

The 500th Bomb Group Day By Day

24 November 1943 - 17 January 1946

by James E. Bowman

"In our youth, our hearts were touched with fire."

- Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr.

This journal is dedicated to my father and namesake, James E. Bowman, who left this world long ago but is not forgotten by his son.

Author's Note: Please bring any errors to my attention at JEB538@aol.com. They will be corrected as soon as possible. New material – reminiscences, journals, diaries, letters, official documents, photographs, etc. – are all eagerly sought.

3 Dec 43

Effective this day, at Gowen Field, Boise, Idaho, by authority of General Order 176, Paragraphs 1 and 3, Headquarters 2nd Air Force, Colorado Springs, Colorado, dated 24 Nov 1943, and Special Order 337, Paragraph 46, Air Base Headquarters, Gowen Field, Boise, Idaho, dated 3 Dec 1943, the 500th Bombardment Group (Very Heavy) and its subordinate units, the 881st, 882nd, 883rd and 884th Bombardment Squadrons (VH), the 29th, 30th, 31st and 32nd Bombardment Maintenance Squadrons (VH), and the 18th Photographic Laboratory Squadron were activated. The original cadre was formed by transfer of 29 officer and 271 enlisted ground personnel from the 494th Bomb Group (Heavy). However, three days later, on 6 Dec 1943, all these men with the exception of 1/Lt Billy C. Griffith and three enlisted men were ordered transferred to Walker Army Air Field, Victoria, Kansas, where they would be attached to the 462nd Bomb Group (VH) of the 58th Bomb Wing and later form the nucleus of the 29th, 30th, 31st and 32nd Bombardment Maintenance Squadrons of the 500th.

The 500th Bomb Group, along with the 497th, 498th and 499th Bomb Groups, would form the new 73rd Bomb Wing, which was the second B-29 wing organized during World War II. In December 1943 the first B-29 wing, the 58th, was already in training for deployment to India and China. While the 58th would play an important role in the war, it would fall to the 73rd to carry the war to the Japanese homeland from the Mariana Islands and bear the initial heavy cost of that effort.

7 Dec 43

On this date 1/Lt Billy C. Griffith assumed command of the 500th Bomb Group, with only three enlisted personnel and no equipment assigned.

13 Dec 43

Today the 500th Bomb Group, consisting of 1/Lt Griffith and his three enlisted men, departed Gowen Field for Clovis Army Air Base, New Mexico.

16 Dec 43

On this day 1/Lt Griffith officially opened the Headquarters of the 500th Bomb Group at Clovis, New Mexico, still with only himself and three enlisted men assigned. This small cadre began performing routine garrison duties. For the next four months, until April 1944, the Air Echelon of the 500th would be based at Clovis, steadily growing in strength and getting in what training they could, which wasn't much, while the Ground Echelon – the 29th, 30th, 31st and 32nd Bombardment Maintenance Squadrons – would be based at Walker AAF in Kansas, providing maintenance support to the 462nd Bomb Group of the 58th Wing while simultaneously learning as

much as they could about how to maintain, modify and repair B-29's.

6 Jan 44

Last night at about 2200 Pfc George E. Hughes from the small town of Greenwich, New York, reported to Walker Army Air Field near Victoria, Kansas. George had been in the Army almost a year. He had originally been accepted into the Aviation Cadet Program and had trained at Maxwell Field, AL, and Dorr Field, FL, but like so many others had been washed out. It didn't take much to wash out of pilot training in those days, by many accounts just an instructor in a bad mood on a particular day. With far more flight cadets than they would ever need as pilots, the Army Air Forces were deliberately harsh and unforgiving. You didn't get a second chance.

After Dorr Field, George had been sent to St Petersburg, FL, for regular enlisted basic training, and then to Airplane Mechanic School at Gulfport, MS, where he did well. His training was capped off with about six weeks at the end of 1943 at the Chevrolet company in Detroit and at the new Consolidated aircraft plant at nearby Willow Run. George had been without a furlough all this time and had been really hoping for one after Willow Run, but instead he was sent directly to far-away Walker AAF in Kansas, and in the middle of winter too. He was not happy about that.

Today George spent the day taking a physical, getting shots, being interviewed, and receiving his assignment, which was to the 29th Bombardment Maintenance Squadron. Some of the mechanics who had come in with George were assigned to maintenance squadrons of the 58th Bomb Wing's 462nd Bomb Group and would be heading overseas soon, but the 29th was part of the 73rd Bomb Wing's 500th Bomb Group. Along with the 30th, 31st and 32nd Squadrons, the 29th would support the 462nd Bomb Group Air Echelon until it left, and then revert to control of the 500th Bomb Group.

George had time today to write a letter to his family. After reporting his safe arrival at Walker, George informed his parents, "This is a B-29 outfit here. I don't know how much mechanics I will be doing yet. For awhile I will probably wash these planes. All these Sqdns. are just being formed so there should be some good openings soon." George wrote that it had been "quite a rough ride out here. The train we had stopped at every crossroads. ... After we left Kansas City we didn't hit a town over a couple thousand. This is very wild country around here. It's an ideal spot for airfields." As for a furlough, George didn't think there was a chance of getting one anytime soon, but maybe after the Squadron got to full strength.

13 Jan 44

At Clovis, NM, 2/Lt Edward H. Gibbs, a Special Service Officer (MOS 5000), became the fifth man assigned to the 500th Bomb Group Air Echelon when he reported to the unit today, but he was immediately placed on Detached Service to the 73rd Combat Crew Training School, also at Clovis.

At Walker AAF, KS, Pfc George Hughes received his first letter from home to his new address today. He wrote his parents back, telling them a little about life at Walker: "I have been working nights this week. *[Maintenance was a round-the-clock activity on an air base. - JEB]* I go on at midnight and get off at nine the next morning. We change shifts every week. So far it hasn't been too bad. We have leather pants and jackets lined with sheepskin. They make a good warm outfit."

George continued: "Some of these Squadrons are nearly ready for overseas shipment. The Group C.O. Is a Colonel about thirty years old. *[Colonel Richard Carmichael had assumed command of the 462nd Bomb Group on 26 Aug 1943.]* He has been in every theater of war so far. According to him there will be a half million men sent over in the next six months to handle the B-29s. From what I have seen here I wouldn't say the B-29 was fit for combat yet. ...

"Victoria is near Hays and Russell. None of these towns are very big. I had Sunday off and went to Hays. It seemed to be deserted. Even the bowling alleys were closed. We don't have any time off on the night shift. I guess when we change shifts I will get a day off. ...

"I have to take yellow fever, cholera, and typhus shots pretty soon. I had two shots and a vaccination when I got here. They are very free with the needles here."

George Hughes was not alone in his negative assessment of the B-29. To cite a higher authority, Col Sam Harris, CO of the 499th Bomb Group, "This airplane has more bugs in it than a Tennessee mountain bed." The regular appearance of new problems was a consequence of the headlong rush into production before a single prototype had been built for testing. There had been reason for the urgency at the time. The production order for 250 bombers was placed on 17 May 1941, before Germany attacked the Soviet Union and while Britain stood alone against the Nazi war machine. It was not at all clear at the time that Britain would survive, and if it didn't, possession of a trans-Atlantic bomber would be critical. General Henry H. "Hap" Arnold, Chief of the Army Air Forces, was determined to have the B-29, no matter what the cost.

17 Jan 44

Maj John E. Gay reported to the 500th Bomb Group at Clovis, NM, and by authority of GO 3, HQ 500th Bomb Group, dated 17 Jan 44, immediately assumed command of the unit.

22 Jan 44

On this day Lt Col John T. Fitzwater and Maj Theodore B. Swanson reported to the 500th at Clovis from the 73rd Bomb Wing, and by virtue of his rank Lt Col Fitzwater assumed command of the Group by authority of GO 4, 500th Bomb Group, dated 22 Jan 44.

23 Jan 44

George Hughes wrote his parents a long letter from Walker AAF, KS, today:

"Dear Mother & Dad,

I received your letter with the money yesterday and the other letter today. Thanks a lot for the money. We signed the payroll today so we should be paid the first of February. Some fellows on this field haven't been paid since November.

The weather has been lovely the last week. The sun has been very bright and there isn't any snow on the ground. There always seems to be a wind blowing here and it is getting quite dusty."

... There are just three of the old bunch [*from Airplane Mechanic School*] in the 29th [*Bombardment Maintenance Squadron of the 500th Bomb Group*]. The rest are in the 9th and 11th. [*The 9th, 10th, 11th and 12th BMS's belonged to the 462nd Bomb Group*]. The 9th and 11th are taking overseas training now. They have stopped all work [*this meant that the four BMS's of the 500th Group had assumed responsibility for maintenance of the 462nd Group*] and have been issued new clothes, rifle, trench knife and other combat equipment. We were lucky to get into the 29th. It isn't even up to full strength yet. ...

We aren't very near any large city here. Hays and Russell are about fifteen miles from the base but they are small towns and awful dead. ... I was in to Russell on Wednesday and bowled a few games and shot some pool. There are buses running to both Hays and Russell.

I am working the graveyard shift again this week. We were changed around again this week when the 9th quit work. There is more work to do on this shift but there are fewer big shots around. I just came off the day shift from eight till five. Most of the ships were flying but you have to appear to be doing something anyway. The army believes the only way to kill time is to work it to death. There were more engineering officers around than enlisted men. Some of them are really stupid when it comes to practical work. These old time sergeants have

them running around like kids. Most of the fellows in this outfit are back from Panama. I think they stayed out in the sun down there too long because they aren't exactly normal from all appearances. Most of them have been in from three to thirty years. There is one fellow here that just made sergeant after twenty two years in the army. ...

Write soon and I will write again in a few days.

Love
George”

25 Jan 44

After being in command of the 500th Bomb Group for only three days, Lt Col Fitzwater was transferred out today and Maj Swanson assumed command of the Group by authority of GO 5, 500th Bomb Group, dated 25 Jan 44.

27 Jan 44

On this date 30 officers and 127 enlisted men from the 480th Antisubmarine Group, a unit which had flown B-24's out of North Africa but had recently returned to the States, were transferred to the 500th Bomb Group Air Echelon at Clovis, NM.

28 Jan 44

Today at Clovis, NM, Maj Ralph A. Reeve assumed command of the 500th Bomb Group. Maj Reeve held organizational meetings and made various duty appointments, including Maj Gay as Deputy Group Commander and Maj Swanson as Acting S-3 (Operations) Officer.

During this period at Clovis, more officers and men gradually reported to the 500th, but most were placed on Detached Service at various Army schools, particularly the Air Forces School of Applied Tactics at Orlando, FL, for approximately four weeks.

30 Jan 44

According to the Organization Historical Record, on this date the four Bomb Squadrons of the 500th Bomb Group at Clovis, NM, were at the following strengths:

881st – 4 officers & 8 enlisted men
882nd – 2 officers & 10 enlisted men
883rd – 3 officers & 7 enlisted men
884th – 4 officers & 9 enlisted men

However, the command anticipated 50-60 new officers to report to the Group in the near future.

Apparently, the 30 officers and 127 enlisted men from the 480th Antisubmarine Group who were assigned on 27 Jan had not reported by this date.

31 Jan 44

At Walker AAF, KS, airplane mechanic George Hughes wrote his parents again today. After some small talk about family friends, George wrote about some maintenance problems they were having:

“We have another B-29 in our Sqdn. Now. I have been assigned to work on it now. As we get the new planes we get rid of the old B-17s. There is always something going wrong with the B-29. One of them here had twelve new engines since it has been on the field. You can get two B-17s in the hanger [sic] but only one B-29. When the hanger is occupied all maintenance has to be done out on the field. I am working from four [pm] till one [am] this week. This is a good shift for sleeping. When you are working nights it's hard to get much sleep. There is always someone going or coming during the day.

“... Some of the boys are on the alert to ship. They have to be ready to leave in ten minutes notice.”

George was right about the B-29. The list of teething problems was almost endless. There were so many things going wrong which required redesign or modification that the factories didn't even attempt to resolve them as they came up. Trying to do so would have disrupted the assembly lines too much. Instead, retooling was done only occasionally. This meant that new B-29's came off the production line already requiring multiple modifications. The adopted solution was to set up modification centers around the country to which new B-29's would be sent to have those modifications made. Only then would they be delivered to the training bases. Of course, new modifications were being introduced all the time, so even once-modified planes already delivered to the bases would periodically need to be taken out of service to have additional modifications applied.

The most serious problem was the engines, which overheated, swallowed valves, leaked oil and otherwise malfunctioned with regularity. It would be a long time before that baby was put to bed.

8 Feb 44

Today at Walker AAF, KS, George Hughes wrote his parents another letter:

“Dear Mother & Dad,

... We move to a new barracks today. It is much better than the one I have been in. The 9th *[Bombardment Maintenance Squadron of the 462nd Bomb Group]* occupied these barracks until they shipped out. Most of the old Gulfport bunch has shipped out. Only the three of us in the 29th *[BMS of the 500th BG]* are still here.

They gave us a physical and some more shots last night. They must have lost the old records because it is the same thing I had a month ago. They even tossed in a yellow fever shot for good measure.

I am on the day shift this week. The weather has been very nice lately. The sun is very bright and it gets warm enough to work in just coveralls in the afternoon.

A B-29 cracked up here last week. It was taxiing up to park when by some reason or other the wheels retracted. Pieces of the prop flew for several hundred feet. The plane was all twisted out of shape and unrepairable. A B-29 is supposed to cost nearly a million *[dollars]* so there has been plenty of investigation. The pilot must have pulled a boner and pulled up the wheels by mistake.

Things are pretty quiet here. Except for working, sleeping and eating there isn't much to do. ...

Write soon and take it easy.

Love
George”

13 Feb 44

In a letter to his parents today, George Hughes at Walker AAF told them how cold, snowy and windy it had turned there lately. In fact, on his day off between the day shift last week and midnights this week he had gone

into town with one of his friends and they “nearly got stranded. The snow blew so hard the buses didn't run.” George was envious of a friend of his who had got a furlough. “I wish they would come across with one for me.”

18 Feb 44

George Hughes at Walker AAF, KS, wrote his parents again today:

“Dear Mother & Dad,

I received your letter and the Journal today. The package you sent me arrived earlier this week. The cookies were very good. Thanks a lot.

I am on the graveyard shift and don't do much but eat, sleep and work. The ships have been away a lot lately and there hasn't been much work. I would rather work on the plane though than putter around the hanger [*sic*] trying to appear busy.

Thursday was my day off and Dick Maus and I went to Hays. We bowled a few games and had a couple good meals. The restaurants have good steaks anyway. My bowling ran from 140 to 198. The alleys are in very good shape. They have an electric foul line.

I got two more shots yesterday. I thought I was all set but it seems not. I am beginning to feel like a pin cushion. None of the shots bother me so I don't mind them much.

It is cool here at night. Last night it was about 12 below. For a change there wasn't any wind. ...

Love
George

25 Feb 44

Today at Walker AAF in a letter to his parents George Hughes wrote that he was back on the evening (4 pm to 1 am) shift and that “Things have been very quiet lately. My plane hasn't returned from New Mexico yet. It has been down there quite a while now. They had to change an engine.” George held out hope for a furlough in May or June.

2 Mar 44

In early 1944, under heavy political pressure to get the new B-29 into the war, General Hap Arnold, Chief of the Army Air Forces, became increasingly personally involved in B-29 production and modification. His goal was to get the 58th Bomb Wing to India and China by April. With progress still lagging by March, a concerned Arnold took drastic action. All available trained (and partly trained) AAF personnel were pressed into service. Hundreds of Boeing workers were pulled from production lines and sent to the Modification Centers and the Kansas air bases to get the B-29's of the 58th Bomb Wing combat-ready. Working mostly outside in the bitter Kansas winter due to lack of hangar space, shivering men with numbed fingers could function effectively for only a few minutes at a time before they had to go inside to warm up, then return to their task for another few bitter minutes.

Each plane required a staggering amount of work. Engine cowl flaps had to be modified, wing supports strengthened, all electrical plugs replaced, new distortion-free plexiglass panels in the nose and improved blister seals installed, main landing gear tires replaced, and much more.

It wasn't easy, but in the end the work was done. This period of frenzied activity at the Kansas bases would later be termed “The Battle of Kansas”. And airplane mechanic George Hughes at Walker AAF was in the middle of it. In a letter to his parents written on this date, he described some of what was going on:

“I am now working twelve hours a day. They have made up two shifts of engine change crews and I work from seven P.M. until seven A.M. We are getting a bunch of new B-29s to replace our B-17s. Every plane has to have a complete engine change when it gets here. They are putting regular combat engines in them.

“We have two more B-29s and expect about five more soon. I would like to have the money that is being spent on these planes. Each engine is valued at \$22,000. That's \$10 per horsepower. ... Things are being held up quite a bit because much of the new engines have to be modified.

“The last plane that came in had bomb bay tanks and could hold about 1000 gal. of gas. Some gas dealer would probably give his eye teeth for that.”

Reporting today to Walker Field in the middle of all this turmoil was young 2/Lt Norman F. Garrigus from Tucson, Arizona. Garrigus was something new in the Army Air Forces – a Radar Counter-Measures Officer. The B-29 was the first US bomber to be equipped with radar, and Garrigus knew almost everything about that mysterious device. Not only that, he knew a lot about enemy radars too. That in fact was his primary job – to learn the strengths and weaknesses of the enemy emitters, then use his knowledge and special, secret equipment to counter the former and exploit the latter.

Garrigus had enlisted in the Air Corps in August 1942 while still only 19. Originally trained as a radio operator, he soon entered the Cadet Training Program, from which he eventually graduated as a brand-new 2/Lt and then was sent on for eight more months of specialized radar training, mostly at Boca Raton, Florida.

After a few days, the base personnel section finally figured out what to do with Garrigus and assigned him to the 30th Bombardment Maintenance Squadron. Garrigus was probably lucky during this frantic time that he was a radar and not an engineering officer. Still, he would have plenty to do, because radar would eventually have to be installed on all the Group's flyaway B-29's – they didn't come from the factory with radar – and the Group's radar personnel would have to do most if not all of the work.

12 Mar 44

At Walker AAF, airplane mechanic George Hughes was still working hard, as he explained in a letter home:

“It is cold and rainy today. I hope we work in the hanger *[sic]* tonight. We are still on the twelve hour shift. It is hard to keep track of the days working seven days a week. What a pay check we would draw if this was a civilian job. The ships are still coming in to be modified. The last ones are complete with Radar equipment and bullet proof glass. *[If George's letters were being censored, his reference to radar would have certainly been removed, since this new technology was still very secret. - JEB]*

“I don't think that I would like to get back in Cadets again. Once was enough for me. *[You may recall that George had been washed out of the Aviation Cadet Program, but he had recently toyed with the idea of reapplying. - JEB]* They won't release anyone from this field anyway. This B-29 program is about the hottest thing in the Air Corp *[sic]*. The B-29 can carry four, four ton bombs so you can see what damage will be done when they get in combat. The plane is about 99 feet in length. The wing span is over 140 feet. A 'Flying Fortress' looks small beside it.”

George then turned to more personal matters:

“Anna *[George's sister]* should have a good time in New York. I would like to *[be]* near a bigger town than Hays or Russell. ...

“I haven't heard from any of the boys in the Ninth *[Bombardment Maintenance Squadron of the 462nd Bomb Group]*. They must not be located yet. No one knows where they went. *[They were on the way to India via the Mediterranean and the Middle East.]* We are liable to go to the same place when we ship. *[George was right. The original plan called for the 73rd Bomb Wing to join the 58th in China. But that would be changed.]*

“Write soon and don't work too hard. Maybe furlough will be opening up soon. There is one fellow here that hasn't had furlough in three years. He is on top of the list.

Love
George”

20 Mar 44

In a letter to his parents today from Walker AAF, George Hughes wrote, “It is bright and clear today and the snow is melting fast. We had quite a snow the other night. I suppose there will be mud up to our knees in a day or so.

“We are still working twelve hours. The planes are nearly ready but there are little things to take care of yet. It is rumored that we start on eight hours sometime this week. I certainly hope so.”

7 Apr 44

Today George Hughes at Walker AAF wrote his parents another letter:

“Dear Mother & Dad,

It has been quite a while since my last letter. We have been very busy getting the planes ready for combat. They are all nearly ready now and some have left already. The ships are going out heavily loaded and are carrying extra engines and other equipment. The gross weight is about 126,000 lbs. per plane.

“We expect to get three day passes about Sunday if everything goes right. There have been rumors going around about furlough but so far nothing official has been announced. I don't see why we can't start on furlough soon.

“The past week has been very warm and the sun has been very bright. I have started to sunburn already. The wind is always blowing whether it is bright or cloudy.

“It would be nice if I had been able to be home on Easter but maybe it won't be long before I get home. Some fellows have been shipped out lately for overseas replacement. I'm lucky I'm not in that group. Most of them have never had a furlough either.

Write soon and don't work too hard.

Love
George”

10 Apr 44

In the Army things often happen suddenly. On this day George Hughes sent his parents a brief telegram:

=PLEASE WIRE \$100 IMMEDIATELY COMING HOME=
=GEORGE”

19 Apr 44

On this day radio operator Sgt Wilton H. “Matt” Mattinson reported for duty at Walker AAF, Kansas. Mattinson was unusual among the enlisted men at Walker because he had been a pilot. Unfortunately, he was also color

blind, and although he had managed to hide this handicap for a while by memorizing all the charts, the Army Air Forces finally found out. Mattinson was quickly reclassified to enlisted and sent to radio school. But he had not lost his love for flying. If he couldn't be a pilot he could at least be a member of an air crew. Or so he hoped.

The Army had different plans. To his intense disappointment, Mattinson was assigned as a radio maintenance man to the 30th Bombardment Maintenance Squadron, which supported the 882nd Bombardment Squadron. But Mattinson was determined that he was going to fly, and when he found out that there was a radio operator vacancy on one of the air crews, he began pestering the Communications Officer. After a week of this, the officer could stand no more and recommended Mattinson for reassignment to air crew. Two days later, Mattinson had his orders and became a member of the Savage crew, #224.

22 Apr 44

Today a large consignment of recently graduated aerial gunners (MOS 611) reported to the 500th Bomb Group from Lincoln, Nebraska. Among these men was young Pfc Hugh J. Phillips from Los Angeles, California. Phillips remembers debarking from the troop train at a small station in a rural part of Kansas. This would have been Victoria Station. The men were assembled into formation and marched several miles to an air field in the middle of nowhere. This was Walker Army Air Field. Phillips later wrote down his first impressions of what would be his home for the next several months. He also saw something strange sitting on the runway:

“As we marched by the runway, there was a huge airplane on it. I commented that it wouldn't fly, and many others agreed with me. I had been an airplane bug since I was six, and I had worked at Lockheed Burbank in California for almost two years, so I thought I knew what I was talking about. The plane looked larger than it was because the yellow oxide that was put on aircraft sheet metal to help prevent scratches had not been removed; it wasn't the shiny aluminum color. This was the first B-29 most of us had ever seen, or in my case had ever heard of.

“Walker was not an attractive base. The runways looked good and the hangars looked as if they could serve well as working areas, but the barracks were half-completed, as they were wooden and covered with black tar paper, which we found made good heat traps when summer came. There was no grass except the natural weeds that were cut short.”

The 57 gunners were more or less evenly distributed among the 881st, 882nd, 883rd and 884th Bomb Squadrons. Phillips was assigned to the 882nd Squadron. The Group was building up and Walker Field was becoming more crowded.

30 Apr 44

Today George Hughes returned to Walker AAF, KS, from his furlough at home and found the base much changed. The 462nd Bomb Group was gone and in their place was the Air Echelon of the 500th Bomb Group. George wrote his parents about it:

"April 30, 1944

Dear Mother & Dad,

I arrived in camp about eight thirty on Sunday morning.

This place is a mad house. A new bunch has come in from Clovis, New Mexico. They have just about taken over from what I hear. All the men we had in charge are now assistants now [*sic*]. There seems to be a lot of hard feelings around here. The field is overcrowded now. I never saw the place so crowded.

.... There doesn't seem to be many planes here yet and they are all B-17s. From what I hear the Clovis bunch

never saw a B-29 yet.

Love
George"

8 May 44

Another letter written home by George Hughes, airplane mechanic in the 500th Bomb Group at Walker Field, Kansas:

"May 8, 1944

Dear Mother & Dad,

I am in a new squadron although I haven't moved. The 29th [*Bombardment Maintenance Squadron*] has been changed into the 881st [*Bombardment Squadron*]. Many of the newcomers [*meaning the air echelon recently arrived from Clovis, New Mexico*] and some of the old timers have left. I guess Ed, Dick and I will stay in the same outfit.

We have been working eight hours but are starting a twelve hour tomorrow. I am working on a B-29[;] it is the only one we have now. The rest of the planes are B-17s. The fellows that came in from Clovis don't seem to be very good on any kind of plane.

....

Love
George"

In early May 1944 the 500th Bomb Group, along with all the other Groups in the 73rd Bomb Wing, underwent a major reorganization. The four separate maintenance squadrons, the 29th thru 32nd, were dissolved, as was the fourth operational squadron, the 884th. Most of the personnel of these squadrons were folded into the three remaining bomb squadrons, with the excess being transferred out. Maintenance would now fall directly under the bomb squadron commanders, and the now larger bomb squadrons would have ten B-29's assigned vice seven under the old organization, making the total for the Group 30 planes vice 28.

The 500th was now composed of the following units:

Headquarters section
881st Bombardment Squadron
882nd Bombardment Squadron
883rd Bombardment Squadron
18th Photographic Laboratory

14 May 44

From the 500th Bomb Group Operations Journal, location Walker Army Air Field, Kansas:

"14 May 44

B-17F, 42-5064, Pilot -- Major Hurlbutt, made emergency landing due to fire #4 engine. No's 1 & 2 fire extinguisher bottles used, but obtained no results. Number 4 engine fell off on impact of landing. Cpl. Monahan

jumped from A/C while plane was in motion, and suffered serious injuries. 3rd Ech. Maint. [*basically, repairs beyond the capability of the ground crews*] required on A/C."

This incident affected lives beyond the 500th Bomb Group. Cpl Monahan was the CFC gunner on the Hurlbutt crew (#222). As he was expected to be in the hospital for some time, a replacement was needed. The Army's personnel procurement machinery was set in motion. Enter Edwin Levin (now Ed Lawson), recent graduate of CFC school. Levin received orders to report to Walker, and soon Maj Hurlbutt had a new CFC gunner.

It was an accident that put Levin on the Hurlbutt crew, and it was an accident -- in this case, a piece of Japanese shrapnel in his ankle -- that would save his life, as we shall see in due course. This metaphysical game of chance would one day be summed up by Levin's quonsetmate on Saipan, the poet John Ciardi: "We live by accidents."

16 May 44

On this day 2/Lt Harold "Hal" Towner of the Hays crew (#228) of the 882nd Squadron made the first entry in his diary:

"16 May 44

Today our flight commander passed to us an order of the Group C.O. that a crew record will be kept by some member of each crew. Unfortunately, in more ways than one, I, the bombardier, was chosen as the log-keeper for our crew.

Thus far we have flown 12 training missions, all in B-17s, and are looking forward to our first flight in a B-29."

17 May 44

From the Hal Towner (Hays crew, 882nd) diary:

"17 May 44

"Completed mission #1 -- three camera attacks -- one each at Wichita, Tulsa, and Oklahoma City. On our return we had our first scare when pilot suspected fire in #2. On landing he stopped ship in middle of runway and ordered crew to abandon ship. Fire fighting crews arrived just in time to see the engine stop smoking."

Note: This flight was in a B-17.

18 May 44

On this day the Curtis crew (#119) of the 881st Squadron got 6 hours and 20 minutes in a B-29. Since there were no less than 14 landings recorded during this time, the crew must have been practicing take-offs and landings.

19 May 44

Mechanic George Hughes of the 881st Squadron was still working hard at Walker Field:

"May 19, 1944

Dear Mother & Dad,

I am back in the old rut again. Working and sleeping, without a day off. We are on twelve hours and no days off. When we change shifts we work sixteen hours.

The flying personnel are mostly inexperienced and are only flying the B-17s. A few of the older men are flying the two B-29s we have. They have been interviewing combat crew the last few days. It seems as though most of the fellows are waiting to be called. Not many seem to be jumping at the chance.

Love
George"

The air crews must have been short of personnel. One of the airplane mechanics who did jump at the chance to transfer to a combat crew was Cpl Kiolen Crider from Kannapolis, North Carolina. Maybe it had something to do with the fact that he was on KP when they came asking. Anyway, he agreed to become a gunner and was assigned as tail gunner on the Hale Hays crew (#228) of the 882nd Squadron. He would stay with that crew throughout the war.

From the Hal Towner (Hays crew, #228, 882nd) diary:

"19 May 44

Pilot, co-pilot and engineer complete missions 1 & 2 in B-29. Our first close-up inspection of this beautiful aircraft!"

There was much classroom training going on too. The men grouched about the poor quality of the instruction, but despite innumerable shortages and deficiencies, the 500th Bomb Group was doing the best it could with what it had. Attached is a page from the unit ground school schedule for a period in mid-May.

25 May 44

At Walker Field in Kansas, the 500th Bomb Group continued to train as best they could, using mostly decrepit B-17's.

