

12 April 1986

Samuel L. Sox Jr.

Dear Sam,

I have been working on this for some time, but never seem to get time to finish it. I found your call on my answering machine, and decided to give it another go. We were in West Virginia taking Stella's Mother to the doctor when you called. She has dizzy spells, which the doctor attributed to hardening of the arteries. Nothing can be done he said. Terrible for someone who drives 25 miles each way to church, and for shopping. Dangerous for her, and for other drivers.

Sorry I could not make it for the interview. I'm sure we can get together at some future date. If you come to Dayton, you can get Bill Kohlhas and I together.

Let me go down some of the areas you wanted to cover. Some of the following material comes from letters I wrote my Father. He saved them all. You must consider I saw the Major only in the line of duty.

Enlisted were not allowed to go on leave with Officers, or enter Officers clubs. The crap games were not matters I witnessed, or even knew about for the most part. His diary or fellow officers could provide much better information regarding this aspect of his life. Also, after all successful missions, there were big crowds around the Major, while I was tearing off the cowling looking for damage, and preparing to change all 24 spark plugs in preparation for the next days mission.

Initial thoughts about reporting to Bodney.

First, let me put things in perspective. I went to England with the 17th Service Squadron in March/April 1943. After a short stay at Shrewsbury, during which I worked on Spitfires, I was sent to Burtonwood Air Base. There I attended a Crew Chief course on P-47s. The course was taught by RAF enlisted personnel. Rather ironic. We did not have any planes to work on, only pictures.

While I was at Burtonwood, the 17th SS moved to Bodney. I arrived at Bodney at the end of June, or the beginning of July 1943. The area the 17th SS was assigned was north of the field and had no running water, 8 seater outhouse toilets, and the electricity was by generator, which was cut off at 8PM each night. To take a shower, you had to walk a couple of miles to the southeast side of the field. The shower had no hot water, no lights, and the concrete floor had evidently never hardened. You always found cement on the bottom of your feet after a shower.

The 17th SS was to operate the hangar. Since there were no planes on the field when we arrived, and no planes in the hangar, the Commanding Officer, a gray haired former infantry Major, way out of his element in the Army Air Force, volunteered our services to dig ditches and other menial tasks.

Fortunately, about that time, the control tower requested 3 men to assist with transient aircraft which might land on Bodney. I was assigned to head that group. Why I was chosen I'll never know. The other 2 guys were far older than I. One was a former professional football player, college graduate. The other was a fine fellow 10 years my senior. We were all PFC's or Corporals, I believe. I have lots of good stories about happenings while assigned that duty, but I have not included them as they don't pertain to Major Preddy, who is the subject of this.

Bodney was not an airfield as I had imagined one. No concrete runways and only one hangar, which was out of view from the airfield. It was just a big field with a road around the perimeter. The middle of the field was the highest point on the field. A plane could land at one end of the field and

you would never know it at the other. You took off going up the hill, and landed going up the hill.

Shortly after the 352nd arrived, I was relieved of my duties at the control tower, and assigned to work with the 17th SS in the hangar. [I was still at the control tower on 9 September 1943 when a Canadian Stirling bomber landed with 3 engines and a couple of gas tanks shot up. Came in after midnight. Pitch black. I was told to go out in the field and find out what was happening. I took a flashlight and guided this monster toward the control tower. All the while a German plane was buzzing low overhead. Of course I didn't know what plane was doing this, but I rather suspected it was German. It had followed the plane back hoping to shoot up the bomber base. The pilot, instead, chose to lead him to a field he knew to be empty.]

My father had been in WWI. He was a very strict man, and I was always frightened of him. He managed a large hotel in Greenwich, Connecticut, my hometown. He seemed to be embarrassed that it took me 10 months to get overseas. I do believe he wanted me to get in action so that he would have something to discuss with the many people who came to the hotel during the course of a day. Probably many of whom had boys overseas.

Under the Army infantry Major, those personnel of the 17th SS who worked in the hangar had to march back and forth from the barracks area to the hangar, about a mile, back and forth for lunch, and back at the end of their working day. [At Shrewsbury we were required to do this with our helmets on and rifle over our shoulder.]

