

40th Anniversary Memories of WWII

by Gary Dielman

This year is the 40th anniversary of the end of World War II. It has stirred memories among many of us who lived through those momentous years from 1939 to 1945. The memories that follow are those of present-day Baker County veterans Harry Yeakley, Don Clark, Carl Kostol, Leo Case, Henry Davis, Dave Williams, Don Hunt, Ray Dielman, Clyde Perrine, and Bud Howard. Also sharing their memories are former Bakerites Bill Gilliam of Beaverton, OR, and Leo Boyce of Desert Hot Springs, CA, who were in Baker in July to attend the reunion of the BHS Class of 1940.

For Baker County, war service got started in September 1940, when Baker's F Company, 2nd Battalion, 186th Infantry, 41st Division of the Oregon National Guard was mobilized and sent to Fort Lewis, WA. F Company was still there 15 months later, when Japan attacked Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941.

(The following memories are based on interviews with Baker County veterans in 1985.)

Leo Boyce and Bill Gilliam

Leo Boyce and Bill Gilliam recalled that F Company's first assignment after war was declared was to guard the coast between Seaside and Astoria starting with December 7, 1941, when they guarded the bridge between Longview, Washington, and Rainier, Oregon. At that time, the threat of Japanese invasion of the U.S. mainland along the Pacific Coast was seen as very grave. The division commander had word that an invasion fleet was in the Gulf of Alaska. As a result, Boyce and Gilliam recall, when flotsam from the wreck of a ship off the Oregon coast started washing ashore one night, many soldiers thought the expected invasion had begun. Some even fired at floating Christmas trees, part of the cargo headed for the Philippines.

Boyce and Gilliam were with F Company for most of the war. The first enemy action they saw was when F Company did mopping up operations on New Guinea. On 50-mile patrols, native scouts would go ahead into a village to see if there were any Japanese soldiers present. Later, at Hollandia, F Company was in the first wave ashore, meeting little resistance. But, in the taking of the Santani Airdrome, Leo Boyce remembers that a photographer, who was in the same amphibious tank with him, did not get any pictures taken, because the firing was too heavy.

Both Boyce and Gilliam recall that the landing on the island of Biac also met light resistance primarily because they landed in the wrong place. They had to wade the last 100 yards in a mangrove swamp in water up to their armpits. The airstrip which was their goal was easily taken, but it took 30 days to take the next 800 yards to the top of a ridge. The Japanese refused to be dislodged from their honeycomb of caves. It was during this same time that F Company withstood a banzai attack that left 100

Japanese dead. Gilliam and Boyce both remember that battle as the most intense fighting they experienced in the war.

Boyce and Gilliam added an interesting footnote to F Company's WWII experiences. For about three months, while F Company was in Australia, one of the platoons was under the command of a capable young lieutenant named Caspar Weinberger, who is today in the Reagan cabinet as Secretary of Defense.

Neal Dikeman

The two veterans Boyce and Gilliam also agree that if F Company had a hero, it was a Halfway boy named Neal Dikeman, who is presently a resident of Redmond, Oregon. Dikeman was noted for his fighting and his leadership qualities rather than for his size. On Pearl Harbor day Dikeman was in the brig in Tacoma for fighting. Nevertheless, he rose from private to sergeant, and, through a field commission, ultimately became a captain, getting two silver stars and a purple heart on the way.

Boyce watched Dikeman in action on Biac, when F Company was trying to dislodge the enemy from a cave. Dikeman said, "Cover me," then ran toward the cave and tossed in a grenade, while his men laid down a blanket of fire. What followed was a tremendous explosion that sent Dikeman tumbling down the hillside. The cave had contained an ammo dump, which was set off by the grenade, killing 125 Japanese occupants.

Harry Yeakley

On December 7, 1941, Harry Yeakley, ill with flu, was confined to a hospital bed at Madigan Army Hospital at Fort Lewis. When he heard about the bombing of Pearl Harbor, he abandoned his bed and "hightailed it" back to F Company, fearing it might be shipped out leaving him behind.

In the South Pacific with the rest of the company, Yeakley discovered that disease was a more potent enemy than the Japanese. On the three-week long mopping up patrols in the jungles of New Guinea, slogging through swamps for up to three days at a time, and pulling leeches off in the evening, the soldiers had to withstand the attacks of mosquitoes and microbes as well as the enemy.