From the Hal Towner (Hays crew, 882nd) diary:

"25 May 44

Local flying -- tried to drop bombs from 20,000 but gave up after 7 attempts -- bombardier [*Towner himself*] couldn't get them away properly again and everybody disgusted including bombardier who reported four malfunctions."

26 May 44

The 500th Bomb Group was still in the early stages of its training at Walker AAF, Kansas.

From the Hal Towner (Hays crew, 882nd) diary:

"26 May 44

First mission for whole crew in a B-29 finds us very enthusiastic about this sweet ship."

28 May 44

From the Hal Towner (Hays crew, 882nd) diary, still in training at Walker AAF, Kansas:

"28 May 44

Dropped 20 bombs from B-29, 1,000' combat bombing -- good fun -- also flew a couple hours formation. Altogether we had a full period."

29 May 44

Probably the biggest problem the 500th Bomb Group at Walker AAF, Kansas, had to deal with in conducting its training was the poor quality of the planes assigned. There were only a few B-29's available, and at this early stage in production these still had many bugs and glitches. The majority of the planes were old B-17's with many flying hours on them. Of course, there were other problems as well. The following letter from the Group Engineering Officer was thorough and candid in its explanation.

HEADQUARTERS 500TH BOMBARDMENT GROUP (VH)
Office of the Engineering Officer
Walker Army Air Field

29 May 1944
Victoria, Kansas

SUBJECT: Lack of T.O. [*Technical Order?*] Compliance on Aircraft.

TO : Major C. P. Dittman, Headquarters Army Air Forces, Office of Flying Safety, Ordmore [*Ardmore?*], Oklahoma.

1. All airplanes assigned to this organization do not have 100% T.O. compliance for the following reasons:

- (a) Lack of parts; kits have been requisitioned as needed and in the majority of cases have received a "Not in Stock". Follow through has been initiated for all kits.
- (b) Lack of T.O. compliances on airplanes received by this organization. Approximately 75% of aircraft received had from 30 to 60 T.O.'s not complied with.
- (c) Condition of aircraft received: Approximately 50% of aircraft received had from 1000 to 2000 hours total time, and no record of a 500 hour inspection or a D.I.R. [*Depot Inspection and Repair*] Personnel on hand not sufficient to keep airplanes in flying condition to meet required flying schedule and also comply with all non-grounding T.O.'s.
- (d) Shortage of personnel: Maintenance personnel stationed at Walker Army Air Field previous to arrival of air echelon worked excessive hours to complete modifications on B-29 airplanes for 462nd Group and were promised furloughs. About 50% of personnel were on leave when Air Echelon of 500th Group arrived at this station. Additional personnel who were assigned to the 884th Squadron [*since disbanded*], and who were being depended upon to assist in maintenance work were transferred from the base.

2. Seven aircraft have been sent to Fairfield Air Depot for D.I.R., at the request of this office, and three more are awaiting movement.

3. The above mentioned loss of aircraft in poor condition has made it possible to concentrate on the aircraft on hand. It is believed that all aircraft can be brought up to date in thirty days, if parts are available.

For the Group Commander:

HARRY G WEBER
Major, Air Corps
Group S-4 Officer

31 May 44

The 500th Bomb Group continued training at Walker AAF, Kansas. Attached is a copy of the Daily Aircraft Status and Combat Crew Report as of the end of May 1944. As you can see, only nine (one-fourth) of the 36 aircraft assigned were B-29's. The rest were B-17's, and old and overworked ones at that. So obviously the Group had to do most of its training on B-17's. That didn't matter as much to the navigators, bombardiers and radio operators, but for the rest of the crew the B-17 was a poor substitute for the B-29. The two planes didn't handle alike, and the B-17 lacked a flight engineer's position, remote-controlled guns, and radar. But it was all they had until enough new B-29's came off the production line.

The report also shows how much work had yet to be done in filling out the crews. Only 10 of 58 were complete.

From the Hal Towner (882nd) diary:

"31 May 44

Morning mission -- dropped 20 from B-17 at 20,000 feet. Had to land with bomb doors open. These B-17s are really ancient wrecks."

1 June 44

The 500th Bomb Group continued training at Walker AAF, Kansas.

From the Hal Towner (Hays crew, 882nd) diary:

"1 June 44

Took part in a wing formation consisting of 48 B-17s. Our target [was] 2nd A.F. hdqs. at Colorado Springs, 10,000 feet. Fountain City was the I.P."

Somebody in the 73rd had a sense of humor in picking HQ 2nd AF as target. There was little good feeling in the 73rd for the organization that controlled their training. Probably some on the crews wished they had real bombs to drop.

4 June 44

At Walker AAF, Kansas, the number of B-29's assigned to the 500th Bomb Group was slowly increasing.

From the Hal Towner (Hays crew, 882nd) diary:

"4 June 44

[AC Hale] Hays, [copilot Ed] Betts and Wally [flight engineer William B. Wallower] went to Salina this afternoon to pick up a ship -- the rest of us flubbed our dub for the rest of the day."

7 Jun 44

The 500th Bomb Group continued training at Walker AAF, Kansas.

From the George Hughes (airplane mechanic, 881st) letters:

"June 7, 1944

Dear Mother & Dad,

I haven't any great news for you. That deal I was speaking of was a transfer into the 330 Bomb. Group. As yet nothing has come of it. The 330th is the outfit to replace ours when we go overseas. *[The 330th Group was part of the 314th Wing and would end up on Guam in the spring of 1945. When the ground echelon of the 500th, including most of the mechanics, left in the summer of 1944 to travel to Saipan by ship, the maintenance elements of the 330th would move into Walker to support the 500th air echelon until they flew out in October.]*

.... We have been back on twelve hour for the past few days. I didn't think the eight hour shift would last. I am still on nights. We expect to change to days this week probably about Friday. The nights have been awful cold lately. It would be lovely sleeping weather if we could only get to bed.

We have four B-29s and five B-17s *[in the 881st Squadron]*. They are flying them every chance they can get. It looks as though they were in a hurry to go across.

Love
George"

From the Hal Towner (Hays crew, 882nd) diary:

"7 June 44

... Flew a round robin in B-29 -- St Louis, Mpls. *[Minneapolis?]*, and back -- engineer Wallower maintaining his eating rep all the way -- all disappointed that the ship couldn't be pressurized due to cracked blister -- on last leg flew through worst storm yet -- even *[shook?]* up the "29" -- lots of St. Elmo's dancing lights -- illuminating whole ship, especially glass nose and props -- it was a long, tiring mission and on top of it all had to fly 3 hours locally after reaching W.A.A.F.B. ..."

The Curtis crew (#119) trained closer to home this day, putting in 5 hours and 20 minutes in a B-29, mostly practicing take-offs and landings.

8 Jun 44

As training progressed for the crews of the 500th Bomb Group at Walker AAF, Kansas, longer missions were scheduled, often over wide expanses of water. On this date the Hays crew, #228, of the 882nd Squadron, took off on one of these. Unfortunately, there still were not enough B-29's to go around.

From the Hal Towner diary:

"8 June 44

Started on missions 14 & 15 in a B-17 at 5:00 P.M. this afternoon -- finally got the plane loaded down with heavy flying clothes, chutes, Mae Wests, oxygen masks, head sets, first aid kits and overnight bags because this mission would take us to Tampa, Florida overnight. Reached Galveston [Texas] uneventfully except for some of the worst weather yours truly has ever flown in. ... [F]rom here to Tampa is supposed to be a night celestial mission -- poor Wex [*navigator Wilbur Weksler*] forgot his sextant and will never live it down, but his luck held with him for he was able to borrow one so here we go [*across the Gulf of Mexico*] to Tampa."

9 Jun 44

The Hays crew of the 882nd Squadron continued their training mission to Tampa and back.

From the Hal Towner diary:

"9 June 44

Well we found the Dry Tortugas Islands, and had some fun making bombing runs and taking pictures of a coast guard patrol boat and of the fort on one of the islands this A.M. Arrived Tampa safe and sound with a good hour's worth of gas left. Most of the crew slept till shortly after noon."

The crew was supposed to return to Walker AAF that evening but were weathered in and didn't get off until the next morning.

10 Jun 44

On this date the Hays crew of the 882nd Squadron returned to Walker AAF, Kansas, from their long training mission to Tampa.

From the Hal Towner diary:

"10 June 44

Took off for Memphis & W.A.A.F. at 8:00 A.M. -- hit Memphis zero zero but as I navigated from then on [*most bombardiers and navigators were dual-trained*], we didn't do too good to W.A.A.F. [*Towner often employed self-deprecating humor.*] ... [D]idn't believe it possible but it was actually good to see W.A.A.F. again -- and what a trip! It was very interesting and educational, but exhausting."

11 Jun 44

Training continued today for the 500th Bomb Group at Walker AAF, Kansas. AC Ferd Curtis of the 881st Squadron checked out his pilot (copilot), Henry Standridge, Jr., on three landings.

12-15 Jun 44

As training progressed at Walker AAF, Kansas, the 500th Bomb Group began incorporating more unit training spanning longer periods of time.

From the 500th Bomb Group Operations Journal:

"[Group] Mission #1 -- June 12-13-14 inclusive to Kanapolis Dam [*about 60 miles SE of Walker*], Great Salt Plains Bombing Range. Ten B-29's + 10 B-17's scheduled for mission. On 12th two (2) B-29's & 2 B-17's

participated. On 13th 3 B-29's + 5 B-17's participated. On final day (14th) only 2 B-29's were over target area. 882nd furnished both A/C.

[Group] Mission #2 -- Run 15 June 44 with Dalhart PBT [*I think should be PBR - Practice Bombing Range*] #1 as target. Five (5) B-29's and ten (10) B-17's were scheduled for mission and Sqdns. of 500th Group got following number A/C off to a successful start of mission:

<u>881st</u>	<u>882nd</u>	<u>883rd</u>
3-B-17's	2-B-17's	2-B-17's
1-B-29	1-B-29	2-B-29's

This constituted a grand total of 7 - 17's and 4 - 29's.

S-3 [*Operations*] Section issued this Wing Mission as a Group Tactical Operations Order but it was in reality Wing Mission #2."

From the Hal Towner (Hays crew, 882nd), diary:

"13 June 44

.... Today we flew a gunnery mission in a B-29 -- found out how little we know about the guns and learned a great deal by correcting malfunctions and cleaning and loading the guns ourselves."

14-16 Jun 44

At Walker AAF, Kansas, the Hays crew of the 882nd Squadron, 500th Bomb Group was ordered off on another cross-country training flight, this time to a very popular location.

From the Hal Towner diary:

"14 June 44

We took off for New York this A.M. at 0500 -- flew thru two hours of soup from Pittsburgh to New York -- what a thrill to see the famous skyline for the first time -- a rather uneventful trip except we came in on three engines -- stayed with ship till 1600 till we were sure it would be ready for us in time for take-off."

The members of the crew who had family in the New York area were able to visit overnight. The others were able to get in some sight-seeing. The plane was supposed to return to Walker on the evening of the 15th but they had more engine problems, which required another overnight, with flight engineer Wallower staying with the plane. They finally got off at noon on the 16th.

"16 June 44

... Arrived K.C. at 2000 for gas up -- arrived W.A.A.F. at 2230 -- what a tired crew -- thank God ground crew back from bivouac and we didn't have to service the ship."

While the Hays crew had been away enjoying New York, the Squadron ground personnel were probably not enjoying themselves quite as much. They had been away at a three-day exercise and bivouac at the Kanapolis Dam area, 60 miles SE of Walker. The training schedule included such activities as "Mimic warfare, gas attacks, strafing, map reading and camouflage lectures, showing of Training Films "Kill or be Killed" and "Malaria", and all the accoutrements of combat training...."

In his entry for 15 June written while in new York, Towner noted one event of special significance for B-29-ers: "First B-29 raid on Japan reported! Four ships lost!" This was a raid by the 58th Bomb Wing flying from China against the steel mill at Yawata on the southernmost Japanese island of Kyushu.

18 Jun 44

It was now the turn of the ground personnel of the 881st Squadron for field training near Kannapolis Dam. Airplane mechanic George Hughes told his family about it:

"June 18, 1944

Dear Mother & Dad,

I am just writing a few lines to let you know everything is alright. We leave to-morrow morning for three days bivouac near Salena [*Salina*]. We ride part way in trucks and the rest on foot. I got my pack all set and it seems to be pretty heavy.

The weather has been pretty hot and dry lately. It has been hard sleeping days. [*Hughes had been working the night shift.*] This camping trip will break the monotony of working all the time.

Some of the planes that were in that raid on Japan were out here. I knew some of the pilots and crews that were in the raid. [*Hughes is referring to the first B-29 raid on Yawata, Japan, on 15 June 1944 from bases in China by B-29's of the 58th Bomb Wing. The 462nd Group of that Wing had trained at Walker, and Hughes had worked on some of the planes.*] The war news is looking better every day now. Maybe it won't last much longer.

I believe I will go to bed now. We start around four or five in the morning. Breakfast is at three-forty five. Don't worry and take care of yourselves. Write soon.

Love
George"

Meanwhile, the Hays crew of the 882nd Squadron was as usual having a more enjoyable experience. From the Hal Towner diary:

"18 June 44

The Globe Trotters take another trip -- but what a pleasure this one -- dinner at Haywire's [*Hays'*] home -- fried chicken and everything that goes with it. We would have done justice to it without [*flight engineer*] Wallower or [*radar operator*] Burulia, but as it was we licked the platter clean -- what a spread, and wow what a gal Hays has under lock and key down there in Oke City.

Pearce [*probably 1/Lt Stanley Pierce, AC Crew #223*] and Pease [*Capt Harlan Pease, AC Crew #227*] screamed and moaned about our crew getting so many cross country hops. We felt awfully bad about the boys but decided to be selfish and go anyway. On the way down and back to Oke City the whole crew got stick time to the exasperation and frustration of Wex [*Weksler*], the navigator, who can scream and moan with the best of them. He always gets us there and back though in spite of the peculiar numbers he gives the pilot to fly."

21 Jun 44

The 500th Bomb Group continued training at Walker AAF, Kansas, still plagued by aircraft and equipment shortages.

From the Hal Towner (Hays crew, 882nd) diary:

"21 June 44

Wing formation over 2nd A.F. Hdq.'s at Colo. Springs -- again we miss out on flying -- gunners get camera gunning though with the old man *[possibly meaning left gunner Cpl Robert Moistner, a little older and therefore called "Pop" by the rest of the crew]* in charge -- the rest of us get synthetics *[ground-based training devices]* -- we beat crew 222 *[the Hurlbutt crew]* at skeet."

22 Jun 44

Training continued at Walker AAF. From the Hal Towner (Hays crew, 882nd) diary:

"22 June 44

Flew a couple hours in a Baker Dash Two Nine -- we completed some gunnery before one engine went out.

Bombardier and Navigator got some trainer time later in the evening."

And the ground echelon of the 881st Squadron had returned from their field exercise near Kanapolis dam. George Hughes, an airplane mechanic in the 881st, wrote home about the experience:

"June 22, 1944

Dear Mother & Dad,

.... We got back from bivouac last night. It wasn't too bad out in the woods. I was on guard duty most of the time. We had a raid by some engineers from Camp Phillips and they put on quite a demonstration with flares and T.N.T. We were all blacked out and it was really hard to see. I nearly stepped on a skunk when on guard at night. It's lucky that I saw him in time. We didn't get much sleep and the ground was pretty hard.

We are still working twelve hour shifts and I am back on nights. *[Hughes vents here about the disorganized promotion process which thwarted his advancement to corporal.]* We will probably be alerted soon and some of the men are moving from town into camp. *[Probably married men who had been living in town with their wives but decided to send them home in anticipation of deployment.]* I have most of my equipment except new clothes and a new gas mask. They said today that we could take cameras overseas with us when we go.

It looks as though the B-29s are going to do allright in combat. There has been some new improvements made lately. Maybe we won't stay over there long. One good thing is that a combined maintenance and flying squadron gives a better break for the ground crew. When the air crews get their missions in they will bring the whole outfit back to the states. *[As Hughes would find out later, it didn't quite work out that way.]* ...

Love
George"

24 Jun 44

From the Hal Towner (Hays crew, 882nd) diary:

"24 June 44

Navigator & Bombardier to trainers. Our squadron couldn't get a single ship in the air this morning -- a sad state of affairs. ..."

The 500th Bomb Group history for the month of June 1944 confirms Towner's unofficial estimate of the situation. On an average day in June only 35% of the B-29's assigned to the Group were in commission. The main problem with the B-29 was the engines, which were constantly swallowing valves or overheating or otherwise malfunctioning. Replacement engines were hard to obtain and took many hours to install. The result was B-29's unable to fly.

There were other problems too. "Shortages of gunnery equipment persisted until late June and appreciably retarded Air-to-Air Gunnery training. ... Critical shortages of radar equipment likewise delayed long mission training and these shortages still continue despite the efforts of the Group Radar Officer who twice went to the Wing to expedite shipment."

The quality of ground training was so bad that many officers and enlisted men avoided it whenever possible, resulting in only a 70% attendance rate for most classes. The command took steps to improve the instruction and schedule make-up classes, but they couldn't do much about the lack of proper classrooms and other facilities. Walker Field, originally designed to accommodate 2,000 men, was now crammed with 6,000, overfilling every available space.

One bright spot was the Group and Squadron Intelligence sections, which somehow managed to develop functional and attractive situation rooms that garnered praise from official visitors. The intelligence personnel also presented interesting and useful classes which averaged 90% attendance.

26 Jun 44

From the 500th Bomb Group Operations Journal:

"[GROUP] MISSION #3 -- This mission was run 26-27-28 June 44. Target = Woodward, Okla., and Gt. Salt Plains Bombing Range. Maximum number of B-29's. Following number B-29's departed on mission on dates indicated:

26 June: -- (5)
27 June: -- (5)
28 June: -- (3)"

27-28 Jun 44

On the night of 27-28 June the availability figures of B-29's in the 500th Bomb Group at Walker Field got a little worse.

From the 500th Bomb Group Operations Journal:

"27 June 1944 --

B-29 -- 42-6372, pilot W. S. Hodge made night crash landing in field NE WAAF [*Walker Army Air Field*]. Cause: Failure of landing gear to extend and fire in #2 engine. A/C severely damaged -- No injury to personnel."

From the Hal Towner (Hays crew, 882nd) diary:

"28 June 44

We had fifth priority on today's 29s so didn't fly -- especially since Lt. Hodges' crash landing 372 last night...."

There was now one less B-29 available for training.

29 Jun 44

As June drew to an end, the date when the 500th Bomb Group would deploy overseas was fast approaching and was constantly on the men's minds. George Hughes, airplane mechanic in the 881st Squadron, shared his thoughts with his family in a letter:

"June 29, 1944

Dear Mother & Dad,

... There has been a list published today of the men that will fly over and I was not on the list. The ones on the list will leave later than the ones going by boat. Maybe the slower way might be safer.

I don't know whether I can get a camera here or not. They have them *[in the post exchange]* once in a while but they don't last long. I haven't even been able to get a pen yet. They get in a few from time to time but they sell very quickly. ...

We get our final clothing processing this week. It looks as though we will leave sometime in July. *[Hughes was right about that.]* We will probably go from here to a P.O.E. *[port of embarkation]* on the coast somewhere. We might even go to N. Africa for a month or so like the boys in the Ninth *[the 9th Bomb Maintenance Squadron, 462nd Bomb Group, 58th Bomb Wing, with which Hughes had worked before they left Walker]*. They laid around over there for awhile and went on to India. That way you get to see a lot of the world. ...

Love
George

[At the end of the letter Hughes included a little code so he could tip off his family where he was going.]

Code
Gorden - India
Myers - South Pacific
Quinn – England"

30 Jun 44

From the Hal Towner (Hays crew, 882nd) diary:

"30 June 44

Finally, at last, at long last (!!!), we completed mission #16 *[I believe Training Mission #16 was aerial gunnery]* which has long been our jinx -- however, bombardier *[that would be Towner]* came back without firing a shot due to both guns jamming -- a rainy day so no bombing. Haywire *[AC Hale Hays]* pulled a beautiful landing -- two latrinograms: (1) we spend 6 weeks in Mohave Desert, (2) we spend 6 weeks in Florida."

1 Jul 44

Training problems continued at Walker AAF, Kansas. From the Hal Towner (Hays crew, 882nd) diary:

"1 July 44

Got off to a late start with 5 tons of bombs in a 29; at 18,000' #1 engine went out and we had to come back without dropping any...."

4 Jul 44

The 500th Bomb Group at Walker Field took a short break from training on this national holiday and celebrated as best they could. George Hughes, airplane mechanic in the 881st Squadron, went to Salina for the day with a buddy only to find "about sixty thousand soldiers on the streets." But George had "a pretty good time" anyway.

Some of the officers had different ideas about how to celebrate the 4th. According to Hal Towner (Hays crew, 882nd), "No fireworks except at O.C. [*Officers Club*] in liquid form."

[After the war, many of the buildings at Walker Field were moved to Hays and other nearby towns to provide housing, school classrooms, etc. Some of these are amazingly still in use. The old Officers Club eventually ended up as a chicken restaurant in Hays.]

5-7 Jul 44

The training woes of the 500th Bomb Group at Walker AAF continued. From the 500th Bomb Group Operations Journal:

"[Group] Mission #4 -- Run 5-6-7 July 44 to March Fld [*California*] PBT [*Practice Bombing Target*] #7. Five (5) B-29 Acft scheduled for mission. Ships participating on mission:

5 July: -- (1)

6 July: -- (3)

7 July: -- (0)

Major Van Tright [*Trigt*] (flying B-29 #373) made a lone attempt at completion of mission on 5th, but returned WAAF due to mechanical difficulties. On 6 July each Squadron had one (1) B-29 available for mission, but no ships reached target area due to varied mechanical difficulties. No attempt was made 7 July 44."

To sum up, the 500th Group was not able to get a single B-29 to the target. This result must have been frustrating and embarrassing to the command.

Hal Towner's (Hays crew, 882nd) diary confirms the training problems and the shortage of flyable B-29's:

"5 July 44

Night flight scheduled for 'A' flite, that's us, but again we didn't get off the ground. Not enough ships in commission."

"6 July 44

Well, we got off the ground today and dropped 20 500 pounders. Just barely finished our last bomb run when I blew an engine cylinder and we had to land."

"7 July 44

Night flight scheduled but we didn't get a ship. ..."

9 Jul 44

Training continued at Walker AAF, Kansas, even on Sundays. From the Hal Towner (Hays crew, 881st) diary:

"9 July 44

Morning flight schedule but again we're without a ship, however we're not allowed to go home, so we go to trainers, etc. till now when [*copilot Ed*] Betts had to fly [*Deputy Group Commander Lt.*] Col. Dougherty to Dalhart. Found out today that we got 17 impact pictures Friday which is damn good news as we only had 7, though had dropped 110 bombs."

Lt Col Dougherty's trip to Dalhart, Texas, was undoubtedly connected with the imminent move of the ground echelon of the 330th Bomb Group of the 314th Bomb Wing from Dalhart to Walker Field. Just as earlier in the year the ground echelon of the 500th had supported the air echelon of the preceding 462nd, the ground echelon of the 330th would support the air echelon of the 500th when the latter's ground echelon left for overseas deployment... and that would be soon.

Another officer departed Walker this day, but much more unobtrusively. This was 1/Lt Edward H. Gibbs, Assistant Special Services Officer. His secret destination was the Port of Embarkation, Camp Anza, California, and his mission was to make advance arrangements for non-standard-issue equipment and supplies that the Group felt it would need overseas. This included such items as washing machines, ice boxes, ice cream mix, carpenter tools, and sports equipment.

It was the Ground Echelon that would be leaving soon, but the Air Echelon also had some preparations to make. There would be only so much room on the B-29's that they would fly over, so any excess items had to be packed for shipping with the Ground Echelon. From a letter written by Ken Fine (navigator, Hurlbutt crew, 882nd) to his future wife:

"Sunday, July 9, 1944. ... Yesterday we had to draw our bed roll and pack a duffle bag with those things we wanted to send over with the ground troops who are leaving today [*actually, not for a week or so*] and will go across by boat. So, I spent the day in that line. I sent socks, underwear, towels, shoes, etc across. Also soap which they say is really hard to get overseas. ..."

10 Jul 44

At Walker AAF, Kansas, the air echelon continued their training despite all difficulties, while the ground echelon continued preparations for overseas deployment.

From the Hal Towner (Hays crew, 882nd) diary:

"10 July 44

Today, Hays told us we'll probably get a cross country hop to L.A. soon. Hurrah! Wine, women & song, here we come!

Also, our official crew name has just been released. Here's luck to the Ramblin' Roscoes!

We're scheduled to fly tonight. Finally we got a ship and flew to Wichita, Oke City and back in 2 hours & 15 minutes. Ground speed - 275 M.P.H."

A letter from airplane mechanic George Hughes of the 881st:

"July 10, 1944

Dear Mother & Dad,

I received your letter today. Thanks ever so much for the money. There was a notice posted today that we won't sign the payroll this month. It looks as though we will be gone before the end of the month. Of course this may be just a trick to keep us from knowing when we will leave.

There have been rumors around that we have been set back a month. I hope so. They have changed the shipping number stenciled on the duffel bags. The amount that we can take is limited by weight.

I have two more days of K.P. left. *[The 500th apparently assigned their K.P.'s for seven-day periods.]* It isn't too bad but the hours are long. We work from about 5 until 7:30. I will be glad to be off.

Most everyone thinks that we will go to P.O.E. *[port of embarkation]* on the west coast but the 9th *[Bomb Maintenance Squadron of the 462nd Bomb Group, with which Hughes worked in early 1944]* went to N.Y. ...

Love
George"

The rumors were partially true. The ground echelon movement would be delayed but not for a month; they would still leave in July. And the unit would not be following the route of the 462nd, which had gone via North Africa and the Middle East to India and China.

11 Jul 44

Training -- of sorts -- continued at Walker AAF, Kansas. From the Hal Towner (Hays crew, 882nd) diary:

"11 July 44

Ground school. PHOOEY!"

Towner's emphatic opinion was obviously shared by most in the 500th Bomb Group. Ground school attendance was very low, no better than 70% for most classes. We have already heard about the poor quality of classroom instruction in June, and it had apparently not improved in July.

The 500th Group narrative history is very open in discussing this problem. Command attention was blatantly lacking in this area:

"Because of incomplete attendance records, no one knew exactly who had missed what classes^[!]. The Attendance Progress Charts were the only available source to use in determining absenteeism and those were not well kept. As a result, dissatisfaction was rampant among the crew members."

Such mismanagement would, to use an old army phrase, come back to bite the 500th in the butt. The Second Air Force had authority over all aspects of the 500th's training program and it demanded that all missed classes be made up by the end of "Third Phase Ground School Training", which was 24 July. What to do? Quick results and stern measures were called for. The command decided that "each delinquent crew member [would] take as many exams as necessary covering the subject matter which he was charged with having missed. Having passed these exams, he was declared 'caught up' in all three phases of Ground School." And to ensure compliance, no one would be eligible for leaves and furloughs until he had made up all missed classes. This worked. "... [B]y 24 July nearly everyone had been declared 'caught up'."

Obviously, the airmen of the 500th thought ground school was boring and flying was exciting, but sometimes the latter could get a little too exciting. On this day the 500th Bomb Group suffered its second major accident involving a B-29 aircraft, 42-6373. The 500th Bomb Group unit history describes the incident in detail:

"Second Lt. Willard F. Shorey, piloting a B-29 airplane on a bombing mission over the Walker Bombing Range discovered that his #4 engine was cutting out and later that it was throwing oil. He feathered this engine and started back toward the field. Just before he reached the field, #1 engine began to run away and efforts to decrease the RPM proved in vain. Then #1 engine caught fire, and though attempts to feather it cut down the RPM, it was not completely feathered. At the same time both fire extinguishers were pulled but the fire did not abate. Making a left hand turn into the final approach, Lt. Shorey encountered extreme difficulty in raising the left wing to level off after he had lined the plane up with the runway. Both pilot and copilot exerted all the force they could to raise the left wing. They succeeded to a sufficient degree in leveling the aircraft and landed on the first third of the runway. During this time the fire was increasing in fury and was eating its way through the nacelle. When the plane had rolled several yards down the runway, #1 engine tore loose and fell forward and below the wing. This pulled the plane toward the left and application of right brake did not overcome this veering. When the plane stopped all but two of the crew members made their exit through the main doorway on the right side of the plane. The plane caught fire before the fire engines arrived and there was little left to salvage when the blaze was brought under control. Fortunately no one was hurt.

"As a result of his expert handling and landing of this plane with one engine feathered and another on fire, 2nd Lt. Shorey, at the request of the Second Air Force, was recommended for the Air Medal citation. As yet, official approval has not been received.

"The Accident Investigation board in its findings held that responsibility lay in material failure in #1 engine and #4 engine. There was no pilot error involved."

An eyewitness to this incident was 1/Lt James Farrell from San Francisco, an AC in the 882nd Squadron, who at the time was doing a walk-around inspection of his own B-29 prior to a flight. He heard the base crash alarm sound off and looked up to see a B-29 coming in with an engine on fire about 300-400 feet in the air and trying desperately to make it to the runway. He didn't think they were going to make it but somehow they did and "immediately on touch-down the burning engine fell off and as the plane coasted to a stop the crew made a miraculous escape! In spite of the fire trucks, the whole plane continued to burn until only its very wing-tips remained." A shaken Farrell looked from the ashes on the runway to his own B-29 and thought, "Oh boy – and this is the Chariot I'm taking to the games."

