

# Ernst F. Knobloch

Mechanic  
414<sup>th</sup> Squadron  
97<sup>th</sup> Bombardment Group  
5<sup>th</sup> Bomb Wing  
Fifteenth Air Force

by  
Lowell Knobloch

After the bombing of Pearl Harbor and war was declared, dad and uncle Albert talked and decided they would enlist to stay out of the infantry and possibly get better pay. Dad signed up for service at the United States Army Recruiting Station at the post office in Sioux Falls, South Dakota on December 23, 1941. Uncle Dietrich tried to enlist but was refused because of his eye sight. He was later drafted as a volunteer with reduced pay.

Dad reported for enlistment January 12, 1942 in Sioux Falls, SD and was then transferred to Ft. Snelling, MN. He was inducted at the Ft. Snelling Reception Center January 15, 1942 and stayed there until January 18. The Articles of War and the sex Morality course were read to them January 17. Base pay was \$21.00 a month and laundry charge was \$1.50 per month. He was transferred to Keesler Field, Mississippi on January 20 for basic training where he was part of the 301<sup>st</sup> Tech SS (SP) Group. He first worked as a carpenter under a Corporal Lewis. They told him to watch for snakes. If they came across a log, they were supposed to step on it and jump over it as a snake might be laying on the other side.

One day they were short on man at formation. Their search found him dead sitting against a tree stump. There were bite marks on his back and they figured when he leaned against the hole in the stump, the snake bit him and left. Another day they were going into a building and there was a water moccasin in the entry. He was black as coal and his mouth was snow white. A fella from the South said, "I can get rid of him." He started jumping up and down on it until he smashed his head.

Dad said the base must have been built in a low spot because every time it rained, they walked through water. Actually, the base was located in a Palmetto grove in a swamp. If there was a cigarette butt on the ground, you were expected to pick it up whether it was yours or not. If you didn't and an officer saw you, they would find things for you to do. They would give you a shovel and tell you to dig a 3-foot square by 3-foot deep hole and then come back and measure it. Then you would fill it back in. Not that you did anything wrong, but to see if you could follow directions. One thing you learned at the mess hall was not to "short-stop" the food. When someone asked you to pass the potatoes you did not take some first and then pass them. If you were caught doing this you would receive extra duties.

They wanted volunteers for mechanics. Dad told the CO he would try it and started training. Everywhere they traveled was by train. He was transferred to MacDill Field February 3 and

stayed there until March 29. He was then transferred to Sarasota on March 29 until May 16. Dad received his engine mechanics rating on March 20 and his airplane and engine mechanics rating April 21. He became a PDF April 1 under Special Order #34.

They staged at the fairgrounds in Miami for three days before transferring to Ft. Dix, New Jersey. While at the fairgrounds, they stayed in the poultry barns as they were the only buildings large enough to house them.

Over 12,500 ground personnel left in a black out to England on June 4. They sailed on the Queen Elizabeth and had a smooth ride over. They were on a solitary journey doing a zig-zag course without escort as no military ships could keep up with them. They arrived in Clyde, Scotland on June 10. Dad met Joe Rokery, a cousin of Margaret Rokery on the ride overseas. The Rokery family worked for Ernst's family. He was stationed at Grafton-Underwood Base from June 13 until November 27.

The people of England were hard to understand with their slang and using different words for the same thing (for example, loo-latrine). The weather was usually foggy and drizzly. Driving on the wrong side of the road was hard to get used to. There were bicycles all around as they were easier to get around on the narrow roads. They used their bites to get from the barracks to the airfield – a distance away in case they would get bombed. They would get passes to go to movies in town. They called their base Grafton-Undermud as the airfields were mostly grass runways.

The bomb group, the 97<sup>th</sup> was the first to do daylight bombing raids in Europe. Some of the B-17s would come back from missions with holes in the wings big enough to jump through. The engineers from Boeing looked at some of the damaged planes and said they should have fallen from the sky. One B-17 returned with one side of the tail completely missing. Another came in with a direct flak hit just ahead of the tail. The only thing holding the tail on was the catwalk in the floor and the cables controlling the rudder. (Flak or black puffs would be seen exploding around the planes.) Flak shells were 88mm or 150mm reaching an altitude of 40,000 feet.

They armed the bombs before take-off until a couple of B-17s crashed causing great damage to runways and disrupting the take-off of the other planes. After that, they armed the bombs once the B-17s were in formation. If a plane didn't catch fire when it crashed you were lucky to find a foot in a boot or a dog tag. If you have seen the movie "Memphis Belle", that B-17 was in the 91<sup>st</sup> Bomb Group. Dad remembered that plane from his time in England and when it reached its 25<sup>th</sup> mission.

