

Memories of Bob Basnett

Robert J. Basnett was born to Tom and Gladys Basnett on October 18, 1922 in Webb City, MO.

Bob was brought up on the edge of town. His family raised hogs and a super large garden. Chores kept Bob out of trouble, and he and his little dog, Spot spent days together. The little dog served as Bob's best friend when other boys his age were busy helping their parents, also keeping them out of the "wood shed". As much as Bob loved Spot, he didn't have any bearing on the little boy Bob growing up to be a vet. Bob's only sibling, his older half sister, played a big part in his growing-up years by watching out for her little brother. And grow he did. He grew out of his overalls and shoes before the school years were out. Soon he outgrew his beanflip and marbles. Before his parents could think of it, Bob was in high school taking wonderful classes such as Physics, his favorite subject.

The attack on Pearl Harbor, Hawaii took place just before 7:53am on Sunday morning, December 7, 1941. News of the attack was broadcast to the American public by radio bulletins, interrupting many popular Sunday afternoon entertainment programs. Bob heard the reports from Kansas City, MO while attending an aircraft mechanic school. He left his civilian mechanic school to enlist in the Army in Joplin, MO on May 21, 1942. He thought the bombing news was very treacherous and assumed that he would be involved in action against the enemy. Never did he think he would be dropping bombs on a European enemy.

Mr. Basnett attended boot camp in Salt Lake City, Utah. He sums up the early recruitment days in one word, "confusion".

The trip by ship to England on a French luxury liner was very exciting since he had never traveled much. All of the GI's of the 416th Bomb Group were on board. The officers had cabins and the enlisted men were on bunks stacked 4 or 5 high. The luxury liner furnished the men warm showers. Some guys going over on large ships were not so lucky and had to take freezing cold winter showers in salty sea water. Many got sea sick.

Bob was affectionately given the pet name of "The Kid" by the guys of the 416th because he was barely 21 years old when he went to England.

After the ship landed in Scotland, the group went by steam train to Wethersfield, England. Some of the service groups attached to the bomb group were already there.

As for the Army chow, he states, "The food was always OK, not five star."

After taking an aptitude test in Santa Anna, 1Lt. Basnett was chosen to become a Bombardier/Navigator. Later he was placed in the 671st bomb squadron. and flew 65 bombing missions. The three-man crew consisted of Pilot 1Lt. Hillary Cole, B/N 1Lt. Bob Basnett and Gunner Sgt. Ben Fandre. Their planes, which were Douglas A-20's and A-26's (Havoc) had no nose art like so many others on the base. The navigator and bombardier attended the bomb briefing meetings with the pilots. The pilot did not know most of the time where the targets were, he depended on navigator/bombardier. He dropped the bombs when he was sighted on the target. Very few times the plane came under fighter attack from to the enemy. When it did, Sgt. Fandre found the enemy in his gun sights and protected the aircraft.

Lt. Cole belly Landed with the landing gear shot out twice with no injuries but fairly extensive damage done to two planes. He did not circle around the base before attempting the landing. The crew was strapped in and ready for the rough plane to earth contact. The injured planes landed last if no injured on board or a lot of damage was done to the plane. No flares were dropped since there were no injuries to the crew. Bob explains, "Actually it was more of a controlled crash than a true belly landing, the left landing gear failed to come down and we landed on the nose wheel and right gear. As soon as we lost speed, the wing went down and sort of cartwheeled on the grass." The back tires were still on the plane, one was down, the other in the fuselage. With good piloting

the plane did not overshoot the runway. After stopping on the ground, the crew exited the plane in about 30 seconds. The guys were pretty shook up when their feet hit the grass. There was never any fear that the plane would not make it back to the base. Bob relates, "The next day we flew another mission. We had the very same thing happen, much damage to two planes in less than 18 hrs."

Lt. Basnett relates, "Usually 38 planes in two boxes flew the missions. We flew missions from two hours to four hours." For the D-Day Invasion, The 416th flew two on June 6, 1944. "I flew about a two hour block to our target to knock out a cross roads located in the center of the town of Argentan, about 60 miles inland where the Germans were bringing up reinforcements, dropping 500 pound bombs on them." The 2nd target mission, another short trip that day, was a marshaling yard.

Between missions Lt. Basnett enjoyed playing Bridge most every day with almost everyone in his tent, guys like Lt. T.J. Murray, Lt. Robert H. Smith and Lt. John T. Beck. Other activities he enjoyed were going to London, England and, after D-Day, going to Paris on pass. With pay, plus flight pay and combat pay, Mr. Basnett made about \$475.00 a month.

Before the war ended, Lt. Basnett had earned enough points to go home. He was in Midland, Texas attending an instructor's school when the war ended. Later he attended school to become a veterinarian. He used the GI Bill benefits to help pay for his education. His wife Puz worked as a teacher and as Bob says, "I had several small jobs as a waiter, gas station attendant, golf course employee and also worked for a vet in town. After medical school graduation, he went into partnership with the same vet that he had apprenticed with.

Mr. Basnett married his wife Lanola (Puz) Epperly on October 12, 1947. The two young folks met at Missouri University. The Basnetts were blessed with two children, a son Mike, who is a dentist in Fulton, and a daughter, Jan, who is an accountant in California.

Bob had dedicated his life to the care of animals. After the war he became a veterinarian. He is now retired and enjoys his kids, golf, travel and animals. How fitting that a WWII Vet became another kind of vet, One that loves animals almost as much as he loves mankind, a mankind that he fought for to preserve freedom for all. Thank you, Mr. Basnett, for being such a great American, one that we can all be proud of.



Left: Lt. Joe Lackavich and Lt. Bob Basnett in Melun, France, Fall 1944

Right: Fulton Sun interview - Bob Basnett, June 22, 2007. Photo courtesy fultonsun.com

(Lt. Murray, Lt. Smith and Lt. Beck mentioned above all made it back to the US after the war and led productive lives, also.)