12 Jul 44

On this date the 500th Bomb Group received a Warning Order for deployment of its Ground Echelon. The specified date of departure was Sunday, 16 July, and the destination was Alliance, Nebraska. According to the Group history for July 1944, "the members of the Ground Echelon were thereupon relieved from their duties in the various sections of the Group. Final preparations then began for the movement. Field equipment was issued, final adjustments in the service records made, nesting boxes and crates were painted and lettered, and loading got under way."

13 Jul 44

Today some minor modifications needed to be made to the B-29's of the 500th Bomb Group at Walker AAF, Kansas. Had the modifications been major, the planes would have been flown to one of the modification centers set up around the country for that purpose. But minor modifications were usually taken care of at the training fields by the assigned mechanics. The trouble today was that most of the mechanics of the 500th were part of the Ground Echelon, and the Ground Echelon had been relieved of regular duties yesterday in order to prepare for their overseas movement. Furthermore, the mechanics of the 330th Group which were to replace the 500th mechanics had not yet arrived at Walker. As a result, the air crews were pressed into service.

From a letter from Ken Fine (navigator, Hurlbutt crew, 882nd) to his future wife:

"Thursday, July 13, 1944. We didn't fly this afternoon but they had some modifications to do to the planes so they had them all grounded and had us working on them. So I was an aircraft mechanic awhile this evening. I worked there until about eleven [p.m.], then quit, cleaned up and came on up here.

"We are supposed to have some Generals visiting here on Saturday so I expect they are getting things ready for them too."

14 Jul 44

With the time for the ground echelon of the 500th Bomb Group to leave Walker AAF, Kansas, seemingly imminent, George Hughes, airplane mechanic in the 881st Squadron, sat down to write a letter home:

"July 14, 1944

Dear Mother & Dad,

I received your letter today and I also got the camera and pen. This may be the last letter I will write from W.A.A.F. The Group Commander told us today that we would leave tomorrow as far as he knew.

We still don't know a thing about where we will go except for the rumors. I heard today that we might go to Nebraska for a week or two and then to go on to P.O.E. [*port of embarkation*] The Group Commander said we might have to do things we never dreamed of such as loading barges, trains, etc. This doesn't look as though we were going to a combat zone too soon. Time will tell.

I believe that I have made Cpl. but am not sure. I was listed that way on the last roster made up. I know that a new rating list was turned in.

There is a lot of work to be done getting everything ready for moving. I will be glad when we get settled. This moving around and not knowing your destination is no good.

It wouldn't surprise me to land in China and have to build a landing strip for our planes. Maybe a little pick and shovel work is in the offing.

How is everything at home? The barracks is in an uproar right now. A bunch just rolled in from the beer hall so there will be no peace or quiet for awhile.

Write soon. The mail may be forwarded faster than you can hear from me. Don't worry and I will write when I can.

Love
George"

15 Jul 44

Today, as the Ground Echelon of the 500th Bomb Group frantically prepared to depart Walker Field tomorrow for Alliance, Nebraska, they received a reprieve, in the form of an order postponing the movement indefinitely. According to the unit history, "The explanation for this postponement seems to have been that accommodations at the Staging Area at Alliance, Nebraska, were inadequate for all the Ground Echelons of all the Groups within the 73rd Bombardment Wing VH [*Very Heavy*]."

The command did not anticipate a lengthy delay, and since most everything was packed up and ready, they decided to leave as much as possible that way and use the extra time they now had to wrap up any last-minute details and get a head start on the Ground Echelon Training Program as directed and outlined by the 73rd Bomb Wing. This program had been intended to begin later, en route and after arrival at the overseas destination, but with the extra time why not start it now? So over the next several days the troops were given lectures in the Intel Section's War Room on such subjects as Security and Aircraft Identification.

While the Ground Echelon was making the best of their delay, the Air Echelon continued training. There was both a Group Mission and a Wing Mission scheduled for this day. From the 500th Group Operations Journal:

"[Group] Mission #5: -- This mission was carried out 15 July 44 against (Simulated) Amarillo Oil Refinery at Amarillo, Texas, with three (3) out of a scheduled six (6) B-29 aircraft. There were no abortions and mission was completed."

"Second Wing mission (FO #1) was run on 15 July 44 to DALHART [Texas] PBR [Practice Bombing Range] #1. Squadrons were requested to furnish a total of 5 - B-29's & 10 - B-17's. Total of ships participating in this mission was 4 - B-29 & 7 B-17 A/C. B-29 [42-6]364 returned to line shortly before take-off time due to engine trouble. Only plane having mechanical difficulties on mission was [42-6]372 (B-29) which made an emergency landing at 1726 [at] WAAF."

Things were improving. Most of the planes that made it airborne were now completing the mission.

16 Jul 44

On this day Ken Fine (Hurlbutt crew, 882nd) at Walker AAF, Kansas, sat down to write another letter to Miss Marie Sisco, whom he would marry after the war:

"Sunday, July 16, 1944. "We had visiting Generals and high rank all about yesterday. Even they were up and about at 5 in the morning so you see this war is a serious business after all. *[The VIP's were probably at Walker to observe the scheduled Group and Wing training missions.]*

We have to go down to the flight line at 3 this afternoon but I don't know whether our crew will fly as the bombardier *[2/Lt Glenn Aitken]* is grounded with a cold and sore throat. He really has it bad as he can hardly talk. Anyway, they probably will make us stay down there and fool around at something until about midnight."

As it happened, Maj Hurlbutt gave the crew the rest of the day off.

17 Jul 44

George Hughes, airplane mechanic in the 881st Squadron, wrote his parents about his delay in departure from Walker AAF, Kansas:

"July 17, 1944

Dear Mother & Dad,

I didn't think that I would be doing any more writing from here but I was wrong. We had our bags packed and the train loaded with equipment and luggage when our shipping orders were changed.

We are to remain here for an indefinite time. They are allowing us to send laundry so I expect to be here at least a couple of weeks more. Some of the fellows are back to work and the rest are drilling and getting lectures on various things to prepare for overseas. We took a six mile hike this afternoon and drilled all morning. It is plenty

hot out here now. The sun is very bright.

I don't know the reason for our change in orders unless the higher ups thought we were unprepared for overseas. ... The rating list was posted on the fifteenth so I am now a corporal. Every little but will help.

Love
George"

18 Jul 44

On this date the Ground Echelon of the 330th Bomb Group, 45 officers and 972 enlisted men, completed its move to Walker AAF, Kansas, from Dalhart, Texas. These personnel would provide maintenance and other support to the Air Echelon of the 500th Bomb Group for the next several months until the air crews completed their training and flew off to war.

The Ground Echelon of the 500th Group had been scheduled to depart Walker on 16 July, but that movement had been delayed and consequently the field was now very badly overcrowded.

But training had to go on. The Hurlbutt crew of the 882nd had been scheduled to make a long round-trip flight to Mather Field, California, but to the relief of navigator Ken Fine this was canceled. Instead, "We flew locally going to the gunnery range and firing at ground targets and then flying locally the rest of the time. We didn't get in until about 3:30 so it was 4 by the time I left operations and I felt like 11 hours at a stretch was a rather long drag considering no breaks and no meals mixed in either."

When the crews started flying thirteen- or fourteen-hour missions from Saipan in November, "11 hours at a stretch" would seem like child's play.

19 Jul 44

On this date Walker Field and the 500th Bomb Group were the recipients of a visit by Maj Gen Uzal G. Ent, Commander of the 2nd Air Force, which controlled the training of all Army Air Force units in the midwest region. General Ent made a hurried inspection of the field, then spent most of his time speaking to the personnel of the 500th. According to the 500th Group unit history, "The informal way in which the General conducted his talk and the open house question session which followed it impressed those who attended with the idea that the 'pompous brass hats' are a thing of the past and that the present Army Air Forces' leaders are interested most of all in the personnel who make up the entire organization."

That was the official view anyway. 2/Lt Ken Fine (Hurlbutt crew, 882nd) seemed less impressed, only noting that "We had a Major General here to talk to us this morning at ten."

Other events were more important to Fine: "We didn't fly this afternoon but took a medical exam and then went around to get some papers signed to show that we were up on our third phase work so that hopefully we could get a leave. *[This confirms the command threat to deny leaves until all third phase training was successfully completed.]* Then we had to go over and take a P.T. or physical training test. After that we (the copilot Omilian and the bombardier Aitken and myself) went up to the club *[Officers Club]* and sat around and talked for a while."

20 Jul 44

The air crews of the 500th Bomb Group at Walker AAF, Kansas, had been complaining about the mess halls there for some time. It wasn't the quality of the food that was their main gripe, although of course as red-blooded American GI's they complained about that too -- it was the hours that irked them. The air crews were training

practically around the clock, flying long missions, and taking off or landing at Walker at all hours. Coming back hungry from a long flight late at night to find that the mess hall would not open until normal breakfast hours made for ill tempers and unhappy crews. Finally, the 500th command did something about it.

From the 500th Bomb Group unit history for July 1944:

"On July 20, the newly formed Flight Feeding Kitchen began serving its first meal. S/Sgt. Short, an instructor from the Salina, Kansas, Flight Feeding School, is in charge and two cooks and two KP's are being supplied daily from each of the squadrons. The inaugurating of the Flight Feeding Kitchen and the arrival of the Food Warmers which are installed in the plane has [sic] resulted in favorable comment from the crews, in contrast to the many previous complaints and pleas for some method of serving food to the crews on their long flights. The Personal Equipment Section of each squadron handles the Food Warmers and their distribution."

21 Jul 44

Training continued for the air crews of the 500th Bomb Group at Walker AAF, Kansas. Hal Towner (Hays crew, 882nd) made the following entry in his diary:

"21 July 44

We had today about the smoothest mission we've ever flown -- had [42-24]537, a really sweet flying ship -- camera bombed Des Moines, Bettendorf, Chicago and Kansas City. We tried out the new food warmers and found them most satisfactory -- especially Burulia and Wild Bill [*radar operator Stanley Burulia and flight engineer William Wallower*]."

Meanwhile, on the ground, things were in turmoil again as the 500th had received new movement orders for the Ground Echelon. Now they would depart on Sunday, 23 July, and this time directly for the Port of Embarkation at Camp Anza, California. The unit history for July 1944 captures the atmosphere well:

"The period between July 21 and July 23 was marked by intense activity as final preparations to get under way were carried out. Supply problems interfered to some extent with the normal loading of the trains when at noon on July 21 an amendment to the Movement Orders was received which necessitated the issuing of certain items of Field Equipment to all officers in the Air Echelon and the shipment of these items with the Ground Echelon. The amendment further directed that part of the personal baggage of each officer in the Air Echelon which was within the POM [*Preparation for Overseas Movement*] overall baggage limitations and above that amount allowable for travel by air, would be shipped with the Ground Echelon movement. All officers, including those on leave, succeeded in getting their equipment and baggage packed and loaded in time, but not without a great deal of trouble. July 21 and the following day witnessed runs on certain items like soap, razor blades, towels, toothbrushes, and other personal items at the Post Exchange Store, whose stock was already depleted by previous purchases of the members of the Ground Echelon, and similar runs on khaki clothing, shorts and undershirts, shoes, socks, etc., at the Quartermaster Sales Store. It is anticipated that once overseas, there will be much trading among the officers of newly purchased clothing in an effort to fit everyone as best as possible as a result of conditions existing back at this field which found many officers buying shirts and pants either much too small or much too big for themselves."

22 Jul 44

On this day at 0115 the Hays crew of the 882nd Squadron left Walker Field on a long-distance flight to Los Angeles. However, they didn't get that far. Near Trinidad, Colorado, the #1 engine cut out and would not feather. They headed for the nearest field, which turned out to be Santa Fe, New Mexico. When they got there the field was dark and the crew was unable to contact the tower, but they went on in and managed to make a bouncy but successful emergency landing. This was a very scary experience for the crew, which was, as Hal

Towner put it, "praying to beat hell. We got religion that night."

With their B-29 in need of repair, the crew had to wait in Santa Fe until another plane could be sent to retrieve them. Presumably a repair team would also come to work on the plane.

23 Jul 44

At Walker AAF, Kansas, George Hughes, airplane mechanic in the 881st Bomb Squadron, found time today to write a letter home:

"July 23, 1944

Dear Mother & Dad,

This is just a few lines to let you know that everything is alright. We are drilling for three days and then working three days. We are restricted to the base but I haven't the slightest idea how long we will stay here.

I will be glad to go and get it over with. This waiting gets very monotonous after awhile. There are rumors around that we may go to a staging area for further training instead of going directly to a P.O.E. [*Port of Embarkation*] Everyone has their own ideas on this shipment but no one knows.

From what I have heard they are cracking down on anyone disclosing any information about troop movements.

The way the news looks now we shouldn't have to stay overseas too long. Germany should crack before the end of the summer. Japan won't last long after the B-29s get really organized. [*Hughes was a trifle overoptimistic here.*]

Don't worry if you ever go for awhile without hearing from me. After all no news is good news. I will write just as soon as I can and let you know all that I can disclose. Our mail is censored from the time we board the train for P.O.E. until we get back to the states again.

Write when you can and don't worry.

Love
George"

It couldn't have been very long after he wrote his last uncensored letter that Hughes and the rest of the Ground Echelon found out that their waiting was over. The command had known for at least two days that today was departure day but had successfully kept that information secret. But when three Union Pacific trains pulled onto the Walker spur today, everyone knew. The men were ready and loading started quickly, but as always there was a last-minute task. From the unit history:

"On July 23 an additional amendment to the Movement Order was received which required that steel helmets, to be used overseas by the Officers of the Air Echelon, were to be shipped with the Ground Echelon. Warrant Officer Koon was placed in charge of this hurry-up detail and he successfully arranged for the drawing of 380 steel helmets and liners, packing them, and getting them loaded before the trains departed."

A few curious civilians who had noticed that something was up wandered over to the base to watch, but guards posted at all the entrances kept them at a distance.

After the trains were loaded, the men had one last homage to pay to Walker Field. Each Squadron had to police

its respective area.

At 1420 the first train, carrying the ground echelon of the 881st Squadron, 8 officers and 303 men, under the command of Squadron Executive Officer Capt Ralph Maust, pulled out.

A few hours later, at 1820, the second train, carrying the ground echelons of the 882nd Squadron, the Group Headquarters and the 18th Photo Lab, 23 officers and 385 men, all under the command of 882nd Executive Officer Maj Robert Wolcott, who was also in charge of the entire Ground Echelon, departed. On this train with the rest of the 882nd Squadron was 21-year-old 2/Lt Norman Garrigus from Tucson, Arizona. He did not have to be there. Garrigus, the 882nd Radar Countermeasures Officer, was supposed to have stayed behind as part of the Air Echelon. But he was single and his friend 2/Lt Allen Morton, Squadron Radar Maintenance Officer, was married. When Morton was assigned to the Ground Echelon, Garrigus volunteered to switch places so that Morton could stay in the States with his wife a few months longer. No one can blame Garrigus if two months later, trying to get to sleep in a pup tent pitched in a muddy former sugar cane field on Saipan, he might have had second thoughts. The fact remains that he did a good thing.

At 2000, the last train rolled off with the 883rd Squadron ground echelon, 7 officers and 305 men, under the command of Capt Harold Johnston.

The 500th Bomb Group, or half of it anyway, 1,031 officers and men, was finally off to war.

While the Ground Echelon of the 500th Bomb Group was loading up and moving out at Walker AAF, Kansas, the Hays crew of the 882nd Squadron spent most of the day stranded at Santa Fe after their emergency landing there yesterday -- stranded yes, unhappy no, as they enjoyed the hospitality of a local family. The plane sent to pick them up didn't arrive until 1800, and they didn't make it back to Walker until 2200.

24-25 Jul 44

It took the Ground Echelon of the 500th Bomb Group two-and-a-half days to reach the west coast. The unit history describes the trip:

"The three troop trains had Pullman cars and Troop Sleepers to accommodate personnel, and each train had mess and baggage cars. The trains traveled by separate routes. While quarters were crowded in so far as moving around and exercising were concerned, each man had a bed. Paper plates and cups were provided and food was brought from mess cars to the men in their respective cars. Large appetites seemed to be in order and it was quite a sight to see mess personnel bringing large pots and pans of food down the aisle and then loading the plates. Food was good during this stage of the movement. Censorship began when troops entrained. Guards were posted in each car and officers took regular turns as Officer of the Day enroute. At several train stops the men were unloaded and given exercise. At more than one place, all food items and reading material available were purchased, leaving shopkeepers with bare shelves.

"The only incident enroute was an accident in which one man in 881st Squadron was burned by gasoline in a mess car. He was placed in William Beaumont General Hospital, El Paso, Texas."

25 Jul 44

The Air Echelon of the 500th Bomb Group continued their training at Walker AAF, Kansas, but was still having problems with the planes.

From the Hal Towner (Hays crew, 882nd) diary:

"25 July 44

Scheduled for a honey of a round robin today, but strangely enough we seem to have exhausted our luck and only one ship got off out of three scheduled to do so.

Some amazing poop from the group. Our C.O., Major Brannock, is giving us another crack at L.A. Looks like the Roscoes will be Ramblin' again tomorrow if our luck holds out."

26 Jul 44

On this day the Ground Echelon of the 500th Bomb Group arrived at Camp Anza, California, 55 miles east of Los Angeles. This would be their staging area, and they would remain here until time to board ship in the port of Los Angeles. All three troop trains arrived within a few hours of each other, the 882nd train at 0140, the 883rd at 0630 and the 881st at 0800.

The officers and men of the 500th quickly learned that the authorities at Camp Anza had their own rules and schedule. The different elements of the 500th were immediately assigned shipment numbers, such as 9159-V for the 881st Squadron and 9159-AA for the 882nd, and these numbers were used by the Anza cadre in place of unit designations. Also on the first day, medical checks were made, regardless of how many might have been done elsewhere. Anyone whose immunization record was not up to date got some shots.

Nobody knew for sure how long they would be at Anza.

While the Ground Echelon of the 500th Bomb Group was getting acquainted with Camp Anza, some of their Air Echelon comrades were coincidentally setting down just a few miles away, at March Field. The two groups were probably unaware of each other. The Hays crew of the 882nd was in the Los Angeles area on a training mission. From the Hal Towner diary:

"26 July 44

We fired her up and took off this A.M. on schedule and arrived at March Field at 3:00 P.M. We had a swell trip across the mountains. On the way we flew down the Grand Canyon at cliff-top level and had a remarkable view of the phenomenon.

We didn't get to L.A. till 7:00 P.M. C.W.T. because our business at March Field took about three hours.

We all had a heck of a good time and had a fast uneventful trip home."

Other less glamorous training was continuing for the air crews back at Walker AAF in Kansas. 2/Lt Ken Fine (Hurlbutt crew, 882nd) described his crew's situation in a letter written this day to his future wife:

"We flew yesterday afternoon and night and then today we had ground work in our 4th phase. We have over a hundred things to be checked out on in this phase and that's really going to take a lot of time. It all has to be done by September 5th too so I want to get as much done before our leave comes up so they won't call me back after about the first day of leave and say, 'get to work getting these proficiency checks out of the way.'

Tomorrow that good old 4 o'clock morning again. I never saw anything roll around as fast as that every third day does."

The crews had to get up early every third day to make a long training flight to some distant location. Usually they returned the same day but sometimes were allowed to RON (remain overnight).

27 Jul 44

At Camp Anza, California, George Hughes, airplane mechanic in the 881st Squadron, was able to write a short, censored letter to his family today:

"July 27, 1944

Dear Mother & Dad,

I arrived safely at my present station and am in good shape. It is impossible to let you know where I am. The censorship is quite strict about such information.

I haven't the slightest idea how long we will be here nor where I will go after I leave. ...

Love
George"

28 Jul 44

At Camp Anza, California, the Ground Echelon took the requirements laid on them by the camp authorities seriously. They were anxious to meet them because doing so was the only way to be granted passes to visit nearby cities, most enticingly Los Angeles, which was only 55 miles away and therefore well within bus or hitchhiking distance.

At Anza, showdown inspections were held for clothing and equipment, and any shortages were filled. Weapons were inspected. A new type of gas mask was issued and the troops went through the gas chamber with it. Training in climbing and descending boarding nets was given. Hikes with full field packs were conducted. And there were any number of lectures on safeguarding military information, first aid, conduct aboard troopships, etc. Also, the Intel Section provided regular news updates.

Of course, the men also had to pull KP, guard duty and police detail.

Some of the 500th personnel thought they detected a prejudice toward the Army Air Forces on the part of the Anza staff. The unit history noted "a particular lack of cooperation in matter of assistance in obtaining supplies, extras and luxury items our units desired to purchase." But morale remained high and the frequent passes were very much appreciated.

Training continued for the Air Echelon of the 500th Bomb Group at Walker AAF, Kansas. 2/Lt Ken Fine, navigator on the Hurlbutt crew of the 882nd Squadron, wrote another letter today to his future wife:

"We have to fly this afternoon and night so it means another long night of it. The Major [*Hurlbutt*] is in the hospital with a skin infection on his feet. (Not athlete's foot though) so we fly with some of the other pilots.

I was over at the hospital awhile yesterday afternoon to see the Major and I guess he is going to Denver this morning for it too.

As things still stand, we are to get our leaves the 7th [*August*]. The Major said yesterday it might be possible for us unofficially to get a day or so head start on them. I'll let you know as soon as I know definitely."

The Hays crew of the 882nd was back at Walker after their trip to LA and was apparently the subject of some jealousy from the other crews for "too many RON's [*remain overnight*]". But bombardier Hal Towner was flippantly unapologetic: "[W]e're the best crew and should have a vacation once in a while." Still, they had to work through the same training as all the other crews: "We started our 4th phase today. It consists of a helluva

lot of proficiency checks -- very tiring."

29 Jul 44

The best part of life at the staging area at Camp Anza was its proximity to Los Angeles and other southern California cities, and the availability of passes to visit them. Excerpt from the 500th Bomb Group unit history:

"In the evenings after 1700, those who had passes crowded into busses [*sic*] and went to Los Angeles, Riverside, San Bernardino and other nearby cities and towns. Personnel were attempting to catch up and store ahead good food, entertainment of their favorite variety and all forms of recreation, against that day when the ship should sail. Los Angeles and Hollywood were popular places of rendezvous. Some of our personnel attempted to become blotters and soak up enough spiritus frumenti to last them until they should return to the States. It is significant, however, that out of more than 1,000 men, only a scattering handful made unpleasant contacts with Military Police. Those who were not out on pass spent their evenings attending one of the Camp theaters, visiting PX, canteen and Officers' Club, or in writing letters in their quarters; and although we were at Anza almost three weeks and were anxious to continue the journey, time passed rapidly and many of our numbers wished for a few more days or nights with the bright lights and civilization. Los Angeles was 55 miles distant from Camp Anza and between four and five hours bus riding were required for the round trip, cutting down on time allowed for passes."

30 Jul 44

On this day eight more CFC (Central Fire Control) specialists, MOS 580, reported to the 500th Bomb Group at Walker AAF, Kansas. Four days previously, on 26 July, 26 CFC specialists had reported from the Fort Myers, Florida, Gunnery School, and five Radar Mechanics, probably either MOS 852 or 867, had arrived from the Boca Raton, Florida, Radar School. These latest additions brought the combat crews of the 500th almost up to strength. The only shortage listed now was "2 Radar Operators (867)." (And there's some sort of error here. They probably meant MOS 866, Radar Observer, as those were the men who served on the combat crews. MOS 867 was a ground crew MOS, Radar Mechanic.)

The TO&E under which the 73rd Bomb Wing operated called for 60 combat crews per Group. The 500th Group was actually operating with a small overage, 64 crews, which allowed for some attrition during training if necessary. The crews were originally numbered 1 through 64, but someone soon came up with the idea of adding 100 to the 881st Squadron crews, 200 to the 882nd crews, and 300 to the 883rd crews. This system allowed immediate recognition of the Squadron to which a crew belonged. So the 881st crews were numbered 101 to 121, the 882nd crews 222 to 242, and the 883rd crews 343 to 364. These crew numbers were used throughout training, but after deployment overseas you generally saw them only on official documents. The crews invariably referred to themselves and other crews by the name of the airplane commander, hardly ever by the number.

Aerial training was continuing apace. In his little diary, right gunner Bob Schurmann of the McClanahan crew (#353) of the 883rd Squadron listed "Bomb training" from 0930 to 1400 on 29 July and "Camera bomb training over Kansas City" from 1700 to 2400 on 30 July.

Some crews, including the Hurlbutt (#222) and Hays (#228) crews of the 882nd, flew a long-range mission today to Birmingham, Alabama, and back. Hal Towner, bombardier on the Hays crew, recorded this mission in his diary: "Another good mission completed today. Our itinerary: Nashville, Birmingham, Memphis, Little Rock and base. Went thru some rough weather and thrilled to see the B-29 ride it out in stride."

31 Jul 44

At the end of July the Air Echelon of the 500th Bomb Group could list a certain number of accomplishments.

The number of B-29's assigned had increased to 16, including four of "the newer type" from the Birmingham, Alabama, Modification Center. This was timely, as most of the training tasks that could be accomplished in B-17's had been completed. More B-29's were expected in August.

Maintenance of the B-29's, especially the engines, was still a big problem but the proficiency of the mechanics of the 330th Bomb Group, who were now providing almost all the support, seemed to be improving.

The air crews were almost entirely filled out and well along in their training. They were now engaged in proficiency checks under Phase 4, which was scheduled for completion by 5 September.

One area which had required a great deal of work was radar. The B-29's did not come from the factory with radar installed. That had to be done by the radar mechanics of the 500th, and they had been busy. At the beginning of the month, only two B-29's had radar equipment installed; now 12 planes were so equipped.

The Group Photo Officer, Lt. Donald C. Almy, had come up with a great idea to help in radar training. He devised a method whereby a camera could take actual radar scope pictures in flight. This enabled instructors to point out and explain features using a static image instead of trying to use a fleeting image on the scope.

A special project to increase morale was instituted in July. Photographs of the crews in front of a B-29, arranged so that nothing secret was revealed, were taken, and a copy was given to each man to do with as he wished. Here was something he could proudly show to his family.

Of course, the best boost for morale was leave, which started for some crews as early as 24 July.

But for most crews, including the Hays crew (#228) of the 882nd, training continued. Self-deprecating bombardier-diarist Hal Towner recorded the day's activity:

"Radar bombing mission today. Navigator drops better bombs by radar than bombardier does with bombsight. There were 15 men aboard today -- it was crowded and hot." *[The extra bodies were probably trainers and/or evaluators.]*

1 Aug 44

At Camp Anza, California, George Hughes, airplane mechanic in the 881st, took time today to write another brief letter to his parents:

"August 1, 1944

Dear Mother & Dad,

I am still in the States and still don't know for how long. We are having a pretty good time here. This is just the same as any shipment, you lay around and draw K.P., drilling and other such detail. So far I have had two passes to leave camp. This breaks the monotony somewhat.

It's very hard to write any sort of a letter when you can't tell any more than we are allowed but maybe later things will be better. ..."

Love
George"

At Walker AAF, Kansas, the 500th Bomb Group received another new B-29 today. That was the good news. The bad news was that a B-29 already on hand, 42-6379, was now out for extended maintenance after Capt Vance Black, crew #359 of the 883rd Squadron, brought her in today from a training mission with two engines out. A note in the 500th Group Operations Journal related to this event states that the Group was averaging about 28 emergency landings per month. That's almost one a day. Clearly there were still many problems with the B-29.

The weather was very warm at Walker at this time, making training very uncomfortable, both indoors and out, and causing tempers to rise as well. Hal Towner of the Hays crew (#228) of the 882nd made the following entry in his crew diary:

"1 Aug 44

Ground school -- we had some lectures on naval forces -- identification of same, then chow and were hustled out to the gunnery range by 1220 -- we got sunburned and impatiently angry with the army in general. Returned at 1500 and then had to sweat out a lecture at 1930, hottest day yet."

4 Aug 44

On this day at Walker AAF, Kansas, the 500th Bomb Group had to ground another badly needed B-29 for repairs for an indefinite period of time. From the Group Operations Journal:

"August 4-44 -- Captain R.W. Taylor had a malfunction of fire interruptor on B-29 [42-24]573. All props received hits & each sustained 5-20 holes each [*sic*]. Left wing tip was badly shot up, but normal landing was affected [*effected*] & no personnel injured."

Not a good thing to shoot off your own propellers. For those who may not be familiar with it, a fire interruptor was a mechanism which automatically prevented your guns from firing when they were moved into a position where the bullets might strike your own plane.

The Ray Taylor crew, #112, belonged to the 881st Squadron. Ray Taylor would fly at least eight missions from Saipan before being replaced as AC by 1/Lt Hugh McNamer. There was another Taylor crew late in the war, but this was a replacement crew commanded by 1/Lt Roy Taylor. The similar first names have led to some confusion.

5 Aug 44

Today the 500th Bomb Group participated in the third Wing Training Mission. If the diary entry of Hal Towner, bombardier on the Hays crew (#228), is accurate, the mission wasn't very successful, at least the 500th's part of it.

"Saturday 5 Aug 44

Big!! Wing Misson today -- two objectives according to Col. King, our group C.O., 1 -- to put 8 planes over the target, 2 -- to be there at exactly 12:00:45. Six ships took off, or rather were ready to take off, but one didn't make it. Five took off and three aborted -- the remaining two bombed 10 minutes late."

