

Stories told by Capt. Elmer T. Olson of the 12th Tactical Reconnaissance Squadron during WWII
By his son Jerry Olson

My Dad didn't talk a lot about his experiences during WWII. As with many WWII veterans, I'm sure he preferred to forget the horrors he saw and experienced. He never talked about any of the 15 pilots and men from the 12th who were either missing or killed in action. Most of what he did tell was of more memorable experiences, and some of the crazy stuff they did. My Dad wasn't one to tell stories or exaggerate. If he said anything, I could count on it as being true.

One of the stories my Dad never told was about his older brother Edward Olson. Edward was in the infantry. In Feb. 1945, his unit was going house to house clearing them of German soldiers. While attempting to throw a grenade into a basement, the handle hooked on Ed's sleeve. He dove on the grenade to save the other soldiers in his unit.

I accidentally found out about Edward when I was around 14 years old. I came home from school one day, and found a large envelope labelled, "Do Not Bend" in the mail. Knowing this must be a photo, I opened it to find a photo of Edward, along with a newspaper clipping describing his sacrifice. I had never even heard of Edward, and miss-read the name as Elmer. I'll never forget the wild thoughts that raced through my head trying to sort out how this photo, that looked so much like my Dad, could be real. It was only after re-reading the newspaper clipping several times that I realized I had miss-read Edward as Elmer. This was one of those memories my Dad just couldn't bear to talk about.



PFC Edward Olson

Two other cases that my Dad never talked about were told to me by my Mother. She said that shortly after my Dad had returned from WWII he told her about these two on one occasion. After that, despite repeated questions by my Mother, he would never talk about them again.

One case was a strafing accident. For the first couple months after the squadron had moved from England to France, the recon pilots were ordered to search for and attack enemy columns as they returned from their recon missions. On one of these my Dad was flying wing when he and his lead spotted two long columns of Germans on a road, some pulling carts loaded with supplies. He and his lead dove in and began attacking these columns, only to realize when they got closer that the columns were civilians.

The other case was what my Dad saw at the Buchenwald death camp after it was liberated by Patton's 3rd Army. General Patton ordered all his officers and as many enlisted men as possible to witness the horrors the 3rd Army had discovered at Buchenwald. I suspect the one time he told my Mother about these, was the last time he ever wanted to think about them.

My Dad finished pilot training in June 1944, and arrived at Chalgrove, England, with the 12th TRS, in July, approximately 4 weeks after the D Day invasions on June 6th. Within a few weeks, they relocated to France. Their first airfield at Le Molay, France, was about 6 NM inland from Omaha Beach. They relocated to new airfields seven times, many on short notice, to keep the 12th TRS close to the front lines. Patton's planners needed the recon as quickly as possible, as well as having the 12th and the 15th TRS protect their right flank, as the 3rd army raced across France and into Germany. A quote from Lt. Ed Kenny, my Dad's wingman, summarizes this protection very well,

"It could come out as bragging," he said, "but I really felt that reconnaissance played a very significant role in the war, specifically for Patton's Third Army. He always knew what was five miles, 50 miles ahead of him -- the bridge was out, a road was not there, tanks were over here."

In order to trace the movements of the 12th TRS, I used my Dad's flight logbook, and located each airfield on Google Earth. I attached a push-pin at each one, and dated each with the entries of the flights my Dad flew from that airfield. Opening the following file in Google Earth will display the airfield locations, dates from my Dad's logbook, and information about each airfield. [12th TRS WWII Airfields.kmz](#)

Clicking each of the blue airplane symbols opens up the description of the airfield which includes links to other on-line references. The airfields, the dates and links have been cross-referenced for accuracy to two books written by Tom Ivie about the 10th PRG. The titles of these two books are, "Aerial Reconnaissance – the 10th Photo Recon Group in World War II" and "Patton's Eyes in the Sky."

My Dad described his missions as one of three types, visual recon, photo recon, or targeting. Most of his missions were visual recon, flying two ship P51 elements, at 1,000' – 3,000' above ground level at fairly high speed. He said these altitudes and speeds were high enough to prevent ground fire from being much of a problem, and low enough to prevent anti-aircraft batteries from targeting them easily. Most missions were deep behind enemy lines. There was a newspaper article published in my Dad's hometown newspaper that describes one of his missions. This article matches his descriptions of his missions.

