

Taking flight

Sztanyo shares experience of WWII and Honor Flight

By Sherry Barnum

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PRESCOTT — Emotions ran high for Emil Sztanyo, 92, of Prescott as he stepped off the flight in Washington, D.C., and onto the World War II memorial with other World War II veterans to watch the changing of guard.

Emil, a World War II veteran, joined the Army Air Force in 1941 at 19 years old and was a night fighter pilot.

“He left for service a month and a day after we got married,” his wife Iris said. “It was hard not to worry about him while he was gone, but I stayed busy working.”

According to his son, Mark, many lives come and go and pass without having impact, but in a little over two years, three major events occurred during the war because of Emil Sztanyo.

“I have always had an interest in learning about my father’s missions and activities during the war, but he didn’t always have a willingness to talk about it,” Mark said. “In fact it was years afterward, when I was a family man and the time and separation from war made it possible for him to share. I sat down with him a number of times to interview and document

his role. It was always something I felt worth-while.”

Mark said he thinks most would conclude that just becoming a fighter pilot in the war was a significant achievement. But what really stands out in his mind was rising to become a night fighter pilot.

“The numbers are staggering. More than 91,000 World War II aviators were trained, yet only 450 would become night fighters,” Mark said. “The air war was conducted during day VFR (meaning good weather) and flying at night at low level with weather was very, very dangerous. Engaging the enemy at night even more so.”

“My respect for what they did, and in particular what Emil did, climbed 10-fold when as a Delta Air Lines captain, I was able to stick my nose up in the Bristol Beaufighter’s cockpit that had been restored and located at the Wright Patterson Air Force Museum,” he said. “Flying night IFR (instrument flight tools) in that limited bird was near a death mission — and the toll was high. But Captain A. Emil Sztanyo survived it and came back home.”

Mark said after years of distance and many interviews he learned what he believed to be Emil’s top three missions during the



Photos courtesy of Mark Sztanyo

Above, Emil Sztanyo looks out over Arlington National Cemetery. Right, Emil’s crash with the Beaufighter that he walked away from with only a gashed arm.



war.

The first mission: protect the president.

“As the World War II moved at a frantic pace, Allied leaders were pressed to find an answer and a response to the rapidly overtaking Nazi machine,” he said. “Our president, Franklin D. Roosevelt, was now engaged and committed. Coordination, however, was essential with the other Allied nations, and the communication grid simply wasn’t strong enough, which necessitated face-to-face meetings. In fact I think you would be surprised to learn that the Big Four nations met more often than one would first think.”

“On Jan. 14, 1943, there was to be another such clandestine meeting in Casablanca. The timing for this big event was just months after the famed 415th Night Fighter Squadron arrived in North Africa and received their assigned aircraft, the Bristol Beaufighter,” he said. “The president liked to ‘fly under the radar’ and travel in understated ways. The plan was hatched that he would be transported to this meeting on a lone, unescorted, small and unassuming Navy frigate. While our intel on the enemy’s naval assets in this region was quite good, this Navy frigate would steer clear of any confrontation and sail

unobtrusively into port. Overhead the air war was different.”

Mark said random enemy intruders and even full flights of enemy aircraft could be encountered.

“In keeping with the low profile plan, a flight of night fighters swarming over the frigate was considered to be way too obvious and a telltale and give away that something important was down below. Still, the ‘eyes’ of the onboard radar from the Beau and the firepower to engage were needed — just in case,” Mark said. “So the 415th was tasked and Captain A. Emil Sztanyo was chosen.”

According to Mark, the mission was a long six-hour sortie and ran right up against the duration limit of the aircraft, and the selection of the youngest pilot in the 415th probably raised some eyebrows and even caused a second thought or two.

“But tonight Emil was chosen, and he would rise to perform one of his most significant missions during the entire war — protect the president, at all costs,” he said.

