



With the Colors

Oct. 17,
1943

Eugene Bickers, 17 year old son of Mr. and Mrs. Al Bickers of Champaign and grand-son of Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Schafer of Newton, is home on a furlough from the United States Navy. In telling of his experiences in 50,000 miles at sea since he became a Naval gunner on a merchant vessel, he told of his ship's being torpedoed in the Atlantic and of being under attack many times.

"We didn't hear a thing," he said, telling about the time his ship was hit by a torpedo. "There was a jar and then complete silence. The coffee pot and some dishes were knocked off tables, but that could have been the sea without any hit. Our crew's personal radio, not the ship's radio, was knocked out.

The torpedo struck below the surface and the water cushioned the blow. The ship didn't sink but all hands were ordered to abandon ship at 3:15 a. m. After six hours in his life-jacket in the water, which he described as "cold enough," Bickers was picked up by an escort vessel and returned to his own ship about 4:00 p. m. the same afternoon.

"I was getting ready to go on watch when the attack came. There was a thirty foot sea, which isn't very high as seas go, but it was plenty high for swimming," he commented.

Bickers wears the yellow bar used to designate men who were in service before Pearl Harbor, but in his case it's a special decoration presented to the men of his crew by the British government for helping a first aid unit and treating the wounded in the streets of an English port after an air raid.

The star on the yellow bar indicates that he has seen action and the dark red bar for Carribean service also decorates his blouse. His father, Al Bickers, is a gunner's mate, first class, and is attached to the Champaign recruiting office. The family lives at 205 West Beardsley, Champaign.

During his three trips on the same merchant ship, Bickers has traveled at least 50,000 miles, hit eleven foreign ports, and been attacked both by airplanes and submarines several times. He has seen action on several occasions he was not at liberty to discuss.

"There isn't a lot of difference, but I think you have more chance with airplanes than with subs," he said, when asked which kind of attack the men disliked more.

He mentioned a fellow sailor, who was in a hurry to see some action. Once during a plane attack, this fellow stuck his head out of his shelter with the anxious question, "Two motors or four?"

Bickers was enlisted June 7, 1942, in a ceremony at Champaign, marking the six months period after Pearl Harbor. After boot camp at Great Lakes, he went to gunnery school in Chicago. His present rating of gunner's mate, third class, came January 1 and he already has qualified for second class rating, which will go through June 1. He will be 18 in April.

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Dewey R. Connor of Newton was promoted to the petty officer rating of aviation machinist's mate, third class, upon graduation from the United States Naval Training schools at Navy pier at Chicago, Friday. He now awaits assignment to active duty with the fleet or at a Naval aviation base servicing the warplanes of the Navy's fighting airmen.

The blue jacket was included in a class of nearly 200 men graduated from courses for aviation machinist's mates and aviation metalsmiths. Machinist's mates are taught to assemble, service and repair airplanes and airplane engines.

Metalsmiths learn to make temporary and permanent repairs to airplane metal work, such as radiators, pipe connections, instruments and joints.

Students are selected to attend service school upon the basis of a series of aptitude tests taken during recruit training.

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Cadet Gerald N. Gorrell, son of Mr. and Mrs. Alva E. Gorrell of near Newton, is now enrolled as an aviation cadet in the Army Air Forces Pre-Flight school for pilots at Maxwell field, located on the outskirts of Montgomery, the capital of Alabama.

Here the new class of cadets is receiving nine weeks of intensive military, physical and academic training preparatory to beginning their actual flight instruction at one of the many primary flying schools in the Army Air Forces Southeast Training Center.

Cadet Gorrell attended Newton Community high school, and Eastern State Teachers college. He has ten

months previous service, prior to being appointed an aviation cadet, at Camp Crowder, Missouri. Before his entry into the United States Army, he was a rural school teacher.

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Private Walter E. Newkirk sends the following rhyme:

It was a year ago today,
I was drafted away;
Joined the Army, but not to stay,
There have been many more
Joined since that day;
And still more to join, they say.
Give us the equipment to fight with
And we'll see them devils whipped,
Then we'll all be back, I hope,
To see the friends and folks.
Until that time,
I'll just say, I'm doing fine.

His address is Private Walter E. Newkirk, Company B, 929th Signal battalion, Army Air Base, Thermal, California.

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Mrs. B. F. Ferguson of Rose Hill has received a letter from her son, Private William O. King, somewhere in Africa. He says: "I made the trip all right and didn't get seasick although a storm came the second day at sea and the ship rocked and tossed.

"I wish you folks could see these natives plowing with a crooked tree trunk or limb with a piece of steel on it for a point; only one handle and likely to see anything hitched to it—camels, oxen or horses, sometimes a mixture. Lots of burros no bigger than goats. Don't worry too much about me. I'll be o' k."

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William E. Pictor, a son of Mr. and Mrs. Arthur Pictor of Sainte Marie, has been promoted from first lieutenant to captain, United States Army Air Force, and has been transferred from Salinas field, Salinas, California, to Esler field, Alexandria, Louisiana, with the Seventeenth Observation squadron, to which he has been assigned ever since he completed his training at Brooks field, Texas.

Captain Pictor was the first Air Force officer from Jasper county to be commissioned after the Air Force expansion began in 1940.

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Private Bertrand F. Richards, who is assistant to the principal hostess of Service Club No. I at Camp McCoy, Wisconsin, writes home folks that he likes his work very much and that besides his regular duties, he has been called several times by the post chaplain to play the pipe organ for special officers' services in the post chapel. He says when a colonel calls, a private goes! He has also played for regular services in several different regimental chapels. He reports 36 below zero and much snow at Camp McCoy.

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Private Cloyce L. Hunt has been here on a three day furlough this week from Fort Sheridan near Chicago. He and twenty-one other soldiers were engaged in insurance work at Fort Sheridan and a group of Waacs took over their jobs this week, and all were given short furloughs. When they return they don't know where they will be sent. Mr. Hunt was circuit clerk of Jasper county when he was inducted into the Army recently.

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Private Ray Totten of the Seventh Armored division, Camp Polk, Louisiana, is visiting his mother, Mrs. Rufus Jones of near Newton. When he returns he will go to Officers' Candidate school for training.