Perhaps not by accident the official unit history doesn't mention this mission.

7 Aug 44

Training continued apace for the Air Echelon of the 500th Bomb Group at Walker AAF, Kansas. On this date the Hays crew of the 882nd Squadron had ground school, i.e., classroom instruction.

If they chose, those men off duty in the evening had the opportunity to visit the post theatre and enjoy a USO show, "The Panther Room Review".

8 Aug 44

The Ground Echelon of the 500th Bomb Group had been at Camp Anza, California, for almost two weeks now and were still waiting, literally, for their ship to come in. George Hughes, airplane mechanic in the 881st Squadron, wrote to his parents today:

"August 8, 1944

Dear Mother & Dad,

Everything is just about the same here. Yesterday was Sunday and a day of rest. *[Actually, Sunday was two days ago, on the 6th. Possibly Hughes started his letter on Monday and didn't finish it till Tuesday the 8th.]* We didn't have any formation to meet and it was quite a relief.

There was a show here last night sponsored by Bing Crosby's brother. It was very good and lasted about two hours. There was quite a few good acts and musical numbers.

I played ball yesterday afternoon for a while and got my shoulders sun-burnt. The sun burns me in a hurry if I am exposed to it. I guess I will have to take it in small doses. ...

There isn't much more to write about so be patient and wait for things to straighten out. Write as often as you can.

Love
George"

Meanwhile, back at Walker AAF, Kansas, the Air Echelon of the 500th Bomb Group continued their training. Also, the crews had begun getting their promised leaves, a few crews at a time. Three crews of the 882nd Squadron were on leave at this time, including the Hurlbutt crew (#222), which left yesterday. Navigator Ken Fine of that crew planned to spend his leave with his family in Hopkins, Missouri.

9 Aug 44

The Air Echelon of the 500th Bomb Group continued training hard at Walker AAF, Kansas. Hal Towner, bombardier on the Hays crew of the 882nd Squadron, recorded in his diary their activities for the day:

"9 Aug 44

We dropped our first night bombs tonight -- also flew our first 25,000' flight. The bombs dropped all around the target area but not in it. Visibility must have been fifty miles at that altitude. Wild Bill *[flight engineer William Wallower]* has been checking out Mike *[ring gunner August Michelsen]* in engineering and feels he has an apt student. *[Most crews trained one of the gunners, usually the tail gunner because in most cases he was also a trained airplane mechanic, as an assistant flight engineer so that the regular FE could be relieved on long flights.]* We shot our first air to air gunnery. Lots of firsts today."

10 Aug 44

Just before noon this day at Walker AAF, Kansas, the Air Echelon of the 500th Bomb Group received Wing Field Order No. 3 for a Wing training mission to be flown tomorrow to Galveston, Texas. The S-2 staff quickly began preparing the mission briefing, which was scheduled for 0400 tomorrow.

Meanwhile, down in the Squadrons, crew training continued. From the Hal Towner (bombardier, Hays crew, 882nd) diary:

"10 Aug 44

Hays, Sawdust Bill and Linwood slow-timed #366 today and the latter shot his second B-29 landing."

This brief entry cries out for annotation. Hays was of course AC Hale Hays. Sawdust Bill has to be flight engineer William Wallower. Linwood must be the middle name of copilot Edgar L. Betts. Slow-timing is the term for breaking in a newly installed engine. #366 may be B-29 Serial No. 42-6366, although I can find no record of this plane ever being assigned to the 500th. Possibly Towner got the number wrong.

11 Aug 44

The Ground Echelon of the 500th Bomb Group had been at their overseas staging area of Camp Anza, California, for 16 days now. Most of the men continued to have a relatively good time. They knew they would have to leave but they didn't know when. George Hughes, an airplane mechanic in the 881st Squadron, wrote another letter to his parents today:

"August 11, 1944

Dear Mother & Dad,

Everything is fine here and going along smoothly. ...

I just got off K.P. a little while ago. This is only the second time that I have had it here and outside of that things have been very easy. A few more weeks of this life and I would start getting fat.

There isn't anything I can tell you about when we expect to move. Maybe a little later on I will be able to write more.

The war news certainly indicates that the European war is about over. Maybe it will be all over before we expect it. *[In Europe, US forces had broken out of Normandy and Patton was racing across France, but appearances were deceptive. There would be plenty of tough fighting ahead.]*

Write as often as possible and don't worry.

Love
George"

Back at Walker AAF, Kansas, the Air Echelon of the 500th Bomb Group had an early briefing for today's scheduled Wing training mission, a radar bombing mission to Galveston. No details on this mission are available in the official history, but it must have been a mess, as it "was declared a failure by 73rd Bombardment Wing Headquarters." General O'Donnell decided it would have to be done over, so it was rescheduled for later in August.

The Hays crew of the 882nd participated in this training mission. In a case of damning with faint praise, Bombardier Hal Towner thought it wasn't as bad as the previous one:

"Off we go on a wing mission again -- this time to do some Radar bombing off Galveston. It wasn't quite as S.N.A.F.U. as the next preceding mission was. We arrived almost on time and dropped our bombs successfully. ..."

12 Aug 44

The time for the Ground Echelon of the 500th Bomb Group to leave the United States was nigh. At 0900 on this date an advance party under the command of 1/Lt Harry Salomon, Group Ordnance Officer, departed Camp Anza by motor convoy for the Port of Los Angeles. The convoy arrived at the port at 1315 and the men boarded the ship that would take them to Saipan, the SS *Alcoa Polaris*. The members of the advanced party were assigned duties and given instructions to ensure an orderly and speedy embarkation of the main body of troops when they arrived tomorrow.

On this date at Walker AAF, Kansas, there was a meeting of the 500th Bomb Group staff at 0830 in the War Room, a relatively secure room in the S-2 spaces. Primary reason was to pass on the latest information on delivery of flyaway aircraft (the new B-29's that the Group would take to war), movement to staging areas, etc. Much of the information was still very tentative, however. Capt John Smolenski, Assistant Group S-2, took notes:

"Maj. Brannock [*CO 882nd Squadron*] told of what happened at Wing Ding at Salina, Kas, the first part of this month:

(1) Flyaways will be delivered either at Okla. City depot or at the Staging Area of 500th Air Echelon. Can't say yet where Staging area will be, may be Kearney, Neb, Harrington [*Herrington*], Kans, etc. [*It turned out to be Kearney.*] Some A/C (flyaways) will be delivered by the 5th of Sept, some by the 15th. Maybe.

(2) Order of proceeding to Staging area will be: (1st) 497th + 498th Gps. (2) 499th + 500th. We should be leaving for Staging area around 1st of October. Not definite, however.

(3) Possibility of our being assigned with another Grp to the same landing strip. Not well received.

(4) Spoke of modifications on flyaway A/C."

Meanwhile, outside on the runways training continued. On this day the Hays crew of the 882nd flew to Rapid City, SD, and back. Bombardier-navigator Hal Towner rated the crew's performance, including his own, as follows: "I did a beautiful job of navigation on the way up, but the return trip proved I need lots of celestial work. Betsy [*copilot Ed Betts*] greased it in for the third time today -- a sweet landing."

Showing at the post theater tonight was the USO show "Topsy Turvy".

13 Aug 44

At 1600 today the main body of the Ground Echelon of the 500th Bomb Group boarded a train at Camp Anza for the relatively short trip to the Port of Los Angeles, where at 1900 they boarded their transport, the SS *Alcoa Polaris*. At the pier, the Red Cross served sandwiches and coffee. Embarkation went very smoothly as each element was directed to their bunks and told to stay in them until boarding was finished and everyone

accounted for.

The ship was not scheduled to depart until morning, but the men would sleep aboard overnight, so there was some time for shipboard acclimation that first evening. The *Alcoa Polaris* was a converted merchant ship. The first thing the men noticed was that most of the troop compartments were filled with folding bunks stacked five high. Even so, the ship was so crowded -- the 11th Combat Camera Unit and the 572nd Materiel Squadron of the 91st Air Service Group were also on board -- that over a hundred men had to sleep on cots placed on lower deck hatches. As always, the officers had it better than the enlisted men but were still uncustomarily crowded in their compartments. The next important thing the men had to learn was where the heads, as latrines were called aboard ship, were located. Gradually, things quieted down and the men settled into their bunks for their first sleep aboard ship.

14 Aug 44

At 0800 today the *SS Alcoa Polaris*, carrying the Ground Echelon of the 500th Bomb Group, left the pier, an action which the purist might say turned them into the Sea Echelon. But before leaving harbor, the vessel had to undergo degaussing and a few other necessary tasks. Finally, in midafternoon, she headed out to sea, and the men of the 500th gathered at the railings to quietly watch the United States slowly recede into the distance. Who knew when they would see it again? When would they see their families again?

Before long, they were all alone on a vast ocean, except for a Navy blimp overhead. The *Alcoa Polaris* was a fast ship for a converted merchantman, able to make 16 knots, so it was not deemed necessary that she travel in a convoy or with surface escort.

Out on the open sea, which was fairly rough for the first few days, the ship began to roll, and the men learned first-hand what "sea legs" meant. Most of them took the sea sickness pills they had been issued, and those who were able and curious put on the life preservers that they were required to wear at all times when away from their bunks and set about familiarizing themselves with the ship. Later, those who were not too queasy tried dinner, which by all accounts was less than satisfactory.

At dusk the men learned a little more about life at sea during wartime when a voice boomed out over the loudspeaker, "Attention! Attention! All members of the Merchant crew, Armed Guard Crew and Army -- Blackout is now in order. Place blackout screens in ports or close the ports; adjust curtains in all pasageways and companionways; no smoking on deck. Blackout!" And so the men settled down for their first night at sea, far away from home and getting farther away with every turn of the propellers.

15 Aug 44

By their second day at sea, the men of the 500th Bomb Group Ground Echelon were getting more used to shipboard routine. There were near-daily fire and lifeboat drills, with each man learning these procedures and his place therein. There were details for KP, guard and sanitation, with each man pulling it once about every four days. Daily inspections of the troop spaces were conducted by both ship's officers and troop officers. There was a PX or ship's store on board, where the men could purchase candy, tobacco, toilet articles, etc. After a few days on board there was even a free distribution of candy, cigarettes and cigars. However, smoking was allowed only on deck or in the heads. Films were shown nightly in the troop mess hall. There was even a daily news sheet, including baseball scores, put out by the Ground Echelon headquarters.

The biggest source of dissatisfaction during the voyage was the food. To quote the official history, it was "partially very unpalatable and generally unsatisfactory." The mess facilities were too small to begin with, which created long lines and limited full meals to breakfast and dinner, with only a sandwich or soup served at lunch. To ease the congestion, the several troop compartments messed in rotation, with duty officers and NCO's trying to keep things moving as smoothly as possible. There was no room for seats or benches in the mess area; the men had to stand at tables while eating. The officers of course messed in a separate area, but most of

their food came from the same kitchen. The dissatisfaction was not helped when after a time the men realized that the crew and the naval armed guard, which manned the guns, had their own galley and ate much better food.

But the *Alcoa Polaris* steamed steadily on in a generally west-southwest direction.

At Walker AAF, Kansas, the S-2 (Intel) Section of the 500th Bomb Group got official word from Maj Freeman Parsons, Group Assistant Operations Officer, of two upcoming Wing missions. One was scheduled for this coming Thursday the 17th and would be a repeat with only minor changes of the failed 11 August radar bombing mission to Galveston. The other was scheduled for Saturday the 19th and would be to Batista Field, Cuba. As it happened, the first mission would be pushed back to 18 Aug and the second to 25 Aug.

16 Aug 44

While the Ground Echelon of the 500th Bomb Group was on its third day at sea, the Air Echelon continued training at Walker AAF, Kansas. Today the Hale Hays crew (#228) of the 882nd Squadron "became proficient in swimming at the Hays bathtub", as bombardier Hal Towner impishly put it. The swimming training probably took place at the new community pool in the nearby city of Hays, coincidentally bearing the same name as the crew's commander.

To be honest, the crew was not particularly focused on training this week. They were looking ahead to their long-awaited leaves, scheduled to start on Friday 18 August. Some of the men from the New York area planned to hitch a ride on a B-17 Friday morning as far as Chicago, then try to find a ride eastward from there. Towner and the others planned to leave by midnight Friday by various means of transportation. Towner also noted, "Some of the fellows will bring their wives back with them after their leave, but most of the married boys are gradually getting moved back to the base." It wouldn't be that long before the Air Echelon would also be on the way overseas.

17 Aug 44

Today at Walker AAF, Kansas, the S-2 Section of the 500th Bomb Group was very busy preparing for tomorrow's Wing radar bombing mission to Galveston. This would be a re-run of the failed 11 August mission. The journal entry written by Capt John "Smoky" Smolenski is very illuminating as to how these briefings were organized. It also shows how the S-2 Section was itself learning on the job.

"[August 17] -- Briefing at 4:30 this afternoon, all to take part except weather *[due to the changeability of the weather, that briefing was usually not given until shortly before take-off]*. This mission is a repeat of Wing Mission No. 3 ..., except for a few minor changes which are:

- (1) We are the 1st Group to bomb, from 1130 CWT *[Central War Time]* to 1140 CWT.
- (2) We take same route out, but break up *[into?]* 3 plane formations @ 93 degrees W, 31 degrees 20 minutes N, which is around Alexandria *[Louisiana]*.
- (3) After bombing proceed back over Strother Field AAF *[near Winfield in southern Kansas]* for fighter interception.

"A pre-briefing meeting was held in Gp Operations Office & everything was thrashed out with Col Dougherty presiding *[Deputy Group Commander Lt Col John Dougherty was in charge while Group CO Col Richard King was on leave]*. This meeting should become standard procedure, I think, if you want the briefing to go off well. Everybody was there.

"Briefing at 4:30 PM was good. Held in 883rd Sq. We had each sq make up their own pilot's kits for distribution the following morning & S-2 made out the Pilots' flimseys *[sic]* & Navigation Section made out the Navigators' Flimseys & we put them in the pilots' kits." *[A flimsy was a single sheet of paper containing the most important*

mission data presented in a concise format. For example, a navigator's flimsy would show the planned route, change points for course, speed and altitude, other important reference points, etc. The term flimsy was used because originally it was a thin sheet of rice paper that could be quickly chewed and swallowed if capture was imminent.]

18 Aug 44

Today the Hays crew (#228) of the 882nd Squadron, 500th Bomb Group, was busy getting out of Dodge, or rather Walker AAF. Their final leaves before overseas deployment started today and the men lost no time in getting away.

It was an entirely different story in the 500th's S-2 Section, where a very harried Capt John Smolenski had more than he could handle with a Wing mission being flown today. This was a repeat of the original Wing radar bombing mission to Galveston on 11 August. Smolenski was actually the Deputy S-2 but was in charge while the S-2, Capt William Marmion, was on leave. Smolenski's detailed notes provide a wonderful feel for what it was like to be in the S-2 seat at that time. Remember, the S-2 Section was responsible for preparing and administering the mission briefing, conducting the post-mission crew debriefings (then called interrogations), and then compiling all the information into a consolidated mission report.

Capt Smolenski's very hectic day:

"[August] 18 -- 6 planes got off today & I'm making arrangements to instruct the Squadron S-2's to get all the dope from the crews on those Wing Interrogation forms. It's hard as hell to make any sense out of reports that are inconsistent as hell. Col. Dougherty at the pre-briefing session yesterday said it would be better if I personally interrogated each crew. I squawked, but said I'd do the best I could.

Another thing, Capt. Farmer, one of the Wing Radar Officers, is here and will go on the mission. He brought a Radar questionnaire that is as long as the Wing S-2 questionnaire. He wanted S-2 to fill it out. I told him to fill it out himself, that we had enough to do. I guess he passed them out to the navigators. Capt. Farmer said the interrogation forms are being revised to include radar dope, etc. Holy Smokes! What next?

Planes began returning around 3:30 PM. I caught the first crew down. Then rushed over to the 883rd & took care of another. Then back to the 881st for another, then sat in on the tail end of Lt. Anderson's *[2/Lt Leonard W. Anderson was the Assistant S-2 of the 882nd Squadron]* interrogation.

I think each Squadron S-2 should have to make a Consolidated Mission Report out on one of these Wing Missions to realize what a job the Grp. S-2 has in consolidating all the interrogations. I appreciate the difficulty involved in interrogating a tired crew but hell, it can be done & well too, if only the Squadron S-2's go at it correctly.

At about 6:15 P.M. Lt Carroll called from Wing A-2 office & said Col. Sweeney *[73rd Bomb Wing Chief of Staff]* was demanding the Flash Reports so I gave him what I had on four planes. Then called him back at 6:40 & gave him a revised Flash Report. (See Report on Mission in Wing Mission folder in my desk -- lower drawer right side) *[Smolenski was going on leave in a few days, so the parenthetical note was undoubtedly meant for S-2 Capt William Marmion, who would be returning from leave about the same time. Sure wish I could find that Wing Mission folder.]*

Took Interr. forms home & wrote up consolidated mission report. Sure is a hell of a job."

19 Aug 44

At Walker AAF, Kansas, Capt John Smolenski, Assistant S-2 for the 500th Bomb Group, after a very long day yesterday, got no relief today. The first thing on his plate this morning was to study the bomb impact photos from yesterday's training mission to Galveston. His verdict: "Pretty sad." The next task was to hand the Mission Report he'd spent last night writing over to Deputy Group Commander Lt Col John Dougherty, who was flying today to 73rd Bomb Wing HQ at Colorado Springs. Smolenski noted that he'd classified the report Confidential.

Part of the Group S-2's duties was to advise and assist the Squadron S-2's, and Smolenski spent some time today doing that. Now that Lt Moye was back on the job, Smolenski thought the 881st Squadron was "OK again." He was a little concerned about the 882nd -- Lt Anderson of that squadron was having to handle everything himself with no other reliable officers. Smolenski did not mention the 883rd.

Apparently, the S-2 Section had the responsibility for distributing the crew pictures which were being taken at Walker. These photographs, which showed the crews posing in front of a B-29, were intended as a morale booster for the men, each crewman being given a copy to keep or send to his family. Smolenski noted that 51 (out of 64) of these pictures had been distributed already.

Another S-2 responsibility was writing the monthly Group histories. Smolenski noted that the one for July "was mailed today, at last. Only 2 weeks late." Smolenski suggested that Lt Thompson, Assistant S-2 of the 883rd Squadron, should write the one for August.

But Smolenski's greatest concern was planning for upcoming missions:

"New Group Mission being planned for Aug. 21, 22 & 23rd. All available Group planes will camera bomb targets in Winfield, Kas. Mission primarily for A/A [*air-to-air*] gunnery with interception from Strother Field. Gp. Ops. wants Intelligence Annex, & Lt. Johnston [*a photo interpreter assigned to Grp HQ*] is writing one up.

"Lt. Anderson says 882nd is planning on the Batista [*Cuba*] Mission for Sunday, tomorrow, the 20th [*this actually didn't take place until the 25th*]. Anderson has most of the dope on it -- I gave him some received from Capt. Gabbert. He can handle it O.K."

20 Aug 44

After six days at sea on the *SS Alcoa Polaris*, shipboard routine had become, well, routine, for the men of the 500th Bomb Group Ground Echelon. But today there was a stir. Land was in sight -- Hawaii! As the ship came closer, the men crowded the rails. They steamed past Diamond Head and necks craned to see the famous tropical landmarks everyone had heard of but never seen except in movies -- Honolulu, Waikiki Beach and the big resort hotels. Then they passed Hickam Field and entered Pearl Harbor, anchoring at 1730. The harbor was full of Navy ships of all types and sizes. But the men on the *Alcoa Polaris* could only watch. The ship spent the night at anchor and no one was allowed to go ashore.

21 Aug 44

The *SS Alcoa Polaris*, carrying the Ground Echelon of the 500th Bomb Group, spent most of the day in Pearl Harbor, but the men could only look longingly at the shore and the green hills beyond. No shore leave was allowed. The vessel took on fresh water, then at 1700 she pulled out of the harbor. Other ships did too, and as soon as they were out at sea a convoy of ten troop ships and Navy transports, with three destroyer escorts, formed up, and then it was off to their next destination, somewhere far to the west.

On this day the Hurlbutt crew (#222) of the 882nd Bomb Squadron, 500th Bomb Group, was back at Walker AAF, Kansas, after their leaves, and of course not happy about it, but as navigator Ken Fine put it, "such is life."

This Monday morning the field was noisy with activity as six B-29's took off on Group Mission #6, which was a camera bombing of Winfield, Kansas, about 35 miles southeast of Wichita, to be followed by a simulated interception by fighters from nearby Strother Field.

While the Winfield mission was in progress, the 500th Group headquarters had a big staff meeting this morning, with Deputy Group Commander Lt Col John Dougherty presiding. Several big items were covered,

with Assistant S-2 Capt John Smolenski taking his usual detailed notes:

"[August] 21 -- At Staff meeting this morning, Col. Dougherty explained that the Air Echelon would move out of WAAF around Oct. 1. Major Lloyd [*Group Adjutant*] said the movement orders had arrived & that Gp. Hdqs, Air Echelon is due at the POE [*Port of Embarkation, which would be Mather Field, California*] on Oct. 21st, with the Squadron air echelons arriving within the next 2 days. Some conflict exists about the Flight Echelon [*meaning perhaps the men who would be going overseas via Air Transport Command planes*]. Col. Putnam, base C.O., who was present at the meeting, said the flyaway planes [*the ones the 500th would take to war*] would be delivered here, & he indicated the 500th would be pulling out before Oct. 1 because of the arrival of the 330th Air Echelon. [*The 330th Bomb Group of the 314th Bomb Wing would be the next unit after the 500th to train at Walker. Their Ground Echelon had been supporting the 500th Air Echelon ever since the 500th's Ground Echelon had departed for overseas on 23 July.*] Well, we'll see.

"Next big news was the criticism on the last Wing Mission. [*This was the repeat of Wing Mission #3, a radar bombing mission to Galveston, run on the previous Friday, 18 Aug.*] Col. Dougherty didn't direct [*two lines illegible*].

As far as S-2 was concerned with the last Wing mission:

- (1) Briefing was O.K. except that there was too much disorder in the specialized briefings. This will have to be corrected by the creation of Group briefing teams made up of Gp. Navigator, Bomb., Radar, Comms, etc., who will work out in advance their briefing material.
- (2) Adequate mission folders must be available. Ours were O.K. on last mission but this is tied up with:
- (3) Flimsies -- each section will make out its own flimsies [*single sheets of paper containing essential mission data, handed out to key crew members such as navigator, flight engineer, radio operator, etc.*] well in advance, so crews can study them & know them before the Group briefing takes place. Good idea!
- (4) Pre-briefing meetings will be held with each section present to adequately thrash out all the problems concerning the mission & the briefing.

"Then came the news about the big Wing Mission. [*There were two missions being planned to Cuba at this time, a smaller one which took place on 25 Aug, and a second, bigger one to take place on 29 Aug. Smolenski is referring here to the second one.*] It will be an important one, & will be a long one. Several Generals riding, including General Hassell [*Hansell*], who is C.G. of the 21st B.C. now. O'Donnell [*CG 73rd Bomb Wing*] will also ride along. Here's the dope on it:

- (1) 12 planes from each Gp. must get over the target.
- (2) The target is Cayo Traviesa, I guess, same as on the Batista Mission [*meaning the 25 Aug mission*].
- (3) All Wing planes will take off from Salina field, & 499th [*Bomb Group, stationed at Salina*] will take care of it, briefing, etc.
- (4) Planes will fly in 12 ship formations & route will be from Salina to Wichita to Batista to target to Batista to Tampa to home fields. Don't know for sure about that last pt. Planes may all land at Salina, but I think not.
- (5) 10 bombs will be dropped.
- (6) 499th is the lead Group.
- (7) Field Order is expected Wed. night on the mission."

After covering a few more minor issues, Smolenski confessed to an embarrassing error: "I pulled a boner on the last Mission Report to Wing. In plotting (or reporting) the bomb impact error in feet, I used the wrong aiming point. ... Am preparing a correction sheet to be sent [to] the Wing."

Then Smolenski, who was scheduled to go on leave tomorrow, made what he thought was going to be his final observation for a while: "Oh yes, we may laugh at the 499th now because of the big job they have in preparing for this mission but don't forget that we may be called upon to do the same thing before we leave the country."

Finally, if anyone at Walker had any spare time tonight, they could attend the USO show "Novelties of '44" at the post theater.

22 Aug 44

On this day the convoy containing the *SS Alcoa Polaris* and the Ground Echelon of the 500th Bomb Group continued its journey generally west-southwestward. In addition to having to travel in convoy, the men found that things past Hawaii were a little different. Since it was uncertain when replenishment would again be available, the fresh water on board was kept "limited." Most of the troop drinking fountains had cold water, although on occasion the ship water condenser system became overloaded and allowed salt water into the drinking fountain lines. Worse, showers were strictly with salt water. So-called salt-water soap was issued, but still the men found this "a most unsatisfactory way to bathe." One thing had not changed, however. Everyone agreed that the food continued to be bad.

This morning at Walker AAF, Kansas, five B-29's of the 500th Bomb Group took off for the second day of Group Mission #6, flying to Winfield, Kansas, for a camera bombing exercise and a simulated fighter interception.

Over in the S-2 Section, Capt John Smolenski was busy in his office again. His leave was supposed to start today, but yesterday at 1730 a Capt Beckett from the 73rd Bomb Wing A-2 (Intel) office called to discuss the upcoming Wing mission to Batista, Cuba. It seems that Wing wanted some S-2 officers from the 500th to go to Salina tomorrow, the 23rd, to conduct briefings and crew interrogations for the Wing mission currently scheduled for Thursday, 24 August. (The plan currently called for the 500th planes to fly to Salina, be briefed and take off from there, then also return to Salina for the interrogations.) By the time they were done, Beckett had talked Smolenski into postponing his leave until Friday, and the list to go to Salina included Smolenski, Lt Moye (S-2 of the 881st Squadron) and Lt Anderson (S-2 of the 882nd).

When Smolenski informed Deputy Group Commander Lt Col Dougherty about this conversation later, Dougherty "was against the idea of our planes landing back at Salina after the mission, said he'd try to talk Wing out of it & he'd let me know." However, a later call from Wing that afternoon showed that they still had the planes landing back at Salina. A Lt Kramer told Smolenski that a teletype message would be on its way ordering him, Moye and Anderson to Salina tomorrow. He was asked also to bring along two enlisted clerks and enough pilot's kits for the 500th crews. Everything else would supposedly be taken care of by the 499th Group, which was based at Salina and was running the mission.

Meanwhile, the upcoming Batista mission was interfering with other crew training at Walker. 2/Lt Ken Fine, navigator on the Hurlbutt crew of the 882nd, told his fiancée today in a letter, "We were supposed to fly tomorrow but they grounded the planes tomorrow to work on them. They are getting some of them ready for a trip to Cuba and back non-stop. I don't know whether we will be on it or not."

23 Aug 44

On the final day for Group Mission #6, two B-29's of the 500th Bomb Group at Walker AAF, Kansas, took off this morning for a camera bombing of Winfield, Kansas, followed by a simulated fighter interception from nearby Strother Field.

This morning Assistant Group S-2 Capt John Smolenski received the expected teletype message from Wing ordering the agreed-upon group of S-2 personnel from the 500th Group to Salina to conduct the briefing and interrogation of the 500th crews participating in the upcoming Wing mission to Cuba. An obvious problem was that the message directed them to be there by 1200 today, which was impossible. The best Smolenski could arrange with Maj Parsons in Operations was a flight leaving for Salina at 1300 or 1330.

Another concern Smolenski had was that two S-2 officers of the 330th Bomb Group who had been helping the Squadron S-2's of the 500th would be leaving today for Camouflage School at March Field in California. Since Lts Moye and Anderson, S-2's of the 881st and 882nd Squadrons respectively, would be accompanying Smolenski to Salina, this meant that those two squadrons would have no S-2 officers at all for a few

days. However, Smolenski reasoned that this should not be much of a problem, "since most of the planes will be gone on this mission."

In the 882nd Squadron, Ken Fine of the Hurlbutt crew (#222) still did not know if his crew would be one of those flying to Cuba. If so, they would have to fly to Salina tomorrow and leave from there for Cuba on Friday morning. Fine also confided to his fiancée something he wasn't supposed to: "They told us we would probably be leaving here [*to head overseas*] around the 1st of October which is very confidential and also subject to change but gives an idea of when we might be going." But Fine may be forgiven, because probably most of the men at Walker were doing the same thing.

24 Aug 44

As the *SS Alcoa Polaris* and her convoy moved closer to the equator, flying fish became a common sight. The weather also became steadily warmer and the sun burned down hotter, which some men of the 500th Bomb Group discovered the hard way when they lingered in the sun too long and ended up with sunburns.

With no laundry facilities available, most of the men had run out of clean clothes long ago. However, they learned that a semblance of cleaning could be achieved by tying your clothes to a rope and trailing them in the water. But you had to be careful. If you lost grip of the rope or failed to tie it securely to the railing, you could lose your wardrobe. More than one man watched in frustration as his laundry receded in the ship's wake.

Boredom started to be a problem. The ship had a fairly good stock of books and they were much used. All kinds of card games were played, as well as games such as bingo. The Special Service section organized entertainment programs, boxing matches, discussion groups and more. Even an orchestra was put together and practiced daily. And of course there were regular religious services.