“We all know that leaders occasionally step up to the plate. Sometimes, during the times and challenges leaders demonstrate great courage,” he said. “This meeting was an example — from the location, to the transport to the issues on the table —

our leaders stepped up.”

“Churchill, Roosevelt, De Gaulle and Stalin were the usual characters,” Mark said. “Stalin was a no-show but the meeting was too important to cancel, so it went forward and interestingly enough, though the war was frankly quite grim and victory was far from certain, they met to continue to prosecute the war but with great forward thinking organize the aftermath.”

“They talked about the peace and a rebuilding Europe. What came out of meetings such as this is just how the peace would be won and maintained,” he said. “Though far from perfect, their plans for postwar Europe have kept the world from war for more than 69 years.”

“The frigate looked like a toy boat on the sea below. By itself it also looked vulnerable, and Emil said the night sky was smooth and for hours there was no trace of enemy activity,” Mark said. “None until this moment when sheer terror occurred in a moment. First, two blips on the radar, then a visual over the nose.”

“Two Messerschmitt intruders flying the coast down low — oh no! Had they been tipped off? Do they know who is on that little vulnerable boat? It wasn’t their guns that concerned Emil, but if they were fitted with a bomb or a drop torpedo then they could sink the frigate,” Mark said.

“Further, if they locate their target and then radio for support, Emil’s Beau could be quickly overwhelmed. All these thoughts in mere seconds, and he turned to engage.”

“Then — as quick as it presented — the threat was gone,” he said. “The Messerschmitt continued on the coastline and out of sight, apparently oblivious to what and who was sailing unescorted below. The German intruders were not seen again. Emil emitted a big sigh, because he knew he had dodged a very big bullet.”

Mark said a few more quiet hours had passed, and the frigate was sailing into port. The transport was finishing and Emil’s mission was now complete. the

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Photo courtesy of Mark Sztanyo

Emil Sztanyo in flying gear.

Meritorious honor

By Mark Sztanyo

Volunteer Guardian for Mid-Michigan Honor Flight

Allow me to ask you a rhetorical question. But before I do, a couple of caveats: I believe that there are people in our generation and younger that have earned their high place on the ladder. And I sincerely believe that many deserve accolades for their actions and character, and I truly wish all deserving (including veterans from any conflict) would experience an outpouring of honor. Yet, as I lay on my pillow after this amazing day, the question on my mind is what follows:

What have you done in your life of extraordinary note?

What thing have you done that would illicit others showering you with gratefulness? In other words what have you done, if anything, that would qualify as meritorious? Actions so big or great that would prompt a police honorary escort for 60 miles? How about actions that motivate hundreds of volunteers working to make your every moment wonderful? What have you done that may merit not one or two, but a total of seven overpasses occupied with fire trucks in full light array and at full salute as you are escorted down the interstate? Since living and breathing around airports for the past 45 years, I have witnessed twice what I now ask. What would you have

had to do to call into action the airport’s fire department for the most honored dual-truck water cannon salute as your aircraft taxis underneath? Further, what would you have accomplished in order to warrant special prime parking of your bus motorcade at Dulles International Airport that only the most prestigious ever receive?

When you read this next one please pause to consider where it happened. What have you done that would give you an honorary multi-police car escort in downtown Washington, D.C., during noon rush hour, directing your convoy of buses through red lights and around slowed traffic and pausing pedestrians (like only a few in D.C. ever experience) simply to get an amazing city tour?

And now on the human side; what would convince people, many, many people, to take time out of their day to greet you in a receiving line that appeared to wrap around the airport with hugging, handshaking and grateful greeters of all ages getting very personal and thanking you over and over again? Beyond that, what have you done that would make countless impromptu random strangers, and random groups of strangers, in public parks interrupt their day and shake your hand, telling you what a difference you made and thanking you for it?

Lastly, what could you have possibly done to convince the mighty

Amway Corporation to give you carte blanche use of their prized private airplane hangar and then arrange a welcoming reception with literally hundreds of invitees being topped off by flying a vintage B-17 bomber to that same hangar for a static display, all for you?

