

FROM FLYING CADET TO COMBAT PILOT

MEMOIRS OF U.S. ARMY
AIR CORPS TRAINING
1941-42

BRIG. GEN. WILLIAM HENRY WEBSTER

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Thanksgiving weekend, 1941, was filled with pleasant memories of the past thirty weeks and pleasant outlooks for the next ten days. In completing my primary flight training at Muskogee, Oklahoma, basic flight training at Brady, Texas, and my near-completion of advanced training at Kelly Field, Texas, I had accumulated over 200 hours of flying time in the PT-17, BT-13, and, most recently, the AT-6, and was looking forward to my upcoming assignment upon graduation from Kelly Field on December 12th. I was, by my standards, an average pilot with no special skills and a strong dislike for acrobatics and inverted flying. I felt very fortunate to be in the final stages of my flight training.

Equally important, I had met a charming girl named Betty Baldwin at the Methodist Church in Muskogee. We had about seven or eight movie or dinner dates and found we had many similar interests in music, sports, food, and literature. Maybe something serious would develop from this connection.

Once you get to advanced pilot training, there are frequent notices on the cadet bulletin board of vacancies for flyers overseas involving big money. I applied for consideration by the Flying Tigers in China, and for being a ferry pilot for the RAF (Royal Air Force) delivering unarmed American P-40s from Accra on the West Coast of Africa across the Sahara desert to RAF Desert Headquarters in Khartoum. I didn't get a callback on either, which proved to be fortunate.

On Friday morning, November 28th (no activities scheduled for the holiday weekend), I was in my room in the cadet barracks when I was notified by the Cadet Officer of the Day to report immediately to Lt. Col. Prosser, the commandant of cadets. It took me a few minutes to change from my off-duty casual shorts and t-shirt to my cadet uniform, worrying about what I might have done or not done that would require this special visit to "the head man". Upon my reporting to him, with full formalities of saluting and standing in a stiff "brace", he gave me an "at ease" and told me to be seated near his desk. He immediately told me that the American Red Cross had notified the Kelly Field authorities that my father (Wm. Sr.) had died the previous day in Chicago and the funeral service would be Monday, December 1st in our home suburb of Hinsdale. He noted that I had completed all my necessary classroom work and flying profiles, and he would make a plane and a commissioned instructor pilot available to fly me up to Chicago for the Monday morning funeral. I was naturally surprised by the sad news. I had not seen Dad for almost nine months, but knew he had been in declining health for several years. And as a youth, I had had little contact with family illness or death. Lt. Col. Prosser stated that a four-day absence for family reasons would have no adverse effect on my few remaining days before graduation. He would assign a pilot to meet me at Base Operations at 0900 Saturday morning for flight planning prior to planned takeoff at 1100. With mixed emotion, I

thanked him for his kind offer, and I told him I would call Mother and advise her of my plans to arrive at Chicago Midway airport late Sunday afternoon.

I got very little sleep that night from the mixed news, but showed up for the prescribed meeting with 1st Lt. Ed Kelly, my 'driver' for the next four days. In the Map Room he supervised my flight planning and marking two sets of maps. The weather forecast was good with favorable winds, cloud cover, and temperature in the low 40s. I threw my flight bag containing one civilian funeral outfit into the small luggage compartment, climbed into the parachute harness in the back seat of the AT-6, and Ed sat in the front seat. (The front cockpit of the AT-6 has a full complement of flight and engine instruments and flight controls, while the rear cockpit has only limited flight instruments and controls, and is usually occupied by the instructor pilot. Dual radio controls give the rear-seater intercom capability.)

The first leg of our trip was a three-hour flight from San Antonio to Love Field, Dallas, where we refueled and grabbed a quick sandwich. The Army Air Corps ground crew were surprised when I got out of the back seat clad in a cadet blue uniform and flight suit – apparently very few cadets had landed there. From there we had another three hour leg to St. Louis, where we arrived at dusk at about 5 o'clock. We parked the plane in the Army Air Corps hangar and spent the night in a small nearby barracks called the "Hotel De Gink". Upon questioning, the attendant there had no idea who "De Gink" was, but stated that most of the small Air Corps transient facilities were similarly named De Gink.

The next morning, we took off to land at Chanute Field at Champaign, Illinois, for refueling. I phoned Mother and told her our expected arrival time at Chicago Midway where brother Jack was to pick us up at the Air Corps

Operations building. We arrived on time about 1600, and Jack drove us the 15 miles to the family house in Hinsdale where Ed Kelly and I would share a bedroom. Ed was well received by the family.

