

War Era Story Project 2012

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Current home town: Greenville, Ohio

Age: 99

My name is Mary A. (Powell) Martin. I was born in Darke Co., Ohio, at the start of the First World War. I graduated from Greenville High School in 1932, in the mist of the great depression. My father ran several local grain elevators in the county and a coal business in town. He also had the first telephone in Greenville, which was always kind of neat since you just picked up the phone and told the operator "Number One Please."

I was visiting my mother, Leona M. Powell, in Greenville on Sunday Dec. 7, 1941 when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. I still remember listening to the accounts over the radio with my sisters and mother. The next day, I went back to work in Dayton, where I worked at the Standard Register Company. During the day, they made an announcement that all employees were to report to the company auditorium for a special radio announcement by President Roosevelt. We sat there and listened as the President addressed Congress and ask for a declaration of war.

I continued to work for a short time at Standard Register, but early in 1942, I got a government secretarial job at Wright Field in Dayton. During the 1930s, I had worked for a short time at a bank in Columbus and lived on High Street in a boarding house own by Mrs. Wright, one of Orville and Wilbur's sisters. She always told stories about them around the dining room table, so years later, being at Wright-Field around the aircraft was very exciting at first.

Later my sister Mayble's husband, Ralph S. Wiebusch, would be involved in making troop gliders at WACO in Troy; we had many aircraft stories. Ralph was also an early ham radio operator. I remember him telling me how the mailmen during the war were required to report any house on their postal route that had an antenna running from the house, as that person may be an agent making secret radio transmissions. On one occasion, he had to prove he was a licensed ham radio operator.

While at Wright-Field, I met my future husband Eugene F. Martin. He was also from Greenville. Gene was older than I and had been in my oldest sister's high school class and also in Ralph's class, so I already knew him as one of their classmates. Gene was an electrician and worked for the U.S. Army Corp. of Engineers on base as a civil service employee. At the time, Wright Field had a riding club, and after work we would go horseback riding on the Huffman Prairie, which is now part of the main runway area at WPAFB.

On July 4, 1942, Gene and I got married in Dayton. By the summer of 1942, the war was not going well. So, ten days after we got married, Gene thought he should enlist. Though at age 37 he was not likely to be drafted, he felt it was his duty. His great grandfather enlisted in the Union Army in the Civil War at the age of 52, and on his mother's side, his 3rd great grandfather was with Gen. Washington at Valley

Forge, so I know he felt a family obligation. Plus, his oldest brother Harold served in WWI and his older brother Fred was now in the Army along with two nephews.

So, my husband went into the office at Wright-Field on July 14, 1942, and told them he wanted to enlist and filled out the paper work. An officer who was present administered his oath of enlistment and, afterwards, reached across the desk to shake his hand saying, "Welcome to the U.S. Army Air Corp." My husband immediately told him he did not want in the Army Air Corp, but had wanted to join the U.S. Army Corp. of Engineers. The officer then said, "if you don't want in the Air Corp then we don't want you," and reached over and tore up his enlistment papers.

My husband was so mad that he got into his car and drove to Ft. Hayes in Columbus, OH, where he reenlisted in the U.S. Army Corp. of Engineers that very same day. He joined a new type of unit specifically created to conduct amphibious warfare landings, called "Engineer Special Brigades." On July 22, 1942, I saw him depart on the train for the east coast. On Aug. 15, 1942, he was assigned to Regimental Headquarters Company, 593rd Engineer Boat Regiment, 3rd Amphibian Brigade, Camp Edwards, MA.

With Gene gone, the job at Wright-Field seemed boring, as it entailed shuffling papers. I wanted to do more towards helping the war effort, so I got a better paying job in a war production plant in Dayton. There, I was working on an assembly line making chamber bolts for the 50-cal. machine guns being used on the B-17 bombers. Working with guns was something I always liked. My Great Aunt was Laura York; she married John H. Moses, Annie Oakley's brother, so Annie was my Great Aunt. She died when I was 11 years old but I still remember her being at family occasions and once in a while seeing her after school. She influenced me some because I was one of only three girls on the 1932 Greenville High School Rifle Team. Yes, we had a rifle team in high school, and there were about 25 students on the team. We all kept our school-issued rifles in our school lockers. We would shoot at an indoor range on the second floor of a local business, just off Main Street in downtown Greenville, and after practice we would all walk with our rifles slung over our shoulder to a local drug store for a coke-a-cola or ice cream. No problem then, as gun education and safety training was taught in school. I even remember after WWII, guys I had shot with in high school who had been in the Army, laughing about guys they went through basic with that were from New York City. They thought it was so funny that those guys didn't know one end of a rifle from the other and couldn't hit a thing. Not like a Darke Co. kid who shot in high school or after school during squirrel season.

My husband was later assigned to Camp Carrabelle, FL, as the unit did more training for assault landings on enemy beaches. He got his first furlough Dec. 4 to Dec 12, 1942, and we able to see each other once again. On Feb. 22, 1943, he got promoted to Staff Sergeant, which was great. Then, the unit transferred to Fort Ord, CA, and did some desert training in Death Valley. It was so hard being separate, and we both knew at some point his unit would be shipped overseas and we didn't know how long it would be before we would ever see each other again.