These are just a few of the many extraordinary acts that did happen on this day to an extraordinary group of people, World War II vets who were on the inaugural Mid-Michigan Honor Flight to Washington, D.C. And now you finally know the rest of the story. What prompted this amazing amount of outpouring of honor, respect and gratefulness from all generations? Well, it had to be something big. And it sure was! The answer lies with those present who represented the “greatest generation” that rose successfully for one of our nation’s most challenging times. World War II veterans!

Everyone knows a World War II vet, and we all tend to share a natural view of respect about this generation. And natural is the somewhat surprising but operative word here. When you are on the receiving side of this outpouring shown toward a World War II vet, you realize that the givers of this honor (across all generational barriers) are being completely natural. They share honor, respect and gratitude and with that a beautiful and a completely natural thing happens.



Photo courtesy of Mark Sztanyo

Emil Sztanyo poses with his son, Mark, during their Mid-Michigan Honor Flight trip.

This generation of vets without question did a big and great thing for other Americans. And if you do a great thing for others, you can rest assured others will recognize it, naturally. That is the experience the vets received in D.C., and I was lucky enough by proxy to see it.

Honor Flights are organized by this nonprofit with all volunteer help. And the Mid-Michigan Honor Flight hub is led by an exquisite team. These flights are designed to be completely free for the vet yet shower them with an experience of lasting honor and respect.

That, in a nutshell, is what hap-

pened this June 24th, 2014. What a flight! What a day! And what an amazing group of World War II vets to serve. My faith in country has been completely renewed, all because I saw the younger generation naturally giving up honor and respect to those who truly deserve it, our World War II vets!

So back to the beginning, how would I answer my own question of: “What comparable thing have I done that would bring about this incredible outpouring of honor and respect gracefully received by these World War II vets?”

Nothing! All the more reason why I stand and salute!

Sztanyo: Veteran provided air protection for president, UN

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President arrived safely. The meetings took place for over a week. And their plan of a secretive transport had worked.

“It takes many hands quietly and behind the scenes to pull off the effort of this magnitude that the U.S. military did during World War II,” Mark said. “In fact, I believe that is the real story of the war. One nation unified and rising to achieve on all accounts an historic epic scale. This night, one farm boy from Turner rose up and did his part, and in so doing became a life-long member of the ‘greatest generation.’”

The second mission: fly the valley (the dreaded Liri Valley that is!).

“In late 1943 and early 1944, there was a major ground war heating up in the ‘soft underbelly’ which was designated as Italy and Southern France,” Mark said. “The famed invasion took place at beaches of Salerno, and progress went swiftly up to Anzio, bogged down and became deadlocked at the infamous Gustav Line (drawn by the Nazis as a place to retreat no further and ran east-west across the Italian peninsula just south of the Monte Cassino).”

According to Mark, the mountaintop monastery of Monte Cassino served as the doorkeeper to the famous Liri Valley which was home for the Appian Way (the ancient most passable way from the south to Rome), and this military stalemate happened precisely at the same time (March of 1944) as the arrival of the 415th Night Fighter Squadron at Pomigliano.

“Advancing airbase homes had been happening in rapid succession for the 415th, until now,” he said. “Every few days to a few weeks they usually were picking up gear and repositioning north ever since arriving in June of 1943 in North Africa.”

“On March 25, 1944, they arrived at Pomigliano in the eastern shadow of Mount Vesuvius adjacent to the southern border of Naples,” Mark said. “They would be hunkered down here until June 11, 1944. Little did he know this, but many of the

most memorable events of Emil’s wartime experience would happen here — everything from dodging the erupting volcano’s spewing ash, to heavy air fighting, to an emergency radar-directed approach and successful landing in dense fog, and additionally where Emil incurred a takeoff accident flying an out-of-rig non-air-worthy Beaufighter.”

