**Vern Latta’s Memoirs of World War II**

By Vern Latta, written by his daughter,

Betty (Latta) Kitchen, June 2006

Vern was drafted into the Army Air Force in 1943. As soon as I was born (July 1) and he gave my mother a blood transfusion (which almost killed her since they have different Rh factors and did indeed kill my brother Jerry Richard in l946), he was sent to Columbus, then to Miami, then to Boise, Idaho, then to Salina, Kansas. It was in Kansas when he first jumped from an airplane (which he said was really scary like having your heart in your throat).

In February he was shipped overseas. He was supposed to have a leave first; but as soon as he got home, he got a telegram saying that he had to go right back. He never did like that commanding officer, and that officer wasn't real fond of Vern either. From Miami he first went to South America then to the Gold Coast of Africa then flew to India. In India he was part of a non-combat headquarters unit of the 20th Air Force that made and repaired airstrips and airplanes. They built six airstrips in India which they later abandoned. The airstrips were used as a base to fly B-29's and C-46's and some gliders to China. This was known as flying the hump (over the Himalayas). Vern flew many trips in and out of China. He still didn't care much for this commanding officer, and a general who was a friend helped arrange the transfer for him to the 58th Wing.

On one of the trips to China there were four people in the plane--Vern, another private, the captain, and the pilot. The engines died, and the captain told them to jump. Shortly after, Vern saw the plane crash creating a huge fireball. He never saw the pilot or the captain (who he thought was a pretty good guy) again. Vern and the other private wandered about 27 days in the countryside before meeting up with any GI's. They had no guns and subsisted on berries and hand-outs from the mountain people. Once a Chinese lady hid them in a cave. Vern lost 20-30 pounds and was skinny as a rail to start with. He was in China about 60 days altogether before flying back to the base in India.

Once the Japanese shot holes in his airplane. He took cover behind the blade of the bulldozer. Fortunately, the plane landed safely, even with holes in it. When they landed the second lieuie (who Vern said was a pompous, obnoxious . . . who did not know . . . from prunes, a 90 day wonder) jumped out and promptly got shot and killed. Vern had told him to get behind a bulldozer blade for cover, but he chose to jump out in front of the machine gun spray instead. When the second lieuie got shot, a nurse jumped out to help him, and she was shot in the leg and really bleeding badly. Then Vern jumped out and covered her with his body and bandaged her leg. Fortunately some help had come by then. The British counterattack drove the Japanese back.

Another story was about taking Rangoon back from the Japanese. The British were on the move and were going to bombard the Japanese. A bunch of gliders were brought in to haul the Indian troops into the battle on one flank, but there was a big windstorm and the gliders were ruined. When the gliders were ruined, they brought in US Army planes and picked up Vern. They had to fly extremely low to stay out of the barrage of Navy artillery. They decided to make paratroopers out of the Indian troops. It was early morning; still dark. They told Vern that when the lights came on and the doors opened he was to make sure parachute lines were hooked and push the Indians out. They were not trained. The rice paddies were so hard that the officers thought that there would be broken bones and did not want to try training. Obviously, the Indians were rather reluctant to jump so Vern (and three or so others) were ordered to boot them out. There were about 20 Indian troops on that plane.

Vern also drove cargo trucks. Once in China he had to pull over to the side of the road and dive into a ditch because the Japanese airplanes were strafing the convoy.

From India he and maybe 200-300 other guys went to Perth, Australia, on a big boat, then up the South Pacific to Guam. Most of the missions were in Okinawa. He flew there with a bulldozer and radio equipment with about five other guys to keep the airstrip open until the support group showed up to take over the operations. The Japanese would crash nose first into the airstrips kamikaze style, sometimes embedding their planes 8 - l2 feet into the strip. Vern would use a bulldozer (which they then took apart and flew somewhere else) to scrape off all the metal and other debris and then restore the earth. At times it was a very sickening job. He was in Okinawa about four days then went back to Guam.

He was in Guam when Truman had Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombed and the war ended. Soldiers accumulated points on how many missions they were involved in and other things. Vern had 79 which was quite high so he qualified to fly home instead of taking a boat. However, while he was waiting for his flight, it was decided that they needed more supplies in Okinawa so he made a month of deliveries before he got to come home. These flights were known as the sunset mission.

They flew him to San Francisco where he took a train to Chicago, and he and another guy were met there by Vern s dad. (Although his dad 's house and family were in Canton, he was working in Chicago, and would take the train home most Fridays.) His dad took him to his hotel, ran a big tub of hot water, poured him a scotch and soda, and said "enjoy" which he did for the next hour or so. It was the first tub bath and scotch in 2 l/2 years. It sure felt good. From Chicago he went to Dayton to check out of the service. On his discharge he received $250 and an Asian-Pacific ribbon with four bronze stars, one for each major military battle campaign. He called Mom to meet him and gave her his hotel address and room number. He was standing on a corner trying to get a ride outside the check-out center when low and behold along comes a car, followed by his joyous yell of, It's Mary! There weren't too many cars coming along that road so for his wife to drive boy really was quite a coincidence. She took them to the hotel.

Vern almost didn't end up going overseas. As first they thought he wouldn't even be drafted because he was blind in one eye. Hercules Motors (his employer) could have had him exempted from the draft, but didn't think they had to use one of their allotted deferrals. They reasoned that he would be automatically deferred due to his vision. However, he went through basic training and a couple special schools; and then when it was time to be shipped out, the Air Force decided he couldn't see and would have to work someplace in the United States. This made him damn mad. In no uncertain terms, and not using the most polite vocabulary, he demanded to see the captain and told him he had gone through his whole life with one eye, he got through all the damn training schools with one eye, and he damn well wasn't going to let it stop him now. The captain listened then took Vern over to the vision wall chart, read him the letters, had Vern repeat the letters, then stamped him okay and ready to go."

Yep, one thing I will always say about my Dad is that he’s always been ready to go! If he feels something should be done, it’s going to get done and nothing is going to stop him.

Vern Latta, is a descendant of Branch 17, of our Latta family. His parents, David Wilson Latta (1881-1956) and mother, Effie Jane Schaub (1883-1972), were both born in Monroe County, Ohio, and died in Canton, Stark County, Ohio. The next generations back in the Latta tree include the following, all of which died in Monroe County, Ohio.

John Copeland Latta (born 1837-West Virginia; died 1915).

Mary Jane (Morris) Latta (born 1837-Monroe Co., Ohio; died 1927)

John Latta (born 1784-Pennsylvania; died 1865).

Anna Elizabeth Hockinbury (born 1793-New Jersey; died 1865)

Following the war, Vern and his brother Don opened a feed mill and fuel oil supply business, Latta Brothers, in Robertsville, Ohio. The business was sold in the 1960’s and he moved to Fort Myers Beach, Florida, where he currently lives in the winter months. In the summer, he and second wife Libby (Folger) Thomas return to her home inVermont.