

War Era Story Project 2012

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A Promise Denied: A World War II Story

This story is a condensed version of a book, "A Promise Denied" written by Bob Imhoff in 2003.

It was with great pride, excitement and anticipation that I enlisted in the Army Air Corps in July, 1943. I was seventeen years old and since the United States was at war with Germany and Japan most eligible young men were enlisting in some branch of service to serve their country. I had always been interested in airplanes and aviation, so that was my reason for picking the Army Air Corps, really hoping that eventually I could become a navigator. At the time of my enlistment it was explained that the training would be basic training, college training, flight school and then after finishing all this successfully, I would be commissioned as a Second Lieutenant. This was the promise to me by General Hap Arnold, Army Air Corps Commander. It was the kind of service I had dreamed of and now it seemed like reality. Since I was only seventeen, I had to wait until my eighteenth birthday to actually be inducted. That came on January, 1944, when I received my orders. I left my home in Charleston, WV, boarded a train and was inducted into the Army Air Corps on February 8, 1944 at Fort Benjamin Harrison in Indianapolis, Indiana. I was at Fort Harrison only a week when our group of new inductees boarded a train for Biloxi, Mississippi.

It took us 36 hours to travel to Mississippi by rail from Indianapolis. Many times, our train was put on a spur track while we waited for trains carrying troops for embarkation to pass us, as these troops were headed for overseas to fight the war. Each had packed all his belongings in one big barracks bag. Upon arriving at Kessler Field in Biloxi, Miss. we were assigned to barracks and given our barracks bag back to unpack. Kessler Field was great! We wore our uniforms with pride and we saw so many different soldiers of all ranks wearing so many different shoulder patches. Rumors were everywhere at Kessler Field. Our training proceeded as normal, but the rumors were saying there was an overabundance of Air Cadets and the Army would not be training many more. But my buddies and I had passed mental and physical tests that had proven we were ready for the college training and flight school. We were very optimistic! We learned our five months of college training would be at Michigan State University, East Lansing, Michigan. All of us were encouraged at this news. At the last minute, the plans changed. All of a sudden we were "On Line Trainees" awaiting an opening in the College Detachment Program. On April 14th at 7:00P.M we boarded a train for Del Rio, Texas.

Thinking back now, this event of going on to on line training instead of directly to college should have been a clue to what was happening to the Cadet Program. But we all had high hopes that we would squeeze through the doors and go on to Pre-Flight School. Laughlin Army Air Force Base was a training base for newly commissioned pilots. The people at Laughlin were good to us. After a few days on the

field they gave us a course of duty: two hours of physical training, drill for an hour and then time in the base theater watching training films. On May 1, 1944, the field gave us a mighty send-off as we left for East Lansing, Michigan and the College Training Detachment.

My immediate dream was to complete College Training Detachment and advance to Preflight School at Santa Ana, California, in my quest for silver wings and gold bars as an air crewman and 2nd Lieutenant. Arriving at Michigan State University was such a thrill for me. This was the first college campus I had seen. I was excited to be here attending classes in the beautiful brick and stone buildings with the beautiful stream running among them. School was hard and I had difficulty with Physics. Grades earned could and did result in "washing out" of the Cadet Program, but my friends and I safely made it through this phase of training. Part of our curriculum was studying about flight and actually flying an airplane. I managed to have actual flight time of ten hours. I still have my log book of those ten hours. On June 6, 1944 the campus was buzzing with the news of D-Day; allied soldiers crossed the English Channel and were landing on the beaches of Normandy, along the coast of France. Two weeks after D-Day it was announced that the College Training Program at Michigan State was being aborted and we would be leaving school heading for some other Army Station. It was also rumored that our training as aviation cadets and movement on to Preflight School was in jeopardy. In a few days we learned that 75 of us were to be shipped to La Junta AAF Base in La Junta, Colorado.

