GEORGE FULLMER

LIGHTER MEMORIES OF WWII—FROM CADET TO THE HUMP

To set the time era, think of two songs based on places at the time. Our troop train from pre-cadet indoctrination at Boca Raton, Florida, en route to our cadet school at Grand Rapids, Michigan, went through both: Chattanooga, and Kalamazoo!

There were six places at the time for training meteorology cadets from recruits in the top of their first two years of science or engineering: Cal Tech, MIT, UCLA, U. of Chicago, NYU, and Grand Rapids, Michigan. Whereas the college campuses were somewhat informal, our commanding officer, Colonel McNeil, was a West Point grad, and our view was that he was out to make us 900 cadets another West Point. We occupied the Civic Center in Grand Rapids, the main building similar to the old San Jose Civic Center gym, with an adjacent 1,000-seat auditorium. The auditorium was used for lectures and the main building as our lab for working on weather maps—row on row of library tables, lighted by low-hanging rows of fluorescent fixtures. We were housed across the corner in the Pantlind Hotel to which we had winter access through a tunnel under the street.

Two of the staff members bring back memories of the auditorium and the gym: Lt. “Doah” Johnson, and Sergeant “Louie the finger”.

Major Wexler, a top Weather Bureau man, who taught our Dynamic Meteorology class, wore a uniform because he had to; he was a civilian at heart, and the cadets appreciated him. To extend his talents further, he had a Lt. Johnson who would see that the major never had to lecture with a dirty blackboard. As soon as the major filled one side of the blackboard, which rode on a caster-wheeled frame and was reversible, Lt. Johnson would come out and erase the backside of the board as the major wrote on the front.

I guess Lt. Johnson was smart enough, or he would not have been kept around for grading papers, helping with lab work, etc. But all the cadets ever saw or heard was his anxious look as he peered from behind the stage curtain to see when the blackboard would be ready for erasing again. There was no signal from the major, and no words were exchanged. Thus, it became a common practice of the 900 cadets in the auditorium to be watching from the corner of their eyes for the peek from behind the curtain, and when the peek came, there was a long, low monotone chorus, “Dough-ah”. So, smart or not, Lt. Johnson was known to the cadets as “Doah” Johnson.

When Sergeant Louie, the little guy from Colonel McNeil’s office, wanted to talk to someone in the crowded lab, he could not get to their seat. He would just have to walk down the center aisle to the right row and point with his index finger at the cadet he wanted to nab. Then that individual would squeeze his way past everyone else in the row until he reached the center aisle, whence he and Sgt. Louie would exit together. The cadet would never be seen in class again! Thus the term, ”Louie the finger”. We subsequently learned that “the call” was for a

conference with the colonel, and it was a chewing-out rather than a discussion, followed by a reassignment to J. B. (Jefferson Barracks, MO, overseas debarkation point for the “walking” army).

Our nine months of meteorology classes were hectic. Incidentally, I did meet Major Wexler many years later as a civilian on the CCRC--Congressional Committee on Reactor Safety, and I mentioned how we cadets appreciated him. His comment was that he appreciated the rigor of our cadet life, and he tried to make it seem more like college. Now, a little story about the “two-finger rule” demonstrates the importance of understanding concepts and relative magnitudes, not just mechanical calculations. In our one-hour lab we had to plot in the key data points, draw in the isobars on the weather map, designate the highs and lows, draw in the weather fronts, and then make our prediction. Needless to say, there was no time to think, let alone to waste. Our main predictive tool was Petterson’s formula. By putting in numbers on wind speeds ahead and behind the front, directions, temperature and pressure gradients, and a couple of other indicators, one could then work out the formula for predicting where the front would be in another 12 hours. By the time the map was drawn, the hour was almost gone, and a careful answer would have meant no answer and a flunk. It didn’t take long under those circumstances for a pragmatic approach to develop. By laying two fingers to the foreside of the front, then drawing a second line guided by the second finger, lo and behold, one had a reasonable approximation of the Petterson formula frontal prediction, already drawn in for 12 hours hence!

It’s interesting to look back on the meteorology hierarchy’s view of Colonel Crick, the Cal Tech prof who made money by selling long-range forecasts—really climatology treatises—to Standard Oil for Saudi Arabia, and to the May Company for their Los Angeles holiday parades. He had a system for long-range forecasting, before the days of computers, which he wouldn’t divulge. Basically it was to classify weather maps by certain key characteristics, then to find a series of maps corresponding to “today’s” weather, and using the subsequent maps in that series as his “prediction”. By hindsight, his method was a substitute for current computerized statistical methods, in which his future maps represented the integrated solution. Clever, don’t you think? But the established meteorology hierarchy referred to him snidely as “Colonel Crook”. Incidentally, Dr. Crick resumed his money-making after WWII by initiating cloud-seeding.

