

Oklahoma City, Oklahoma
March 21, 1987

Dear Mr. Strong:

I have returned the postcard with the additional information you requested and the list of names of members of the 1628th Ordnance Company for the picture you published. This is just the follow-up letter I promised.

I realize that what is to follow here will be of little or no significance to the greater story of Station 111, and I'm sure in your capacity as historian you have heard many more exciting stories from the people who were there. However, if you can stand one more, I would like to chronicle this former GI's trail in and out of Thurleigh. Just "indulge the old man," it will be greatly appreciated.

The dates I give you here were retrieved from a diary (which we were encouraged not to keep, as I remember) and are fairly reliable; my memory (not very reliable); and my Army discharge papers (very reliable).

I volunteered in the U. S. Air Force about three weeks after Pearl Harbor (December 30, 1941) after I tried to enlist in a Navy flight training program and was disqualified. After induction at Fort Sill, Oklahoma, I was immediately shipped to Will Rogers Field in Oklahoma City and assigned to an Ordnance cadre for training. After six months of training in Air Corps Ordnance (bomb and ammo handling and storage, and repair and maintenance of 30- and 50-caliber machine guns). On June 9, 1942, I was given detached duty to a bombing range in northwest Oklahoma. Principal duty there was to disarm or deactivate the fuses of the black powder spotting charges in unexploded practice bombs.

On September 1, 1942, I rejoined the cadre at Will Rogers Field and on September 3rd, we were sent to Alamogordo, New Mexico. There we acquired more personnel and a company commander, Lt. Lester G. Williams. Still not up to company strength, we left Alamogordo September 19, 1942, and two days later arrived in Fort Dix, New Jersey where we were processed for overseas duty.

We were transported from Fort Dix to New York Harbor in the middle of the night (September 23, 1942) and put on board the Strotholland (sp?), a ship of British Registry with a Hindu deck and engine room crew, and British and Canadian officers. (The Strotholland was later sunk in the invasion of North Africa.) We sailed north from New York Harbor to Halifax Harbor, Nova Scotia, where we became part of a convoy that reached as far as you could see in any direction. With Navy escort, we proceeded to take the northern route by way of Iceland. The seas were rough and we were on British rations. Meaning no disrespect for the British, but Kippers in oil with bread and butter for breakfast will give you second thoughts about ever eating again.

We were told the convoy could only go as fast as the slowest ship (reasonable) and that we were probably averaging ten to twelve knots per hour. The rumors of German wolf-packs were rampant. Ships on the outer edges were being picked off every day (according to the latest rumor) and there may have been some, I never knew for sure. But you could still find a crap game almost anywhere, any time. There was American money, Canadian money,

British money and Hindu money in the games. Most of the Players had no idea what the exchange rate was (and at that point, didn't really care) so they would throw a pound note out and say, "I bet this piece of paper!"

We docked in Glasgow, Scotland, October 8, 1942 and left immediately for Thurleigh. When we arrived, we were billeted in tents just across the road from the basefall field adjacent to the Officers B Mess. The mist and fog was thick, nothing was dry, the temperature was chilling to the bone, and we were still on British rations. We had been upgraded, however. Now it was baked beans on toast for breakfast. For an old farm boy accustomed to having three fresh eggs, a half-dozen slices of bacon or a half-pound of pork sausage with all the good stuff that goes with it, that was a very traumatic experience to say the least.

I don't recall the exact date we got back on American chow, but I do recall that I was never happier to see powdered eggs in my life (and needless to say, I don't care for powdered eggs.)

I got acquainted with a "mafia type" GI from Brooklyn a couple of months after arriving at Thurleigh who had made "connections" He sold me one fresh egg for 10 shillings (two bucks then, or in that range.) I fried it with a little black market butter in my mess kit on one of those coal stoves in the huts. It was the best damned meal I ever had!--no exceptions!

Fortunately the tent life only lasted a couple of days for me. I was moved into a little building located in the middle of the bomb dump that served as an office and check-out point for bombs, fuses and ammo being brought in or removed from the dump. I spent the next three or four months there. It wasn't a big improvement, but at least it was dry.

