



2D EMERGENCY RESCUE SQUADRON

"Getting There" by Colonel Bill Helmentoler

Sixty-five years ago, on my twentieth birthday, I signed up for pilot training in the U.S. Army Air Corps. I think I was inspired by a speech Winston Churchill made in praise of Britain's Royal Air Force pilots, following the battle for Britain. He said something like "Never have so many owed so much to so few."

I was already a big fan of RAF pilots and wanted to be like them. I must have assumed that within a short time I would be up there shooting down German fighters. As it turned out, I didn't fire a shot in anger for more than two years almost a year learning to fly, and another year teaching young pilots how to fly twin-engine airplanes. My orders to the Pacific came almost as a surprise.

The first stop on my road to combat was Camp Kearns, Utah, in suburban Salt Lake City. I was not ready to say good-bye to my bride, so I took her along on a memorable train ride to the Rocky Mountains. She explored the Mormon culture of Salt Lake City while I fired rifles and pistols on snowy firing ranges just outside the city.

At the end of a week she went back to Missouri to stay with her parents, and I continued west to San Francisco. When we parted, I fully realized that I might never see her again. It was an agonizing feeling. I felt like an empty shell.

On the lonely train-ride to California, I took out the automatic pistol that had been issued to me in Utah. In the privacy of my compartment I donned the shoulder holster and put the pistol in it. It felt strange. As we sped through the night, my reflection in the train window showed a young

man who was a stranger to me. I was truly alone for the first time in years. My first night in San Francisco I stayed at the Mark Hopkins Hotel. From the Top Of The Mark I watched the fog roll in. It swallowed up the cars and lights on the streets below. The white blanket that stretched as far as I could see became a special scene in my memory book. It also accentuated my feeling of aloneness.

After a few days at nearby Camp Stoneman we boarded the U.S.S. Hermitage, a huge troopship that had been an Italian passenger liner before the war.

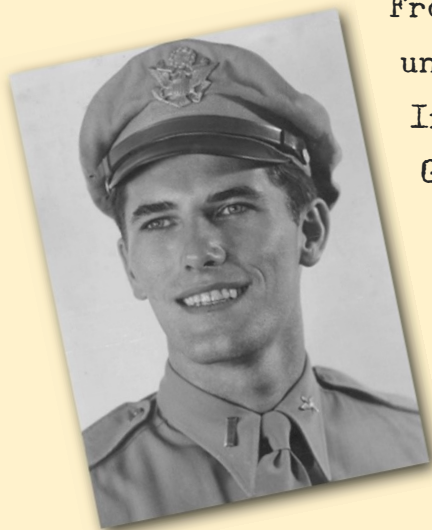
The evening meal was served just before we sailed. Shortly after we passed through the Golden Gate and moved into somewhat rougher water, the diners abandoned the tables in the dining room and headed for the railing on the lee side of the ship. They provided another scene for my memory book: dozens of young officers leaning over the railing, barfing their guts out. It was my good fortune to be an observer, not a participant.

The next day each officer was assigned responsibility for about a hundred of the young troops billeted between the decks below the water line. Most of these troops were still in their teens. They had finished basic training, had been issued a rifle and a steel helmet, and had marched aboard this huge ship. They were very young and very frightened. They didn't know where they were going or what they were going to do.



They spent most of their time in their canvas bunks, stacked five deep between decks. They were so close together that for a soldier to turn over, he had to get the guy above him to raise himself up to make room. Each officer escorted his group of troops up to an open deck twice in each twenty-four hour period. They could breathe in fresh sea-air for about half an hour each trip to the open deck. Back in their bunks, it was not unusual to hear some quiet weeping during the long nights.

Instead of traveling in a convoy with destroyer escorts, our ship was zigging and zagging across the Pacific Ocean in the hope of avoiding enemy submarines. After twenty-eight days of such maneuvering we arrived in the harbor of Noumea, New Caledonia in the South Pacific. It was the site of a large personnel replacement depot.



From there our troops would be assigned to units that had suffered losses in combat. In a few days I flew on to the island of Guadalcanal. I became a tactical operations officer in the Thirteenth Air Force. I had finally gotten there - into combat.