

Ave Atque Vale

John Masefield, once Britain's Poet Laureate, was enamored by the sea and demonstrated this passion in several poems, of which one entitled "Spanish Waters", becomes an opening theme for these remarks. It describes the ruminations of an old sailor, broke, almost blind, a piece of gnarled driftwood washed up on the docks at Bristol; recalling wistfully, his earlier days as a buccaneer on the Spanish main. In fact he remembers burying two chests of treasure on a remote island which he longs to reclaim. What keeps him propped up are memories of earlier days: the canon roar; boarding luckless ships, the ongoing hand-to-hand encounters and sharing the loot. He concludes his reminiscence with melancholy conclusion: "I am last alive that knows it. All the rest have gone their ways".

I'm not all that fascinated by the sea and don't happen to be destitute or stuck in a backwater tavern; but do have my memories of a life away from

home; on the move; serving with a larger crew, engaged in armed encounters, and now in retrospect wonder if, from the old 71st Squadron I am to be “the last alive that knows it.” Since our first reunion in 1946, I have tried to keep track of the old fellowship and marked over time our declining numbers. The only one I know still left from our crew of the 300 men is Bernie Muldoon, hobbling around a retirement colony in North Carolina. He joined us as a pilot in August of 1941 in time for maneuvers; then December 9th we deployed to California, only to fly east in June and wing it across the Atlantic; to Britain, where we flew our first missions. Next, to Tafraoui, during the North African invasion and then he flew fifty missions out of Algeria, only to receive command a new fighter squadron which meant another 50 missions. He stayed in the military and ended up a Bird Colonel in the Pentagon. By the way, he does read the First Fighter publications and recalls his combat

experience. A month ago, seventy one years after his last mission, said to me “I sure miss the old guys”.

But generational turnover is life’s process; no one is surprised. What is important is not the number of years we are given, but what we did with the time we had. Every one of us with duty in the Air Corps remembers that service more vividly than his high school or college matriculation. For many, it would be the most significant experience they would ever have.

Our squadron ground crew stayed intact, while pilots rotated in and out, so we yard birds had a longer period of duty together (mine was 40 months) and thus more shared experiences. Varying aptitudes and intelligence; ranged in age from late teens to the late thirties; held divergent philosophies, habits, and outlooks. Our assignment was subordinated to the squadron mission; our character and performance established the squadron culture.

We did not meditate long on “how” the war was fought or “where”. We focused on why we are camped around these metal landing strips; in a remote grain field... Or maybe cut out of the woods or flat stretches reaching into the desert. What pulled us from our homes and sent us off on this protracted, enforced mission was clear. We were attacked by Japan; then Germany and Italy declared war on us. We responded for a larger reason. The record of subjugation and destruction of whole cities, nations or entire ethnic peoples demonstrate the wanton barbarism of the enemy and threatened most of mankind. America was the only power that could check their onslaught; as Lincoln phrased it, “We were the “last best hope one earth” and we set about obliterating of the Axis power.

Drawing parallels between military units or missions today and those of my time is speculative. It assumes some similarity exists between the two. The assumption is each Air Force required a range of given expertise, from

clerical to technical, from flying a jet to cooking the chow; from headquarters paperwork to fixing radios or gun sights or Allison engines or twenty millimeter canons, plus doing intelligence, the Quartermaster function, medical support. Unlike you, however we were more civilian than military and inclined to do a lot of grumbling and complaining. Because we thought there was a lot to complain about. Living in tents was no longer a Boy Scout thrill; slogging thru mud revived no pioneer instincts, sweltering in tents (at Mateur), baked by the hot sirocco winds, harboring scorpions under the grass-mats, dust clogging the mosquito netting, was never considered a weekend frolic... and we lived in tents almost two years. We bitched about the constant moving, about the mix-up in orders for missions, about the monotony of the C-rations, the caliber of local wines, the character of the local inhabitants, the tenacity of the local insects, and the lineage of Hitler and Tojo who initiated the mandatory foray we were on.

We were assailed by sundry maladies like dysentery, yellow jaundice, malaria, home-sickness, colds and flu, and other esoteric afflictions; yet, remained remarkable vigorous. We adapted to sundry climes and diverse landscapes. Like Masefield's Old Sailor we have memories. Some are of England with its clouds and gloom, its hedge rows, quaint towns, and the disheveled ruins of our Anglo-Saxon experiment. Remember Africa was rough strewn and mostly trashy; also softly pastel in the twilight, but always very foreign; different, from the green farmland north to the forbidding desert around Biskra. Sardinia was abysmally depressing and miserably destitute. Italy got very muddy, was battered, hum-drum and protracted. The landscape, the architecture, and inhabitants, all like refugees from a movie lot. From this exposure something else became obvious and that was the marvel of America as opposed to Africa; its adaptability; its capacity to function anywhere without running water, electric power or building. There was also a

peripatetic factor in place eternally packing the truck with bedrolls and valises and ditty bags, board for D-C3 flights, clambering aboard motorized vehicles, jeeps, or trains, then unpacking; setting up tents; digging foxholes and latrines, etc. We moved 11 times in 21 months. We also greeted new tent mates and stood in old chow lines; eating from tin mess kits, but never got to liking it all that much. Nor what was dumped in it, especially if it were steak and kidney pie with the grease congealing around the edges. We also got used to waiting and to a variation called “hurry-up and wait;” to the snorting and purring of motors early in the morning; in a pinch, pumping gas out of 50 gallons drums. We got used to homemade heating stoves, mail call, batches of new pilots, old guys going home, bullet or shrapnel holes in airplanes, air echelons, and monotony.

