

Havana Whisky Run

G. UDELL

Part of my period of service was spent with the Army Air Forces Air Transport Command. The mission of the Air Transport Command was explained somewhat by its name. We transported anything and practically everything which had to be delivered in a hurry to some place on one of our many battle fronts. Our personnel strength was maintained at a very high level because of the fact that we were called upon to transport almost unlimited amounts of cargo at unscheduled times. Naturally, our entire group was rarely if ever functioning all at the same time, and so there were usually a few of us who were doing nothing but waiting for the next flight. Those periods of waiting were rather dull, and it is about the enlivenment of one of them that I am writing.

I was stationed at Morrison Field, West Palm Beach, Florida, during 1944, and as some of you who read this may recall, at that time good whisky was really scarce and at times wholly unobtainable. Even when it could be purchased, the price asked reminded one of the ceiling report of a bright cloudless day.

Air crew members — that is, pilots, co-pilots, navigators, radio operators, gunners and engineers — were required to undergo several hours of flight training each month in which regular duties provided an insufficient number of hours flying time. They were permitted to go anywhere they pleased on these flights provided, of course, basic requirements were satisfied. The main destination of the training flights always seemed to be Cuba — and for a good reason!

Cuba was outside the continental limits of the United States and therefore

was classified as an overseas station. With such a classification, the base was entitled to and received a few things which we in the United States did not get. Chief among these extra items was an unlimited supply of whisky. This was not just any brand of whisky; it consisted of good American brands. There was no federal tax on this whisky either, as such tax was levied only on liquor sold inside the country.

Cuba is about two hours by air from West Palm Beach, and every week end a C-47 aircraft or two would take off with its crew of three men plus about twenty passengers and fly straight for Cuba. After landing at Batista Field, a few miles outside of Havana, we would crowd into rickety little busses which I remember for their chromium plated air horns and decided lack of brakes, and wind our way over the narrow red clay roads to the city. We managed to make the training flights last the entire week end and each trip was thoroughly enjoyed. Before departure for West Palm Beach, each man in the group would stop by the Officers' Club and buy four bottles of whisky. I say four bottles because that is all Uncle Sam's customs agents would allow us to bring in duty free. The profit we made reselling the whisky went part of the way towards paying for our week end, and I am not exaggerating when I say that the fellows at the field were always glad to buy the stuff.

On one particular trip a group of us dreamed up a novel idea which at the time seemed like a profitable plan. We knew we could gain a profit of about five dollars on the regular four-bottle transaction, and we now had a plan whereby we could

double our profit several times over. We knew the customs agents inspected all baggage and that they did not spend much time on the aircraft itself. Therefore we decided to invest in a case of liquor each. We were practically in the business! We borrowed a truck and drove over to the Batista Field Officers' Club where we took on quite a load. We then went directly to our plane, took the whisky on board, and carefully packed it in the belly beneath the aluminum floor paneling where we were sure no customs agent would ever find it. We took off at the appointed hour and headed north for home. The return trip was without event and upon landing each man cleared customs with flying colors and the usual four bottles. Unfortunately the plane was parked immediately in front of the customs office, and since we obviously could not unload our whisky there, we did the next best thing. We decided to wait until the ship had been gassed and serviced and towed over to the parking apron. There we would be at liberty to unload our prize cargo.

Several of us made our plans and met later that evening at the edge of the field with a truck. We began circling the parking areas looking for our plane, but could not find it on the first trip around and so

we backtracked to our starting point. Still we could not find the plane, and then one of the fellows suggested we look in the hangars. It was possible that the plane had required minor repairs and had been placed in a hangar for that reason, but we scoured all the hangars and still could not find even a trace of the plane which contained our investment. It was at this point that we began to think about the folly of our ways. We had to find that plane! There was just one more chance. Operations headquarters of course would know where it was at the moment. We were a slight bit apprehensive about checking at operations though because we really had no legal business with the plane, but since our entire investment was at stake we went over to the operations building. One of the boys approached the operations clerk in charge, said that an article of clothing had been left on the plane, and asked if he could tell us where the plane was. The clerk said he certainly could tell us where our plane was. Earlier in the evening they had received a priority wire directing the permanent transfer of the plane to an airfield in California, and right at the moment it was in the air over the broad state of Texas!

Sampling . .

The plow digs in, rolling up black, glossy earth. Blackbirds bounce along behind the plow, snatching up betrayed grubs and worms. The tractor determinedly draws the plow through the sod; it puffs hot fumes and sputters an endless hum.

Plowing Through a Spring Night

PHYLLIS SWINNEY