

# Into Life's School: My World War II Memories

## About the book

*Into Life's School: My World War II Memories* is a 332-page memoir centered on WWII, written by Clifford B. "CB" Digre, who grew up in southwestern Minnesota and now lives in south Minneapolis.

The title of the book originated from the motto for the author's 1941 high school graduating class. As an eager student of life, Clifford "CB" Digre encountered new situations and people after graduation, during military service, and upon his honorable discharge. He kept a small diary in which he recorded the stories of boot camp and small-town life along with the more momentous events of bombing missions, the deaths of crew members, and life as a husband, father, and businessman.

In accessible, conversational text that is interspersed with more than 150 images and that moves at a brisk pace, readers will learn what the author learned—and felt. The book is populated with many interesting family members, friends, coworkers, crew members, and their families who all contribute to the author's learning the lessons of Life's School. We later learn what each crew member did after the war, and encounter some of them at reunions of the 457th Bomb Group.

If history is the study of past events, and a memoir is a historical account written from personal knowledge, then Cliff Digre's book, *Into Life's School*, combines those two subjects to tell *his* story. It is we, the reader, who learn from these accounts and, in the words of a crew member's son, "are all the better for it."

The book measures six inches wide by nine inches, and is almost one inch thick. It has 332 pages and 160 images (not including the images of the reproductions of loading lists and track charts in Appendix C). The text is set in 11.5-point Times and was digitally printed in black by BookMobile on 60-pound pure white archival text-weight paper stock. The cover is reproduced in four-color process inks. Both a hardcover and paperback edition will be available by May 1, 2009. The hardcover version of the book will sell for \$25; the paperback version for \$15.95.



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## About the author

Cliff Digre served more than two years as a member of the 749th Bomb Squadron, one of four squadrons in the 457th Bomb Group, 8th Air Force. His assignment was as a ball-turret gunner. Digre's group was stationed at a base known as Glatton, located in the small village of Conington, England, 60 miles north of London.

The author flew 24 bombing missions beginning in September 1944—22 missions over Germany & two over eastern France.

Clifford B. "CB" Digre is a storyteller, veteran, family man, entrepreneur, and now an author.

## Excerpt from a letter

Cliff,

What a marvelous gift you have given those of us with a connection to and interest in the war to end all wars. Historians will delight in the details you provide, down to the loading lists. Those of us in the next generation will cherish the stories, allowing us a peek into the lives of those we love and admire. But best of all, the grandsons and granddaughters will finally understand what it is like to grow up in a fragile world at war and to keep life's commitments to friends, country, and the soul mates we are meant to be with.

There is something for everyone here. You have done a great job getting it all down on paper, in a compelling story that is easy to read and appreciate. I particularly enjoyed the front section. It adds tremendously to the story and provides a context for how unbelievable everything that happened afterwards must have been for a young man from Minnesota.

*Into Life's School* describes what it was really like to fly into battle with the 8th Air Force in World War II. This is a gripping and original account of one man's journey and the everyday drama of the 457th Bomb Group in action. In this true-life story, you hit us in the heart at close range, and we are all the better for it.

—Randall Stutman, son of a crew member.

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**Clifford B. "CB" Digre**  
*Veteran of the 457th Bomb Group,  
8th Air Force*

# Preface

(Excerpted)

What prompted me to write these memories of World War II?

It started with a small diary that I kept of my combat experiences. Years after the war, as our children were growing up, they were interested in reading about WWII history. When they discovered my diary, they found it extremely intriguing to read about their dad's personal experiences. By the time this small four-inch by six-inch spiral-bound book had survived our fourth child, it was tattered and torn and almost illegible.



With the interest our children had shown and with their encouragement, I decided to rewrite the diary to preserve this bit of personal history for my grandchildren and descendants. This account is a combination of the records in that diary, miscellaneous shipping orders, letters I had written and received, conversations with crew members, and my personal recollections.

The title of the book, *Into Life's School*, is taken from my 1941 Hendricks High School class motto: "Out of school life, into life's school." The reason I chose this title was that I found out that most of the real lessons learned in life are not just from school and formal education but from life itself and the people you meet, the experiences you have, and relationships you form—Life's School.

