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Princeton Union-Eagle

World War II vet piloted bomber in Europe

By Joel Stottrup

Larry Edstrom doesn't golf anymore after finding out not long ago his legs were not as sturdy as he would like for the sport. And he has stopped fishing.

But you should still find him keeping a garden at his Princeton residence this summer. He was, after all, known for growing great tomatoes in Onamia where he lived from 1970 until last fall when he moved to Princeton.

While the 81-year-old Edstrom is not unlike many his age in slowing down a bit, he is also among a special group that is dwindling, that of World War II military veterans.

He is also in a class who were in combat during that war. Edstrom is a former pilot who flew combat missions for the U.S. Army Air Corps in Europe during the war, including over Bastogne, France, during the famous Battle of the Bulge.

Edstrom grew up in North Branch as one of nine children and his father was an engineer at a steam-powered flour mill in that town.

Edstrom knew from age four or five, he said, that he wanted to fly for a living.

Among those who inspired him to do so was a man named Ray LeMoon from Spring Lake. Edstrom, as a young boy, would watch LeMoon land his yellow biplane in a 150-acre pasture almost directly across the road from the Edstrom place.

But even more exciting were the Northwest Airline C-47 passenger planes heading for Wold Chamberlain Airport in the Twin Cities that would occasionally land in the same pasture, Edstrom recalled. He explained that it happened during fog or other poor-flying weather.

Flying planes and driving a Greyhound bus were actually his two life's ambitions, he said, and he achieved both. He said he liked the looks of the uniforms of the Greyhound bus drivers that included leather leggings back when he was a child, and liked the big buses that would go to faraway places, like the planes he saw.

But his first big job out of high school was delivering coal and firewood in Minneapolis for the E.W. Wylie Co. He said he lied about his age being 21 in order to get the driving position. Two years later when he sought a job driving at Greyhound, he figured he couldn't lie about his age to a company like that. Since

he was only 20 he spent the next few months, until he became 21, going on runs with Greyhound drivers.

But his early career with Greyhound was cut short when he was drafted into the army on July 1, 1942.

Instead of being picked for the Army Air Corps as he would have liked after his basic training at Camp Crowder, Mo., the army sent him to train at the same base for the signal corps, as recommended by the tests he took.

The training consisted of learning to translate morse code for eight hours each day. It was something that would "drive you crazy," said Edstrom.

After three weeks, he went to the personnel department and asked if there wasn't something better. "I didn't see a lot of future, being up in the front lines with one of those hand-held radios with a crank," he said.

The answer he got made him the "happiest guy," he remembered. They told him the Army Air Corps was giving exams for cadet flying school.

Edstrom went through the interview and took tests for four to six weeks and on Dec. 25, 1942, was appointed a cadet in the Army Air Corps.

Nearly a year later on Nov. 3, 1943, after taking three types of pilot training in California and a fourth in Yuma, Ariz., he received his wings, signifying he was a pilot, and also became a second lieutenant. It was "pinks and greens," he said, smiling at the memory of his new uniform that had pink trousers and a pink shirt and a green blouse.

First duty

His first duty station was at Mather Field in Sacramento, where he trained on B-25 bombers. Next he went to Morris Field, in Charlotte, N.C., to become combat ready with the two-engine bomber called the A-20. After that it was to Hunter Field in Savannah, Ga., to be among a group flying new A-20s to England for replacement aircraft. It took three weeks to get over because there were stops in Maine, Labrador, Greenland, Iceland and Scotland.

After landing in Scotland he went to Stone Field in central England and was assigned to the 416th Bomb Group.

When he went to his first combat duty station at Melun, France, near Paris, he was placed with an A-26, a more powerful plane with a bigger bomb load than the A-20s.

The A-26 crew consisted of just a pilot and a gunner. Besides holding bombs, the plane had 16 forward-firing, 50-caliber machine guns.

He flew out of Melun to various points in Europe from August 1944 to the spring of 1945.

The normal routine on the missions was to drop bombs at 12,000 to 15,000 feet and then drop low to fire the machine guns at communication stations, encampments, railroad bridges and other targets.

There was one rule that he said was always important for the pilots in his group to follow when flying in formation over enemy territory. The pilots had learned that when the big German 88 caliber antiaircraft guns were active, it would take the antiaircraft gunner eight to nine seconds to determine the altitude and range and four to five seconds for the projectile to reach the altitude of the plane sighted in, Edstrom explained.

So in order to evade the flak from the exploding projectiles, every 10 to 12 seconds the pilots would change their course by 30 degrees. If it worked, they would see the flak exploding harmlessly off to the side, he explained.

