

A MOMENT OF VALOR

A look at heroic actions under tragic circumstances.

by Sonny Hays-Eberts

One could walk past Don Carney and not realize the full significance of the pins displayed on his veteran's cap. The Lieutenant Colonel and squadron insignia of a devil tossing bombs from the sky make it easy to realize this man was involved in the air war. The tiny caterpillar and single-winged boot do not lend themselves to easy explanations. Those who read the symbology of war know these simple items indicate a man who parachuted from an aircraft (Caterpillar Club, founded by the Irwin Parachute Co.), and who survived behind enemy lines and returned safely (Order of the Winged Boot, from the British RAF).

I was contacted by Don's wife, who read the previous issue of *Groundwaters* and responded to my request for veterans to interview. I met Don at his house in Eugene a short time later, and he recounted some of his stories and shared his photos and memorabilia with me.

He was a Lieutenant and co-pilot on a B-17 when he graduated from training and was assigned to the 15th Air Force, 483rd Bomber Group (H), 815th Bomb Squadron. His crew flew a new B-17(G) from the U.S. to North Africa and on to Italy, where they joined the unit in Steperone, Italy in 1944. They would not fly that plane in combat; instead they were assigned to the oldest plane, number 029. One crew chief would later inform them it was known as *Miss Behavin'*.

His first mission began on 11 Nov., 1944. Once takeoff was complete and the formation over the Adriatic, gunners test-fired weapons to ensure everything was in working order. This was where *Miss Behavin'* demonstrated the derivation of her name. The twin .50 caliber machine guns in the ball turret would not fire. Three crew members worked on the guns until the bomber reached 15,000 feet, at which time they ceased effort and considered the weapons non-functional. The radio room began to leak oxygen. Not content to illustrate her *nom de plume* so simply, the craft then proceeded to lose oil pressure on the #4 engine as the craft entered Austria.

Unable to keep speed with the formation and lacking support from underneath the plane, the pilot made the decision to return to base. He instructed the temporary bombardier (Toggelier) to jettison the bombs over the ocean before returning. *Miss Behavin'* would have none of that, as one of the bombs caught up on the hooks and was smashed by the ordnance dropped from above. The Toggelier now recognized his serious error - he had forgotten to disarm the bombs. Now *Miss Behavin'* was flying on three engines, with an open bomb bay, and a live 500-pound bomb dangling from a single hook.

When they were contacted by the ground, they were instructed to disarm the bomb in order to land. This

involved having the pilot hold a crew member upside down, over the open bay, while he turned the fuse in the proper direction. Turning the fuse in the wrong direction would cause the bomb to explode. Amazingly, the Pilot and Tail Gunner (who later received the Distinguished Flying Cross for this act) managed to disarm the bomb.

As they were disarming the bomb, the #3 engine failed. Don, the Co-pilot, could not adjust the trim tabs from his position and it took all his strength to keep the aircraft from turning over while the bomb was disarmed. The pilot returned to relieve Don just as his arms were giving out from the strain of piloting the craft by himself for this lengthy period.

With the inactivated bomb dangling and the plane unstable from the engine failures, the crew attempted to land. They managed to touch down, and careened across the runway, bounced off steel matting and finally came to rest off the temporary runway. The plane was on fire, and the crew quickly evacuated and warned off the emergency personnel. As they made their way to safety, the load exploded, destroying the craft and hurling landing gear and pieces of the plane several hundred yards from the crash site.

Don Carney would go on to fly a total of 15 air missions over Europe, including being shot down and parachuting behind Soviet lines. He would later return to service during the Korean conflict and serve until Viet Nam, reaching the rank of Lt. Colonel. He was awarded the Air Medal/OLC (with Oak Leaf Cluster) for his actions in World War II.

Don has collected the notes of his experiences and donated them to the Smithsonian, and has also used some of those experiences as the basis for creative writing. His description of "Gaining Altitude" is almost poetic, until one realizes this description is but a brief moment before carnage ensues.

Don is also quite willing to share his experience with local schools and youth groups, helping them understand what was involved in air combat during WWII. A friend of his is willing to discuss his experiences during the Holocaust, as well.

I am saddened to say that very few people take him or his friend up on their generous offers. They are living links to a historical period that will soon be inaccessible. I would encourage any teacher or youth mentor to contact Don to arrange for him to share about that time. He can provide tangible experience far beyond any book or movie. To contact Lt. Col. Carney, call or email *Groundwaters* and the request will be relayed to him.

Veterans meet at Fern Ridge Library on the 2nd and 4th Tuesdays of the month, at 10 a.m. All veterans are welcome.