Dad's funeral was held at 1100 at the Kreuger funeral home two blocks south at 1st and Lincoln streets. Mom, in her typical stoic manner, had planned a short service followed by cremation and planned ash disposal the following spring up at the Marjawil (MARY-JACK-WILLIAM) cottage at Indian Lake, Michigan. The family met with friends for an hour or so at the funeral home, and then we adjourned back up to 219 Lincoln Street. About 1600, Jack, Ed and I plus two girlfriends from high school days drove two miles to the Hinsdale-Clarendon Hills city dividing line. (Despite being only four miles from Cicero, the capital of Al Capone's whisky empire, the village of Hinsdale had staunchly maintained its own Prohibition despite what Congress said in the 21st Amendment, so Clarendon Hills was our closest legal alcohol.) The five of us ordered a glass of beer, and I was suddenly very embarrassed when the bartender asked for my proof of age. I had no Illinois driver's license, but my military I.D. did show my birthday as 12/12/20—so I wasn't yet 21—and he was reluctant to serve me as a minor. I had a hard time convincing him I was about to become a 2nd Lt. in the U.S. Army Air Corps in the next 11 days—defending Hinsdale—and I wouldn't tell anybody of his failure to enforce the law. We got home about 7 o'clock for a light dinner, as we were leaving early the next morning.

Ed and I tested the flying range of an AT-6 and flew nonstop from Chicago Midway to St. Louis. From there we went to Love Field, Dallas, where Ed suggested that I fly the last leg of the trip back to Kelly Field in the front seat. By that time I was very sick of the back seat and hoped I wouldn't be assigned as an instructor when I got my graduation orders on December 12th. I knew I

wouldn't be a good instructor because I didn't have the required patience or flying skills. The last leg from Dallas to San Antonio brought the realization that my cadet days were about over and I was going to be my own "first pilot". I landed at Kelly at dusk on December 2nd very tired but satisfied that I could handle the responsibilities of cross-country flying.

The next five days were busy getting caught up on pre-graduation errands. Like all new 2nd Lieutenants, I was getting my first set of tailor-made woolen uniforms (total cost, including shoes and "Sam Brown" belt, was over \$250, which exceeded my first month's pay). I had several final fittings, did some car shopping (Grandmother Webster, who was living in San Antonio with her daughter-in-law Kit in an apartment house on Woodlawn Avenue, had promised me a car upon graduation), and looked for a small rental house for possible occupancy after December 12th if assigned to Kelly Field. On Saturday night I had a "fix-up" date with the daughter of a friend of Aunt Kit. I borrowed the car of my roommate Otto Wellensick, a South Dakota farm boy, and drove from the base into town to pick up my date for a movie. We came back to her house about 2200 to chat with her mother for a few minutes, during which I took off my tie and draped it over the sofa. I drove back to the base (about 6 miles) and upon getting to my room, realized my tie's absence. The next day, Sunday December 7th, after noon "mess" I drove back to her house to get my tie. During the return drive back to the field, I turned on the car radio and heard the special broadcast about the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. The announcer directed all military personnel to immediately return to their quarters and await further orders. You can imagine the confusion that afternoon in the cadet barracks. Nobody knew where Pearl Harbor was, only that it was someplace in the Pacific Ocean. Speaker announcements from the Kelly Field headquarters were frequent and confusing. It became obvious this was not another Orson Welles radio ruse.

The next morning, Monday December 8th, we had been scheduled for a 50-plane formation flyover, but the weather proved to be cloudy with light rain, and the flight was cancelled. My section of fifty cadets was instructed to report to the instructors' lounge at Section Four hangar at 1300. Still wearing our cadet flying suits and new leather flight jackets, we marched down to the assigned hangar and went into the instructors' lounge which heretofore had been off-limits for us lowly cadets. There were about 100 of us, including instructors, seated around the tables, and we were served coffee and donuts by colored servants. Despite my apprehension about the coming radio address from President Roosevelt to the U.S. Congress, I suddenly realized this was a momentous occasion for all of us. The President's message was relatively short, but historic in his request for Congress to declare war on Japan. After the radio sign-off, we all sat in silence for several minutes, contemplating how this might affect our coming graduation and future military career. Having no previous knowledge about the activities and skills of the Japanese Air Force in its five-year war record in China, we were totally at a loss for constructive discussions. Several of the "comics" noted that the Japanese pilots with their slanted eyes would be unable to fly inverted and would hence be easy to shoot down in air combat. How little did we know their true capabilities.

The next three days were filled with even more confusion. Hundreds of news reports, as well as rumors, were flying about. Congress also declared war on Germany and Italy, and suddenly it was truly going to be a World War Two. There were no more cadet classes or flying, and all 230 of us were nervously sitting in the barracks periodically checking the bulletin boards. Every morning there would be notices of cadet assignments effective December 13th, and each afternoon contradictory orders would be posted with different assignments. I was initially scheduled to be an instructor trainee in Section Three at Kelly Field, which didn't exactly thrill me. I knew it would mean

more backseat flying in the AT-6, but the accepted belief by most of the pilots was that once our military units in the Pacific were reinforced, the war would be over within 90 days, and we instructors would still be sitting in the back seat of that AT-6.