On the visual recon missions my Dad said the Germans would generally stop moving, and try to hide in trees or ditches, when these 2 ship P51 elements approached. The Germans recognized these were most likely recon and they didn't want to be discovered. He said the only times they would attract anti-aircraft (AA) fire was if they got close to something important. Then it was usually just one 4 or 6 round burst of AA, so the Germans could remain hidden. If they got close to anything really important, then the AA would continue. This was almost an automatic signal for the recon pilots to call in P47 Thunderbolt squadrons to attack the target, or if close enough to call back to the front lines and direct long range artillery onto the target. His descriptions sounded almost like a game of cat and mouse, but one where the recon pilots effectively put themselves on the line to draw out the enemy.

On one of these missions my Dad said he and his wingman had gotten tired of performing the constant evasive maneuvers, continually moving up, down, left and right. He said they were peacefully flying along straight and level when a 4 round burst of AA surrounded them. He said they quickly got back to shoving that stick forward, back, left and right in rapid succession.

Elmer Spots 'em! U. S. Bomber Pilots Pulverize 'em!

**GRAND MEADOW BOY
VETERAN OF OVER 50
MISSIONS IN GERMANY**

A Ninth Air Force Reconnaissance Base, France: Two P-51 Mustangs fly wing to wing south of Kassel, more than 200 miles into Germany where most fighter group commanders would hesitate to send less than a squadron. The section leader, First Lieutenant Elmer T. Olson, of Grand Meadow, Minn., sees some enemy movement below that interests him. While his wingman keeps an eye peeled for German planes, Lt. Olson dives for a closer look. Then the two tactical reconnaissance pilots leisurely proceed on their route, skirting enemy airfields and heavy flak areas. On their return they are interrogated by ground officers of the Third Army, and Lt. Olson reports:

"Marshalling yard at Limburg is 3-4 full, mixed cars, mostly box. One train of approximately 20 cars is in the yard, stationary, facing east. Marshalling yard south of Weilburg has three engines with steam. It is half full. One train appeared to be made up of 50 box cars and six flats. The flats appeared loaded, with no engine attached to the cars. The yards southeast of that one train entering the yard of 30 cars and 15 flats loaded with vehicles. I radioed for fighter bombers to attack this target—" He continues for 15 minutes, giving the condition of 12 other yards, three sidings, and the movement of 11 trains totaling more than 325 cars.

This is no unusual mission for Lt. Olson, a veteran of more than 50 tactical missions and recently awarded the seventh and eighth oak leaf clusters to the Air Medal. His unit is one of the oldest in the Army Air Forces, and, now in its thirtieth-month overseas, adjusts long-range artillery of the Third Army, photographs targets of special importance to the ground forces and carries on visual reconnaissance for enemy movements and installations. The squadron served 17 months in France in World War I, winning battle honors in seven engagements, and boasts among its alumni Lt. Gen. Lewis H. Brereton, commanding the First Allied Airborne Army; Major Gen. Claire Chennault of the 14th Air Force in China; and Major Gen. O. P. Weyland, commanding the 19th Tactical Air Command of which the squadron is now a part.

Grand Meadow, MN, Newspaper Article from Fall of 1944

My Dad also talked about Bed-check Charlie visits that occurred each evening not long after dark. He said a lone German fighter or fighter bomber would dive in for a low level attack on the airfield. Everyone would then dive for the nearest hole, and return fire with their side-arms. From his descriptions I believe this was at Rennes or Conflans airfields, as they were living in tents while based there. At Chateaudun and St. Dizier airfields they had living quarters instead of tents.

During the first couple months they were in France, the recon pilots would attack steam engines on the railroads and in rail yards. They ceased that activity as it was too easy to pick up shrapnel in the belly scoop when the steam engines exploded. The shrapnel could puncture either the oil cooler or radiator, resulting in seizing the engine in their P51. Subsequent to this, they were ordered not to attack or fire on enemy aircraft unless they were attacked first. The visual recon, photo recon, and targeting were too valuable to the 3rd Army to risk losing any of the P51's or pilots. Instead, they would call up P47 squadrons and lead them to the targets, or direct long range artillery onto the targets.

