

1st Lt. Bert Collison
21st Squadron
Supply Officer

Bert graduated from the Johns Hopkins University as an officer in the U.S. Army. Bert's first assignment was Camp Croft, followed by Fort Benning for communications school.

When Bert arrived at his next assignment at Camp Butner, he told the MP at the base gate which unit he was looking for. The MP gave him a funny look and sent him in the right direction. As he got closer to the HQ, he noticed more and more black faces. When he reporting for duty, the commanding officer pulled a bottle of whiskey from his desk and said "you're gonna need a plug of this".

Bert had been assigned as one of the white officers of a unit of black troops. One company had half tracks, the other were ground troops. In theory they were being trained to protect airfields in France. However, it was determined that these companies would not be needed and they were broken up.

Bert's company was sent to the air base at Orlando, FL. Upon arrival by train at night, the MPs directed the white officers on to the base and the black troops to an area outside the base. Separated from their officers, many of the troops went AWOL. The next day Bert and the other officers were issued side arms and sent to retrieve them. "I went to places I never thought I would to bring them back." Eventually, the unit was assigned to remove moss from trees since there was nothing else for them to do.

Next, Bert became a supply officer at the Walterboro, SC air base where black pilots were trained. All the pilots were officers, but because they were black they had to have their own officer's club.

Says Bert of blacks in the military; "They were treated pretty shabbily."

While at Walterboro, Bert heard that the 413th was forming and applied to join the unit.

Upon arrival at the 413th, based in Wilmington, NC, Bert reported to the commanding officer, Colonel Thyng. At the time, Bert had a bad case of laryngitis. The Colonel told him he was going to be assigned as the engineering officer and Bert became alarmed, because he didn't know a thing about engineering and he couldn't say anything. "Somehow we worked it out," and Bert became the supply officer for the 21st squadron.

In Wilmington, Dad was the 413th Fighter Group Supply officer and Bert was 21st Squadron Supply officer. Bill Schierholz, the 34th Squadron Supply Officer became another friend. "Your Dad was older than us. He took us under his wing."

When it was almost time for the unit to ship out overseas, Dad asked Bert if he'd like to go ahead to make sure that all of the 413th's gear went onboard the ship. Bert ended up enjoying the officer's club in Seattle for an extra few days when the Air Corps pushed back the departure date.

When the Kamikaze attacked Kota Inten it knocked off the loading booms so that supplies couldn't be taken off. Dad asked Bert if he'd like to go with the ship to Guam where it would be repaired and sent Bert with a shopping list of other supplies to bring back. Round trip took a week or so.

Another time, the outfit need airplane parts that were only available in the Philippines. Dad asked Bert if he'd like to go, so Bert ended up on a B-25 there and back.

They showed movies outside at night. The men sat on a hill with a view of the China Sea and could see Kamikazes attack shipping. One night what looked like an American bomber flew overhead and then dropped bombs on another group. It was a disguised Japanese plane.

Another time, two Japanese soldiers showed up at breakfast in the mess tent saying they had been hiding in caves on the island. Bert says they ate well that morning.

There were Japanese bombers every night, it "got to the point that none of us got off the bunks" when the sirens went off.

"Your dad was a great scrounger." There was lumber stacked and guarded on the piers that would eventually be stored in a lumber yard which hadn't yet been built. Dad, Bert and Bill Schierholz took trucks in as soon as the air raid sirens started as the lumber was then unguarded. They would get lumber for pilots who wanted wooden floors. Bert stopped when a pilot yelled at him for waking him up.

"We didn't mingle with the pilots. They stuck together. They were pretty cocky guys." When a pilot went missing, the other pilots would split up their clothes. In a couple of instances pilots were rescued at sea and came back to find they had nothing to wear.

Of the trip to Japan, Bert noted that "nobody knew we were gone". They took a pilot's invitation and had no orders to go. He remembers landing on a southern island and being taken to a home and given food & sake.

"Your dad always had things to trade", "Always trading something". First guy they met in Tokyo was an English speaking Japanese from Montclair, NJ.

After the war Bert and Dad kept in touch. Bert, an attorney did trademark work for Dad's business and Dad hired Bert's son Mike, in what was his first job. Later Bert loaned \$5k to Dad when he was buying out a shareholder. (Bert did get his money back!)

