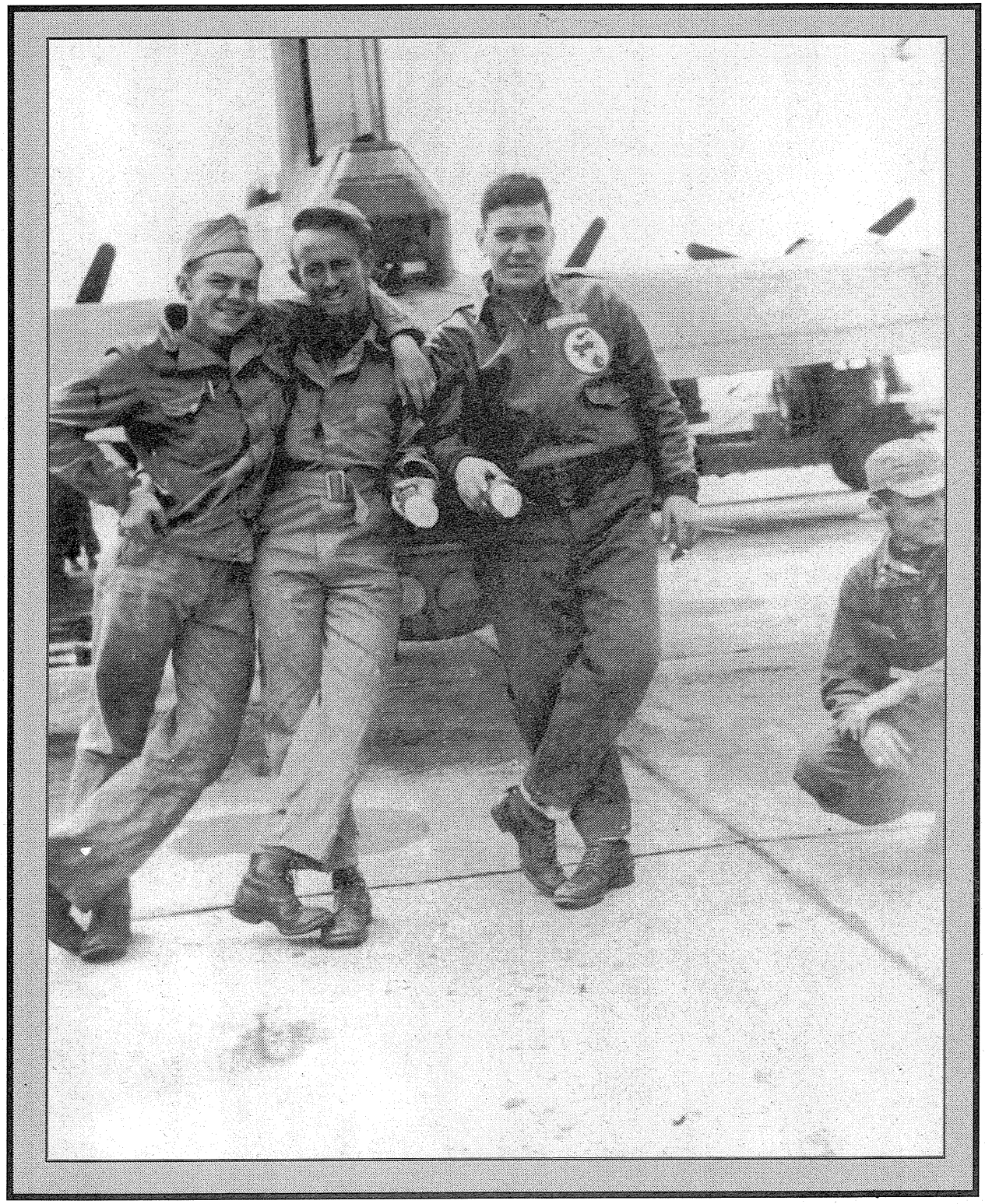
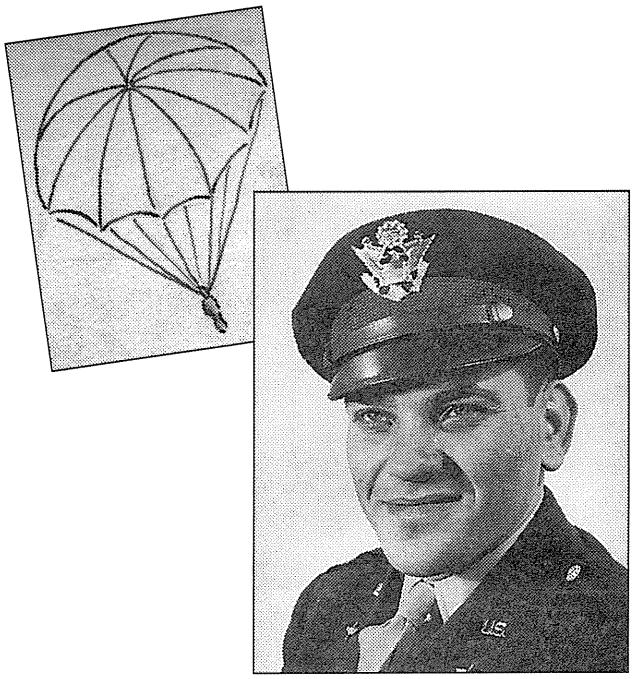
The Road Home