25 Aug 44

At 2400 on this day, the *SS Alcoa Polaris* crossed the International Date Line, meaning that the men of the Ground Echelon of the 500th Bomb Group on board passed immediately to 27 August. There was no 26 August for them.

By this time, word had leaked out to many of the men that their next stop would be Eniwetok in the Marshall Islands.

On or about this date George Hughes, airplane mechanic in the 881st Squadron, wrote a brief V-mail to his parents. The letter is undated but the V-mail is postmarked 26 August 1944. Due to censorship, all Hughes could really confirm for his parents was that he was safe and "on a ship now enroute to our destination."

On this date the first Wing mission to Batista Field, Cuba, was flown. Deputy Group Commander Lt Col John Dougherty led four B-29's from the 500th Bomb Group on this mission. The planes had flown from Walker Field to Salina the day before and took off for Cuba early this morning.

There is nothing in the unit history about the flight down to Cuba and what transpired there, but on the way back the planes hit bad weather which completely broke up the formation. One of the 500th planes landed at Eglin Field, Florida, and another at Gulfport, Mississippi. Only one plane made it back to Walker Field.

The plane piloted by Lt Col Dougherty with the Shorey crew of the 882nd Squadron ended up near Omaha, Nebraska, with one engine feathered and burning and another cutting out due to lack of fuel. Apparently fearing the other engines might quit at any time, Dougherty, according to the official 500th Group history, "ordered part of the crew to jump and gave the remaining officers and EM their choice. Five enlisted men jumped, two losing [*sic*] their lives in doing so; the airplane was landed with no other loss of personnel or equipment." The two men

killed were left gunner Cpl Kenneth G. Clawson, who apparently struck the horizontal stabilizer and died instantly, and radio operator Pfc Harold E. Woodruff, who could at first not be found. After a two-day search, Woodruff's body was found floating in Omaha Lake, where he had apparently drowned. Nobody wore a Mae West over the mid-west plains. What were the odds of dropping into a lake?

This incident created considerable bitterness toward Dougherty on the part of some of the enlisted men, who noted pointedly that Dougherty had not ordered the officers to jump. John Ciardi, CFC gunner on the Cordray crew (#239) of the 882nd Squadron, still simmered over the incident months later on Saipan: "What sticks in my craw is that it was Dougherty who ordered five EM to bail out of a burning ship over Nebraska. He then proceeded to land [the] plane with all the officers intact. Two of the boys that jumped were killed. It's all in the chances of war, I suppose, but the big thing is that the men were offered no choice." Ciardi held the grudge for the rest of his life.

27 Aug 44

On the *SS Alcoa Polaris*, still in the Central Pacific plodding generally westward, most of the men of the Ground Echelon of the 500th Bomb Group had already learned that their next stop was Eniwetok. As they neared that atoll, they were also informed of their final destination -- Saipan.

The officers in charge thought it would be a good idea to give the men some orientation lectures on what they could expect on Saipan and in surrounding areas. Unfortunately, all training aids had been stowed somewhere in the hold with other baggage and freight. However, the men of the Group Intelligence Section were resourceful and inventive and were able to put together some lectures on Saipan and other Pacific islands. Also, the Group was fortunate to have on board a Lt Charles Peden, who "had spent much time in Japan and the Orient and gave some very interesting orientation lectures."

28 Aug 44

Today at Walker AAF, Kansas, much of the 500th Bomb Group was preparing for another Wing mission to Batista Field, Cuba, tomorrow. This would be much bigger than the one run three days earlier on 25 August, but even so, only 13 crews were going. Not among the 13 was the Hurlbutt crew (#222) of the 882nd Squadron. Navigator Ken Fine touched on this subject when he wrote his future wife in Houston today: "I thought we might be going to Cuba in the morning but I guess we aren't. We may be coming down into Texas, down to Denison or Denton, I don't know which. I guess it's Denison though as we are supposed to go on a Radar mission on the lake north of there."

Playing at the post theater tonight was the USO show "Step Lively".

29 Aug 44

Today was another busy day at Walker AAF, Kansas, with the biggest Wing mission yet as the main event. Group CO Col Richard King, back from leave, led 13 B-29's of the 500th Bomb Group into the air for a long mission all the way to Batista Field, Cuba, and back. The Curtis crew (#119) of the 881st Squadron was one of those that flew this mission. AC Ferd Curtis recorded his flight time as 14 hours and 25 minutes. Unfortunately, it didn't take long for things to start going wrong. Three planes aborted and never reached Cuba. The rest apparently made it to the target but there is no indication in the records as to how successful the bombing was. Then, on the way back, two planes had mechanical problems which forced them to make emergency landings, one in Cuba and the other in Florida, probably at Eglin Field. The remaining eight bombers, just as had happened on the previous Cuba mission on 25 Aug, ran into bad weather and were scattered all over the central and southern US. All were able to make it down safely except one.

The Mahoney crew (#362) of the 883rd Squadron in B-29 42-6435 found themselves trying to land that night in foul weather at Tulsa, Oklahoma. "... Capt. Mahoney entered the traffic pattern ... and was cleared to the 5,000'

level after advising the tower that he had only 30 minutes of fuel. After circling the field till three engines were out and the fourth sputtering because of lack of fuel, all members of the crew successfully parachuted to the ground." The B-29 crashed near a quarry and was a total loss.

Below is the composition of the Mahoney crew as of 18 Oct 1944, which was probably the same as on 29 Aug.

AC	Capt Eugene C. Mahoney
P	2/Lt Ernest E. Dearborn
B	2/Lt Donald A. Lent
N	2/Lt George J. Weber
FE	2/Lt John R. Johnson
Radio	Sgt Donald E. Van Pelt
Ring G	S/Sgt Warren G. Cook
RG	Cpl Bruno J. Swarce
LG	Cpl Rudolph J. Groce
Radar	Sgt Earl B. Cousins
TG	Cpl Paul F. Young

30 Aug 44

On this day at 1100 the convoy with the SS *Alcoa Polaris* and the 500th Bomb Group Ground Echelon arrived at Eniwetok and anchored in the large lagoon, which was already filled with a great number of vessels of all types. The *Alcoa Polaris* would remain here until a convoy was ready to move on to Saipan.

At Walker AAF, Kansas, Capt John Smolenski, Assistant S-2 of the 500th Bomb Group, had finally managed to get away this past weekend on his overdue leave, while S-2 Capt William Marmion had returned from leave, just in time to deal with the big Wing mission to Cuba on the 29th. Today Marmion noted that he was "back on job amidst the confusion of the Wing super mission which was run yesterday. A/C are beginning to arrive after being widely disbursed on mission due to mechanical failures and weather. The loss of [B-29 42-6]435 at Tulsa is keenly felt by all. Crew bailed out with no casualties. Col. King asked for a narrative report of mission."

The Hurlbutt crew (#222) of the 882nd Squadron had not gone on the Cuba mission. They were instead supposed to fly a mission to Texas but it was postponed yesterday because their plane needed an engine change. Their flight was rescheduled for this afternoon and evening but navigator Ken Fine wasn't sure if they would be going because "we have 3 ships out for repairs and 3 scattered over the country: one in Cuba, one in Florida and one at Oklahoma City."

31 Aug 44

Another sign that the time for the overseas deployment of the 500th Bomb Group Air Echelon was steadily approaching occurred today. The food warmers were removed from the B-29's at Walker Field and along with photographic equipment were shipped to the staging area for installation in the flyaway aircraft as they became available.

The Group was still trying to recover from the big Wing mission of the 29th, which had taken a heavy toll on the aircraft. Several were down for repairs, one had been lost, and some had not yet returned to Walker. This did not help the end-of-month status report, which showed only 15 B-29's available in comparison with 17 at the beginning of the month.

Maintenance continued to be a concern. The mechanics of the 330th Bomb Group who had been providing maintenance support since late July were stretched very thin, resulting in a constant maintenance backlog. The 500th was seeking additional maintenance personnel from the 72nd Service Group. In one bright spot, the Group had managed to acquire four new engines and planned to hold them ready for needed engine changes.

The personnel figures were more positive. With the addition of two radar operators, MOS 867, the Group now had no MOS shortages, and in fact was 32 officers and 33 enlisted overstrength. The surplus men were expected to be transferred out soon. The Group now had 63 full crews and only one partial crew.

In training, the Group was actually ahead of schedule in hours flown, instrument time, individual navigation and camera bombing. However, they were behind schedule in missions flown and completed, formation flying, bomb releases, radar bombing and gunnery.

The medical portion of the report was good, with only one case of venereal disease reported.

Morale was considered high, in large part because of the leaves and furloughs which were currently being issued.

Other accomplishments during the month included the construction of a parachute training stand and a mock-up of a B-29 for teaching ditching procedure. The Base Operations building had been remodeled to create upstairs offices for Flight Control. And the 882nd Squadron enlisted men had been moved to a new barracks area which gave them more room and put them closer to their operations buildings and the flight line.

1 Sep 44

Today at Walker AAF, Kansas, Capt William Marmion of the 500th Bomb Group noted in the S-2 journal that a message had been received from the 73rd Bomb Wing advising of a Wing critique of the recent Wing mission to Cuba on 29 August to be held tomorrow morning at Salina. Marmion then spent the day "consolidating reports and getting records together for Wing", as well as preparing a narrative report for Group CO Col King. The reports would necessarily be incomplete, however, because only nine of the thirteen 500th Group planes which had participated in the mission had returned to Walker. One had crashed at Tulsa, although the crew had successfully bailed out, while three had made forced landings at other fields due to mechanical problems, and those three had not yet been repaired.

One positive thing that happened today was "a very successful Group Critique ... led by Col King."

2 Sep 44

On this day at Salina, Kansas, a critique of the 29 August Wing mission to Cuba was held, led by Brig Gen Emmett "Rosie" O'Donnell, Commanding General of the 73rd Bomb Wing. Twelve officers of the 500th Bomb Group, including the CO, Col Richard King, and the S-2, Capt William Marmion, traveled from Walker AAF to participate. Capt Marmion took notes of the critique:

"Sept 2 ... The group CO's gave their story of the mission from beginning to end. All agreed that the mission was not successful as a whole. There was some satisfaction for the 500th, however, inasmuch as we did as good or better than any one of the other three groups. The C.G. pointed out many short comings and stressed some very good points. It was generally conceded that much more was learned by the errors committed than would have been possible if the mission had been run perfectly. These points included --

- (1) The Airplane Commander must realize his responsibilities and be just what his name implies.
- (2) Increased use of visual signals.
- (3) Bombardiers to assist Navigators by doing DR [*dead reckoning*] navigation.

Upon return to Walker, Col. King announced intention of having two group missions next week -- one to Galveston on Tuesday [5 Sep] and one to Key West next Friday [8 Sep] with 12 A/C on each."

3 Sep 44

Today at Walker AAF, Kansas, the 500th Bomb Group held a briefing at 1600 for a Group radar bombing mission to Galveston scheduled for Tuesday, 5 Sep. *[It was unusual for a mission briefing to be given two days ahead of the mission. Am not sure why, unless the Group did not want to fly on Labor Day, which was on Monday 4 Sep.]* Capt William Marmion, Group S-2, admitted that the briefing was "not too successful", in part because "I did not cover any friendly or enemy situation." The airplane commanders complained that they were not provided sufficient detail.

The Hurlbutt crew (#222) of the 882nd Squadron was not scheduled for the Galveston mission, so today they had a crew picnic and cookout with steaks and beer at a park in nearby Hays. Afterwards, navigator Ken Fine and bombardier Glen Aitken went out with the enlisted men "to a joint there and drank our sorrows away."

4 Sep 44

The men of the Ground Echelon of the 500th Bomb Group on board the *SS Alcoa Polaris* had been swinging at anchor in Eniwetok lagoon for five days now. No one was allowed ashore, and everyone was becoming frustrated. What was the hold-up? Why couldn't they get a move on?

Maj Robert Wolcott and the other officers did what they could to keep morale up. Daily boxing matches continued, sometimes including members of the merchant crew and the Navy gun crew. The medical officers gave lectures on health conditions on Saipan. A chess tournament was organized, with Pfc Aubry Ross, a draftsman in the 883rd Squadron, defeating Capt Ralph Maust, commander of the 881st detachment, for the championship. But despite the best efforts, the long, sweltering days at Eniwetok ate steadily away at everyone's morale.

One of the medical officers, Capt Paul J. Trier of the 882nd Squadron, wrote a letter to his wife at about this time. It is undated, apparently because even dates were censored at this time (see George Hughes' comment re this in 9 Sep 44 entry).

"Darling,

I haven't written for several days because I thought that we would get on the move to our final destination, but we have met with a slight delay for some unknown reason. Have been doing about the same thing every day and things are as monotonous as usual. Have taken to playing chess, and find it a very useful game for passing away the time. ...

This ship is beginning to seem more like a prison all the time, and all the more so because we don't get any mail. It gives you a peculiar feeling to be so completely cut off from home. It looks as though we'll finish out a full month on this tub. Nobody has been off the ship since we got on the day before sailing. Fellows are getting cabin fever right and left. Zimmerman [*Capt Henry A. Zimmerman, Medical Officer of the 883rd Squadron*] has just concluded his second black mood of the voyage, and will probably approach full normalcy by tomorrow.

... Sitting around is taking its toll on everyone's morale, and I find myself smoking two packages of cigarettes a day plus a couple of cigars. I'll have to start regulating myself. I have finally returned to my old sleeping habits and stay up reading late, and finally get to sick call at 0900. Breakfast consists of fruit juice and coffee just like at home, and am eating my usual sandwich for lunch. The only trouble is that I have very little difficulty in working in the evening snack. I'm going to have to be careful because I don't want to come home to you fatter than when I left. I have an idea that the slimming down process will start soon.

Living on the ship wouldn't be so bad if you could go ashore and come back here to eat and sleep. We have all the modern conveniences in a G I sort of way, and are able to take baths, shave daily, etc. It is really difficult to write letters when you aren't getting any, and I am forced to fill them with trivial things. I guess the important thing though is to keep the lines of communication open.

I'll try to write every day as long as there is any chance of getting mail off of the ship. The reason I'm not

sending these letters air mail is that I heard they held them here *[that would be Eniwetok – JEB]* for some time after we leave before sending them on. I'm missing you more than ever, darling. Sure hope we can get this god damned war over with in a hurry. I'm sick to death of sleeping alone, and very anxious to get home to the perfect wife. I love you darling.

Paul”

At Walker AAF, Kansas, the Hurlbutt crew (#222) of the 882nd Squadron did not get Labor Day (4 Sep) off. They were sent on a special mission instead. Navigator Ken Fine explained what happened in a letter to his fiancée:

"... Monday we went to fly and they sent us down here *[stationery says "Officers' Club -- Eglin Field, Florida"]* to pick up a crew which was stranded down here. We waited at Walker from 9 in the morning until 4 in the afternoon. They got an old B-17 ready to go. We left then and got down here at about 10. We went over to the club and fooled around awhile and then went to bed. This other crew had gone to Cuba and had developed engine trouble and made it back here and are having an engine changed. *[This was probably one of the B-29's that had had mechanical trouble on the last Wing mission to Batista, which means it and the crew had been sitting at Eglin since 29 Aug. Missing a crew and more importantly a plane for that long must have put a big crimp in the 500th's training schedule.]* We were supposed to take them back to Walker. We were scheduled to go back today *[5 Sep]* but we had engine trouble (on purpose) so we are going back tomorrow. *[This ready admission makes you wonder how often this sort of thing happened.]*

We are out at the club they have on the beach. It really is nice. They have a nice club house here and the breeze is blowing in grand from off the coast. I'd like to be able to come back down here some day. Maybe we can."

As it happened, the Hurlbutt crew didn't get back to Walker until 7 Sep. Turns out they had been delayed another day at Eglin by mechanical trouble -- apparently real this time.

5 Sep 44

This morning at Walker AAF, Kansas, Group CO Col Richard King led ten B-29's of the 500th Bomb Group off on a radar bombing mission to Galveston. The official records are silent about whether this mission was successful or unsuccessful. One of the participating crews was the McClanahan crew (#353) of the 883rd Squadron. According to the brief diary notes of right gunner Robert Schurmann, they took off at 0815 and returned to Walker at 1810. All Schurmann says about the mission itself is "Galveston radar bombing mission. Fired guns over Gulf."

8 Sep 44

Today the morale of the men in the Ground Echelon of the 500th Bomb Group at Eniwetok "was lifted 1000% to write conservatively", according to the hyperbole of the unit history, and all because of a few bags of letters. Mail which had accumulated at Saipan was flown in and distributed. Almost everyone got something, and some men received as many as 40 letters. All over the ship, men were busy reading. Morale would be okay for a while.

From the 500th Bomb Group Operations Journal:

"8 Sept 44 Gp Mission #8. Batista Target. We got 7 B-29's off. Colonel King was Force Commander. Remaining part of day very slow."

The Hurlbutt crew (#222) of the 882nd Squadron was not on today's Group mission. They flew instead to

Denison, Texas, making as many as six simulated radar bombing runs on a large lake there before returning to Walker AAF. The Hays crew (#228) of the 882nd, just back from leave, also flew a crew mission today, an aerial gunnery exercise at 25,000 feet. According to Hal Towner, who as a bombardier was also a gunner, they fired off a total of 1500 rounds.

9 Sep 44

At Eniwetok, the *SS Alcoa Polaris* must have started running a little low on food, because today the noon meal, which had been only soup or a sandwich, was discontinued. Many men started saving fruit from breakfast to have as a noon snack. But even this cutback failed to significantly dampen the men's spirits after yesterday's exhilarating mail call.

Airplane mechanic George Hughes of the 881st Squadron was inspired to answer his family's letters today, even though he had to use V-mail and he didn't know when it would actually be posted. V-mail was a system in which letters were photographed, reduced in size and transferred to microfilm for shipment to their destination, where they were copied back onto paper and sent on to the recipient. This method saved the military an immense amount of weight. As it happened, Hughes' V-mail was postmarked Sept 26, 1944, which was after the unit arrived on Saipan, but we know Hughes wrote it on 9 September because of his reference to receiving letters yesterday.

"Dear Mother & Dad,

I am still aboard ship enroute to my final destination. Don't think that I am forgetting the date on these letters because it is against rules to date them at this time. Everything is fine and the trip has been most enjoyable so far. There isn't a great deal to do except read, play cards and of course eating [*sic*].

We got our mail yesterday. I got four letters....

Love
George"

Ken Fine of the Hurlbutt crew (#222) of the 882nd Squadron must have had a security briefing today, or else he was feeling guilty, because today from Walker AAF, Kansas, he cautioned his fiancée in a letter, "Say, for Pete's sake don't say anything over the phone about whether we are leaving here around the first of October. You might get me in trouble if anyone should hear that." It's doubtful if any security personnel were monitoring phone calls in and out of Walker Field, but it should be remembered that all long-distance calls in those days were manually connected by usually fiercely patriotic female operators, who could listen in as they pleased and might feel it their duty to report security violations.

11 Sep 44

From the 500th Bomb Group Operations Journal:

"11 Sept 44 73rd Wing FO #6 which was scheduled to be run tomorrow is cancelled per TWX [*teletype message*] 73BW. This is a Batista Mission.

Major Parsons [*Assistant Operations Officer*] departed WAAF [for] Los Angeles, Calif. at 0830 CWT in B-17F."

On this day the Hurlbutt crew (#222) of the 882nd Squadron flew a mission to Galveston. They left Walker AAF about 1430, flew over Houston at about 1900 at 22,000 feet, then continued to Galveston for what was probably a radar bombing mission. They got back to Walker at about 0030 on the 12th. The next day navigator Ken Fine excitedly wrote his fiancée that he had flown almost directly over her Houston home.

12 Sep 44

From the 500th Bomb Group Operations Journal:

"12 Sept 44 Operations Order #9 (F.O. #6) not run today as scheduled due to bad weather in vicinity of Batista [Cuba]. Apparently a hurricane is due along East Coast. Mission was cancelled before briefing was held."

The Hurlbutt crew (#222) of the 882nd Squadron had been scheduled to go on this Batista mission but got a reprieve. The McClanahan crew (#353) of the 883rd flew a three-hour mission today of unspecified nature. We know it was above 10,000 feet, though, because flight engineer 2/Lt Fred Stacker had a problem with his oxygen system and nearly passed out.

13 Sep 44

Finally today at 1640, after two weeks of languishing in the lagoon at Eniwetok, the SS *Alcoa Polaris* with the Ground Echelon of the 500th Bomb Group left for Saipan "in a convoy consisting of seven ships and two escort vessels." One of the ships was an LST (officially Landing Ship, Tank, but dubbed by their crews Large, Slow Target), which could make no more than eight or nine knots, so the convoy traveled very slowly. The trip was expected to take about five days. The men were glad to be on their way, even though their route would take them within 300 miles, that is, within bomber range, of the Japanese fortress of Truk. Supposedly, repeated American air attacks had neutralized the base, but you could never be sure.

From the 500th Bomb Group Operations Journal:

"13 Sept. 44 There was a meeting of 'Planning Committee' for 73rd Bomb Wing 'Wing Ding' in Captain Martin's Office [Group Air Inspector] today. Colonel King [Group CO] was present at latter part of meeting.

Major Parsons [Assistant Group Operations Officer] returned WAAF from L.A. today."

The "Wing Ding" planned for 15 September was to be a big, combined inspection, briefing, reception and dinner in honor of no less than four visiting generals, including Brig Gen Emmett O'Donnell, CG 73rd Bomb Wing, and Maj Gen Uzal G. Ent, CG 2nd Air Force. The command of the 500th Bomb Group intended to spare no effort to impress the big brass. 1/Lt Harvey Chapin, S-2 of the 883rd Squadron, was placed in charge of organizing the "Wing Ding".

The McClanahan crew (#353) of the 883rd Squadron was up again on a mission this evening, air-to-ground gunnery practice from 1800 to 2130. They had a little engine trouble and had to feather a prop but got down okay.

On this day 2/Lt Kenneth Fine of the Hurlbutt crew (#222) turned 28 years old. Before turning in for the night he wrote his fiancée:

"... I think I'm about right on the time we will be leaving here but we merely go to another field, get our plane, fly shakedown flights and get ready to jump across. That all takes almost a month.

I went to the movies tonight, saw 'Girl Crazy' with Judy Garland and Mickey Rooney also Tommy Dorsey and orchestra and quite a few good tunes although most of them were old ones.

I'm sending you some pictures one of the boys took the day we were leaving on our leave. Gosh, that seems like ages ago. I sure wish I was starting off again on that leave.

Aitken [bombardier] and I have to start to a school here tomorrow for three days. I guess it's about some new long range radio navigation they have gotten. Anyway, we won't be flying for those days."

15 Sep 44

Today at Walker AAF, Kansas, was the day of the long-planned "Wing Ding", a series of inspections and briefings, a reception, dinner and other entertainment in honor of four visiting generals, including the CG, 2nd Air Force, Maj Gen Uzal G. Ent, and the CG, 73rd Bomb Wing, Brig Gen Emmett O'Donnell. It must have been a great disappointment to the command of the 500th Bomb Group when only one of the generals, O'Donnell, actually showed up. But the program went ahead anyway. From the 500th Bomb Group Operations Journal:

"15 Sept - 44 'Wing Ding' held today! Brig General O'Donnell arrived WAAF in B-25. ... Business meeting was held at 1600 in 882nd Sq. Briefing Room followed by session of Miniature Golf & Skeet shooting on range. Refreshments followed at Officers' Club and Dinner at Officers' Mess in dining room."

Research Note: The handwritten Operations Journal and S-2 Journal both state that it was Gen O'Donnell who was present, but the "official" typed unit monthly history says it was Gen Ent. Contradictory information like this gives the researcher fits and teaches you to be wary of single sources, even "official" ones. In this case, the two handwritten sources are almost certainly more contemporary and therefore more reliable than the history, which was probably written weeks or maybe months later.

Another important event took place at Walker today when the first flyaway aircraft, B-29 42-24653, arrived on the field. This plane was assigned to the Moreland crew (#344) of the 883rd Squadron. The plane had to undergo an acceptance inspection and various checks, and probably some modifications had to be made. All this would take a few days, then the Moreland crew would get to take her up for a shakedown flight.

16 Sep 44

This morning at 0930 Brig Gen O'Donnell of the 73rd Bomb Wing departed Walker AAF, Kansas, after last night's "Wing Ding" events. As the general's plane took off, Col King, CO of the 500th Bomb Group, was already a half-hour into an officers call at the base theater.

Col King mainly passed on information from yesterday's "Wing Ding" briefings and discussions. Capt John Smolenski, Assistant Group S-2, was back from his leave and keeping the S-2 notes again:

"... Meeting was very successful. Points discussed included:

- (a) Approximate [time] of departure from WAAF to Kearney [*Nebraska*] & approximate time of departure from Kearney.
- (b) Taking of wives and children to Kearney not encouraged.
- (c) Delivery of flyaway A/C to this Group.
- (d) Liquor pool: \$2.08 increase per man.
- (e) Question session.
- (f) Schedule of missions to be flown by flyaway A/C from Kearney AAB."

This evening the McClanahan crew (#353) of the 883rd Squadron was in the air from 1710 to 2330 conducting gunnery and bombing exercises.

17 Sep 44

On this day at Walker AAF, Kansas, the Hurlbutt crew (#222) of the 882nd Squadron did not fly, but the copilot, 2/Lt Felix Omilian, was assigned to fly a B-25 to Chicago to pick someone up. Since the plane would be stopping in Kansas City to refuel, 2/Lt Ken Fine decided to hitch a ride as far as that city and visit his sister. He arrived in K.C. at about 6 P.M. and was able to spend five hours or so visiting before catching the 11:30 train back to Walker, where he had ground school all the next day. Presumably Fine caught some sleep

on the train.

At 1754 today the Cooper crew (#349) of the 883rd Squadron took off in B-29 42-6379 for a scheduled air to ground gunnery training mission. They completed this mission and returned to Walker field at 1926, where the navigator, 2/Lt Henry R. Weber, who was suffering from what was termed “a slight illness”, left the plane. But the training wasn't over for the rest of the crew. Fifteen minutes later, at 1941, the Cooper crew took off again, this time to practice formation flying with another plane. However, the second plane was unable to take off, so the Cooper crew was directed instead to conduct “local instrument practice”. Presumably 2/Lt Kenneth West, the listed bombardier, was now acting as navigator. (In the 500th Bomb Group navigators and bombardiers were generally dual-trained.)

It appears that 2/Lt Cooper and crew chose to interpret “local” quite liberally, as a little over two hours later their B-29 was seen flying very low, at an estimated 200 feet, roughly from north to south over the little town of Copeland, Kansas, 132 miles southwest of Walker Field. Witnesses said that the plane descended even lower as it approached the Ora Hatfield farm about a mile south of Copeland. At 2150 hours the plane made a right turn, which caused the tip of the right wing to dip and strike the ground, which in turn caused the plane to cartwheel into the ground and burst into flames. The plane's momentum carried it on across the farmyard and into the Hatfield barn and house, both of which were destroyed. All ten crew members were killed. Also killed were two civilians inside the farmhouse, 59-year-old Ora Hatfield and his infant grandson, Jay Settles. Surviving but badly burned were Ruth Settles and Kittie Hatfield, the baby's mother and grandmother respectively.

The very thorough 2nd Air Force accident investigation which followed determined that this was no random accident. The copilot on the crew, 2/Lt Lawrence H. Eslinger, was a native of Kansas and was very familiar with the Copeland area, having relatives there and having worked on various farms in the vicinity, including the Hatfield farm, over the past four summers. Moreover, he was a personal friend of Dean Settles, the husband of Ruth Settles and the father of the dead infant. Dean Settles, a B-17 pilot who had completed 25 missions in Europe, had been home on leave at the Hatfield farm with his wife and baby but had recently returned to duty.

It was a common (but forbidden) practice for B-29 crews, whenever they were in the vicinity, to buzz their hometowns and the homes of relatives and friends. It was a thrill not only for the crews, but also for the people on the ground when a huge B-29 thundered close overhead. But it was also dangerous, which is of course why it was strictly prohibited. It was certainly Eslinger's idea to buzz Copeland and the Hatfield farm that night, but the AC, 2/Lt Cooper had to give his permission. We don't know if it was Cooper or Eslinger at the controls, but whoever it was misjudged the altitude. Regardless, it was Cooper, the AC, who was officially charged with violation of flying regulations and pilot carelessness and held responsible for the crash.

This was the 500th's first loss of a full, or nearly full, crew in training. (Two men had died bailing out near Omaha on 25 Aug.) The men of the Cooper crew are not listed as combat casualties, but they were training for combat, so probably they should be. They were just as patriotic, just as young, and just as dead.

Here are the names of the men who died in this accident:

AC	2/Lt Wayne B. Cooper
CP	2/Lt Lawrence H. Eslinger
B	2/Lt Kenneth O. West
FE	2/Lt William P. Kane
Radio	Sgt Bruno Gutt
Ring G	Cpl John F. Kelly
RG	S/Sgt Clarence A. Boston
LG	Cpl Robert L. Cooper
Radar	Sgt George V. Johnson
TG	Cpl Gerald J. Murphy

The deaths of his crewmates must have had a devastating effect on young 2/Lt Henry Weber, the navigator-bombardier who left the plane due to sickness before the fatal crash. He was probably in the grip of survivor's guilt and telling himself that if only he had stayed on the plane that night he might have somehow been able to

prevent the accident. On the day after the crash he was given leave for ten days. At some point he had to testify to the accident investigators, before whom he steadfastly and loyally defended the integrity of his deceased airplane commander, 2/Lt Cooper. On 4 Oct 44 Weber was transferred to the 498th Bomb Group, which at that time was at Kearney Army Air Field in Nebraska preparing for overseas movement.

