

War Era Story Project 2012

Submitted by: William Wendell Harlan

Current home town: Amherst, Ohio

Age: 88

Story recorded by Mr. Harlan's Daughter, Pamela Harlan Ribic

Across The Pond

My father, William Wendell Harlan, began his introduction into World War II on a seven-day voyage to England. In writing this story, my focus is on my father's experiences aboard the *S.S. Nieuw (New) Amsterdam*. The quotes in this story are taken from letters from October 4 through October 11, 1944, sent home to his mother, Thelma, my grandmother.

On Wednesday, October 4, after receiving medical checks, my father, Naval Aviation Radio Technician, 2nd Class Petty Officer, and a group of 300 sailors "drew overseas gear, including gas masks, mess kits, first aid kits, guard belts, canteens, helmets, and liners." After the first fire drill, my father wrote, "I learned how easy it is to get lost on this damned big thing. Cleveland is a cinch to get around in comparison to this thing." During the night of Thursday, October 5, the *Nieuw Amsterdam* left the New York Hoboken harbor, with Glasgow, England as her final destination. "She is the fourth largest ship, I believe, and fairly new. Her first civilian run was her last, and from then on it has been under war control."

"We've all sorts of characters aboard: Marines, Swabbies and Doggies...there are at least 8,000-10,000 men aboard and our trip, they say, takes seven days," penned my father. Even though the *Nieuw Amsterdam* was a liner designed for luxurious travel, to accommodate such a large number of servicemen, they slept on C deck, located slightly below the water line, in hammocks strung one above the other. Their quarters were "the same that the German prisoners occupied coming across. We aren't with the aristocracy by a hell of a long ways. Living conditions are plain putrid." Many nights, my father chose to sleep on the hardwood floor of the promenade deck, where the air was fresh and cool.

To pass the time on the ship, "every type of game you've ever heard of is on board, including craps, bingo, poker, black jack and cribbage." A boxing match was also a daily spot of diversion. The men were entertained by the marine life, watching the seagulls hover above, and the porpoises and whales swim alongside the vessel. On Sunday, October 8, community singing was part of the day's activities, and a few chaplains gave sermons and led the men in prayer. Blackouts were frequent and fire drills were daily.

Seasickness was common and "if a fellow hasn't dysentery, he's constipated or vomiting. I hope my chow stays put because it's a wonder the writing here isn't on wavy lines, too." Hot showers were hard to come by and "the water supply was nothing but drops and dribblings." Showing his sense of humor

my father notes, “the old ship is still going along with everyone aboard; yep, not even one passenger has decided to go swimming.”

On Monday, October 9, the servicemen got shaves and “baldheaded” haircuts for twenty-five cents each. The men were told that now they would be docking in Liverpool, not Glasgow, but received no explanation on why the change in the final destination.

On October 10, my father writes, “This evening’s letter will probably have to conclude this short story you’ve been reading. The Chief says that tomorrow they will be censored and then mailed as soon as we arrive.” He continues, “I think I’ll write airmail to you from across the Pond, because it’s much faster and more can be said than in V-mail.”

In the letters to my grandmother, there were several references to thoughts of “back home.” When the sea spray and biting wind hit my father’s face, he wrote “It reminds me a lot of the days I would spend on Lake Erie hunting ducks and ice skating.” and he asks of his father: “Rod, take care of Mommy for me, Love, Willy.”

To get the men ready for arrival, on Wednesday, October 11, there were numerous inspections, two musters and a meeting with a British captain concerning the English currency, travel and entertainment over “in the Isles.” The same day, my father notes, “the boys are voting today—maybe Eleanor will get in again after all.”

One very touching outcome of this trip aboard the *Nieuw Amsterdam* was a special bond that my father made with one of the Navy boys, Robert (Bob) Kelly. They had met at Texas A & M during Naval training the year before, and my father wrote, “A fellow couldn’t have met a nicer family.” Now both at 88 years of age, they remain friends to this day.