Even with all the war preparations, some personal activities still had to be completed. I picked up all my new uniforms, and finished my car shopping, ending up with a new dark blue 1941 Chevrolet two-door sedan for \$650, and signed up for USAA car insurance. By Friday afternoon I was ready for the arrival of my guests for graduation day activities. As brother Jack—a 1938 graduate of the University of Chicago law school—was not going to be able to come to San Antonio because of his emergency job to re-organize Kennedy Webster Electric Co., of which Dad was the president, Mother decided to take the train from Chicago to Muskogee to meet Betty Baldwin's mother, Ona Bell, for the first time. They then continued by train to San Antonio together, arriving late Friday afternoon. Betty had taken an overnight bus trip from Stillwater to San Antonio and arrived about 1800 Friday. I was able to meet them in my new car and drive them to their hotel in downtown San Antonio. They were as excited as I was about the next day's activities. December 12th would also be my 21st birthday, so it was obviously going to be one of the more important days of my young life.

Graduation services and the commissioning oath for the 230 cadets of the class of '41-I took place shortly after 1100 at the Kelly Field Base Auditorium. The day was clear and the weather warm, but because of the state of war, they cancelled the customary formation flyover. Our commissioning oath was originally planned to be given by Brig. Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower, the Chief of Staff at nearby Fort Sam Houston, but he had been called to Washington on Friday to assume a high position in the reorganized Department of Army.

After a quick luncheon, I took the ladies out to meet Grandmother Sophie Webster out at her apartment with daughter-in-law Katherine (Kit). Sophie was in rare form and with her poor sight, she thought I was her recently deceased son William Henry, so the meeting started off rather tensely. That evening we had a celebratory dinner at the hotel and adjourned about 2200 after a very busy day.

The next morning, December 13th, I took all three ladies to the train station as Betty was going to go back to Muskogee on the train with them and would then continue on by bus to Stillwater. I don't recall any particularly romantic moments I had with Betty or commitments that were made at that time, as my upcoming military assignment was still an important mystery. We were well-chaperoned during her visit, and at best we may have held hands a few times, but I was pretty sure she would be my choice for marriage if I weren't immediately assigned overseas.

December 13th was a day of constant bulletin board monitoring for any assignment news. Finally on Tuesday, December 15th, a list of about thirty-five 2nd Lieutenants from '41-I was listed for assignment to Bowman Field in Louisville, Kentucky, to report not later than December 23rd. It took me two days to get packed and turn in all the G.I. military equipment to the base quartermaster. On December 18th I left Kelly Field in my blue Chevy, accompanied by my best classmate friend Jack Taylor from Eureka, Illinois, downstate south of Springfield. The highways were not very good back then and averaging 40 miles an hour was quite a feat. We drove through Dallas, crossed the Mississippi River south of St. Louis, and proceeded north-east to drive through Terra Haute, Indiana, where we stopped for several hours for a short visit with Grandmother Mary Parker Warren. I vaguely remembered her house at 603 S 6th Street from my visit there with Mother for Grandfather

Warren's funeral in 1931. Leaving there we proceeded eastward through Indiana to cross the Ohio River at Louisville and pulled into the entrance gate at Bowman Field on December 21st.

Bowman Field was of relatively new construction. There were two 5000' concrete runways, and about twenty WWI wooden buildings which had apparently been moved there from Fort Knox, some 20 miles south-west of Louisville. Each BOQ (Bachelor Officers' Quarters) accommodated ten officers with single rooms and a common latrine. As new 2nd Lieutenants, we weren't expecting anything fancy. The nearby mess hall fed both officers and enlisted men, and barely accommodated the 400 people assigned there.

After signing in, we were directed to go to the quartermaster building to be issued our winter flying gear of sheepskin-lined jackets, trousers, flying boots, and flying helmets. It had recently snowed in northern Kentucky, and we felt like schoolboys wearing recently-issued football suits. Jack Taylor was assigned to the same BOQ and we decided to give the girls of Louisville a real look at the country's 'defenders'. Clad in our bulky winter gear, which the Chevy's front seat could barely accommodate, we drove into town in the late afternoon only to find the downtown area blocked off because of snow accumulation. We parked the car at the corner of Broadway and E 5th Street and proceeded north on foot down the middle of 5th Street towards the Ohio River, which by now was virtually deserted because of the heavy snow forecast which had emptied most of the stores and hotels. We found one open bar (The Canary Cottage) and entered, probably looking and sounding like two polar bears. We found a booth, took off our flying gear, and proceeded to consume numerous 'Singapore Gin Slings'. There were two girls seated at the bar, one of them a redhead that Jack Taylor had his eye on. Thanks to my numerous gin slings, I abandoned my usual conservative nature and went up

to the redhead and asked her if she'd like to meet my 2nd Lieutenant friend. She agreed and I waved Jack over and introduced them to each other. As my first venture into being a match-maker, it was a smashing success as Jack later married Dotty, and they were together for almost 60 years.