The name of dad's plane was "Kwiturbitchin II". It was taken out of combat after 89 missions. It was declared unfit for combat and then used for weather scouting or transport. It got its name because there was always something wrong with it when it came back from a mission. The CO asked dad if he wanted to be the Crew Chief, knowing the good work he did and he would get more pay. Dad said no. Dad said he wasn't afraid of the work he did, but if someone else goofed up and it crashed he would blame himself.

The engines had a magneto spark plug ignition system. Dow Corning made a compound the ground crews put over the ignition and other electrical wires to help with the moisture problem in England. Depending on the damage to the plane they may have to work all night to have it ready for the next mission. They would pump 1500-1600 gallons of gasoline from 55-gallon drums by hand for each plane. They had few replacement parts so they made them or took them off of damaged planes. They cut new pieces of sheet metal to patch holes in the plane. The engines were equipped with a 37-gallon oil tank for each engine. The engines were designed to burn oil. Once it reached over 35 to 40 gallons per mission, the engine was replaced because they had no over-haul kits at that time. The mechanics didn't socialize with the flight crews as they were higher officers and thought they were a few rungs higher than the mechanics. As one ground crewman said, "If the plane didn't come back then we didn't lose a friend." The hardest guys to get along with were the 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenants as they just came from officer's training and were bucking for a promotion. If they thought you didn't salute them correctly, they would call you on it and you visited the CO. After a while, the noncoms got sick of this and went to the CO. He said, "Don't come to a complete attention and salute." He talked to the 2<sup>nd</sup> "Louies" and told them to ease up, this was a war time situation and some things don't have to be by the book.

Most of the mechanics were smaller guys like dad, 5'7" to 5'9", 135 to 145 pounds. Dad's nickname was "Knobby." James "Shorty" Bracewell from Allerton, Iowa enlisted when he was 17 years old and stayed in 28 years; Leonard "Little" Howe from Shelby, Iowa; Angelo "Fiddle Dee Dee" Fedele from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Carl Sieber from New Cornerstone, Ohio; Eugene Ballard from Noblesville, Indiana; George Gable from Cedar Rapids, Iowa, a college football player with a bad knee, and Paul "Big Howe" Howe from Dale Oregon. The last two were over 6'2" and 200 pounds. There was also a Herman "Hog Eyes" Heyland from Peabody, Kansas; Wadsworth "Buck" Jackson from Wadsworth, Alabama, Buck was in the peanut oil business after WWII.

On November 27, they sailed from England to North Africa. Dad said any place there was room for a box of 50 caliber ammo they put it there. Dad said they would have gone up like a roman candle if a torpedo had hit them. They sailed north for two days to get away from the German U-boats before turning south to Africa. Every direction you looked there were lines of ships. They hit a storm and it took two days to get realigned. They landed at Oran on December 6. Dad was in the 8<sup>th</sup> Army Air Corps. After arriving in Africa, the groups co-mingled and became the 12<sup>th</sup> Army Air Corps. They were the 97<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group (H – Heavy bombardment) 414<sup>th</sup> Squadron. Their motto was "Coming In On A Wing And A Prayer." And also was "Venit Hora" which means "The Hour Has Come." Dad became a Corporal TWP on December 19 under Special Order #217.

Once in Africa, the French, who had big farms, welcomed them with open arms. They raised flax, wheat, barley, and also had dates and vineyards for wine. If they had trouble with their grain binders, the service men would help fix them. They would also help with shocking and threshing the grain. The service men would hire them to do their laundry and would buy fruit and wine from them. The French invited them over for meals once in a while. One time they had chicken soup and there were a few feathers floating on top and if you stirred it too deep you

could hear the gravel from the gizzard scratching the bottom of the pot. There meat was goat, lamb or beef.

One time the Air Corps was moving to another base and some mechanics from dad's outfit came across some GIs raping a 16 year old French girl. They grabbed the ½ inch breaker bars out of their tool chest and beat the tar out of them. Then they took the girl home.

