

MY LIFE

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From August 1921, when I was born, until September, 1941, I was fighting the battles of growing up-School, parents, 3 sisters and 1 brother, right here in Fort Smith.

From September, 1941 to May, 1950, I was helping to fight some battles for our United States.

From 1944 until today, I have been fighting the battles of marriage!!

I received a good upbringing in a Christian home during the early years. I received a Purple Heart and an Air Medal and some other ribbons to show for the military war and I have a wife, 3 sons, and 3 daughters-in-law, 6 grandchildren, and 2 great-grandchildren to show for the longer war. I am happy that my wife, Wanda, is here with us today. We moved back to Fort Smith in 1975. I commuted to Denver the last 6 years on Frontier Airlines for my flights. We were away from this area for some 30 years, but this is home and we always intended to come back to retire. This is a great place to live.

I want to mention right up front the names of my air crew members. Selbie Greenhalgh (now deceased) was my radioman. I talked with his wife, Helen, this past week. John Hutchinson was my gunner and he is now living in California. These 2 men helped save our lives with their quick thinking and cool heads while under enemy fire.

There have been five United States ships named USS Lexington. The 4th Lexington, an aircraft carrier, was sunk early in WWII. In 1942, in the Coral Sea during the Guadalcanal, Bougainville, Solomon Islands and Rabaul battles. When the USS Lexington was sunk in the Coral Sea, the shipyard in Boston was building another Essex type carrier. It had another name but the shipyard workers wanted another USS Lexington in the Pacific Fleet to confuse "Tokyo Rose," the propagandist for Japan during World War II. She reported the Lexington sunk several times. So, the nickname of the Lexington was the "The Blue Ghost." They got the new carrier out one year earlier than planned and the 5th USS Lexington was ready for battle. The ship's number was 16 and the first air group aboard was Carrier Air Group 16. I was assigned orders to Torpedo Squadron 16. There was also a fighter squadron and a dive bomber squadron aboard the Lexington.

CAG 16 - meaning Carrier Air Group 16 - was composed of about 90 aircraft and approximately 500 pilots, crew members and maintenance personnel. We were well trained and ready to go. So in August, 1943, we went through the Panama Canal and out to Hawaii. September, 1943 our fighter pilots were on reserve to cover an attack on Wake Island. September 18, we attacked Tarawa, in the Gilbert Islands, and made a reconnaissance report for the Marines to land and take the island from the Japanese. Tarawa was the first landing to take back an island from the Japanese and it was tough. Some 3,500 marines were casualties taking this island. Our fighter squadron caught 23 Japanese planes going to attack the marines on Tarawa and shot 19 out of the air. Victories like this went on as we attacked Kwajalein Atoll, Marshall Islands, Wake Island, Palau, Hollandia, New Guinea, Saipan, Tinian, Guam and Truk.

When we bombed Kwajalein we caught a cruiser at anchor and strafed and bombed it.

On the attack on Palau Island, on a glide bombing run, my plane was hit in the engine as I dropped my bombs. I was able to get halfway back to the carrier but was advised by those flying wing on me to land before the engine quit or caught fire. I have a picture taken from a rescue plane showing my landing in the water. The picture shows a rescue submarine in the upper right corner and a rescue plane landing to pick up my crew and me. We were back in the air in 10 minutes and on our way back to the USS Wichita. It took another week before they transferred me back to the Lexington.

My airplane had bullet holes 6 out of the first 10 raids I made. Something just told me this was going to be a long war!!

The big events, for me, came in June, 1944. The Saipan, Tinian and Guam assaults began. The marines and army landed on Saipan. They were having a difficult time. The Japanese fleet left the Philippine Islands for the first time since their earlier defeat at Midway Island. June 18 we learned their plan was to send their planes over our carriers and on to Guam to refuel. They planned to stay out of our range. Our radar spotted many Japanese planes coming in. They were 130 miles away. Our

fighters met them about 60 miles from our carriers and shot down 402 Japanese planes before the day was over. We lost maybe 10 airplanes but we did not really know where the Japanese aircraft carriers were.

Scout planes found the Japanese carriers about 4 p.m. the next day, June 19, 1944. They were 250 miles away. That was our safe limit of gasoline. About 120 airplanes took off. I navigated for 325 miles and still had the attack to make when Japanese zeroes came up under us out of the clouds. The time of day was about 7 p.m. I had seen the largest carrier hit with bombs two or three times. The air was full of smoke - all colors - red, blue, white, black. I did not know the Zeroes were there until I felt the bullets hitting my plane and heard the machine guns. Fire, smoke and hydraulic fluid filled the cockpit. I had to bail out. I had no communications but everyone in formation saw it happen. We were 11,000 feet above the Japanese Fleet and a long, long way from home and from the Lexington.

I delayed several thousand feet before pulling the ripcord hoping to avoid Japanese gunfire. After I pulled the ripcord to my parachute I saw my burning plane on the water and a Jap Zero strafing it. It was dark when I hit the water still strapped to the parachute. The parachute acted as a sea anchor and instead of riding on top of the waves, I was going under the waves and was about to drown. I got rid of the parachute which was attached to my lifeboat - I couldn't get the lifeboat loose and had to let it all go or drown. I kept most of the other stuff - ripcord, survival pack and a 38 caliber pistol. Soon I had to let it all go including my boots because I didn't think I would ever need them again and they were full of water. The survival pack was waterlogged and felt like 50 pounds of lead. I discovered only half of my flotation gear (the Mae West) was inflated and I was up to my chin in water.

The Marianas Trench is 35,000 feet deep. I was over 300 miles from my carrier, with no lifeboat and in the middle of the Japanese Fleet and it was all but dark. I saw my only hope of getting out of this mess coming right at me - a Japanese cruiser. I was trying to decide which way to swim to get out of its way when it turned and went to one side. It was so close to me that I could see the color of their uniforms even though it was virtually dark. The uniforms were white and brownish olive drab.