On the BOQ bulletin board was an announcement that a swanky Louisville debutante group was having Christmas and New Year's parties and would be glad to include any available 2nd Lieutenants. I can't remember how many events I attended, but each one was definitely top Louisville society, held at beautiful townhouses along the Ohio River or at their Country Clubs. It was a blur of pretty girls, great food, and drink, on every night for a week. Little did I know that twenty years later I would be living in Louisville, head of a large bank trust department and Wing Commander of the Kentucky Air National Guard.

Bowman Field was the new home of the 46th Bombardment Group, a splinter unit carved out of the 3rd Bombardment Group at Savannah, Georgia. Over the previous five years the 3rd Group had become identified as the premier light bombardment group in the Army Air Corps. The 46th was commanded by Col. Richard Lee, a well-liked senior aviator with WWI experience, and had four squadrons of twelve 2nd Lieutenants, two 1st Lieutenants, and a Captain commanding. When we originally arrived at Bowman, they only had two flyable planes, B-18s, post-WWI twin-engine pot-bellied whale-like bathtubs that took off at 70mph, climbed at 90mph, and cruised 120mph. On landing at 50mph the pilot had to be especially careful because it was a conventional two front main gear and one dragging tail-wheel, inclined to tail-loop if not closely monitored. Jack Taylor and I were assigned to the 51st Squadron, and it was commanded by a Captain named Richard D. Dick, a 5'4" Napoleonic martinet who loved to push tall 2nd Lieutenants around. Capt.

Dick, soon to be known as 'Dick Dick', with apologies to the miniature South African deer of the same name, was aided by two 1st Lieutenants, nice guys, of the vintage of late-1930s flying school. The first week we had little to do so the Commander decided we needed some more ground school training, repeating much of what we had absorbed at Kelly Field. We were all anxious to get started on some constructive training in new combat-ready planes while taking several familiarization rides in those old B-18s – ugh!

About the 20th of January, nine pilots (including Capt. Dick) and nine crew chiefs from the 51st Squadron were flown to Los Angeles in an army C-47 (nicknamed 'the Gooney Bird') to pick up new A-20s from the Douglas factory. The A-20 was a twin-engine, single-pilot, attack bomber which was a favorite among all Army Air Corps pilots. It was fast, easy on the controls, had tricycle landing gear (a small nose wheel and two main wheels), superb visibility with the pilot slightly ahead of two air-cooled engines, and had four forward-firing 50-caliber machine guns on each side of the bombardier's compartment in the nose. A gunner aft of the pilot fired the two 50-caliber machine guns. If I had been given a choice of any military aircraft to fly, I would have picked the A-20 for a bomber or a P-38 if I'd been in fighters.

After a briefing by the factory chief pilot, a pilot and crew chief were assigned to each airplane, and we took off for a short introductory flight to Tucson with Dick flying the lead formation. I had the left flight of three and Jack Taylor had the right flight of three. The next leg of the flight back to Louisville was from Tucson to El Paso on an easterly compass heading of about 85 degrees. Dick took off with his three-plane flight, followed by my flight and Jack Taylor's flight. After forming up in a conventional flight of three Vs, we followed our leader who took up a south-easterly heading of approximately 125 degrees, putting us on a course into central Mexico. One must remember

that early in WWII the international reliability of Mexico was questionable, and there were many rumors of the possibility of secret German airfields in central and southern Mexico. I didn't like the idea of possibly being interned in Mexico, so I broke formation integrity by turning my three-plane flight left away from Capt. Dick and picked up a heading of about 75 degrees toward where I thought El Paso would be. As yet these new planes had no inter-plane communication ability, so I had no way of calling Dick. In about five minutes his flight was out of sight heading southward, and Jack Taylor had also broken his flight away from the leader and was about fifteen miles behind me on a more northern route. My flight soon reached the Rio Grande River, which we followed down to the army airport at El Paso. Jack Taylor's flight arrived about ten minutes behind me, and we six pilots were waiting in Base Operations wondering what had happened to Capt. Dick when his flight finally showed up. He was very apologetic, blaming his faulty navigation on a malfunction in his magnetic compass, and promised to buy us a drink in the Officers' Club at dinner. The next day the balance of the flight back to Louisville was uneventful. From that time on, I was on Dick's blacklist for having broken formation.

