

Notes from the 1987 WWII Reunion
of the 47th Bombardment Group (Light)
in Long Beach, California

by

Dave Tolle
(Donald MacDavid Tolle)

[Note: the portions in square brackets, [], were added in October, 1999, some from notes taken from conversations with John Murphy in October, 1988, and some from other recollections.]

Sunday, May 24, 1987 --- Los Angeles Airport, 6:00pm

My flight back to Houston is being delayed an hour or so, until 8:00pm. So I'll arrive at Hobby after 1:00 am, and be in bed by 2:00am, I hope. Mom and Dad [Mary Alice McNeill Tolle and Donald James Tolle] are flying home from the Long Beach airport at 6:50pm, intending to spend the night in St. Louis, then drive home tomorrow [to Carbondale, Illinois].

We've been out here for a reunion of the 47th Bombardment Group (Light), Dad's WWII outfit. I'd told them I couldn't come, then decided a couple of days before it started to fly out and surprise them. So I flew into LAX Friday night, rented a car, drove down to Long Beach, finding my way to Ocean Blvd, guessing I should turn left, and soon finding myself at the Ramada hotel. Walked in, followed the signs to the 47th reunion, spotted Junior [Ed Tolle, Dad's younger brother, who also served in the 47th Bomb Group], then Kay [Junior's wife], and went with them to Mom and Dad's room. Knocked, Mom answered---I was standing out of sight---and I peered around at Mom and was rewarded with a look of complete wonderment, bewilderment, and surprise, and then delight. Dad was still somewhere downstairs, talking with friends, so I went down, stepped off the elevator, and there he was, waiting to get on, talking to someone. He didn't see me, so I stepped up, held out my hand, and said "How ya doin'?" He shook hands before recognizing me, then did a fine imitation of Mom's reaction: "Dave?!? You said you couldn't come!" And everyone made me feel welcome.

The festivities were pretty much over for the evening when I arrived. We arranged for a cot to be brought into their room. (Costa [Chalas] insisted on billing it to the general account.) And Mom and Dad and I talked awhile, I gave them a few little items from my trip to The Hague and England, and we turned in.

On Saturday we decided not to go on the big all-day tour with the group to some air museums, but went with a smaller group of friends to the Queen Mary and the Spruce Goose. Mom and Dad and I, Junior and Kay, Bill Boiselle and his wife [Vangie], Ted Schroth and his wife, Elmer and Helen Garrison, and one other couple (I can't recall who). Dad had gone to Europe on the Queen Mary in September of 1942 with about

10,000 other troops. Incredibly crowded. Slept on bunks that were stacked from floor to ceiling, so closely spaced you couldn't turn over in bed. Slept in shifts. Thousands on the decks. Dad hadn't seen the ship since then and was frankly disappointed that the WWII display on board didn't show the bunks the way they'd been. They looked fairly spacious and uncrowded, not at all the way they should have been.

Didn't get to see as much of the ship as we'd have liked, since several of the folks were having trouble walking. Mom's arthritis in her knees keeps her from walking much. Elmer Garrison got banged up when he had to bail out once in WWII, and his legs are in bad shape now, probably from that. And of course all in the group but me are in their sixties, at least. Helen Garrison (stage name Klebe) is eighty, but could pass for sixty or so. (She was on "TheWaltons" TV show for years, as one of the two old-maid Baldwin sisters.)

The Queen Mary made 1001 Atlantic crossings in her career, and many of those were troop crossings during the war, carrying as many as 16,860-some people on one trip. She crossed without an escort, since she was too fast for the escorts to keep up. She zigged and zagged every few minutes, and on Dad's trip went 1000 miles out of the way to avoid a U-boat nest.

On a trip in early October 1942, a couple of weeks after Dad's trip, she sliced across a friendly escort as she neared the British Isles, sinking that ship and killing about 300 men. She continued on without stopping, since her captain was under strict orders not to hesitate and endanger the lives of the 10,000 men on board. (Other escorts arrived and saved about 100 men.)

Four of us went over and saw the Spruce Goose for a few minutes, while some others sat and rested and waited for us. The largest plane ever built. Flown just once, for about a mile, at 75 feet off the water, by its builder, Howard Hughes.

Returned to hotel, rested, showed Mom and Dad some recent pictures (from Europe, and my department).

Then to the "gala banquet" Saturday evening. What a crowded hallway! 300 or so of us, standing packed outside the banquet hall for 30 minutes or more, waiting for the doors to be opened. Everyone was pressing toward the doors, knowing there hadn't been enough seats the previous evening. And we waited and waited, past the appointed hour, all these sixty-five-year-olds, standing on arthritic knees. Dad and I were surrounded by women, packed shoulder to shoulder. People stayed remarkably cheerful, talking and laughing. Dad turned to me once and laughingly said, "The only safe place for your hands here is in your pockets." (Anywhere else, they'd be touching something they shouldn't.)

