

SGT Robert J Blackwell—Airplane and Engine Mechanic

I enlisted on 18 May 1943, in Decatur, Alabama; I was married at the time but this was something I felt like I needed to do and my wife was supportive. I had already gone through Aircraft Mechanic School at The Alabama School of Trades and at Brookley Field in Mobile, Alabama so that is why I chose the Army Air Corps. After enlistment I was sent to Basic Training/Mechanic School in Texas; from there I went to Chanute Field in Rantoul, Illinois; and then on to Walker Air Base prior to Guam. I arrived on Guam in November of 1944, prior to any of the B-29 arrivals. We helped build the airfield—buildings, etc. The runway was constructed by the Seabees. I recall the bulldozers clearing out the jungle. Initially we stayed in small tents, then 6-men tents, and finally barracks for the ground crew—our crew lived in the same barrack. I was assigned to the 458th squadron—ground crew. I was one of four mechanics assigned to work on the K-31; we all had the same training.

Most of my time was spent working on the R3350 engines. A lot of time was spent fixing oil leaks, cylinder changes, bird strikes and some flak damage. I would say 90% of my work was on the engines, though; we worked both day and night. I recall working three days straight after one mission ... changing 3 engines. We would wait for the return of K-31 specifically, since that is the plane we were assigned. I recall waiting on the hardstand and watching a B-29 try to land with two engines (on the same side) out, it ended up nose down on the runway and the crew was killed.

When I was on Guard Duty at night I would listen to Tokyo Rose on the radio. We would watch movies at night, using coconut tree trunks for seats. I wrote letters home almost every day and my wife still has a box full of the letters I wrote to her; I did not keep a diary nor did I have a camera. I have very few photos, but one I do recall is a one of the ground crew members names on the side of the plane. Sometimes we would go to the beach, but we couldn't swim due to the sea anemones.

Another experience I remember was on the day that Japan signed the surrender, every airplane in commission flew over Japan on a show of force. Anyone that wanted to go, went. I especially remember flying over the atomic bomb destruction. It was unbelievable. Then we flew low over the Missouri and could see the men sitting at the table when the memorable event was taking place. Ships were lined up coming up Tokyo Bay.

On 30 DEC 1945 I returned to the states. I thought I was going home on an Aircraft Carrier, but next to that was an LST with it's doors open off the beach; its tank deck and upper deck were covered with cots. During rough weather the flat bottom boat would slam into the waves; the cots had to be roped down. Once we got to Hawaii we were able to transfer to the USS West Virginia battleship and that took us back to San Pedro, California. I stayed at a base there and then took a train to Mississippi where I was discharged. After the war I went back to Brookley Field and resumed my job there for 2-3 years. Then I went back to Decatur and worked with my father-in-law. I worked at Hayes Aircraft 3 years. I also continued my technical training. I completed the following coursework: Aircraft Control Specialist, Egress System Specialist (ejection seat), Weight and Balance, and corrosion control specialist. I worked at Maxwell Air Force Base, where the Air University was located, and we maintained around 100 airplanes. I went on to be Quality Control Inspector, Flightline Superintendent, and Product Quality Control ... this was the best job in the maintenance field—everyone likes QC. HA!

After WWII, I served as a full time technician in the Air Force Reserve Unit for three years, and the Air National Guard for twelve years, I was called up to active duty several times for various reasons and worked at bases in England and Spain. I retired from the USAF in 1980 as SMSGT.

My wife and I have been married for 69 years.

Three members of the K-31 Ground Crew



L-R: Wayne Chinneck,
Francis Cetta,
Robert J Blackwell