

Flinchum served in Air Corps crash, rescue unit during WWII

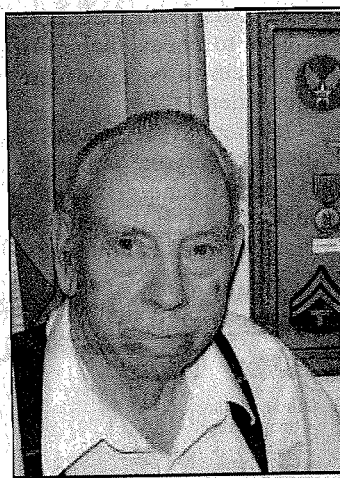
By Gene Morrell

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Editor's note: This year is the 60th anniversary of the end of World War II in 1945, and throughout 2005, the News Messenger will publish a series of stories on local World War II veterans to recognize them and to honor their courage and sacrifice.

James (Jim) Flinchum was living in Willis in Floyd County when he was drafted into the Army Air Corps on March 10, 1943.

Flinchum, now 82 years old and living in Riner, said he was sent to Miami Beach, Fla., for basic training and then to the Air



James (Jim) Flinchum served in the Army Air Corps in the European Theater during World War II. Right, Flinchum in a photo taken in 1943.

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World War II Victory Medal

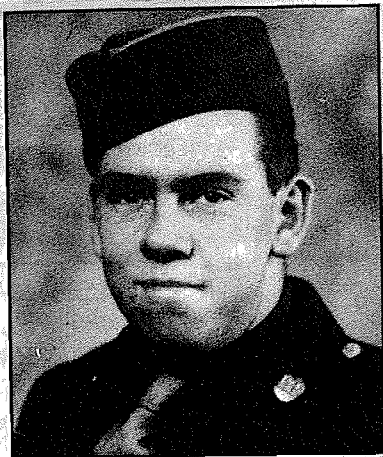
Corps' Crash and Rescue School at Lake Pontchartrain, located near New Orleans, La.

Later, he went to Camp Kilmer, N.J., and departed on board the troop transport ship, the USS Monterey, for his trip across the Atlantic Ocean to England.

The ship landed at Liverpool, and when Flinchum reached Boxted Air Base, located near Colchester, in the fall of 1943, he was assigned to the 2026th Engineer Aviation Firefighting Platoon of the 354th Fighter Group, which was part of the 9th Air Force. Flinchum was assigned to the 354th for the rest of the war.

"We were always out on the air field beside the control tower. The crash fire truck and ambulance were ready to respond to any emergency," Flinchum said. When the planes were taking off for their

missions or returning from them, Flinchum and the other members of the platoon were on duty in case of a crash, fire or other emergency. "We didn't have any of that high-tech radar and stuff like that then," Flinchum said, "so when the fog



Honoring our local heroes

On the 60th anniversary of the end of World War II

was bad, which was a lot of the time, the takeoffs and landings could be pretty dangerous." Sometimes, planes would be damaged when they returned from their missions or might have to land with one landing gear down, and Flinchum and the other members of the crash and rescue platoon were ready to respond. "Some [landings] had sad endings, and many had happy endings. However, we always did our best," Flinchum said.

Flinchum recalls "long days and longer nights watching the P-51 pilots land or attempt to land, hoping I would not have to watch another crash or pull another pilot from a burning plane."

Flinchum remembers that in April 1944, a P-51 was taking off with fragmentation bombs under each wing. Everything was going normally, but Flinchum said, "Just as it was leaving the ground, one bomb fell off. It bounced along and then exploded."

Then, Flinchum was surprised to see thousands of propaganda leaflets blowing across the field. The leaflets were to be dropped over enemy-held territory and were designed to encourage German soldiers to surrender. "I picked up a handful of leaflets and brought some home with me," Flinchum said. "They were written in German and urged the Germans to surrender. The leaflets said things like, 'You are completely surrounded. You all will be killed. Our planes are on the field being warmed up. Come out with your hands up now.'"

