

Memories of Wayne E. Downing

Wayne Downing born 1919, of Thousand Oaks, served as an Army pilot during World War II.

Downing had enlisted in the Army Air Corps in the summer of 1941 after finishing his third year at the University of Denver.

He was sent to Fort Logan, Colorado as an aviation cadet and then to the San Antonio Cadet Center in Texas, where he completed his initial cadet training.

The Pearl Harbor attack came when Downing was on a weekend pass with friends. "It was a Sunday morning and a cadet came up and yelled, "Report to your base," Downing recalled. "We got back, lined up in formation behind the commissary and were told to put our civilian clothes in a box and send them home. They told us we were at war and that we wouldn't need them anymore."

Soon after, Downing was sent to the Spartan School of Aeronautics in Tulsa, Oklahoma for primary flying school and to Goodfellow Field in Texas, where he completed basic flying school. He completed advanced flying school at Moore Field in Texas.

By the fall of 1942, Downing was combat ready as a member of the 85th Bomb Group Dive. "We were told we were going to San Diego to get ready to be sent to the war in the Pacific," he said. "We stopped in Louisiana and by the next day, we had been told that there was no longer a need for dive bombers in the Army. Our group no longer existed."

By February 1943, Downing was on his way to war, and this time it was for real. He was to be a member of the 8th Air Force, 67th Reconnaissance Group, 2911th Bomb Squadron. "We flew C-54s over," he said. "We went from Tennessee to Maine to Goose Bay to Greenland, Iceland and then England."

By October 1943, Lt. Downing had been transferred to the 9th Air Force, 416th Bomb Group, 668 Bomb Squadron.

While training in England, Downing heard about a dance hosted by American Army nurses. He went and met Norma, a nurse with the 298th General Hospital who was beginning her Army career in England. The two began dating, but the war was getting closer.

"We knew eventually we were going to invade," Downing said of the D-Day attacks. "We just didn't know exactly when until the night before."

Downing and his crew were given orders to paint black and white stripes on their plane to help the Allied forces recognize friendly aircraft and avoid being shot down by their own men.

On June 6, 1944, Downing flew behind the front lines in France and bombed the German replacement troops making their way to the coast. Each day for a week, he and his crew flew the same mission trying to stop as many Germans as possible and to lessen the amount of ammunition they had available.

Norma also played a role in the D-Day attacks. Three weeks after the invasion, Norma landed on Utah Beach to recover the wounded and treat them in the makeshift hospital made from tents.

By October 1944, Downing had flown 65 successful missions and was given the opportunity to go home. "I decided to stay," he said. "I wanted to fly a P-38 and thought I would stay to have my shot at that." But first he had one thing left to take care of. He travelled to Cherbourg, France, where Norma and the rest of the 298th had taken over a German hospital. The two were married soon after he arrived.

They had two ceremonies. The first was in the mayor's office at 11 a.m. It was a ceremony that fulfilled France's requirements. The second was with an American chaplain in the living room of the chateau where the nurses had their quarters.

Downing never got the chance to fly a P-38. Instead he was assigned to an A-26 and flew in 21 more missions over France, Germany, and into Czechoslovakia. On March 3, he flew his 86th and final mission.

When the war in Europe ended in May 1945, both Downing and his new wife were sent home. Norma was discharged soon after. Downing decided to remain in what was soon to become the Air Force.

After returning to the United States, Downing enrolled in the University of Minnesota, where he completed his degree in engineering. In the summer of 1950, he received orders to report for active duty flying a B-50 Superfortress in the Korean War. From 1954 through 1963, he flew missions from the United States to England and to Guam as part of the Cold War efforts.

He retired from the Air Force in 1963. He enrolled in the University of Maine that year and completed his Master's degree in Mathematics. He worked as a math teacher for 20 years and retired in 1985.

On September 9th - 12th, 2009, Mr. Downing attended the 416th Bomb Group reunion in Branson, Missouri. Thank you, Mr. and Mrs. Downing for your unselfish contributions to our country and helping the US Army to return home victorious.