This restriction led to one of the stories my Dad told numerous times regarding Lt. Mingo Legothetis, the pilot in the 12th TRS with the most aircraft kills. Anytime the guns were fired on the P51's, the gun cameras would record what was being targeted. Mingo would routinely come back from missions with photos of enemy aircraft he had been shooting at, while the rest of the squadron would rarely even see enemy aircraft. Finally one of the other pilots followed Mingo to see why he was encountering so many enemy aircraft. It turned out Mingo wouldn't drop his wing tanks when they were empty. Instead, when returning from a mission, he'd search out an enemy airfield, dive in and drop the wing tanks on the field. These would frequently explode due to the residual fuel inside, causing the Germans to believe they were under attack. The Germans would then jump in their planes and take off to counter the threat. Just as they were clearing the ground, Mingo would come diving back in and attack them at their most vulnerable positions. When word of this got back to the 12th TRS, the commander was furious and decided to make an example out of Mingo for defying the orders. When Mingo's court martial got up to Gen. Patton, he tore it up, supposedly yelling out that he wasn't about to allow a court martial of anyone for killing Germans.

There was only one occasion where my Dad came close to getting into a dogfight. This occurred on Aug. 24, 1944, during the Liberation of Paris. He was flying wing with Lt. Kenyon as lead, on a visual recon over Paris, when they encountered two FW-190's. They chased the FW's around Paris, and finally around the Eiffel Tower a couple times before the FW's escaped up into the clouds. My Dad's logbook for that mission records, "2 FW 190's (Almost)."

There were two other stories my Dad told involving the Liberation of Paris. One was of several 12th TRS pilots flying their P51's through the Arche de Triomphe. On one occasion I asked him if he had really done that. He said he had, but that he went through almost knife edge, as there was only about 5' clearance on each wingtip if flying through wings level. In 2008, I met my Dad's wingman, Ed Kenny at Stallion 51 in Florida. At diner one evening I asked Ed about this story. Ed's nonchalant answer was, "Oh yea, and they flew under the Eiffel Tower as well."

The other Liberation of Paris story involved the pilots of the 12th being lodged at a hotel in the center of Paris during the celebrations. I learned of this story when one of my uncles and my Dad were looking at my Dad's WWII scrapbook. My uncle saw a photo of a building with all the windows missing and made a comment it must have been bombed. My Dad then told him the real cause. One evening Gen. Patton showed up at their hotel in Paris with a truckload full of champagne, which he gave to the pilots as a reward for the great recon missions they had just completed. The pilots proceeded to drink all the champagne, and then threw the empty bottles through the windows, breaking out the windows and the window-frames. This photo, with my Dad's written description, may be a result of that incident.



Repairing windows
after a "beat up"

Lt. Ed Kenny described an incident where he was flying at low altitude. As he came up over a rise, he encountered a farmer pitching hay with a pitchfork. The farmer was so startled, and Ed was so low, that the farmer threw his pitchfork at Ed's P51.

Beyond other antics, such as tearing up parachutes to make ascots, the pilots of the 12th TRS risked their lives on most missions to accomplish whatever the mission demanded. In December of 1944, the 12th was based at Conflans Airfield. This was a grass field overlaid with pierced steel planking as a runway, and tents for living quarters during that very cold winter. This airfield was about 25 NM from the German lines, after their counter-attacked during the Battle of the Bulge. The weather was too miserable to fly any missions, but the pilots were given orders that if the Germans broke through the lines, they were to get in their P51's and fly them west so the planes couldn't be captured.

At the end of December, the 101st was surrounded in Bastogne, about 75 NM northeast of Conflans Airfield. The following 2 page extract of pages 109 & 110 from Tom Ivie's book, "Aerial Reconnaissance" describe missions flown by Capt. "Blackie" Travis. His missions enabled Patton's 3rd Army to rescue the 101st.

