

64 YEARS AFTER PEARL HARBOR

Opinion by Bonnie Henry: More than any other event, World War II changed Tucson



Bill Ersthaler, back row, second from left, and the rest of his crew training at Davis-Monthan Field in Tucson in the fall of 1944.

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Ask any old-timer to name the singular event that changed Tucson like no other and all will give you a two-word answer: Pearl Harbor.

Before Dec. 7, 1941, Tucson was a cowtown of fewer than 40,000 souls. Burros still grazed at what was then called Davis-Monthan Field. Following the Japanese attack that ushered in World War II for America, more than \$3.5 million would be spent on improvements at D-M in 1942 alone.

During World War II, close to 12,000 airmen would flow through the base, which became a major training field for bombing crews. One of those men was my father, who met and married my mother here in the spring of '44.

He would be one of thousands to stay after the war, contributing to the baby boom — and Tucson's boom.

And then there were the guys who trained here, went home, and returned years later, to a town they hardly recognize.

Bill Ersthaler is one of them. Now living in the Green Valley area for the last three years, Ersthaler spent but three months training here in the fall of '44.

But his experiences mirror those of thousands of other guys who briefly turned Tucson into a military town.

A Detroit native, Ersthaler, 79, flew into the Tucson airport as a newly minted navigator in August of 1944.

"It was hotter than Hades," says Ersthaler, who bounced out to the base in a truck over what he called "a very bad road."

Here, he was quickly assigned to a crew of 10 men, training on B-24s.

As soon as the introductory handshakes were over, the crew started to fly. "They needed our services overseas," says Ersthaler.

Assigned to a two-story wooden barracks, the crew would get up early, eat breakfast, then head for their bomber.

"We would fly for six or seven hours all over New Mexico and Arizona," says Ersthaler. "We also flew over the bombing range in Yuma."

Finished with their duties by midafternoon, the men would clean up, then head for Downtown, usually in a borrowed car.

The Pioneer Hotel was one of their favorite haunts, says Ersthaler, who remembers kicking up his heels with plenty of University of Arizona coeds.

"They also had dances at the base," says Ersthaler. "The girls came in on buses."

Kay Kyser and his band entertained them at the Officers' Club, says Ersthaler. So did singer Vaughn Monroe.

"Drinking and dancing" were what he remembers most about his off-duty time in Tucson.

But he must have played tourist as well, judging by his old photo album filled with tiny black-and-white photos of Mission San Xavier del Bac, Sabino Canyon, and thick stands of saguaros.

In November of 1944, the crew members left for Sacramento, where they joined the 22nd Bomb Group, 5th Air Force, serving in the South Pacific.

Flying at low altitudes because the sweltering heat rotted their oxygen masks, the crew completed 40 missions between January and August of '45, everywhere from New Guinea — "worst place I've ever been " — to Borneo, Okinawa and Tokyo.

On June 27, 1945, their plane went down in a Borneo swamp, but the crew was quickly rescued by a Catalina Flying Boat.

Their last mission was over Tokyo. "We flew reconnaissance," says Ersthaller.

Days later — Sept. 2, 1945 — the Japanese formally surrendered on the USS Missouri.

The war was over. But its reverberations were just beginning to be felt in Tucson.