

Kenneth Ousley interviewed July 26, 2007

Master Sergeant, US Army Air Corp, October 1940 – November 1945

Ken was born in the desert in California. From an early age, Ken was drawn to aviation which was big in the desert. Ken had read all of the dime novels about WWI flyers. Ken was taking piano lessons and had



a dollar for one of his lessons, but it so happened that a pilot was offering bi-plane rides. The plane ride won out. The plane ride was given by Fred Austin who later flew two record setting jet trips around the world in 1966 with Arthur Godfrey.

Ken started college, but with funds running low and war brewing, he enlisted (October 3, 1940) in the Air Corp so that he could work with planes. Basic training was at March Air Force Base in California.

Training was rough. Lots of tough old Sergeants who wanted to make sure things were done right.

Once done basic training, he was put into the 250th Quartermaster group at March AFB. His first duties were working in the plumbing and maintenance department. In the spring of 1941, Ken was transferred to Company D of the 92nd QM group. This group went to Tucson, AZ and was involved in turning the runway into an air base which is now Davis-Monthan AFB.

Ken was later sent to Welding school in San Antonio, TX. While in school, the unit was told they should be in the Philippines. The question was asked, what about Ken? They were told to transfer him to the base and get a replacement for the Philippines. The original group, without Ken, arrived in the Philippines in November 1941 and he never heard from them again as they were captured when the Philippines fell.

Abrupt End to Classes

Classes ended abruptly with the attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. The school was closed down and everyone was put to work on an assembly line to make water trailers and other equipment for troops overseas.

Next, Ken was returned to Tucson where everything had changed since his previous time there. The war effort was in full swing. Buffalo soldiers from Fort Huachuca, AZ were brought in to guard the base. They watched the barbed wire perimeter from guard towers. One time, a weather balloon was sent up from the air base and someone who didn't realize what it was, shot it down.

Planes were ferried in and out of the base. At one point, a fleet of planes came in from Seattle and Ken was told to organize several vehicles to get the pilots which he did, but one young man forgot his briefcase. They went back to get it near dark, and foolishly the guy jumped out of the vehicle and ran toward the plane, but didn't very far because there were troops already guarding the planes. He was stopped by a guard with a rifle. He learned quickly that you had to move carefully on base.

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One of the more enjoyable duties was field testing vehicles in the desert. Ken was told to put 100 miles on the jeeps, motorcycles and trucks and then bring them back for inspection, which he was happy to do.

The Youngest Sergeant...

Around this time, Ken was promoted to Staff Sergeant and two months later was made Master Sergeant. After the last promotion, he was informed that he was the youngest Master Sergeant in the Army.

In 1942, moved to Muroc Army Air Base (now known as Edwards Air Force Base) in California where Ken worked in the ordinance maintenance company. When he moved to Muroc, Ken had a first lieutenant that was probably the oldest one in the army, and he was just horrible. After he was sacked, his replacement was a great West Pointer, a real nice guy who was real gung-ho, a good officer.

One group got orders to move out, but had four trucks on the “dead line” (out of commission). Ken took the one with the fewest problems and cannibalized it to get all of the other trucks running. Then, he took what was left of the first truck, loaded it onto a flatbed truck and took it into the depot at Riverside and traded it for another truck. The people at the depot were unhappy about this and said “You can’t do that.” Ken said he already had and the depot did end up accepting the truck and gave him another one in its place.



Ken Ousley, November 1941

The next move was to Biggs Field in El Paso, TX. After some training exercises, they had the opportunity to help out the base motor pool that was entirely staffed by civilians. The motor pool had a backlog of military vehicles that needed work so Ken volunteered his men to help out. This gave them a chance to work in the nice surroundings of the motor pool with its cement floor and other accommodations. Ken was popular with his men because he said that every driver, most of whom were women, had to come into the shop and go for a test drive with one of the mechanics. This rule enabled a lot of the boys to get dates with the female drivers and morale blossomed.

A Shortened Sight-Seeing Trip...

As a native of the desert, one day, Ken took a group of men out to see Carlsbad Caverns. But as soon as they got there, they received a radio message to return to base as the unit had received orders to head for Fort Campbell, Kentucky.

While at Camp Campbell, Ken had the opportunity to see Nashville, the USO and the original Grand Ole Opry. He had a good time touring the countryside, saw civil war battlefields and cemeteries. It was also at Camp Campbell that Ken first became associated with Major Kenneth Heckman, who Ken describes as the best commanding officer he had during his five years of service. Ken says that Major Heckman always looked out for his men, something that was to become evident later on when they were on Guam.

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During war games, Ken's unit was charged with fixing up broken down trucks in the middle of the war games. At one point, Ken told one of his men to go and pick up a truck that had broken down. On the way down, his guy was almost run over during the blackout by a tank that didn't see him in the dark. On the way back, he turned on every single light so that everyone could see him.