We traveled to La Junta by train, a very long ride. We arrived in La Junta on July 3, 1944. When we arrived there it was apparent they did not know what to do with us; there simply were too many of us for the small base to absorb. One half of us were sent to Pueblo, Colorado and it was rumored that we were to be sent to Pre Flight School at Santa Ana, California. We were called On The Line Trainees while stationed at La Junta. We lived under the cadet system of discipline, meaning we had Saturday morning inspection, and the demerit system. Our daily routine was severe: up at 4:30 A.M., military drill, physical training, several hours of mechanics school, and about five hours of working on the flight line. B-25s were assigned to this base and I was assigned to a fuel truck that filled the B-25s with fuel. The rumors now were saying we were to be discharged from the Air Corps to get us out of the Cadet Program and then be drafted back into the Army Infantry. I tried to turn a deaf ear to the rumors. Very shortly after Christmas of 1944, our entire group was called to the base theater and told that 16,000 aviation students in the Western Training Command were to be spread out among the airfields in that Command. Many airmen were being transferred to the Infantry. On January 8, 1944, I packed my bags, saw the dentist, visited the quartermaster, had my records checked, verified insurance and was given the final clearance to go. But there was still a secret.

We were leaving La Junta and heading south. We arrived in Roswell, New Mexico, an Air Force base where B-17s were being replaced with B-29s: a super fortress. Roswell was a Transition School. Pilots were being retrained to fly the larger airplanes. We were treated not as Cadets but as a Permanent Party. We were OLT's being divided among the squadrons on the field, given many different jobs just like the regular enlisted men. I was assigned duty in the orderly room, where I typed the morning report each day, typed all correspondence and filed all paperwork. I was still waiting to be called for Pre Flight

School. Most of the world news was available to me, as I posted it on the bulletin board in the orderly room. but I did not pay too much attention to it. I did not realize that the war was winding down and what that meant for me and my future in the service.

Many of my fellow OLT's were writing letters to their Senators and Congressmen complaining about their treatment and asked to be discharged, go home and continue on with their lives. My life went on in Roswell, working in the orderly room, seeing movies, and I did manage to get two furloughs. I visited my sister and her husband in San Antonio, Texas for a brief time and spent ten days at home in Charleston, with my parents and my girlfriend, Virginia. Rumors were still following me, the latest being all OLT's were going to be inducted into the Infantry. May 11, 1945- Germany surrenders and V-E day is declared. A big day for the world! In May, after fourteen months in the service, I was promoted from the rank of Private to Private First Class with four dollars more per month. The rumors persisted, we were to be transferred to Squadron K, the Air Student Squadron, and shipped to another assignment, perhaps Pre-Flight School. We secretly hoped this was true. Shortly afterwards I received a personal letter from General Yount regarding my future in the Air Corps. I had three choices: to be made a Permanent Party at Roswell, go to a technical school, or go directly overseas as a replacement for soldiers coming home. I chose technical school. Training had ended for the Cadets, we were not needed and really the Air Corps did not know what to do with us. Later all the choices were eliminated and discharges were being offered to the men who had earned eighty-five points. With 1 point for every month of service, I had fifteen points. I would be an old man by the time I was eligible for discharge. Things were to change soon for me, although I did not realize it at this time.

On August 6, 1945 an atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, Japan. On August 9, 1945 another atomic bomb was dropped on Nagasaki. On August 14, the Japanese surrendered and the war was over. V-J day was celebrated all over the world and hopes were high that we would go back to living our peaceful lives. On August 21 we heard that we were being transferred to Squadron K, and would be going to Pre-Flight School in Santa Ana, California. Our status was "unassigned," meaning they really didn't know what to do with us. Many rumors were around and time went by with nothing happening. We had correspondence from Command Headquarters stating various options but no action was taken. On October 24, 1945 the rumors were that Air Cadets were being discharged. To my surprise, on October 25, 1945 I was given a discharge. General Hap Arnold decided he no longer needed us: his promise was denied: he had released us!