



1<sup>st</sup> Lt. Al Kellner  
1<sup>st</sup> Squadron  
Pilot

Just before we spoke, he'd been at working out at a gym.

Al was born on 8/18/21 in Washington, but grew up and spent most of his life in Portland, OR.

After high school he became a salesman for a wholesale electrical supply company.

He was drafted and was inducted in August 1942. Initially he was sent to aircraft mechanic school at Sheppard Field in Texas, then on to Mac Dill where, at that time, B-26 training took place.

"I wanted to become a pilot. That was the biggest mistake in my life. I didn't expect to get shot at so much."

When he was transported to Ie Shima, the pilots were split up and Al "never saw a plane until Ie Shima". The other half of the group went with their planes and actually flew a mission before arriving on Ie Shima.

#### Missions

"I only saw one Jap airplane", when flying, but the "flak was so thick it was like black balloons. On Al's first mission he saw two big orange balls and thought "boy, they have balloons on cables". Al quickly understood that the orange balls were the flak exploding nearby.

Al recalls the toughest mission for flak was when the 413<sup>th</sup> accompanied B-29s on a bombing mission to Kitakyushu, called "the Pittsburgh of Japan" because of its steel production. [Need to research]

One of the first six missions that Al flew was a strafing mission against an airfield on the Island of Kyushu which he referred to as "the worst day of my life".

In addition to the fuel tanks, one in each wing, the P-47N could be equipped with up to three external fuel tanks, one 165 gallon tank under each wing and, if necessary, one under the fuselage in place of a bomb. As a plane traveled to its destination, the pilot would use one tank at a time and when it emptied, switch to a full tank and jettison the empty. Equipped with all three tanks, the "N" could fly a ten hour mission.

On a strafing mission a pilot would search for a target above flak level then dive in to attack and In order to strafe targets on the ground it was necessary to jettison any remaining external tanks.

As he prepared to strafe a target, he accidentally switched to an empty fuel tank and the engine stopped. "They [the planes] went down like a rock", so Al did the one thing he could, pointing the nose down and getting his airspeed to 400 mph while pumping the wobble valve that would put pressure into the engine. At one point Al considered bailing out, but he was able to restart the engine.

All American planes were equipped with a radio beacon that identified them as American. Japanese attackers attempted to get into the flight pattern of the bases to hide from so they would escape detection. On one occasion, when returning from a mission, Al thought he was being fired on by US anti aircraft batteries, but, it turned out they were shooting down a Japanese interloper.

Because the runways were crushed coral, and the planes took off one after the other, each consecutive plane would be taking off into a cloud of dust. Because of this, water trucks would water down the air strips.

Nevertheless, with the coral strips, pieces of coral would get thrown up. In fact, upon take off, until the wheels were fully up in the nacelles you wouldn't hit the brakes to avoid throwing coral that was stuck in the tire.

On one flight, Al had a piece of coral get stuck in the wheel well's lock down pin. When Al landed, all was well until he turned off the runway. At that point the landing gear collapsed and the plane fell onto its propeller destroying the engine.

The runways on Ie Shima were 5300 feet long followed by a sheer drop off. With a full load of fuel and munitions the P-47N weight 20,000 lbs which called for a longer runway. The "N" was equipped with water injection designed to keep the cylinder heads cool. If the pilot accelerated too much on take off, the water injection would kick in, causing a drop in power, in turn causing the plane to crash.

The 318<sup>th</sup> Fighter Group had arrived earlier on Ie Shima and several of their pilots were killed in take off accidents. Republic, the manufacturer of the P-47s sent a test pilot to show the fighter pilots how to take off properly. He crashed and was killed on his first attempt.

Al described the method they used to take off as follows;

"Taxi to the runway... get the plane lined up on the strip - lock the tail wheel - check mags + cylinder temp etc. Interconnect the water injection with the throttle and hold the brakes while advancing the throttle to approximately 80 inches of manifold pressure. When pulling 80" manifold pressure stand on right rudder - release brakes. Water is already on so there is no pause in the engine half way down the runway. When wheels are off runway throttle back to take off RPM."

"Note: ...by comparison a P-51 Mustang pulled 67 inches of manifold pressure on take off."

One aspect of pilot training was teaching that keeping their oxygen masks on at altitude was vital. All the cadets went into a big metal cylinder with pads and pens. There was a bench on either side of the cylinder for them to sit on. As the oxygen was slowly removed from the cylinder they would be asked to write one line at a time on the pad. Initially Al recalls he began to feel drunk and by the time they were asked to write the third line, none of the pilots could.

When flying above 10,000 feet the oxygen mask was vital, but because the microphone was in it they had to wear it virtually all the time, in any event. "I smoked. Of course, everybody smoked and when you go five to six hours without a cigarette you get nervous." Returning from one mission, there came a point when Al was at a lower altitude and took the mask off in order to smoke. After having the mask on for hours "gunk" had built up on his face and after a puff, when Al attempted to pull the cigarette away from his lip, it was stuck, and the lit cigarette

fell on the floor. "There was no floor, just the two slats for your feet that operated the rudder." The cigarette had fallen to the bottom of the fuselage where there was always seepage of hydraulic fluid. Al's solution was to open his flight suit and pee the cigarette out.

Al flew a mission after the first atomic bomb was dropped. "The sky looked weird. There was a purple haze hanging all over."

Bombing during the war was indiscriminate, with no regard for civilian targets. They would fly napalm missions. First the B-25s would fly over and bomb the town and then the P-47s would fly over and drop napalm. "Those towns burned like a paper bag."

"I often think about those missions. It still bothers me today." Al recalls that while flying weather from Ie Shima to their targets and back would typically be excellent, Ie Shima would often be covered in clouds. There were sixteen planes in a squadron and when they would come back from a flight they would fly in through a hole in order to land.

Because of the double strength squadron, even though there was a mission every day, you would fly every other day. There were also no assigned airplanes, so you could have nose art painted on and then never see the plane again.

On Ie Shima, Al remembered that the natives were rounded up into their own fenced in compound to minimize their interaction with the military. "They could go in and out. They didn't guard 'em much."

As for our military, Al recalls there were "a lot of people on that island".

There were caves on the island where the natives traditionally buried their dead. During their defense of the island the Japanese soldiers used them to hide. One day Al saw a Japanese soldier's boot in a cave and thought it would make a good souvenir. When he put his hand in the cave to grab it, he found the foot was still in it.

Al left the AAF when he was 26. When Al got home his wife told him she didn't want to be married to him any more.

"Going back to college would have been like going back to grade school", and Al returned to his job at the electrical wholesaler.

Al eventually remarried and remembers fondly traveling 150,000 miles, with his son, by motorcycle.

"One thing that you might be interested in. Because of my experience, I have never been in an airliner to go anywhere."