Mom got to feeling faint, but wouldn't sit down. (The nearest chair was only two or three people away, but things were so tight it would have taken a bit of effort to get to it.) Fortunately, the doors opened before she got too bad off, and the meal was really good and she recovered after awhile.

Dad had kept a diary during the war, and had transcribed it---and some other things he wrote during the war---with a great deal of effort over the last year or so, partly at my urging. It's a fascinating document, one man's day-to-day perspective of the war in North Africa, Sicily, and Italy. He didn't wish to cause anyone any pain, so he carefully produced a slightly expurgated version, leaving out a few names here and there to protect the guilty, so to speak. And he got 150 copies made, and shipped them here, and turned them over to Costa, for distribution to all those who might want one. Dad paid for it all himself, and refused any suggestion of any reimbursement. He has a great distaste for putting himself in the position of even appearing to wish to profit from any such endeavor, or of even appearing to want to thrust his writings upon anyone. He would be uncomfortable---miserable, really---if he were put in the position of standing around trying to give out copies of the diary. (And I guess I take after my old man---so would I, if it were mine.) So he turned it over to Costa, who turned it over to two of the guys, who didn't do much of anything about it, until finally, at the very end of the Saturday night banquet, after the meal, after the entertainment, after the raffles and the announcements and the honors, just as the MC was about to close the session, *finally* Costa raised his hand and said he had one more thing to bring up. And he went to the mike and told everyone about Donald Tolle's diary, that it was fascinating, and that there were not quite enough copies to go around, so they'd give them first to Dad's squadron (the 97th) and then to others who wanted them, and they'd make more copies if necessary.

And he said two or three times how fascinating it was. And he finished by saying that the wives shouldn't read it (hoping to pique their curiosity, I suppose), because it kept no secrets. So it was a nice little off-the-cuff announcement, and was sincere (mostly) and came just in the nick of time to head off some serious exasperation on the part of both my parents (and me). Dad was still upset that it had sounded like it would be of interest mainly to those in the 97th (though I didn't get that impression from what Costa said). And we were all disappointed that it had been handled in such a disorganized way---it wasn't clear when and where people would get them. We all went back to the room feeling a bit upset, relieved that the announcement had finally been made, but wishing it had been done a day earlier.

A short time later, I said I'd like to go down to the "PX" and see what mementos the 47th BG had for sale, so Dad took me down to show me where it was. And then I said I'd like to go on down to the lobby and see if anything was going on there, so Dad came along. And Costa had been down there, busily handing out copies of the diary, so quite a few people did get them Saturday night.

And one of Dad's friends approached us, with another guy in tow, both holding copies of the diary, and the friend asked if Dad remembered Murphy, motioning to the other guy. "Murphy? The gunner who got shot down and taken prisoner?" And indeed it was: John Murphy, the subject of one of the most striking passages of the diary.

On March 27, 1944, two planes of the 97th squadron were shot down on a mission. One chute was seen to open from each plane. Murphy was a gunner on one of the planes. He'd been with the 97th for just a couple of weeks. The entire crew was assumed dead.

On July 16, 1944, Dad was on duty in Operations at about 2200 hours when he had the surprise of his life: Murphy walked in, very much alive, having escaped a German prison camp and made his way back through the lines.

So Dad and I (and later Junior) stood and talked for an hour or more with Murphy. Really something. I remembered having been struck by that passage in the diary when I read it some months ago. Dad found the spot in the diary where he noted that the planes had been shot down (and listing the names of those on board). And then the spot describing Murphy's return. And read them aloud.

And Murphy pulled out a plastic bag, and pulled from it a piece of the parachute he'd been wearing when he bailed out. He'd been captured immediately when he landed, having been hurt in the explosion and the fall. The other two from his plane were also captured, and two from the other plane, and two others were killed. They were interrogated. He asked for a piece of his chute, and they obliged, and he kept it while a prisoner, and left it later with a friendly Italian family who helped him hide out. And three weeks ago he went back, and they had kept that piece of parachute for 43 years for him, and that's how he came to have it with him last night.

He also asked for the D ring from the chute, so he could join the "caterpillar club," and the Germans went out in the field and helped him look for it, but he couldn't find it.

