

The Blizzard of January 1949 in Fort Francis E. Warren AFB, Cheyenne, Wyoming

This is my account of living through a historic blizzard in Cheyenne, Wyoming in early 1949. Written by Mr. Wayne Park of Montgomery, IN.

After completing basic military training at Lackland Air Force Base in late 1948, I was given orders to attend a technical school in Wyoming. Shortly after being home in Indiana for the Christmas Holiday I took a train to the Air Force Base Ft. Francis E. Warren in Cheyenne Wyoming.

Shortly after arriving at the Air Force Base we got hit with a major blizzard. In those days the technology for weather forecasting was quite basic. In fact, I don't think we even had a TV at that period of time.

Before getting into the blizzard details let me digress for a moment and provide some information about the situation.

When I arrived, I was assigned a bunk in the barracks. I was assigned to a training squadron, cannot remember the number of airmen in a squadron. The airmen were coming from their various locations in the United States a few at a time since this was immediately after the holidays.

The barracks were what we called "double decker barracks". They were two stories. They were probably constructed quickly during WWII. We had water, a coal fired boiler which provided heat as well as our hot water for the "latrine", military term for a restroom. Each barracks had a 24/7 airman assigned to feed coal to the boiler. The coal was stored out of doors and close to the boiler room. It was placed in a bin which consisted of 4 concrete sides about 18 inches tall, just tall enough to retain it. Also, airmen were assigned latrine duty to keep the latrine facilities up and running which required continuous attention. This duty was in addition to working in the kitchen "Mess Hall". Each squadron had a Mess Hall.

Now the stage is set for what is about to happen. As you can probably understand, this group of Airmen are all strangers and need an assigned leader. Since this was an event that happened over 70 years ago many of the details of the military life escape this writer. No television or phone service for us so I have no idea of how weather info was provided. All I remember is that we woke up early one morning to one monstrous storm. Bear in mind this Airman was only 18 years old and was now more or less on his own. I didn't realize it then, but I was in reality in a survival mode.

Normally we would march in formation to wherever we had to go; however, we were not officially in tech school yet; awaiting the effective date of school in near future...our orders had a date to report for duty.

During this blizzard I woke up one morning and found out we were out of coal and no way to receive any more. Soon our water froze in the pipes, at boiler, and commodes. Fortunately, they waived our inspections also. Slowly our barracks became cold then colder and colder.

We soon found out that snow would drift thru the cracks in the walls of the military barracks, they were tar paper covered and snow drifted thru the cracks. We slept in our long johns, our wool pants and shirts and an overcoat at night plus we used all the blankets we could find, on us. Since the barracks were not full yet we had access to the mattress of some of the other beds and placed that on us too between layers of blankets...those mattresses were only about 3 inches thick so worked pretty good as a buffer. Of course, we slept with our stocking caps and gloves on. In case you do not know what long johns were, they were made of wool and the back side had a pretty large flap on it with buttons for access. It was quite handy so you did not have to remove any more clothing than was necessary for emergency use.

In the midst of the storm many of us volunteered to perform KP (kitchen police or patrol) so we would have quick access to a restroom and of course food. As I remember I think they kept the mess hall open 24/7 so we would have access to them. We were not permitted to sleep there though. One day I headed to the Mess Hall, which was only about 1,000 feet from our barracks, and got

disoriented and had great difficulty in finding my way...that was a scary moment. Under the conditions I used my instinct which was a guess at best but did finally arrive at the Mess Hall.

The blizzard lasted for a long period of time. To the best of my recollection the temps got to 30 below zero. The snow was up to the edge of the roof on the first floor of the barracks. That would be above the top of our windows at the first floor level. Putting this into perspective the airmen on second floor could walk out of their rooms directly onto the snow without using the stairs at each end of the barracks.

When we had a break in the weather, they started clearing the main streets at the base. Once the conditions permitted our classes began...always marched to class and other places we went as a group. One memory I have of marching to class was that the road surface was pretty slippery, yet according to military discipline we still marched. It always seemed to be windy and we had one airman that was not very big but did meet the minimum weight limitations. On occasion he couldn't maintain marching steps due to wind and he would be blown out of formation. We had airmen in the platoon that would go out of formation and bring him back into formation. I can still see him sliding backward and going out of formation.

In spite of the blizzard I survived and got orders after graduation to report to Bolling Field in Washington, DC.