

THE EARLY DAYS

Ellis B. Scripture – one of only two men from the 369 flight personnel in the first cadre of the 95th Bomb Group still on active flying status from England on VE-Day – said of the early days in the U.S. at Geiger Field in Spokane, Washington, and in Ephrata: “Fortunately for the greenhorn second lieutenants and flying sergeants who arrived at Geiger Field, there were more experienced people who seemed to know what they were doing.

“The average navigator and bombardier assigned to the 95th had about 35 total flying hours; the enlisted crewmen, even less. New first pilots had logged a total of about 150 hours through flight schools and multi-engine transition; co-pilots, even less. We soon learned to respect the men who really knew what flying is all about!”

“This strange new world was exciting; we wanted to do the job, but we didn’t know what the job was or how to do it. But we soon learned what to learn and how to work together as a combat team.

“The men who really put the 95th on the right track were the strong team of older, more experienced Group and Squadron leaders. Colonel Alfred A. Kessler, World War I veteran, West Point, 1922 put the Group together. Tough, forgiving, demanding, understanding, we all came to know Colonel Kessler (affectionately called ‘Uncle Aaron’ and ‘Old Ugly’) as a fine leader who earned the respect of his men.

“There is no doubt in anyone’s mind that John H. (‘Jack’) Gibson is the man who was the organizing genius behind

the 95th...Trained at Randolph Field and Kelly Field in 1934, Jack had flown the post-WWI planes...

“Years of logging about 10,000 hours’ flying time and organisational training at American Airline had prepared Jack to be the air executive, the man who put the flying organisation together.

“Much of what we were to become as a combat group was due to the background knowledge and patience of John H. Gibson. He was and is an inspiration to all who were fortunate enough to have him as their lead and a fine example of what a flyer should be, in the air and on the ground.

“Other experienced pilots were chosen for key positions. Without exception, they were to prove to be leaders in every sense of the word: Ed Cole, Al Wilder, Dave McKnight, Cliff Cole, and Grif Mumford.

“Some had at least a few years of Army flying experience; some had trained with the Royal Canadian Air Force before the United States became involved in the war. All were respected leaders who were excellent examples to follow into combat.

“Other men who became flight leaders with more than average flying experience were Harry Stirwalt, brothers Richmond and Cliff Hamilton, Dexter Schnebly, Owen Cornett, Joel Bunch, Gale House, and Bill Lindley.

“The expertise in the fields other than flying also gave the younger crewmen and ground personnel much comfort and a feeling of security.

“These included Clarence D (‘Pappy’) Fields as chief engineering officer. Pappy had been a Master Sergeant in the pre-war Army Air Corps whose service had been in multi-engine bombers from their inception. Flight Surgeon Dr. Bill Harding headed a fine medical team. The ‘paperwork squad’ of Lester ‘Curly’ Burt and Ed Russell – with their able assistants – kept the records straight (as one would expect, Curly didn’t have a hair on his head, but his head was filled with a well organised brain!).

“...The early flying days at Ephrata, Washington; Spokane (Geiger Field), Washington; and Rapid City, South Dakota, were frustrating for everyone. Starting in October 1942 and continuing through mid-March 1943, the weather everywhere we were stationed was atrocious. The Bases in Washington were plagued with rain, fog, and snow to the point where the group was falling far behind in scheduled training flights.

“So, on to Rapid City, South Dakota, which should have been the training centre for the Arctic Sled Forces. It was so cold that the thermometer fluid formed icicles!

“The cold weather had some advantages. It gave the married men additional time to spend with their wives in the hospitable town of Rapid City, where we learned that buffalo steaks weren’t on the ration coupon list, and the Alex Johnson Hotel had the best bar in town.

“However, the miracles performed by the ground crews allowed enough flying to earn the Inspector General’s report, ‘Ready for Combat Duty’. An all-too-short leave at home for everyone, and the navigators got the chance to fly

individually to Kearney, Nebraska, for overseas assignment
– but where?

“At Kearney, the Group was outfitted for war – and the orders were finally revealed: to the ETO the European theater of operations!...

“Mr. Hitler, here comes the 95th.”