the ball or got a walk he would go to first, proceed to second and then on to third. We demonstrated how to fake going to second after every pitch and if the catcher did not catch the ball cleanly, go to second. He caught on to that quick enough. The boy had one big plus, he was a good listener.

Our next lesson was the hit-and-run and the run-and-hit. This will show you how well that kid listened. It'll also demonstrate that what seems to be perfectly clear to every one, sometime isn't. I told him to keep his eye on the ball and if the hitter should hit the ball past the infield, go to third. The very next pitch was the proof of the pudding. The ball was hit sharply, right over second base into the out field.

My new player followed my instruction exactly. He went to third base like a charging bull, but to my surprise, he didn't take the detour around second base. He went straight across the diamond, almost running down our pitcher on his way.

You see, I didn't tell him to first go to second base, and then on to third base. This is what I told him to do. Quote: "Keep your eye on the ball and if the hitter should hit the ball past the infield, go to third." That's exactly what he did, to the letter. He ran across the pitchers mound to third base. My instruction was clear to every one within earshot, except the one I was aiming at. A child often hears exactly what you say but may not grasp what you mean. Always make sure the meaning gets through. Never assume that it does.

When Tommy was thirteen, some of us old coaches tried to start a thirteen to fifteen age league. We almost made a go of it but we fell short by two teams. My partner and I decided that, if we could get a sponsor, we'd take a team to Baton Rouge. We got the sponsor. Let me explain something here. We had gotten together a list of boys who were eligible to play in the new league. Then we recruited coaches and divided the boys among the coaches. No coach could pick the best players for his team. That was to balance the league. The only exception was that a coach's could chose his son.

When the league fell through we were left with the players on our team and some of them didn't fit into the age limit in Baton Rouge. We did get a team together but we had only one pitcher and our outfield was a little weak. Our strength was pitching, catching and a good infield. I say pitching was one of our strengths because Tommy, at his age, was one of the best. However, we had no back-up or relief for him.

We played one scrimmage game before the season started. The best team in the league, "The Big Green Machine", wanted to size us up so they came to our field all dressed up in new green and white uniforms. We didn't have our uniforms yet and our boys were wearing old ragged blue jeans and worn out tennis shoes. Our sponsor was sitting in the stands and over heard a lady ask "Is this the kind of riff-raff we're playing?" When one of the riff-raff boys stole home to win the game, he turned to the lady and said. "Yes ma'am, that's the kind of riff-raff you're gonna have to play."

We went through that league like a whirlwind until just before the end of the season. We entered a two day round-robin tournament on the weekend before the last week of play. I'll remember that tournament as long as I live. Only one game was played on Saturday. All the rest were rained out. The winner of that one game was the team we had to beat. They got to sit back, Sunday, and watch us play back-to-back games all day.

We started our first game at 7:ØØ Sunday morning. We had drawn the second best team in Baton Rouge; third best counting us. At the end of regulation, five innings, the game was Ø to Ø, so we went into extra innings. In the top of the ninth inning we scored one run and went into the bottom of the ninth leading 1 to zip. Tommy wasn't used to pitching more than five innings and was getting tired. The other team had used two pitchers.

In the bottom of the ninth, they had the bases loaded with two out when their long hitter came to bat. I was praying that Tommy could keep the ball in the infield so we would have a chance at the out. No such luck. The batter hit a long fly down the left field line and I knew that if the ball stayed fair, we lose. I couldn't watch. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw our left fielder running for the ball and I closed my eyes. He had not caught a fly ball all season long. All of a sudden our fans burst into a roaring cheer. I looked to left field and there he stood, with the ball in his glove, two thirds of it showing. He had saved the game. We won it 1 to none.

Our boys had to play games back-to-back all day long until 11:ØØ that night. We were to start the title game at 11:3Ø. Our boys were tired, Tommy was exhausted and the fingers on his pitching hand were swollen around the nails. He had already pitched thirty one innings that day and the pitcher for the other team had pitched only five innings. He was well rested. We left the decision up to the boys, but we told them that if they left it to the coaches, we'd forfeit the game.