After the 352nd arrived at Bodney, we began hearing the roar of engines down on the airfield even before we started our breakfasts. We also heard them long after we quit for the day and had marched back to our barracks area. I inquired about this, and was told by the Sergeants of the 17th SS that the 352nd had two shifts of crews working on the planes. I was to find out that that was in error, for I became the two shifts on the planes of Major Preddy. Three shifts, if you count the number of times I had to stand guard over the planes at night.

I knew I would never be able to return after the war and tell my Father I had spent the war in a hangar handing up tools to a Sergeant. I went to the Maintenance Officer of the 17th SS and asked for a transfer. Surprisingly, they put up quite a fuss. You would almost think I was doing something important. In fact, you would almost think I was doing something.

They should have known I would not take no for an answer. While in Fort Dix with the 17th SS, I volunteered to do a few days work in the orderly room because one of the clerks there was sick. When they saw I could type well, they would not let me back with the rest of the men. I probably should have qualified for a Section 8 discharge right then and there for wanting to get out of the orderly room, as all the rest of the outfit not working there or in the stock room, or mess hall were out doing so in the bitter cold weather marching, performing close order drills, or some other such silliness for a person in the Army Air Force.

An old timer told me the only way I could get out of that job would be to foul up. Although that was totally contrary to my nature, I did. I took to my cot at Fort Dix and refused to leave it until I was relieved of my duties in the orderly room. That lasted 3 days, during which time all the officers came down to tell me I would be court-martialed. One even pleaded with me to get up, but I refused unless my demand to leave the orderly room was met. They finally gave in, and I reported to a coal detail, in the bitter cold of a February morn in New Jersey, on my first day out of the heated orderly room. My persistence in requesting transfer from the 17th SS also paid off. I was transferred to the 487th in January 1944.

First impressions about Preddy. How the men came to appreciate him.

When I joined the 487th, I was originally assigned as a roving assistant crew chief. I remember one of those days very vividly. It was January 20th.

That day I was assigned to Captain Preddy's plane. God it was frightening. It was the first time I was ever left alone with responsibility for a plane.

At school at Lincoln Air Force Base, we were taught from books. We were the second class through that school, and equipment, even screwdrivers, were not yet available in the early part of the class. During the whole training, we were only allowed in a plane once. That came at the end of the course when we were marched outside, lined up, and allowed to climb into a P-40 one by one to start the plane. Later, at Fort Dix, I would "qualify" on a carbine rifle by firing 10 rounds in the air. Much the same with the plane. One start and you graduated.

Somehow or another, I got the Captain off that day, 20 January 1944, and stayed by his hardstand awaiting his return. I was so brand new to the 487th, no one knew me, or gave a damn. Later, when the planes became returning, I watched them land one by one and taxi to their hardstands. I was on tenderhooks each time, hoping it was Captain Preddy. Gradually it got dark and I still waited by the Captain's hardstand. Most of the crews had left the field when someone passing by asked what I was doing. I told him. It was then I learned the Captain was down in the English Channel. I sat there and went through everything I had done on the plane before the flight, trying to think if there was anything I had possibly done to cause the plane to go down. Eventually I would find out more details about that mission.

I am not quite certain just when I was permanently assigned to Captain Preddy's plane. I have a letter written 1 April 1944 in which I speak of the assignment. [In a letter dated 5 April I note that he is now a Major. In a letter dated 9 May I wrote that recently the first pilots returning from a mission had reported that Major Preddy had been hit, but that it turned out to be another plane. In my letter of 15 June, I told my Father that I was now on my third plane with Major Preddy, and that I would be happy to say after the war that I always had the same pilot.]

As the Major's score mounted, and his stature as an 8th Air Force ace increased, I began to feel a pressure from the Sergeants as to the manner in which I greeted the Major before a mission. They felt I was not military enough. They wanted me to salute Major Preddy each time he approached the plane for a mission, or otherwise.

