

John Vanderpoel

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John Vanderpoel's WWII memories

The following article comes from interviews with residents at the Concord Deaconess and has been put into a book titled "Memories of World War II."

I was in the reserves in the ROTC at Massachusetts Institute of Technology. When I went to flying school, I was a good student and was larger than average. The larger guys were sent to two engine school. After that I was put into an instructor role in pilot school, where we taught guys who had their wings but needed more. Early in 1941, I was called to active duty. I trained people in flying over water, night flying, bombing and navigation, and I was only 23 years old. They gave a lot of responsibility to us as very young men. Albany, Ga., Smyrna, Texas and El Paso were some of my stations until May 1944 when I was shipped to Guadalcanal.

Even though I was a squadron commander of 750 men, the brass above me kept putting me into instruction when I wanted to go to war. Because I had taught, I knew how to deal with emergencies. We always had rotten gas and engines to train people on (because they needed the good materials for the fighting forces) and I had dealt with 60 or 70 engines failing. Finally I started flying bombing runs out of the Admiralty Islands as we worked our way to the Philippines.

We lived under palm trees and the monkeys would throw coconuts at us. Conditions were pretty primitive in our tents. We had a beautiful landing strip surrounded by coral reefs, but it was narrow with strong winds. In the evening at 6:15 p.m. a movie would start, and last maybe until 8:15 p.m. We always took our helmets to the movies because at the end, the Japanese would flyover with their engines off, trying to beat radar and bomb us. We lost three planes one night, when a Japanese bomb hit an airplane already loaded with bombs for the morning run. It exploded and took out two other planes, including my favorite B-24.

I had to write 93 letters to mothers of killed pilots, though we did not have many losses in my immediate group. I thought I was going to die many times — I could see the enemy pilot's face when they would fly right through our formation of airplanes. We had no fighter plane escorts. Except one time, Charles Lindberg escorted us in flight. He was selling airplanes, but was the best gas conserver of all time. He taught people how to fine tune and run their engines. He shot down a Japanese plane on that trip.

When you flew with no fighter escort and the enemy flew right into your formation, you'd come home with engines out, bullet holes through the plane, people hurt, guys screaming from fright.

My plane was the first over Palau, a big island east of the Philippines. We were a reconnaissance flight sent to take pictures of targets before the Navy started the invasion. They told me to go in at 22,000 feet. But when I got there, I could not see anything because of the clouds. We had to come down to 9,000 feet before we came out of the clouds. Japanese Zeros came right up after us while I was taking the reconnaissance photos. We kept spiraling up to hide in the clouds. We left lots of pilots under the water there in that campaign. Tokyo Rose came on the radio later and said that the lone B-24 that came over in the afternoon had crashed. But it wasn't true — we all laughed. We used to listen to her show just for the music.

One night at the movies, all of a sudden the microphone came on and announced my wife had given birth to our second son. We had been married in September 1941 and we had our first child, Eric, the following August. I figured I had enough experience that I

would live through the war, so we wanted another child — the child whose birth was announced over the microphone on our island base. I came home in July 1945 on a boat with no escort and few guns when the USS Indianapolis was sunk on the way back from delivering the atomic bombs to the Enola Gay. If it had been sunk on the way over, the bombs would have been lost. Anyway, we spent 30 days zigzagging on the water to dodge Japanese submarines.

The war did not really change me — it made me older. I had so many blessings. A few days ago, I got news that one of my flying school buddies had died and it brought tears to my eyes. We had the best squadron — when people needed help, they always stole from my group.

Dick Krug is the director of Veteran Services for the town of Concord, and is located at 105 Everett St. He can be reached at 978-318-3038 or Dkrug@concordma.gov.