Recce Over Bastogne

With Third Army on the move towards the Ardennes Forest, TAC R was receiving urgent requests to provide reports of enemy and friendly positions but terrible weather over the battle area was frustrating the effort. Captain E.B. "Blacky" Travis and Lt. Newman of the 12th TAC R had made an attempt on December 19 but weather had forced them back, and on the 20th it was so bad no attempts could be made. By December 21, the need was so critical some single plane volunteer missions went up to make another attempt in locating troop positions. Clyde East went out

looking for US troops that had been cut off, but had to abort due to weather. However, his squadron-mate John Hoefker was able to observe some German troop movement, but the truly outstanding mission of the day was flown by "Blacky" Travis.

Captain Travis' mission was to make another attempt to locate the cut-off US troops he had searched for on the 19th. Knowing their situation was growing more serious by the hour, "Blacky" took off in his Mustang without an escort to try and get through at all costs. In weather which was as bad as it could possibly be, ceiling 50 feet and visibility 100 yards, he located the target area and made his first pass but the overcast was too low. He then pulled his Mustang, "Mazie, Me and Monk," above it and searched for a hole but to no avail. After checking his position with the controller Captain Travis went in again and on his fourth attempt struck paydirt. There were many enemy vehicles all over the area as he streaked across the treetops and he was receiving heavy fire from German positions, but Captain Travis successfully charted the dispositions of our men and returned to base with it. With this information a rescue effort was now possible, and because of his dogged determination to get the mission accomplished, Captain Travis received numerous Commendations in addition to the Silver Star.

For any pilot, taking off in the conditions described would be almost suicidal, without today's specialized equipment on-board. Then throw in flying at tree top level, probably as fast as a P51 will fly, while receiving heavy fire the Germans, and looking out the side of the canopy to map out the positions of our troops. And, do it four times to complete the mission. I cannot read these two pages without shaking my head in disbelief. Oh, then fly back and land in these conditions at Conflans, without an instrument approach, and land a P51 on a 5,000' wet metal runway. Today, 200' ceilings and ¼ mile visibility are the minimum limits for most aircraft to land without specialized equipment and crew training. Is there any wonder these men are called the Greatest Generation.

As a teenager, I was present when a few of my Dad's squadron mates came for a visit. The three I remember are Capt. Edward Bishop, Lt. Don Lynch, and Lt. Robert Marple. At the time they were just guys my Dad was in the war with. Little did I realize the history these men represented. Now I wish I would have had a tape recorder to capture every word they said.

In the last few years I've had the distinct privilege to meet two more, my Dad's wingman, Lt. Edward Kenny, and Capt. Clyde East, the leading ace from the 10th PRG. Meeting Ed Kenny was an unbelievable delight. It was almost like my Dad had come back to life.

I met Clyde East by accident at Oshkosh in 2010. I had heard there was an F6D on display in the Warbird area, probably the only recon version of the P51 left flying. When I found it, I thought I recognized the name Capt. Clyde East, painted under the cockpit. As I looked around for anyone who may know something about Lil Margaret, the plane's namesake, I noticed an elderly gentleman in a flight suit with Clyde East sewn on the breast pocket area. I asked him what outfit he flew with in WWII, and he said the 15th TRS. I immediately recognized Clyde as the leading ace from the 10th PRG. I told him that my Dad had flown with the 12th, his sister squadron. Clyde's response was, "There aren't many of us left." I then told him of my meeting with Ed Kenny in 2008 in Florida. Clyde's eyes lit up a bit and he said, "Well, I know Ed Kenny." He then asked who my Dad was, as I told him Elmer Olson, Clyde's immediate response was, "I knew Amos." (Amos was my Dad's nickname.) This led to a 30 minute or so conversation covering all the guys I knew of or had met. With each one, Clyde's eyes seemed to light up more.

After I returned to Texas from Oshkosh, I did some research about Clyde East. He had told me he had stayed in the service after WWII. Little did I know he had flown an additional 130 combat missions in Korea, another 100 recon missions for JFK over Cuba in 1964, or that he had been awarded a Silver Star, and garnered more Air Medals than anyone in history. Our short conversation was just a couple pilots talking.

One thing has always amazed me about all these men is their humility. None of them view what they did as heroic. When asked, their responses always seem to be some variation of;

"I'm not a hero. The real heroes are the _____."

(Fill in the blank with the bomber crews who flew un-escorted over Germany, the guys who died on Normandy beaches, the guys storming the beaches in the South Pacific, or some other group that suffered great losses.)

"I just went and did my part."