Also during this time, Ken had a young man come up to him and ask him if he could be a watchmaker for him because he used to inspect watches as a civilian. Ken checked the organization table and found out that they were authorized to have a watch repairman in the unit. This man was put in a tank crew and for awhile they had the best running wrist watches in the Army.

Tragic Accident...

Part of Ken's unit's job was to handle the ordinance in addition to their vehicle maintenance duties. One of the Tech Sergeants, Carl Dietz, was teaching new recruits how to assemble booby traps when a grenade went off accidentally and caused him to lose both of his hands. He was the first double amputee of WWII in the Atlanta, GA hospital. The group later moved to Macon, GA and Dietz came down to visit them where Carl was able to demonstrate opening beer bottles with his prosthetic hands instead of a bottle opener.

The unit next headed for Nebraska and became part of the 20th Air Force before heading overseas. The ultimate destination was Guam in the South Pacific. After spending Thanksgiving, 1944 in Seattle, they boarded a ship for Guam traveling by way of Hawaii and Kwajalein. The trip took over a month and Christmas was spent on the ship.



Ken Ousley (on right) at Muroc, CA.

An Airfield to Strike Japan...

Ken's unit arrived on Guam shortly after the battle, but before it was secure. Their first task was to set up support facilities for North Field. Conditions were difficult with heavy rain and at first, they had to live in simple tents before more established quarters were built which included tents on platforms. There were still Japanese on the island at the time. One morning, some engineers came back and said they were missing a caterpillar tractor. Closer inspection revealed that the tractor was still there, but had been camouflaged by the Japanese during the night.

In another incident, a crew was stationed down in a valley to pump up fresh water. One of their pumps developed a bad radiator and Ken had to go with one of his men on foot to retrieve it for repairs. They began to carry the radiator back up and were pretty close to the top when his partner couldn't go any further, so the partner stopped to rest while Ken kept going. Ken was almost to the top when his partner came running up the trail. He had seen a Japanese soldier and assumed he was armed, so he ran as fast as he could to get away. Fortunately, the Japanese soldier was just as surprised and he ran the opposite way!

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Ken's unit worked with another unit at a large vehicle repair shop. As senior Master Sergeant, Ken had his choice of running the shop or doing inspections. He chose inspections which meant he ran the team that inspected all of the vehicles, generators and equipment on the air base.

In the first couple of weeks, three Japanese surrendered at the field and the officers decided to interrogate them, but couldn't get anything out of them because of the language barrier. They called down to the center of the island to the Marines to come up and get the prisoners. The Marines, not wanting to drive all the way up to the top of the island, told the men at the air base to just go out into the jungle and shoot them! But cooler heads prevailed and the Marines did come to collect the prisoners.

In Trouble with the Brass...

While working around the shop or on base in the living quarters, it wasn't mandatory to have complete uniforms on. One day, Ken came back from lunch and a jeep came flying up saying they needed mechanics to repair a bomb caterpillar critical to loading bombs for a mission that was getting ready to leave. Ken and his men went to fix the caterpillar and on the way were stopped at the gate of the wing headquarters by the guard saying they can't leave because they weren't in full uniform. Ken told the guard they had to go right away and left anyway. A couple of weeks later, Ken's commander, Major Heckman, got notice from Headquarters that Ken was supposed to be disciplined. Major Heckman decided to help Ken out and only confine him to the island for the next two weeks as the punishment. Major Heckman then got another notice to reduce him in rank to punish him. The General did not think the two weeks of being confined to the island were a sufficient. Major Heckman stormed down to HQ and told the General that he was not going to reduce Ken in rank, that the General would have to do it himself and reduce the him in rank at the same time! It took two reviews before the Inspector General, but Ken and the Major Heckman beat the rap and Ken was able to maintain his rank.

VJ Day...

Guam was the farthest south of the airfields employed in bombing Japan. North Field had a runway that ended at the edge of a cliff. The B-29's were fully loaded and would take off from the runway and then drop out of sight off the end before gaining altitude again. It was common for them to fly nearly 17 hour missions. Bombers from Guam were in the air returning from a bombing run when Japan surrendered.

When the surrender of Japan was announced, this was the day everybody ducked. When the news came in, guys went to the guns and began firing off ammunition. Ken and one of his fellow sergeants headed for an air raid shelter to wait it out.

Because Ken had accumulated a high number of points, he was eventually sent home on a B-29. The plane had numerous mechanical difficulties and made an un-scheduled fly-over the pilot's house in San Francisco so he could wave to his wife and drop a capsule full of Japanese contraband out of the plane.

Ken was discharged on November 7, 1945 at San Bernardino Air Base. The incident with the General on Guam is was one of the determining factors in Ken deciding against re-enlisting. But Ken never regretted his service was happy to be able to serve.

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