

Essay by George Makris (Falls Church, VA), 2010-2011 Scholarship Awardee

When my grandpa, George W. Mueller, passed away, I was a freshman in high school. At 14 years old, you're caught somewhere in between a boy & a man. Losing him at that age was a huge shock to me. Not just because of how fast it happened or the heart-wrenching feeling that somehow things would never be quite the same. It was also the realization that there were a lot of conversations that we would never get to have & stories we would never get to share. All my memories of him are happy ones. Building my first snowman, the way he hugged me, his laugh. He was Grandpa & I was his "Little Buddy". I wish that I had been able to talk with him about the time he spent at Kunming but, unfortunately, we ran out of time. Unfortunately, I don't recall him ever telling me any stories about the time he spent with the 69th DRS in China. It may have been because so much time had passed or perhaps, in his eyes, I was simply too young.

I am thankful that an organization such as The Flying Tigers 69th DRS Association exists to keep that history alive so that I have been able to learn about it, meet men who served with my grandfather, & in some sense, hear the stories that he never got to share with me.

When my grandfather joined the war effort in early 1945, it was for the same reason that many enlisted to serve for the United States of America during WWII. It was simply their patriotic duty. Like my grandfather, many of the men who enlisted left behind their families & loved ones in order to do their part in protecting the freedoms we enjoy everyday. Sometimes that even meant delaying the promise of marriage.

The 301st Air Depot Group was created in late 1944, with the 69th DRS being developed as a rear operations maintenance & salvage group for the 14th Air Force, US Army Corp. The "14th's mission was to provide necessary air support to keep China in the war." One could say that the mission was accomplished with great success, but the road to success was a long and treacherous one.

The journey of the 69th DRS began in San Antonio, Texas at Kelly Field. The 69th DRS "included maintenance and supply officers, sheet metal mechanics, bomb site mechanics, gun site mechanics, small engine repairmen, welders, motor pool drivers, auto mechanics, parachute specialists, oxygen technicians, orderly room and mail clerks, cooks, general maintenance mechanics, general aviation mechanics, crew chiefs and various other specialists. The key role for them was to maintain Army Air Corp fighter planes, transports and bombers."

The 69th DRS left Kelly field on February 16, 1945. Their destination was Camp Anza in Riverside, CA. Once there, they prepared themselves for the certainty of travel overseas, although their destination was unknown. In less than 2 weeks, the 320 men of the 69th DRS were aboard the USS Benson & endured a 2½ week journey to Melbourne, Australia. Two days later, on the 16th of March, the Benson set sail again. It wasn't until several days later that the men of the 69th DRS learned of their ship's final destination... Bombay, India.

After having just left the bitter cold that can accompany even a California winter, the men immediately found themselves trying to adapt to their new surroundings physically, as well as mentally. However strange the sights & sounds that greeted them, to have two feet firmly planted on solid ground must have been a great relief. That relief must, also, have been short lived. In spite of all the weeks of uncertainty & trepidation that had already passed, the men still had a rather arduous journey ahead.

The Benson arrived in Bombay (Mumbai) at 11 AM on March 27th. The heat & humidity were some of the first obstacles that needed to be overcome by a squadron still wearing the winter wool uniforms they had left California with. Nearly ten hours later, the men were boarded onto trains for a seven day rail ride to Camp Kamcharapara in Calcutta (Kolkata). Upon their arrival, the men were able to disembark and have a moment to reflect on the blur of faces & scenery that had already passed by. Some surely questioned why they were there, or even strained to comprehend where they were. However disorienting, the men still displayed the sort of kindness & generosity of spirit which can only be described as selfless. To the people in need they met, they gave as much as they could.

Their stay at Camp Kamcharapara lasted nearly 3 weeks, after which the men left to drive the Burma Road to Kunming, China. The squadron departed in 3 separate convoys of approximately seventy-five 2½ ton army trucks, beginning on Saturday, April 21st and ending on Monday, April 23rd.

On “Friday April 20th, the guys found out if they were a driver or passenger.” My grandfather drew the lot as one of the drivers. The journey to Kunming Airfield covered 1800 miles & took an arduous 30 days. During the trip, the men of the 69th were exposed to many “sights that were unfamiliar to Yankee eyes”, most of which have not been forgotten. To see the caste system & lepers of India, the tropical jungles of Burma & then pass over the highest mountain range in the world must have been quite an experience. Amazing but terrifying...

