

The Nissen Hut and the Unknown Pilot

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A typical Nissen hut!

To me, a Nissen hut at Glatton during the winter of 1944-45 was a man-made cave. The interior was always cold, damp and gloomy. The windows were covered by thick blackout curtains, the overhead light bulbs, two to a hut, gave scant lighting. As a result, the time spent in the hut was mostly for sleeping. Off duty time was largely spent at the officer's club where there was a huge fireplace which gave off some warmth, if you stood close enough.

The hut provided quarters for up to twelve men but my hut usually housed ten. There were no chairs, no table. Men in lower bunks could sit down, but men in upper bunks were disadvantaged.

In my hut no lingering ties of friendship seemed to develop. For example, the four officers of the Don Meyers crew, a typical crew, shared my hut from the time I arrived at Glatton in December until they finished their tour in March. Within a matter of days, they received travel orders, packed up, left for the Stone Replacement Depot and we never heard from them again. No final good-byes, no exchange of addresses. Why was this so?

To begin with, the Nissen provided cramped and uncomfortable quarters, an atmosphere not conducive to social conversation. We tended to share limited personal information about ourselves. The infrequent talks seldom touched on serious matters as the war or future plans. I didn't know who was married, not anyone's home state with the exception of a bombardier nicknamed "Tex" Huddleston, who I assumed, was from Texas.

There was another factor, and it was probably the primary one, working against the creation of friendships, namely combat missions. We tried to deny it to ourselves but the missions concentrated and dominated our thoughts, You couldn't help thinking that maybe tomorrow, or the day after tomorrow, or the next day after that, you might be wounded, face captivity or

even death. A man was meditative about missions and survival. Maybe we tried not to know each other too well, so if a man from the hut was posted as missing, or killed, the loss would be less personal.

For the seven months I was stationed at Glatton there was no combat loss in my hut. On one occasion after a mission John Medwin was declared missing in action, but his plane landed safely at an alternate field and he later came back to Glatton.

The only man wounded in those seven months was Bill Pursell, who got his first medical attention from a British doctor when his plane landed at a Royal Air Force base due to a shortage of fuel. The flesh wound on his leg was painted with a generous amount of a disinfectant called Gentian-Violet. For a time he was the "man with a violet leg" but he fully recovered.

Your bunk bed was a repository for your mail and other items. One day I returned from a mission and found a good-looking box lying on the bed. It was an Air Medal, given for six missions. Additional increments of six missions brought flimsy sheets of paper to the bunk informing me that Oak Leaf Clusters were added to my Medal. This method of award delivery lessened the luster of the award. No ceremonial rites, no handshakes.

The practice of rating an officer with an efficiency report continued even in combat. In view of what one of my reports contained, or more correctly what it didn't contain, I was lucky that my report even reached me. The rating completed by the 750th Squadron Commander, Major James Havey, on March 15, 1945, stated "the only rating I can fairly give this officer is UNKNOWN."

If there was anything good to be said about living in a Nissen hut, it was the omission of a mainstay of military routine in the States, the inspection of Quarters. We took advantage of this; we wasted no effort to make up bunks or to be neat. This disarray added further to the man-made cave atmosphere of the Nissen hut.

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