

FROM SHIPYARD TO AIR FORCE

Marlyn came from a family of four boys, one girl. He was the second oldest. He grew up in Iowa.

When he was 15, the whole family moved to Oregon. His father had a poultry and berries farm. His tasks included checking the quality of the eggs.

He quit high school and went to work in the shipyards aged 16 as a ship-fitter - working with a welder to hold the material while they held it in place. He worked on some of the 'Liberty ships'.

Marlyn wanted to sign up for the navy when he was 16, but he needed his parents' permission and they refused to give it ('You didn't argue with your father.') He enlisted in the Army Air Forces in Woodburn, Oregon 15 or 16 January 1944. By the time he got out of training, it was 1945.

The day he got his notice to go into the service, his dad took him down to the local drug store, also the Greyhound bus stop. They went in the restroom and his dad turned to him and said 'I'm sorry Marlyn.' He had served in World War I. 'That war was supposed to be the last one. I'm sorry.' Marlyn said he didn't care; he was just eager to get going.

He wanted to be a fighter pilot. He got scarlet fever while training. While he was in hospital they raised the test score and he no longer qualified. He felt that in the long run this was a good thing as he would have ended up in the Battle of the Bulge.

He did his basic training in Amarillo, Texas and then gunnery training in Kingman, Arizona. OTU (forming into crews) in Bakersfield, Texas. Then he left for Grafton Underwood in the UK as part of the 384th Bomb Group.

SAVED BY A FAULTY FLAK JACKET

He was only at Grafton Underwood for a few days. What was supposed to be his first mission was aborted after a faulty engine. His first official mission was on 6 April 1945. His crew dropped their bombs on the marshalling yards at Leipzig and then began to head back. They made a big right turn off the target and then collided with another B-17. There were c.300 in the formation.

He felt a bump and heard someone scream over the intercom after a bump. It was very smooth up until that point. He felt a second bump and thought maybe he better go forward and see what was happening. He hooked up to an oxygen bottle and walked towards the front. He could see the pilot and co-pilot were still in their seats and the radio operator too, although the engineer wasn't there. He couldn't raise anyone on the intercom. He went back to his position and hooked back up to the main oxygen system, but then blacked out as it was no longer working. He has a memory of everything coming apart, like slow motion. He remembered thinking he should have written to his mother.

He had his parachute on. When he took off that morning, he had tried to put on his flak suit but couldn't get it on. He kept trying to fix it, and couldn't. understand why it wouldn't do up when he was wearing it as it was working fine when he had it off. Eventually he gave up and just put it on the ground in front of him to give him some protection from flak coming up through the floor of the plane. He decided to put his parachute on instead to give him what he thought would be rudimentary protection. This decision saved his life.

He was unconscious when the plane blew up. The pilot of a P-51 watching, saw him fall 3 miles before he gained consciousness again: 'I knew I wasn't an angel as I was flapping away so I pulled the rip cord.'

BECOMING A POW

There were two German women and three men in the field farming in the field he landed in. All of the manure was piled up in the middle of the field. He missed the manure pile by a foot and landed on the other side of the pile from the farmers. He saw one of them running towards the farmhouse. He hid his weapons under the manure pile so that they wouldn't see them and feel threatened. The farmers had pitchforks and the one who came back from the farmhouse had a rifle but no-one threatened him ('I didn't think I was that harmless looking!'). He was bloody, but didn't feel hurt.

They took him to the farmhouse and cleaned up his blood and helped him. The young man never took the rifle ('a beauty') off his shoulder. Two old men with bicycles took him down the road to another farmhouse. A hay-wagon came by, drawn by two horses with 6 German guards and an officer in charge. He had to walk behind the wagon with the guards behind him. He only had one shoe because the explosion had blown off the other. His clothes were in a state and it was difficult to walk. He thought at one point that he was going to get shot, but he said 'I was ready for it; you have to be.'

Initially Marlyn was put in a gaol which was formerly a castle. From there, he was taken to a Luftwaffe base where other captured airmen were already held. He was interrogated by a German officer – 'a good-looking guy who spoke perfect English'. He was then taken to Stalag Luft 4F, near Hartmannsdorf.

To get to Stalag Luft 4F, he had to march everyone overnight. One of the other men had been so badly injured in his crash that both his legs had been amputated at the knees. He was afraid that the Germans would shoot him because he couldn't do the march. He asked for help. Marlyn and a P-47 pilot were the healthiest among the men and took turns carrying him through the night. After they arrived, he was taken into the hospital block and Marlyn never saw him again (he didn't know his name - something Smith).

Marlyn wasn't in Stalag Luft 4F long. He was in a huge bay full of prisoners – 'Australians, Polish, English, you name it; there were women in there too - Russian or Polish?'

ESCAPING FROM THE CAMP

Marlyn heard two officers talking and knew that they were going to be marching the group onwards further into Germany as the Allies were getting closer. He didn't understand how he had understood what they had said as they were speaking in German but he did.

Six of them determined to try to escape – including another tail gunner (John E. Kaiser Jr. from the 100th BG) and a South African who had been a prisoner for years. They hid under the beds. Marlyn's hiding place was so narrow he couldn't move his head at all, but it worked.

After the men had gone, he heard children's feet. A German girl aged about twelve came in with her brothers to see if they could find anything left over that would be useful. She went to where the South African was hiding and reached under the bed. She found a pair of shoes and tugged. She didn't realize that they were attached to his feet and couldn't understand why they wouldn't come free. She tugged at something which turned out to be a bag with all his letters in. She pulled it out and he pulled it back under the bed which scared her and she screamed. Marlyn was near the door and jumped out and shut the door before she could escape. They told the girl that they would hurt her brothers if she didn't help them ('We wouldn't have hurt them; there would have been no point.'). She told them that the Germans were still outside.

Marlyn was a prisoner for 9 days and an escapee for 22, which is a pretty good ratio. When he escaped, he was about a day's ride in a jeep from the US lines.

GETTING BACK TO ENGLAND

Marlyn, John E. Kaiser Jr. (from the 100th BG), Joe Bull (the tail gunner on the other aircraft) stayed overnight in a German farmhouse on his way to the American lines, displacing the family.

He got a ride into Paris on a C-47 transport aircraft. There was a red carpet laid out for them when they arrived. He didn't think it was for them.

He landed in London and took a train to Grafton Underwood. They wouldn't let him fly again in accordance with the rules (if you'd been caught and escaped you'd be classed as a spy and shot if you crashed again). He was given a choice between doing admin at Grafton Underwood or going home. He went home.

A CAREER IN THE AIR FORCE

Marlyn stayed in the Air Force, retiring in 1975 as Chief Master Sergeant after 31 years. He served in Panama, Trinidad, Puerto Rico, Miami, Hawaii, Texas and worked on the Atlas and Titan missile programmes.

Marlyn married Leia, a Brazilian girl he met in Rio De Janeiro and courted on Copacabana Beach. They had three daughters including twins, and retired to Fort Myers, Florida. They were married for 62 years, until his wife's death in 2010.

He moved to Monterey, Tennessee in 2011 and built a new house: 'It is designed to my wife's ideas...'