

Private First Class Migdel's Account of World War II

Many men were drafted to fight for the United States in World War II. One of them was my grandfather, Private Emanuel Migdel.

On April 8, 2009, I conducted an interview in a Monroe, NY work office with Private First Class Emanuel Migdel on the subject of his service in World War II. Eighteen years after his birth on February 11, 1925, Mr. Migdel was drafted in the Air Force beginning as Private Emanuel Migdel. Owing to a law passed by Congress a year or so after his recruitment, he then became Private First Class Migdel. This new title was primarily associated with the number of stripes presented on all Privates' uniforms, which were representative of the amount of time spent in war. Originally starting off as a Private, none of the draftees had any stripes but afterwards each draftee involved in the war began with at least one stripe on his uniform.

Although he now resides at 1947 68th Street in Brooklyn, NY, Private Migdel had been settled on the lower east side of Manhattan at the time of his enrollment. Although he did mention that he was not quite "college material" and going into the military was his best course of action, Private Migdel had been drafted into the Air Force. When it came time to report for duty, Private Migdel walked up to the drafting board who had a long list of names broken into different sections. His section ended at the letter "M," and it just so happened his section was recruited into the Air Force. Knowing it was very difficult to get into the Air Force, my grandfather was very grateful that he would be in this branch of the military. After reporting for duty during either May or June of 1943, he was flown to

Greensborough, North Carolina where the Air Force would decide what he would do in the service. Greensborough was also the location of the most basic form of training where the men would go down to the rifle range and shoot at a target. Mr. Migdel said it was quite a waste of time, because when men would shoot at a target the marks were always the same whether they hit the target or not. The Air Force wanted all its men to appear as if everyone could handle weapons with precision and sharpness, even if, during actual practice, he/she could not.

After spending several months in Greensborough, each draftee became either a “gunner” or attended cook and baker’s school. Due to the fact “gunners,” or the men who typically fight at the fronts of battles, were voluntarily put in that position and my grandfather did not volunteer to be a “gunner,” he was told he would be sent to cook and baker’s school for training after one week of furlough. When he told his parents about the training and location, they were absolutely thrilled he would be behind enemy lines since very few cooks and bakers had the opportunity to stand at the front. Coming back from furlough he was sent to Salt Lake City, Utah where he was then sent to training school located in Miami Beach, FL. There he would also work in the hotels on Ocean Drive, which is now known as South Beach. He would sleep in the hotel and every morning he was sent to a different hotel where he would learn how to cook and bake. Although he does not specifically remember his instructors, he does know they were part of the Air Force service. According to Mr. Migdel, many military service members referred to the Air Force as “the Country Club” due to the easiness and lax training since the Air Force did not have the obstacle courses and difficult ropes courses on which many military men trained. In

July or August of 1943, he was sent to very sweltering Alexandria, Louisiana to begin cooking in the mess hall. Unfortunately, this particular town that hosted the infantry did not enjoy the company of the Air Force, so he would mostly stay on the base during free time. Although he does not remember too many specifics such as movie titles or types of guns, he does remember watching movies, learning to play billiards, and rarely heading to the rifle range. On the infrequent visits to the rifle range, he would be handed a gun, which was comparable, in his terms, to a "BB" gun. Also, every month, the United Service Organization (USO), would bring in shows such as Bob Hope or Jimmy Durante. Louisiana was also the station where most of the prisoners of war, belonging to any of Axis powers, were sent to do work. They mostly worked in the kitchens with the cooks. This being the case, some worked under my grandfather. Although they were the enemy, many prisoners didn't want to fight and mostly did what they were told. Any portrait or movie displaying a man peeling potatoes provided a false reflection, because there was a machine, my grandfather recalled, that had a coarse paper, similar to that of sand paper, which would peel the potatoes while the prisoner and other cooks would take out the eyes and anything the machine missed. Provided that many of these men came from "hillbilly" states including Tennessee and Kentucky whose diet consisted of spinach and potatoes, they were ecstatic to be able to eat meat as part of their meals. The only casualties his unit incurred were men burning themselves on pots and pans. He knows he was lucky in that sense, especially after physically participating in the infantry's training program for the one day. Mr. Migdel never received any formal

training with guns aside from the basic training in Greensborough, but he reveal the fact he had to carry a gun most of the time.

Private First Class Migdel was told he needed to take a second furlough and was flown back home for a week. Although he only had one week there were many activities in which he could partake visit by being a member of the service. Some privileges included watching shows and movies for free either in the back of the theatre or in standing areas. Once in a while he would meet some of his friends with whom he had grown up. Most of the time, though, he would stay with his family because in their eyes, he explains, "I was a hero. It didn't matter whether I was a cook or gunman, when people heard 'Migdel's son is in the service' they would respond 'Wow. [His parents] should be proud of him.'"