The story of bombardier Charles V. Carlson's 11 months behind enemy lines with the Belgian and French underground during World War II.



And I say unto you, "Ask, and it shall be given you;
seek, and ye shall find;
knock, and it shall be opened unto you."
Matthew 7:7



Written by Anne Jacobson Robertson

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On the cover:
Ball-turret gunner Robert Metlen, tail gunner George Janser and bombardier Charles Carlson relax for a few minutes at Moses Lake Army Air Field. Kneeling is Co-pilot Arthur Pickett.

Preface

The plane exploded and then it was quiet. The bottom of the B-17 bomber was gone and me with it.

I had no sensation of falling from above 20,000 feet. My face was burned, my eyebrows were gone and I felt like I had a bad case of sunburn. My hands were singed and red.

I was tilted spread eagle on my back, and between my feet I could see below two Nazi Luftwaffe fighters who were part of the dozen-or-so Folke Wolfe and ME-110s that had knocked our 10-man crew out of the sky. I couldn't hear their engines and there was no rushing sound as I seemed simply to hang in the air.

We had been told that German pilots might shoot a man held helpless in a parachute, so I decided not to open my chest-pack 'chute until I could distinguish between cars and trucks on the road below. ... that is, if the parachute would open and hold me, because in the center of the pack gaped a bullet hole. In the strafing of bullets that had pierced our bomber, one bullet had gone through my 'chute as I was reaching to strap it on. I'd never have made it to the radio room to get the spare.

Looking over my shoulder I could see the B-17 which seemed to be quite far away. The tail had broken off just forward of the rear hatch and the well for the tail wheel; the rest of the plane, engines running, was turning around the lateral axis. I could spot no other 'chutes, and so I waited and waited until it was time.

Then remembering a Bible verse from confirmation class, 'Ask and it shall be given,' I asked, and pulled the rip cord.

Chapter 1
I want to fly

Wold-Chamberlin Field and its Navy held an attractive lure for children growing up in the 1920s in Minnesota, and Chuck Carlson, who was born Nov. 16, 1917, was no exception. He longed to fly. The airplane was still a new means of travel, and famous aviators were capturing the headlines with unheard of feats:

- Two British pilots, J.W. Alcock and A.W. Brown, made the first nonstop transatlantic crossing in June 1919. This came only 16 years after the Wright brothers first flew for less than a minute at Kitty Hawk, N.C., and 13 years after they patented an improved plane.
- Minnesota's Charles Lindbergh made the first solo nonstop flight across the Atlantic May 20-21, 1927. It took the "Lone Eagle" 33 1/2 hours to fly his Spirit of St. Louis 3,610 miles between Long Island, N.Y., and Paris.
- Flying nearly 42 hours Oct. 3-5, 1931, C. Pangborn and H. Herndon Jr. made the first nonstop flight from Japan to the United States. They landed in western Washington.
- Amelia Earhart became the first woman to make the solo transatlantic trip in 1932, and the first to fly solo from Hawaii to the U.S. mainland in 1935.