I decided to join him for whatever time we might have left, so I quit my job in the war plant and caught a train to California. He got a second furlough Mar. 30 to Apr. 9, 1943, and we were able to get together

again. I located in Salinas, CA, and took a job working the desk at a local hotel. At the time, I was able to share a room above a drug store with another woman who had followed her guy out to California. Apartments or rooms were very hard to come by, as many women tried to be near their husbands before they were shipped overseas to the war. Plus, many people were coming from all over the county to work in the California war production plants. Families were renting out rooms in their homes, but even those were hard to find.

One day, Gene phoned me that a fellow in their staff office was being transferred and told me to get over there and see if I could rent his apartment. I immediately went to the apartment building and told the landlady that my husband said a fellow was moving out and requested if we could rent from her. She said she knew of no one moving out then she paused and said just a minute. She went to an apartment and caught a renter packing who was about to skip out without paying her his rent. She told me that Gene and I could have the apartment – what a deal. That night, when Gene got off post, we went to our new apartment. He took one look at it and said we cannot afford such a place, and beside that, this was not the location his friend had referred him to. So, by accident, I had gotten the wrong address, but fortune had shone upon us. The landlady caught the guy skipping out, and we now had a very nice place to live. My husband was permitted to move off post and commute to Ft. Ord. We were very lucky.

Gene got his 3rd furlough Oct. 1 to Oct. 12, 1943, and we toured the coast highway some and had a wonderful time. He was later transferred to Camp Storeman, CA, Dec. 12, 1943, to Jan. 8, 1944, in preparation to their deployment overseas. Rumors were they were being shipped to Europe, as they were issued winter gear and coats.

He sailed on the S.S. Sea Flasher for the Southwest Pacific Jan. 9, 1944. He later told me that as he sailed below the Golden Gate Bridge, he wondered if he would ever live to see it again. Once out at sea, they were ordered to throw all winter gear over the side of the ship and break out new gear stored in the ship, as they were sailing to the Southwest Pacific to fight the Japanese. At this time, I was pregnant and, with my husband now having been shipped overseas, I took a train back to Greenville, OH, to live with my mother and wait for my husband's return from the war.

During this time, my husband made his first D-Day assault landing on a Japanese held island, Aitape, New Guinea, D-Day (Ceuraco) on Apr. 22, 1944. He remained there until May 15, 1944. He made his second D-Day assault landing at Wakde Sarmi, Dutch New Guinea, Arara - original beachhead, D-Day, May 17, 1944, and was there till Jun. 30, 1944. Later, he became a liaison for the unit's supply lines and spent time flying to various locations throughout New Guinea and the Philippine Islands.

On June 15, 1944, our only child Richard was born in Greenville, OH. Due to the long time it took letters to go by ship to Gene in the Southwest Pacific, he did not learn of his son's birth until after his third D-Day assault landing at Noemfoor Island, Netherlands East Indies, D-Day July 2, 1944. He remained on the island until Aug. 14, 1944.

In either late 1944 or early 1945 (I don't remember the date), I went down to Cincinnati, OH, to visit my oldest sister, Mouree Powell. She hadn't got to see my son for a while, so I wanted to show her how her

little nephew was doing. While there, I decided to attend a War Bond Rally being held over at Union Station Terminal. At the time, Gene Autry was there or at least passing through, urging people to buy War Bonds. I was able to get through the crowd and work my way up to the front where he was speaking. He happened to look down and saw I had my little baby in my arms. He stopped his presentation and said, "Lady! Could you pass that child up to me?" I held out my son and he took him from my arms and held him up before the crowd in Union Terminal. He then said "Folks this is why you need to buy War Bonds." I was very touched.

My husband wrote that by late 1944, he was being transferred between various field hospitals, as he had malaria, beriberi and jungle rot of the feet. He eventually ended up in the hospital at 5th Camp Co., APO 75 Manila, Philippine Islands, Jul. 11 to Jul. 28, 1945. He celebrated VJ Day in Manila. He then sailed from Manila, Philippine Islands, Sept. 15, 1945, to Leyte Harbor on Sept. 17, 1945, and sailed on the *USS General W. C. Langfitt*, arriving in Seattle, WA, on Oct. 3, 1945. As he once said, he did not see the Golden Gate Bridge again, but he at least he returned to America. He then went by train across the country to Camp Atterbury, IN, arriving there on Oct. 8, 1945.

He was discharged at Ft. Benjamin Harrison, IN, on Oct. 10, 1945. He gave me a phone call from Ft. Benjamin Harrison, which is on the east side of Indianapolis, IN. He told me that he was soon going to be on a train bound for Greenville, OH, and gave me the time he was to arrive home. At the time, we lived just across the street from the railroad, near my father's old grain elevator that was beside the railroad track.

That day I stood on the corner by the house and waited for the train from Indy. As it came into Greenville and began to slow down for the train station, I saw Gene standing on the platform between the railcars waving at me. I started waving back and running as fast as I could to the train station. I still remember a neighbor shouting from her porch "Mary where are you running to?"

I replied, "I'm running to see my husband! He is home from the war." My son was 16 months old when he first got to see his dad back from the Second World War.

Gene was an electrician and later worked with friends to organize and form the local V.F.W. Post in Greenville. I worked to help form the V.F.W. Ladies Auxiliary. Our son Dick later retired from the U.S. Air Force as a Lt. Col.