Sometimes enemy soldiers were the first to reach supplies parachuted in, so the patrol had to fight for its supper. Yeakley says the most frightening thing about the war was "the nights." On patrol in the swamp, they slept in trees, secured to the branches by their belts. But they normally slept in hammocks in huts with roofs but no sides. At night the Japanese would sneak into camp and cut a person's throat. The luckless soldier was not discovered until the next morning.

But it wasn't a knife, bomb, or bullet that got Yeakley. Shortly after being commissioned an officer and being reassigned to the 25th Infantry Division, he was sent to the hospital with malaria and dysentery. It was in that hospital that Yeakley

met a nurse who later became his wife. Doctors discovered that the real culprit that had laid Yeakley low was tuberculosis, so he was shipped to Santa Fe, NM. From the TB sanatorium, where he spent the rest of the war, he courted his South Pacific army nurse by mail.

Don Clark

For Don Clark, the mobilization of F Company was a family affair involving his brother, his father, and himself, although each of the three eventually ended up in other units. In the spring of 1942, Clark was assigned to a headquarters unit of the 41st Division in the South Pacific, where part of his duties included playing in the band. During the following three years, Clark participated in eleven boat landings, during which time he was never injured or sick. Clark says according to his memory everybody else got sick, if not with dysentery, then with malaria.

Clark's closest call came in Oro Bay, when he was on a barge being transported from one part of New Guinea to another. A flight of 100 Japanese bombers flew directly overhead, but luckily for the sitting ducks in the barge, the planes had apparently already unloaded their bombs.

Clark said it was much less threatening to lie in the grass watching the air battles over New Guinea. He recalls that Japanese Zeros seemed to have shot down more US planes, but that General Douglas MacArthur reported the opposite.

Carl Kostol

Eighteen-year-old Carl Kostol was freshly graduated from Baker High School, when he was mobilized with the rest of F Company in September 1940. The winter in tents at Ft. Lewis convinced him that there must be something better, so he applied for the Army Air Corps and was accepted. Kostol was trained to fly the B-25 bomber (Billy Mitchell's plane) and sent to southeast China.

The number of planes at the little base, where Kostol was to be stationed, was doubled by the three planes he flew in with. The planes at the base conducted bombing and strafing of ship convoys in the ocean, river traffic on the Yangtze, and enemy troops. On only his second mission, his plane left a 10,000-ton Japanese vessel broken in half and sinking.

Kostol flew 38 missions in China. His last mission, a bombing run over the Yangtze River, lasted a month. When anti-aircraft fire hit the right engine, setting it on fire, Kostol ordered his crew of eight to bail out. Kostol was the last out and the last to reach the ground, opening his parachute at the last possible moment in order to escape detection by the Japanese on the ground.

His crew, whose parachutes opened higher, were seen by the Japanese. The crew spent two weeks eluding their pursuers. Later in crossing the frontline, the crew and

their Chinese guerrilla protectors had a battle with the Japanese costing the lives of a number of guerrillas before all crewmen, excepting Kostol, made it safely to their base. The \$500 reward the US paid guerrillas for the return of each crewman, as opposed to \$300 paid by the Japanese, was probably not the primary motivation in the airmen's rescue.

Kostol, who landed apart from his crew, was also aided by Chinese guerrillas. A band of about 15 guerrillas and Kostol, dressed in native garb, walked about 250 miles before crossing into friendly territory. From there Kostol went by foot, vehicle, boat, and plane another 250 miles back to his base, arriving just three days after his crew.

Kostol was just in time to catch the last plane out of the base, which was being abandoned in face of the Japanese southward advance. He made a trip to India and ferried a replacement plane back to China, but he flew no more combat missions. An Air Force rule precluded further missions in order to ward against an airman being shot down again and then being tortured into revealing information about the guerrilla organization. Kostol arrived back in the States in December 1944.

Leo Case

"The people back home suffered the most," says Leo Case, citing his mother's experience. In January 1945, she received a telegram, which said, "Regret to inform you your son was seriously wounded in action on Luzon 28 Jan." The rest of the message gave no information about the nature of the injury. When he was stationed on Guadalcanal, New Georgia, Case said he felt like he couldn't get hit, although he did spend time in a hospital suffering from malaria and jaundice.

But, two weeks into the Luzon campaign in the Philippines, Case was wounded in the village of San Manuel 17 miles from the beachhead. Case says as he stood up to run out of the way of an approaching enemy tank, he saw tracer bullets swinging toward him. A bullet struck his pistol on one side and another bullet hit his canteen on the other side. The bullet in between hit him in the stomach and went out the left hip. With the tank still approaching and his legs paralyzed, Case dragged himself along the ground until he was pulled to safety by two young soldiers.

