

RECOLLECTIONS OF AIR CORPS LIFE

February 8, 1992

To Walt Boyne:

My early recollections of military family life will no doubt become a part of a future Ferris book, so what I say here, though I authorize you to include any, or as much as you wish, in your book which will be protected by your copyrights, must still be available for inclusion in a Ferris book without restriction. Don't know how we do that other than to register this intention at this point.

My Dad, Lt. Carlisle Iverson Ferris, my mother Virginia Brecht Ferris and I arrived at Kelly Field from Luke Field, Ford Island, Honolulu, Territory of Hawaii in September 1929. My Dad was 25 at the time and I was 4 months old. He was to serve at Kelly until June of 1935 as an instructor in the Air Corps Advance Flying School flying the Curtiss P-1B (through D), the Boeing P-12B (through D), the Curtiss A-3, Douglas O-2 and the Keystone LB-7, B-3, B-4 and B-5 bombers.

My earliest memories are of the sounds, smells and the excitement of those airplanes right across the street and the instructors and students who flew them, as well as the coverall clad mechanics who serviced them.

Other memories are the arrival of two identical twin sisters followed by the arrival of a little brother which required a move to a larger set of quarters. This was achieved by putting a door between two empty sets on the one block long side street. A move of about 100 feet. The quarters at Kelly in those days were of WW I vintage (which meant that they were about 12 years old). They were finished inside with that very narrow tongue and groove hardwood sheathing seen in railroad box cars. I think of the walls and ceilings as being painted with many coats of light grey paint. Lighting was by single hanging bulb controlled by a pull string. It was a step up from lanterns and candles seen in farm houses of the hill country north of us. Each of us had our own foot locker at the foot of our cream colored government issue iron beds which were complete with the cast Quartermaster Corps eagle, wheel and crossed key with sword insignia suspended in the iron rod and tubehead board. Almost all household furnishings were government issue. The quarters were segments of barracks buildings with long open porches tying them all together in back and porches in front segmented with screened-in areas for each set.

Walks were concrete facing flight line and boards nailed to stringers on the side streets. There were no curbs. Narrow streets were lined with white-washed stones. Whitewash also decorated trees, lamp posts, telephone and electrical poles to a uniform height. The flight line of the early thirties would be what, in legal terms today would represent an attractive nuisance. For it was an irresistible magnet to the kids. While we were "encouraged" not to play out there during operations, we often found ourselves out there during nonflying hours. Sometime we were apprehended and returned to our quarters. All of us learned not only of the dangers of automobiles in the narrow street which separated us from the grass flying field, but we were taught NEVER to walk anywhere near the propellor of an airplane, even if it was unattended with no one in the cockpit. Propellors are like guns we were told. They are never to be considered unloaded--they are always ready to whirl into action. (I've never gotten over that. I couldn't even walk through the propellor disc of the P-51 in the museum.)

There was another "must" unique to the Air Corps children of those days. We had to understand and respect the fabric covered surfaces of the airplanes. Little kids could punchholes in flying machines. We learned to stay on those sand painted walkways and use steps and hand holds properly. Like all military families, we stopped when the preliminaries to retreat were sounded and faced the flag with hand over heart as the flag was lowered each day. This was most often signaled with the startling report of the retreat gun. Also, like all other military families, we moved alot and we travelled by car with leave enroute.

Once we got past those six wonderful years at Kelly, it was to be annual moves on the school circuit. The Air Corps Tactical School at Maxwell followed by Command and General Staff School at Ft. Leavenworth. At Montgomery we started in a civilian rental house in town with a move after several months to quarters on base and another school. Those quarters were permanent type and are still in use today.

The ACTS course included a student list that reads like a who's who of the Air Corps. Both Tooley Spaatz and Ira Eaker were classmates of Dad's. In the course was Pete Quesada whose serial number immediately followed Dad's 016730 in the Regular Army list. Curtiss LeMay was an instructor at Maxwell. We had known him as a student officer a few years earlier at Kelly. Of interest also is that two pursuit section student officers when Dad was an instructor in the P-12 were Hunter Harris and J. P. McConnell fresh from West Point.

We children learned that the moves were part of the adventure. The new assignments brought new excitement, new friends, new airplanes and new flying fields to explore. But most of all we learned that when you leave friends at one base, they were not gone forever. More than likely you will share adventures in the future.

The Air Corps was so tiny that it didn't take long before even the children knew most everyone. At one point in the late thirties, the entire personnel of the Air Corps was approximately 1600 officers and 16,000 enlisted personnel. About standard for a single base in the 50s. Anyway we learned early that military friendships can be instant and that they often are forever. Even though you part, you know that each is still there somewhere and you most likely will see each other again. A sidelight is that even though Peggy and I have lived in a very close neighborhood with good friends since 1958 some of our dearest friends are military who we've met over the last thirty plus years in my travels with the Air Force in the Air Force Art Program.

Civilians such as your two young liberal New York publishers will never understand the comradeship and lasting friendships that mark the life of military families. There is something to be said for everyone around you going in the same direction, having a shared vested interest in flight, service and country.

Civilian neighbors and friends generally are going in all directions and share only limited activities and interests. At Kelly the instructors' families would take off in convoy on weekends to camp along the Guadeloupe River north of San Antonio. Sleeping on open air cots under tarps hung between cars, the kids gathered the wood for fires or joined in the fishing. The Parents cooked, drank and sang songs 'til the wee hours.

The Kelly families were close and I'll always cherish those days. We shared both the joys and the sorrow, for families periodically lost parents to aircraft accidents. Life's lessons came early to the Air Corps kid. My namesake, my god father and my uncle were all killed flying Air Corps aircraft.

The Twinings, Nathan and Maud, were our neighbors and fellow students in the "Bee Hive" high rise quarters at Ft. Leavenworth. Students were mostly captains with some majors like Spaatz and Eaker. All had to ride Cavalry horses which hurt a lot. They got their flying time in P-12s kept there for that purpose. That is where and when the Air Corps revolt against boots and boot pants took place.

One last thing. In those early days the Air Corps pilot was allowed to take his next of kin and each of his dependents 10 years old or older on a 30 minute flight in the unit equipped aircraft (provided it had more than one seat) once each fiscal year. This included the pilot's mother but specifically excluded his father (they must have arrived at that one the hard way). The boys usually couldn't wait until their 10th birthday. In my case I was to fly in B-18A (1939), O-47 (1940) and BC-1A (1941) before the program was overtaken by war. The BC-1A was to become the AT-6.

For what it is worth, Walt, those are a few thoughts about the family side. There is much more, but for now, enough is enough.

I also have some anecdotes floating around in my head of the flying and other experiences of Dad and others of those days. If any of this triggers guidance for alternate approach or request for specific areas of information let me know. It would be fun to sit and talk armed with my "Museum" here. Let me know when you are going to be in our area and hopefully you'll be able to come out to see us.

Sincerely,

Keith Ferris