A Minneapolis native, Chuck was thrilled to watch the military planes maneuvering overhead. Aircraft played a relatively minor role during the Great War of 1914-1919. The dogfights with pilots the likes of Germany's Red Baron were perhaps more symbolic than strategic, but those air battles set the stage for the next major conflict when air raids and the massive bombings would become daily occurrences on both sides of the English Channel.

The Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor Dec. 7, 1941, pushing the United States into World War II. Young men across the country rushed to enlist.

Chuck went to Wold-Chamberlin Field to join the Navy, but officials told him he was 10 to 15 pounds overweight. A couple of weeks later the Navy asked him to try again, but it was too late because he'd already visited the Army Air Corps* in the old Federal Building across from the Milwaukee Depot at Washington and Third Avenue in Minneapolis. The recruiters had signed him up — they weren't as particular, he recalled.

From March to May of 1942 he was at Augsburg College. Then his first stop in 15 months of training was at Kelly Air Field in San Antonio, Texas, for pilot preflight school. It was class 43A, the first group of aviation cadets at Kelly.

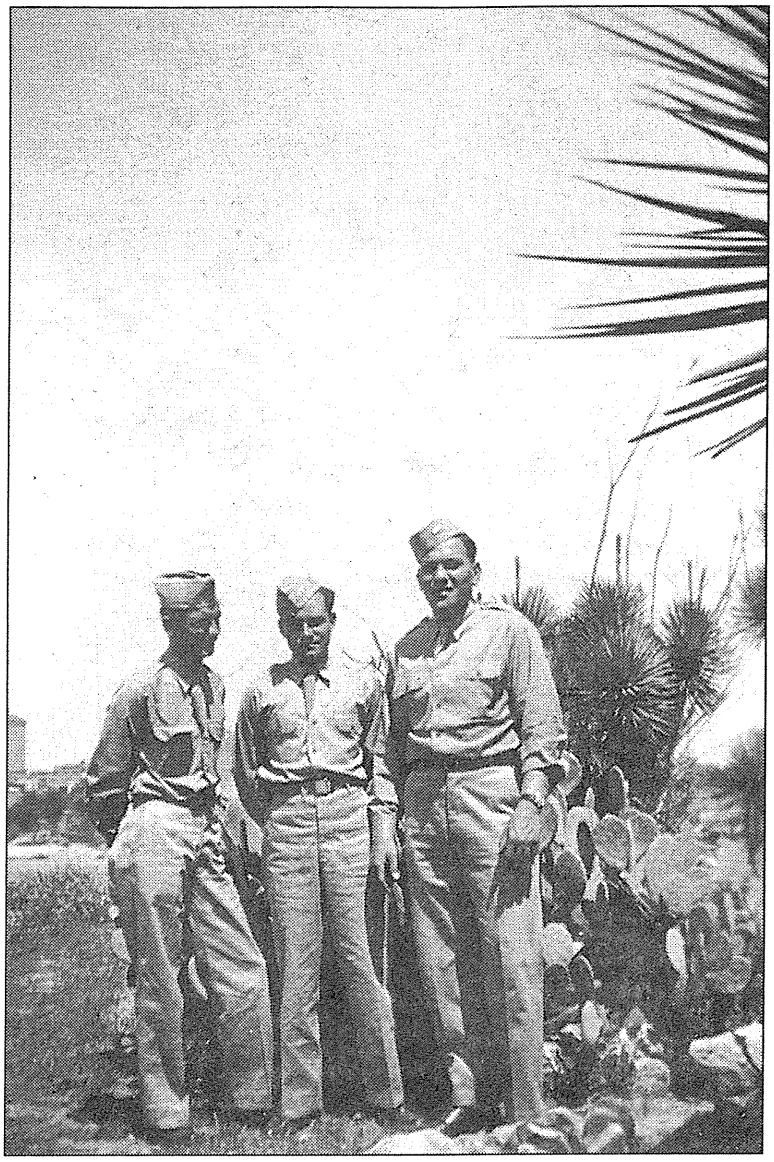
His career almost ended there when spy-fearing authorities discovered a discrepancy between his enlisted name — Charles Vernon Carlson — and the name that a doctor, who apparently couldn't spell or write, had penned on the birth certificate — Charles Nern Valdamir Carlson. Chuck suffered through some tough questioning.