After taking his second furlough, Private First Class Migdel was sent to Salem, Oregon, where he then boarded a troop ship. The troop ships were reinforcements for the ships on the islands including Pearl Harbor. On his way to Guam, the air conditioning on the boat broke and seeing as none of the men were equipped to fix it, they were forced to stop at Pearl Harbor. He was taken to Schofield Barracks where he saw where the Japanese had shot up the American barracks and was able to make out the bullet holes on the beds that had once been the place of American soldiers. From the moment he stepped off his boat, a sergeant from the infantry located at Pearl Harbor told him they would treat him as if he were part of the infantry. On the first day in Pearl Harbor, Mr. Migdel meandered through Honolulu. After several days of walking around Honolulu and spending all their money, my grandfather and some men from his ship decided to spend the day with the infantry.

They went through one day of training and exclaimed, "Never again!" The training was brutal and, in comparison to walking around in fancy jackets and hats that caused bystanders to mistake him for an officer, consisted of several obstacle courses, rope climbing, rock wall climbing, hurdles and jumping over large puddles. Although he did not continue the infantry training, every so often the Air Force would call practice sessions where all men were given guns and sent to stockades. He says, "I was at that stage where if they told me to jump I would jump." During these practices every man would march around the building holding his gun on his shoulder and would be asked to shoot at certain targets by the sergeants in charge. At the time of training there was a boat left from Pearl Harbor known as the Arizona. Although this boat is now a monument in Pearl Harbor, many service men during my grandfather's time would simply look it over with lack of interest. That training ritual with the infantry he remembers as his worst day in the service.

Overall, Mr. Migdel believed the Air Force truly took great care of its men. It would take money out of each soldier's salary and send it to his family back in the States. My grandfather's schedule consisted of working on Monday, getting the next two days off and going back to work on Thursday. During his time off, he would either occupy himself in town or write letters home, as this was the only way to communicate with his loved ones waiting back home. Communication in practically every way was difficult and never immediate. They did not have any radios nor any other news sharing devices on base. If they wanted to go out and purchase a paper on their time off they could, but Private First Class Migdel says that mostly they did not have the money to do so. Media was never easily accessible nor did many

mention it. Although he has several memories of his times spent in the service, he specifically recalls the Chaplain's assistant, who happened to be Jewish, would often come in to the cook's area to ask for special requests for the Chaplain which Private Migdel would always oblige. Many years later, after Private Migdel's son was getting married, he thought he recognized the Rabbi who was marrying his son and his fiancé. It turns out the Rabbi was actually the Chaplain's assistant to whom he often spoke during the war.

In order to be discharged from any service, men must have earned a certain amount of points, generally earned over several years, along with good behavior status. Thankfully, my grandfather always conducted himself well and had earned enough points, he was ready to be discharged at the age of twenty-two. One knowledgeable service member came up to him and explained how he understands that my grandfather had been the service for a while and was ready to proceed homebound. He also knew, though, that my grandfather was only twenty-two and would not have much to do back in the States with his trade as a cook. If my grandfather continued in the service for twenty more years or so he could receive a pension and, being older and experienced, do anything he would like with a pension that was nearly endless. He turned down this option and prepared to leave. In March of 1947, he left his final base on Tinian Island, where the first atomic bomb was loaded aboard the B-29 Enola Gay on August 6, 1945 and later that day dropped on Hiroshima. While packing, he was told that if the service found out he had too many uniforms, the uniforms would be confiscated and he would have to remain in the service. Having either double or triple the amount of uniforms, seven fancy jackets

along with a mackinaw, he gave them all back aside from two jackets and the mackinaw, which the Air Force allowed him to keep.

Upon arrival all servicemen were greeted as illustrated on television and in movies. Once the boat docked and the platform was lowered, men were flooded with love by friends and family members all ecstatic to have them finally home. Back in Manhattan, the G. I. Bill entitled him to attend watch-making school completely free of charge after which he began work at the family jewelry store near the South Street Seaport in New York, New York and, although no longer family run, still exists today.

Looking back on the days he spent in the Air Force, he feels he wasted three and a half years in service because he does not consider his experience helpful in any way. It simply took precious time out of his life, which he could have spent in school or with family, but instead, he was forced to join the military and serve his country. He also believes he made a mistake by not remaining in the service and now regrets not staying the full twenty years in order to receive a hefty government pension. Although my grandfather did make some regrettable decisions, it was an unforgettable experience he will forever remember.