“Every night’s mission involved flying cover for this assembled massive fifth army led by General Clark. Alongside they were joined by the Free French, Poles, and Canadian forces,” Mark said. “Intruders and air confrontations were frequent, and the Germans were defending this Gustav Line with everything they had, and their 10th Army was led by Kesselring, who had to be commended for his uncanny ability to restock and resupply his army when the important lines of communications like rail and bridges had all been taken out by the Yanks.”

Mark said at Monte Cassino (which led into the Liri Valley to the north towards Rome) the battle screeched to a complete halt for a number of difficult reasons, one of these reasons being weather. Rain and cold created significant problems in moving Clark’s army, and between mud and bad aerial weather for aerial support the march was completely at a standstill.

“If you could visit or see pictures of this valley you could quickly understand how elevated mountainside positions by the Nazis would be incredibly difficult to get by and or take out,” Mark said. “And there lies the second major reason for the stalemate — large enemy gun installations ensconced in the rocky mountainsides that seemed impenetrable. Many attacks had been conducted and all with large casualties and all with the same result, they were turned back — the Gustav Line was firm! What must be done?”

Mark said hoping to break stalemate at Monte Cassino, the Allies landed on the coast of Italy at Nettuno and found that the place was undefended.

And during the battle of Anzio, which lasted four months, one side being supplied by sea and the other by

land through Rome, the night fighters were settling in and flying their usual overhead protective sorties out of Pomigliano.

“As such, this is when fate and necessity crisscrossed and fell on Emil,” Mark said. “A team of military planners, including some supporting generals, concluded they needed far better reconnaissance to break this stalemate. They were planning another ground assault but wanting better intel so some of the big Nazi gun installation could be reduced by a major early air strike.”

“The generals wanted to fly the valley and mark these specific locations themselves — it was that important,” he said. “So that is what brought them to visit where much of the 12th Air Force was now stationed at Pomigliano, including the infamous 415th Night Fighter Squadron.”

Mark said Emil was out flying a sortie and war activity didn’t stop as he took hits of ack ack (antiaircraft fire), which knocked out one of his Beau’s engines.

“So as he returned to land at Pomigliano with the night fighter crippling back to base on one engine, his flight caught the generals eyes,” he said. “I don’t know exactly how the conversation went with the squadron commander but it is likely it went something like this — ‘We need a night fighter for a special mission. Who is the pilot of that Beau that just landed with aircraft and engine damage?’ That’s Captain Sztanyo, replied the squadron commander. ‘Is he any good?’ the generals asked. ‘He is a fine and capable night fighter’ came the reply. ‘We’d like to talk to him.’ And so it went where fate and the necessity of war touched Emil again. Emil was asked to fly his most dangerous mission of his wartime career.”

Why did he readily accept? Well, the generals made it clear that two of them wanted to ride along, and the ground stalemate was absolutely no secret but was on everybody’s mind. The longer the army was bogged down the more it was endangered. So Emil knew the gravity and the generals wanting to risk their own lives accepted it. He instinctively knew that this was big, according to Mark.

“Later in the briefing, he



Photo courtesy of Mark Sztanyo

Emil Sztanyo stands in front of the WWII memorial and points to where he was stationed.

would learn that these two generals would somehow squeeze into his craft (built for two) and ask him to fly in such a way as to force the Germans heavy guns to come out and ‘play.’ By doing so they hoped to pinpoint the locations so that they could once and for all take them out,” Mark said. “Loaded up, he took off and (was) so overweight that he clipped the border fence at the end of the strip.”

Mark said climbing, Emil flew in the still night air. Pass number one, and the “whispering widowmaker” slipped through the valley announcing its presence but only attracting a smattering of enemy fire and none of the big guns.

“Before pass number two, a little prayer was said, and now near red line the whispering widowmaker was whispering no more. It was not flying but dancing through the sky in what might have been beautiful had it not been so deadly,” Mark said. “Turning and twisting he flew the Beau through the valley that was totally on fire. Every gunner station was manned and every gun was blazing at the target — one lowly night intruder carrying precious cargo of wartime intelligence.”

