

War Era Story Project 2012

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Age: Not given

My parents and their two daughters and two sons were victims of the “Great Depression.” I was the youngest son, Robert. We were still on welfare in the early 40s. My Dad had lost his railroad job and was doing odd jobs and the WPA. He was also buying a house, which he lost.

We were all listening to the radio on Dec. 7, 1941, when President Roosevelt announced the U.S. had declared war on Japan after they bombed Pearl Harbor. My older brother, Harold, would turn 18 the next day. We knew that our lives were going to change dramatically.

Harold was drafted a few months later. I was still in high school. Then, after I graduated in 1942, I was inducted into the Army. A few months later, I took a test given by the Air Force and was accepted. I was sent to gunnery school and graduated 6 months later. I became a tail gunner on a B-17 bomber named “5 Grand.” This bomber was the 5,000th bomber built by Boeing Aircraft. So, the people who built this plane started autographing it. Even movie stars signed it. It appeared in national papers and magazines. There were no vacant places on the plane. Plans were to go on a bond tour, but this fell through because too many B-17s were being lost.

My brother was sent to the Pacific arena and I went to Europe. During this war, you did not serve a tour of 6 months and then return home. We were overseas for the duration. I did not see Harold for four years. I was gone for about 2 ½ years. Neither of us had received a furlough. Many times, I prayed for my mother. Her two sons were taken suddenly and might never return. She had two stars in her window for us. Her faith pulled her through the agony I’m sure.

I flew the required 35 missions and was waiting to come home for 30 days and then to the Pacific. However, the war in Europe ended when I was in Naples waiting for a boat. Thank God I came home unscathed. I flew 10 missions from Sudbury, England, with the 8th Air Force. I transferred to Italy and then flew 25 more missions. We got shot up, but never shot down. The worst part of the mission is when you start on a bomb run. The bombardier takes over the plane. A run could last up to 30 minutes; during this time shrapnel is flying all around you – the plane starts to rock and roll and the noise is deafening. The anti-aircraft guns on the ground protecting the target could number up to 2,000. It was a wild ride.

During one of the bomb runs, I could see shells exploding in line behind our plane and coming closer. One shell knocked out our No. 2 engine. The next burst hit No. 3 engine. We went into a spin and dropped about 15,000 feet. One engine was on fire, but the pilot finally got it extinguished. All the planes left us. We limped back to England, losing altitude. We were down to about 1,000 feet when we went over the English Channel, then made a very good emergency landing. After landing, I found a hole in the tail where a large piece of flak had entered about one foot above my head. Thank God again.

One of the saddest things I endured happened in Italy. Five young men living in our tent were all killed on a mission that I was not flying that day. Their plane was hit by a 500 lb. bomb dropped from another plane. These men were 18 to 20 years old. Gathering up their belongings and shipping them to their loved ones was so hard. I know – fortunes of war! We lost a bombardier, waist gunner and ball turret gunner on our crew.

The war ended soon after in the Pacific. Harold and I were discharged. I came home first. I surprised my parents that evening when I got out of the cab. They were so happy. But I was very disappointed because my old hound dog, Spot, didn't seem to remember me. There was no "fanfare." I took off 30 days to rest up and acclimate to a new life. I took a job as a machinist at the Lima Locomotive factory. Within a year I married a beautiful redhead who had waited on me. She kept all my love letters. I still have them. Sorry to say I lost her suddenly in 2002. It has been a lonesome time.

Harold was never wounded, but he did have malaria and was in poor health the rest of his life.

In the five years after returning home from the war, I lost four jobs due to the after effects of the Depression. It was rough; those days there were no unemployment payments. I went to a local college for two years at night, which the government paid for. I managed to save a couple of thousand in the Air Force, but I gave my Dad \$1,000 for a down payment on a house. He got called back to his railroad job in 1944. My mother-in-law was instrumental in getting me a job on the railroad in 1949. I put in 35 years and retired in 1985.

I had bought a small new home in 1946 when I got married, which was under the GI bill. No air conditioning and we used a window ice box for food in the winter. And no electric blankets, either. But we survived and had a good life. I have three beautiful children – son David is a pastor – 8 grandkids and 14 great grandkids. And none of them have had a problem with drugs or alcohol. Praise the Lord.

As I reminisce – one thing I think is ironic. I fought a war, attained the rank of staff sergeant, flew 35 missions all over Europe, earned the Air Medal with three oak leaf clusters and seven battle stars and was discharged, but still was not old enough to vote. At that time voting age was 21. I had a few months to go. Ha!

I might add out of 10 crew members, only two of us are still living. Tony Guercia, ball turret gunner, still keeps in touch. Our bomb group also received the Presidential Unit Citation.