The nine-month meteorology course was sufficiently intense and structured that I was able to apply 17 semester hours’ credit toward my subsequent degree in physics.

In spite of the rigor, we did have good morale, and some cockiness, like the parody on “McNamara’s Band” which ended, “We are the men, the weather men. We may be wrong, oh now and then. But when you see, our planes on high-igh, just remember we’re the ones who let them fly!”

GEORGE FULLMER

Upon becoming commissioned weather officers in November, 1943, half of our class was sent to New Jersey for Army Intelligence training, and the other half was sent to Army Air Corps weather stations in the U. S. On the train from Chicago to my home in Pasco, Washington, the passenger cars were full of people going there for work on a nearby Du Pont project. People at home didn't know what it was for—maybe ammunition dumps since they were pouring so much concrete. Of course I learned the answer in August, 1945, then in India, when the A-bomb was dropped on Hiroshima.

I was sent first to an airbase called Gardner Field, at Taft, CA.

While riding a bus to a cousin's wedding in Lancaster, CA, where I'd been raised through the fifth grade, I sat next to an actress currently in a dance-line in a movie with Judy Garland. She told about their observing Margaret O'Brien being tutored during a break, and Judy remarking, "I never really had a childhood. From the time I was 12, I knew all the ins and outs of contracts and working." Which took me back to kindergarten and first grade when I'd given the little girl across the street, Baby Gumm, a pair of doll shoes for her sixth birthday. We moved to the state of Washington soon after that, and about eight years later my older brother saw "The Wizard of Oz" and said, "That has to be Baby Gumm" –she looked just like her older sister Virginia whom he'd dated at Lancaster. Sadly, their mother was the stage-mother type, and Judy was doomed to unhappiness.

Then a bunch of us weather officers were sent to Hamilton Field for an air traffic control course. I didn't know it until recently, but the chief Army Air Corps medical officer for northern California, stationed at Hamilton Field for the duration of the war, was Dr. Tom Lyon, whom I met at The Terraces of Los Gatos where we now reside (and was told that he'd written the first book on cholesterol!) The environs for Hamilton Field were such that the Bay Area was always in my mind as a desirable spot, and I transferred to San Jose with GE in 1971.

We were then sent to Camp Luna, New Mexico, for overseas prepping, a part of which was rifle range practice. You may recall how Col. McNeil wanted to make the Grand Rapids Meteorology Cadet training school a second West Point. We had a marching uniform you just don't see anywhere else –bright new dark green fatigue coveralls, open at the neck, with a suntan shirt and suntan tie underneath, and with buttonhook leggings above polished shoes to give a knickers effect. It was unusual enough that it really did look somewhat sharp, and we'd go strutting through Grand Rapids in formation singing proudly. But upon leaving Cadets, we all forgot about that outfit—all of us except Safran, a dreamy soul who reminded you of "The Sad Sack" cartoon character. What did he do but dress to the hilt in his fatigues, Grand Rapids style, for the rifle range. On the way an enlisted man lying on the grass summed it all up in the comment to his buddy, "My Gawd, I bet his mother's proud of him!"

Elphinstone Street, Karachi in 1940.

After Camp Luna, we were given sealed orders, not to be opened until we were on the plane leaving Miami. Those orders read "New Delhi, India." I've never been to New Delhi, but we did land at Karachi where we stayed until being scattered to different points in the China-Burma-India (CBI) Theatre about a month later. Meanwhile I learned what was meant by the Miami medical officer who told us about the GI's: "When you have to go 40 times a day, you're getting better." To add to the agony was the poor quality of Indian toilet paper and the lack of any of the American product. A friend and I bought all the airmail stationery in the Karachi PX to save our backsides from further aggravation. Later, I sent a square of the toilet paper home, with the comment, "This is how rough it is over here!"

My first assignment was at Gaya, of religious importance, in central India. While cadets, we were asked our ranking of desired climate. My order of preference was temperate, then cold, then hot. And here at Gaya we had days on end at 115 degrees with a strong enough breeze that you wouldn't get damp from perspiration when riding in a jeep. But we had a slick air-conditioning system. Our bashas had screens at each side, with kush-kush (root) mats hung over them. The bearer used a bucket and dipper to pour water on each mat

along the side of the basha, then repeat, taking the temperature down to a moist 90 inside.