By the time my grandfather traveled the Burma Road in 1945 it was already a well established military route, however, it was not without its dangers. As the documentary “Mud, Sweat, & Gears” recalls, “the veterans of the run told you it would be like this. Mud & grades to test the last ounce of power & strength in motors, gears, tires & men.” The men never knew what may await them on the long road ahead. At times they passed through open country that was free of the “valley landslides & sodden washouts by the jungle streams.” Minutes later they could find themselves navigating narrow switchbacks that left them traveling feet from the edge cliffs that, sometimes, plummeted thousands of feet. “All I had to do was keep it steady and not panic,” recalls one of the men. Despite these challenges, the men of the 69th drew upon the courage inside them, their overwhelming sense of duty, & the brotherhood they forged mile by mile, to complete the journey.

The end of May heralded the arrival of most men of the 69th DRS to Kunming Airfield. A long journey, had already been undertaken, full of hardships & dangers, but their true mission was just beginning. The next three months were focused on making every effort to drive the Japanese out of China. In no small part, the men of the 14th were also protecting the lifeline that had tested & united them - an ancient highway called the Burma Road.

It is easy to glamorize the accomplishments of a few & allow the full scope of the effort that was made, during those final months of the war, to fade into history. The Flying Tigers of the 14th were instrumental in “shifting the outcome [of the war] by having troops behind the lines and opening up the Burma Road for transporting of supplies.” At the end of WWII, the 14th “had achieved air superiority over the skies of China and established a ratio of 7.7 enemy planes destroyed for every American plane lost in combat.” Estimates by the United States Army Air Corps credit the 14th with “the destruction of 2,315 Japanese aircraft, 356 bridges, 1,225 locomotives and 712 railroad cars.” During WWII it has been estimated by military officials that “over 4,000 Japanese planes were destroyed or damaged.” Additionally, it is estimated that “air units in China destroyed 1,100,000 tons of shipping, 1,079 locomotives, 4,836 trucks and 580 bridges.” Simply comparing the official numbers is a clear indication of exactly how effective the 14th was at carrying out their missions. It is important to keep in mind, however, that those accomplishments were only possible because of the support & steadfast determination of many thousands of men who, sometimes, sacrificed everything to do their part.

The arrival of the 69th D.R.S. at Kunming was, for the most part, a relief to the men. It’s very difficult to imagine what may have been going through their minds as they endured the long, difficult, & secretive journey there. My grandmother, Virginia Mueller, has recalled that, for many months, she could only wait for word from my grandfather. Arrival in Kunming marked the end of that waiting. The letters slowly began to arrive in many households across the United States, allowing loved ones to breathe a sigh of relief, temporary though it may have been.

The men could finally settle in to the airfield that they would call home for several months, but there was no rest for them. Everyone had a duty to perform that was vital to the success of their mission and, ultimately, the war. My grandfather was one of the men responsible for the production of oxygen needed by the pilots. This was not a glamorous duty, but one that was undeniably vital. Due to the highly volatile nature of that process, the oxygen manufacturing took place at a rather sizeable distance from the rest of the airfield operations. Unfortunately, that kept him from forging some of the friendships that other men at Kunming were able to.

When the war ended in August, the only duty standing between the men & a long awaited trip home was “to close down America’s operations in inner China.” Some of the aircraft & equipment was flown out, but the rest was destroyed. The destruction of remaining equipment & supplies was only conducted because “it was assumed the

communists would take over their part of China as quick as they pulled out so nothing of value was to be left.”

It was at this time that the 69th D.R.S. was officially disbanded. Some of the men were able to set sail for home. Others were “assigned to the 1353rd MP Company in Shanghai.” My grandfather was one of the men whose duty was to essentially “close up shop” at Kunming. There was aircraft & equipment that needed to be disassembled, in addition to the need for a continued military police presence to ensure the men who remained could be safe while doing so. According to my grandmother, providing that aspect of security was not only my grandfather’s final mission of the war; it was also the reason why he didn’t return home until months after he was originally supposed to.

My grandparents were engaged in October of 1943, but it wasn’t until December 7th of 1946 that they were married. They spent nearly a year of their engagement separated by thousands of miles of uncertainty as to what future they would be allowed to have. I find it inspiring that neither time, nor distance, could quell their love for each other. That dedication is echoed by the efforts of the men of the 69th, whose love of our country could not be swayed.

I often think about my grandfather and the time that death cheated us out of, but The Flying Tigers 69th DRS Association has helped & inspired me to learn more about his role in preserving the freedoms and way of life that we hold dear. The efforts made by every last man of the 14th Air Force should be respected. They threw themselves into the fire, wrapped only in the blanket of patriotism, and emerged triumphant. “Their efforts in China are to this day honored by the very old and the young. The Chinese people know that if it were not for the support of the men of the 14th Air Force, their country and the world might be very different today.” I couldn’t agree more. Thank you to the 69th D.R.S., 301st Air Depot Group, 14th Air Force, & any man who risked his life for our freedoms during WWII. I salute you all!