18 Sep 44

At daylight this morning land was visible from the *SS Alcoa Polaris*. It was Saipan and Tinian. At last, after 57 days, the Ground Echelon of the 500th Bomb Group had arrived at its destination. After negotiating the narrow passage into Saipan's Tanapag harbor and being guided to her berth by a small tug, the ship dropped anchor. While the men gathered at the rail to get a first look at their new home, Ground Echelon commander Maj Robert Wolcott went ashore with some of his staff to make transportation arrangements and inspect their camp site. The men would not disembark until tomorrow. And so they spent their last night aboard the *Alcoa Polaris*.

Despite the tragic loss of the Cooper crew the night before, scheduled training continued today at Walker Field. The Holmes crew (#354) of the 883rd made a long flight to Cuba and back, 14 hours and 40 minutes. The McClanahan crew (#353), also of the 883rd, were in the air on a gunnery mission for over three hours, from 1010 to 1325.

Ken Fine, navigator on the Hurlbutt crew (#222), made it through ground training today after his overnight train ride from Kansas City. In fact, he had enjoyed himself so much in K.C. visiting his sister and family that when he found out that the crew was not going to fly on Tuesday the 19th, he decided to go back. He could catch the night train tonight and return to Walker on Tuesday night. Fine confided in his letter to his fiancée that the reason they weren't flying was because "we are ahead of schedule and we are letting another crew fly during our time so that they could catch up."

19 Sep 44

Today the men of the Ground Echelon of the 500th Bomb Group set foot on the island that would be their home for they knew not how long. Transportation and other arrangements took some time to complete, but finally at 1400 the men began debarking from the *SS Alcoa Polaris*. No one would miss the ship; all were happy to be off the "little scow" to which they had been confined for 36 days. Still, there was anxiety about what they would find on Saipan. Signs of the heavy fighting from the invasion in June were all around, and rumor had it that there were still Japanese hold-outs on the island.

The men clambered onto trucks and the convoy headed toward the south end of the island over bad roads choked with dust, even though it was supposedly still the rainy season. At length, the trucks lurched to a stop in what would be the 500th's new home -- a large sugar cane field. Construction was in progress nearby as the former Japanese Aslito Field was being converted into Isley Field, with the long runway needed for the B-29's. There was a detachment of Company B of the 806th Aviation Engineer battalion in the 500th area working on the squadron mess halls, which required concrete foundations, but other than that -- nothing. The 500th would have to build its own living quarters and working spaces. But that was in the future. The immediate task was to set up a campsite for the night.

The men put up pup tents for overnight shelter. Fortunately, it was not raining at this time, because as the men found out later, this area, and especially the 881st Squadron area, had poor drainage. Drinking water was supplied in 55-gallon drums, and the men, unused to working in the tropical heat, stood in long lines to get a drink. A makeshift latrine consisting of a barrel with a seat on top was set up. Late in the day cold C-rations were handed out for supper, and many men had to eat in the dark. Area guards were posted. Then those men not on guard duty crawled into their tents and tried to get some sleep. They knew there would be a lot of work tomorrow.

While the Ground Echelon of the 500th Bomb Group was debarking on Saipan, the Air Echelon was still at Walker AAF, Kansas, but the time for reuniting the two halves of the unit was moving a bit closer. At least two more flyaway aircraft, 42-24656 and 42-24664, arrived at Walker today. The former was assigned to the Goldsworthy crew (#101) of the 881st Squadron, the latter to the Hays crew (#228) of the 882nd. In a diary entry written the following day, bombardier Hal Towner enthused over their shiny new B-29, which the crew had already named: "Our ship arrived on the field yesterday -- old Ramblin' Roscoe in person and it's a honey -- a brand new Boeing #664 with an all-electric bombing system."

There was a Wing mission to Batista, Cuba, planned for tomorrow, but according to notes written by Assistant Group S-2 Capt John Smolenski, it would involve "only the groups in the Staging area" at Herington, Kansas, which meant only the 497th and 498th Groups. But for some reason the 497th was staging for this mission through Walker, and fifteen of their planes arrived on the field today. (Does this mean the 498th staged through Salina?) The briefing for the mission was held in the 500th's "War Room" at 1800.

Smolenski also noted that today Deputy Group Commander Lt Col Dougherty returned from leave.

20 Sep 44

Reveille came ungodly early for the Ground Echelon of the 500th Bomb Group this morning -- 0400. Many men had to be driven out of their blankets and pup tents by multiple blasts on the whistle. Breakfast was cold C-rations again, with cold coffee for anyone who cared to mix it up in his canteen cup.

There was much to do today. First priority was unloading the ships, and work details were formed for that purpose. There was great pressure to get the ships unloaded as quickly as possible, so this continued on a 24-hour basis, with portable lights used at night. The port authorities loaded crates and boxes onto trucks as they came off the ships, with no regard for units or shipment codes. This resulted in a huge mess which would have to be sorted out later. "Very soon there were mountains of supplies in the several dump revetments. Unfortunately the supplies were not loaded on the ships according to shipment codes. Our supply dump had boxes belonging to all codes in the Wing, and it would have been unusual to find two boxes on a truck with the same code number."

A temporary motor pool was set up near the docks and 500th Group vehicles were put into service as soon as they were unloaded. They and trucks from the island authorities formed a steady stream across eleven miles of bad roads, carrying the supplies to temporary dumps, then returning for another load. At the dumps most of the unloading was done by muscle power, with some help from cranes supplied by the service groups. Supply and section officers scoured the growing stacks of boxes for items that were needed first. These included mess equipment so that hot meals could be served to the men, and pyramid tents and cots so that more permanent and comfortable quarters could be established.

The 500th quickly learned that everything had to be guarded -- at the port, at the motor pool, at the dumps, and even along the way. Every truck carried a guard. Anything remotely useful left unattended on Saipan tended to disappear very quickly.

Another big job was the Group area itself. The cane field had to be cleared, and bulldozers from the 303rd Air Service Group were used for that purpose when available. But simultaneously the area had to be cleared of battlefield debris. There had obviously been much fighting here. Most dangerously, large quantities of ammunition, mortar shells, grenades and more than 100 tons of Japanese dynamite had to be carefully removed.

Due to the presence of Japanese holdouts on Saipan, guard posts were established in the Group area and the men drew regular guard duty. There was understandably much nervousness initially, and in the first few nights occasional shots were fired, but the only victims appeared to be a couple of goats.

At Walker AAF, Kansas, this morning, the 15 planes of the 497th Bomb Group that had arrived yesterday took off on their Cuba mission. The 500th Bomb Group Operations Journal noted that these planes upon return from Cuba would land at their staging base at Herington, Kansas. In any case, the 500th Operations Section had had a man on duty all night to take care of any problems that might arise.

Ken Fine, navigator on the Hurlbutt crew (#222), had carried through on his plans to travel to Kansas City again yesterday. He caught the 1:05 AM train, probably at nearby Victoria, spent the day in K.C. with his sister and family, then returned on the 11:30 PM train. And today he had another easy day, attending an officers' picnic at a park in Hays.

Hal Towner, bombardier on the Hays crew (#228), had some very important information to impart to his diary today:

"Friday, 20 Sept 44

Excited -- who's excited! Just because we know when and where we're going and also how. I've not been able to write for a week because I knew I'd spill the beans, but I can't resist the temptation any longer to tell you, dear diary, the latest poop from the group. ...

It looks like we leave here the 30th, spend a month at Kearney, Nebraska, where we will be staged.. From there, we'll take our new ship to the Port of Embarkation at Hamilton Field, California, and finally the big day when we hop off for Saipan. I'm glad I got that off my chest and I'm glad there was someone I could tell that will keep the secret!"

21 Sep 44

Today the Ground Echelon of the 500th Bomb Group on Saipan continued unloading ships in Tanapag harbor, sorting out boxes and crates in the temporary supply dumps, and clearing the assigned Group area. The supply and mess sections had found and unpacked the immersion heaters, so at least today the men had hot water for making coffee and heating up their cans of C-rations. The pyramid tents had been located and were being set up in neat rows on ground that was slightly higher, or at least not in an obvious depression. Luckily, the rains were holding off so far.

Group and squadron orderly rooms and also a dispensary were quickly established in tents. A common problem treated by the medics at this time was cuts from opening C-ration cans. More barrel-type latrines were set up pending the digging of more permanent latrines. In place of showers, many men temporarily bathed in the ocean. Today the 500th did get one piece of unexpected good news. There was a Quartermaster laundry on the island and the 500th was allowed to use it, so many men rushed to send off bags of dirty clothing.

On this day back in Kansas a group of command and staff officers of the 500th Bomb Group, including CO Col Richard King and Deputy Commander Lt Col John Dougherty, flew to the unit's designated overseas staging area, Kearney, Nebraska, "to investigate processing system there & facilities for handling our Group when it arrives." The group returned to Walker Field at 1515. The war was getting closer for the Air Echelon.

22 Sep 44

On Saipan, the Ground Echelon of the 500th Bomb Group continued improving its living area. By the end of today, enough pyramid tents had been put up that all the men could be moved in from their pup tents, with as many as ten cots and men per pyramid tent. And none too soon, because the rains came and turned the lowest lying spots into ponds and the "higher" spots into mud. Much of the 881st Squadron area became a small lake about two acres in extent and two feet deep at its center. Clearly much work needed to be done to make

the area livable.

23 Sep 44

Things on Saipan were gradually getting better for the 500th Bomb Group. Drainage was greatly improved in the new tent area by shoveling and hauling many loads of sand from the beach and spreading it on the muddy pathways. Also today a PX opened in the 500th area in a tent, with Special Service Officer 1/Lt Glenn McClure in charge. The most popular item was beer, which was available at the rate of six bottles per week. Of course, there was no refrigeration, but even warm beer was better than no beer at all. Fruit juices were also available on a rationed basis, three cans of either tomato or orange-grapefruit.

Today at 1000 at Walker AAF, Kansas, there was a staff meeting in Col King's office to discuss what had been learned by the staff visit on the 21st to Kearney AAF, Nebraska, which was to be the overseas staging area for the 500th Bomb Group. Each officer related his experiences there and gave his opinion of how things would go at Kearney. Col King "emphasized fact that there was no basis to the rumors that this Group would be postponed in its movement to Kearney, but that we were pulling out on date originally scheduled."

24 Sep 44

On Saipan the men of the Ground Echelon of the 500th Bomb Group continued to work on improving their assigned areas. The various Group supply dumps continued to teem with activity as supply officers went from one to another trying to locate items belonging to their units. Questions such as "Have you seen any boxes marked 9159Z?" were heard often. Despite the initial confusion, things were gradually sorted out, and in the 500th no major items ended up missing.

Up to this time, in order to keep clean, the men had had to bathe in the ocean or take "spit baths" out of their steel pots, but about today the Squadron decontamination trucks began offering showers of a sort. As the Group history described it, "Operators manned the hose nozzles and sprayed those wanting a shower. The force of the stream alone was both invigorating and sufficiently strong to almost take the dirt off of the bather." Sorry, no nude photos available.

At Walker AAF, Kansas, the flyaway aircraft for the 500th Bomb Group continued to arrive, at the rate of one or two per day from 19 September through the end of the month. A note in the S-2 Journal under today's date (but obviously entered later) states that 13 planes had arrived by the 25th. One of these was 42-63429, which had arrived probably on the 22nd or 23rd and had been assigned to the Hurlbutt crew (#222) of the 882nd.

On this Sunday Ken Fine, navigator on the Hurlbutt crew, explained in a letter to his fiancée in Houston why he had not written her yesterday. The crew had "worked on our plane all day Saturday until nine at night," then Fine and his buddy, bombardier Glen Aitken, had gone to the officers club and "proceeded to get pretty high." This morning they had worked on the plane again, then in the afternoon Fine and Aitken went to the post theater to see Dorothy Lamour in "some island picture." Then it was back to work on the plane again for a while, after which Fine and Aitken ended up at the club again. Finally, Fine wrote that their flight engineer, 1/Lt Glenn Truesdell, was sending his pregnant wife home to Massachusetts on Tuesday. The baby was due in December, so Truesdell knew that he would not see it before he left. In fact, sadly, he would never see the baby, as he would be killed in action over Nagoya on 3 January 1945.

25 Sep 44

Today on Saipan the men of the 500th Bomb Group Ground Echelon got their quartermaster laundry back. From the 500th Bomb Group unit history:

"On September 25th laundry was returned. Men learned that no attempt at ironing was made, but that apparently a concerted effort at wrinkling clothes was undertaken by the laundry crew. Clothing was not entirely cleaned, but the dirt was more or less evenly distributed, and there was no charge for the laundry service; and although the hot weather and labor in setting up camp caused clothing to need cleaning sooner and number of pieces allowed were limited, all agreed that it was very convenient not to be required to wash all of their clothes."

As time went on, many men turned to doing their own laundry, using home-made wind-driven washing machines. Some even cleaned their clothes with high-octane gasoline. (A little dangerous if you were a smoker, wasn't it?) But that was all in the future. For now the men had to walk around in soiled and wrinkled uniforms.

Today George Hughes, airplane mechanic in the 881st Squadron, found time to write his first letter home from Saipan. The censors were very strict at this time because it was still secret that elements of the 73rd Bomb Wing were on Saipan.

"September 25, 1944

Dear Mother & Dad,

This is the first chance I have had to write since we landed here. We are not allowed to say where we are yet but it is *[cut out by censor]* in the Pacific. That isn't very definite but is the most I can say.

There is a lot of work to be done getting set up. Things aren't too bad here and should get better as time goes on.

The mail seems to come through pretty good and I believe that most of the back mail has caught up with me.

We lived in pup tents the first few days and now have big tents set up. We are eating 'K' & 'C' rations. It seems nice to be off the boat and be able to move around a little. I got pretty soft and lazy on the boat but a couple more weeks of sand shoveling should get me in good shape.

It is quite hot but the nights are cool enough to sleep well. It is dark here at *[censored]*. The sun is up at *[censored]* though. ...

Love
George"

From the 500th Bomb Group Operations Journal:

"25 Sept 44 Officers and Enlisted Men 500th Hqs. were processed this A.M. All completed by noon.

Three (3) B-29's off for Batista *[Cuba]*. #446 *[42-6446]* (881st) only a/c completing same. This airplane landed Eglin Fld. due to engine trouble.

P.M. fairly slow. We now have thirteen (13) Flyaway Aircraft.

S-3 busy preparing equipment for Air Echelon shipment. Subject equipment will go over by boat. Packing lists are also needed by S-4."

The processing mentioned was probably for overseas movement.

26 Sep 44

According to an account written later by Maj Ralph Maust, Executive Officer of the 881st Squadron, copies of the

Base Development Plan had been obtained soon after arrival on Saipan. Referring to this plan and using surveying equipment borrowed from the Island Engineers, the 500th Bomb Group staked out the locations of buildings and latrines in their assigned area. One of the first projects was to dig the 15-foot-deep permanent latrines. Another high priority was to drain the small lake in the middle of the 881st Squadron area by digging a drainage ditch to the sea. However, working parties quickly discovered that only a foot or two below ground level was a layer of coral impenetrable to pick and shovel. As a result, resort was made to air compressors and blasting, and for 24 hours a day until the work was completed, the noise of jackhammers and shouts of "Fire in the hole!", followed by loud explosions, were heard throughout the Group area. A good night's sleep was impossible under these conditions. Fortunately, during this time there were only a couple of minor injuries from flying bits of coral, and only a few tents were damaged.

From the 500th Bomb Group Operations Journal:

"26 Sept 44 S-3 Office crowded all day with 330th [*Bomb Group*] Navigators & Bombardiers to see Lt. Colonel Walter (330th S-3).

Shakedown Mission forms & data published in PM.

Two (2) emergency landings today."

This entry requires analysis and comment.

First, it's unclear what the S-3 (Operations Officer) and flight personnel of the 330th Bomb Group were doing at Walker AAF at this time. The 330th's ground personnel had moved in to support the 500th's air echelon after its ground echelon left for overseas on 23 July. But the 330th's air echelon was originally not scheduled to move to Walker until after the 500th's air echelon departed. So what happened? Was the schedule moved up? Or were the flight personnel of the 330th only temporarily at Walker for some sort of exercise? We don't know.

Second, those shakedown mission forms probably refer to the checks and procedures performed on the flyaway aircraft after arrival at Walker. There was a lot to be done, as will be discussed later.

Third, there are unfortunately no details available on any emergency landings on this date.

Otherwise, training continued at Walker for the crews of the 500th Bomb Group. The McClanahan crew (#353) of the 883rd Squadron flew a gunnery mission today from 1710 to 2050.

27 Sep 44

From the 500th Bomb Group Operations Journal:

"27 Sept 44 S-3 officers went on Bomb-Gunnery mission this A.M. (4 hours) in 421 [*B-29 42-24421*] - (882nd).

Aircraft of 497th [*Bomb Group*] (Herrington) arrived WAAF for F.O. [*Field Order*] #8 -- Batista Mission -- to be held tomorrow. --- Rec'd TWX [*teletype message*] postponing same until 30 Sept 44 at 1800. Base notified by night NCO."

One of the requirements laid on by higher headquarters was for each flyaway aircraft and crew to complete one practice bombing mission to Batista, Cuba, and return. This is probably what was going on with the 497th aircraft, which were apparently already at their overseas staging area of Herrington.

Tonight Ken Fine, navigator on the Hurlbutt crew (#222), wrote a letter to his fiancée filling her in on his recent activities. For at least the last five days he and his crew had been working on their new plane during the day. Most evenings, Fine and his buddy, bombardier Glen Aitken, had been going out drinking, if not to the officers club, then into nearby Hays or Russell. Fine hoped that they would finally be able to take their plane into the air tomorrow.

28 Sep 44

In the 500th Bomb Group area on Saipan, the only buildings which were not erected by the men of the 500th were the squadron mess halls, which required solid concrete foundations and other special features. These were built by Company B of the 806th Aviation Engineer Battalion, but the 500th supplied work details to help speed up the construction. The additional manpower would pay off. The mess halls would be open for business by about 1 October.

As navigator Ken Fine had hoped, the Hurlbutt crew (#222) of the 882nd Squadron did get their plane into the air today, from about 1200 to 1700. Another crew that took their new flyaway plane up for the first time today was the Hays crew (#228), also of the 882nd. Bombardier Hal Towner described how the flight went:

"... We flew our maiden voyage in our own ship today and she performed very well. Betsy's [*copilot Ed Betts*] flap indicators didn't work, 'Sparks' [*radio operator Henry Koert*] lost his trailing antenna, and the Bombardier opened the bomb bay doors while Mike [*ring gunner August Michelsen*] was crawling thru the bomb bays. We calibrated the compass and air speed meter, check[ed] the feathering function and fired off some bomb stations[?]. Skipper [*AC Hale Hays*] made a good landing after it was all over. We checked the guns and turrets as far as possible without ammunition. Crider, our new tail gunner, had trouble stripping his guns -- ole Pop [*left gunner Robert Moistner*] just sat back there, did his job and didn't say a word while [*right gunner*] Cohen gave forth with choice bits of conversation such as an occasional 'yessir' or 'nosir'. ...

P.S. We climbed to 30,000 feet today -- looks like 28,000' is our service ceiling -- completed #1 shakedown."

These shakedown flights were part of a supplemental training program designed to make sure both the flyaway planes and the crews were fully combat-ready. According to the 500th Bomb Group narrative history, the three main elements of the program were as follows:

- "a. Instrument calibration and test flight of each flyaway aircraft.
- b. One practice bombing mission from WAAF to Batesta [*Batista*], Cuba and return required by each crew.
- c. Two practice bombing missions of seven hours each required of the Group. 14 aircraft over the target was required before considering the mission completed."

29 Sep 44

Work continued on the 500th Bomb Group area on Saipan. In the few hours of spare time that the men had during this time, there wasn't a whole lot to do. Most men wrote letters or got extra sleep. Some men ventured out sightseeing and searched for Japanese souvenirs, but most of the good stuff had already been scoured up by Marines, Seabees or Navy personnel. Souvenirs could be readily bought or traded for, especially if you had some liquor, which was quickly becoming the medium of exchange on Saipan. However, items had to be carefully checked for authenticity, as the Marines especially were proficient at manufacturing fakes.

George Hughes, airplane mechanic in the 881st squadron, gave the censors more work to do by writing his parents today:

"September 29, 1944

Dear Mother & Dad,

Everything is fine here and I am in the best of health. I am getting pretty well in shape after the long boat ride. We still have lots of work to do but it looks as though we will have lots of time to do it. I have been tearing

up a little *[looks like two words cut out by censor]* the past two days. It runs through our area and is pretty much in the way.

I have taken in a couple of movies at night in another outfit close to ours. We should have pictures of our own soon. For an outdoor theater they are very good.

One thing that I should have is a good suntan when I come home from here. I have to stay covered up most of the time because this sun is really hot.

If you notice the envelope you will see that I have a new rank. A rating list was posted yesterday and I was made sergeant effective as of August 31st. I should have a good pay when we finally get paid in full. We haven't received a full pay since we left Walker and probably won't until November 1st. As yet there isn't much to spend money for around here.

Write soon and don't worry because everything will turn out all right. I am trying to get my letters caught up but it seems as though I owe letters to everyone.

Love
George"

From the 500th Bomb Group Operations Journal:

"29 Sept 44 Three (3) B-29's off on Batista *[Cuba]* Mission. Two (2) aborted."

These long-range, partly over-water missions to Cuba were proving to be the bane of the 500th Bomb Group. Even if a plane made it all the way to Cuba, it was difficult to make it all the way back to Kansas without one or more of the very temperamental Wright engines acting up and forcing an emergency landing. But the B-29's would be making even longer flights once they got to Saipan, and there was no place between Japan and Saipan to make an emergency landing, so they had better master this problem or they would be in trouble.

30 Sep 44

On approximately this day the men of the Ground Echelon of the 500th Bomb Group saw their first movie on Saipan, on an outdoor screen in the 882nd Squadron area. The name of the movie was not recorded, but civilization was gradually catching up with the 500th. Later a much larger outdoor facility with a covered stage, called "Surfside", would be constructed in the 500th area.

From the 500th Bomb Group Operations Journal:

"30 Sept 44 All B-29 aircraft 'grounded' per authority 2AF TWX *[2nd Air Force teletype message]* for retraction tests. F.O. *[Field Order]* #8 (497th) now postponed until 3 Oct 44."

Retraction tests involved putting the whole plane up on jacks and checking the extension and retraction of the landing gear. Apparently there had been some problems with the landing gear on new B-29's.

This morning, apparently before the grounding message was received, the McClanahan crew (#353) of the 883rd Squadron took their new flyaway B-29, 42-24657, up for the first time. They were airborne for three hours, and like the Hays crew two days earlier probably accomplished several tasks, but there was at least one they didn't get done. Right gunner Robert Schurmann noted, "Didn't fire guns because of overcast."

1 Oct 44

On about this date on Saipan, the squadron mess halls were opened, complete with concrete foundations, kitchens, serving lines, lights and tables. Now the men could have regular meals instead of C- and K-rations. Not only that, they were allowed to use the mess halls at night to read and write letters. Some work had also been started on other buildings, and paths and roadways were being improved with crushed coral and sand.

Training continued at Walker AAF, Kansas, for the air crews of the 500th Bomb Group. As the date of their departure drew closer, more married men were sending their wives home and moving onto post. In the Hurlbutt crew (#222) of the 882nd Squadron, flight engineer 1/Lt Glenn Truesdell had sent his pregnant wife home a few days ago. Now today airplane commander Maj Wilbur Hurlbutt sent his wife and child home to Arizona and moved onto post.

Navigator Ken Fine of that crew was uncertain when their next training flight would be, or when they would leave for the overseas staging area at Kearney, Nebraska. In fact, he opined in a letter to his fiancée, "Nobody seems to know much about what is to happen as all the plans have been screwed up some." After confiding that he and his good friend, bombardier Glen Aitken, had gone over to the officers' club again last night, Fine noted that "everyone feels like they have to drink up enough to last for a long dry spell."

2 Oct 44

Today on Saipan, even though he wasn't allowed to reveal the name of the island yet, airplane mechanic George Hughes of the 881st Squadron wrote a rather positive letter home to his parents, highlighting the many improvements in their living conditions:

"October 2, 1944
'Somewhere in the Pacific'

Dear Mother & Dad,

Well how is everything at home? I imagine the leaves are starting to fall. It must be very pretty at home now. I don't believe that this place ever has a change in season. It's hot all the time. We still have rain nearly every day. Sometimes two and three times a day.

I am feeling great and sleeping more than I have in a good many years. At first we got up at four but now we arise at five. This doesn't seem very early when you go to bed at seven.

Our messhall is in operation and we can write letters in there at night. We had good food and get fruit and cereal now that we are no longer living from a can. There is a broadcasting system rigged up with speakers set up around the area. We have music and news reports during the day.

I went to some boxing bouts the night before last. Some of them were very good. I suppose in due time we will have baseball diamonds fixed up but now the important things are being taken care of. I am still working on a sand detail. We bring it from the beaches to our area to combat the mud. I never saw such mud in my life. These heavy trucks and tractors can really churn it up.

There isn't much more to write about and I must go to work soon. Take care of yourselves and write soon.

Love
George"

At about this time the flyaway B-29's of the 500th Bomb Group at Walker AAF, Kansas, were having Group and Wing markings painted on their large vertical stabilizers. For confirmation of this we are indebted to 2/Lt Ken Fine of the Hurlbutt crew (#222). In a letter written this day he described for his fiancée what she should look for if their plane happened to show up on any newsreels:

"They have painted the letters and numbers on our plane now. If you look on the B-17 up here *[according to Ken Fine's son, also Ken Fine, his father drew an arrow pointing up to the B-17 depicted on the stationery, and on the tail of the B-17 he had drawn the letter Z, with a square below it, and the number 22 below that -- Z Square 22]* you can see them. The Z and the Square and 22 also a small 3429 *[the last four digits of the serial number, 42-63429]*. So now if you see us in the news reel, you will know us."

The Z stood for the 500th Bomb Group, the Square for the 73rd Bomb Wing, and 22 was the plane number within the Group. In the 500th, numbers 1-19 were reserved for the 881st Squadron, 21-39 for the 882nd, and 41-59 for the 883rd, so you could tell immediately by the number to which squadron a plane belonged.

Some veterans remember that their planes weren't marked until they reached Saipan. That may have been true for later planes and crews which came over, but this letter is pretty clear proof that the original 30 flyaway aircraft had their markings painted on in Kansas. This is further supported by the unit narrative history, which in noting the date each plane arrived on Saipan in October and November 1944 reports them as "Z Square 5", etc.

This seems a good place to note that the plane numbers within the Group were not permanent to a particular plane. They were changed as circumstances dictated. In fact, it would be fair to say that in the beginning the number stayed more with the crew than the plane. For example, take the Hurlbutt crew's first plane here, Z-22, 42-63429. They flew this plane to Saipan but never took her into combat. For unknown reasons 63429 was transferred to the Savage crew (#224) as their regular plane, at which time she was renumbered Z-29. Still later, 63429 would be again renumbered to Z-35. Meanwhile, the Hurlbutt crew was assigned a new plane, 42-24766, which was promptly numbered Z-22. A lot of numbers painting was going on in the 500th.

3 Oct 44

Today the 500th Bomb Group Operations Journal recorded that Field Order #8, which was a Batista, Cuba, mission involving the 497th and 498th Groups, had been postponed again, this time until 6 Oct. You may recall that on 27 Sep several aircraft of the 497th group had arrived at Walker AAF from their staging area at Herington, Kansas, to participate in this mission. Then late on the 27th the mission was postponed until the 30th, then later postponed again until 3 Oct. Now it had been postponed a third time until 6 Oct. The probable reason that the 500th was closely following the progress of this mission is that, for unknown reasons, the 497th planes were staging through Walker.

4 Oct 44

The Ground Echelon of the 500th Bomb Group continued working on their living and working areas on Saipan. Today the permanent living area of the ground crew of the 881st Squadron, and possibly those of the other squadrons as well, were completed. The ground personnel would live their entire time on Saipan in these tents. The more substantial quonset huts were reserved for the air crews. Of course, the ground crew tents weren't just ordinary tents. They were large pyramid tents reinforced with wooden frames, and later wooden floors were laid inside to get things up out of the dirt. Most ground crewmen found the tents perfectly adequate.

Speaking of wood, this was always a critical shortage on Saipan. There was never enough to go around, and sufficient quantities had to be bartered for, scrounged or stolen. Men became expert in fashioning tables, chairs and other furniture from scrap lumber, sheets of plywood and shipping crates. Nails were also a critical item.

5 Oct 44

Today George Hughes, airplane mechanic in the 881st Squadron, filled in his parents on the latest happenings on Saipan:

"October 5, 1944

Dear Mother & Dad,

Everything is fine here and I hope that they are at home. I suppose you are listening to the World Series. We get replays of the game by short wave. ...

My election ballot came the other day and I sent it right out. ...

We get our first full pay on November 1st. ...