During the latter part of October 1942 after the first mission, there was a spell of inactivity as you know while the weather settled into acceptable flying conditions. Someone at headquarters said they needed some practice missions. We didn't have enough practice bombs for what they had in mind, so another Sergeant and I "borrowed" a British Air Corps "lorry" to bring some in. Since this was one of those half-way midnight requisitions (with a little help from the other base), we went after dark. Neither of us had ever driven a right-hand drive vehicle, the roads weren't built even for British lorries, it was raining and it was BLACK OUT, the kind I'm sure you remember well. Our destination was Kimbalton and there were no signs, of course. I'm convinced the Sergeant with me had built-in radar, otherwise, there is no way we could have made it.

When we got there and loaded up, we felt like we were in good shape. We started back and kept congratulating each other on the success of the trip. We were supposed to go through a guard gate shortly after we left the dump. We didn't come to a gate. We had a nice wide road and we just kept driving. We decided we had somehow left the base without going through the guard post. Then with what little light we had, we began to see landmarks that were either exactly the same or being repeated, so we stopped. That is when a British soldier on a motorcycle came roaring up and informed us we had been driving around-and-around the perimeter of his "air drome" for the last 30 minutes and he would be happy to escort "you bloody yanks off the base and back onto the road!"

In November, we had a pleasant diversion when Martha Ray and her group came by to do a little entertaining. I don't recall what they did, it was enough just to see them. I was fortunate enough to be passing by the jeep carrying Martha Ray, and in the crush of GI's I was crowded so close that Martha stepped on my foot as she got out. She looked at me and said, "Oh, pardon me, soldier!" I was so impressed to be that close to a celebrity that I didn't even respond. Needless to say, she not only made my day, she made my whole year. Then later, of course, we had Glen Miller. His band practiced occasionally in the enlisted men's mess during the noon hour. I don't remember the date, but we also had Bob Hope and his traveling companions. I believe this was either during the last days of the European war or after it was over.

At that time we had little or no bomb-handling equipment. When they drove in with a truckload of bombs, we let the tailgate down and rolled them off the back of the truck onto the cement. The hanging lugs that attached the bombs to the shackles in the bomb bay were protected by a U-ring that covered the lug and went all the way around the bomb, but kicking them off the four-foot drop from the truck bed was certainly not the prescribed way to handle bombs. We had no choice and fortunately we had no accidents.

Those first few months (October to mid-December) we seemed to be a little short of everything. Our bomb inventories were short and our ammo was short (by military standards), so we were not able to run what might be considered a classic support operation. However, we always managed to have enough to sustain the operation. Lt. L. G. Williams (later to be Captain and acting station ordnance officer, as you noted in your book) and Lt. E. W. Rudolph did yeoman duty during those tough times. Lt. Rudolph, who was responsible for the bomb dump operation, did the impossible many times. (Rudolph stayed in the Service after the war and retired later with the rank of Major.)

In mid-December 1942 when Capt. H. B. Blumenthal arrive with the 1628th, the Ordnance contingent under Lt. Williams was absorbed into his company. At this time I moved from the bomb dump to some new Nissen huts in the area across the main road from the baseball field. Shortly after the first of '43, their equipment caught up with them and we were able to stop kicking bombs off the trucks. From that point on, we had everything we needed to do the job we were supposed to do.

We had some unruly characters, but by and large, we had (in my opinion) a very good group of both officers and enlisted personnel, and they did an excellent job (again in my opinion) of complimenting the super job the rest of the 306th did.

The 1628th operated the motor pool, the machine shops, the bomb dump and performed maintenance on vehicles and armament (among other things) and made a significant contribution to changes in fire power of the weapons on the "forts." Some of the people in Ordnance had an opportunity to transfer into gunnery positions during those early days when crews were short. I don't recall exactly how this was accomplished, but they did.

There was always a little "class distinction" between the guys who flew the missions and faced the fire and the guys who didn't and that was understandable, but it did cause a little friction on occasions. However, I'm not sure the people who flew the missions were always aware (if at all) of the sympathy, understanding and compassion the ground people had for them. Many of those support people would have been willing to trade places, and would have, had it not been for unsurmountable physical or mental restrictions.

