

USAT GREYLAG

By William Elmgreen

This story is by William (Bill) Elmgreen (1902-1990) who was Chief Engineer on US Army Transport ships the Greylag (or Grey Lag) and then the Nebraskan, between 1944 and 1946.

William was born in Denmark on 1 March 1902. He studied diesel engineering there, and from 1923 worked as a Junior Engineer for the Scandinavian / American Line, crossing the Atlantic to New York more than 30 times in the 1920s as the ships (including Frederick VIII) took emigrants to North America.

In 1927 he took a job as a ship's engineer with the Great Northern Telegraph Company. He was posted to Shanghai where he was until 1940.

In 1940 luck brought him to Australia, where he eventually started work for the US Army, involved in the supervising of the building of small ships in Newcastle, New South Wales. Following that, in 1944 he made a decision to go back to sea for a time, to earn enough money with which to get married to the young nurse he had met in Newcastle. He was appointed Chief Engineer and ranked as a Colonel. He did indeed marry the young nurse and lived the rest of his life in Sydney.

Extracts from his unpublished autobiography, written in the 1970s; supplied by his son, John Elmgreen, Sydney Australia, May 2024.



August 1944: joining the US Army

I made my final decision in August 1944 and called in at the U.S. Army Services of Supply Office at Grace Building in Sydney on a Saturday morning. The Marine Superintendent, a Londoner, liked my papers. "We shall contact you, when we have an opening", he said.

The following Saturday, he phoned again early in the morning and asked me down right away for an interview. Shortly after I arrived, I was appointed Chief Engineer on the *U.S.A.T. San Antonio*.

She was a 'laker', formerly ploughing the waters of the Great Lakes, The Michigan, Huron, Erie and Ontario. I knew the *San Antonio* quite well, but didn't like her a great deal. She was an odd-looking boat. However, the salary was not to be sneezed at - plus room and board - and free travel all over the world(?). "Call in at the Appointment Office, Monday 9 am. and sign on," I was told.

I went to Walsh Bay U.S. Ship Construction Office and saw the Major. We had always been good friends. He got up and shook my hand and congratulated me: "Mr Elmgreen, you have been promoted from this day to Marine Superintendent, Newcastle Shipbuilding Project". This high office carries with it a substantially higher remuneration as you would expect." He had taken me by surprise. It took me some time to recover. I thanked him for his kind offer and his confidence in me, but told him that I was sorry, but I had decided to go to sea again and I had been offered a job.

The Major jumped out of his chair: "You can't!" he said. "It's out of the question - we simply won't let you go!" I realized then that a good friend of mine, a First Lieutenant, had already tried hard to persuade the Major to let me go. He carried a lot of weight with the boss. The Major continued, "We cannot prevent you from leaving us, but we can stop you from getting a position onboard one of our own ships." They were his final words.

I left, but I had not given up the fight. I found my friend, the First Lieutenant. He said, "It will be a man-size job to persuade the boss to let you go, but I will do my best". I went in and pleaded again. He was kind and understanding, but he wouldn't budge. "Please don't ask me again - that is my last word!" I decided not to annoy him again and my friend promised to approach him in a couple of hours, which he did and stayed over half an hour while I worried outside. Finally, the Lieutenant came out, with a smile on his face. "Marjorie owes me a kiss for this," he said. "He doesn't want to see you again today, but he instructed me to have you honourably discharged!" I forgot to tell Marjorie she owed him a kiss. My memory sometimes fails me in cases like that - he was quite handsome.

Monday morning, I called in at the Appointment Office, the girl handed me the papers for the *San Antonio* job for me to sign, which I did. Then someone shouted: "What the hell are you doing in my office, Bill?" It was my old friend Geoff who helped me in Newcastle some time ago. Geoff weighed 23 stone. I told him I had signed on the *Antonio*. "Bull!" he roared, "You are not going on that old bomb! I have a real beauty for you, the *Greylag*! She has just arrived from New York. They spent a million on her!" He tore up the papers I had just signed. "Put him on the *Greylag*", he said, "Bill will sign on her!" We were pals when he was on duty at Newcastle. I remember one day Geoff was sitting in the lobby at the Great Northern. A girl hit him a gentle blow on his enormous stomach and said, "Boy or Girl?" "An elephant!" he said, "Can't you see his trunk hanging down below?" No further questions asked. Geoff was angry: he had serious thyroid trouble.

My next stop, Wilhelmsen's Shipping Office, Agents for U.S. Army Transports. The Agent - Mr Williams, an Englishman - told me, "Before you can leave Sydney on an American ship, you have to get a

pass from the Director of Navigation, Sydney Harbour, permitting you to leave on said ship. A Danish Marine engineer was not granted permission because his services may be required on a Danish ship in port. The English agent advised me to contact the Danish Consulate and get a paper from them verifying that no marine engineer was required on any Danish ship in port at the moment. I got it and went to the Office of the Director of Navigation at Customs House. They refused me a pass at first, until I presented them with my letter from the Danish Consul. I went back to Mr Williams and thanked him for his kind advice.

Next on the list, Medical, U.S. Army. It was long and thorough. We were nineteen Aussies and me. One failed miserably and was told not to bother them again. I was as usual in remarkably good health. On a U.S. Army Pass, you are photographed in front of a long measuring stick, showing me towering 5ft 9".

While we were still in Sydney, I stayed at a Kings Cross hotel and before we left, I was invited out to dinner at Peter's home in Bondi, with my fiancée. We had a very enjoyable evening there with a fairly large crowd of Danes, almost all of whom had lived many years in English-speaking countries.