With these new planes we immediately started a series of tactical training flights. The combat in the African desert between the British and the German troops was showing a growing need for low-level airplane attacks. Every day brought a new emphasis on minimum altitude bombing and strafing, and the poor farmers in southern Indiana must have thought they were being invaded as we practiced our daily flights at maximum 250mph over their fields and cattle. Each flight was monitored by an enlisted observer. On one particular flight in late January, my observer was a Master Sgt. Eubanks who had been a WWI gunner in the early heavy bombers. With his 25 years of flying experience, Sgt. Eubanks thought he knew more about flying than any Army

pilot, especially a 2nd Lieutenant. He had a irritating whiny, nasal tone of voice. We took off on our assigned mission, a 650-mile, 3-hour flight from eastern Indiana to southern Ohio and back to Louisville. Our assigned targets were designated highway and rail intersections in these areas, and we were directed to avoid populated areas. I was averaging about 200ft off the ground, which at that speed creates quite a noisy disturbance to any nearby people or farm animals. I reached every target on schedule but was never low enough in Sgt. Eubanks' opinion. I was heading back to Bowman Field about 60 miles north of Louisville, over Indiana farmland, and Sgt. Eubanks was taunting me with his "lower, Loo-tenant!" On the top of a small rise about 10 miles ahead of me was a lone tree which would be an ideal target for my observer's evaluation. I applied maximum power to the engines, reaching about 275mph, and intentionally flew through the top ten feet of the tree, passing virtually between Sgt. Eubanks' legs and unfortunately breaking all of the plexiglass windows in the nose of the plane. His next radio call wasn't quite so sarcastic, saying "Lieutenant Webster, I'm cold! Let's go home!" Upon landing, the line chief reported the plane damage to the squadron commander. He took great pleasure in confining me to the limited facilities at Bowman field until I had personally helped my maintenance crew replace all forty-five pieces of broken plexiglass. This took one whole weekend and both my hands were blistered from the screwdrivers working on the Phillips-head screws to repair the damage. One unexpected benefit was Sgt. Eubanks volunteered to be taken off flight status.

I had little time for social activities and spent most of my evenings listening to radio programs of Artie Shaw, Glenn Miller, and Tommy & Jimmy Dorsey.

On the last week of January the 46th Bomb Group was ordered to move to Barksdale Field in Shreveport, Louisiana. This looked like a fairly permanent

assignment compared to the temporary make-do at Bowman, so I immediately called Betty at college (Oklahoma A&M) in Stillwater, Oklahoma, and asked her if she could check the bus connections to Shreveport for a quick rendezvous. She reviewed her schedule and found the second weekend in February would be preferable.

In 1942 Barksdale Field was one of the more desirable permanent air bases in the Army Air Corps, ranking up with March Field, California; Mitchell Field, Long Island; Maxwell Field, Alabama; and Randolph Field, Texas. Built in the early 1930s with a lot of WPA money, they had excellent hangars and runways, plus supporting hospitals, on-base family housing, sporting facilities, a great Officers' Club and BOQ facilities. Betty's overnight bus ride to Shreveport arrived about 7 o'clock in the morning. I left the BOQ about 0645 to drive the five miles into town to the bus station. The weather was cold and icy rain was falling. I was travelling a bit fast for the ice and visibility conditions and sideswiped a small truck by about six inches. After stopping briefly to check my car's minimum damage and give the truck driver my name, address, and insurance company, I proceeded just as fast and got to the bus depot about ten minutes late. This was not the best way to start a close relationship, but she was very understanding. I checked her into the Washington Youree, one of the better hotels in Shreveport, and we spent the rest of the day talking and planning. It turned out to be Valentine's Day. At dinner that night in the Crystal Ballroom, I formally proposed to her and gave her an engagement ring. Wedding plans would have to be based on further assignments. She took the bus the next morning back to Stillwater, and I went back to continued low-level combat training.

The 51st Squadron had several TDY (temporary duty) periods while at Barksdale. We were at Fort Benning, Georgia, for a week flying Russian

infantry officers around in an attempt to perfect some method of identifying friendly troops on the ground for low-level close support attacking planes. These Russians were only weeks away from fighting the Germans in some of their biggest land battles, and were used to close hand-to-hand combat and many casualties. Up to now, my combat experience was dropping 50 pound sacks of sand and flour on the artillery range at Fort Knox and firing several hundred rounds of 50-caliber ammunition at abandoned tanks at the Barksdale bombing range. Despite the language difficulties, we developed reasonable conversations with them during the day and drank volumes of vodka with them during the evening. We also had a week's temporary duty at Tallahassee, Florida, working with Chinese pilots who were trying to develop low-level support experience.

During these periods I tried to call Betty on a daily basis to bring her up-to-date on what the 46th Bomb Group was doing. In the middle of April, the 46th was transferred to Galveston, Texas, ostensibly to await loading aboard ships for movement to North Africa. The drive from Shreveport to Galveston was only four hours. The field we would be operating out of was the Galveston Municipal Airport, which was about five miles west of town at the end of Galveston Island. The field had few facilities that were compatible with military operation, but as it appeared we were there on a temporary basis, the group commander accepted the assignment. Everything was on an improvised basis. The married personnel had to get their own quarters without military assistance. The BOQ was the sixth, seventh, and eighth floors of the ten-floor Buccaneer Hotel on the Gulf of Mexico waterfront. The feeding facilities were any bar or barbeque stand or fish fry place you could find. I was fortunate in locating a one-bedroom efficiency apartment on the waterfront side of the promenade, right across from the Buccaneer Hotel, for our honeymoon 'hideaway' available May 1st.

