

SSGT John E Celentano—CFC Gunner

I have two older brothers. One of my brothers was an aeronautical engineer; he helped design the bulkhead doors on a B-29. He was also designed the P-51's air scoop. While I was in high school, my brother was visiting from Detroit and told me about the B-29—I was familiar with the B-17; when my brother mentioned the B-29, I said, “what’s that?”, not many knew about the B-29 at this time. Since I was interested in aircrafts, I chose to enlist in the Army Air Corps. I washed out of Flight Training and was sent to Gunnery school in Fort Myers, FL. But I didn’t want to be a gunner—one of my brother’s friends told me, “don’t do it—you’ll never come back”; he was the only one from his school still alive after flying 25 Missions in a B-17 over Europe. So I told the folks at Gunnery school, that I didn’t want to be a gunner and that I wanted to be an aircraft mechanic. They told me to, “Shut up and do what you’re told”. They wanted me to be a CFC gunner. After Fort Myers, I went to Lincoln, NE and from there went to Walker and joined a crew then. We went to Cuba for over-water training and to look for submarines—none were there. I had to get some immunization shots before going to Guam. I think we flew from Mather Field in California, to Hawaii, to Kwajalein, and then to Guam. My first impression of Guam: I’d rather be in Europe! At least they had girls walking around!

I was a pain in the neck during pre-flight. I was the first one to the plane and I double checked the guns. Our Pilot wondered if I trusted anyone. I said it’s not a matter of trust; I was just doing my job and wanted to make sure everything was right. In the end, I think I was admired for that. I became good friends with our Armorer...one day he was walking through our barracks on his way to the movies, he asked if I wanted to go—I said, “yeah, you buying the popcorn?” While we were there sitting on the log, the city of NY comes on the screen. He said, “Man, look at that!” I asked if he was from NY? We didn’t realize we lived within a mile of each other!

Prior to take-off I would sit on the floor—either in the radar room or by the gunners. I managed the putt-putt (auxiliary power plant), which gave extra current and helped close the bomb bays, and bring up the landing gear. Once airborne, our Flight Engineer would instruct me as to when to turn off the putt-putt.

On the way to target, I would nap; then the right gunner would nap and I’d man his position; then the left gunner would nap and I’d man his position; then I would nap again. It was hard to stay awake; we were given Benzedrine to take at take-off, but I didn’t like to use drugs. One time I was in the tunnel sleeping, all of a sudden the Radar Observer wakes me up and tells me to bail out! What? Yeah, hurry up, bail out! I grabbed my parachute and pulled the rip-cord and the parachute opened in the tunnel.

We were always kidding each other, and would single out one guy—put him on the spot. One time we teased our Tail Gunner. Once he got in his seat he would alert the Pilot to start pressurizing. “Tail Gunner to Pilot, over”, “Tail Gunner to Pilot, over”, “Tail Gunner to Pilot, over!” IS THERE ANYBODY UP THERE?!?!? Our tail gunner wanted to bail out!

About 50 miles from target I would climb into the CFC gunner chair.

Our second mission was over Tokyo, at 5000 feet. It was bad. When the Bomb Bay opened, smoke came into the aircraft, you could smell burning bodies—I haven’t been able to shake that for over 60 years. At one of the reunions, one of my crew members brought up that mission and asked if I remembered that I accidentally still had my finger on the intercom. I was repeatedly reciting the Hail Mary prayer; I then realized my finger was on the intercom and stopped....someone said, “Don’t stop now; we’re not out of it, yet!”

We landed on Iwo Jima five times, once because we couldn’t close the Bomb Bay; another time our plane had 91 holes in it.

As we were approaching a landing on Guam with one engine out, we lost another engine while landing. As we were unloading the plane, Bob Cupp (our Left Gunner) and I were sitting in the back of a truck and a fellow comes up and says General Arnold wants to see us. I said, “Who, wants to see us?” Why? Cupp says to the guy, “Tell General Arnold, if he



wants to see us to come over here.” WHAT?!?! I was quite nervous! Oh my...I thought *here comes the gallows!* It turns out General Powers was a personal friend of Cupp’s family! General Arnold came over and shook our hands. He had another guy with him and I said, “I know you!” To which he responded, “No you don’t”. Well, I said, I know who you are—it was journalist, Lowell Thomas. He asked me how the mission was, I said, “lousy, I want to go home”. He asked, “What’s at home?” I said, “the prettiest girl in the world, and I want to see her!” I married that girl; we’ve been married 63 years.

Our crew flew 28 missions, plus the show of Force; I also volunteered for two POW Supply Missions. Incidentally, our original Pilot was transferred to another crew and was shot down, I hoped he might have survived as a POW. The POW Missions were very sad. On our first flyover, we revved our engines to alert the POWs that we were there, guys would come out waving—some were walking, but some were crawling to get the supplies we dropped; it was very sad. I was then transferred to Saipan and flew home from there. I cannot recall how I got from California to New Jersey for discharge. But that’s a funny story—during discharge processing, they called my name, I saluted, they asked for my Army Serial number, after reciting it the man said, “congratulations, you are now a civilian”, I said, “Hey, man, thanks!” The discharge officer was taken aback by this, I said, “I can’t say ‘sir’ anymore since I’m not in the service”. I was discharged on my 20th birthday. I returned to the job I had prior to my enlistment. I then went to a technical school for HVAC. I married three years later and stayed in the HVAC business until retirement. In addition to that, I bought a plow for snowplowing but needed a truck; I asked Mom if I could borrow the money to buy a truck. Mom lent me the money and wanted to know when I would pay it back. There was a huge snowfall and I earned enough money to pay her back 4 days later!

When I was 57-years old I had a heart attack, I needed bypass surgery and was sent to Milwaukee for it. About 3 months after surgery I went back to work, I worked for about 4 months before the doctor told me I shouldn’t work anymore. I’ve been retired ever since.

I was recently in New Orleans and visited the National WWII Museum there; I was disappointed that they didn’t have any aircraft on display. While we were in the Pacific section, my granddaughter asked where I served...there was a large map of the Pacific that had lights...I said you see that light that just blinked...that’s where I was. She wondered how we could land a plane on such a small island! I continued to tell more stories and answered their questions. Then my grandson said, don’t stop now, pops, you have an audience. I didn’t realize that a group of people were standing behind me listening. One woman came up and gave me a hug and a kiss. I said, “Do I know you?” She said, “No, but she wanted to thank me for all that we did during WWII.”