One night I received a phone call at my hotel from my former Danish friend Jonah. He said, "If you think I am going to serve as second engineer under you on the *San Antonio*, you can think again!" I passed on to him the following information: "I didn't like the *San Antonio*, so they put me on the new *Greylag* and I insisted they offer you the Chief's job on the *Antonio*. They will confirm it when they see you - O.K.?" He fell very silent, and that was the end of our interesting conversation.

During the next weeks, I managed to take several trips to Newcastle, staying at my old room (211) at the Great Northern. In the meantime, I had acquired my new uniform with four gold bars on my shoulders. My fiancée said, "It looks quite glamorous." She thought I looked as if I had worn a uniform all my life. I had, almost. Soon we were on our way to New Guinea, loaded to the Plimsol marks with frozen turkeys, some weighing 25 lbs.

USAT Greylag - New Guinea

The *U.S.A.T. Greylag* was a lovely boat, just back from New York and the overhaul. She had liberty boilers and wonderful accommodation for the Chief Engineer: a lab for chemical tests, a modern office, bed-sitting room and large bathroom, all new. There were half a dozen water-coolers in the corridors. Refrigeration: two large steam-driven Freon-12 compressors, freezing a shipload of turkeys and a lot of frozen butter. For our own convenience a motor-driven Frick compressor for the cool room containing food for officers and men, including plenty turkeys! We never got tired of them, as we had a good cook, a New Zealander who was also a champion poker player, fleecing our Commander who was badly addicted to poker.

When we arrived at Milne Bay - by mistake - we had a party onboard. Ordinary booze had been consumed long ago, but Mac, the First Lieutenant (Naval), in charge of our twenty anti-aircraft gunners (Gobbs), managed to produce a bottle of hospital spirit which we mixed with orange juice. It made a wonderful drink and made

us quite happy, so we started a sing-song. Carl, our Commander, asked us why we didn't go ashore under the beautiful palms and entertain the fuzzy wuzzies there, so he could get some sleep! We agreed to entertain the fuzzies: after all Carl was our Captain, so we swallowed our last mouthful of the nectar before we went ashore. I showed them a trick I had learned in China before we left. I lit a match and dropped it into the nearly empty bottle, and expected it to produce a beautiful blue flame, moving slowly from the bottom of the bottle to the neck, like Johnnie Walker always did. It had its own ideas. It nearly blew the roof off the messroom with a loud Bang! Later, we moved ashore and continued our sing-song there. Two years later Mac reminded me of our party at Milne Bay, when I met him in the streets of San Francisco. He was with his partner and friend, an Attorney-at-Law, now back in civilian life. I was on my way back to Sydney from New York, where we had stayed four months.

We left Milne Bay for Hollandia the next day, with a stop at Lae. We anchored in the bay and unloaded our turkeys onto army ducks and went ashore with our goods sitting on top of the frozen turkeys. We saw a picture show in Lae. After a trip ashore and back, it took time to thaw our bottom ends.

We finally arrived at Hollandia and began unloading our bitterly cold cargo. We had been eating turkey all the way there and still never got tired of them. In Hollandia, we went to a picture show every night and often sat there in torrential rain, never moving an inch. One evening, an Army Officer and a young lady, probably an Army nurse entered the arena. She was the only member of the female species we ever saw in New Guinea. The several thousand G.Is. started roaring, the young couple looked forlorn!

Always good shows, and if we weren't completely blinded by rain, we enjoyed every minute of it. Later in the war, we were shown two full-length films of good quality every evening. It was funny to watch the reaction of newcomers when all of a sudden heaven and earth was one. They would jump up and look around surprised, as if they thought the other 2000 spectators were oblivious of the downpour, after which they would quietly settle down again like the rest of us and pretend they didn't notice they were drowning. After all, it didn't take long to dry up again.

The *Greylag* fed the armies with the most delicious food they had eaten for years, including frozen butter.



Among my father's papers was found this B&W photograph of him sitting on the wing of an aircraft (smoking a pipe) in a large field of aircraft. He annotated it: "New Guinea", "Plane Grave Yard", and "P.38 Lightnings in plane graveyard (all junk)". Designations on the aircraft that can be seen in the photo are "42 084" and "29 5 20". One aircraft seems to be numbered "30" and you can see the shark's jaws painted on another. - Editor

Soon we were on our way back to Sydney, going full speed along the New Guinea Coast, completely blacked out, when we ran into a large landing barge and had our nose smashed in. Carl talked to the skipper on the barge by radio. He radioed back: "We are O.K. - no serious damage to us - keep going.". Our forepeak (bow tank) was flooded, but the watertight bulkhead stuck together - nothing to worry about. Carl's estimate: "Two months in Sydney for repairs!" he said.

Back in Sydney

When we arrived in Sydney, my fiancée was on holidays and we had a wonderful time together. It was mid-summer and we both managed to get rooms at a very nice hotel on a hill overlooking Bondi Beach. Carl's estimate was correct: the dock estimated it would take at least two months for our repairs to be completed. It gave us a good chance to overhaul our main engine down below. It was extremely noisy on our trip to Hollandia.

USAT Nebraskan

Unfortunately, I never enjoyed its quiet performance, reported to me later in Manila, after the overhaul. I was transferred to The Flagship - Commander Carl called her - the 16,000 ton *U.S.A.T. Nebraskan*. I could refuse to change ship, but Carl advised me against it. He said: "This is promotion, Bill, don't ruin your chances with the U.S. Army!"