“Blasts rocked the ship; the blood pressure couldn’t get any higher. The big guns lit up, but fortunately the plan for staying low prevented them from zeroing in. Then just ahead the dark end of the gauntlet, and soon the Beau was climbing,” Mark said. “Emil’s Beau along with the important passengers were unscathed but not unshaken. Relieved from what easily could have been the end, he turned to the generals and asked a question that he hoped he’d knew the answer to: ‘Want to try ‘er again?’ Their quick reply, ‘No, no, I think we’ve seen enough.’”

“Emil was willing to make another pass. How crazy is that? Chalk it up to bravery of the extraordinary kind. Heck, the first two passes bordered on suicidal. Not many would even ask,” Mark said. “Fortunately, the generals had

seen enough and had taken good notes. The next few days the famed bombing and ground pounding north of Anzio, to break the Germans Gustav Line, began and it was ultimately successful as the breakout was on. Within a few days the Allies march into a joyous and liberated Rome.”

The third mission: the new United Nations.

“As the European theater was seeing major Allied advancements, Captain Sztanyo was relieved of duty to return home for training,” Mark said. “He was assigned to Fresno’s Hammer Field where he was training on the famed Northrop P-61 Black Widow. This was the first American-made night fighter, and the plan was for Captain Sztanyo to lead the newly created 450th Squadron of Black Widows to the Pacific Theater where the war was in full swing.”

“Coincidentally, while this training was going on there was a big event scheduled to happen in nearby San Francisco. Since World War I and now this current war a new world order was being formed. A world that had greater needs for cooperation and communication,” Mark said. “The earlier League of Nations grew out of this need. Now in its waning usefulness, 50 of the League’s nations were to convene in San Francisco to draft a new charter and create a new organization.”

From this meeting the United Nations was born and today, the UN brings about a mixed set of feelings and opinions, but no one questioned its importance and need at this historic time. So April 25, 1945, the conference would begin.

According to Mark, the location of the meeting on the West Coast may have been a convenient, nice site, but the Japanese forces made the coastal region anxious.

“There were rumors of an impending attack, and a few incidents with Japanese fighters on the coast made people nervous,” Mark said. “Security for this meeting had to be tight and must be multi-faceted.

While there were ample ground forces to be re-assigned for ground and sea protection, the air was a concern. In particular was the worry of stealthy nighttime intruder fighters getting through the perimeter, and a nighttime protective cap must be organized and flown. Who should lead this mission? As Captain Sztanyo was now a combat veteran, and in training to be a squadron commander, he became the choice to be mission commander for the air protection.”

Mark said all meetings came off without major incident and/or any enemy activity. It would seem that the Japanese had their hands full being spread so thin to maintain order in their newly occupied islands and territories. Whatever the reason, the air protection was a complete success and Captain Sztanyo received a letter of commendation.

“The meetings were held, the charter drafted and the United Nations were born,” Mark said. “Many, many post-war activities were run by and through the UN.

As bad as the war itself was, the rebuilding and re-unifying efforts were monumental. The UN became an essential tool for that historic effort.”

According to Emil, being a part of the Honor Flight was an amazing experience.

“And being able to share that experience with my son, Mark, was just amazing,” Emil said. “We had fire trucks and police escorts leading us everywhere we went.”

“It was just amazing how well it was operated,” he said. “You wouldn’t believe the crowds that were there to welcome us everywhere we went — it was just a great experience.”

According to his wife, Iris, he still shakes his head in disbelief.

“He’s been back for a couple days now and still wakes up every morning, shakes his head and says, ‘I can’t believe it, everything was so well-organized. That trip was just an amazing experience,’” she said. “It truly was a great experience for him to be a part of.”



Photo courtesy of Mark Sztanyo

Emil flying the Bristol Beaufighter taken from formation aircraft.

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