Now things began to settle down. I saw a Japanese carrier going by but it was listing so badly I didn't think it could stay afloat much longer. There were four or five Zeroes trying to find a place to land. Then everything got very still but I could feel thudding sounds in the water. This went on for a very long time even though the Japanese had left the area. I believe the thudding came from the carriers that had been sunk. As the ships sank deeper into the Mariana trench the pressure was so great that the sealed compartments in the ships were collapsing.

The night was long. I felt a fish once when I moved my hand into it. Not a huge one but big enough to scare me. Salt water will make you sick and eventually I got sick, several times. My hands began to shrivel - my tongue began to swell - I lost a lot of weight that night.

During the night I thought of what a predicament I was in: 300 miles from the carrier, 600 miles west of Guam and swimming in 35,000 feet deep water.

I needed a miracle. I began to realize that I would not leave a legacy to this world. I had not accomplished much in life - 22 years old - no family of my own and none in sight I had nothing to leave as a legacy.

My mother and father were living in Fort Smith. Dad, Herbert McLellan, traveled and was in Booneville, AR that night. When he returned home the next day and mother tried to tell him the story as the newspaper wrote it up, Dad stopped her and said, "I know it for I dreamed about it last night." I always knew prayers for my safety were offered daily from my family and from my home church. I felt those prayers that night.

The next day my squadron came over me about 10:00 a.m. I pulled a dye marker to color the water around me and they dropped me and each of my two crewman a lifeboat. I crawled into my boat, covered up with a sail included in the boat, and went to sleep. About 4:00 p.m., a U.S. fighter plane buzzed the boat and woke me up, and a sea plane landed and picked me up. This was my own squadron coming back to find us. I saw my crewmen in another sea plane and that was the first glimpse I had of them and now I really knew that they were alive. We had been in the water about 22 hours.

Admiral Mitscher wanted to get my eyewitness report so they sent a destroyer over to take me back to my carrier. He immediately called me to report. When I told him what I had seen he thanked me and said, "I believe we sank 2 carriers." And I thanked him for caring enough about downed aviators to send rescue planes over 300 miles to get 5 people out of the water.

Two crewmen from another torpedo plane and me and my crew were rescued. That night we lost about 42 men. There were approximately 80 people in the water. It was about 9:00 p.m. and they had to get aboard their carrier. They had been in the air about 5 hours. Admiral Mitscher had turned the search lights on in enemy territory to help planes get back to the carrier, it was so far and they were out of gas. God surely had allowed him make great decisions in that first battle of the Philippine Sea and it was a great success. That was the last fight the Japanese carriers had. Their squadrons were devastated and the rest of the war, Japan used mostly the kamikaze pilots. The Lexington was hit by a kamikaze plane after Air Group 16 left for home.

We arrived home in late July, 1944. Wanda was in a group of welcoming friends when I got back to Fort Smith in August, 1944 and we married in November, 1944. This November 23rd will be our 56th anniversary. God is so good to us. It took a miracle to bring me back home and allow us to have a wonderful family. God does answer prayer. I now have a legacy.

Here are some facts about my squadron of 18 torpedo planes:

Made 653 strikes, dropped 480 tons of bombs, expended 53,600 rounds of ammo, fired 221 rockets, laid 35 mines, dropped 17 torpedoes damaged and destroyed 37 Japanese planes, sunk 93,500 tons of Japanese ships, damaged 30,500 tons of Japanese ships.

The whole Air Group 16: Shot down or destroyed 150 Japanese planes. The fighters were exceptional. Alex Vraciu shot down 23 planes - 6 in one trip and still had 150 rounds of .50 caliber ammo when he landed.

Last June 19,2000, was 56 years since I spent that night swimming in the Pacific Ocean. During these years I continued to fly as a reserve Naval aviator for 26 years. I went to college twice and got two degrees, taught school along the way and then started my commercial aviation career in 1953.

Flew one year for American Airlines, flew 12 years for Central Airlines, flew 16 years for Frontier Airlines.

I started flying in 1939 and retired in 1981 - about 42 years. I retired with 25,300 hours of flight time and had made about 40,000 landings.

I tell you today that it is a miracle that I am here. I do have a wonderful family and now I have that cherished legacy I dreamed of while swimming in the deep waters of the Pacific Ocean.

That is a miracle and it is wonderful to be with the Wal Mart Distribution center today. Thank you for letting me tell you about the USS Lexington and the Air Group that took a heavy toll for the United States in World War II.

Since this is a Veteran's Day Celebration, it is great to see what you are doing to recognize accomplishments of the generation that has been labeled "The Greatest Generation" by Tom Brokaw. Our struggle for freedom will always go on. There are those who want to take away our freedom. We must not - we cannot - let down our guard. This is the greatest nation in the world. We must hold on to our freedoms and cherish our freedoms and fight for our freedom. The USS Cole episode is the latest struggle with those people who would take away our freedom. It cannot happen - it must not happen - it won't happen if we are vigilant and live like God intended for us to live. Listen to these words received in an e-mail from a friend in Fort Worth, TX:

"It is the military man or woman, not the reporter, who has given us freedom of the press. It is the military man or woman, not the campus organizer, who has given us the freedom to demonstrate. It is the military man or woman, who salutes the flag, who serves beneath the flag, and whose coffins draped by the flag, who allows the protester to burn the flag."

We do not like to see our flag burned or desecrated. A constitutional amendment to ban it is debated even now in Congress. But, we do have the freedom, in this country, to express ourselves freely. May freedom never die. We will fight for freedom, forever. Thank you and God bless you.