If something wasn't chained, nailed, bolted or welded to something, the Arabs would steal it. They would work for both sides, trying to make a buck selling materials or information. One came up to dad and asked him if he wanted to buy a watch. He pulled his sleeve up and he had 5 or 6 watches on his arm. They were both American and German. The cost for killing animals was \$15.00 for sheep or goats, \$50.00 for a burrow or mule and a \$100.00 for a camel. Dad said you had to watch the camels as they would bite and spit on you. When they found a place for a new base, all the animals were herded around to clear it of land mines. The people would get paid for their animals and if there was anything left, the killed or injured animals were butchered.

When living in their tent, dad said as long as you didn't touch the canvas with your bare skin when it was wet the tent wouldn't leak. If you did touch it the tent would leak.

The air bases were only 250 miles from the front lines. The tents were away from the airfields and a half mile from there was an irrigation ditch for cover. Almost every night, "Fritz" would drop a couple of bombs and strafe then take off. One night he got pretty close and they took off for the ditch. Dad lost one sandal and didn't remember how far he ran barefoot and never found the sandal. When they went to bed at night, they had to shake everything out so there weren't any scorpions in there. After they were in Africa for a while, dad's neck would get sore from shaving so he let it go for a few days. The CO called him in on it. Dad told him his neck would get raw shaving every day. The CO told him to just shave his neck every three days or so. Once in a while an enemy plane would strafe during the day, but would quit after a few times when the gunners hit him pretty good.

Dad couldn't figure out the British and their addiction to tea. It didn't matter if it was during the take-off, landing, moving or being strafed, they dropped what they were doing and made tea. Even if the shells landed close to them, they kept drinking tea. Dad said it was quite a lend-lease program, we loaned them out trucks and when we needed them they charged us \$50.00 per day.

The engines had no air cleaners so the planes would take off four abreast and after the dust cleared four more took off. One time, two P-38s took off in a terrible dust storm and collided, one of the pilots was killed. They pumped gas over pieces of cloth to keep out as much dust and sand as possible. It also helped with moisture because it was cold and hot every day. In north Africa, until supplies caught up to them they had to refuel the planes using 5-gallon cans. They had no replacement engines so they cannibalized engines from damaged B-17s to keep others flying. At one time they had 23 unusable B-17s on the ground until new engines came. All the ground crew help with guard duty and kitchen patrol, "KP." Dad said guard duty was pretty scary because you only had a lantern here or there; in case an enemy plane came they could put

them out quickly. One night, something was making noise all night, but he never saw an animal or person. You made sure the password was not forgotten.

The first cook they had couldn't boil water. He made the worst tasting food you ever ate. So they bought some wine from the French and would take three or four swallows before they ate. Doing this dad gained weight and was up to 173 pounds. The next cook they had was a Russian. He had a scar from his left ear all the way across his neck. Dad asked him about it and he said he got it during the Russian-Japanese war. The wound was from a bayonet. He cooked good tasting food because he knew how to spice things up. One day was hash for breakfast, dinner and supper. The next day it was stew for breakfast, dinner and supper. Their water supply was a P-38 belly tank hung under a tree or engine stand. Once in a while they would find a well and would hang wine bottles in it so they would have cool wine or water to drink.

One-time dad was on "KP" peeling potatoes. Another cook was making something and laid down a butter wrapper. Dad reached for the wrapper and the cook nearly stabbed his hand. Thinking dad was trying to steal some food, he told him to keep his hands back. Dad said all he wanted to do was look at the wrapper, so the cook let him pick it up. The wrapper was from the Hull Creamery. Dad told him Hull was about 30 miles from his home. The cook didn't seem to care. Most of the food sent to them was spoiled. It took too long to get to them. At Christmas one year, a buddy got a fruit cake. It was solid green so he sharpened his knife and sliced off thin layers until the green was gone. Then he cut it in half and there was a bottle of rum in it. He poured the rum over it, lit it and after it burned a few seconds they put it out and ate it while it was still warm.

Bob Hope showed up with his show to entertain the troops at Diepienne, Tunisia on August 15, 1943. They had a noncom officer's club at Le Senia, French North Africa. They could get one day passes at first. One guy in the outfit lost his stripes as fast as he got them. He said he was going to find out what an Arab woman looked like behind her veil. The MPs found him a few days later with his throat slit.