All the other captured fliers were sent almost immediately to the northern part of Germany, but Murphy had been injured, so he was sent to a hospital and then to a prison camp in Italy. About 3800 men were being held there. Escape tunnels were being built, but they were found out, so Murphy decided to use an idea from "The Count of Monte Cristo." He'd read the book and seen the movie, and decided to hide himself in a garbage sack. He went to the American leader in the camp and described his plan, and got all the support he needed. Sewed garbage to the outside of the bag, hid himself in it, in the garbage box, which got taken outside the camp to a nearby dump. Cut the bag open with a razor, sneaked over to an adjoining wheat field, and hid for awhile. Heard footsteps coming along a path through the field. It was the camp commander, walking to his house outside the camp. Murphy was close enough to have reached out and grabbed his ankle, and he thought, "I could kill this son of a bitch," but he also thought, "They could capture me again," so he lay low.

His escape came about six weeks after his capture. As I understand it, he walked about 40 km, over a period of time, and eventually found some friendly Italians who hid him, two Englishmen, two Belgians, and an Italian. He stayed with them until the Allies advanced through the village in the valley below. Then he made his way to friendly forces, almost got assigned to another outfit, but he wanted to get back to the 47th, and

somebody scratched his name out and told him to go ahead. Didn't know where they were anymore, of course (it had been 3½ months), but finally found a pilot who said they were just down the road from his outfit in Corsica, and he flew Murphy there. (It turned out to be 40 or 50 km down the road.) So he finally walked in about 10 o'clock the night of July 16 and surprised my Dad, who recognized him immediately, and excitedly informed a couple of officers.

[The Germans never missed Murphy, because the prisoners routinely caused the prisoner-count to vary up and down by 20 or 30, so the Germans never knew how many prisoners they had.]

Murphy was shipped home shortly thereafter, and Dad never saw him again until last night. He lives in Kettering, Ohio, has a wife (he was widowed for seven years, then remarried) and four children, three by the first wife (ages 30 to 36 now) and one, age 9, by the second wife [Barbara]. He's semi-retired from the model-building business. Builds any kind of model---ships, airplanes, crash dummies. Worked for the federal government for years doing this, then had his own business, with 8 or 10 or 12 full-time people and maybe 30 part-time, and now takes on jobs occasionally.

[He built a flotation device, a "horse collar," for the space capsules, after Gus Grissom nearly drowned. He'd suggested the idea much earlier for use on planes on carriers, but was turned down. The federal government couldn't find a record of his idea in his files, although they found other ideas before it and after it. So they used it for the space capsules, without crediting him. He also invented a flotation device for a plane whose whole cockpit would eject. Did he get a patent on it? No. Why not? "Stupidity," he said.]

He tells some interesting stories. While he was making his way behind enemy lines, he came one night to a slope leading down to a small river. Found himself on top of gasoline drums, camouflaged by branches, then noticed a German with a rifle, about fifty feet away to his right, then another nearby on his left. There was a rowboat tied up by the shore, and a wire run across the river, to stop anyone who tried to move a boat up or down river. Murphy sneaked down to the boat, untied it, lay down in it and pulled himself and the boat hand over hand across the river. Then tied the boat up over there to keep it from floating away and attracting attention. And continued on his way.

Dad asked if the barrels contained gasoline. Murphy said he assumed so. Dad asked (jokingly) why he hadn't set them afire. Murphy said he guessed he should have, but he just wanted to get away. Dad assured him he had been kidding.

I took a few pictures of him, which I promised to send to him. Really an interesting and friendly guy, who seemed to enjoy talking about it all. He said that the whole journey seemed to be automatic, inevitable, that it just had to happen the way it did, that now when he thinks back on it, it seems like he's watching himself do it, as if it all happened to someone else.

When he went back over there a few weeks ago to retrace his steps, he found the people who had helped him---several families, I think---and they remembered him well, and showered him with kindnesses, and remembered details that he had forgotten, and helped him find some of the places he'd been---that river, for instance. And it had all changed, and he knew it was where he'd been, but it didn't look familiar.

[Murphy and Francis Savontis (?) were friends who joined the army at the same time. When Murphy returned, Francis was MIA. Murphy went to see Mrs. Savontis, Francis's mother. She said she knew Murphy would return, but didn't believe Francis would. She told of seeing Murphy in her sewing room, sitting on a boulder, drawing an alpha-shaped symbol with a stick, at dusk, looking down a long valley toward a distant lake. Murphy says it exactly matched the scene in Italy where he hid out after his escape. Every day at dusk he would go to the boulder, and think of home, and draw in the sand. And he'd never told a soul about it.]