We did forfeit that game and lost the league championship the next week. Tommy's hand was so sore he couldn't grip the ball. We didn't win the league but we won the respect of the league, the players, the coaches, the umpires, the parents, and their fans. The boys were good sports and they really made us all proud of them, as a team and individually. The lady who made the ugly remark at the scrimmage game paid us a compliment. She said, "They're all gentlemen."

Let me tell you about one incident in the last game we played. We needed one out to end the game and Tommy had a two-two count on the batter. He got a foul tip on the next pitch and our catcher caught it. Tommy started off the field before he realized that the umpire did not call the batter out. The umpire said the fouled ball had to go higher than the batters head to be an out. Everyone knew that was a bad, bad call.

Now, if Tommy had a weakness in his pitching it was his tendency to pitch as hard as he thought he needed to, and no harder. After that bum call he got fired up, or maybe he was just mad. Anyway, he put the catcher on his behind with the two pitches it took for the strike-out to end the game.

That was the last time I coached Tommy. He played Little League baseball after his earlier stint in softball and when he was fifteen, he was chosen on the all-star team. He had never tried pitching baseball until he was fifteen, but he looked pretty good. His pick off move to first and second was real sneaky, and effective. Third base was his natural position in baseball. He didn't have blinding speed but he was quick and had a strong, accurate throw to first.

I went with him to the first all-star practice session. The coaches gathered the players around them and gave the usual pep talk. Almost as an after thought, one coach told those who wanted to play outfield to raise their hand. Guess who was the first to raise his hand. You're right. The best third baseman on the team; my Tommy.

After that, he played baseball and football in high school. He did play some basketball but not a lot. I think there was one football game he'll remember. Central Private was at home against a team from Opelousas. That team had one outstanding player. He played fullback on offense and linebacker on defense. He was a bull. In fact, rodeo bull riding was his hobby. He played linebacker for LSU one year before joining the rodeo circuit, full time.

That boy is the reason Tommy should remember that game. On offense he carried the ball ninety percent of the time, first around one end, then around the other. On his second carry, the Bull ran around his left end. Tommy was playing right cornerback and he hit the Bull head-on, but he hit him a tad high. Tommy was outweighed by about fifty pounds and the ball carrier had up a full head of steam. I'll let you guess who won that encounter.

It was a different story next time though. The Opelousas coach thought he'd found a real soft spot and he called the same play again. This time, Tommy took the Bull by the horns, so to speak, but instead of horns he took feet. He up-ended the Bull and caused him to plow up about five feet of turf. Tommy had stopped him cold. That boy was a heck of a football player and, after that first encounter, Tommy did himself proud. Made me proud too!

After graduating from Central Private, Tommy attended Northeast, at Monroe for one year. Then he transferred to Southeast, where he stayed one semester before enrolling at LSU.

Now, back to my thrilling life history. Shortly after returning from my stint on the left coast, I was asked to take over a Machinist Apprentice program; on the 11:00 pm to 7:00 am shift. Right back on shift again. But I had some things around the house I needed to catch up on, so it worked out. I was classified as a temporary supervisor and stayed on that assignment almost two years. Then I went out in the field for a year. From there I went to the Training Department, where I was made a permanent supervisor. That was in 1972.

1972 is also the year our first grandchild was born. November 17th Sheila gave birth to a beautiful little baby girl, Heather DeShea. Then on December 27, 1973 another beautiful little girl, Heidi DeLyn, was born. It doesn't seem possible but Heather is now twenty and Heidi is nineteen. We have thoroughly enjoyed them both, from infants to now. When Heather began talking her grandmother was transformed into "Granny", and I became "Pappy."

When I coached Tommy and his softball team, I was Coach Alderman, or just Coach. When I coached Heather and Heidi, I was Coach Pappy or just plain Pappy. I liked the plain Pappy better. I'd like to say here that I really enjoyed trying to teach those youngsters, boys and girls, how to play the game. I tried to teach them sportsmanship and stress the importance of proper behavior.

Let me digress long enough to relate some things about my short career as a girls softball coach.