Despite the impending departure Betty and I decided to go ahead with marriage plans in May. As a unique coincidence, at Cornell I had a Chi Psi fraternity brother named Henry Renfert who came from a prominent family in Galveston. I had called on them shortly after arriving there and found Henry's parents to be very charming and well-to-do. He was a cotton broker who had made a lot of money in the 1920s and 30s exporting raw cotton to Europe. After Betty and I had decided we would like to get married in Galveston, I decided to ask Mrs. Renfert if she knew a Methodist minister in Galveston whom I could work with on developing wedding plans. Mrs. Renfert not only had the right social connections, but had a number of helpful suggestions for us to consider. Despite the fact that I thought I was making some progress with the plans, she became anxious and decided to get active with the planning. The First Methodist Church of Galveston could accommodate our wedding on Saturday May 2nd, which I relayed to Betty and she was thrilled with the sponsorship we were getting from Mrs. Renfert. So once again Mrs. Baldwin and Mrs. Webster were notified of an important event coming up May 2nd, and they proceeded to make railway plans to get to Galveston. Jack Taylor agreed to be my best man (on May 5th I served as best man at Jack and Dotty's wedding), and Mrs. Renfert offered her daughter, Maleeta, Henry's twin sister, to be the maid of honor. Furthermore, she insisted on furnishing all the flowers for the bride and maid of honor, and volunteered to host a post-wedding supper for our guests at her lovely home, complete with servants and champagne.

Everything went off on schedule. The mothers arrived Saturday morning and Mrs. Renfert insisted that they stay at her lovely large house. The wedding went off at 4 o'clock, after which we adjourned to the Renfert house for the wedding supper. It was very fancy and one that I could not have duplicated on my own. I shudder to think of the cost if I had paid for it all. (In addition to

me being a big winner on May 2nd, the Kentucky Derby that day was won by a colt named 'Shut Out'.)

About 6 o'clock Sunday morning, May 3rd, there was a loud knock at our apartment door, which I answered and found the Army Air Corps Officer of the Day there with the announcement that the next O.D. from the 51st Squadron, whose tour began at noon that day, had turned up ill and Capt. Dick had selected Lt. Webster as the substitute. I pointed out that I had just been married a sum total of 13 hours and didn't think it was fair to my bride that I be immediately rushed away. That logic fell on deaf ears and I was told that the air police would pick me up at quarter of twelve, which would give me time to get out to the air base and check in by 1200. There wasn't much we could do to change it. I did have time to pick up the mothers from the Renfert house and take them to the train station, and got back to the apartment in time to put on my uniform and be escorted by the air police out to the end of the island to begin my tour. After 24 hours of inspecting the runways every three hours and making sure the field boundary lights were on and no planes were stolen, I finished my tour and finally got back to my bride late Monday afternoon. What a way to start our married life.

The customary military routine of reveille, inspections, parades, and work details was temporarily waived because of our semi-civilian living conditions. The Group was responsible for three or four scouting flights a day between Brownsville and New Orleans looking for German submarines that were plundering the oil tankers traversing the Gulf of Mexico. We didn't have any bombs or machine gun ammunition, so our options were solely to discover and report by radio if a sub sighting was made. Apparently the War Department had misplaced the shipping orders for the 46th Bomb Group going to North Africa, or maybe someone had changed their mind, for we sat

there for eight weeks until late June when the Group was ordered to go to Blythe, California, located 90 miles south of Needles on the border between Arizona and California, and not far from the Salton Sea. Brig. Gen. Geo. Patton was at Needles training the Army Tank Corps in desert survival and battle technique, and the 46th Group were to be the attacking Luftwaffe German aircraft.

The facilities at Blythe were absolutely minimal. Two 5000-ft intersecting concrete runways had been laid down in the desert two miles north of Blythe with no buildings, control towers, or barracks. Everything on the air base had to be under canvas, so everyone got a taste of desert living. Blythe was a town of about 5000 hardy 'desert rats', most of whom worked in the vegetable and fruit packing industry, shipping fresh produce out of the heavily irrigated nearby farms. There were about four small motels, only one of which had a swimming pool. There were perhaps a thousand small one- and two-bedroom wooden frame houses for the residing population.

