

Sophia Leon & Sofia Leiva

Mr. Peters

King High Remembers

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Archie Aitcheson: WWII Veteran and POW

To call Mr. Aitcheson a former military man is an understatement; by demonstrating valor, perseverance, and comradery, Mr. Aitcheson is an example of a true, American hero. This decorated World War II Air Force Veteran and POW carries a legacy of greatness in his tales, and by his humble story, he offers an alternate vantage point from which to view United States history; not only in its majesty and glory, but in its darkness and hardship as well. The remaining World War II Veterans illuminate nearly-forgotten history and a bygone era for the new generation of Americans.

Archie Aitcheson was born to Scottish immigrants in Waterbury, Connecticut on February 29, 1924. Due to the fact that the Great Depression swept the United States when he was just a child, Aitcheson had his first job by the time he was only thirteen years old. He was an active Boy Scout and patriot, so when the attack on Pearl Harbor shattered the previously isolationist policy of the United States, Mr. Aitcheson lept into action for the war effort, just as his father did in World War I. He enlisted in the Air Force in September of 1942 after graduating high school.

With a group of friends, he was taken to Hartford, where they would then be examined for fitness to enter the military. Being the only one to pass the physical, Mr. Aitcheson was sent

to Fort Devens, a military base in Massachusetts to be fitted and prepared for basic training. That training took place in Atlantic City, New Jersey, where they stayed in a hotel and conducted drills on the beach as a result of the swarm of young men enlisting after Pearl Harbor. From there he was shipped to Scottfield, Illinois, and then Fort Myers, Florida to train as a radio operator, mechanic, and aerial gunner. At Fort Myers, he finally applied to become a pilot. This meant more training and even more bases, moving to Boise, Idaho, Arizona State College, Santa Ana, Oxnard and finally Taft, California where he completed the necessary training. Mr. Aitcheson was then assigned to to a B17 crew in Pyote, Texas.

On his first mission, he and his crew were assigned to the 351st bomb group and tasked with jamming radio signals so the Germans could not locate their base. On his final mission, Mr. Aitcheson was sent to Germany, where he and the others flew in formation to bomb and railroad system. During the first round of bombing, not all bombs were dropped, so his crew turned around to finish the job. However, by this time the Germans were aware of the pilots circling back. When they arrived the second time, they were met by German soldiers who shot down their planes and prevented them from completing the mission. Only seven out of the 28 planes had made it, but not unscathed. Mr. Aitcheson's plane had only two of four engines working, so they "threw everything [they] had out, guns and ammunition, to stay flying." His plane had 250 bullet holes in the tail. He and his partner were not able to make it back to Italy, and crash landed with their parachutes on an island. By some luck, British soldiers had been stationed there, and radioed back. The United States Air Force had arrived two days later to pick them up.

Mr. Aitcheson's 18th mission would be the one to change his life forever. Tasked with bombing yet another rail system in Yugoslavia, they were in the same situation as his second

mission, only this time his plane was the one to get shot down. While attempting to bail out of the mission, his parachute caught in a tree and was seen by German soldiers. He cut himself down, ran, and then tried to hide, covering himself in mud and leaves. Ultimately, he was caught by the Germans, becoming a prisoner of war. When they found him they said, “War has come to an end, Americans are using kinders now,” referring to how young Archie Aitcheson had looked, and was, at the time. He was taken to a small town, strip searched, questioned, and thrown into a small cell in the dead of night. When he awoke, he realized the other person in the cell had been a close friend, an engineer he worked with in the Air Force. They stayed in the prison roughly two days before moving to another. From there, the prisoners were taken to a railroad station in Vienna, and then to Du Lag Luft. Here, Mr. Aitcheson was interrogated by a German officer. He was asked his name, rank, and other basic information. The soldier had pulled out a book, logged with information about American soldiers. He found “Archie Aitcheson” and proceeded to read everything about him: where he was born and previous military stations. A few days later, after being cleaned up, the prisoners were relocated to Stalag Luft IV in Poland, a prison of 10,000 Americans. The mass of prisoners meant little food and crammed rooms; 26 people in a room meant for 16. He had been separated from his engineer, but had met another soldier from Connecticut, who was there for about a year. The soldiers, though, kept their morale high by playing cards, trading cigarettes, and playing petty pranks on the German soldiers in the camp.

Word arrived that the Russian troops were approaching, thus initiating a wide-scale evacuation for the camp. The most difficult trial for Mr. Aitcheson and his fellow prisoners was a grueling 86 day march in the dead of winter: miles without food, lice infestation, exhaustion, frostbite, dysentery, and extreme malnourishment plagued these soldiers as they marched on.

The resilience exuded by these soldiers was not in vain; on the 80th day of the march they came in contact with the Russians at the Elbe River, and they were liberated on April 26th, 1945. The soldiers were sent to a hospital in La Harve, France to recover, but Mr. Aitcheson and his engineer, in desperation to get back home, escaped with a motor group to a military base in northern France. After packing onto an overcrowded hospital ship for a journey across the Atlantic, Archie Aitcheson finally arrived back to the United States on June 26th, 1945. Mr. Aitcheson's work with the military was not completed yet; he worked at a military base in Long Island as a Chief before he accumulated enough points to end his service, and in November of 1945, despite some persuasion from the military for him to stay, he was finally discharged and ended his service.

Archie Aitcheson took advantage of the the G.I. Bill and took a loan to buy a house. He settled down and made a family with his wife; they had two boys and one girl, who are now a teacher, pastor, and social worker. Mr. Aitcheson worked jobs that did not offer much pay, but he was committed to providing for his family. He eventually worked in a tool company, as a subcontractor in a flooring company, and as the Superintendent of Buildings and Maintenance for the Watertown, Connecticut Board of Education, finally retiring in 1989. Aitcheson remains an active member of his community by speaking at schools and churches, participating in bowling, being President of the Little League, serving as deacon at his church, and leading an ex POW support group. He is a model of how we should interact in our communities, and how we must "get along with other people." His story reflects the way in which serving in the military impacts so many lives, in positive and negative ways. Mr. Aitcheson endured trials that many of

us will never have to face, and his story serves to inspire the next generation of Americans to be courageous, kind, and resilient in times of hardship.