

Preserving holiday memories

By **MICHAEL VAUGHAN**
Guest commentary

feeling of gloom deepened as the two young men passed my service record back and forth between them.

One muttered, "I can't understand this at all." Both were moving their heads from side to side and one said, "What a shame." Then with a resigned shrug one of the young officers put my records back in a manila envelope and said, "Be on the flight line this afternoon. Get on the plane for Alliance, Nebraska." The date was December 23rd — just two days before Christmas.

We departed on the afternoon of the 23rd. Our pilot made a slight change in course and flew over downtown Kansas City. I would estimate our altitude at about 500 feet, perhaps less. Shoppers filled the gaily-decorated streets. I could even see the brightly colored Christmas packages they were carrying. It did little to ease the feeling of homesickness felt by the crew and the three passengers aboard the C-47.

About two hours later we made a pass over Alliance AFB. I thought it strange there was no activity at all, no smoke from chimneys, no cars or jeeps, no sign of human life at all. We made our approach, and the pilot set the C-47 down smoothly. He taxied to the tarmac in front of a large hangar. Without killing his engines, the pilot turned and yelled, "Vaughan, this is where you leave us. Get off the plane and take your chute with you. Turn it in as you are charged out with it."

The crew chief opened the door and threw out my duffle bag. I climbed out the door, dragging my parachute and musette bag. Now for you old Air Force veterans' information, I was issued a parachute back at Missouri before I got on the plane. Why? I have no idea. I was never issued a parachute again, and I flew thousands of miles during the war.



Standing alone on the deserted tarmac I watched as the C-47 took off and disappeared into the cold winter sky. I walked toward the hangar. The small door beside the large sliding doors was unlocked. I was later to find that all doors on the base were unlocked.

I stepped inside the frigid hangar and noticed that there was only one plane inside and no people. I dumped my heavy parachute in a corner of the hangar, picked up my duffle bag and started walking around the barracks area. I began to get the creepy feeling that I was alone on this base.

I walked perhaps a mile and at last spotted a jeep parked in front of the orderly room. I stepped inside the room, half expecting it to be empty. A young sergeant was sitting behind a desk filling out some papers, and he seemed as surprised to see me as I was to see him. "What the hell are you doing here?" he asked.

I handed him my sealed envelope. He opened it and studied it for two minutes

or so. "You live in Arkansas, it says here. How long would it take you to get home?" "With travel like it is today, I'd guess at least two days," I replied.

"Well, I could write you a three day pass — that's my limit. You can't get home and back in three days. Suppose I go ahead and write up the pass and you spend it doing whatever you want here in Alliance. There is no one else on the base. There are a couple of MPs on the main gate. Everyone else shipped out to North Carolina two days ago. I am getting ready to go home on furlough. I will not come back here; I'll report for duty in North Carolina."

The sergeant continued, "I understand that there will be a few men joining you here during the next few days. Pick out any barracks you want. I'd advise carrying in a supply of coal.

"The nights get pretty

cold here. Everything on base is open — the recreation hall, the mess hall, whatever. You will find plenty to eat in the freezers but you have to do your own cooking. Just pick out any barracks, build a fire, and make yourself at home. For the next few hours this may be the only air base in the world where the highest ranking man is a private."

"If I am the only man on base, does that mean I am the base commander?" I asked.

"If I were you, I'd make myself comfortable and not push my luck," replied the sergeant. "Merry Christmas."

Later that afternoon, another plane landed and three fellows got off. They saw smoke coming from my barracks chimney and settled in with me in my barracks. I had picked one near the mess hall and the service club. We strolled over to the mess and opened up some rations. After a cold meal we went to the club and shot pool until bedtime — pretty soft service for the Air Corps.

Christmas Eve, another plane landed at Alliance, and ten more enlisted men got off. The highest-ranking non-com was a buck sergeant. None of us knew what was going on. All we knew was that we had been ordered to this base.

We were one homesick group but we decided to make the best of a bad situation. As it turned out, the buck sergeant, a small Italian fellow about thirty-five years old, told us he was a chef in a large, well-known restaurant in New York City before joining the Air Corps.

"If all you fellows will pitch in and do your part we will have a Christmas dinner the likes of which the Air Corps has never seen," he said. Needless to say, we quickly agreed to

do whatever the sergeant told us to do.

We went to the mess hall and took inventory. We had enough food to feed an entire squadron — maybe even an entire AF Group.

I remember we had the usual turkey, a large ham, and several fancy dishes the chef worked up. In addition, we had a beautiful large cake and several pies. Our chef came through with a better Christmas than most generals enjoyed that holiday. With everyone working, cleanup was not a major problem. Soon we had the kitchen as clean as it was when we found it. I don't know what happened to the great cook.

After our sumptuous dinner, we went to the service club where we listened to Glenn Miller, Artie Shaw, Tommy Dorsey, and other favorites on the jukebox.

That afternoon and evening we shot pool. When we got hungry, we took time out for more cake and pie. This life was far too good to last — we knew it would come to an end soon enough. As expected, it did end, about three days after Christmas.

Within days we had enough troops in Alliance to make the 440th a more or less operational TCC Group, once we joined them at Pope Field. As it turned out, the upper brass was, even then, preparing for the coming invasion of Europe.

That is the end of my dad's story. He was subsequently awarded the Bronze Star for his participation in the D-Day invasion. Yet, the point of this story isn't D-Day. The important point is the importance of memories. During this holiday season, take the time to capture some.

Photo is of Bruce Vaughan receiving his honor from the U.S. military.