When they got to Algeria, dad, Eugene Ballard and a couple of other guys got a 3-day pass from 12:00 noon on April 12, 1943 until 12:00 noon April 15. They got a hold of a 2-man raft and some beer and started floating in the Mediterranean Sea. They were busy talking and pretty soon dad figured they were 2 or 3 miles out from shore. Dad said he wasn't a good swimmer and another guy said he wasn't either. Dad asked what to do if they flipped over. Ballard and the guy from the west coast were good swimmers and said to stay calm because the salt water would help you float and paddle your way back in. Just that quick they flipped over. Dad swallowed a couple of mouthfuls of water then calmed down and paddled to shore. After he got closer to shore and being more confident, he decided to drop down to see how deep it was. He landed on something big and round saying it may have been a submarine or a big rock. Dad was the first one back to shore. About ten minutes later, the other guy who couldn't swim well came in. About 15 minutes later, Ballard and the guy from the west coast came in. They got into the same swell and swam out a little way looking for dad and the other fellow before swimming back to shore.

A year later, on April 17, 1944, a British or South African Wellington was returning from a night time bombing raid, ran out of fuel and crashed into the tent area. Sgt. Eugene Ballard was cut in two by a propeller. Also killed were Sgt. John G. Barnett, Jr., Sgt. Veylon A. Miller and S/Sgt. Jacob K. Friedly. Another report says 5 were killed and another report says 7 were killed. These guys were all armament crew. No one on the Wellington was killed. Ballard lost his life after he watched over dad.

While in Africa, dad ran into Ervin Mogler who was in the Army Artillery. One day, General Dwight D. Eisenhower reviewed the troops and presented medals. He stopped and talked to a soldier just 5 guys away from dad but dad didn't get a chance to speak to the future President. Dad became T/Sgt. on September 15, 1943 under Special Order #206. His rank could not advance any further because he only had an 8<sup>th</sup> grade education. The bases the 97<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group were at in north Africa were Maison Blanche, November 13, 1942; Tafaroul (where the mud was thick and gooey), November 22, 1942; Biskra, December 25, 1942; Chateaudun-du-Rhumel, February 8, 1943; these were in Algeria; Pont-du-fahs, Tunisia, August 1, 1943; there were only here for 2 weeks. Poor planning put this base between 2 mountain ranges and the dust would not clear on take-off or landings because there was no wind; Depienne, Tunisia, August 15, 1943; this was their last base in Africa before going to Italy.

On December 6, 1943, dad left Bizerta, North Africa and landed at Taranto, Italy on December 10. They headed for their next base, Amendola, near Foggia, Italy. It was not ready so they came back 80 miles to a base at Cerignola where they flew from December 20 until January 16, 1944 when the base near Foggia was ready. Travel was done by train and truck.

By the time the Allies had a foothold in Italy, the P-51 fighter was in production. The P-51 was able to out maneuver the German fighters. It had fuel capacity to fly to the targets and back giving the bombers protection all the way. At times they flew the personnel from base to base in cargo planes. They walked into the planes nearly touching the guy in front, then squatter down on the floor sitting in their little spot. In Italy the climate changed and the mechanics had to attend to mud and snow. They would have to clean the snow off the planes making sure the controls were not frozen before take-off. The weight of the snow would hurt the wings on the B-17s. The cold weather also made it difficult to work on the planes with bare hands.

They were closed enough to the sea that seafood was available but dad didn't eat very much of it. One little boy was out spearing fish one day and came back with the fingers missing on one hand. He said he had speared a big shark that he couldn't pull in and having the line wrapped around his fingers, they were cut off when it escaped. The medics were able to save his hand and they took up a donation to help the family out. A couple of days later the shark floated in with the spear still in it.

At Christmas, dad received no mail, but sometime later got 27 letters and cards in one day.

They brought a German prisoner to the base one day. The CO knew dad spoke German so he asked dad if he would interrogate him. Dad spoke high German and the prisoner spoke low

German. Dad asked him how he sounded and the prisoner said it was like dad was talking with his mouth full. Dad got no information from the prisoner. Some guys went on a pass through a German cemetery and told dad there were grave markers with the Knobloch name on them. They asked dad if they were related and he said he didn't think so.

The 97th Bomb Group led the first "Shuttle Mission" on June 1, 1944. They would bomb deep into Europe and then land at Poltava, Russia then refuel, rearm and bomb another target on the way back to their base. Other planes from England did the same thing. This proved to be inefficient as they could only use 250-pound bombs. On the first mission, 2 B-17s were loaded with spare parts. Paul Sakina was on one of these planes and said it was overloaded causing the engines to burn up and the plane crashed. They thought he was lost but showed up at the 1992 reunion.

Dad got a pass to Rome from September 21, 1944 until September 23. They were at Rest Camp #74. While there, he got to see all the bones and the catacombs, the underground cemeteries. They had a party called state night where they honored the service men from the 50 states. On Iowa night dad received the prize for being overseas the longest, 27 months.