When their duties permitted, there was always support personnel out on the ramp "sweating out" the return from a mission. When every Fort returned, it was a great day. Our team won! When there were some missing, you kept waiting and hoping he was just a straggler and when a red flare came out, you hurt and when the stragglers didn't come in, it was a sad day. Even though we didn't know very many of them personally, when a plane didn't come in, it was very personal. We didn't have access to debriefing intelligence, of course, so all we could do was count planes and wait for the stories to filter out. In addition, when there were casualties, you knew some mother, father, brother or sister, and maybe some wife, was going to be hurting.

I had a very personal experience with that kind of hurting myself while there. My only brother (and I have no sisters) came over to England in February of '44 with a B-24 group. He was a radio operator/gunner and was stationed on "the Wash" up around Nottingham. During the next four months he was able to get over to Thurleigh twice and I managed to visit him at his base once. We had some lively discussions about the relative merits of the B-17 and the Liberator. Since he had never been up in a B-17 and I had never been in either one, you can safely assume it was not what you would call the "Great Debate."

He went down over France in May '44 on his 16th mission. It was a "flamer" and only three of the crew got out. I was able, through the efforts of some very good officers in my company and sympathetic men at Nottingham, to interview some of the men on the mission on his base only a day or so later and pick up his personal effects. These were crew members who were in a position to see what had happened. From their account of where the chutes came out of the plane and where the plane was hit by the flak burst (directly in the radio-op/gunner position), it was obvious that there was no way my brother could have survived. The AAF notified my parents that he was MIA and there was no way I could tell them what I knew. So, as you can see, I knew about hurting.

As you well know, some of the roughest missions flown during the war took place in the early part of '43. It was what they commonly call now "a learning experience." Tensions were so high you could feel it all over the base. There was a never-ending series of unbelievable stories told by the flight personnel of heroic deeds and super human efforts. The culmination of these heroics, of course, came with the presentation of the Medal of Honor to Snuffy Smith. On the day he received the medal, I recall going through the chow line at 11:45 a.m. and having Snuffy dish chow out to me (he was actually on K.P. on "his day") and two-and-a-half hours later I was dressed in Class A uniform along with everybody else on the base, passing in review for him. Hard to believe, but from all accounts Snuffy was a real renegade.

By the end of '43, support personnel began to start rumors and hear rumors and speculate about the possibility of being "rotated" back to the States. The reasoning was, nobody stayed overseas more than 18 months during World War I, so after 18 months it seemed reasonable we should be rotated. All that theory did was keep our spirits up. It was a different war and a different time, and the months rolled on. The men who were long time residents (as well as some short timers) began to find English girls in Bedford and the surrounding villages that they wanted to make long-term commitments to. I attended six GI weddings and was "Best Man" at one.

Around this time, we had an unfortunate incident at the bomb dump. The guard at the front gate to the dump this particular evening, a rather nervous fellow who was actually a recent replacement, was responsible. On one of those fog-laden, pitch-dark nights he heard footsteps approaching. He called "halt" the required three times and when the footsteps continued, he leveled his 45 and shot. He heard something fall and the footsteps stopped, but he didn't want to venture out, so he called the Officer of the Day. When the OD got there, they investigated and found the guard had shot a goat squarely between the eyes. (According to the story, the guard had flunked target practice!) It turned out, a crew member of one of the B-17s had picked the goat up on a trip to North Africa and he was a pet that had broken loose after being staked out beside the plane. Further investigation revealed the goat didn't give milk, so it was no great loss from a utilitarian standpoint, but needless to say, the crewman was not all that happy about it. To their credit, however, they did not barbecue him. They gave him a nice military funeral.

As D-Day approached, activity was heavy everywhere including the bomb dump. We began to get in several types of sophisticated new bombs and fuses. Included in the assortment was a long delay fuse that had various time settings on it (12 hrs, 24 hrs, 36, 48, etc.) as well as a ball-bearing locking device which made it impossible to defuse the bomb without setting it off once the fuse had been set. It was this fuse (so we thought) that caused the only real unfortunate incident we had at the dump. As you noted in your book, we had a powerful explosion!

Under normal conditions, bombs with the delay fuses were jettisoned over the Channel if a plane had to abort as I recall. But occasionally a plane didn't make it to the Channel. We had a revetment up close to the front of the bomb dump that had been set aside for this type of emergency. When it happened, the bombs were unloaded from the plane and all safety precautions were observed in handling and storage into the revetment. To my knowledge no one was ever sure exactly what unstable element caused the explosion, but several of them went off with a high order detonation and fortunately several others went with only a low order and several others survived. (Your records show twenty-four, I had forgotten how many.)