Case was not able to get word to his mother about his condition until he arrived at a military hospital in Van Nuys, California, in May 1945. His war wound is still with him.

Ray Dielman

Ray Dielman received his draft notice at Christmas 1944. After training at Camp Roberts, California, where at 29 he was the oldest trainee, he found himself working in the galley of a troop ship headed for Saipan in July 1945. He recalls that the galley was like a sauna, which left him 30 pounds lighter by the end of the voyage.

During the ten days he spent on Saipan before going on to his assignment on Guam, Dielman said a loud speaker announced that an atomic bomb had been dropped on Hiroshima. During the night he had heard the B-29 bombers pass over after taking off from nearby Tinian Island. The bombing caused a lot of speculation about how much longer the war could last.

Dielman, who worked for the US Postal Service as a railway postal clerk in civilian life, was assigned to the Army Courier Service on Guam. The four-man office handled strictly confidential, secret, and top secret mail. All branches of the service sent their mail through the office for distribution throughout the South Pacific and to the US. Each piece was handled just like registered mail.

Dielman spent Christmas 1945 on a troop ship headed home.

Henry Davis

Henry Davis volunteered for service in 1942 at age 27, and became a carpenter in the Seabees serving in both the European and Pacific theaters. After seeing duty in Iceland and Scotland, Davis went ashore at Omaha Beach three days after D-Day (June 6, 1944).

There he set up tents for the evacuation camp. He says the biggest problems were mines called mustard pots, which were buried in the soil. Since setting up tents required pounding pegs into the ground, there was the fear that a mine might be set off.

Davis was in Europe until the fall of 1944. The following spring he went to Okinawa on the other side of the globe for the remainder of the war.

Don Hunt

Don Hunt, a radioman and waist gunner on an eight-man naval patrol bomber, arrived in the South Pacific during the last year of the war. His plane, the "lucky Lady," was a watercraft which flew sub patrol, rescued downed flyers, and bombed shipping lanes. Besides bombs, it carried eight 50-caliber and two 30-caliber machine guns that shot straight tracers. According to Hunt, the main technique for avoiding Japanese fighter planes was to fly so close to the water that the fighters could not easily maneuver around the Lucky Lady. But that did not keep the plane from being shot at.

One time, Hunt says, the plane came back to its mother ship *St. George* so badly shot up it would have sunk had it not landed close enough for the ship's crane to latch onto it. Of the twelve seaplanes in Hunt's squadron, four were lost with all crewmen. Hunt's plane was credited with sinking four ships and downing two planes.

Clyde Perrine

Uncle Sam called on Clyde Perrine twice during WWII. Like the men of F Co., Perrine, age 20, was mobilized in September 1940. He was discharged a year later only to be called up again in 1942. He helped train recruits before being sent to England as a tank driver in an armored division.

In June 1944, Perrine went ashore at Omaha Beach on D-Day plus six. His outfit joined General Patton's 3rd Army and that winter relieved troops at Bastogne, where his unit repelled four attacks. Perrine's five-man crew essentially lived in their tank, using a Coleman burner to warm themselves as well as their food.

Perrine's outfit crossed the Rhine on a pontoon bridge south of Frankfurt. With Perrine's tank on point near that city, it was hit by fire from an anti-aircraft gun manned by German boys and an old man. The tank caught fire. Perrine ordered the crew out and he followed, getting out just before the ammo inside exploded.

When the anti-aircraft gun started shooting high explosive shells, he dived into a shallow ditch. As he lay in the ditch, shrapnel from one of the shells struck Perrine in the right buttocks. Ignoring his wound, he got his assistant driver, who was hit in the pelvis, and his gunner, who had a broken wrist, to the safety of a deep furrow about 100 feet away.

After three days in a field hospital, where a 50-cent-size piece of metal was removed, Perrine was back with his unit driving a jeep for the company commander. Perrine was awarded the Purple Heart medal for being wounded in combat.

Jeep driving was hazardous, too. As they were entering a little town in Germany, a bazooka blast hit a nearby building knocking the jeep onto its side. Perrine, his captain, and a lieutenant, all uninjured, righted the jeep and drove on.

The jeep may not have had the power of a tank, but it proved to be the instrument Perrine used in a daring rescue. The same little town had a bridge on which wounded soldiers were pinned down by German machine gun fire that periodically strafed the bridge.

