



1st. Lt Arch Gratz
34th Squadron
Pilot

Arch Gratz was born on February 12, 1923 in Great Neck, NY. He and his family moved to California when Arch was 13.

I asked Arch what his aspirations were before the war. "To have a good time", was his answer.

Arch joined the Army as an Air Force cadet when he was 19, reporting to Santa Ana, CA where the men were selected for pilot, navigator or bombardier training.

From Santa Ana he went on to Santa Maria, CA for primary training and learned to fly. Art then went on to Marana Army Air Field, northwest of Tucson, for basic flight training and then, finally, to Williams Field in Mesa, AZ where he completed his training and "got his wings."

Arch was sent to Greensboro, NC for training on the P-47. The training continued at Bluethenthal Field, where he was eventually assigned to the 413th.

"I had over 1000 hours flying the Jug before I got to Ie Shima."

When I asked about going overseas on the Kota Inten, Arch described it as an "old dirty scow". I could hear disgust in his voice.

He recalled the "scow" stopping on Kwajalein which was devoid of vegetation because the "battleships wiped it clean".

As for life on Ie Shima, "We just flew, ate and slept. I just did my job and floated along." Arch recalled being a tent mate with George Oden at one time.

Arch is best known for a great story that could have been a great tragedy. Arch described it this way;

On my first mission I was hit by flack. I managed to reach the ocean where I was forced to bail out. I was lucky and landed in the ocean with no injuries, where I got [into] my dinghy and set up housekeeping. [June 23rd] I was a million miles from nowhere all by myself. My flying mates were forced to leave me as they didn't have enough fuel to stay with me.

I floated around for seven days and did not see or hear a single human being. During my time as commander of my own ship, I was lucky enough to catch some rain water in a poncho. I also caught a seagull and of course I ate him raw--very good! I was resigned to my fate when I spotted a PBM Flying Boat. They had no idea I was out there. They were covering a raid in China. I signaled them with a signaling mirror and shot off a yellow smoke bomb which they saw. They started circling me and dumping gasoline in preparation for landing at sea. The ocean swells were at least ten feet high and I felt that they could not possibly land in such conditions. But, I just thought, "What the hell, it's not my airplane."

They hit the water and tore off a wing float and the left wing went into the drink. I paddled over to them as they were abandoning their craft and asked them if they needed any help? They joined me instead of me joining them.

They managed to radio their location and twenty-four hours later, their whole squadron was circling above us. About thirty minutes later, a submarine, The USS Sea Devil, showed up and picked us all up. [July 1st] There were about eight of them in the PBM crew.

We were on the submarine for about three weeks. They had to complete their war patrol before we returned to Guam. At Guam, I hitched a ride back to Ie Shima. When I got there I walked into the ready-room. You never saw so many surprised men in all of your life. They figured I was dead. It had been a month since I went down. They wanted to send me home, but I refused and went back on flying status.

I asked Arch how he managed to catch the seagull. "He just landed right on my life raft and I grabbed him. I hated to kill him."

According to the island newspaper, The Big Bird;

Lt. Gratz's return was a complete surprise to the outfit. No one had been informed.

Col. Thyng greeted him simply. "Never thought I'd see you again. Glad to have you back," the CO said.

As Arch puts it, to the other pilots "I was gone." In his absence, they'd "stole all my stuff. I got enough back to survive."

"I flew several more missions before the war ended, and was lucky enough to shoot down two enemy aircraft." The aerial victories occurred on a mission escorting B-29s. [Arch received only one official credit.]

Of the P-47, "I loved it. It was the greatest airplane ever built. The thing would take tremendous abuse. That engine was a real beast."

"Taking off, that was hairy. You just flew off the end of the island and the plane fell down about 50 feet."

Arch remembers the missions lasting about eight hours. "I remember a couple times coming back really low on gas. It was really a tussle getting 1000 planes back in there. So many damned airplanes. [Sometimes I] thought I'd have to dump it in the ocean."

After the war Arch was in a Reserve squadron for about six months but didn't stay. He went to college for a BA and then taught auto shop for about seven years. Then, after twelve years working for Ford, Arch went back to teaching, this time the 6th grade for fifteen years before retirement.