As You Were

Job Flexibility

MY FIRST bombing mission, as a 19-year-old staff sergeant on the "Big Idjit," our B-24 Liberator, was over Albania in 1944.

My job as top gunner was to keep enemy fighters at a distance, or so I thought. I saw the first flak burst off our left wing, and boy, was it close.

We made it through the mission okay, but when we prepared to land, one of the wheel mechanisms would not unfold. We found that the hydraulic system had been hit by flak and was leaking oil.

My job then was to stand on a narrow platform in the bay area, lean over open air and pinch a hydraulic line closed with a pair of pliers. I held things together until there was enough pressure in the fluid line for the wheel to come down.

After we landed, the bombardier and pilot both agreed that I should be made a technical sergeant, and so I was. I flew another 49 missions but I'll never forget that first one, flying high with nothing between the ground and me but open air.

—Donald R., Shelby, Ohio

One More Crucial Detail

IN 1966, I was a new recruit early into basic training at Fort Polk, Louisiana when I was summoned to the headquarters building for some paperwork glitch.

I had recently been trained in the art of the proper salute—who, what, when, where and why—so I was quite confident I would know what to do.

An officer was walking toward me out of the headquarters

building. I saw the captain's bars, the dress uniform and the high-gloss shoes. Yep, I was ready!

I stood tall, got my pace just right and, at just the right distance, I snapped a proud and correct salute and confidently called out, "Sir, good morning, sir."

That's when my whole world fell in. I heard a female voice shout out to me, "Trainee, come back here! Do I look that bad to you?"

I was flushed. I hadn't been prepared to meet a female officer. All I could say was, "No, ma'am, not at all." She excused me with a curt "Don't let it happen again."

I doubt she remembers that day, but it's one that stands clearly in my mind even 40 years after the fact.

—Tom W., Ozark, Alabama

A Royal Recollection

IN 1939, I was a 16-year-old corporal in C Company of the Algonquin Regiment, a volunteer militia unit in the bustling gold-mining town of Kirkland Lake in northern Ontario.

Every soldier in our unit was excited when the regiment was ordered to perform guard duty for King George VI and Queen Elizabeth during their historic visit to Sudbury.

On June 4, our group of 250 soldiers boarded the train for a journey of 300 miles, marched to an armory and slept. The next day, we learned that instead of lining the parade route, we would line a lonely road to a mine the king and queen wished to visit. Our morale dropped to ground level.

There were no cheering crowds on our march out of the city, just blackflies, rocks and poplar trees. Then we waited in our ill-fitting, heavy, woolen uniforms of World War I vintage.

To make matters worse, my mother had sewn my newly acquired corporal stripes in the wrong place on my sleeves.

At last, the royal couple appeared in an open car. We were ordered, “Present arms!” As Queen Elizabeth went by, she gave me a long and beautiful smile! My negative thoughts immediately disappeared.

I boasted to my friends about the smile, but they said the queen smiled at everyone. But to me, it was a never-to-be-forgotten moment. She really did smile at me!

—Norman P., Fort Walton Beach, Florida