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Capture Living History - Fred Bell, shot at but never shot down

By Carl Kelly

The following story is the second in a series for the Naples Sun Times, reporting on the experiences of a few of our local World War II (WWII) veterans. The Collier County Communications and Customer Relations Department is conducting interviews with veterans to create and collect audio and video taped oral histories and associated transcriptions of American WWII veterans.

In June of 1941 Fred Bell graduated from high school in Washington, D.C. and started working toward becoming a CPA. On Dec. 7, 1941 the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor and Fred Bell changed his plans.

Like many young American men at that time he enlisted in the military in response to Pearl Harbor. Some joined the Army, some the Navy. Bell joined the Army Air Corps.

Also, like many American dads at that time, Fred Bell's father willingly accepted his son's decision. "My father was on the *USS Texas* in WWI (World War I)," Bell explained. "He said, 'Son if that's what you want to do, go ahead.'"

So, Fred signed up to be a bombardier in the Air Corps. He passed the exam, "with flying colors. But when I got to flight school I got washed out because of my blood pressure. It wasn't real bad, but it was enough to knock me off becoming a bombardier. So they said I could still fly if I wanted to go to gunnery school and navigation." And he did.

Bell was first sent to Europe for about a year to serve as radio/gunner on B-25s and B-24s. Then, he was sent to the South Pacific as the navigator on a C-47, the military version of a DC-3.



Fred Bell displays some of his WWII medals and memorabilia from flying B-24s, B-25s, and C-47s.

In the course of 48 missions and over 1400 hours of flying time, none of Bell's planes were shot down. "We got shot at a lot," he noted, "but we never got hit. They cut a couple holes in the plane. I considered myself pretty lucky not to have been shot down. We had one crash. That's all. I should have written that book *God Is My Copilot*. I know he was on my side."

The crash came late in the war while Bell was navigator in a C-47. The crew was flying on a mission from New Guinea across the Coral Sea, as part of the effort to stop the Japanese in their push toward Australia. When they were nearing Australia they lost the starboard engine.

"It just went out on us," Bell recalled. "We started losing altitude. We had a lot of stuff on board and started throwing everything off to try to lighten the load. We were going down fast. The only thing we could do was circle, and we found an old remote airstrip. It was all grown up, so we decided to pancake in there and crashed.

"I got a piece of the fuselage in my side, but thank goodness we didn't catch on fire. I got my radio message out before we went down, so they came in and got us out of there.

"I had second thoughts about whether I wanted to go up again, but I had to get my missions in if I wanted to get home. So, 10 days later when I got out of the hospital I was back flying again. It had to be done. It was my job."

There were two other incidents Bell retold as he thought about the things that stood out in his memory. He commented on how strangely similar they are to one another. Both times he was gone from base on a mission when the enemy attacked his base, bombing and strafing. Both times his tent, his cot, and his footlocker were shot up.

"I'd have been gone if I'd been there," he said calmly. "But, I was on a mission. So, I lucked out."

Fred Bell served through all of WWII. "You were supposed to go home after so many hours, so many missions, but it just kept on," he said. "I don't know if they were short of guys, but it just kept on going on and on. Finally, they figured it was about time for me to go home and they sent me home."

Commenting on his service record, Bell said, "I did my job. We did our part." Then, he opened a silver case like that of a pocket watch, a piece of his memorabilia, the never-used compass from his parachute kit.