The answer was quite simple, really, he explained. As a boy he hadn't liked his name and had taken the middle name of Vernon. "It sounded better," he said laugh-

* The Army Air Corps became a separate command after the war and the name changed to the U.S. Air Force. This put it on equal footing with the Army, Navy and Marines.

ing. Brother Harold's wife, Shirley, went to the Hennepin County Courthouse and straightened the matter out in a week. The Army let him stay.

Park's Air College in East St. Louis was next. Chuck and five other would-be-pilots from Kelly were shipped there in July to fill out a training class. They had to suffer the hot, humid conditions in their wool uniforms, never being issued replacements. Everyone else had cotton chinos. And, adding insult to injury, the six new men had never received a paycheck while at Kelly so they couldn't even buy light-weight clothing themselves.



Dan Dunning of Colorado, Marion Blackburn of Florida and Chuck Carlson became friends during training at San Angelo Air Field in early 1943. Dunning was killed Jan. 17, 1944, in Australia.

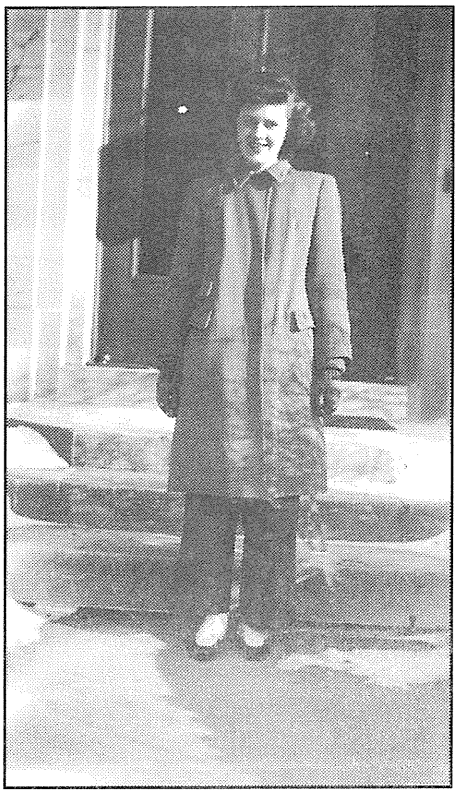
There were two classes at the civilian school, and one consisted entirely of cadets from West Point who generally gave the others a hard time. Chuck recalled the final trial was an instructor who failed to give the new men the instructions necessary to pass flight school, never speaking to them outside of 11 hours of dual instruction. During a check ride with an Army pilot Chuck crossed the foot and hand controls in his emergency landing test. Sorry, the pilot said. Chuck had "washed out." So it was off to an Army Air Corps replacement depot called Ellington Field at Houston, Texas.

The weather still refused to cooperate with the Army's choice of clothing, and several soldiers ended up in the hospital. Chuck's double pneumonia did not respond well to sulfa, a new drug of the day that was hard on the body but was designed to fight bacterial infections. When the commanding officer ordered every recovering man back to the barracks to begin a new class for preflight navigator and bombardier training, the chief physician countermanded. If the men weren't given a 21-day leave he would hospitalize them for the duration.

With a Red Cross train ticket home and $5 in his pocket, Chuck took a three-day train trip via Chicago home to Minneapolis. He spent $3 on a meal before departure and by Chicago had nothing left. The Army had paid him only once in six months.

"I put 20 cents in my shoe so I wouldn't spend it. I'd have carfare when I got home," he said. The street car was a dime.

It was September and a few days before the return trip to base when he agreed to accompany a buddy for a night on the town — provided the friend's girlfriend brought someone for Chuck to meet. Elizabeth Roe, a nursing student at Fairview Hospital, joined them. Chuck would see her only a couple more times before shipping out for Europe 12 months later, but they would build their relationship through letters. She would wear his Air Force bombardier wings, and he would carry her photograph in his shirt chest pocket.