When night came, the men were still trapped on the bridge. Perrine's captain came to him and asked if he would take the jeep and a medic and try to rescue the wounded men. The captain made it clear to Perrine that he was not required to attempt the dangerous rescue. Perrine volunteered. He waited until there was a lull in the firing, then, in the dark, he gunned the jeep backwards to the men on the bridge. He and the medic quickly loaded the wounded soldiers and roared off the bridge to safety. Perrine's daring rescue earned him the Silver Star Medal for bravery.

Bud Howard

As soon as Bud Howard got out of high school, he joined the Army Air Force. Having no idea how hazardous it would be, he chose gunnery school. After his training, he

was assigned to the 8th Air Force in England, from where he flew on 33 missions as a tail gunner in a B-17 bomber over Germany and Czechoslovakia. According to Howard, the American planes did the daylight flying, while the British planes flew at night. Therefore, the American planes relied on their firepower for survival. Each B-17 carried thirteen 50-caliber machine guns.

“All the missions were bad,” Howard says, “but we always got our plane home.” That was the exception. Of the 48 planes in his outfit, only four got through 60 missions. Only once did his plane return from a mission without bullet or flak damage. Sometimes there would be upwards of 300 holes in the craft.

Howard remembers well a couple of extremely close calls. One time with the ailerons damaged, the plane slipped below the formation into the path of bombs being jettisoned by another B-17. One of the bombs crashed through the plane damaging the radio and a wing.

Another occasion was an even closer call for Howard. While flying through flak, seated in his exposed tail gunner’s bubble, pieces of flak went through ammo cases on each side of him, ripping away part of the right sleeve of his flight jacket before exiting upwards through the tail fin.

This summer Bud Howard was one of 10,000 B-17 veterans who, at Boeing’s invitation, attended in Seattle the 50th anniversary of the first flight of the B-17. While there he got together with his company’s commanding officer and chaplain. And, by chance, he ran into the man in his squadron who at the end of the war had given Howard his passport picture—the one they all carried in case they were shot down behind enemy lines and needed it for a fake passport.

Dave Williams

Already a veteran of 15 years service when he arrived in Baker as Navy recruiter in November 1940, Dave Williams was again ordered to sea in 1942. Stationed in the South Pacific aboard the destroyer-tender *Oyster Bay*, Williams was deck officer and damage control officer.

The ship, which was about the size of a destroyer, had a 208-man crew, which included Gordon Brinton and Paul Curts, both of Baker. Besides providing support services for destroyers, seaplanes, and PT boats, the *Oyster Bay* also launched Army Rangers in rubber rafts near their targets and picked them up after their missions.

During the years of Williams’ tour aboard the *Oyster Bay*, two of the ship’s crew were killed and several wounded, including Williams, who caught a piece of metal in his arm during a kamikaze attack. The attack occurred while the ship was taking on high test fuel in the Philippines. One of the two planes involved was downed by anti-aircraft fire before it got close, and the other blew up along side the ship.

Williams participated in invasions in the Admiralty Islands, in Pango Pango, and in the Battle of Leyte Gulf in the Philippines. One of the most memorable experiences, Williams says, was hearing all the ships blow their whistles, when the announcement came that the war was over.

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George V. Nicolescu

[I interviewed Nicolescu about his military service, when I learned about his war experiences after writing the series above. The following article appeared in the *Baker City Herald* on 3-10-1993, shortly after I learned of Nicolescu's death. It was written as a letter to the editor, but was printed as a Guest Opinion.]

Nicolescu's War Story Recalled by Gary Dielman

The recent passing of Eagle Valley rancher and former Baker County Commissioner George Nicolescu reminded me of a story he told me in 1985 about his service in the Air Force during World War II.

He had just read about the World War II exploits of several Baker County veterans in a newspaper article I had written in commemoration of the 40th anniversary of the end of that war.

Had I been aware of his exploits, I would certainly have included them in the article. So, I hope you'll grant me the opportunity now to tell George's story, a bit late but fondly remembered.

During the war, George was a crew member of a bomber that flew missions out of England over Germany. I can't remember how many missions he had flown, but the one he told me about was his last.

In 1943 his bomber was hit by flak over northern Germany and everyone bailed out. They all landed safely and were soon rounded up by the Germans, who took them to a local school house for interrogation. They were put under guard in a gymnasium and taken one at a time into a side room to be questioned. In that room the Germans had deposited all the flyers' person effects found at the crash site, including a pair of fleece-lined boots.

