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Historic Wendover Airfield, Utah
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The Most God Forsaken Place You Ever Saw

March 16, 1942

The day began with five young officers arriving in Salt Lake City at 7:00am. These young men 2nd Lt's Glen Burch, Jacque Daniels, Ray Hopper, Jack McCarty and John Michaels, had just completed officer training at Scott Field, Illinois. Their plans were to eat breakfast and lunch, then hire a cab to take them to Wendover Field since the bus wouldn't deliver them there until after 8:00pm.

When this group of bright-eyed, anxious young officers arrived in Wendover, they found six officers and about 380 enlisted men already ensconced at the newly opened field. Officers were living in barracks, and tents sprouted from the dry, dusty soil for the many enlisted men. B.O.Q.'s (Bachelor Officers Quarters) were to be built within a matter of days. Carpenters were at work putting up temporary buildings and the noise of construction at all hours confirmed the haste and desperation to provide shelter for the planes and flocks of men who would descend on the field any day. Things had to keep moving if the plans for building 130 structures in 45 days were to come to fruition.

The men were disheartened and discouraged that there was not a squadron of planes to greet them, not even a hanger to accommodate them. Wendover boasted a single A-17 trainer and a single B-18 assigned to Colonel Peck the base commander. By the first of the month five squadrons of bombers were expected to arrive at this newly formed gunnery and bombing-training center. To maximize the facility's efficiency, each squadron would train for about 12 weeks then be cycled out and a new bunch cycled in.

The military visionary's who planned the base here on these salt flats, looked at the wide-open desert framed by distant mountains as a training zone. The site was 18 to 36 miles wide and 86 miles long; it was to become the largest bombing and gunnery range in the world. Planners saw clear flying weather 90% of the time, and a small town that would add support, but not too much distraction from the job at hand. They knew the rest would grow from the ingenuity and determination of the men called to serve. The harsh conditions at Wendover would not represent the last sacrifices to be given freely by the men of the 306th.

March 18,

Seventeen new flying officers, just out of flight school checked in and no one knew what to do with them. They had to maintain their flying status, but there was only one plane they could use, so a schedule had to be established. With things growing crowded, everyone had to eat in shifts; there wasn't enough table space to accommodate everyone at once. By March 24th, the C.O. decided a lecture series should be set up to continue

training flying officers who had little else to do. Lectures on radio operation, navigation, and aerial gunnery and bombing, along with various other topics were taught from the technical manuals. Much was to be learned along the way.

March 25,

The arrival of 350 new men on the base in the late afternoon led to a mad scramble to house and kit the unexpected newcomers. Trying to present an organized front, the officers focused on duty rosters and equipment distribution. Things needed to run smoothly as the new C.O. of the 306th was to arrive within the week. Col. Charles Overacker would train and lead the men to Westover, Massachusetts, and then on to Thurleigh, England.

Prior to Colonel Overacker's arrival, Colonel Peck did discourage men from marrying if they weren't already wed, because, "Who would want to bring a girl to this hole". But soon there were wives, and they met the 17x12 foot converted car parks and other various accommodations as those in love would do, with joyful expectation of being alongside their men. These wives collectively felt their husbands would go out there and save the world. They all felt their boys could do it, so they suffered the desert, the dry, the cold, the windy and the beautiful. Much like the men of the 306th, a camaraderie formed among these women that would last a lifetime.

Shortly after the arrival of Colonel Overacker, Executive Officer Lt. Col. Curtis Lemay chewed out the transportation officer for not keeping the Colonel's car clean. Of course the car was sent to be cleaned immediately. Water being scarce at Wendover, the vehicle was driven to a reservoir some three or four miles away over dirt roads. Needless to say when the car returned it was just as dirty as when it left, just as the transportation officer had explained earlier. This may have been just one more reason Lemay was so disdainful of Wendover. He was quoted as saying, "Wendover was the most God forsaken place he had ever seen." Many others disliked the conditions, and more than one man remarked, "What in the hell have I done to deserve this".

The town of Wendover didn't provide much distraction with only 190 or so locals and only shacks and gravel streets. One of the primary amusements for both men and wives was the State Line Hotel. It straddled the official border of Nevada and Utah, which brought another popular benefit. When the bar closed in one State you could step across the State line and have another round. Now, that's not to say the bar was the only place you could get a cold beer. The men were quick to improvise. Tying lines on beer bottles and dropping them in test holes in the salt flats, here they could lower them well below the surface where they cooled nicely.

The salt flats provided a venue for romantic rendezvous as well. Newlywed Norine Hopper decided to make a picnic for her Sweetheart Ray when he returned from a long day at work. First, they went to a local lake, but the bugs were unbearable. So, they drove out onto the salt flats and laid out a blanket to enjoy their meal. Then, under a half moon, they turned on the radio and danced in the moonlight in the middle of the salt flats.

With B-17 trickling into the base, crews began working together honing their skills. July 1942 was a busy time training flight crews, many cross-country flights were scheduled until 2:00 and 3:00 in the morning, which meant ground crews were busy as well. We all know no flying time would ever be logged without the skill and dedication of the men prepping the crews and planes. It was an all out effort from every man at Wendover to ready the 306th for the difficult work that lay ahead.

Sadly, casualties were not destined to take place only over seas. Training brought accidents and officers and enlisted men perished even before the fight was undertaken. These losses were only a token of what would be experienced by the men of the 367th, 368th, 369th and 423rd. The First Over Germany would pay a high price to ensure victory over a common enemy.

August 1, 1942,

The first group of the 306th began their migration to Westover Field in Massachusetts. By train, air and ship, contingents of men began the long journey to England and war. By the end of 1942, three groups had completed training exercises at Wendover in long-range navigation, target identification, high altitude formation flying, and simulated combat missions. By late 1943 Wendover had approximately 2,000 civilian employees and 17,000 military personnel. From 1942 through 1944, approximately twenty-one groups and over 1,000 crews were trained at Wendover airfield. By May 1945 the base had 668 buildings, a 300 bed-hospital, gymnasium, swimming pool, library, chapel, cafeteria, bowling alley, two movie theaters and accommodations for 361 married officers and civilians.

My parents Norine and Ray Hopper remembered their time at Wendover with great fondness. Even with the discomforts they found here they knew they were on the cusp of something big, a world event that would shake the very foundations of all those who would participate. This generation would bond unlike most; they would understand each other's struggles and losses, joys and victories. They truly served each other, our nation and those who could not defend themselves. Never before and never again will we wage war as these boys did, they were the proving grounds. They were the reason the allies defeated the axis and their bravery and devotion is what brings us here today.

BENEDICTION

The men of the 306th are of exceptional caliber. They were forged on these hot desert salt flats and tempered and polished in Europe. We are blessed to have some of these heroes with us today and blessed to have had many more touch and influence our lives. For them we are grateful. For those who gave their lives fighting for the Allied cause we remain in awe of the sacrifices they made. They are truly worthy of our honor and respect; we enjoy many freedoms today because of them. In return, it is our task to communicate and perpetuate their love, honor and inspiring stories for future generations. They sacrificed their dreams that we may have ours; our duty is to share so our children will know who they were, and what they accomplished.

Today, I thought it fitting to share Isaiah 40:30-31, as it speaks to me of the work this generation did for all generations to come.

Even youths grow tired and weary,
And young men stumble and fall;
But those who hope in the Lord
Will renew their strength.
They will soar on wings like eagles;
They will run and not grow weary,
They will walk and not be faint.