Chuck carried a picture of Elizabeth in his pocket. The photo survived his 10 months behind enemy lines.

In the meantime, Chuck returned to Ellington in time for a hurricane. Questioning the construction of the 75-by-100-foot, two-story barracks located closest to the gulf, the Army awoke the troops at midnight at the peak of the storm. They marched about a mile to quarters that were built at an angle believed to be better suited to surviving the storm. Of course the wind shifted, the storm hit the new barracks, and in the morning a wet and weary group returned to find their first home standing and the interior dry.

Completing class, Chuck opted for training as a bombardier rather than as a navigator and was sent to school in San Angelo, Texas. A fellow trainee, who volunteered to be the leader and who wanted to impress the brass, made life miserable for several of the other bombardier students. He demanded military precision even when marching to the mess hall, and the trainees wouldn't conform. For some such as Chuck, the punishment was three demerits every time the barracks were inspected despite everyone's bed looking the same. The men would walk off the demerits on

No. GC 0027467 (a)
Age. 25. Wt. 195.
Hgt. 5. ft. 9½. in.
Color Hair Brown.
Color Eyes Blue.
Date of issue 4/22/43
Card not official without
Army Air Forces Seal
Signatur Charles V. Carlson
Name Typed Charles V. Carlson
Rank. 2nd Lieutenant
ARMY AIR FORCES RESERVE
Rating. Aircraft Observer.

S A A A F
A/C 2836

No. GC 0027467 (b)
UNITED STATES
ARMY AIR FORCES
This is to certify
Charles V. Carlson has been
appointed 2nd Lt. in the
ARMY AIR FORCES
commencing
April 22, 1943
Rated Aircraft Observer (Bomb)
per P.O. 7 AAFGCTC 1943
J. E. McCord
J. E. McCord
Lt. Col., A G.D.
Asst. Adjutant General

Saturday mornings while others went to town.

Chuck ranked in the top 10 in his class in academics and was second or third in bombing accuracy. In addition, because he had enlisted early and received other training, he graduated with a rating of aircraft observer April 22, 1943. The only one with that rating in his class, he qualified for more duties than would a regular bombardier.

At graduation time Chuck had 10 more demerits than allowed. The captain gave him and several others the choice of a hearing before the commanding officer or a court-martial. To the captain's surprise, all selected the court-martial — the trainees knew it meant more work for the guy — and they never heard anything more about it.

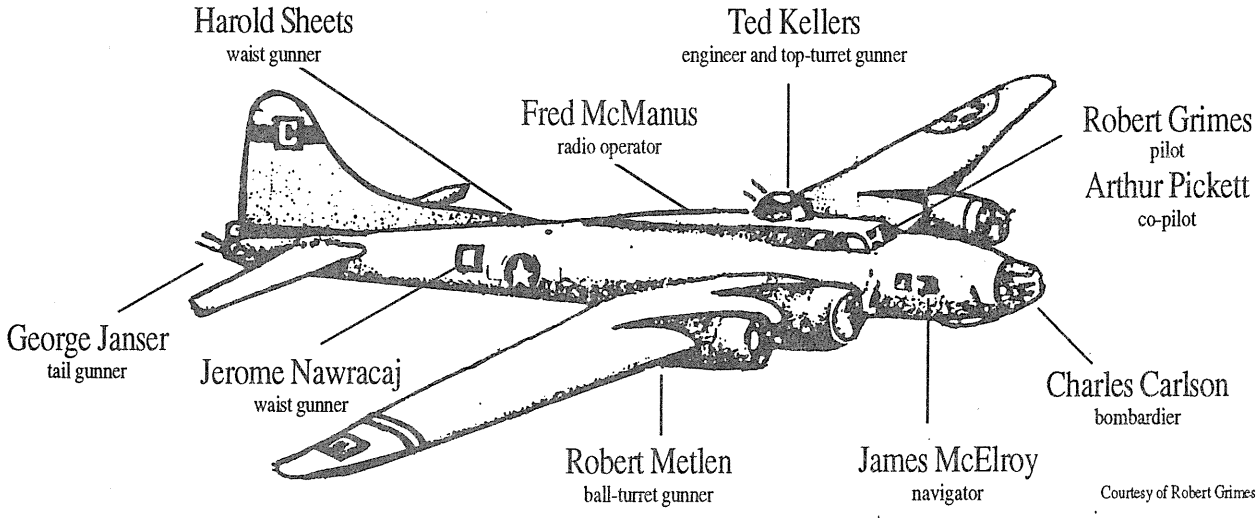
The Army Air Force couldn't afford to lose good bombardiers.