We are still doing about the same jobs and our area has shown lots of improvement. We moved to our permanent area yesterday. ... There is *[sic]* eight to a tent for now but later they expect to cut down to six. That gives one quite a little room. ...

Love
George"

The 2nd Air Force grounding directive of 30 Sep had been lifted apparently late yesterday, which resulted in much air activity today. Training and transfers could resume. This afternoon, an unspecified number of aircraft from the 497th Bomb Group flew in to the home field of the 500th Bomb Group at Walker AAF, Kansas. These planes were to participate tomorrow in the much delayed Field Order #8 training mission to Batista, Cuba. It appears that this FO had now been expanded to include planes from all four Groups of the 73rd Bomb Wing. Fifteen B-29's of the 500th Group would now participate in this mission.

The 500th Operations Journal doesn't give many details about this mission, but navigator Ken Fine of the Hurlbutt crew (#222), which was scheduled for this mission, tells us that the participating planes flew today to Salina, the base of the 499th Group. Salina apparently served as the staging base for all Groups for this mission, as Fine states that "There were supposed to be around 50 B-29s in that flight and I never saw so many 29s as there were over at Salina."

The Hurlbutt crew had been notified about the Batista mission this morning at about 1100. They hurried to get ready, then flew their plane to Salina, where they were in "a meeting all afternoon." This was probably Fine's description of the mission briefing. They then spent the night at Salina in preparation for an early morning take-off.

Among the 500th crews not assigned to the Cuba mission today were the Hays crew (#228) of the 882nd Squadron and the McClanahan crew (#353) of the 883rd. The Hays crew was on a gunnery-bombing exercise. Bombardier Hal Towner recorded that "All guns were fired including the 20mm. cannon and then we went to 10,000 feet and dropped ten *[bombs]*." The McClanahan crew was probably doing the same exercise, but all right gunner Bob Schurmann noted was that they "fired 200 rounds per gun at 15,000 *[feet]* with no malfunctions."

A large number of flyaway aircraft which had stacked up at the depots or modification centers due to the 2nd AF grounding directive flew in to Walker today. The Operations Journal reported today that the Group "has 26

Flyaway Acft at present." This meant only four to go to reach full strength.

Several crews were finally able to take their flyaways up for their shakedown flights today. One of these was the Holmes crew (#354) of the 883rd. After four hours and 30 minutes in the air with their plane, probably 42-63434, the crew returned to a nasty surprise. According to flight engineer Bob Sebring, the post-flight inspection revealed that "an entire row of rivets on a panel on the top surface of one wing had popped out." Bad luck for the Holmes crew. The plane was red-lined and they were now without a flyaway.

6 Oct 44

At 0300 today the Hurlbutt crew (#222) of the 882nd Squadron was awakened at Salina, Kansas, for their mission to Cuba. They went to breakfast and got all ready to go but the rain was coming down hard, so there was a delay until 1000. According to Ken Fine, navigator on the Hurlbutt crew, a decision was made to send only some of the planes off to Cuba. The rest, including the Hurlbutt crew, presumably in their flyaway B-29, 42-63429, "were supposed to fly up to the north of Minnesota and back." The weather must have been better in that direction. However, the Hurlbutt crew apparently didn't even get off the ground. They "burnt out a starter and had to change that so we flew back to Walker this evening."

Fine wrote his fiancée tonight that he wished they had made the Cuba mission and had it behind them. They would have to make it soon and "I'm sure not looking forward to a 15 hour ride. I'll sure be glad when the time comes when I'll never have to get into a plane again."

Their next shot at Cuba would come probably sooner than the Hurlbutt crew imagined. Today the 500th Group Operations Section received 73rd Bomb Wing Field Order #10 for a mission to Batista, Cuba, on 8 Oct 44. The 500th scheduled 15 planes and crews for this mission, including the Hurlbutt crew.

7 Oct 44

By this time the 500th Bomb Group probably had its full complement, or close to it, of 30 flyaway aircraft. These planes were assigned ten per squadron.

Also by this time the number of crews in the 500th had been whittled down to 60. The original assumption was that the long missions would be harder on the men than the planes, hence two crews per plane. However, in combat the opposite was found to be the case. It was the lack of flyable aircraft that quickly became the critical factor, at least until more planes were assigned and maintenance improved.

It is unknown what criteria, objective or subjective, were used to select the 30 crews who got the 30 flyaway planes. As for the 30 crews that didn't, they were divided into two groups of 15, five crews from each squadron. The plan was to send the first group of 15 to Kearney AAF, Nebraska, to await the arrival of new aircraft, which they would then fly over to the Marianas. The second group would be sent to Lincoln AAF, Nebraska, then eventually on to Kearney, either to fly new planes overseas or to travel to Saipan via Air Transport Command planes. While waiting at Kearney and Lincoln, these crews were apparently to continue training insofar as possible. Possibly the 500th crews were divided between the two locations so as not to overtax the training and other facilities at Kearney.

The original 30 flyaway aircraft and their assigned crews were as follows:

881st Squadron

Z-1 42-24656 Goldsworthy (#101)
Z-2 42-24662 Irvin (#105)
Z-3 42-63435 Samuelson (#106)
Z-4 42-24672 Oswald (#121) (later renumbered #103)
Z-5 42-24643 Luman (#109)

Z-6 42-24694 Field (#110)
Z-7 42-24680 Sullivan (#111)
Z-8 42-24692 Fitzgerald (#115)
Z-9 42-24689 Hatch (#118)
Z-10 42-65219 Thompson (#117)

882nd Squadron

Z-21 42-24652 Pierce (#223)
Z-22 42-63429 Hurlbutt (#222)
Z-23 42-24664 Hays (#228)
Z-24 42-24676 Tackett (#237)
Z-25 42-24686 Van Trigt (#230)
Z-26 42-24687 Grise (#231)
Z-27 42-24668 Cordray (#239)
Z-28 42-63436 Gerwick (#233)
Z-29 42-65221 Savage (#224)
Z-30 42-24700 LaMarche (#226)

883rd Squadron

Z-41 42-24675 Ashley (#343)
Z-42 42-24653 Moreland (#344)
Z-43 42-63441 Setterich (#346)
Z-44 42-65218 Hansen (#351)
Z-45 42-24657 McClanahan (#353)
Z-46 42-24721 Holmes (#354)
Z-47 42-24600 Adams (#358)
Z-48 42-24660 Black (#359)
Z-49 42-24671 Feathers (#360)
Z-50 42-24696 Braden (#364)

8 Oct 44

On Saipan, now that the mess halls and living areas for the ground personnel had been completed, the men of the 500th Bomb Group had more manpower available to finish the quonset huts for Group and Squadron Headquarters and the various staff sections. Also, construction was started on quonset huts to serve as living quarters for the air crews when they arrived. A total of 65 Quonset huts for all purposes were erected during this time. Meanwhile, the 500th continued to be called on to furnish construction details for Wing Headquarters. Also, according to Maj Ralph Maust, Executive Officer of the 881st Squadron and author of the Group history covering this period, the 500th furnished 75 men per day "to assist the Service Groups in constructing the warehouses and facilities for Service Center 'B'. The 500th Bomb Group was the only Bomb Group required to furnish personnel for this purpose." The men of the 500th were fast becoming first-rate carpenters.

Today the 500th Bomb Group prepared to send 15 planes on a Wing mission to Batista, Cuba, a daunting round-trip of 3,000 miles expected to last 15 hours. It was probably not a coincidence that the round-trip distance between Saipan and Japan was also 3,000 miles.

According to navigator Ken Fine of the Hurlbutt crew (#222) of the 882nd Squadron, the crews were awakened at 0430, ate breakfast at 0500, then went down to the flight line to check out their planes. Take-off was about 0730. The Hurlbutt crew would be the lead plane on this mission, with Group CO Col Richard King on board.

All 15 planes scheduled made it airborne, but there was a problem right away. Z-5, 42-24643, probably Luman crew (#109) of the 881st Squadron, had some sort of trouble and aborted shortly after take-off. The remaining

14 planes headed off for Cuba, but two more aborted later. Z-48, 42-24660, probably Black crew (#359) of the 883rd Squadron, returned to Walker AAF at 0210. If that late arrival time is correct, it's a good indication that she had had to make an emergency landing somewhere to make temporary repairs. Z-25, 42-24686, probably Van Trigt crew (#230) of the 882nd, made it all the way to Batista but for unknown reasons (rack malfunction?) was unable to complete the mission. She did however make it all the way back to Walker on three engines.

According to the Group Operations Journal, "Interrogation was held at Gp Hqs under the direction of S-2, immediately after last ship returned WAAF. All S-3 Staff Officers were present. Interrogation completed shortly after 0300 AM."

The Hurlbutt crew must have been one of the first ones back. According to navigator Fine, they returned to Walker at around 2200 and finished interrogation by midnight. Fine hadn't had anything to eat since breakfast but was so exhausted that he went straight to bed and didn't wake up until 1000 the next day. After cleaning up, he went over and got some lunch.

Landing at 2220, not long after the Hurlbutt crew, was the McClanahan crew (#353) of the 883rd. They came in on three engines. Right gunner Bob Schurmann wrote in his diary, "Bombed range at Batista, Cuba. Saw Havana. Feathered #3 engine over Oklahoma for lack of fuel transfer on return trip."

The Hays crew (#228) of the 882nd also flew this mission but according to bombardier Hal Towner, they did it without their airplane commander. Towner does not say why Hays was absent or who filled in for him. He does however mention that they had to make an engine change after returning to Walker.

Another crew completing this mission, in 14 hours and 45 minutes, was the Holmes crew (#354) of the 883rd, but it is not known in what B-29, since their flyaway had been red-lined back on 5 Oct.

9 Oct 44

This afternoon at Walker AAF, Kansas, at Group Headquarters, the 500th Bomb Group held a general critique of yesterday's Cuba mission. Apparently all the participating crews were present. Many of the crews, including the Hurlbutt crew (#222), were also told that they would be flying another mission tomorrow, 10 Oct, this one a Group mission.

Over in the S-3 Section, officers and men were busy completing lengthy and detailed Consolidated Tactical Mission Reports, apparently on yesterday's Wing mission to Cuba, to be sent to the 73rd Bomb Wing.

10 Oct 44

Work continued for the 500th Bomb Group Ground Echelon on Saipan. Airplane mechanic George Hughes of the 881st Squadron had been working the night shift lately and wasn't very happy about it. Sleeping during the day was difficult due to the heat, and also he wasn't able to go to any of the movies in the evening. The only good thing about it was that it gave him more time to write letters.

2/Lt John Barrett Grant, 882nd Squadron Aircraft Engineering Officer, known to his friends as Barrett or Barry, was also very busy. Writing his sister in California about this period later, Grant noted that he was the only officer in his maintenance section, which meant he was working "twelve to fourteen hours a day, coordinating things, getting equipment and censoring letters on the side." But there were some bright spots. The tent he shared with several other officers now had the "wonderful luxury" of a wooden floor and was located in a grove of small trees with a beautiful view of the sea. They were sleeping on cots, but Grant was one of the few men with a precious mattress, which he had stolen off the Alcoa Polaris "by stuffing it in a barracks bag and throwing it over the side, then later nonchalantly retrieving it." This Yale engineering graduate had learned a few things about how to survive in the Army. More living improvements would come later.

The air crews of the 500th Bomb Group at Walker AAF, Kansas, were being kept very busy. There was good reason for that. The scheduled deployment date to the overseas staging area was coming up fast.

Today there was a Group Mission, FO #8, a bombing exercise to Pueblo [Colorado?] PBR [Practice Bombing Range] #2. Ten B-29's got off as scheduled but two of them had to abort. Z-48, 42-24660, probably Black crew (#359) of the 883rd Squadron, returned to Walker at 1637, and Z-4, 42-24672, probably Oswald crew (#121) of the 881st, returned at 1655. The other eight planes, including the Hurlbutt crew (#222) of the 882nd, probably in Z-22, 42-63429, and probably the Holmes crew (#354) of the 883rd, plane unknown, apparently completed the mission.

11 Oct 44

Hal Towner, bombardier on the Hays crew (#228) of the 882nd Squadron, was in a thoughtful and reflective frame of mind as he wrote in his crew diary today. The crew had been at Walker Field for almost six months now and felt that they were "pretty well trained." They had developed confidence in each other and felt they were ready to go to war. But a problem had arisen: "We're overdue at our staging base [Kearney AAF, Nebraska], but they have no room for us there. Something along the line has bottlenecked the flow of combat crews to the theatre and each day we become more anxious to leave the field."

Towner added that "the accommodations at this field, which we have suffered for six months, grow steadily worse, though we thought such a thing impossible." Towner doesn't say why conditions had deteriorated, but it is likely that more elements of the 330th Bomb Group, which would replace the 500th at Walker when they left, had moved onto the base, making all facilities more crowded.

Finally, Towner recorded that his crew was scheduled for a seven-hour mission tomorrow, if their plane was ready. The #1 engine, which had been slated for change after the Batista mission of 8 Oct, had still not been replaced.

12 Oct 44

On this day on Saipan a landmark event occurred. After a long flight from Kansas, the first B-29 of the 73rd Bomb Wing, T-5, "Joltin' Josie", of the 498th Bomb Group, carrying Brig Gen Heywood Hansell, Commander of XXI Bomber Command, set down on Isley Field. This of course wasn't one of the 500th's planes, but the arrival of "Joltin' Josie" brought home to the men of the 500th that their planes wouldn't be far behind. Work to complete the Group working and living quarters redoubled.

Throughout the training period in Kansas, the 497th and 498th Groups were always a little ahead of the 499th and 500th. The 497th and 498th went to the overseas staging areas first, so it's not surprising that it was a 498th plane that got to Saipan first.

Today Capt Paul Trier, 882nd Squadron Medical Officer, received a "most welcome letter" from his wife Ida in Wisconsin and sat down to frame a reply. He was concerned that Ida had received so few letters of the many he had written since leaving the States. V-mail letters seemed to be getting thru better, so he was going to try that method for a while.

Trier had been able to buy some good cigars yesterday, five for 65 cents, but there were many other things that were not available at his location, so he asked his wife to send him a few items if she could find them. The list included a set of chessmen, photographic paper and some light fixtures. He explained that he had actually bought a socket, two plugs and two extension cords in Riverside, California, before shipping out, but "one of the plugs is now attached to the infra red lamp, the socket and the other plug is attached to the refrigerator, and one half plug is on the washing machine. [Someone in the 500th had had the foresight to buy some appliances to

ship overseas, but that foresight had evidently not extended to the electrical fixtures needed to operate them.] If I assert my rights and take them back, I'll slow down the operation of the entire organization. If you can get them, I'd like about six plugs, and three sockets with switches on them."

Trier continued, "It was murder to have you mention snow falling. My costume at the present time consists of a sun helmet which I picked up off the road after I saw it blow off a fellow's head, a T shirt, and a pair of shorts made by cutting the legs off a pair of G.I. Trousers. They make very fine shorts as there is plenty of pocket space which is missing in most shorts.

"Our hospital is almost finished, the ward consists of a hospital tent, 16x48 with a coral floor, over which we laid pierced steel plank which they use to make temporary runways. It makes a pretty good temporary set up and we hope to get wooden floors and some sort of sides for it eventually. We also have, as I mentioned before, two Quonset huts, and a supply tent with wooden floors and sides in which we are now living, that is Zimmerman [883rd Squadron Medical Officer Capt Henry A. Zimmerman], Lt. Rasmussen, our MAC [Group Medical Supply Officer 2/Lt Eldon U. Rasmussen, Medical Administration Corps], and myself. It isn't too bad at all, but it is a far cry from the way we were living at Walker. We are anxious to hear the subsequent arrivals make a few remarks about how tough things are, and then proceed to climb down their throats.

"I really hope this V mail experiment works out darling, because I want to keep reminding you that I love you more than anything else in the world.

Paul"

As the first B-29 of the 498th Bomb Group was landing on Saipan, the first plane of the 500th Bomb Group had yet to leave Walker Field, Kansas, for the staging area at Kearney, Nebraska. But that move was coming soon.

Today the 500th Bomb Group ran a "Round Robin", which was a navigational and formation-flying exercise usually conducted along a roughly circular route. Ten B-29's were scheduled but one, Z-49, 42-24671, had some sort of mechanical problem during taxi or take-off prep and returned to the line. The other nine planes got off okay and flew the following route: DWK - TS - PDI - PBS - AQ - ELK CITY - DWK. This breaks out to Walker Field - Tulsa - possibly Padre Island - unknown - Amarillo - Elk City (probably Oklahoma) - Walker.

Also today Deputy Group Commander Lt Col John Dougherty and Group Bombardier Capt Charles McClintick departed Walker Field for the overseas staging area at Kearney AAF, Nebraska, in B-17 #554. They would soon be followed by the first of the 500th flyaway planes.

13 Oct 44

On this day 12 B-29's took off from Walker AAF, Kansas, on a "Round Robin", a long-range navigation, formation-flying and bombing exercise to Batista, Cuba. The route as given in the 500th Bomb Group Operations Journal was DWK - WBA - LEESBURG - NW - DWK, which breaks out to Walker Field - probably Batista, Cuba - Leesburg (probably Florida) - Norfolk - Walker. Two planes did not make it to Cuba. Z-10, 42-65219, probably Thompson crew (#117) of the 881st Squadron, had to land at Tinker Field near Oklahoma City, and Z-44, 42-65218, probably Hansen crew (#351) of the 883rd, landed at Maxwell Field in Alabama. Also, Z-26, 42-24687, probably Grise crew (#231) of the 882nd, made it to Cuba but became "separated from formation ... and was unable to bomb." The remaining nine planes apparently completed the mission.

14 Oct 44

Today in a letter George Hughes, airplane mechanic in the 881st Squadron, brought his parents up to date about his life on Saipan, even though he still wasn't allowed to mention the island by name:

"October 14, 1944
'Somewhere in the Pacific'

Dear Mother & Dad,

I am writing just a few lines to let you know everything is all right. Things are just about the same here.

I am working on a ditch digging job now. It's pretty tough digging because there are just a few inches of top soil. The biggest part has to be picked out of solid coral. We use jackhammers when they are available but most of the work has to be done with a pickaxe.

... I received the camera while I was at P.O.E. [*Port of Embarkation, Camp Anza, California*] I must have forgotten to say so at the time. When we get caught up on the work a little maybe I can take some pictures.

I saw a show last night presented by the natives. They did a few native dances but they weren't very interesting. There are fights again tonight so I believe I will attend. They have some very good bouts.

The weather continues the same. I am pretty well used to the heat by now. It still rains a couple of times a day. The nights are cool enough to use a blanket at times. As long as I can sleep nights I don't care how hot it gets.

The medics made everyone put up mosquito nets over their beds. They are the only things for good sleeping. The mosquitoes here carry dengue fever. This isn't bad but quite painful I guess[?]. ...

Love
George"

On this day at Walker AAF, Kansas, another milestone in the history of the 500th Bomb Group was reached when the 248th AAF Base Unit, the controlling authority at Walker, issued Special Order No. 199. Paragraph 10 of this order directed the first ten planes and crews of the 500th Bomb Group to report to the overseas staging area at Kearney AAF, Nebraska. Three pages attached to the text of Para 10 listed the planes by serial number and the full crews by name, rank, MOS (Military Occupational Specialty), ASN (Army Serial Number) and crew position.

The crews were to report to Kearney by the following day, 15 Oct 1944... with one exception. A paragraph in the order read, "Crew indicated by an asterisk (*) now on TD [*Temporary Duty*] Oklahoma City, Oklahoma will comply with this order upon return to this sta[tion]." This was the Hurlbutt crew (#222) flying their assigned plane, Z-22, 42-63429.

Z-22 and the Hurlbutt crew had been sent to the Oklahoma City Air Depot at Tinker Field today in the hope of getting a significant structural defect corrected. As CFC Gunner Ed Levin remembers it, the rivets on as many as 70 wing panels were faulty or suspect. Some had popped and others appeared to be in danger of doing so.

The full crew was apparently not along on this trip. Radar Operator Paul Dreyer remained at Walker. However, two passengers had come along to OKC -- Crew Chief M/Sgt Doc (his real first name) Duncan and 882nd Squadron Flight Chief M/Sgt Raymond "Ace" Carter. These very experienced airplane mechanics had probably been sent along in case the plane had to make an emergency landing somewhere.

This evening navigator Ken Fine phoned his fiancée to let her know where he was, and the next day he wrote her a letter using stationery from the hotel where he and the rest of the crew were staying -- Hotel Black, Grand Ave at Hudson St., Oklahoma City, OK. The Air Depot must have quickly determined that the necessary repairs were beyond their capability, because by this time Fine already knew that they would have to take the plane back to the factory in Atlanta. He didn't know how long they would be there, but after the plane was repaired

they would finally fly to Kearney AAF, Nebraska, to prepare for overseas movement.

Several men in the crew viewed this excursion as sort of a last fling before heading off to war, so a lot of heavy drinking and womanizing went on, right from the beginning. In Oklahoma City, one of the married officers picked up the girl who drove the tractor that towed their plane to the debarkation area after landing. Young and innocent Ed Levin was shocked by the brazenness of it.

The 500th Group Operations Section was either not aware of the full situation of the Hurlbutt crew or someone deliberately obscured it by noting in the Operations Journal on 14 October, "One (1) B-29 off from WAAF for Kearney, Nebr." Well, yes, Z-22 was destined for Kearney, but by a very roundabout route and not anytime soon.

15 Oct 44

Today at Walker AAF, Kansas, nine of the ten planes and crews listed in SO #199 left for the staging area at Kearney AAF, Nebraska, as ordered. These included three planes and crews from each squadron:

881st Squadron

Z-1, 42-24656, Goldsworthy crew (#101)

Z-2, 42-24662, Irvin crew (#105)

Z-4, 42-24672, Oswald crew (#121 - later renumbered 103)

882nd Squadron

Z-21, 42-24652, Pierce crew (#223)

Z-25, 42-24686, Van Trigt crew (#230)

Z-24, 42-24676, Tackett crew (#237)

883rd Squadron

Z-42, 24-24653, Moreland crew (#344)

Z-48, 42-24660, Black crew (#359)

Z-49, 42-24671, Feathers crew (#360)

Maj Robert F. Goldsworthy was designated as the Movement Commander.

The tenth, missing plane and crew was Z-22, 42-63429, Hurlbutt crew (#222), of the 882nd. This plane was still at the Oklahoma City Air Depot and preparing to head to Bell Atlanta for factory repairs.

Each plane flying to the staging area would take its crew chief along as a passenger. (It's hard to keep a crew chief and his plane apart.) Some planes carried an additional passenger. Capt Melvin Parker, 881st Squadron Engineering Officer, flew with the Irvin crew in Z-2. Capt Arthur Miller, 881st Squadron Navigator, flew with the Oswald crew in Z-4. Capt Richard Hale, 882nd Squadron Bombardier, traveled with the Van Trigt crew in Z-25. And 2/Lt Robert Holmes, 883rd Squadron Radar Officer (not to be confused with 1/Lt Theodore Holmes, AC Crew #354, Z-46), flew with the Black crew in Z-48.

1/Lt Frank Carrico was a spare pilot in the 882nd who had been transferred into the 500th in April 1944 from antisubmarine duty. Already with extensive flying time in two- and four-engine aircraft, mainly B-25's and B-24's, he qualified on B-29's while at Walker. With no crew of his own, Carrico hitched a ride to Kearney today in Z-24 with his friend Capt Cecil Tackett. While Tackett and Carrico were flying to Kearney, their wives, Maxine and Rosita respectively, were driving there. The command had discouraged wives from coming to the staging area, but most of them were determined to stay with their husbands as long as possible and would not be deterred. Of course the men reached Kearney first, and while waiting for their wives to arrive they got into a poker game, and Carrico won \$150. He used the money to buy Rosita a going-away present, a lovely watch which she kept for the rest of her life and which one of her granddaughters treasures today.

Also taking off from Walker on the 15th, but heading in a different direction were 15 other B-29's off on a training Round Robin. The route given in the Operations Journal is DWK - TS - PDI - AQ - SPRINGFIELD - DWK, which breaks out to Walker - Tulsa - Padre Island (?) - Amarillo - Springfield (Colorado?) - Walker. All planes completed the training mission successfully except for Z-43, 42-63441, Setterich crew (#346) of the 883rd, who had to land at Hutchinson, Kansas, with engine trouble.

Lastly on this day the McClanahan crew (#353) of the 883rd, while attempting to take off on a training flight, probably in Z-45, 42-24657, experienced a "malfunction of waste gate controls" which cut the power in all four engines and caused the plane to run off the runway.

16 Oct 44

George Hughes, airplane mechanic in the 881st Squadron, wrote his parents from Saipan again today:

"October 16, 1944
'Somewhere in the Pacific'

Dear Mother & Dad,

Everything is fine here and I am in the best of health. There hasn't much of anything happened in the past few days. I went to the fights Saturday night. There was lots of action in some of the bouts. ...

I am still working on the ditch digging. It's pretty slow going. I can certainly sleep at night after bouncing around on that jack-hammer. ...

Do you think that you could get a pair of slippers of some sort? I would like something to wear around the tent at night. These G.I.s are heavy enough dry but when they get covered with mud they are like a couple of lead weights. ...

Love
George"

On this day 1/Lt Hale Hays, AC of Crew #228 of the 882nd Squadron, 500th Bomb Group, married Mary Katherine Brenneman in the 1st Presbyterian Church in Hays, Kansas. Bombardier Hal Towner and probably the rest of the officers in the crew attended the wedding.

Hays was far from the only officer getting married at this time. With the men heading overseas, the choice was to act now and seize what little was left of the present or wait on an uncertain future. Many couples chose the former.

17 Oct 44

Today five more B-29's and crews of the 500th Bomb Group departed Walker AAF, Kansas, for the staging area at Kearney AAF, Nebraska. The Group Operations Journal tells us that these planes and crews were all from the 881st Squadron, but nothing more specific than that. This made a total of 15 flyaway planes and crews, half the Group, to have left Walker.

Besides the planes and air crews, there were other personnel of the 500th at Walker who needed transportation to Saipan. A few men could be squeezed aboard the B-29's, which could carry one or two passengers each. The 500th Bomb Group had already decided that the crew chief of each plane would travel with it, so that

took up one space. Any additional passengers would be command or staff officers.

This left a large number of maintenance personnel at Walker requiring transportation. These men would go overseas via Air Transport Command (ATC) planes. Today a group of these men, 64 in all, consisting mostly of radar (MOS 867) and remote control turret (MOS 960) specialists, under the command of Group Electronics Officer 1/Lt Joel Dolkart and Group Radar Counter-Measures Officer 2/Lt Milton Pack, left for Kearney AAF by motor convoy.

The remaining ground personnel at Walker, probably around 230 in number, would also travel to Saipan via Air Transport Command, but later and not via Kearney. These men would go directly to Hamilton or Mather Fields in California.

But before anyone left Walker, there was a round of immunization shots, the first of several the men would undergo at seemingly every stop along the way.

Also today, Deputy Group Commander Lt Col John Dougherty and Group Bombardier Capt Charles "Chili" McClintick came back to Walker from Kearney for a "4 hour business mission." The details of this meeting are not known, nor is it known when the two officers returned to Kearney.

Meanwhile, down at the Oklahoma City Air Depot at Tinker Field, the Hurlbutt crew (#222) of the 882nd Squadron took off today in Z-22, 42-63429, for Atlanta to have permanent repairs to their plane made at the factory in nearby Marietta. They arrived in Marietta in the evening, left their plane at the factory field, and were taken downtown to the Atlanta Biltmore Hotel, billed as "The South's Supreme Hotel". When they arrived at the hotel, they found it festooned with Confederate flags. It turned out that the United Daughters of the Confederacy were holding a convention there. For CFC gunner Ed Levin, a Jewish boy from Boston, it was a glimpse into a different world. Maj Hurlbutt's rank secured a single room, but the four junior officers - Omilian, Aitken, Fine and Truesdell - were squeezed into one room. The seven enlisted men -- five from the crew (radar operator Paul Dreyer didn't make the trip), crew chief Doc Duncan and flight chief Ace Carter -- presumably were even more squeezed. Navigator Ken Fine was not impressed with the accommodations, writing that if this "is supposed to be the finest hotel in these parts..., I feel sorry for them down here."

The crew hoped to be in Atlanta only a few days until their plane was ready and they could fly off to Kearney and the war.

18 Oct 44

On Saipan, work continued on improving the 500th Group and Squadron areas. Evening entertainment was improving too. Airplane mechanic George Hughes of the 881st Squadron wrote his parents again today:

"October 18, 1944
'Somewhere in the Pacific'

Dear Mother & Dad,

This is a few lines to let you know that everything is fine here. I never felt better in my life. Lots of sleep really does wonders for one.

I'm still working at ditch-digging and probably will for some time. As long as I work days I don't care what job I have. Night work doesn't go over too big with me in this climate. When I get home I think that I will replace my bed with a canvas cot. They feel just like a inner-spring now.

I saw a show the other night given by [cut out by censor] and her troupe. It was very good. Of course it rained during the show but everyone is pretty used to rain by now. ...

I go to the movies almost every night. the pictures are old ones but it is something to do anyway. In time we will probably have the latest films.

... Write when you can, mail is really appreciated here.

Love
George"

The last few days had been very busy for the clerks in the headquarters building on Walker AAF, Kansas. Today they released their latest opus, SO No. 203, at least three paragraphs of which pertained to the 500th Bomb Group and determined the future of 280 men.

