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Summary: World War II Experiences of William L. Griffin

Born September 25, 1923, in Little Rock Arkansas.

Now living in Asheville, NC

William L. Griffin was a student at the North Carolina State University as war was drawing near. He had privately taken flying lessons and had been licensed in 1942. As he thought about going into service he wanted to go into the air force and become a fighter pilot.

He was called up in January of 1943 and went to Miami Beach along with a number of other men from North Carolina. At the training base there were approximately 2000 men, many of them from South Carolina. They were housed in the luxury hotels in the beach area.

They drilled for eight hours a day over the area of the golf courses there near the city. They were there for about a month and during that time took many tests for their abilities for military service.

The group was then sent to Memphis State Teachers College where they continued to train in various aspects of physical and mental aptitudes. William scored high in his class. He was there about two months.

The first group of which William was a part, moved out to San Antonio, Texas. There he took tests of many kinds. Passing all, he was classified as a pilot. The classification being: (since he was already a private pilot) Candidate, Pre Flight. William (or "Bill") says that the physical tests here at this posting were extremely rough but since he was in good physical shape he passed them all. They lived in tarpaper shacks and had classes of all sorts. Among them were Air Craft Identification, Machine maintenance of all kinds, the study of weather, how to predict it, how it affected flying. Bill says that this period of study and preparation eliminated many of the men who were then transferred to other branches of the service.

Sikeston, Missouri

There he received open cockpit training. He was the first person out of 125 to solo. He was in primary training.

Primary Training was in a B-T 13 A. Single engine plane. This was training for fighter pilots. Bill

was then sent to Twin Engine School at Blackland Air Force Base, Waco, Texas.

There he flew AT-10s and AT-17s. He was taught night flying. This was rough duty in that it was bitter cold weather. The pilots had to solo at night landing on fields lighted only by smug pots. At times it was two below zero. Bill was at this base for about two months and was advanced to the rank of Aviation Cadet.

He graduated March 14, 1944 and was assigned to an A-20, a twin engine, low level attack plane. A bomber.

Bill was sent to Columbia, South Carolina and from there sent to Greenville, South Carolina where he was assigned to a B-25, as a co-pilot. He held the rank of 2nd Lieutenant. He trained there for two and a half months in low level strafing and bombing. They used 100 pound bombs filled with white flour.

His next assignment was at Myrtle Beach in South Carolina where he continued his strafing practice.

June 1, 1944 he was sent to Savannah, Georgia along with 15 other crews. Half of these were sent to

Italy, the other half to Australia. Bill was assigned to the Australia group. They flew brand new B-25s and completely outfitted with new gear. The planes were modified in that the radio equipment was removed and gas tanks installed in the place of the radio equipments.

With the crew, except for the tail gunner who was left behind to come by ship and meet up with them in Hawaii they flew to Hickam Field. (This was approximately two and a half years after Pearl Harbor.)

The crew and plane was then sent to Christmas Island. This was a small island, approximately three miles in diameter. From there to Canton Island. It was extremely hot. There was a lagoon in the center of the island but only one tree on the whole island. They slept in tar paper shacks.

From there they flew to Fiji Island where they stayed in the Country Club. Then on to New Caledonia. This was very mountainous. Using instruments they flew to Australia, landed at Townsbill. At this time William was only 20 years old. When asked if he was apprehensive, meaning about the war, Bill said no, he was only apprehensive about the bad weather.

On a Flying Boat, they flew up to Port Moresby, New Guinea. (Here Bill gives a vivid description of New Guinea and tells of the heavy overgrowth of tropical forests and that at the present time they still find remnants of the downed planes and the bones of the pilots who were flying these planes. This can be read in detail in the enclosed memoir.) He spent one month there and learned to skip bomb. They were still using flour filled bombs instead of real ones.

At Moresby, the 5th Air Force had stopped the Japanese advance. Here the weather was always bad. This is one of the largest island in the world. They lost a lot of planes. Thirty Three planes were downed on one flight..