I spent the next ten years between the Training Department, Rotating Equipment supervisor in the field and in Mechanical Facilities. Then in 1982 Exxon offered an early retirement plan for management personnel. I studied the plan for a while before accepting it. That was a tough decision. But, after wrestling with it for about -- three minutes, I took it. And I haven't been sorry since.

For the next five and a half years things just kept getting better. I had stopped fishing before I retired because of the proliferation of bass clubs. It got to the point where fishing for relaxation was not possible any more. So I quit fishing and took up golf. My golf game was getting better and I was really enjoying life.

December 17, 1986, Tommy graduated from LSU. He received his B.A. from the College of Arts & Science. He taught English at Central Private for one semester before resigning to accept a laboratory job with Georgia Pacific Paper Company. The job fell through due to racial quota hiring policies. He eventually got on with the Baker Police force. That's really what he wanted anyway and it's working out just fine. July 18, 1987 Tommy married Patricia Persick.

Tommy is now teaching Drug Abuse Resistance Education (D.A.R.E.) to fifth grade students. This is a very important endeavor and, according to all reports, he is doing a great job with the youngsters. If we could put a stop to the stupid busing, so students would go to their neighborhood school, the program would be far more effective. We are very proud of Tommy and Patti.

As I stated before, things were getting better for me all the time. Well, I'm sure you've heard the old saying "All good things must come to an end." Everything came to a screeching halt for me about 9:ØØ am on May 12, 1988. I was getting ready to chip to number seven green when severe chest pain stopped me. I got on my golf car and drove to Sheila's house. I remember getting in the house. The next thing I knew, I was in intensive care.

For a while there, I was in never-never-land but with the Grace of God and with His guidance of Doctors, nurses and everyone involved, I survived. Throughout the entire ordeal I had the love and devotion of a wonderful family. And once I got out of the hospital I had the devoted attention of my family, especially Granny. She's the greatest.

Let me interject something here. I haven't said much about Granny in this rambling account of my life because that is a whole new story. She has been the best wife and mother of our children that one could hope for. She has devoted her life to me, our children and grand children. I want to ask that in her final years she be cared for as she has cared for her family. I'm sure this request isn't needed but I feel better for having stated it.

Now to finish this narrative.

January 12, 199Ø Patti gave birth to our third grandchild and our only grandson; Cameron Thomas. He really gave me a lift. There can be no better therapy for an old man in the vegetation stage. Then on February 5, 1992 another bundle of joy was born to Tommy and Patti; Chelsea Elizabeth. She is just over eighteen months old now and is talking up a storm. She says "Pappy" clearly but "Granny" is still giving her some problems. I think Granny might be just a tad jealous.

In early March, 1993, it snowed in Baker. Not much, maybe a half inch, but enough stuck on cars to gather some snow balls. Louis, Sheila and Cameron had a snow ball fight. Cameron hit Louis in the face with one and that was a big deal to him. Granny caught enough in a large pan to make some snow cream. Cameron loved it and kept asking for more. We explained that it had all melted and he finally gave up.

It would be wonderful if I could live long enough to watch Cameron and Chelsea grow up like I've watched Heather and Heidi. I think my chances of doing that are slim-to-none, but if tender-loving-care will do the job I'll make it. That decision is in the hands of God.

Well, I guess that's about it. I left out a lot of things but you probably were bored stiff before you finished reading this. If you forget everything else you read here, please remember this, always, and know that I am sincere: I LOVE YOU ALL!

August 25, 1993.

With all my Love,

Pappy

Addendum: February 23,1998:

March 9, 1995 Carlianne was born to Tommy and Patti. She is a beautiful little blonde headed, blue eyed girl who will be three on 3/9/98

September 16,1996 Hayden DeShea, our only great grandchild, was born to Freddie and Heidi Burton. She is a pretty little girl and we enjoy her a lot. She'll be two on 9/16/98

February 5, 1997 Cory J was born to Tommy and Patti. He is a fine, blonde headed, blue eyed baby boy who was one year old 2/5/98