"When you were on the way to combat they could overlook at lot of things," he said. "Then when you got into combat, if you finally couldn't take it anymore and you said you didn't want to fly anymore, then they'd put on your 201 file that you lacked moral fiber. That would be the end of your career with the Air Force."

Chapter 2
Ten good men

The military had just built Moses Lake Army Air Field in Washington at a spot that bragged of no more than a gas station and a couple of houses. The base was designed for B-29 aircraft so the runways were 500 feet wide and more than 3 miles long; a small plane such as a Cub fighter needed only the width for takeoff. But because the first B-29 had yet to leave the assembly line, the Army first used the field to train B-17 crews and to test a new night landing system.

The base was the site of one of the Army's first obstacle courses. The men found the physical drills, climbing 10-foot barriers and negotiating ropes, often tougher than the hours in flight.



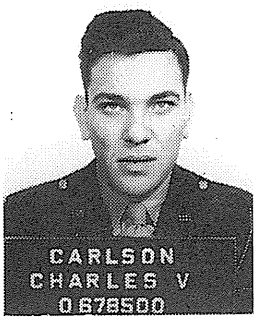
It was here that Chuck's overseas training began and a crew of 10 formed to fill the posts on a B-17. "It was a good crew. None of the officers drank at all which is something unusual. Our biggest problem was when we had to fly next to somebody who did, one who spent too much time at the Officers' Club," Chuck said. "You had to fly formation with them and you got kind of worried about it."

Lt. Robert Grimes, a southern gentleman, piloted the craft. He topped 6 feet and had light hair and a slender, athletic build. Although one of the youngest crew members, the 20-year-old was a good commander and pilot.

Second Lt. Art Pickett, was slender, too, but the Pennsylvania native was a daring pilot. His cousin later told the crew that Pickett had flown beneath a bridge in his hometown. The other crew members knew him the least because as soon as they had free time, he took off for town alone.

"He must have been quite a ladies man," Chuck said. In the event of his death, Pickett left a long list of women for his cousin to contact.

Navigator James McElroy always smiled. Chuck enjoyed spending time with this easy-going guy, who sat closest to him aboard the bomber.



ARMY AIR BASE
MOSES LAKE WASHINGTON

Carlson Charles V. 0-678500
Name ASN

2nd Lt. Bombardier
Rank Crew position

Altitude Training Program
completed 6/13/43

Qualified for flights to 30,000 ft

A-10 Mask: size Large
% leak (ave 3 tests)

C. R. Schmidt
Medical Corps
Aviation physiologist

Next came Staff Sgts. Fred McManus, who operated the radios, and Ted Kellers, the gutsy flight engineer. The crew also had four gunners: waist gunners Jerome Nawracaj and Harold Sheets; tail gunner George Carl Janser; and Robert Metlen, a short, stocky man who sat in the ball turret. After the war, Metlen chose an equally risky career as a smoke jumper, which entails parachuting into forests and fighting blazes there. He became superintendent of forests in Washington and Oregon.

As the crew members flew simulated missions they learned to work together. They experienced some of the potential hazards of this relatively new business of air flight, and these tests defined the young men's strengths.

One night while landing in low visibility they encountered another B-17 half off a runway abutting a steep drop to the lake. Grimes executed two sharp turns at 100 mph to avoid a crash. There was one minor casualty. When the bomber swerved, Chuck's 50-caliber machine swung on its shock cords and hit his head, knocking him off his seat.