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# Crew Assignment and Training

April 27 to May 3, 1944  
Memories of Crew Assignment—  
Plant Park, Tampa, Florida

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Nearly a year had passed since I had been inducted at Fort Snelling—a year full of new experiences, eight exhausting weeks of basic training, a stint in the US Signal Corps at an excellent radio operators' school, six exciting weeks of gunnery school, and now expectations of the most important so far—**crew assignment**.

My orders were to report to the 3rd Army Air Force replacement depot—Plant Park near Tampa, Florida, for assignment. Plant Park was the home of the Florida State Fair.

Plant Park was one of the assembly locations for making up bomber crews of pilots, navigators, bombardiers, and gunners with their skills as flight engineers, armament, and radio operators.

My stay at Plant Park was short—less than a week—just long enough to undergo another series of tests, physical and psychological, and final testing to determine if I was physically fit and mentally stable enough to cope with the strain of combat flying.

Having passed these tests, next was the suspense of being assigned to the right crew, knowing that the skills of my pilot and the other crew members could likely be a matter of life or death.

Most crews were put together with clerks pulling out the names of pilots, copilots, navigators, etc., in a random manner more or less—just the luck of the draw. But this was **not** to be the way our crew was put together.

One day, returning to the barracks after playing a baseball game in the field that was used as a training field for the Cincinnati Reds, I found a note on my bunk that a Lt. Robertson had stopped to see me and that he would be back at such and such a time. I had no idea what it was all about, but I was certain I was not in trouble since I was a conscientious soldier, always playing by military rules.

So I waited, and almost exactly at the time noted, he came back and introduced himself as First Lt. William T. Robertson, bomber

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crew pilot. He explained he was **not** taking a clerk's list for his crew. Instead, he had reviewed the records of at least two persons for each position who would make up his crew, and then he was personally interviewing them. I remember him saying, "I don't want just an ordinary crew; I want the **best!**" He visited with me for about a half an hour, asking a lot of questions—where from, about my family, hobbies, likes, dislikes. I could tell he was sincere and a good listener. I was impressed, and when he left, I was hoping he would choose me to be on his crew.

Two days later, posted on the bulletin board, was a listing of the newly assigned crews, and there I was, Clifford Digre, ball turret gunner on the First Lt. Wm. T. Robertson crew. Included on the crew listing were the orders that we were to assemble the next afternoon at the parade/ball field area where we would meet each other for the first time.

Only Lt. Robertson had met all of us, so of course he made the initial introductions. He then asked that we each give a brief personal profile—name and nickname we wanted to be addressed by—marital status—where from, etc.

As we were introducing ourselves, **everyone** was all ears and sizing each other up. We were all going to be very important to one another. These were guys we would be going through "Hell and High Water" with, living and perhaps dying with, so each person's skills and attitudes were important to everyone.

The following is my profile of each of the members of our crew; in my opinion, the best crew ever in the Army Air Corps.

### **The Wm. T. "Robbie" Robertson Crew**

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#### ***Pilot Wm. T. Robertson—Robbie***

Orlando, Florida—married—wife, Rose, and baby daughter, Grace. Robbie had been in the military service five or six years before Pearl Harbor and had flown nearly every military aircraft as a flying sergeant. From our very first meeting we all knew this man was in charge—an exacting person—competent—a bit "cocky," radiating confidence and the very image of a self-assured bomber crew commander.

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We were assigned to the 749th Bomb Squadron. Located somewhat in the center of the base, it was convenient to everything—the mess hall, the Officers' Club, the NCO Club, Headquarters, and the flight lines. In our opinion the location was the best of the four squadrons, so again we felt lucky when we were assigned to the 749th. The squadron area was made up of several huts—prefab corrugated metal buildings set on concrete slabs. There was absolutely no insulation, so come winter we knew it would be cold with only a potbelly stove in the center of the hut to heat the eighteen of us, three crews, in our Hut #20.

Since arriving we had no duties, only a couple of meetings to acquaint us with leave policies, the base, and base facilities. Sid and I walked into the small village of Sawtry and had beers at a couple of different pubs. Our favorite was “The Oddfellows Arms” owned by Frank and Rose Warren. I was sure we would be visiting them often. Soon we would start ground and more flight training, and then **the real thing**.