While at Gaya, I was a weight-and-balance officer (for plane loading) and the PX Officer. I was not sorry to move on after a couple of months, and after brief stints at Dum Dum and Barrackpore, both near Calcutta, was assigned to Chabua where the action was. There it was ATC squared—Air Traffic Control for the Air Transport Command (of the Army Air Corps).

Note (In April 1942, pilots started flying the "Hump," and continued missions until 1945, when the Burma Road was reopened. The dangerous 530-mile long passage over the Himalayan Mountains took its toll. Nearly 1,000 men and 600 Air Transport Command (ATC) planes were lost over the hump by the end of China-Burma-India Theater (CBI) operations.)

Flying the Hump

Chabua was the air traffic control center for the west side of the “Hump”—the extension of the Himalayas going south down to Burma. We were told that it was a busier airfield at that time than the busiest airfield in the U. S. then—La Guardia—and our control area included southerly routes across Burma as well as from the other six major airports in the Assam valley, flying to about a dozen bases in China, mainly Kunming.

We had a General Bissel in charge of the CBI Theatre who declared, “The Hump is Never Closed,” and he stuck to that position, even when we had eight of our nine radio frequencies tied up in “Mayday” (taking bearings on lost planes). Air transport across the Hump carried far more fuel and materials than went to China via the famous Ledo Road and Ledo Pipeline, and it was the model upon which the Berlin Airlift was later based.

The weather in the Assam Valley had three nineties—90 inches of rain in 90 days at 90 degrees! I can verify that prickly heat is a partly psychological phenomenon. One’s arms could be clear after a cool night, then when one drank a cup of coffee as the temperature started to rise, one’s entire arm would be covered with rash in seconds.

Pilots would scoff at us controllers saying that the cloud ceilings at telephone post height and the droning of planes on letdown made us tighten up. “What are you worried about? We’re the ones who are up there!” If you want to hear more on their side, talk to Chuck Lawton—he’s even credited with downing a Zero while flying a DC-3! That was before the days of radar control; planes climbed and let down over radio markers and gave position reports accordingly. I’ve seen pilots come overseas as cocky kids, get their hours in, and return home six months later as aging men if lucky. So much for the serious side.

The 55-gallon gasoline drums transported across the hump were so heavy that it took coordinated effort to handle them. Remember General Bissel? The Chinese coolies unloading the gasoline drums were taught by the GI's to chant in rhythm as they worked, "Piss on Bissel, piss on Bissel." The name of the pilot next door in our basha who told me that was Lt.Kachurchek (we called him Gesundheit). He also told about Chinese coolies working on the runway who would scamper across ahead of the incoming plane to rid themselves of the devil following them—and the thud that told him that the plane's wheels hit more than the devil.

In the Far East the dragon symbol is seen frequently, and army people were quick to pick it up. Thus the shuttle plane which came up the Assam Valley from Calcutta to Chabua had a dragon painted along the entire side. Naturally, you guessed it, the plane's name read "My Assam Dragon".

Our traffic control work necessarily involved shifts. But too long on one shift and we'd miss movies we wanted to see. So we put movies above good sense and worked continually rotating six hrs on/24 hrs off shifts. Our ticket to the outdoor theatre, although under a thatched roof, was a dousing of mosquito lotion and inspection to assure that our pant legs were tucked inside our mosquito boots. We all had an atabrine-yellow color as we compared ourselves to the pink-cheeked merchant marines on the ship home.

Sometimes we even had a celebrity come through. It was reported that when Paulette Goddard visited with the USO, the plane was stripped of (American) toilet paper. Tom Harmon, the Michigan all-American and later broadcaster, who'd earlier parachuted from a dubious situation over the Amazon, was in a ferrying squadron passing through and called, "Harmon to tower, Harmon to tower," Soon other planes were calling for clearance, "Jones to tower," "Smith to tower," etc. When people ask about my two battle stars, I have to be honest. The railroad tracks lay just to the north of our basha. Army personnel south of the tracks got battle stars because of Japanese planes in the area nfrequently; those housed north of the tracks got none.

Overall, though, I'd say that our gang of 22-23-yr-old controllers had a great work ethic. I was upset in reading "The World is My Home" by Michener to hear of the near-sabotage conditions by our own troops which he had to investigate—observations inspiring such characters as Luther Billus in "South Pacific". I still

corresponded with and visited occasionally my commanding officer and fellow controllers and other conscientious citizens connected with my military career—only three years, but lots of memories per year!