Bombing, radio, and navigator mission training continued after the crew moved that summer to Geiger Army Airfield across from the Boeing plant in Spokane, Wash. Here the Army emphasized night flights above mountains, through valleys and over water.[1] One mission took the B-17 team 500 miles out over the Pacific Ocean to find an American submarine. Failing to find it, the crew turned back. The navigator, McElroy, estimated that the coast was a ways off, but Chuck from his view in the nose of the plane saw a highway filled with cars and he yelled, "Turn around."

"I didn't need the intercom," Chuck recalled. It was urgent because the moun-

1. Navigation during World War II relied on geometry, a compass and a sextant. Getting accurate readings in a bouncing airplane wasn't always possible, so navigators had to rely on an average of several readings. Art Horning, who also was shot down (also in October 1943), describes this in some detail in "Footsteps of a Flying Boot," Carlton Press, New York: 1994, p. 26-27

tains stood 12,000 feet high just 10 miles inland. The plane returned to sea, climbed to the proper elevation and returned to Geiger Field.

Another adventure resulted from a chronic shortage of working bombers. With no operational Flying Fortress available, the crew was assigned to "slow time" the engines of one just out of the repair hangar. This meant taking the B-17 on a short, low-attitude test run. Midway through the radio-range flight the No. 1 engine caught fire. The flames burned passed the tail.

"It's the one time I ever heard the pilot swear," Chuck recalled laughing. "He got on the radio, he's getting close to Geiger Field, and he says, 'I'm on fire. I'm coming in. Get those blankety-blank airplanes off the runway.' He wasn't going to circle. He put her down."

All the way down the 3-mile runway the flames shot out. Trailing far behind the speeding plane were the fire engines and ambulance.

WWII changed the way Americans talk

Some words that came into the language as a result of World War II:

BLITZKRIEG — Not a German word, but a British compound of two German words: blitz (lightning) and krieg (war).

BLOCKBUSTER — A British bomb with massive explosive power.

ROGER — Message received.

TAKE-HOME PAY — The war brought payroll deductions for income taxes and war bonds, and this described what was left.

GREMLIN — A Britishism for imaginary creatures, applied by U.S. pilots to problems with their planes.

SNAFU — Military slang-acronym: Situation normal, all fouled up, or more often a raunchier version.

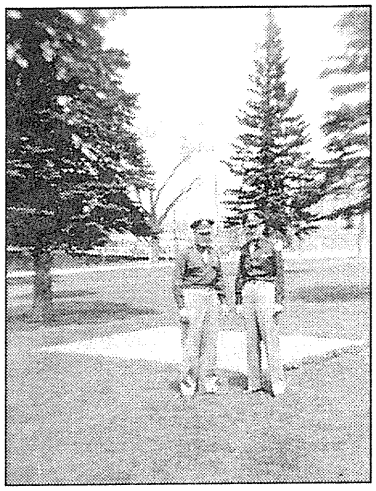
SAD SACK — From the cartoon by Sgt. George Baker in Yank magazine.

PINUP — Also coined by Yank magazine. The famous photo of Betty Grable, looking back with her hands on her hips, was the first and foremost.

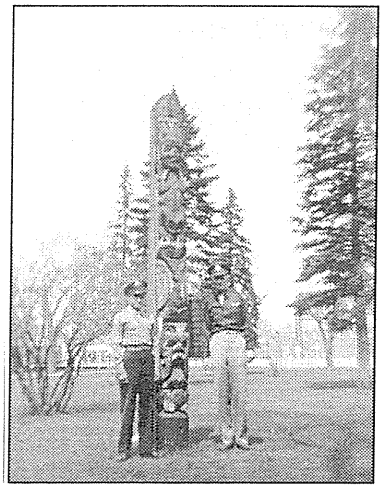
SONAR AND RADAR — Sound navigation ranging and radio detecting and ranging, detection systems used during the war.