The Major never demanded this of his crew. He certainly knew we all respected him. He was very easy to get along with. I never heard an unkind word from him, never heard him complain about any aspect of the care of his plane. Personally, because of my deep respect for the man, I spent many hours beyond the call of duty to assure myself that if anything happened to the Major, it would not be because of something I did, or failed to do. I was sure the Major never expected his crew to drop our work and salute every time he approached his plane.

The pressure mounted so that one morning, to comply with the "wishes" of the Sergeants, when the Major was walking toward the plane for a mission, I approached him, stopped, and saluted. The Major was dumbstruck. He was obviously not prepared for this. He tried his best to be military, to return the salute. What happened, however, was that he dropped his helmet and his maps in the attempt. I helped the Major pick up the mess. I then assisted him into the plane, strapped him in, and waved him off. Not one word passed between us regarding this disaster, but that was the last time we ever exchanged salutes.

The men loved and respected the Major. The men may not have loved LCOL Meyer, but they certainly respected him. J. C. hollered at everyone and everything. He was the boss, and everyone knew it. The Major just kept shooting down planes, and let that speak for him.

One afternoon I looked out on the field and there were Captain Hamilton and Major Preddy measuring the field, with a one foot ruler, from the crest of the hill at the top of the landing field, back toward where they landed late

that afternoon. Evidently J. C. felt they landed too close to the top of the hill. J. C. did not play favorites.

In defense of J. C., I have to say the worst thing about the Mustang was its brakes. They were called multiple disc brakes, but were nothing like the disc brakes on our cars today. If you rode ~~de~~ them too hard, as you would if you landed too close to the top of the hill and the momentum started you down the other side, the brakes got so hot the 13 individual discs welded themselves together. I had to attend to many such brake problems.

One night the Sergeants called a meeting of the enlisted men. J. C. had gone on leave back to the States, and Major Preddy was designated as the acting Commanding Officer. The Sergeants were standing on a podium warning us that we had better not do anything which would cast a reflection on the Major while he was acting CO. If we did, even if we were in London when it occurred, it would go hard on us. I felt so out of place that night. I would not do anything that would hurt the Major in any way, threats or not. But it did show with what respect the Sergeants held the Major.

And there is no question but that Major Preddy was the enlisted mens favorite.

Conversion to P-51's.

The P-47's were huge gas-eating man-o-wars. They were tough. They would bring a pilot back despite almost any type damage. But, using 125 gallons of gas an hour, they had a very limited range.

The pilots respected them, relied on them. When the P-51 came, tiny by comparison, and with a water cooled engine, many were leary of them. One piece of flak in the coolant line, for instance, would cause the engine to overheat and stop. One piece of flak hitting the 18 cylinder 2800 cubic inch radial engine in the P-47 would hardly be noticed.

Further, the P-51 resembled the Me-109. When the P-51s were new to the 8th Air Force, and prior to their receipt by the 352nd, I noticed in the Stars and Stripes newspaper that a flight of P-51's had been shot down the previous day. I noticed shortly thereafter a P-51 appeared over Bodney flying around the field, allowing the pilots of the 352nd to view the new plane from all angles in the air, then landing so they could see it up close. I am sure that the same thing happened that day at all other P-47 bases in England. I rather suspect that an unsuspecting flight of 4 P-51's had been shot down by P-47's.

But most of the pilots were like Major Preddy. They accepted the P-51 as you would a new car, evidently without much thought of the water cooled engine, the coolant lines, etc. The greater speed and the greater range were all they needed to accept this plane. [The P-51 consumed less than half the gas required by the P-47.]

The P-51 required much more work of the Crew Chief and his assistant. On the radial engine used by the P-47, spark plug changes were very infrequent. On the P-51, after we changed to 125 octane gasoline, the Crew Chief and/or his assistant were required to change the 24 spark plugs after every flight. This was not the easiest thing to do, since the change was done while the engine was hot, and the uneven footing provided by the metal matting on which the scaffold rested, often resulted in your getting burns on your hand or arms when you rocked back and forth while changing the 12 plugs on the inner bank of the engine.