"The 2026th also had other duties to perform, and we were on call at night" for

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emergencies such as a fire at the gasoline storage dump or a fire at the mess hall, "but we were back on the field the next morning at day break," Flinchum said.

In late 1943, London was still under attack by enemy bombers as Germany continued its unsuccessful effort to force England to surrender. Flinchum said, "We were in the path of the Luftwaffe planes going to London. We could hear them flying by overhead, and five minutes later, we could hear them dropping their bombs on London. Then, a few minutes later, you would hear the German planes overhead returning [back to their bases in Germany]."

Flinchum said, "Each evening, a pilot would stop by and tell [members of the platoon] where they went and what they did that day. One I remember very well. They shot up a German troop train, and the engine was on fire. The troops were jumping off the train and running across an open field to the woods, so the planes used the rest of their ammunition to strafe them," Flinchum said.

In June 1944, the 354th Fighter Group left its base in England following the Allied invasion of France on D-Day on June 6.

Flinchum said, "We landed on Omaha Beach [the portion of Normandy beach assigned to the American troops] on D+3, and there were still a lot of dead German soldiers lying around. The American dead had already been picked up."

"The aviation engineers were already laying a wire mesh runway for our P-51 planes, and several were killed by enemy fire while working to make the strip," Flinchum said.

"We had the first landing strip on Omaha Beach," Flinchum said, and "Gen. (Dwight) Eisenhower [supreme commander of the Allied forces] took off from there to tour the area and the front lines."

This was the first time during the war that a ground general had planned a battle from an aircraft flying over enemy territory. Eisenhower wanted to see what the Saint Lo area looked like from the air in order to help plan his battle strategy for the

Allied breakout from the beachhead in Normandy. Eisenhower rode in the back of a P-51B called "Stars Look Down," and he went up in the plane with no parachute because there was no room for one in the back seat of the plane where he was flying. "This mission was one that could have been disastrous for the Allies if the Germans had shot down his plane," states a history of the 354th Fighter Group.

The 354th was close to the fighting, and Flinchum said, "One night in France, the Luftwaffe bombed our gasoline dump, causing a huge fire. Without regard for our own safety, [members of his platoon] were trying to put the fire out and salvage what we could. While the German pilots were probably looking down and smiling at their success, we did save about half the gasoline dump, and we were recommended for the Soldier's Medal."

As U.S. forces continued to fight their way across Europe, the 354th stayed just behind the front lines to fly close air support missions for the troops on the ground.

In December 1944, the Germans launched their last big offensive of the war - which came to be called the Battle of the Bulge - in the Ardennes. "In the Battle of the Bulge, all our planes that were flyable flew out. Our ground personnel remained, and we were helping to man roadblocks. Some of the Germans were wearing American uniforms or driving American vehicles, and if anyone coming through the roadblocks didn't know the password, we were to kill them. At the roadblocks, one of our men would stand in the center of the road, and there would be one man in the ditch on each side. If the center man was threatened, then the two in the ditches on the sides would open up," Flinchum said.

The Americans and British halted the offensive, and the Germans began to withdraw back toward Germany in January 1945.

When Germany unconditionally surrendered in May 1945,

Flinchum was with the 354th Fighter Group inside Germany. The unit remained in Europe after the end of the war until late 1945. Flinchum later returned to the U.S. and was discharged from the Army Air Corps on Dec. 16, 1945, with the rank of technician fifth grade.

The medals Flinchum received for his service during the war included the World War II Victory Medal, European-African-Middle Eastern Campaign Medal with four campaign stars, Good Conduct Medal and Army of Occupation Medal (Germany). Flinchum is a member of Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 1115 in Hillsville.

Editor's note: For more information on the 354th Fighter Group, see the web site at www.homestead.com/354thfigtergroup.