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Melvin McMullen

Melvin McMullen was born on June 5, 1925 in Los Angeles, California. In April 1943, when he was seventeen and in high school, he went to the recruitment office to join the Army Air Corps. He intended to join the United States Army Air Corps (as it was called at the time) and became a pilot to follow in the footsteps of his older brother, who was at the time in flight training to become a pilot in the Army Air Corps. Their father was also serving the Army Air Corps. Mel took the entrance exam and was accepted. He was sworn into the Army but since he was only 17, he was given a 6-month deferment to finish high school and turn 18.

In October 1943, Mel received orders by telegram to report to Buckley Field, Colorado for his basic training. Even though he had hoped to become a pilot, it turned out that they were apparently more in need of aerial gunners than pilots and he was eventually assigned to gunnery school in Las Vegas, Nevada. After completing gunnery school, he was sent to Lemoore Air Base in California where he became part of a 10-man heavy bomber flight crew. He and his crew were then sent to March Field for further training.

In October, 1944, they finally received orders to go to Florida to await their overseas assignment. Mel and his crew took a troop train to Miami, Florida where after a few weeks they boarded an army transport plane, not knowing where they were headed. After an hour in flight, their pilot opened their sealed orders to find their assignment was to the China-Burma-India Theater. According to Mel his first days overseas were “exciting and strange” as they flew from location to location to get to where they were assigned in China. He and his crew, since they had

not been issued their own plane, had to “hitch hike” rides on Army planes that would fit all ten of them, from Miami to Brazil, Africa, Aden, India, and finally over “The Hump” to Kunming, China. With layovers, from overnight to several days, it took them over a month to reach their destination.

Mel said that in his time of service in the Army Air Corps in China and India, as well as traveling around the world with his wife Jennifer over the last seventy plus years, there was one outstanding thing that he found common among all peoples. They were all just normal people who wanted nothing more than to live their lives peacefully, just like him, and just like us.

While on his way to China, he experienced his first war casualty. This happened when he was in Aden (now Yemen) just after leaving Africa. He and some of his crew members saw a plane crash and commandeered a jeep to go and check it out. When they got there they found a man lying on the ground who looked to be covered in ash and at first they believed he was dead. Thankfully, the man was not dead but it was shocking to see a man who was seemingly dead, open his mouth and lick his lips.

After those many long weeks of traveling, he and his crew arrived in Kunming, China in December, 1944, where they were given a B-24 bomber to fly their combat missions. They named it “Dragon Lady”. Mel manned the nose gun turret and was the assistant aerial engineer. They served in the 14th Air Force under the command of Lt. General Claire Lee Chennault, who had commanded the original American Volunteer Group, which was called the “Flying Tigers” by the Chinese people.

During the time he was stationed in Kunming, Mel mostly flew combat missions with an occasional photo reconnaissance mission. His bombing raids were usually over railroad yards, factories, bridges, and naval dock facilities rather than over cities.

On one long mission, on their return to the Base after leaving the target, they became so low on fuel that the pilot gave orders to prepare to bail out. Just then the radio operator got a response to their SOS from a field they might be able to get to, which they did reach with two of four engines quitting before they reached the end of the runway.

Mel said when a crew had to bail out after a bombing raid due to enemy action or mechanical failure, their best chance to survive was to get far enough from the target area to be rescued by some brave Chinese farmer or villager. The Chinese villagers hid them from the Japanese soldiers by day and moved them from village to village by night until they could return to their military base. The Chinese citizens did this even though they knew that if the Japanese found out, it was likely they would be cruelly treated or even killed for aiding the enemy. Mel told of how these citizens helped hundreds of American airmen return to safety even though they knew that their lives were in danger if they did so. Mel also told us about how after one of his missions, he took a photo of himself sticking his finger through a hole in his nose turret that was made from shrapnel that was from Japanese anti aircraft fire. He was some months later transferred to Chengtu, China, where he and his crew flew the rest of their combat missions, after which they were all sent, separately, to different locations.

Mel was transferred to Tezpur, Assam, India, to be assigned as needed to fill in a flight crew. Tezpur is where he spent the remainder of his flight time. From here he would go on missions to take supplies from India to China over the “Hump”, the name given to the extremely

dangerous eastern side of the Himalayan Mountains. These supplies were to be stockpiled in China to prepare the United States and Chinese forces for the final assault on the Japanese mainland. Hundreds of planes that flew over the “Hump” went down due to the unstable and erratic weather conditions as well as enemy action. Mel described these these eight-or-more hour combat missions or just flights over the Himalayas as having periods of boredom, excitement, or total panic. He said that while a flight over the “Hump” could be scary or dangerous, on a bombing mission you also had to deal with the anti-air defense set up by the Japanese to protect the target. The only time the crews felt any sort of relief was when their missions was completed and they made it safely back to their base. Mel’s final mission was to fly as an engineer on a three-man crew to pick up and return a plane to Tezpur that had been left in Xian for repair. Xian is where the now famous terra cotta soldiers were discovered several years after the war.

After the war had ended, Mel left the Air Corps (now the Air Force) and moved back home where he met his wife, Jennifer, who was renting a room in his mother’s home. After talking with Mel, we also interviewed Jennifer who told us that while Mel was in China and India, she was one of the young women who worked in the defense industry. These women became known as “Rosie the Riveter”. Jennifer was actually a riveter at Lockheed Aircraft in Burbank, California in 1944. Her brothers served in the Army and one of them fought in the Battle of the Bulge while the other served in the South Pacific Theater. Mel and Jennifer were engaged after six weeks and married six months later, and have stayed married for the past 72 years. They have three sons and four grandkids.

The McMullen family travels quite often and it appears that Mel’s love for travel could have come from his time in the war. We heard about how during the war, there was not much

formal entertainment that was offered at the bases in China. Mel said he saw one USO show in Kunming, so the soldiers basically had to create their own amusement. Mel and some of his crew mates would sometimes commandeer a vehicle and go visit nearby temples and other little landmarks of the land they were in. These experiences have brought his love for traveling. Mel and Jennifer have traveled so much that they said they have a hard time finding new places to visit. Mel and Jennifer were invited by the Chinese Embassy three years ago in 2015 to Beijing, China to celebrate the 70th Anniversary of the “Victory over Japanese Aggression” (Chinese term for WWII as Japan invaded China in 1937).

Many years after the war Mel joined the China-Burma-India Veterans Association and served as National Commander in 2002-2003. He is also a past president of the Inland Empire chapter of the Distinguished Flying Cross Society. Mel was awarded the Air Medal and the Distinguished Flying Cross for his combat service in China.

Mel McMullen’s time in the war had shown him a side of the world that most people have never seen. He had seen the evils of war and the governments that cause them while also seeing the goodness of the common people that live in these countries. He had gained a great respect and admiration for people in other parts of the world, as shown by his constant traveling even at the age of 92. Meeting and talking with Mr. McMullen has truly been a great honor for us and we are thankful to have had the opportunity to talk to such a great man. He was willing to make the ultimate sacrifice for our country’s future and we could only hope to make the most of the future he fought for. Mr. McMullen may not think of himself as a hero and may not of thought he had much of a story, but we will always think of him as a hero and we will never forget the amazing story he had to tell.

