Two Medal of Honor Recipients with Harlingen Connections

Norman Rozeff

The Harlingen Army Gunnery School (HAGS) was established at the Harlingen Army Air Field in August 1941, four months prior to the US's entry into World War II. Its purpose was to train gunners manning the bombers that were to see action in both the European and Pacific Theaters of War. More than 48,000 soldiers were to be trained in Harlingen. In the years following, losses of these crewman were to be very high, especially in actions over Europe. Many performed heroically in their assigned duties. Two Harlingen Gunnery School graduates especially distinguished themselves and were awarded our nation's highest military honor, the Medal of Honor.

The first was Maynard Harrison "Snuffy" Smith. As a 5'6", 130 lb. ball gunner in the belly of a B17, Smith became the first enlisted airman ever to receive the Medal of Honor, from Secretary of War Stinson no less. He was a native of Caro, Michigan. His action occurred over Nazi-occupied Southern France at St. Naizance where a Nazi sub base was being bombed before his B-17 was engaged by a flight of German Focke-wulf 190s.

Thanks to war correspondent (and currently 60 Minutes commentator) Andy Rooney, Smith received considerable publicity for his heroics. His citation reads as follows:

For conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity in action above and beyond the call of duty. The aircraft of which Sgt. Smith was a gunner was subjected to intense enemy antiaircraft fire and determined fighter airplane attacks while returning from a mission over enemy-occupied continental Europe on 1 May 1943. The airplane was hit several times by antiaircraft fire and cannon shells of the fighter airplanes. Two of the crew were seriously wounded, the aircraft's oxygen system shot out, and several vital control cables severed when intense fires were ignited simultaneously in the radio compartment and waist sections. The situation became so acute that three of the crew bailed out into the comparative safety of the sea. Sgt. Smith, then on his first combat mission, elected to fight the fire by himself, administered first aid to the wounded tail gunner, manned waist guns, and fought the intense flames alternately. The escaping oxygen fanned the fire to such intense heat that the ammunition in the radio compartment began to explode, the radio, gun mount, and camera were melted, and the compartment completely gutted. Sgt. Smith threw the exploding ammunition overboard, fought the fire until all the firefighting aids were exhausted, manned the workable guns until the enemy fighters were driven away, further administered first aid to a wounded comrade, and then by wrapping himself in protecting cloth, completely extinguished the fire by hand. This soldier's gallantry in action, undaunted bravery, and loyalty to his aircraft and fellow crewmembers, without regard for his own personal safety, is an inspiration to the U.S. Armed Forces.

From this action in southern France, the plane managed to limp back to the nearest landing strip in England whereupon it split in two after setting down. Smith had fought the flames with extinguishers, drinking water, and finally urine in collection containers. Smith's heroic efforts had saved the crew as well as himself. He flew four more missions
before experiencing combat fatigue, a condition which resulted in his being demoted to the rank of private.

Another distinguished gunnery school graduate was Technical Sergeant Forrest L. Vosler. The Harlingen Army Gunnery School was his first unit. He too received a Medal of Honor citation for action occurring in the European Theater. The citation is so dramatic and moving I quote it in its entirety:

For conspicuous gallantry in action against the enemy above and beyond the call of duty while serving in a mission over Bremen, Germany, on 20 December 1943. After bombing the target, the aircraft in which Sergeant Vosler was serving was severely damaged by antiaircraft fire, forced out of formation, and immediately subjected to repeated vicious attacks by enemy fighters. Early in the engagement a 20-mm cannon shell exploded in the radio compartment, painfully wounding Sergeant Vosler in the legs and thighs. At about the same time a direct hit on the tail of the ship seriously wounded the tail gunner and rendered the tail guns inoperative. Realizing the great need for firepower in protecting the vulnerable tail of the ship, Sergeant Vosler, with grim determination, kept up a steady stream of deadly fire. Shortly thereafter another 20-mm enemy shell exploded, wounding Sergeant Vosler in the chest and about his face. Pieces of metal lodged in both eyes, impairing his vision to such an extent that he could only distinguish blurred shape. Displaying remarkable tenacity and courage, he kept firing his guns and declined to take first-aid treatment. The radio equipment had been rendered inoperative during the battle, and when the pilot announced that he would have to ditch, although unable to see, Sergeant Vosler finally got the set operating and sent out distress signals despite several lapses into unconsciousness. When the ship ditched, Sergeant Vosler managed to get out on the wing by himself and hold the wounded tail gunner from slipping off until other crew members could help them into a dinghy. Sergeant Vosler’s actions on this occasion were an inspiration to all serving with him. The extraordinary courage, coolness, and skill he displayed in the face of great odds, when handicapped by injuries that would have incapacitated the average crew member, were outstanding.

The Air Force in May 1984 established a Professional Military Education Center for non-commissioned officers. The facility at the Peterson Air Force Base, Colorado Springs, Colorado is named the Forrest L. Vosler NCO Academy. The Academy has a heraldic shield. On its right upper half is a purple background symbolic of Vosler’s first unit, the Harlingen Army Gunnery School. Vosler and Smith were among the "Bravest of the Brave."

Harlingen took great pride in the important role it played in the war effort. It remembers the Army Air Field in a commemorative Texas State Historical Commission marker located in front of the Harlingen Arts and Heritage Museum.