One of the flyers had forgotten to zip them up before bailing out. When his chute opened, the sudden slowing of his descent jerked the boots right off his feet. Upon

seeing his boots, he asked to have them back. The German interrogating officer refused, because one of the Germans had already claimed the boots for himself.

The American demanded to have his favorite boots, which he knew he would need. When the interrogator again refused, the American spat on him, an action he immediately regretted most ruefully, thinking he might be shot. But, amazingly, the German did not retaliate.

A short time later, the Americans again thought they might be shot for another bit of impudence. It appears that the real fighting men were at the front, leaving old men and boys to do menial duties like guard prisoners. On this occasion the American bomber crew was being guarded by a couple of young German soldiers about 16 years old. They were posted at each end of the line of airmen, who stood at attention waiting their turn in the interrogation room.

When a German officer entered the gymnasium, the young guards snapped to a heel-clicking attention so nervously done that one of them inadvertently fired off a round from his rifle into the ceiling. In spite of their perilous position, the Americans broke out laughing and couldn't stop for some time, even though ordered to do so. Again, they weren't shot for their boldness, but their punishment was not insignificant—they spent the rest of the war in a prison camp.

[Later I did some research and came up with the news stories below.]

Record-Courier, 10-21-1943

"Lieut. Nicolescu Reported Missing Over European Zone.

"Lt. George Nicolescu, 26, was reported Tuesday in a telegram from the war department to be missing in action over Europe. His mother, Mrs. Mary Skooras, received the advice. The word indicated that he was missing on October 9. As co-pilot of a Flying Fortress (B17), he had been cited a month earlier for meritorious service on 18 missions over enemy occupied Europe, receiving the air medal and one oak leaf cluster to the air medal, in addition to earning a promotion to First Lt. George Nicolescu was a graduate of Eagle Valley high school in 1934, joined the air forces after Pearl Harbor, and was previously an Eastern Oregon normal and OSC student. He was graduated from the twin engine bomber school at Rosewell, N. Mexico, last January.

"Mission is not known, but Oct. 8 Bremen was blasted and Oct. 9 there was a raid of 1800 miles round trip into eastern Germany, Poland, Pomerania, and East Prussia to within 300 miles of the Russian front."

Record-Courier 12-9-1943

"Clark Gable Reassures Mother

"Captain Says Nicolescu 60 Miles from Berlin

"From Culver City, Calif., MGM studios Captain Clark Gable on December 1 wrote this reassuring letter to Mrs. Gus Skooras of Richland concerning her son. Lt. George

Nicolescu, who was well-known in the same bomber groups as Gable in England before being lost over Europe.

"Shortly before I left England we all were naturally shocked the day that the Linda Ball with Harry, Nick and the others did not return.

"One never gives up hope however, in these instances and a couple of weeks ago upon my return home I learned through friends of Harry Morse's father that the latter had received official word that Harry was a prisoner of war in Germany. This is good news and if you have not heard already I think you might hope with a fair degree of certainty that Nick is alive and with him. If the pilot is able to bail out of a disabled ship it is quite certain that the rest of his crew were able to go before him.

"The majority of allied airmen who are officers are confined in a prison camp 60 miles from Berlin and, happily, receive a comparatively good care. This results from Goering's respect for airmen, be they Nazi or enemy.

"We all knew and liked Nick enormously, so that I am very happy to be able to forward any information I can concerning him to his mother.

"Your son is a glowing example of the fighting American boys whose courage and ability are working to bring this mess to a quick conclusion and bring themselves back where they belong.

"I earnestly hope that good news of him is not long in coming to you."

Democrat-Herald 12-16-1943

First letter dated October 26, 1943, received by Mrs. Gus Skooras from son, Lt. Nicolescu, after being shot down over Europe.

"Well, Mother, I am getting quite a reputation for making stews and puddings. The secret of my success though is to keep them guessing as to what I am cooking. We are getting along fine and feeling good. We could use a few things such as chocolate or cocoa but before you send anything see a Red Cross representative in Baker and they will let you know the size of package you are allowed and just what you can send. Please include some wool sox and a wristwatch. You can write as many letters as you want to and I'll write as often as possible.

"The weather here is fine and reminds me very much of our climate at home. I suppose Gus and the rest have been hunting deer and having a big time. I think we will be able to have a steak about once every two weeks and I am beginning to like the black bread we are getting. Please don't worry about me."

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Baker City, Oregon

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