The CO told dad one day he had enough points to go home. Dad told him if they were going to fly him home (knowing what condition the planes were in) he would wait until the war was over. Dad never flew on a plane after being in the service. Dad left Naples, Italy on February 24, 1945 under group movement order #N524-9 dated February 22, 1945. They had rough seas coming home on the Queen Mary. Almost everyone was sea sick. As the war was not over, you could not vomit over the side or risk falling overboard. They had 30-gallon barrels scattered around the ship to vomit in. The problem you may be a step or two away from the barrel, then the ship would pitch and the barrel would slide 20 feet down the deck. The smell was horrible but couldn't be helped. Dad didn't eat for over a week. He only took small sips of water to keep his throat wet.

Somebody yelled land ho. They looked to the horizon eventually sailing passed the Statue of Liberty. They landed on March 10, 1945. Dad bought a New York Times newspaper to remember the day he stepped back on American soil. Dad sent a Western Union telegram to his parents and Helen Wilke telling them that he was back in the States.

They went to a big hall where they had any kind of food you could imagine. They would make you something to eat if you wanted. Dad was so sea sick that even the smell of the food went against him. Dad told the people serving the food he appreciated their efforts, but he just couldn't eat. He took the train from New York to Jefferson Barracks, Missouri. Then he took the train from Jefferson Barracks to Sioux City, Iowa and arrived by bus on Tuesday, March 13, 1945 at Rock Rapids, Iowa.

He had a 30-day leave and was scheduled to go back overseas. He proposed to Helen Wilke at 1:30 AM on March 14, 1945. On March 16 at about 12:00 noon, Helen received her diamond. That evening they went to a music festival in Lester, Iowa.

On March 21, 1945, they gave dad another 15-day extension for leave. On March 24, Ernst and Helen got married in Rock Rapids. Dad's buddy, Carl Sieber, and his girlfriend, Anna Skapura, came from Cleveland, Ohio for their wedding. Uncle Willie said Anna made him dance with her. He said he had never danced before and felt kind of foolish for not knowing how. They went to see his sister, Julia, and her husband, Bert Plattner, at Bern, Kansas. Dad's brother, Benjamin, rode along with them. While they were there dad had to check in at Ft. Leavenworth. On April 21, they gave dad another 8-day extension on leave, but by then the war in Europe was nearly over. Dad returned to Jefferson Barracks, Missouri. From there he was sent to the 1020<sup>th</sup> AAF Redistribution Station at Miami Beach. Dad spent a short time at Pensacola, Florida and was then sent to Camp Davis in North Carolina. There he was part of the 1079<sup>th</sup> AAF. Dad was sent from Camp Davis to Fort Snelling, Minnesota.

He received his Honorable Discharge on July 21, 1945. Helen picked Ernst up at the bus depot in Pipestone, Minnesota at 1:45 AM on July 22 returning to Rock Rapids. When dad got home the job he was promised he would have when he got home was gone. He drove a truck for a year then began farming with his brother, Albert, until 1946.

Dad weighed 141 pounds when he enlisted and 140 pounds when he was discharged. While in then service dad was treated for influenza with 102 degree temperature; Pleurisy; cellulitis; and a chest injury.

Dad received the following awards:

Mechanic Badge

Presidential Unit Citation Badge GO#66WD 1944

Good Conduct Medal General Order #30, 97<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group 1944

European-African-Middle East Theatre Service Medal

5 Overseas Service Bars

No Tome lost Under AW107 Lapel Button

American Campaign Medal

Blue Campaign Ribbon – for being the oldest group overseas

6 Battle Stars

Honorable Service Badge

Ernst F. Knobloch was born on September 4, 1916 at rural Alvord. He attended country school through the 8<sup>th</sup> grade. He then worked for area farmers including Jake Schollerman, Ray McCarty, August Mauer and the Yonker family. After his honorable discharge from the Army Air Corps, he farmed until his death in 1995. He enjoyed fishing and visiting with family and friends.

Dad told how his brother, Albert, would clean up after the horses, scooping the poop under a tarp so they could lay on it and stay warm in the winter. Dad's sister, Wilma, told how Albert cried telling how the blood ran out of the trucks as they sent the wounded back from the front. He called them boys as they were 5 or 6 years younger than he was. Aunt Wilma also told when



photos and stories of the holocaust came out, Grandpa sat at the table with his head in his hands saying, “Oh, Da Father land, how could they do that to other people?”