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By Eniko Jordan

## **Keeping the flyboys in the air**

What is a flyboy?

Flyboy is defined as a pilot or any male who commands an aircraft. Flyboys have also been known by such appellations as ace, airman, aeronaut, aviator, birdman, eagle, flier, skyman, hotshot, jet jockey and throttle jockey. Whatever you call them, Rockland resident Edwin Beitz spent his military career in North Africa and Italy taking care of airplanes so that their American pilots could stay in the air.

When Pearl Harbor was attacked on Dec. 7, 1941, Beitz was 19 years old and already in the service stationed at California's Oakland Airport Airfield in the Army Air Corps. "They sent me to school at Boeing," Beitz explained, and there he learned the aircraft maintenance and inspection skills that he would put to use in both his military and civilian careers.

By late 1942, Beitz was a member of the 301st Bombardment group in North Africa, and was busy working on B-17s, the workhorse of the Army Air Corps, also known as the "Flying Fortress." He and his crews inspected the planes before and after bombing missions, repairing damage, and ensuring the safety of the flight crews. He worked as a parts man, in technical services, as an airplane mechanic, and as a squadron inspector.

Beitz moved around to several duty stations in Algeria, beginning his service at Biskra Airfield, then moving on to Ain M'lila and Saint-Donat Airfields. Conditions were not ideal, especially at the beginning of America's involvement in the war.

Having the necessary materials, supplies, equipment and parts presented a continuous challenge. Often, the ground crews that kept the flyboys in the air just had to make do with what was available.

"Biskra was right on the verge of the Sahara," recalled Beitz. "We used to service (re-fuel) our airplanes by using five-gallon cans of gas. We would throw them up to a guy on the wing, and he would pour them in the in plane."

Beitz said an average a bombing mission would require about 1,200 gallons of fuel.

"Later as we got better supplies, we would put the gas into a barrel and then use a hand pump to pump it into the plane. By the time I got to Italy, we were getting gas in big trucks."

"It was quite an experience," reminisced Beitz. "When we moved out there we were in pup tents for two years. In Biskra we started getting some English rations shipped in for

us to eat. We called it Irish stew, but I never did see any meat in it. Sometimes we had steak and kidney pudding, and I never saw any meat in that either,” Beitz joked.

“We got bombed at Biskra,” he added, on a more serious note.

From Biskra, Beitz’s unit moved on to Ain M’lila Airfield, and then to Saint-Donat Airfield, both in Algeria. Sometimes they had to get creative while trying to keep the planes in their charge airworthy.

“The B-17 had air charger ducts and those things would crack and we would have to take them off. One day I went to see the sergeant from the base supply, and we took a jeep ride into Tunis,” Beitz recalled. “It was all bombed out, and there were holes everywhere. It was quite a ride. We got out to the salvage yard and they didn’t have a single serviceable duct, so we picked up six or seven that were cracked and took them back to Saint-Donat. The welder would cut the beat-up steel ducts into little strips, and then weld them back together,” he explained. “That’s the sort of thing we went through. But we just kept going at the job.”

From North Africa, Beitz finished out his overseas duty at the Foggia Airfield Complex in northern Italy. The Foggia Complex was a series of military airfields that played an important role in bombing campaigns over both Germany and Italy from 1943 to 1945.

“I’ll always remember one time when we were told to get every one of our airplanes ready to fly,” he said. “The next day we got them ready and loaded with bombs, and they took off. They should have been home around 4:30 in the afternoon, but they didn’t come home, and they didn’t come home. Finally, it was just about dark and we saw one airplane come straggling back, and then another. Out of 60 airplanes, only 15 came back,” he recalled, with a regretful shake of his head.

Beitz returned to the U.S. in August of 1944, to be trained on B-29 airplane in preparation for a stint of service in the Pacific Theatre. He was in Santa Rosa, California on VE Day. Beitz remembers reading about the end of the war in Europe in the newspapers.

“We just saw it in the papers that morning,” he said. “We were pretty excited about it, because it meant no more bombing missions and fighter missions and sending airplanes out.”

With VJ Day following on the heels of victory in Europe, Beitz never did have to go to the Pacific. His two brothers, one an Army Air Force top turret gunner fighting in the Pacific, and the other in the infantry in the European theater, both made it home safely as well.

Beitz was released from the military service in July 1945, at 23 years of age. “I got out on Wednesday, and met my wife on Sunday,” he commented. The 89-year-old Beitz and his wife, Eva, have been married for over 60 years and reside in Rockland.

After the war, Beitz maintained a close connection to his background in aeronautics. He opened a service station in Rockland, and was later recalled into the Air Force Reserve, working for Boeing in Seattle, and then working as an aircraft inspector as a civilian at Utah’s Hill Air Force Base.

He also worked on data analysis for the Minuteman missile and the Bomarc long-range anti-aircraft missile.

Looking back on the war after many years of civilian life, one particular story stays fresh in Edwin Beitz's memory.

"I remember one time when we sent our crews out. By then things were a little tame. Our crews came back, there was 45 or 50 planes, and they all came back with not one hole in them. Except for one plane," he recalled.

"There was one place on one plane, where a piece of shrapnel came in through the waist gunner's open window, and hit a guy right in the chest," Beitz continued. "There weren't even any holes in the plane, except for that one piece of shrapnel through the waist gunner window," he said. "I just couldn't imagine that this mission went so smooth, and not one airplane out of all of the group was touched. Except for that one."