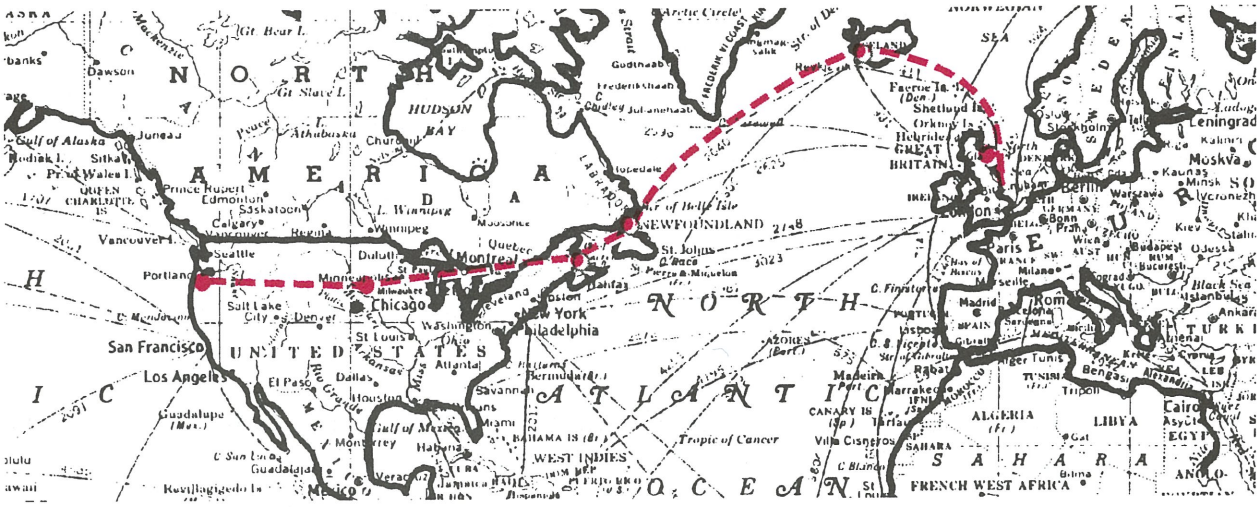
MILK RUN — An uneventful bombing mission.

BRASS — Officers.



Cameras weren't allowed. "If there were pictures it was an accident," Chuck recalled. Above, Chuck stands with Lt. Robert Grims at Moses Lake Air Base. Below are Grimes and James McElroy.





"This is where we were so dumb," Chuck said. Following procedure, he grabbed the bombsight off the plane. Meanwhile Keller hopped out of his turret and tried to save the plane. "He took his fire extinguisher and went on the wing, standing on top of 400 or 500 gallons of high octane aviation fuel which if you click your teeth wrong could explode," Chuck said.

With the bombsight secure, he decided to help Keller. Chuck reentered the plane to get his extinguisher. He couldn't see to release the catch so he braced his foot and pulled off the extinguisher, its mounting, as well as part of the wall. He worked from the inside while Keller continued outside. By the time the fire engine and ambulance arrived, the fire was out.

The crew saved the plane, but the Army higher-ups went at their investigation as if the crew members had done something wrong. Grimes easily could have ordered the crew to a bail out, but hadn't. The other men could have let the plane burn. In the end, an inspection showed that metal filings left inside the repaired engine caused the blaze.

With the excitement over, it wasn't long before the men received a new plane and shipped out Aug. 10 to Pendleton, Ore. They had only two weeks in Pendleton so there was no time for anything except days of solid flights that focused on gunnery missions.

Assigned next to the Gay Provisional Group bound for England, they made several short stops on their way. Sitting in Grand Island, Neb., for two days while a maintenance group modified the bomber for Atlantic flight, they decided to file their flight plan and cruise above the Great Lakes en route to Bangor, Maine. It was breathtaking.

August storms stalled them on the East Coast until Sept. 5. Walking through the rain one evening to kill time, Chuck came across a crap game in an unassigned barracks. He didn't know much about gambling, but decided to splurge with the $10 in his pocket by betting with rather than against the guy throwing the dice. With five consecutive wins, Chuck had $100 for the PX. He stocked up on several items for his footlocker, including two 100-count packages of razor blades which rumor said the GIs couldn't buy in Europe. He remembered with a little disgust that he never had a chance to use many because two months later he was shot down. The Army

shipped his footlocker home minus most of the contents — razor blades, clothing, letter jacket, toiletries — except for a few pieces of uniform. But naturally not knowing the future, he had packed up his new purchases and departed for England.

An angry crew had its new plane taken away upon landing in Preswick, Scotland.