The P-47 never gave you a problem with its brakes. The P-51 had multiple disk brakes which gave all the crews problems. The multiple disk braking system had 13 disks, 6 or 7 attached to the wheel, and the remainder to a spline in the axle upon which the wheel rotated. When the brake pedal was pressed, hydraulic fluid was forced into a rubber ring which compressed the disks against one another. The disks ~~disks~~ attached to the wheel were of one metal, the one attached to the axle of another.

As I said previously, these disks tended to weld together after it was necessary to use the brakes heavily. Sometimes, however, the problem was not

noticed until the next morning, when the pilot was attempting to leave the hardstand to join the others for takeoff. Then it became dangerous, as the crew tried to free the wheels, while the pilot was urging them on, and the propeller was turning directly behind their backs. I have seen them, unknowingly, come within inches of running into the props, as they pulled on the rope attached to the wheel chucks, trying to free them after the brakes broke loose.

Preparation for D-Day. Cripes A'Mighty 3rd.

A day or two before D-Day, we were ordered to paint alternate black and white strips around the wings and body of our planes. We assumed something big was up, and it was.

Nearly every enlisted man who did not actually work on the planes was put on guard duty while the painting was going on, and left on duty until after D-Day. Officers took these men, who usually worked in the orderly room or supply hut, etc., and placed them wherever they felt appropriate to keep those on the field from leaving, and those off the field from gaining entrance to the field. This aspect of D-Day planning, the painting of the planes, was to be kept secret. It must be pointed out that most of the civilian construction workers on the field during the day were from Ireland, a country which had not joined us in declaring war on Germany. Civilians on Bodney on 5 June 1944 were not allowed to go home, and they weren't allowed to tell their families why, if they knew.

Unfortunately, the guard assignments were done in such a hurry, the exact placement of the men was not known with exactness. This was to become a problem later that day, and in succeeding days.

The briefing took place in the wee hours of D-Day. Following the briefing, the pilots came to their planes, were strapped in, and taxied to the southwest corner of the field. They were to take off in complete darkness. To the best of my knowledge, the 352nd had never engaged in night flights before. The night was pitch black, and no lights were lit, making takeoff even more dangerous.

From where we stood, by the 487th section on the northeast section of the airfield, we could not see anything, but could hear the roar of the engines to the west. Then we heard a deeper roar as the planes rolled across the field to gather speed for takeoff. The day everyone had long awaited had finally arrived. We could sense the beginning of the end for Germany, and the beginning of our return to the States, to home.

Then all hell broke loose. The sky lit up like Broadway and 42nd Street in New York, which was 28 miles from my home in Greenwich, Connecticut. The crack of gunfire had us further disorganized. Poor LT Robert C. Frascotti of the 486th, we were later to learn, had crashed into the nearly completed new control tower. The flames from that crash made takeoff easier for the rest of the 352nd, but at a terrible price.

That day the pilots were to stay in the air as long as they had fuel. Some stayed up for almost 10 hours, I seem to remember. Then many of the planes were given to fresh pilots to do the same. Some of these pilots had never flown a P-51, and had been in the States a few days before.

The crews continued their usual work of preparing for the return of their planes, the preparation of new wing tanks, gathering the new 24 spark plugs, and so forth. The normality of life continued and we went to chow in shifts. I was with the late shift that day.

When I returned from chow, I noticed ambulances in the 487th area. I watched them go past on the perimeter road heading to the hospital. However, strangely enough, they only got a hundred yards or so before they stopped again. Then the men inside came bouncing out of the ambulances, assuming unflattering poses.

It turned out many of them had food poisoning, a very powerful type that caused you to void at both ends. I was talking with our propeller man, the

biggest man in the 487th, when all of a sudden he fell at my feet. Later, I was to feel the same weakness he had developed. I was working on Cripes A'Mighty 3rd at the time. I called out to no one in particular, that if anyone wanted me to do something, they had better speak up fast.