It was an earth-shaking blast that certainly got everyone's attention. I was in the "check out" building in the middle of the dump when it happened and I must have "vibrated" for 10 minutes. The windows all went, glass flew everywhere. A bomb fragment ricocheted into the building and

stuck in the wall a couple of feet above my head. It was about two inches long and an inch wide. I dug it out, saved it, brought it home with me and still have it. You should hear the stories I tell my kids about it when they ask me about the war. Of course, you know the greater the timespan between the actual event and the telling of what happened, the greater the tendency to add more color, heroics, danger, fantasies and, consequently, looseness with the facts. It seems to be a common trait among men and I am all for it. Otherwise, how would we ever know how great we are.

I got all "dressed up" for the christening of the "Rose of York." The visit by the Royal family was something of a highlight. I was impressed. First, because all those GI's were on their best-dressed behavior (which was always a proud moment), and second, there was something about the Royal family that made you feel good. Although I never figured out exactly what it was I enjoyed about it. I think Snuffy Smith's medal presentation and the visit by the Royal family were the only "full dress" parades I participated in during my tenure at Thurleigh.

Shortly before and after D-Day, the plane formations got larger and larger. Not only were we sending up more planes at Thurleigh, but obviously so were the other groups. A month or so after D-Day I recall on a particularly bright day watching as they formed up. Soon the sky was filled with planes from horizon to horizon. They kept coming--the parade must have lasted for 20 or 30 minutes. The roar of the engines was deafening and the buildings and ground shook like an earthquake was in progress. To look at all that awesome power was an unforgettable experience and I'm sure we will never see plane formations like that again.

Then on a day some months later that was not bright, but very foggy with visibility that no plane should be up in, a very sad thing happened. I was on my way to the mess hall when the two planes from the 305th collided over the base. I was watching the group as they came around. The collision was so sudden and unexpected. I had no idea anyone had a picture of it until I saw it in your book. The picture is just as the mental picture of it has been etched in my mind all these years. I don't think you ever forget something like that. Parts of the planes and bodies were falling everywhere. I never got to the mess hall. I was too sick to eat.

As January '45 rolled around, there was an air of anticipation that the Germans would surrender any day and we would be going home. But the war went on. Missions were still being flown and we were still having casualties. Finally, the anticipation gave way to a kind of numbness that left the long-timers somewhere half way between high hopes and disappointment at the delay. But the atmosphere on the base was becoming more and more relaxed. When we started substituting paper bombs for the real thing, we knew it couldn't be long.

We had a replacement in the 1628th who arrived about six months before the war was over. He was a Jewish boy. He and his family had fled Germany just before the war when he was 12 or 13. They had found their way to the U.S. and he had volunteered for service when he was old enough.

He spoke perfect German and could do a fantastic imitation of Hitler giving a speech. He would read us the pamphlets we were dropping that were written in German, so at least we knew what they were getting.

I was one of those fortunate enough to get a ride over Europe after VE-Day. We took off from Thurleigh and headed straight for Cologne, Germany. According to the information I received, the pilot set the automatic controls as we left the English coast and did not touch them until we reached Cologne. We flew at 2,000 feet and if we had been at 200 feet, we could have split the twin towers of the Cologne Cathedral. Either the automatic controls and navigation were that precise, or we were awfully lucky. I couldn't believe what I was seeing. It looked like the only thing left standing in Cologne was the Cathedral. Everything else was a sea of rubble. The pilot took the controls then and we flew down the Ruhr Valley, devastation everywhere. We left the Ruhr Valley and flew to Paris, then back to Thurleigh. I occupied the tail gunner's position part of the trip and had an excellent view of where I had been. But the fact there was no flak or ME 110's around helped considerably.

The rumors began to fly that we weren't going home. With the Casey Jones Project in full swing, we weren't needed any more and we were going to be shifted to the Pacific Operation without even the courtesy of a lay-over trip to the U.S. That didn't help morale a whole lot.