You can imagine the chaos that developed when the 46th Bomb Group personnel began arriving in early July. The bulk of the enlisted men had to live in 8-man tents out at the air base while a few of the senior sergeants and the 150 or so officers and their wives were forced to find whatever cover they could in and around the town. Betty and another 51st Squadron wife left Galveston early, driving the family Chevy, to Blythe, and quickly set about in house-hunting. Staying at one of the motels, Betty and Mimi Moser walked up and down the dusty streets of Blythe in 110 degree temperatures, knocking on doors in search of rental properties. They finally found an elderly teacher who was just leaving town for three months who would rent us her furnished one-bedroom, one-bath, five-room house for \$250 a month while she attended summer school in Northern California. It turned out that Mimi had

made a promise to another 51st Squadron wife, 'Baby' Smith, to help her find accommodations, so we ended up with three 2nd Lieutenants and their relatively new wives living in a one-bedroom house of about 1100 sq. ft. Fortunately there was a screened-in back porch as well as a small storeroom that would accommodate bunk beds, while the bedroom was the only path into the small bathroom. While Al, Smitty, and I arrived the next day in our planes, we had to find Betty by looking for the blue Chevy in the motel parking lots. This proved successful, and we decided the only fair way to assign sleeping quarters in our house was by cutting cards. Betty and I won the bedroom, which may have sounded extremely fortunate, except our room was like Grand Central Station at bedtime and midnight bathroom visits.

The daytime temperature at the air base averaged 115 degrees and made it impossible for the maintenance crews to work on the planes after 1200. We pilots checked in at our Squadron Operations tent each morning about 5 o'clock for mission assignments up into Gen. Patton's tank formations. The A-20s could carry eight 50lb. 'bombs' (half sand and half flour) and each plane had a mapped area to cover. The missions only lasted about an hour, so we flew three missions each morning and were back at the base by noon, finished for the day. Our afternoons were usually spent in the kitchen of our house, everyone dressed scantily and perched near the window box fan filled with wet excelsior. The room temperature was usually in the mid-90s. If we were lucky, a cooling breeze showed up at dusk to take the house temperature down to the mid-80 degrees. For social activities, we frequently had inter-squadron softball games complete with a keg of beer at the town swimming pool.

In the military, everything seems to run in alphabetical order. By mid-August almost all of the Group's '41-I 2nd Lieutenant pilots had been promoted to 1st

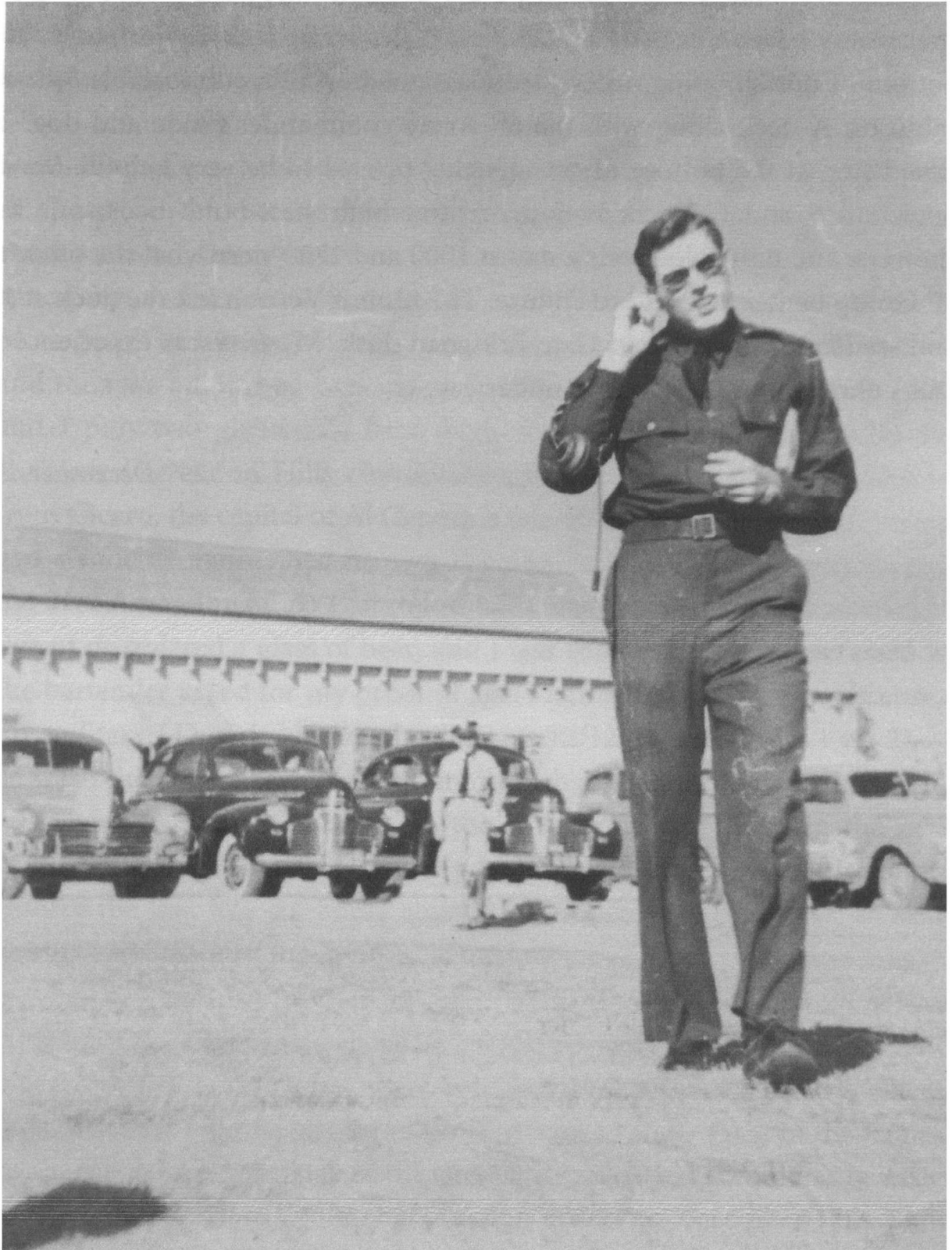
Lieutenant except for Smith, Tabb, Taylor, and Webster, all of whom had been on Capt. Dick's blacklist at one time or another. On September 10th, 46th Bomb Group orders were published transferring 17 pilots (two 1st Lieutenants and fifteen 2nd Lieutenants, including WHW Jr.) to San Francisco for shipment overseas. I was very concerned about being a senior 2nd Lieutenant assigned to a new outfit, but fortunately Jack Taylor, Ray Tabb and I were on the same promotion order issued two days later.