I, too, came down with the same illness and wound up in the hospital. The hospital became so crowded, they had to issue buckets to persons they had no room for. Not a pleasant subject, but very disturbing at this time in the war. Everyone wondered if the civilians trapped on the base had not caused it. I don't think we ever found out.

But it became even more serious for the men posted to guard posts established with the press of time. The officers didn't quite know where some of the men were posted, and it had to be considered that many of them were ill also. In fact, days later the field was still getting calls from townpeople advising of naked men laying in their own filth. Bad show.

A day in the life of a crew chief and his assistant.

We were awakened in time to eat and be at our hardstand 2 hours before that day's takeoff. For early morning missions, that was usually between 4 and 5 AM. [I note in a letter I wrote my father on 14 August 1944 that I had worked from 5:30AM to 11:30PM the previous day.]

When we got to the hardstand, we would often find a stream of coolant coming from the coolant lines. This would be where the aluminum lines were joined together with rubber hoses and hose clamps. These lines went from the engine to the radiator, which was underneath the midsection of the plane. When we worked on the plane the previous day, after a mission, the coolant was still hot. At night, when the temperature of the coolant dropped, the metal contracted and the problems showed themselves. I'm sure the jolt of the landing, and the rough field over which they had to taxi had much to do with this problem.

We did not have Prestone in those days. At least not in the Army Air Force. We had ethylene glycol which we mixed with water, hopefully in the correct proportions. After tightening the hose clamps, we added the anti-freeze.

Almost invariably I was assigned the task of preflighting the plane, that is of putting the engine through its paces. This was very worrisome to me. It was usually dark during the morning preflight. With the cockpit lights on, so I could watch all the instruments, I felt totally alone. I could see no one, nothing outside.

While you warmed the engine up, you performed other tasks, such as going from one gas tank to another, to assure that any air bubbles were removed from the system. When the engine had finally warmed up, you applied greater pressure on the brakes, and then pushed the throttle forward until you were within 200 RPM's of takeoff RPM, I believe it was. By that time, the rear end of the plane had raised up, and the propeller was coming closer to the ground. You prayed that all is well out there in the darkness, that the plane wasn't creeping forward about to crash into something, that Lew Lunn wasn't trying to tell you of a problem developing, etc. You are completely cut off from the outside world, and the noise of the engine further isolated you.

You then checked the two magnetos, one at a time. You checked to make sure the drop in RPM's isn't more than 75. That done, then, and only then, could you relax, cut off the engine, thrust forward the throttle to clear out the gas from the engine, and call it a morning. Then I signed the book assuring the Major that the preflight had been completed, and the plane was ready for the mission. Then we waited for the gas truck to top off CRIPES A'MIGHTY. Oil had been added after the previous mission.

When the Major came out for a mission, we would greet him, help him in the plane, answer any of his questions, plug in the line from the battery cart, wait for him to start the engine, pull out the wheel chocks, lead him out from the hardstand, and wave him off. We then waited by the field until

he had taken off, to make sure nothing untoward has happened since he left us.

We then set to work preparing for his return, hours later. We break open two belly tank boxes, and prepare the belly tanks for installation in the event he drops the ones he took off with. He usually only did that if he engages in enemy action. We get the 24 spark plugs for use after the mission. We then take shifts going to lunch, so one will be there in the event the Major returns early. [Thankfully, that never happened.]

I had developed a hole in the middle of the huge pile of belly tank boxes, in which I would hide and sleep, until the Major returned. The Major caught on to this, and developed a habit of buzzing the belly tank boxes, to wake me up for his return. The boxes were right next to our hardstand.

When the Major returned, we led him to his hardstand, and placed the wheel chocks in place. Then we assumed a position on either side of the engine, and had the Major cut off one magneto then the other, listening for any unusual sound or smoke from the engine. Then we called for the Major to cut off the engine.

We jump up on the wing and talk to the Major to see what happened, and if he had any problems with the plane.