Meanwhile, with nothing else to do, I spent most of my time counting bombs. We tried to reconcile the bombs shipped in and expended with inventories left. No way. They never matched. To some of us it didn't make a lot of sense. Nobody walks off with bombs in their pockets, the paperwork just got fouled up. We counted and recounted.

Then we started counting "Points." I didn't have quite enough in the beginning, but they kept adjusting the way you were credited with Points until I came up with enough. I left Thurleigh November 7, 1945. After spending two nights somewhere around Southampton, we were loaded onto a Liberty ship headed for Boston, Mass. The thing I remember most about that trip was the fact they had plenty of milk on board. I had not had a cold glass of milk in over three years. I couldn't get enough. We docked in Boston November 16th, and five days later I was discharged at Camp Chaffee, Arkansas.

Thurleigh was an experience that no one who was there will ever forget. A lot of boys came there and left as men. For a lot more, it was their last address. Everyone who was there was affected one way or another. I am very grateful to you for your book. You are to be highly commended for the time and effort you put into it. Reading it enabled me to see the war fought at Thurleigh for the first time. All we had on the ground was first, second and third-hand reports on what was happening. Now that I know the real story, I am even more proud to have been a part of the effort as small as it was. You did a magnificent job and I appreciated the autograph.

In the beginning I asked you to "indulge the old man." Well, believe it or not, I had no idea then you were going to be asked to "indulge" so much. If you are still with me, thank you.

Sincerely,



Bill Butler

Oklahoma City, OK 73127
March 27, 1987

Dear Russell:

I certainly enjoyed visiting with you on the phone last night, but I am still not sure you should take a chance on lowering the standards of your fine paper by printing the letter I wrote. I appreciate you feeling it worthwhile, but I do hope you will do a lot of editing on it.

I may have spoken too soon by promising a picture. On short notice, the enclosed is the best I can do. Feel free to make your own choice about which you use (or, even better, forget to put one in at all). The single is a picture made shortly after induction. The other was made in the bomb dump office and left to right, Sgt. Bill Butler, Lt. Earl Rudolph and Bill Murphy. I know I have some better pictures here somewhere, but like so many other things we have around here, they have been misplaced! I'm sure you know what I mean.

By the way, in our conversation I told you my Alma Mater was OSU. Meaning no disrespect for the Big 10 schools, but I always forget Ohio State is also known as OSU. However, I'm sure you knew I meant Oklahoma State University, the home of the original cowboys.

Thanks again for calling.

Sincerely,



Bill Butler

10/25/91

DEAR RUSS—

IT WAS GOOD TALKING TO YOU AND
I APPRECIATE YOU CALLING— I'M SORRY
WE HAVN'T HAD AN OPPORTUNITY TO GET
TO KNOW EACH OTHER BETTER AND VISIT
PERSONALLY— THE SAD FACT IS— WE ARE
NOT GETTING ANY YOUNGER—! BUT
THERE IS STILL HOPE OF SEEING YOU
SOME TIME IN THE FUTURE— MEAN
TIME— KEEP UP THE GOOD WORK—

RESPECTFULLY—

Bill

OVER

W. E. BUTLER

PLEASE SEND TO:

W. E. BUTLER

2705 WINDSOR BLVD.

OKLAHOMA CITY, OK. 73127

MR STRONG —

3/13/97

I WAS OUT OF THE CITY WHEN YOUR LETTER ARRIVED — SO YOU PROBABLY HAVE A LIST OF THE NAMES YOU ASK FOR BY NOW — IN CASE YOU DON'T HOWEVER, I AM SENDING YOU A COPY OF MY LIST — ALONG WITH A STORY ABOUT THE 306TH WHICH I AM SURE YOU ALREADY HAVE IN YOUR FILES — I HAVE NO IDEA WHY THE "HOME TOWN" ADDRESSES OF THE OFFICERS WERE LEFT OFF BUT YOU ALREADY HAVE THE CURRENT ADDRESSES OF THREE OF THEM AND I'M SORRY I CAN'T HELP YOU WITH THE OTHERS — A LETTER WILL FOLLOW AS TIME PERMITS — YOU HAVE DONE AN EXCELLANT JOB WITH YOUR HISTORY OF THE GROUP —

Bill B.

W. E. BUTLER