

MELVIN D. McMULLEN

I was born in Los Angeles, California, on June 5, 1925. I had a brother one year older and a second brother was born three years later. Our 43-year old father volunteered in 1942. Being a specialty welder, he was readily accepted into the Army Air Corps.

In 1943 my older brother, Jim, was in flight training to become a pilot in the Army Air Corps, so, of course, I wanted to become a pilot also. In April I went to the Army Air Corps recruiting office in LA and took and passed all the tests to enter the Aviation Cadet program. I was congratulated and sworn into the Army; however, being only 17 years old at the time, I was given a six-month deferment to finish high school and turn 18.

In six months I received a telegram to report for duty, not to a college as I expected, but to Buckley Field, Colorado, for basic training, and when I got there, I found, at least for me, they were more in need of crewmen and gunners than pilots. I was disappointed, but at least I would still be part of an aircrew.

After gunnery school in Las Vegas, our crew was formed at Lemoore Field, California, and then on to March Field for flight training.

Eventually we were sent to Florida in November 1944 to await our overseas assignment. While in Florida, my dad, who was also stationed in Florida, came down from Kissimmee Field to see me. When my orders came, we were not given a plane of our own but put on an army C-47 heading out over the Atlantic.

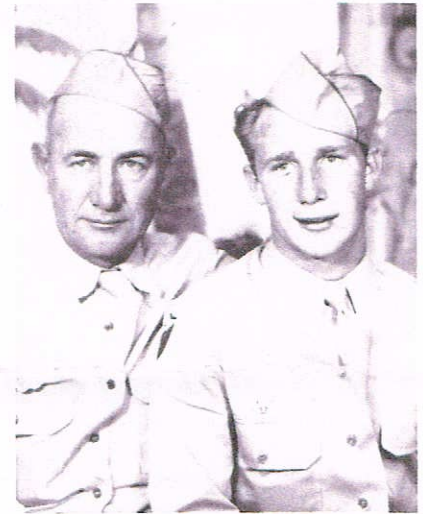
About an hour out of Miami our pilot opened our sealed orders and found we were going to China to join General Chennault's "Flying Tiger" 14th Air Force, assigned to the 308th Heavy Bomb Group, 425th Squadron, based in Kunming, China.

I was the nose turret gunner/assistant engineer on our new B-24J, which we named The Dragon Lady.

The bombing targets for the 308th bomb group included the Victoria Naval docks in Kowloon Harbor, railroad marshaling yards, factories and military installations around cities in eastern China. Kunming was in south-western China, so missions to eastern China would be at least 6 to 8 hours.

We flew our missions unescorted by U.S. fighter planes, for by then, most of the Japanese fighter planes had been called back to defend the Japanese homeland from B-29 raids.

After several months in Kunming, our squadron was relocated to



Staff Sergeant James McMullen, and his son, Corporal Mel McMullen



Mel McMullen with Chinese soldiers and the B-24J bomber, Kunming

Chengtu about 400 miles to the north. We took over the base of a B-29 outfit sent to the Marianas to be closer to Japanese mainland targets. In Chengtu the 425th missions put us closer to cities in northern China and also included bridge strikes. In fact, our squadron commander was killed when his plane was brought down by anti-aircraft fire on a bridge mission.

During most of our missions our main adversaries were not Japanese Zeros, but anti-aircraft fire, which was always very heavy over every target, and just as deadly, was extreme weather, hazardous mountainous terrain and having enough fuel to get back to base after a long mission.

The air route over the "Hump" from China to India was called "The Aluminum Trail" because it was said pilots could just follow the reflection from the sun or moon on the aluminum skin of the planes that didn't make it across.

After our combat missions were over, we were sent to Tezpur, Assam, India, not as a crew but to be assigned individually as needed, to crews hauling gas over the Hump to stockpile it for the final assault on the Japanese homeland. Fortunately, my hump flights ended when the big bang went off, and I was soon on the way home. My final rank was tech sergeant.

Our co-pilot was not so fortunate. Three days prior to the A-bomb drop, he agreed to fly with a new crew to check them out on a gas haul. They never returned. Seventeen years later, Assam Valley tribesmen discovered the wreckage in a dense mountain jungle fifty miles from base. Dog tags and the few remains were buried in a single silver casket in Arlington National Cemetery.

After more than seventy years, I find it difficult to recall with any clarity specific missions or targets. The more I try to isolate those events, the more they seem to blend into one long adventure, sometimes boring, sometimes exciting to the extreme with periods of total panic. Of course, on the other hand, some events will pop into my head unbidden: the ammunition train trying to outrun the bombs and losing the race; the piece of flack from an anti-aircraft gun punching a hole in my nose turret but missing me (I still have the shrapnel); one long mission so low on fuel we were given the order to stand by ready to bail out, before we finally made radio contact with a base where we could land, with two of our engines cutting out before we reached the end of the runway.

The flight crews were always very gratified when their missions were highly successful; for instance, we knew that blowing up that munitions train would not only deprive the Japanese of the vital material on that train, but the damage to the rail yard would render it unusable for some time. That was a successful mission.

I was awarded the Air Medal and the Distinguished Flying Cross (DFC) not for any one spectacular mission, but for surviving over a couple hundred hours of aerial combat time.

The feeling of friendship, admiration and respect that developed between the Americans serving in China and the Chinese people should never be forgotten. On our recent trip to China to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the end of the World War II, we were reminded of the story of Lieutenant Robert Mooney, one of General Chennault's original Flying Tigers. In an aerial dogfight near Kunming, Lieutenant Mooney's P-40 fighter plane was critically damaged after bringing down two Japanese Zeros. In order to save himself, he needed to quickly bail out. However, he soon realized that if he bailed out now, his plane would crash into the center of the village of Xiangyun. Lt. Mooney held his plane aloft until it had passed over the village, but by then he was too low to bail out, and he did not survive the crash. The people of the village, witnessing and recognizing that he sacrificed his life to save the lives of the villagers, erected a monument

dedicated to his act of friendship and heroism and still celebrate his memory to this day.

You do not have to be a soldier to exhibit friendship and heroism. Hundreds of American airmen owe their lives to the friendship and heroism of the brave farmers and villagers who, at great risk to themselves and



Tech Sergeant Mel McMullen



DFC Chapter President McMullen

family, rescued downed American airmen, hiding them by day and moving them by night from village to village until they were safe from the enemy. The Japanese took deadly revenge on those Chinese heroes who aided the Americans. The families of those airmen also remember those brave villagers to this day.

My year of service in the China-Burma-India Theater shaped my life in many ways. I served as National Commander of the China-Burma-India Veterans Association and am the current President of the Inland Empire Chapter of the Distinguished Flying Cross Society.

Upon returning home in 1946, I met and married a beautiful young lady named Jennifer, who has shared life with me for 70 years and counting. We have three sons, each successful in their own calling. Our eldest son, Tim, is a recently retired high school teacher and a talented musician/songwriter. Our middle son, Tucker, works for an electric supplier by day and is a professional musician by night. Our youngest son, Kevin, is a Logistics and Warehouse manager for an international manufacturer of medical devices. We have four grandchildren and one granddog.

I am 25 years retired after 43 years in the title insurance industry, and Jennifer is retired the same number of years from Administration at Cal State University, San Bernardino. We are world travelers several times over and keep active and involved in our community. Life is good!

