

U. S. ARMY AIR CORPS

VETERAN: LUTHER B. BRIGHT
HIGHEST RANK/GRADE: STAFF SERGEANT
INTERVIEWED BY: JOYCE KELL

Luther B. Bright, known to his buddies as "Sunshine" (Bright), served our country during WWII from November 6, 1941 to September 11, 1945. He was a sergeant in the 13th Air Corps in the 69th Bomb Squad and part of one of the most unsung professions of the war. He was a member of the ground crew which kept the bombers and pilots in the air. Most of his enlisted time was spent overseas in the Pacific, specifically New Caledonia and Guadalcanal where the 69th Bomb Group, flying B-25's, pounded the Japanese.

Mr. Bright described his experiences much like an old quote which says, "war is hours and days of boredom wrapped around the minutes of sheer terror." Although working with the ground crew, Mr. Bright was subjected to daily air raids, artillery and sniper fire. The boring times were filled with mosquitoes, intense heat and the loneliness of being separated from his loved ones. I chose Mr. Bright because of his interesting experiences in the South Pacific during the dark days after Pearl Harbor.

Talking with Luther Bright was very informative and enjoyable. He and his wife were both easy to talk with and had many stories to tell. They have several albums which they have compiled containing hundreds of fascinating pictures of such things as his troop, campsites, beaches of Guadalcanal, sinking Japanese ships and cemeteries of American soldiers buried on the islands. These pictures were taken and given to Mr. Bright by his dear friend and troop photographer, "Oklahoma Curly." Mr. Bright is very proud to say that he was also good friends with fellow troop member Jimmy Doolittle, Jr. and continues to remain in touch with his father, James Doolittle, who led the historic air raid of B-25's over the Japanese homeland.

Mr. Bright's army career began in November of 1941 at the age of 22. Prior to this, he was in the Civilian Conservation Corps for a couple of years, working in Mississippi, California and Oregon. He earned \$30 a month, sending \$22 home to his widowed mother, working on projects such as building fences, stone structures and clearing lands.

Soon after, his enlistment into the army began when he received a letter reading something like: "Greetings from the President of the United States. Your friends and neighbors have chosen you to represent your country. You will report to the draft board on November 6, 1941."

Shortly afterward he found himself on a train to Fort Sam Houston in San Antonio where he and the other draftees were given I.Q. and mathematical tests. Since Mr. Bright did well on these tests, they offered him a deal which he accepted — instead of signing up for the regular Army for one year making \$21 a month, he enlisted for three years at \$30 a month and was able to go directly into the Air Force.

He was first sent to Biloxi and then Jackson, Mississippi, for his initial corps training. He was there taking part in daily routine drilling — right-face, left-face — when the news that Pearl Harbor was being attacked erupted. The next thing he knew, he was on a ship looking across the water, wondering where he was going. He really didn't think he'd be sent overseas so soon since he had only been in the Army a month. Mr. Bright and his troop were on the sea for 25 days without knowing where they were headed. They eventually landed in Brisbane, Australia, then continued on to Melbourne and finally to Ballarat. Here, since they had no tents or supplies yet, they took shelter in the private homes of the Australians who were glad the "Yanks" were there to protect them from the advancing Japanese.

They stayed in Ballarat about six weeks, then moved on to New Caledonia. There were air strips here, and the air group who met them was made up of survivors from the Battle of Midway. Shortly afterward, they headed for the New Hebrides Islands and then in February of 1943 were shipped to Guadalcanal on navy transport ships. Immediately, his guys were pressed into service and began flying missions against the Japanese in the upper Solomons. Mr. Bright kept a diary of his experiences, and in the 3 1/2 months he was there, recorded some 68 air raids, numerous artillery shellings and once, when he ventured to the northern end of the camp, was almost hit by sniper fire. The Japanese hid in tops of coconut trees and were cleverly camouflaged.

During the quiet times, Mr. Bright worked as paymaster and records keeper for the troop. He was also the corps bugler. In his younger days, he had served as drum major in school and later in an orchestra while in the CCC. He blew revelry in the morning to wake everyone up, chow calls and any other calls needed to alert the troop. He originally played a trumpet until it was stolen and was replaced with a bugle. According to Mr. Bright, people stole anything they could get their hands on.

The morale of the guys was pretty good most of the time, although there were instances when men had to be sent home because they just "couldn't take it" and were not able to function for the troop as they should. Mr. Bright's opinion of his leaders and commanding officers was fairly high.

There was a lot of boredom among the troops, a lot of sitting and waiting. For entertainment, they put bands together, played ping pong and baseball, watched the same movies again and again and made pets of the deer who hung around the camps. They also listened to the radio and often heard Tokyo Rose spreading her propaganda and lies. The troop found her broadcast quite funny, but did like the music she played. On occasion, famous celebrities visited the camps, and Mr. Bright saw Randolph Scott in New Caledonia and Joey Brown in Guadalcanal.

The mail was very slow to arrive overseas, and they'd often receive letters two or three months old. Once, Mr. Bright received 63 issues of *The Daily Sun* (now *The Baytown Sun*) at one time. Outgoing mail was censored and parts of their letters blacked out which contained information the censors thought "revealing."

The food in the camps was really bad. They ate lamb almost daily in Australia and lived mostly on instant potatoes, canned stew and canned meats. Milk was missed most as they went for two years without seeing any at all.

There were Japanese prisoners of war were kept right near their camp. Mr. Bright said they were treated very well despite the fact that the Japanese had no mercy on American prisoners.

Most of the men came down with malaria while in Guadalcanal, including Mr. Bright. He became very ill near the end of the stay and required extended hospitalization.

After their station in Guadalcanal, the 69th Bomb Squad traveled back to New Caledonia where they stayed until March of 1944 when, after having earned seven battle stars, they finally received their ticket back home.

They arrived in San Francisco and were given furlough during which Mr. Bright married his long-time sweetheart and present wife, Ernestine, whom he met here in Goose Creek. He was stationed in McCook, Nebraska, until his discharge date of September 11, 1945.

After becoming accustomed to civilian life again, Mr. Bright used his carpentry skills and landed a job as carpenter at the Exxon refinery in Baytown. He retired with the company after 35 years of service. He is currently a member of the Kiwanis, working to promote and serve civic organizations.

Mr. Bright was the youngest of five sons. His father was killed when he was only three months old, and a motorcycle accident claimed the life of an older brother. His three remaining brothers were military men, also. One served in Panama and another was a merchant seaman who made the convoy runs to Murmansk, Russia. He was one of only a handful of survivors when the ship he was on sank in the icy cold waters of the Arctic Ocean. There was also a brother on the submarine *Nautilus*. All of the brothers survived their assignments in the war, but Luther Bright is the only remaining son today. He and the surviving members of the 69th Bomb Squad continue to remain in touch and attend reunions every two years in different parts of the country.

Mr. Bright did not have anything really negative to say about his experience in the war though it certainly had to have been hellish at times. He is very admirable and, like all our veterans living and dead, has given this country something which we can never repay them for.