Murphy didn't really remember Dad last night---he'd been with the squadron only a short time. He'd been shot down on his fourth mission. But as he talked, the name Tolle suddenly rang a bell, and he mentioned a yellow sheet of paper that he has at home listing all of the flight crews, and he's pretty sure now that Dad wrote it out for him, at his request [in 1944]. He's going to send a copy to Dad.

When his plane got hit, Kuckenbecker (the other gunner?) was stunned by the impact. There was flak embedded in his flak jacket, and he was dazedly pulling at his ripcord. Murphy got him out of the plane, and he was okay. Murphy's own chute started to open in the plane, and I think it was a very close call, and he hit the ground about the time the chute opened. The plane went down "like a log," he said.

The Germans who shot them down showed them their "trophy case," a door from the first plane their outfit had shot down, inscribed with the details of all the planes they'd shot down. They'd been all over the place during the war, including North Africa, Russia, and Italy.

He told us about a couple of Italian boys that he and the Englishmen had taught some English to, and how one of the boys told him, as the American troops were about to enter the town, that he'd really fixed things up for the troops. "What do you mean?" asked Murphy. The boy replied that he had taught the Italian girls in the town what greeting to yell to the American soldiers: "F*ck *me*!" "True story," Murphy told us, "True story."

He has a K20 camera at home, that he bought as surplus. He asked if I'd like to have it. Says he'll pack it up sometime and send it to Dad, to give to me. It's the kind of camera that they used in the A-20s. And he gave Dad a sterling silver A-20 tie tack that he'd bought at Wright-Patterson AFB in Dayton (I think).

[Murphy was a founder of the Aviation Hall of Fame. He had (as of 1988) a swatch of cloth(?) from the wing of the plane the Wright Brothers first flew. He also had a piece of the first plane to fly across the U.S.; the first to fly non-stop across the U.S.; the first to

fly across the Atlantic; and the first to fly around the world. He knew the niece and nephew of the Wright Brothers. One died in 1988 or shortly before that. The other, as of 1988, was the last relative who knew Uncle Orv and Uncle Wil well.]

I'd hoped that Donald Beetum would be at the reunion. I'm named for him (among others). But he wasn't there. [I did get to meet him at a later reunion.] Nor was Tony Molina, Judy Popelas's father. [I had met him at an earlier reunion. Judy and I have been good friends since graduate school at UNC Chapel Hill in the 1970s.] And, of course, we knew Mac McLaughlin wouldn't come (another one whose name I carry). [Mac did come to a later reunion. I'm named for Donald Beetum, Wilmer D. (Mac) McLaughlin, and Dave Frieze---Dad's three best friends during the war.]

I did enjoy meeting Tommy Tutt and seeing Bill Boiselle and Ted Schroth and Ed Tolle (Junior) again. And it was good to meet Elmer Garrison and his wife Helen Klebe. She has a face that looks familiar to most people. Mom and Dad particularly treasure her cameo role in "The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas." She seems awfully nice, and so does he.

Despite the late hour at which the copies of the diary were given out last night, a number of people had read the first 15 pages or so by this morning, and really seemed to be enjoying reading it. "I just couldn't put it down," said one woman. "It sure sounds familiar," said one man. I'd heard WWII tales from Dad all my life, but it wasn't until I read the diary a few months ago that I really appreciated how primitive the living conditions were, and how much *danger* they were in with the bombing and strafing. I'm sure that the men and their wives are going to enjoy and appreciate the diary, and I hope some of them let Dad know.

He inscribed a copy for Akers (his C.O.), saying he had *respected* him *then* and *liked* him *now*, and it brought tears to Akers's eyes.

I should suggest that he send a copy to Beetum and Mac (which he probably already intends to do) and to Tony Molina.

This morning at breakfast, Dad and I sat next to a man named Dillon, who was clutching a copy of the diary. Dad wondered whether Dillon had gotten yellow jaundice and been taken to the hospital along with Dad, who had malaria. Indeed he had, and they had a fine time looking that up in the diary and reading it. "That's just the way it happened!" said Dillon. And Dad was pleased. And I believe that Mom and Dad and I and Dillon and his wife had stood beside each other at a bus stop in San Antonio at the reunion there three years ago, and talked for 10 or 15 minutes, without anyone realizing then that Dad and Dillon had once taken a bad ride in an ambulance together.

[As of October, 1999, I know the following to be living: Mary Alice Tolle, Ed Tolle, and Kay Tolle. I know the following to be deceased: Donald James Tolle (1918-1993), John

Murphy (about 1989?), Don Beetum, Dave Frieze (1960s?), Vangie Boiselle (mid-1990s), and Bill Boiselle (1999).]

End of Notes