If no problems with the plane were encountered, we check the plane for damage, then strip off the cowling preparatory to changing the spark plugs. When the 24 spark plugs have been replaced, the "old" ones thrown in the woods nearby, and the new wing tanks have been installed, a maddening process if one is alone, I then go through an engine preflight similar to the one I performed before the mission.

We then put the cowling back on, and tie canvas covers over the engine and the wings. This job is very difficult in the Winter, when the canvas is frozen and the wind is up. We then wait our turn with the gas truck, and check and fill the oil tank, if necessary.

The armorer, Lew Kuhaneck, comes by after a mission to check if the guns have fired. If so, he reloads. If not, he is through for the day. (I had no idea the armorer did nothing except on days of bombing with our planes, or when the plane fired. I thought everyone worked as hard as I did. Had I known this, I would have raised hell to have him assist me at least in mounting the wing tanks for the next day when I was alone.)

In my case, since I was only a Corporal while with Major Preddy, it is entirely possible I will have to stay and guard the planes, or will be on KP the next day. If I am on guard that night, I am allowed the next morning off, but must report to the line at noon, after eating early lunch. For KP, I have to report as usual the next morning.

Why didn't his crew transfer to the 328th when the Major took over as Commanding Officer.

I'll quote from my letter of 29 October 1944. I completely forgot the details until I reread that letter.

"The Major tried to take his crew with him to his new squadron, but our Colonel wouldn't permit it. According to the Major, the Colonel said that the other squadron couldn't replace us with a crew as good. Damn swell of the Major to show his confidence in us that way.

He has made a lasting imprint on my mind and I'll always consider myself lucky to have worked for him and to be able to call him my friend."

6 August 1944

As I indicated previously, I do not believe I had any knowledge of the Major's big evening before the mission. That just wasn't the type thing you spoke about as you strapped him in for a mission. I might have noticed him coming out before the flight to get a whiff of oxygen, but that happened often to many of the pilots. Said it cleared their heads after a bad night.

Here is what I wrote Dad on 7 August 1944. "I've told you a bit about my pilot, but here's an article describing his latest adventure.

They've taken any number of newsreel pictures of himself and the plane. If you see them, you are bound to see me as I am in every one. The crew chief was off that day, so I was alone on the ship when he came in with news of his six successes.

Since his plane has to be kept in the best of condition, we are kept busy a lot of the time. But when you can see the results, you feel a lot better.

He's flown my plane for as long as I've been in the outfit. When I joined him he had three to his credit, so maybe I'm a good luck charm."

Christmas Day 1945

Most of the crew chiefs were at Y-29. The assistants would follow in January. I forget the exact date I left, but I do remember it was in a blizzard. We flew over in C47's, with only the crew of the plane having parachutes. We did not go to Y-29 but landed in Chievres. Deep snow, slept in an unheated church. Cold as hell.

At Bodney, someone bought a keg of beer and had it delivered to the 487th enlisted area on Christmas morning. Don't know why. Perhaps some officer felt it would help our pick up our spirits. The weather was overcast, and the damp went through you.

I wandered up to have a drink of beer, but was not looking forward to it. I usually drank my beer at night. In any event, I went up to see what was going on. The keg of beer was standing on top of a table, with the spigot in place. Anyone could turn the handle and have as much beer as one wanted.

Actually, few were taking advantage of the free beer. Those that did were just sitting about talking about nothing in particular. Certainly not the fact it was Christmas. For many, including myself, it was our third Christmas away from home.

Some one, I don't remember who, came over to the group and announced that Major Freddy had gone down and was presumed dead. A silence came over the group. This could not happen, should not happen, could not be true. Not to Major Freddy, the favorite of the 487th enlisted men.

No one spoke. One by one we got up and left the area, left the keg of beer, to find some place where they could compose themselves, and try to understand what had happened. More specifically, to try to understand why it had happened to their hero. For all I know, that keg of beer may still be there.

Sam, I'm just getting tired. I'm stopping now to see if this is the type thing you want. I'm sure you want more of the Major, and less of me.

Please advise. I'm sending a copy of this to Joe Noah. He might find it interesting.

Regards,

Red

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