

Tom Marshall's Weekly News, September 5, 2016

Diversification in the Army Air Force: On December 11, 1942, I was sworn into something called the Enlisted Reserve Corps, from which one could apply for weather forecasting (and a lot of other things). I was accepted in an Air Force program called "Meteorology B," which meant there would be six accelerated months of pre-meteorology training, and eight plus months of the real thing that followed. On March 15, 1943, a telegram advised me to report to Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island, immediately. I arrived in civilian clothes, but the army training unit was not there yet, and Brown's campus seemed deserted. A Tech/4th Class named Prime gave me a place to sleep in a very old dormitory and told me I could eat in the school's cafeteria. In the next couple of days, Dick Ramsey of Lexington, Kentucky, arrived as I had, equally confused. Then one night we were awakened in the wee hours when about 150 buck privates, direct from Basic Training at Clearwater, Florida, arrived and crowded into two dormitory buildings. This was to be my class and several became close friends. For at least a week, however, I was the only one marching with them in civilian clothes, and the authorities never realized that I never had Basic Training (eventually a uniform was forthcoming, but it didn't fit very well).

During my four years in the service, I never served with anyone from Delaware. However, in my 22-man unit at Brown (which we were soon advised to call a "flight") were five from the Philadelphia area: Carl Brandt, Wally Sonntag, Bob White, Jerry Haas, and Aaron Cohen. Several times we rode the train as far as Philadelphia together on a 36-hour weekend pass, which was granted once a month. Those in our Flight at Providence who lived farthest from home were Dale Richter from Wiggins, Colorado; George Thompson of Galesburg, Illinois; Martin Polhemus of Ames, Iowa; Ed O'Brien of St. Louis; and Dick Ramsey of Lexington, Kentucky. About ¾ of us made it through Pre-Meteorology, and moved on to Meteorology "A" at M.I.T. in late September 1943. The western fellows were assigned to Chanute Field at Rantoul, Illinois, for the final eight months leading to commissions. Whereas we had been buck privates at Brown, we were now Aviation Cadets and got paid \$75 per month instead of \$50. The boys from Brown joined those who had a similar course at M.I.T., and the combined class had a total of about 225 who became second lieutenants on June 5, 1944, the day before "D" Day in Europe. I really didn't pick up many new friends at M.I.T. Those of us from Brown seemed to be roomed together in the M.I.T. dorms, and we enjoyed sticking together. On the day we were commissioned, five other schools in the country each graduated about the same number of weather forecasters, so we flooded the market. M.I.T. and N.Y.U. in the East, Chanute Field and the University of Chicago in the Midwest, and Cal. Tech and U.C.L.A. in the West all had similar meteorology programs. Upon graduation, I was sent to Roswell, New Mexico, as were new lieutenants Harrison Munro from Illinois and a fellow named Goodman, both graduates of the Midwest schools. Of all my friends from the service, more than 90% were single, but a few were married. We had to be in uniform at all times.

At the Weather Station on Roswell Army Airfield, about 25 men were assigned, of whom about eight were forecasters, 12 or so were weather observers, and the remaining were recordkeeping "tactical" personnel. We needed one mechanical man at the station to keep our teletype machine in good operation. These fellows were from all over the country, and some became good friends. Anthony Rippo, an observer from San Pedro, California, and I visited back and forth and kept in touch until his death less than a year ago.

When I joined a 10-man B-24 crew to fly weather reconnaissance missions in the western Pacific, a new set of friends surfaced. Planning to train together at Will Rogers Field in Oklahoma City, my crew, nearly complete, arrived soon after I did from their basic flight school at Mountain Home, Idaho. The pilot was 28-year-old Dalton F. Newton of Lakeland, Florida, who had graduated from the Citadel in Charleston, South Carolina, and had joined the regular army in 1940. The co-pilot was Charles E. "Chuck" Fake from Ilion, New York. Our navigator was Theodore J. "Jack" or "Honest John" Furry of Kansas City, and the Flight Engineer was Seth S. Sparkes of Saginaw, Michigan. The three waist gunners were Robert F. Wagoner and John V. Freymann, both from California, and Norman A. "Jake" Jahaske of Belvidere, Illinois. The tail gunner was Stanley J. Gloede of Mount Clemens, Michigan, at 18 the youngest on our crew.

While at Will Rogers Field, we were joined by Earl M. Alkek of Victoria, Texas, who was to be our radar operator. Radar was brand new on weather planes, and fronts, thunderheads, and other special phenomena could be spotted on a small screen. Unfortunately, the radar equipment malfunctioned on most planes in our squadron, so it was never used, and the radar man had no job but to ride along with us. I was the weather observer and nose gunner. Newton was a first lieutenant; Fake, Furry, and I were second lieutenants; and Alkek was a warrant officer. The other five crew members were enlisted men. The Air Force was the most informal of the services, and much of the time the 10 of us shared and shared alike. At the larger bases and more permanent headquarters, however, we were five and five, except when we were in the airplane, and the system was weighted heavily in favor of the commissioned officers. The 10 of us were very close and shared experiences for eight months at Will Rogers Field, Hunter Field near Savannah, Mather Field at Sacramento, Barking Sands on Kauai, Harmon Field on Guam, and on Iwo Jima and Okinawa, but I never saw any of them again after our squadron broke up in the fall of 1945. Christmas cards were exchanged for a few years.

As described, my friends from World War II service were not local to this area. Although there must be others, I know of only one who is alive, Wallace E. Sonntag, age 95, a native of Philadelphia, who now lives with his wife in a retirement facility in Saratoga Springs, New York.