### August 25 to September 9, 1944 Final Training Before Combat

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Our training started with a meeting of the new replacement crews. Some had arrived a day or two before we did and other crews arrived with us. One of these was the crew of Capt. John Wallace. We had been with the Wallace crew since we started training at McDill. Now we would be flying combat together. They, too, had a quality crew. At that meeting we were told we would have ground school and air flight training when weather and available aircraft permitted. Most of the air flight training would concentrate on formation flying. Many new techniques had developed since our training at McDill.

### August 28, 1944

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Sid and I bought bicycles from a crew in the hut next to ours who no longer needed them; they had completed their tour and were going home. I paid nearly four pounds (\$16), about the price of a good bottle of Scotch, for an old beat up but usable bike. Some years ago I had sold my classmate John Midtaune a bike in very good condition for three dollars. Bikes were at a premium there. Our bikes would make our trips to Sawtry easier, so I was sure we could be there more often.



## September 6, 1944

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On this day we were told that we had completed all flight training, and we were now combat ready so we could expect to be on a loading list for our first mission any day. We knew we were not scheduled for a mission the next day, so to keep our minds off what was coming up, Sid, Korny, Brown, and I went to a dance in Sawtry. We asked Rinehart to go, too, but he said he had letters to write. Earl wrote to his wife, Ruth, almost daily. Earl definitely had a fatalistic attitude, while Sid and I kept trying to keep up our optimism, thinking positively. We said, "We wouldn't be here if we didn't think we would make it."

## September 8, 1944 The Eve Before Mission #1

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Just a short time ago we learned we would be flying our first mission the next day. Now it was for real—no more practice missions. All the crew members were in the barracks tonight—even Kornblatt and Szydlowski, even though they were not flying tomorrow. Everyone had been writing letters tonight, even Korny whom I had never before seen write a letter; and Sid wasn't even going out for a beer.

You may wonder why Kornblatt and Szydlowski were not flying. We were trained as a crew of ten members with two waist gunners. Since our training, the Air Force decided to reduce the number of waist gunners from two to one—thus eliminating one position and making a crew of nine. On a crew's first mission, they always flew an experienced crew member.

I hoped that the next night I would be writing up Mission #1.



Me with my \$16 bike.

## Appendix B

Although we spent most of our time with Kornblatt, Dahle, and Astor, we did get together with our friends from the Sellon crew for dinner, and we were looking forward to the 1997 reunion in Savannah, Georgia.

### *Were we ever this young (1945)?*



Art Astor



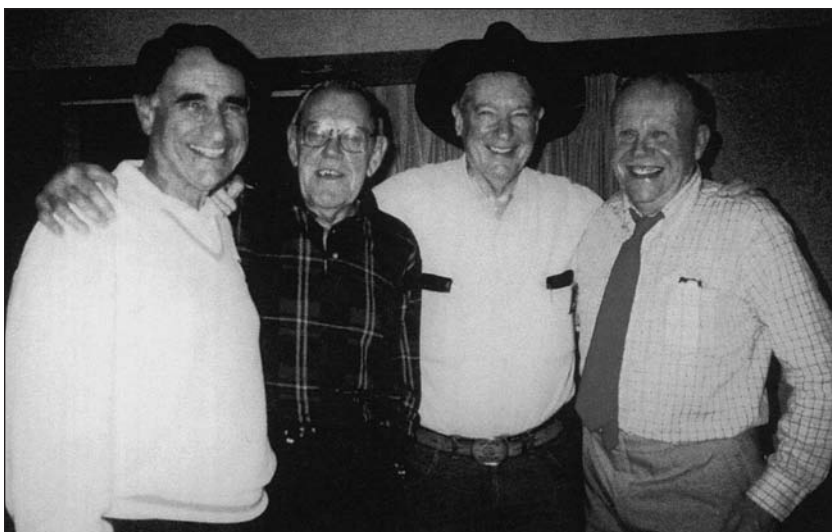
Cliff Digre



Julius Kornblatt



Louis Dahle



Art Astor, me, Julie Kornblatt, and Louis Dahle—1995