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World War II

In 1941, I joined the service right after the attack on Pearl Harbor. I went through basic training at Shepherd Air Force Base in Wichita Falls, Texas. From there, they sent me to ordnance school at Lowery Field in Colorado. We left for Fort Dix to board the Queen Mary (the fastest ship afloat at the time) in August 1942 for our unescorted trip overseas.

We zigzagged across the ocean at 10-15 degree angles for the entire trip to avoid torpedoes from waiting German submarines. Two days before we reached England, two British destroyers met our ship to escort us to their country. One of the destroyers kept cutting back and forth in front of the Queen Mary. Finally, our ship rammed into the old wooden destroyer and cut it in half. I witnessed that tragedy from the deck. The two broken halves of the destroyer were sinking on either side of our ship, and we could see dead men lying on the deck. Our crew immediately tossed life rafts overboard and stopped for about 10 minutes to assess the damage to the Queen Mary. They discovered a hole in the bow and closed off that bulkhead. We couldn't wait any longer to check for survivors because our commanding officers couldn't risk the lives of the 15,000 servicemen aboard our ship to save 100 to 200 men.

The following night, we docked at the harbor in Glasgow, Scotland. Then we boarded a train to Norwich, a small town beyond London near the southeastern coast of England. Six weeks later, we boarded another ship and joined a convoy to participate in the North Africa Campaign. Our 10 or 15 ships circled out into the Atlantic away from the coast of France. As we sailed through the Straits of Gibraltar, we heard firing from the area of Morocco. The officers told us that was a warning not to come nearer than we already were. We didn't know our destination until then.

On November 8, 1942, we landed eight or ten miles outside of Oran, Algeria. Before going ashore, we were issued rifles and told we might meet with some token resistance. I thought *Why do I want a rifle. I'm in the Air Force. I don't want to have to kill anybody with a rifle. It might be all right to kill them with bombs later.*

We went ashore at a vineyard and were told to find a tent mate for our pup tent, not much larger than a Boy Scout tent. After a couple of weeks, we moved on to a French airport where we slept on the concrete hangar floor. Our next stop was just outside the capital of Algeria. Though we were supposed to have 18 planes, we only had nine B-26 aircraft. Some of them didn't make it through. At that point, we began "skip-bombing" with four 1,000-pound bombs on each plane. The Germans and Italians were interfering with our shipments between Tunisia and Sicily. So we would fly in at a very low altitude to release the bombs. By flying at that low altitude, the pilots could escape detection by enemy radar and accomplish a surprise attack. Our first mission resulted in the loss of two aircraft.

For the most part, North Africa was an arid desert. In some areas, however, they managed to grow grapes, oranges and other fruit. One thing that impressed me was the size of the larger cities like Oran, Algiers and Tunis. The population of Oran and Algiers was about 400,000 each. A French Territory at the time, the Frenchmen treated the Arabs like dogs. We were among the first Americans to arrive in the area.

During the Salerno Campaign, the seas were rough so it was difficult to get artillery ashore. Also the Germans were shooting at the troops from a bluff overlooking the shore. So our planes served as the artillery for the Fifth Army during that landing. We operated 24 hours a day for two or three days and lost several men.

I served with the ground personnel and loaded bombs, ammunition and machineguns onto the aircraft. Quite often, we had to unload and diffuse bombs due to weather or target changes. We also handled 100-pound fragmentation bombs (antipersonnel). After several bombing raids, we returned to Morocco via boxcars to regroup and get more planes.

When we moved just outside Tunis, Tunisia, we had our required 18 planes. The area had been devastated in previous battles. We saw buildings that had been destroyed, tanks that had been knocked out, bombed-out ships in the harbor, and the remains of aircraft throughout the area. We were warned not to pick up souvenirs because the Germans had left booby traps behind. By that time, the American Infantry & Tank Division had driven them out of North Africa into Sicily. Our planes participated in the Sicilian Campaign. After Sicily and Sardinia were captured, we were based in Sardinia and proceeded to bomb targets in Italy and Southern France.

Though I became a Christian when I was 12 years old, I did a lot more praying during World War II than ever before. I always felt like the Lord would take care of me if I did my part, so I didn't lose any sleep worrying about it. Whatever was going to happen would happen. I believed I had a 50/50 chance of surviving. As it turned out, more than half of our soldiers returned home safely.

I was still in Sardinia when the atomic bomb was dropped in Japan. We had been scheduled to fly to the Pacific, but I was able to go home instead. Of course, I was glad to get back to the United States. The best day of my life was when I got back on American soil. During the war, I had vowed to kiss the ground if I ever got home again, and I did.

While overseas, we didn't receive any mail for about two months. After that, I would get a two or three-week-old letter from my wife about once a week.

I was 22 years old when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, probably the average age of most of the soldiers. There was no question about what we had to do, so I volunteered like many others. We were fighting for our country. Since the bombing of the World Trade Center in New York, there has been a surge of patriotism again in this country. As we watched the events unfold on television that day, I told my wife, "This country will never be the same again."