What occurred in our peregrinations was a perpetual awareness of the strange world “out there” beyond the encampment. Unable to speak the

language, or associate with the natives, we lived in an aura of isolation. We became a transient enclave: mobile, adaptable, versatile, proficient. In this circumstance we looked inward which reinforced our intra-connectedness and welded us together more firmly as a unit. That process built an affiliation and loyalty to the unit which the nature of war and our human condition often induces. The connected nature of our assignments created an inevitable cohesiveness. We were a professional amalgam, sustained by a personal camaraderie.

No one stopped to ponder the psychological phenomenon occurring nor was there a deliberate effort to create a team spirit. We didn't need a diagram or lectures on "in the field" cooperation. The person produced his own image, based on his attitude and proficiency. These engendered mostly mutual respect, and accorded personal acknowledgement of each man's rank. Some guys we liked; some we didn't; many we didn't know too well. Bottom line is

we assumed unanimity of purpose arising from differing perspectives as creative of the squadron's ethos. What we were and how well we fit together arbitrated how we would execute our mission.

What made us unique was a simple fact: Only a few guys out of 12,000,000 in the armed forces knew where Aïn M'lila was or what Château dun looked like after the flood, recalls the bombs on are British base or the JU88's hitting us in Biskra except members of the 71st Fighter Squadron. No one knew the rhythm, the character, the psyche of the squadron, except "we few, we happy few, we band of brothers".

Rule number one was the requirement that each person do his job right, in coordination with other guys doing likewise. It quickly became apparent that this was not a solo act. This was a team function, a team production. One dummy or malcontent can smear the entire operation. If we send a service man out of my shop to fix a Caterpillar tractor and the owner calls a day later

and says the bloody machine still has no power, we have one unhappy customer... not angry with the mechanic but with the whole company. So Allison engines had to work, the guns had to fire or bombs release, the radio functions loud and clear, etc. Every member of the ground crew was required to make decisions; had to make a “call” and automatically fix what was wrong. The pilot carried the attack to the enemy and his skill, and courage succeeded to the extent his support team backed him up.

Now your experience is probably described in a similar pattern except updated with modern technology. The aircraft, weaponry, instrumentation, and supporting maintenance and tooling are three or four generations more creative and awesome than mine. But human nature remains the same. We are taught how to act, how to do things: The importance of learning the rights of others; we also learned what pride and honor are, how to contribute, to improve, to share, to carry our load. My guess is the air force elan has not

changed and retains enormous pride in who you are, what you do - and have done. We revere the past, are instructed by it and adopt or adapt as seems most pertinent.

In the summer of 1976, while memories were still fresh the First Fighter Group began to hold biannual reunions. The 1988 reunion at Wright Patterson, dedicated a monument to the Group. Someone asked me to make some remarks on the occasion, along with other speeches one of which was a message from the Commanding Officer at Langley. Later on I was asked if I would address his people at an annual awards ceremony. I pointed out to the Colonel that I was not a pilot nor was I a hero and perhaps he ought to reconsider. He said, "Au contraire. What I want our people to know is that they are not a given unit stationed on their own at Langley but they are a part of a historic continuum". Meaning they are one phase in a legacy that started in 1918 and though, not inculcated into the military's grand strategy,

persistent men like Billy Mitchell would risk careers to insist upon the development of the air arm. In 1940 de Seversky wrote, “Victory thru Air Power” and predicted that battles from now on will depend on control of the sky. The sad thing about that chapter of our story not only is the lack of books, histories or memorials to the U.S. Army Air Corps and its role in World War I (which was minimal) but the absence of army support, any brave new thinking. Seversky was right and in my war was demonstrated in the battle of Midway when naval pilots inflicted a mortal wound on Japan. Anyone who sees footage of D Day has to notice the absence of German fighters or bombers since we had virtually destroyed the Luftwaffe. What broke the Battle of the Bulge, for sure was not only Patton but clear skies and waves of P-49’s raising havoc with German tanks.

History is not written by “we the people” but rather by a select few who are determined to seek improvement and move the enterprise forward.

Legacies are not maintained by the Chambers of Commerce or the Lions Club. They are maintained and are perpetuated by those who created them and those who are direct inheritors of the traditions; fruit from the same tree and who are not only committed to see that the effort lives on but that those who follow are instructed by an existing example. We are in a sense, keepers of the flame; the guardians of the group, its honors and history. We are also the architects of memorials to give tangible representation of our efforts in support of America's policy and challenge future practitioners of aerial technology and deployment to replicate our record.

We know our journey together is not eternal; but consoled by the fact that our contribution was of value and will not diminish. It is burnished by Clio the Muse of History and evident in the postwar world which we were commissioned once to set aright and reshape. The emblem of my group was the P-38. It was a unifying symbol, the talisman of our combat effort and our

squadron's odyssey during the nearly 4 years of war. At the center of this particular occasion the aircraft is the F-15 which has become a legend for many of you involved in its deployment. It proved productive, effective, tough and enduring. It is fitting to pay homage to its capability and record and to memorialize both the service rendered by those who flew and respected it as well. In the process we grant to both pilot and plane a measure of immortality which may serve as well in demonstrating to others how it is we guard America's future and support national policies abroad.

And with that prosaic observation, have completed my remarks. Except for saying it has been an inestimable privilege to be part of this occasion and a great personal pleasure to be back at Langley where you continue the mission of my WW II group in a superb fashion. God bless and happy landings.