It took us several days to figure out how we were going to arrange a rendezvous with our wives in San Francisco. We made room reservations beginning September 23rd at the Mark Hopkins Hotel. Being newlyweds proved to be an advantage because we had few belongings and small wardrobes to move. We pilots had one B-4 bag for our clothing and one for our bulky winter flying gear we were ordered to take with us, which confirmed the rumor that we were headed for assignment in Alaska.

Betty, accompanied by June Downs, drove the Chevrolet from Blythe to San Francisco. We packed up Betty's things in the car, along with June's, and they headed out September 19th with several sight-seeing stops along the way via Los Angeles and up the coast to San Francisco. Several days later the 'shippees' were put on a train and took the slow non-scenic trip north through Needles to arrive in San Francisco on September 23rd. Jim Downs and I took a cab up to the Mark Hopkins and met our wives who had arrived that morning. Betty and I spent two days walking and bussing around downtown, and had an evening drink at the Penthouse Bar before retiring. On September 26th, Betty and June left the hotel for the long drive back to Muskogee, and June would continue by train to her home in West Virginia. At noon we pilots met up at Pier 10 in the shipyards for boarding the SS Mount Vernon, formerly a very plush ocean liner now converted into a troop transport

carrying over 7000 troops. Our 17-man shipment was used to fill empty bunk spaces way below decks in alphabetical order while Jack Taylor and I, at the bottom of our shipping orders, were assigned to fill a comfortable four-man cabin on A deck along with the 6th Army commander's aide and dog. This time being at the bottom of the alphabet proved to be very helpful. Six days down on F and G decks in 9-man three-high steel bunk beds, salt water showers, and only two meals a day at 1000 and 1700 were what the other new 3rd Group lieutenants had to endure. The Mount Vernon left the dock at 1800 and we cleared the Golden Gate Bridge at dusk. My overseas experience to a still-unknown destination was underway.

29th December, 2015



ADDENDUM: SOPHIE WEBSTER (née FOUKE)

Sophie was the daughter of Philip Fouke, a lawyer, a U.S. Congressman from south Illinois, and a Civil War Union Colonel. She married William Henry Webster (b. 1841) in 1875 after a brief courtship. They moved to St. Louis and had two children: a son Philip, born in 1877, and William Henry Jr., born 1888. Sophie was a very domineering woman, and the couple split up in 1894. They never divorced, as Sophie was a Catholic. Webster moved to a downtown hotel, and Sophie moved to a boarding house with the boys. In early 1898, at the outbreak of the Spanish American War, Philip left St. Louis without Sophie's permission to travel to San Antonio to join Col. Teddy Roosevelt's Rough Riders. After six months in San Antonio, he contracted a bad case of malaria, and had to be hospitalized. The government hospital facilities there were minimal, and while Sophie was furious with Philip's unauthorized departure, she realized he would need a more personal hospital care. She decided to move to San Antonio, but younger son Henry, aged 10, opted to remain in St. Louis with an accommodating foster family. For many years, Sophie lived in the Menger Hotel, which was about 100 yards east of the famed Alamo Mission. In the daytime, she walked around downtown, calling on lawyers and doctors to sell trade publications. In the evening, she aided her income by being the regular dealer at the hotel's 'floating' poker game. (The dealer usually got at least 50¢ each hand.) Son Philip recovered from malaria, and got a job selling insurance. He married Katharine Kelly from Biloxi, Mississippi, and they had one daughter, Elward. Philip died in 1929, and Sophie moved in with Katharine and Elward. She died in 1945, and is buried at one of the San Antonio missions.