Paragraph 1 of SO No. 203 ordered 15 crews, a total of 165 officers and men, to depart Walker either today or early the next day by rail and report to Lincoln Army Air Field, Lincoln, Nebraska by the next day, 19 Oct 1944. Capt John F. Charters was designated as the movement commander. After a few weeks at Lincoln, all of these crews would be transferred to the staging area at Kearney, where some would be assigned new B-29's to fly to the Marianas, while others would travel to the war zone via Air Transport Command. These crews were:

881st Squadron

McGuire crew (#107)
Mather crew (#108)
Ray Taylor crew (#112)
Bricker crew (#113)
Kappil crew (#120)

882nd Squadron

Reeves crew (#229)
Arbon crew (#234)
Hodge crew (#235)
W. Parsons crew (#238)
McClure crew (#242)

883rd Squadron

Ryan crew (#347)
Clinkscales crew (#350)
Haley crew (#352)
Charters crew (#357)
Irby crew (#361)

Paragraph 2 of SO No. 203 ordered another 15 crews, also totaling 165 officers and men, to depart Walker today and proceed by government motor transport directly to Kearney AAF, Nebraska, which would be the overseas staging area for the 500th Bomb Group. These crews did not as yet have assigned flyaway planes. At Kearney they would either pick up additional new "Theater Reserve" aircraft which had been earmarked for the 73rd Bomb Wing and then fly these planes to the Marianas, or they would be sent over on Air Transport Command planes. The designated commander for the motor convoy to Kearney was Capt Eugene C. Mahoney of the 883rd Squadron. The crews listed under Para 2 were as follows:

881st Squadron

H. Jackson crew (#102)
Brown crew (#104)
McNamer crew (#114)
Pearson crew (#116)

Curtis crew (#119)

882nd Squadron

Farrell crew (#227)
Gray crew (#232)
D. Jackson crew (#236)
Shorey crew (#240)
Schmitz crew (#241)

883rd Squadron

Cheney crew (#348)
Gregg crew (#355)
Schmidt crew (#356)
Mahoney crew (#362)
Amos crew (#363)

Para 2 had one footnote. 2/Lt Frederick W. Shippee, Jr., flight engineer on the Amos crew and currently in the base hospital, was directed to comply with the order upon release.

Next, Paragraph 4 of SO No. 203 directed ten more B-29's and crews of the 500th Bomb Group to proceed tomorrow to the overseas staging area at Kearney AAF, Nebraska. These ten planes and crews were as follows:

882nd Squadron

Z-29, 42-65221, Savage crew (#224)
Z-30, 42-24700, LaMarche crew (#226)
Z-23, 42-24664, Hays crew (#228)

883rd Squadron

Z-41, 42-24675, Ashley crew (#343)
Z-43, 42-63441, Setterich crew (#346)
Z-44, 42-65218, Hansen crew (#351)
Z-45, 42-24657, McClanahan crew (#353)
Z-46, 42-24721, Holmes crew (#354)
Z-47, 42-24600, Adams crew (#358)
Z-50, 42-24696, Braden crew (#364)

From the crew lists on this order we can see that the crew chiefs for all planes have been included as passengers, which would be the case for the entire movement overseas. Also, in order to make room for another passenger, one of the gunners has been bumped from each crew. The gunner left behind was in all cases the one holding MOS 611, Aerial Gunner, probably chosen because he was the only gunner without an additional specialty. (The CFC gunner, MOS 580, was trained in operation and maintenance of the remote control turret system; the left gunner, MOS 1685, was also a trained electrical specialist; and the tail gunner, MOS 748, was also a trained airplane mechanic.) The 611 gunners would travel to Saipan via Air Transport Command planes and be reunited with their crews there.

A few command and staff officers hitched rides to Kearney with this batch of planes. 882nd Squadron CO Lt Col Joseph Brannock rode with the Hays crew in Z-23. 883rd Squadron Engineering Officer Capt Harold Reichenberg flew with the Adams crew in Z-47, while his assistant, 2/Lt Alvah Willis, rode with the Setterich crew in Z-43. And the 883rd Squadron Navigator, Capt Roy Hopper, flew with the Braden crew in Z-50. Finally, a lowly Corporal, Harry Pennel, somehow rated a spot flying with the McClanahan crew in Z-45. Maybe his MOS of 686, Airplane Instrument Mechanic, was in critical demand.

There was one footnote with this order. 2/Lt Donald G. Wilson, navigator on the Braden crew, was in the base hospital at the time. He was ordered to comply with the order upon release. Also, there are at least two errors on the crew lists. (Errors are to be expected on such a long, complicated order.) On the Hays crew, the MOS of

Cpl Kiolen Crider should be 748, and the MOS of Sgt Henry Koert should be 2756.

There was another apparent error on the order. The Holmes crew of the 883rd is listed as flying B-29 42-24721, but other reliable sources indicate that this plane didn't arrive at Walker until the following day, 19 Oct. It was a replacement for original flyaway 42-63434, which had developed a serious structural problem on 5 Oct and consequently would not deploy with the 500th.

The 500th S-3 Section would soon be leaving Walker too. Lt Col Marcus Mullen, the S-3 (Operations Officer), and his deputy, Maj Freeman Parsons, "began settling business & clearance papers for expected shipping Friday 19 Oct 44."

In spite of all the turmoil of men moving out or preparing to move out, some training was still going on at Walker. There was apparently an abortive Group mission from Walker AAF to Galveston today, but the Operations Journal says nothing at all about it. The only indication we have of it comes from an unofficial source, the diary of Robert Schurmann, CFC gunner on the McClanahan crew (Z-45). But Schurmann's brief notation rings true: "Started for Galveston, but returned to base because not enough planes got airborne." Schurmann records only 15 minutes flying time. This mission would be rerun tomorrow, and in an innovative way.

19 Oct 44

At 0700 today in the 500th Bomb Group S-3 Office at Walker AAF, Kansas, there was a meeting of the airplane commanders of the ten crews scheduled to fly to Kearney AAF, Nebraska. The purpose of this gathering is not stated but was probably because of a last-minute change in plans. Some of the crews, including the McClanahan crew (#353) in Z-45, still had to complete the aborted training mission from yesterday. Therefore, those crews would fly a very roundabout route to Kearney, DWK - TS - GS - KEARNEY, which breaks out to Walker - Tulsa - Galveston - Kearney. The crews that did not need to complete this Galveston mission, including the Hays crew (#228) in Z-23, would fly directly to Kearney.

As it turned out, only eight of the ten planes were able to get off the ground. Two planes had problems and had to return to the line. For one plane, the problem was not serious and she got off by noon. This was probably Z-23, as bombardier Hal Towner's diary tells us that that is the time they took off. The other plane, despite what the Operations Journal says about returning to the line, was probably 42-24721, the replacement flyaway for the Holmes crew (#354) of the 883rd. 42-24721 arrived at Walker just today and would need at least a couple of days for the acceptance inspection, a shakedown flight, and other checks. She was definitely not leaving for Kearney today.

It took Z-23 only 45 minutes to make it to Kearney. Towner noted that "We expect to stay here long enough to draw new equipment and to modify and inspect our ship -- at most two weeks. *[Towner was a little optimistic here.]* This field is just like all the others but our morale has changed overnight."

Meanwhile, the crews that had to make up the aborted mission from yesterday, including the McClanahan crew (#353) in Z-45, had a much longer flight to make. According to CFC gunner Bob Schurmann, they took off from Walker at 1005 and touched down at Kearney nearly seven hours later, at 1700.

Some men traveled to Kearney by other means. Today Group Flight Engineer Capt Prescott Martin and Group Navigator Capt Berry Thompson left for the staging area by automobile.

And the 500th Group weren't the only ones on the move. Today the Group received a teletype message from the 73rd Bomb Wing "barring submission of correspondence of any kind to Hqs 73 BW until further notice is issued."

20 Oct 44

Since the bulk of the 500th Bomb Group had now left Walker AAF, and the 73rd Bomb Wing had barred submission of any correspondence, the 500th's Operations Section considered themselves essentially relieved of duty at Walker. An entry for today in the Operations Journal noted that the Operations personnel of the 330th Bomb Group, which was moving in to Walker after the 500th, "are now in complete charge of our S-3 building. Until we depart this station for our overseas assignment we have only to finish our packing & clear up other minor details."

But while most of the Air Echelon of the 500th had now moved to Kearney, there was one small far-flung detachment temporarily grounded far to the east.

The Hurlbutt crew (#222) of the 882nd Squadron had arrived in Atlanta on the 17th and left their plane, Z-22, 42-63429, at the Bell factory in Marietta to have a number of defective wing panels repaired. CFC gunner Ed Levin remembers that the factory was huge, with 25,000 employees, most of them women. The workers rarely if ever had a chance to see the combat crews who flew the airplanes they were building, so as news of the crew's presence spread through the factory, they became instant celebrities. Anybody who wanted female companionship had no trouble getting it. Levin actually ran into a girl he knew from college who set him up on a date with a local girl from a proud southern family, complete with crossed swords over the mantle.

Today, three days later, the crew was still waiting on their plane. Navigator Ken Fine wrote his fiancée a letter today from the hotel where they were staying, the Atlanta Biltmore. He had no solid information on how much longer they would be in Atlanta but hoped they would be able to leave for Kearney on Monday, 23 October. In the meantime, they had nothing to do but laze around and enjoy themselves, which most of the crew had no trouble doing. Fine wrote that he had been "sleeping about all day, getting up of the evening and going down town and going to a show once in a while, taking in the floor show at one of the joints down town, etc." Tomorrow he and a couple of other crew members were planning on going to the Georgia Tech - Navy football game. Sixty-three years later, Fine's son Tim would find three tickets to this football game in the pocket of his father's old dress uniform jacket.

21 Oct 44

At the overseas staging area at Kearney AAF, Nebraska, the air crews of the 500th Bomb Group were subjected to another round of processing, including physical examinations and more immunization updates. In addition, the men were issued a dizzying array of new equipment to carry overseas. Bombardier Hal Towner of the Hays crew (#228) of the 882nd Squadron described how it went for his crew today:

"21. Oct 44

We were processed today, and I do mean today because it took all of it. In spite of the comparatively efficient manner in which we were processed it still took eight hours. We went through a lot and got a lot done. Innumerable articles of clothing and equipment were issued to us including new parachutes and attachable jungle emergency kits, sun-glasses, helmets and goggles [*I still have my father's - JEB*] -- thousands of dollars worth of equipment. Wex [*navigator Wilbur Weksler*] and I drew duplicate bombardier-navigator kits except for the sextant. We have one A-14 and one A-10. This new A-10 is a honey with the automatic averager attached. Anyhow, we were a pretty tired crew by suppertime."

Coming late to the ball was the Holmes crew (#354) in Z-46, 42-24721. This plane, a replacement for the crew's original flyaway which had been found to have some structural problems, had not arrived at Walker until 19 Oct. Then she had to undergo an acceptance inspection and other checks. Finally today the Holmes crew had been able to take her up for a shakedown mission. Fortunately, everything checked out okay, and soon after that she and their crew were off to Kearney to catch up with their Squadron.

22 Oct 44

The men of the Ground Echelon of the 500th Bomb Group continued their hard work to prepare the Group area for the arrival of the Air Echelon. Most of the working and living quarters were up now but some interior work remained to be done. Also, digging continued on drainage ditches, roads were being improved, communications lines were being laid, and buildings and tents were being wired for lighting,

To supply electricity, the 500th had some of its own generators, but more were needed. To fill the gap, some old Japanese generators were repaired and put back into service under new management. A critical shortage of wiring was addressed by sometimes unorthodox means of procurement. The 500th Group narrative history tells this story: "On one occasion when Major Wolcott [*Ground Echelon Commander*] was attending a Wing meeting, the Wing Communications Officer complained that most of their communications lines were out and that the trouble had not been located. When the Major returned to our area it was discovered that the main phone lines from Wing running through our Camp had been cut and hauled up as additional 'much needed' wire."

Two days ago the 500th Bomb Group Operations Section had turned over their offices to their counterparts in the 330th Bomb Group, expecting that they would be pretty much out of operation until they shipped out, which they assumed was imminent. They now found however that there was more work to do and that they would be at Walker longer than they had anticipated. From the 500th Bomb Group Operations Journal:

"22 Oct 44 -- Apparently we were a bit optimistic as to our duties for the remainder of our stay at WAAF. Gp Hqs has moved into a building near the Base Processing Hqs and has incorporated the Squadron S-1 [*Personnel*] offices into one section. All records are being given last minute checks, and furloughs for all men of Air Echelon are in order. (5 days maximum) Final entries are also being inserted in Service Records."

Reading between the lines, we might reasonably reach several conclusions. Most important, something had happened, at the staging area at Kearney or elsewhere along the line, to slow down the overseas deployment of the 500th Bomb Group. The last-minute decision to give furloughs appears to be fall-out from this deal. It also seems likely that the processing authorities had found the personnel records of the 500th deficient, hence the belated extra attention.

23 Oct 44

Today the men of the Hays crew (#228) of the 882nd Squadron at the overseas staging area at Kearney AAF, Nebraska, received some welcome news, which bombardier Hal Towner enthusiastically recorded in his crew diary: "Whoopie! A three-day pass which means we all get to see our wives, sweethearts and families for the last time -- that is if they live within a reasonable distance. Wex [*navigator Wilbur Weksler*], Pop [*left gunner Robert Moistner*], Koert and Burulia have to go to Omaha though, which is pretty tough. Their families are back East. Omaha has its compensations."

24 Oct 44

On Saipan the work details of the 881st Squadron of the 500th Bomb Group were finishing up with the digging of drainage ditches and had moved on to other things, including road repair and improvement. Airplane mechanic George Hughes was ready to return to his regular job, as he told his parents in a letter today:

"I am still doing the same work. It will be nice to get back to work on the planes again. The ditch digging is about completed. We were patching road this afternoon. This coral makes very good roads. It packs nearly as hard as cement. It is hard on the eyes though because of the glare from the sun. The coral is as white as snow in some places."

Back at Walker AAF in Kansas, in preparation for the overseas movement of the Air Echelon, the 500th Bomb Group today ordered a group of 12 mechanics and technicians ahead to Mather Field, California, thru which all aircraft would pass. This group was composed of men from all three Squadrons and included a variety of specialties, so that hopefully any mechanical or technical problem which arose could be addressed. There were engine mechanics, radio and radar repairmen, electricians, aircraft instrument technicians, and more. The officer in charge was 2/Lt Maurice R. Pearce, an aircraft engineering officer of the 882nd Squadron. The group was referred to as the "Island Hoppers", because they were to follow behind the 500th planes from island to island on their way to Saipan, making repairs to any stragglers as necessary. The group was ordered to proceed by train, probably departing tomorrow. They were expected to report to Mather by 27 Oct.

Apparently at the last minute someone in headquarters realized that the group headed for Mather was missing a very important job specialty, MOS 687, Propeller Specialist. This man's job was mainly to maintain and repair the propeller governors. The governor controlled the pitch on the B-29's variable pitch propeller, which was a vital feature for achieving optimum efficiency at various altitudes. The governor was also an integral part of the propeller feathering system. But there were apparently no Propeller Specialists available in the 500th at Walker. A telegram was quickly dispatched to the Elizabethtown, Pennsylvania, home of Sgt Clyde Barnhart, MOS 687, of the 883rd Squadron. The young NCO, then home on pre-deployment furlough, was ordered to cut his leave short and report back immediately to Walker AAF. Barnhart would be going off to war a little earlier than expected.

On this day the Hurlbutt crew (#222) of the 882nd Squadron was still in Atlanta waiting for the Bell factory to finish repairing their plane, which was taking a lot longer than they had expected. At first, their time in this large southern city had been like a big vacation. On Friday night the 20th, navigator Ken Fine had gone to a wrestling match, on Saturday a college football game, on Sunday a movie, and yesterday he went shopping with flight engineer Glenn Truesdell. Nearly every evening they were out drinking late into the night, followed by sleeping late into the next day. Fine admitted to his fiancée, "I've never spent such a lazy time in my life."

But too much of anything can become boring, and it was becoming increasingly hard for the crew to enjoy themselves when they knew that their buddies in the 500th were heading off to the war zone... without them. Fine's sense of guilt may have been sharpened when last night in the hotel bar he "met some guys just back from combat and sat around for awhile talking to them." Today he was so jaded that he just loafed about the room reading and listening to the radio. He impatiently wrote: "How much longer we are going to be here I don't know. ... They keep saying that we will be going in a couple of days then when that comes along they say it will be another couple of days more. I thought we would be going home by now." By "home" Fine clearly meant his unit.

25 Oct 44

Another milestone in the history of the 500th Bomb Group was passed this morning when the first B-29 of the Group to leave for the war zone climbed into the air from the staging area at Kearney AAF, Nebraska. This was Z-42, 42-24653, Moreland crew (#344) of the 883rd Squadron, and her destination was Mather AAF, California, and beyond. The rest of the Group would soon follow. On nearly every day with flyable weather for the next several weeks, one or more B-29's of the 500th Group would take off from Kearney bound for Mather.

Each plane carried twelve men -- ten crewmen and two passengers -- plus their baggage. The MOS 611 "career gunner" in the crew had been "bumped" in order to make room for the plane's crew chief. The other passenger was a command or staff officer. The gunners left behind would travel to Saipan by ATC (Air Transport Command) and rejoin their crews there.

Each plane also carried in its bomb bays a vital cargo. No, I don't mean cases of booze, although liquor would prove to be as valuable as gold on Saipan, and those crews which had crammed several cases into their plane would be able to barter it for practically anything. The vital cargo to which I refer is the spare Wright R-3350 engine that each plane carried. The decision to load an extra engine into each plane turned out to be a very wise one, considering the number of engine changes that would be required in the coming weeks and months.

Z-42 and the Moreland crew apparently had a safe trip and landed at Mather Field this afternoon.

26 Oct 44

All the men of the 500th Bomb Group who left descriptions of Mather Field as they passed through on their way overseas were impressed by this beautiful, well-kept base a few miles east of Sacramento. The Moreland crew was probably no different. They were no doubt less impressed by yet another round of Army processing today -- physicals, shots, clothing and equipment inspections, records checks, etc. The men held their breath. If any serious deficiencies were turned up, they could be delayed at Mather for an indefinite time. Thankfully, this would be the last such check they would endure before reaching Saipan.

The processing included a review of ditching procedure. With all that water out there, everyone agreed this training was necessary but hoped they would never have to put it to use.

Probably departing Kearney and arriving at Mather today were three more 500th planes -- Z-2, 42-24662, Irvin crew (#105), and Z-4, 42-24672, Oswald crew (#103) of the 881st; and Z-24, 42-24676, Tackett crew (#237) of the 882nd.

It was good that Mather was such a nice, well-run base with all the amenities, because while they were there, in order to protect the secrecy of the overseas move, the air crews of the 500th were restricted to the base.

Meanwhile, over 2,000 miles to the east, the Hurlbutt crew (#222) of the 882nd Squadron was still stuck in Atlanta -- nine days and counting -- and still with no projected date of departure. What was the factory doing with their plane? Ken Fine wrote his fiancée that he was beginning to feel like a native. Indeed, he had taken a liking to Atlanta. "It's so warm and comfortable and gives one such an easy going feeling and I just love to hear these people talk." But at the same time, "I'm ready to leave I guess for it is getting old this not doing anything...."

Reporting back to Walker AAF today from furlough was Sgt Clyde Barnhart, a propeller specialist in the 883rd Squadron. The nineteen-year-old had been summoned back early from home furlough in Elizabethtown, Pennsylvania. Travel orders were cut immediately, and tomorrow Barnhart would be off by train for Mather Field, California, where his services were much needed. The young man spent his final night at Walker in an otherwise deserted barracks. It seemed that everyone else had left.

27 Oct 44

Today George Hughes, airplane mechanic in the 881st Squadron, updated his parents on things on Saipan, otherwise known as "Somewhere in the Pacific":

"October 27, 1944
'Somewhere in the Pacific'

Dear Mother & Dad,

Everything is fine here and going along smoothly. I am working nights again but this shouldn't last very long. We are hauling sand again to increase the size of our tent area. After shoveling coral this sand is a cinch. We work from six P.M. until two A.M. This gives us a little sleep before the sun comes up. These tents get plenty hot during the day.

We should have as nice an area here in time as most places in the States. We have a shower in operation now with a tank big enough to hold about 800 gallons of water. Soon they expect to have another one in the making. The lighting system is pretty good now so it is possible to read or play cards in the tents. ...

I hope the Christmas packages get here safely. They probably get plenty of rough handling on the way. Some of the fellows have started to receive Christmas cards already. That's really rushing the season isn't it.

There isn't much more to write about now. I think I will try to get a little more sleep before dinner. There is a good breeze blowing so it is quite cool yet. ...

Love
George"

First out of the blocks in the unofficial race to be the first B-29 of the 500th Bomb Group to reach Saipan was Z-42, 42-24653, Moreland crew (#344), which took off from Mather Field, California, for Hawaii probably late tonight. The plane headed down the Sacramento Valley, across San Francisco Bay, over the Golden Gate Bridge, and then out into the vast Pacific.

The scheduled route for B-29's flying from Mather to Saipan was via Hawaii and Kwajalein. Flight time was about ten hours from Mather to Hawaii, about the same to Kwajalein, and about six hours from Kwajalein to Saipan. If everything went perfectly, the trip would take three days, but since the planes would be crossing the International Date Line, it would be four days by the calendar. However, a couple of wild cards -- bad weather and mechanical problems -- could add days or even weeks to the trip.

The Air Transport Command, which controlled all overseas departures, normally scheduled take-offs from Mather Field late at night or early in the morning, so that the planes would be ensured a daylight landing in Hawaii. If there was enough light and it wasn't foggy, the crews could watch the California coastline gradually recede from their vision. Thoughts of home and loved ones passed through their minds as they wondered how long it would be before they saw that coast again. For some men that day would never come.

Possibly watching Z-42 take off was Group CO Col Richard King, who had arrived at Mather this afternoon in Z-1, 42-24656, with the Goldsworthy crew (#101) of the 881st. When his crew assembled this morning at Kearney preparatory to take-off, Maj Goldsworthy realized he had forgotten his shaving kit back in the off-post room he and his wife Jean had rented. Like the good army wife she was, Jean jumped in the car and raced off to retrieve the critical item, only to be stopped by the MP's at the gate for speeding. She broke out crying and the flummoxed MP's just told her to go on. She got the shaving kit and made it back to the field in time.

After Z-1 lifted into the air, Goldsworthy turned and circled the field. Jean and the other wives were clearly visible below standing beside their cars and waving. Goldsworthy rocked the bomber's wings to say goodbye, then turned and took up a heading for California. The wives watched with tears in their eyes until the plane disappeared. Only three of the eleven men in the Goldsworthy crew would come home again.

Also probably flying today from Kearney to Mather was Z-49, 42-24671, Feathers crew (#360) of the 883rd. With the Irvin (Z-2), Oswald (Z-4) and Tackett (Z-24) crews already in processing, that made five planes and crews now at Mather.

Back at Kearney this evening there was an unfortunate accident. At about 1800 hours, a base ground crew was detailed to pull Z-6, 42-24694, of the 881st Squadron out of the Depot Maintenance Hangar where she had been worked on. Towing a B-29 out of a hangar was not a simple task. The great wingspan of over 141 feet left little clearance for the hangar doors, and the tail, or vertical stabilizer, was so tall that in existing hangars special doors had to be cut in the wall above the center of the main doors. The NCO driving the cletrac, a small towing tractor, started out all right, going slow, but once the wings had cleared the doors, he started to turn to the left too soon. This caused the tail, still inside the hangar, to swing to the right and then crunch into the wall of the hangar. The result: "Vertical fin damaged from leading edge at rib station 176.55 to rear fin spar, and from rib station 176.55 to tip. Damage necessitates skin replacement, deicer channel replacement from station 168.45 to rear spar, and replacement of 5 each false ribs at fin tip." Z-6 and her crew, the Field crew (#110), would be delayed a while in getting out of Kearney.

28 Oct 44

Probably sometime this afternoon the aerial spearhead of the 500th Bomb Group, Z-42, Moreland crew (#344) of the 883rd Squadron, landed safely at John Rodgers Field on Oahu. At about the same time, back in California, two more 500th planes arrived at Mather from Kearney. These were Z-48, 42-24660, Black crew (#359), 883rd; and probably Z-7, 42-24680, Sullivan crew (#111), 881st. As these planes arrived, two planes and crews already at Mather were preparing to leave for Hawaii tonight or early tomorrow. These were Z-1, Goldsworthy crew (#101), 881st Squadron, with Group CO Col King aboard, and Z-49, Feathers crew (#360), 883rd.

Way back at Kearney AAF in Nebraska, the Hays crew (#228) of the 882nd had returned from their three-day passes. Bombardier Hal Towner noted in the crew diary that "Hays and his bride went with Wallower to his family's place in the mountains. [*Flight engineer William Wallower hailed from Evergreen, Colorado.*] They spent three days there and brought back enough venison for a big crew dinner."

At Kearney, once through the initial processing, the crews waiting for their turn to leave for Mather had little to do. Some crews were able to take their planes up occasionally to check out something or other, but mostly they just sat and waited. According to CFC gunner John Ciardi of the Cordray crew (#239) of the 882nd, "On orders of Col. Causland [*base commander?*] the ships were turned over to base personnel for maintenance, and crewmen were forbidden to work on the planes." Other accounts also indicate some level of friction between the 2nd Air Force personnel handling maintenance at the staging areas and the personnel of the outgoing bomb groups. But the 2nd AF had the authority here and they seemed determined to exercise it to the last minute.

29 Oct 44

This morning Z-42 and the Moreland crew of the 883rd Squadron, 500th Bomb Group, departed John Rodgers Field on Oahu and headed for Kwajalein.

Arriving at John Rodgers from the States probably well after Z-42 had gone were Z-1, Goldsworthy crew of the 881st, and Z-49, Feathers crew of the 883rd.

Back at Mather in California, the Oswald crew (#103) of the 881st was preparing to leave for Hawaii tonight in Z-4.

Z-2, Irvin crew (#105) of the 881st, and Z-24, Tackett crew (#237) of the 882nd, had arrived at Mather on the same day as Z-4, 26 Oct., but they would be delayed in leaving the States. Z-2 would require an engine change, which would take some time. The problem that Z-24 had is unknown.

Thousands of miles away from Hawaii and the war zone, the Hurlbutt crew (#222) of the 882nd Squadron was still in Atlanta waiting on their plane to be repaired at Bell Aircraft. Navigator Ken Fine was more than ready to leave. He confided to his fiancée in a letter written today that he was even getting tired of drinking. He was frustrated with the factory, where "They keep telling us we will be leaving here in a couple of days and then when that time is up, they say it will be another couple of days more and so it goes." But Fine really felt that they would be leaving by Tuesday, 31 Oct, or Wednesday, 1 Nov.

30 Oct 44

About 1300 miles out of Hawaii on 29 Oct, Z-42 and the Moreland crew of the 883rd Squadron, 500th Bomb Group, crossed the International Date Line and immediately leaped into 30 Oct, which is the date they landed on Kwajalein. So far, so good. Only about 1350 miles, an easy day's flight, to go to Saipan.

The B-29 crews found Kwajalein to be a stark contrast to lush, idyllic Hawaii. The atoll had been assaulted in

January, and evidence of the fierce fighting was all around, from wrecked landing craft on the beach to shell holes and splintered trees. Clearly, they were getting closer to the war.

Meanwhile, arriving today at John Rodgers Field on Oahu after a long flight from Mather Field was Z-4, Oswald crew (#103), of the 881st. She joined there Z-1, Goldsworthy crew, also of the 881st, and Z-49, Feathers crew of the 883rd, who had been held back from leaving for Kwajalein today for unknown reasons, possibly bad weather. While on Oahu, the crews were officially restricted to base. Maj Robert Goldsworthy obeyed the order but learned later that some of his crew had sneaked off to the beach, probably the famous Waikiki.

And far away in Nebraska, Z-5, 42-24643, Luman crew (#109), 881st Squadron, took off from Kearney today and flew to Mather, where the Sullivan crew (#111), Z-7, 42-24680, of the 881st and the Black crew (#359), Z-48, 42-24660, of the 883rd had completed their overseas processing and were preparing for a night-time departure for Hawaii.

31 Oct 44

From the 500th Bomb Group narrative history:

"October 31st was a red letter day in the records of the 500th Bombardment Group. B-29 No. 24653, Group No. Z Square 42, commanded by Captain Charles T. Moreland, Jr. of 883rd Bombardment Squadron, landed at Isley Field No. 1, the first B-29 in our Group to arrive at Saipan."

In other activity today, Z-1, Goldsworthy crew, with Group CO Col Richard King on board, and Z-4, Oswald crew, both of the 881st Squadron, were able to fly out of John Rodgers Field on Oahu this morning. Both planes reached Kwajalein safely, landing on 1 Nov after losing a day due to crossing the International Date Line.

Finally today, coming into John Rodgers from Mather were Z-7, Sullivan crew, of the 881st and Z-48, Black crew, of the 883rd.

Sgt Clyde Barnhart, propeller specialist in the 883rd Squadron, and his buddies in the maintenance and repair group at Mather Field, California, were being kept pretty busy as the 500th planes passed thru on their way overseas. It seemed like there was always something that needed to be done on a B-29.