Two men representing Elgin, Illinois, were with the 380th Bomb Group, 5th Air Force.

Laverne “Buck” Wassinger arrived with the original cadre in 1943 at Darwin to help prevent a Japanese invasion of Northern Australia. Many of the residents of Northern Australia already had moved south to escape the evident invasion, taking only what they could carry. They had to leave their livestock to roam the territory. Numerous bombings had already occurred – the 380th was bombed while unloading at Darwin. An unpleasant welcome for our boys! They also underwent numerous bombings later at Fenton Field by the Japanese air force.

While at Fenton, Wassinger and a Texan managed to round up a couple of the stray semi-wild horses. They kept them corralled and could ride for their own pleasure during off-duty times.

Irving “Pappy” Rowe arrived in February of 1944, and he, the pilot, co-pilot, and navigator were trying to get settled in their new quarters – an assigned tent – when up the path came a lone rider on horseback. The animal hit a chuck hole at our doorway and the rider came sliding down the horse’s neck, running into our tent. “Is there a guy by the name of Rowe in here?” he asked. I acknowledged I was Rowe. His hand extended as he said, “I’m Buck Wassinger from Elgin.” How many miles are we from Elgin? In the tent comes a cowboy from my hometown! When I left in 1941, there were no cowboys in Elgin. I had heard of Wassinger Trucking, but had never known any of them personally. A million miles from home, in Fenton Field, Australia, I meet Buck Wassinger from Elgin, Illinois!

When you enter military service you are given an ID number called an ASN. As an enlisted man (EM) or as an officer (O), you are also assigned an M.O.S. (Military Occupational Specialty) number. Buck was an EM (16144225) in Headquarters Company. I did not know his M.O.S., but he was in a position to know of crew arrivals, EM and O. Their papers to HQ listed their hometowns and other pertinent information. That is how Buck found Rowe. Being from HQ he was all over the area – EMs and Os, and all over the northern territory, our various fields and jobs. Twice we made emergency landings, and he was on the fire truck. He drove a 6x6 loaded with personnel on a visit to the beach provided by a priest. I think his military hobby was locating Elgin service people. He located Marvin Radloff of Elgin (who was with the Navy) in Darwin. He brought Marv to our tent in Fenton. So now there are three Elginites in Australia. Marv had a leave coming up and needed transportation to Brisbane, on the East Coast. Our pilot, Sheehan, was able to get him a round trip on a B-24 to somewhere near where he wanted to go. Free airfare (a good deal).

In 1945 we moved to Mindoro in The Philippine Islands, where a group of infantry had also moved in, prior to an invasion by U.S. troops going into Mindanao Island. It was here Buck found Gieske. He brought Gieske to our tent at Murtha strip. Gieske wanted a ride in a B-24. We promised him a ride, but our crew was shipped home before we could keep our promise.

It was April of 1945. Our crew had flown 44 missions and we were being sent home for R&R (rest and recuperation). We had “combat fatigue,” or so our overseas medic said. We would recoup in the States and be sent back to our units in a few weeks. I got back to Elgin in April 1945, back to my wife and family. I wasted no time and called the Wassinger, Radloff, and Gieske families to let them know their sons were okay, and exactly where they were. We made dates to go and see them to answer any questions they had and that I could answer. All were very pleased I’d seen their sons and that I’d come to see their families. I can’t remember Gieske’s first name, but was told he had been wounded on Mindanao, but was doing well in a U.S. Army hospital. Gieske’s dad operated a welding shop at the rear of Muntz and Lea Hardware on Brook Street and I was able to check on young Gieske’s condition often. He was okay and returned home later. He constantly reminded me that I owed him a ride in a B-24. He just wouldn’t forget I owed him that ride!

Wassinger died in an accident out west a few years after the war; I’ve lost track of Gieske, see Marv on occasion, and we have yearly reunions with the 380th, and we are able to see most of our buddies, their wives, and families.

Written by Irving “Pappy” Rowe, April 2000

Story submitted by Bill Bever, October 2011

Notes: Buck Wassinger was on the ground staff with Group HQ

Pappy Rowe was bombardier on Sheehan’s Crew (5), 528th

Gieske was not with the 380th