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Jim - I send the enclosed
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I'm sending a copy to
Poland - They are asking for WWII
submarine stories -

Bill McKay

A MEETING JUST MISSED

By William McKay

7/07

Many heart-warming stories have come out of World War II--stories of family members or close friends who met unexpectedly on the battlefields of Europe or islands of the Pacific. This is a story of two friends who just missed seeing each other on the other side of the world, neither knowing that the other was within thousands of miles.

Frank Fitzsimons was not just a friend; he was my best friend during our growing-up years. We lived on farms just one mile apart and spent many hours together as two country boys. Our fathers were veterans of World War I, each volunteering for service. Frank's father was in the Navy, but served with the U.S. Marines in France. He was awarded both the Navy Cross and the Silver Star for bravery. My father served in the Navy, stationed at Naval Headquarters in London and Paris. Each of our fathers attempted to re-enter service at the outbreak of World War II; however, at age 45, they were considered too old.

As boys, Frank and I were fascinated by stories from World War I. Growing up in families where patriotism and pride of country were paramount had a significant influence on our decisions as sailors in World War II. Frank and I graduated from high school at the age of 17 in June, 1942, approximately six months after the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. Each of us went away to college in September, 1942 because plans for us to attend college had been made by our families prior to Pearl Harbor. But during the fall of 1942, the war was foremost in our minds, as many of our friends and classmates were entering military service, and college no longer had an attraction for us.

By letters (long-distance phone calls were seldom made in those days), we pressed our fathers to allow us to enlist in the Navy after one semester of college. To our amazement and to the dismay of our mothers, our fathers agreed, no doubt after much discussion between the two of them and certainly influenced by having been in the same situation as young men themselves in 1917. We enlisted in the Navy on February 16, 1943, and were sent to boot camp at Bainbridge, Maryland. Though we were separated in boot camp and didn't see each other again until we were discharged at about the same time in Charleston, SC, in February 1946, our careers in the Navy had several amazing similarities.

While in boot camp, Frank received an unexpected Congressional appointment to the Naval Academy and was sent to Naval Academy Prep School. However, his desire was to go to sea; and after a few weeks, he was transferred out of the Naval Academy program.

While I was in boot camp, I took the competitive exam for the inaugural class of the new V-12 (Officer Training) Program and was accepted. However, I, too, had my heart on going to sea and declined to enter the V-12 Program.

Frank was a crew member on a troop transport and made two trips from New York to the British Isles. After the second trip, he saw a notice of a draft for PT (Motor Torpedo Boat) Service. He had often said that his top priority was the PT Navy. Over the strenuous objections of his Chief Gunnery Officer, he volunteered and was soon on his way to the Pacific and eventually was a crew member of PT-188 in the Solomon Islands.

When I asked to be transferred out of the V-12 Program, my battalion commander said in no uncertain terms that I was a fool to decline an education and a commission, but he granted my request to go to submarine school, and I soon found myself at the New London Submarine Base.

As all World War II submariners know, crews normally receive two weeks leave for rest and recuperation after each patrol. After my second war patrol aboard USS Guavina (SS-362), we were sent to Brisbane, Australia. After the relief crew took over, several enlisted men chose to visit a rest camp located in a small town a few miles inland from Brisbane. It was a quiet and restful place where we enjoyed the small-town atmosphere for two weeks. While at the rest camp, I dated a young lady who was a resident of the town. There was no nightlife, so we spent our time horseback riding, picnicking in the country and enjoying community events, which included horse races by local youngsters on Saturdays. On leaving, I had not the slightest idea that I would ever return. We had gone to the Marshall Islands after our first patrol, Brisbane after our second, and it was anybody's guess where we would go after the third.

It was in the fall of 1944 and Frank and I had lost touch with each other, except an occasional mention in letters from our families. The only letters which I wrote were to my family after each patrol.

On the third patrol, Guavina made a successful attack on a large ship inside Davao Gulf on the south side of the Phillipine Island of Mindanao. However, on the approach, we struck an uncharted reef and destroyed the underwater sound heads. This resulted in our being ordered back to Brisbane after our shortest patrol, only 48 days. I, along with several others, elected to return to the same rest camp.

After settling in, I looked up the young lady that I had dated before; and as soon as I saw her she said, "Guess who's been here while you were away?" Of course, I would have guessed thousands of names before I would have guessed my best friend, who could have been anywhere in the world, except that particular place in Australia. When she said, "Frank FitzSimons," I was shocked beyond belief. Not only had I missed seeing him, but I'd missed him by only one week.

Frank has enjoyed relating his side of the story. He met the young lady and they went on a picnic outside of town. As they were enjoying the sun, she soon realized that he was from North Carolina. She said to him, "I dated a boy from North Carolina." Frank told me he really wasn't interested because there were thousands of North Carolina boys in the Navy. However, to be polite, he casually said, "Where in North Carolina?" She said, "Hendersonville." He said he bolted upright and said, "I'm from Hendersonville, what's his name?" She answered, "Bill McKay." You can imagine his shock and surprise.

After leaving boot camp, I did not see anyone from my hometown while making six war patrols in the Pacific. How ironic that I missed seeing my best friend by only one week when we were on the other side of the world in the middle of a war.

Though following different paths in our Navy careers, we each were discharged as Second Class Gunner's Mates and each ended up at the Discharge Center in the same week.

After the war, our lives continued to run parallel in many ways. We roomed together at Clemson College and graduated together in the Class of 1949. We were best men in each other's weddings in the late Forties. After graduation, Frank and I both worked in agriculture in our home county for about 20 years and then both went into banking. Today, we still have homes on our family farms where we grew up, and we still see each other almost every week.

The story of our just-missed meeting is one we've enjoyed sharing with family and friends for more than 50 years. The story has a happy ending because we both returned safely from the war. But I often think what a great experience it would have been if our paths had crossed in Australia in 1944.