Edstrom flew 27 missions before leaving Europe and he called the flying generally “fun.”

But there was one mission that wasn't. He said he can't remember if it was his fourth or fifth that he flew over Bastogne when the Battle of the Bulge was raging.

In mid-December of 1944 the Germans made a surprise counterattack on the Allies in the Ardennes and ended up encircling Bastogne. The Allies holding the city were facing great odds, hoping for air support to come through.

But in the few days before Christmas of 1944 the weather was misty and overcast and so the bombers could not pick out targets to fly missions. Then the weather began clearing on Christmas Eve and Edstrom explains what the pilots were told.

“They called it max effort,” he said, telling how the call went out for “every plane available to move into the air” and for the bombers to carry all the bombs they could and to hit “anything you could.”

The Battle of the Bulge raged until mid-January of 1945. The Germans were unsuccessful in their goal but had inflicted heavy casualties among the Allies there.

Edstrom and his gunner almost got hit, too, when they were on their mission over Bastogne on Dec. 19, 1944. It was a clear day and his bomber group was flying in the afternoon.

“We were so close to being out of enemy territory and the flight leader kind of relaxed,” Edstrom recalled. That meant that instead of continuing to lead in the changing of course 30 degrees every 10 to 12 seconds, the group just kept flying straight, Edstrom said.

“All of a sudden, all hell broke loose,” he said. “It just rained shrapnel over my plane.” Edstrom remembers the sound of the fragmented metal from the antiaircraft projectile ripping through the metal of his aircraft.

The flak broke the windshield and the left side window of the cockpit, and punctured a gas tank. Edstrom said he was bleeding from his face, forehead and hands.

“By now I was assessing myself,” he remembers. “I've got blood and all that crap all over myself. I'm assessing the instruments to see if they're working.”

Edstrom recalled that his injuries were more from the flying pieces of glass than

from flying flak. "I was very fortunate," he said.

Edstrom said he called back to his gunner, yelling, "Paul, are you OK?" and did not get an answer. "I thought, 'Oh ____.'"

To Edstrom's relief, the gunner crawled up to the front and was all right, though he was "white as a sheet," Edstrom remembers.

There had been damage to the aircraft from flak hitting it at other times but nothing like in that one mission during the Battle of the Bulge, he said. It was the one that got him the Purple Heart. But he said he most values his air medal with four clusters signifying the number of his missions.

After Germany surrendered in June 1945, he received orders to begin preparing for combat in the South Pacific as Japan did not surrender until August that year. But before Edstrom could begin carrying out plans to pick up new planes in California and head for the South Pacific, victory over Japan came.

Instead he went to South Carolina and was given a 30-day leave for home and that was extended another 15 days. After that, he marked time for about four weeks in South Carolina and then was given the choice to be discharged or sign up for 18 more months.

Edstrom remembers standing in line and waiting to give his answer and after hearing the man in front of him choose discharge, Edstrom did the same.

The Air Force was born as a separate branch after World War II and he stayed in the Air Force Reserve, flying planes regularly for training. During his time away from training he first drove for Greyhound until mid-1947 and then went back to work for Wylie until 1952.

All during the time he had been discharged from active duty, he said, he regretted he had ever done so. He had tried to get back in and in March 1952 was successful, going first to Marianna, Fla., for a pilot refresher course. By then he had been married for two years to his wife, Betty, whom he met while in a boat on Mille Lacs Lake.

For a time he trained pilots bound for the Korean War and after that was at many stations across the states, Labrador and Morocco.

Edstrom finally retired from the Air Force on June 1, 1970. His time served, between the Air Force and Army Air Corps, was 17 years and 10 months.

Edstrom said he considers himself fortunate that he was not in the infantry in the war, having to see the faces of the enemy during engagement. The most he ever saw of an enemy during his attacks, he said, was someone running, but never saw their face.

"You just do your damndest to get the bombs to do what you want them to do," he said about the job that war required.

He added that when he thinks of the American soldiers who fought in Vietnam, Korea and now in Afghanistan that it breaks his heart because most of them have wives and kids at home, explaining that was not his case when he was in World

War II.

He said he also finds it difficult to understand how people could carry out the atrocities that have been committed in war. He gave the example of Japanese soldiers killing Allied soldiers when they could no longer walk during the infamous Bataan death march in the Philippines. He couldn't understand, either, he said, the thousands of Japanese kamikaze pilots who went on suicide missions during World War II, nor the suicide bombers in the Middle East today.

"How does God feel about that?" Edstrom asked. "I'm not deeply religious but I believe in God and I pray. How can people carry out suicide bombings and be out to kill just anybody?"

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