

The Trip Across the Pond

Two childhood friends enlisted in the Army Air Force from their hometown, Lexington, KY in 1943. William R. Smither graduated high school in January 1943 (mid-year) from Lafayette High School. Marvin Nicholson graduated Lafayette in May 1943. William enlisted in the fall of 1943. Marvin had enlisted in February 1943, but finished school before entering service in June. Both fellows wanted to fly and fight the enemy. They both hoped to be pilots. William noted that despite his great desire to be a pilot, the AAF didn't need any more. So they washed him out with increased vision requirements. Reflecting later, he mused, "They didn't think I could see well enough to fly the plane, but now they wanted me to shoot at the enemies?" William's operational specialty was tail turret gunner and Marvin's assignment was ball turret gunner.

William and Marvin did their basic training, gunnery school, B-24 "overseas" training, and crew assembly in differing locations across the nation. Marvin also completed the technical school for armament training. But when it came time to ship out in November 1944 and take the trip across the pond to Italy, they were both, unbeknownst to each other, in Hampton Rhodes, Virginia. The ship was a former French luxury liner, converted to ferry the military back and forth across the ocean. It was one ship of several in a convoy across the Atlantic. They both embarked with about 1000 other airmen, and spent 14 days on the ship, without knowing the other rode on the same ship.

The trip was long and at one point to avoid the German submarines, Marvin recalls, zig-zagging evasive maneuvers were necessary. Both William and Marvin remember that Red Skelton was on this ship. He apparently was part of the transportation corps during the war, ferrying men back and forth across the ocean. His light-hearted comical jokes made for some levity prior to the airmen going into combat in the skies over enemy territory. William said that one time he saw the officers looking down from the upper deck, and Red was down a level with the enlisted fellows. He took a scrap of paper out of his pocket, and pointed a disapproving finger up to one particular officer, scribbled a name down and said, "I am going to have get that one later" as those nearby laughed aloud.

Finally, the coast of Italy came into view, the ships docked, the men had all their belongings in their duffle bags, and the crews began disembarking. William saw a familiar face peering over the rail and shouted, "Marvin Nicholson !" "Hey Bill," he returned with a wave. They were 50 feet from each other, so the conversation was short and sweet. However, there was time to get closer for a bit more discussion. Neither knew of their final destination, but each would soon find out. These Lexington, Kentucky buddies had just spent 14 days on a ship together and didn't see each other until they arrived at the port of Naples, nearly half way around the world. William was holding up the line, and guess who peeked his head around the corner? Red Skelton said, "Hey shortie, come on now, you get off here."

Marvin's crew walked down the gang plank and up another one to board a second ship. They sailed around the toe of the boot of Italy to Taranto, where trucks ferried the men to their base in Venosa. Marvin was with the 485th BG, 830th BS. They arrived the next day at midnight and the

officers showed them an empty field and said, "This will be your new home for awhile." They pitched tents by flashlights and tried to get some sleep.

William's crew hopped into trucks in Naples that drove them to San Pancrazio and they arrived after midnight. William was with the 376th BG, 512th BS. The officer's club building was a welcome sight, as their pilot Richard S. Ritter and co-pilot Ralph G. Wilson hosted the crew for a late-night snack of orange marmalade and bread. Then they all had to pitch tents and sleep, just as Marvin described. The tent cities on the airbases would later be built and customized by the men, in an effort to make them as comfortable as possible.

William and Marvin learned later that they were both in southern Italy, but at different airbases. They could write some letters back and forth. They certainly flew on similar missions, and probably on some of the same days to the same targets. Both men have amazing stories of heroism and bravery to tell of their time with the Fifteenth Air Force. These stories include a crash landing in Ancona, Italy, where Marvin helped co-pilot the damaged B-24 when the co-pilot and pilot were injured by flak, but all of the Don Adams crew survived on April 11, 1945. William's** B-24 hit flak over its target and he and 8 other surviving crew members bailed-out over Yugoslavia. His pilot (Ritter) and co-pilot (Wilson) were unable to get out in time and perished on January 15, 1945.

When VE day arrived, Bill had rotated back home to Lexington just 2 weeks prior, sailing back without worries of German submarines. Marvin remained in Italy until July 1945, relocating from Venosa to Bari before flying back to the states on a B-24. Marvin Nicholson, Jr. was awarded the Air Medal with one oak-leaf cluster and received the Distinguished Flying Cross for his actions on April 11th.

** William R. Smither was awarded the Air Medal.

This story was written by William's daughter, Celeste Smither, as told to her by William and Marvin on 4/8/2015.

(Smither was in the 376th BG and Nicholson was in the 485th.)