Then they went to Nadzab where they continued to train in low level bombing and skip bombing for one month.

William was then assigned to a group for combat, the 405 Squadron, 38th Bomb Group, 5th Air Force in a C-47- at Biak Island. He was near the equator at this time for a very short while. Still acting as co-pilot, William, in a months' time, flew three or four missions.

(Here Williams reads a long quote from a previously written manuscript which is enclosed with these documents. This includes a very poignant description of his meeting with the Major who was to be his commanding officer during this period and is well worth reading from Williams's own written manuscript.)

On September 15, 1944 the group bombed at low level the island of Morotai which had been invaded by the Japanese. They were constantly bombed by the Japanese.

He did not fly the first mission over Leyte where Japanese resistance was even worse.

On November 10, 1944 the group intercepted a Japanese convoy. They lost eight planes out of thirty. For this mission, William received a Presidential Citation. They sunk four war Ships, five freighters, and badly damaged one war ship.

They then flew missions over the Himalayas and some over the Philippines.

William remembers that this might have been Christmas day 1944. They lost a tent mate who was shot through the neck. This was the first real touch of war that had come so close to Bill.

By this time William had flown around 26 missions. He lost another tent mate. He was the only remaining tent mate left out of the original crew.

On the missions they were now flying six to nine planes on each mission with six men in the lead plane and five men in the wing planes.

William was moved up to Luzon on January 31, 1945. They had barely arrived when they were ordered

to go after three Japanese ships that were being sent to evacuate Japanese soldiers from Luzon in the Philippines. Since the air field where they were was not finished they were driven by truck through Philippine soldiers, who seemed unconcerned) with sirens going full blast. Bill was "scared to death" and almost certain he was going to be killed.

They took off south of Formosa, with 823th Squadron, flying six planes. They were to go in at a 45 degree angle, 2000 feet high, upside down.

Once again, Bill was left as the only survivor in his tent group.

They went in again, and had the "Bombs Away" signal. Bill's plane suffered a damaged wing and they had a very rough landing. Then more missions against Formosa. All low level.

William then flew with a new captain dropping flag bombs. They had to fly during the Monsoon season which made flying very dangerous. They could only see the wing tip of the planes that flew beside them in formation. For the first time, Bill experienced vertigo. They had to go up to 3,500 feet to break out of the bad weather.

William was then checked out to become 1st pilot, promoted to 1st Lieutenant. This was April 1, 1945

All in all, William flew 50 missions, 5th Air Force, 405 Squadron, 38* Bomb Group. This was in the Southwest Pacific Theater under General George C. Kenny. William flew more missions quicker than any of the other men stationed with him. Having fulfilled his missions he received orders to come back to the US.

He was still expecting to have to go back to Bomb Japan in the US invasion of that country. But in the meantime he was at the Replacement Depot at Greensboro, North Carolina. He left there coming back to Asheville. He requested fighter pilot duty in a P- 38. He was in Asheville when he heard of the bomb being dropped and felt that the event was "kind of scary" He was standing in front of the Ivey's Department Store when he heard the news that the war had ended. He did not celebrate. He had no regrets that the bomb was dropped.

He did go back to Greensboro for reassignment. He was asked at that point: Do you want to stay or get out? William got out.

He enrolled at the University of North Carolina and graduated in Economics. Later he would spend his civilian working days as a salesman with Lance, Inc., a food distributor. He met his wife Jeanne who was attending Queens College, majoring in languages and they were married in a format ceremony on September 11, 1948 in York, South Carolina. They made their home in Asheville, NC and have three children.

On remarks on the war William thinks the world now is a very different place for the time of WWII. He considered the war an individual adventure. He stated that some people want to go to war, some don't (aren't suited.) He personally had always wanted to fight a war. He has always been very patriotic. At the same time, Bill says, "War is rough, people get killed."

This interview was conducted by Lou Harshaw,