

SANTA BARBARA NEWS-PRESS

Top guns : World War II fighter pilots relive harrowing escapades

MARILYN MCMAHON, NEWS-PRESS STAFF WRITER

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It has been seven decades since they took to the skies over war-torn Europe and the Pacific as fighter pilots during World War II, but their memories of their daring flights remain vivid for Gen. F. Michael Rogers, Col. Hugh D. Dow and Lt. William E. Davis III.



The Santa Barbara-area residents, who joined the service from different parts of the country, will be honored for their exploits on April 19 at Fess Parker's Doubletree Resort.

Memories of their daring flights as fighter pilots during World War II remain vivid for, from left, Col. Hugh D. Dow, Lt. William E. Davis III and Gen. F. Michael Rogers, who will be honored at a luncheon co-sponsored by the Channel City Club and Pierre Claeysens Veterans Museum & Library.
THOMAS KELSEY/NEWS-PRESS

"70 Years On — A Tribute to Three of Santa Barbara's Most Highly Decorated Fighter Pilots 1942-45" will be presented by the Pierre Claeysens Veterans Museum & Library in cooperation with the Channel City Club. Included will be a discussion with the three heroes moderated by Col. Noel Zampot, commander of Edwards Air Force Base Test Pilot School.

The veterans gathered at a home in Montecito recently to share their experiences for a preview of what promises to be a riveting afternoon.

Awarded the Navy Cross, Mr. Davis, 91, was cited for "extraordinary heroism" while serving as a pilot on the aircraft carrier the USS Lexington on Oct. 25, 1944. "I had a 500-pound bomb that I delivered pretty much in the center of a Japanese aircraft carrier, which was left burning and subsequently sank," he told the News-Press. "I didn't really see it hit because I was trying to get away from there as fast as I could. I temporarily blacked out, and when I came to, I was skimming the waves from the plane's propeller.

"I looked up just in time to see that I was flying into the side of a Japanese cruiser, so I rolled my plane on its side and flew through the cruiser's No. 2 gun turret and the bridge. I could see the Japanese crew all in their dress whites," said Mr. Davis, who admitted that before he sank the carrier he told himself, "I'm going to die in the next five minutes."

He made it back to the USS Lexington, and the next day, while on another mission, his plane was attacked by anti-aircraft guns. "I wasn't shot down, but on the way back to the carrier, my engines stopped and I had to make a water landing about 20 miles east of the Philippines. I ended up in a life raft in the middle of a typhoon. There were 20-foot waves. It was like a roller coaster," said Mr. Davis. About four hours later, an American destroyer spotted him and took him to the Lexington. "But before they transferred me on a breeches buoy, they sent a note that in return they wanted 50 gallons of ice cream from the Lexington's freezer. It was the first time I ever really knew what I was worth," chuckled Mr. Davis. (A breeches buoy is an apparatus used for rescues and transfers at sea, consisting of sturdy canvas breeches attached at the waist to a ring buoy.)

Mr. Davis was born and grew up in Ambler, Penn., a small town near Philadelphia. After graduating from Ambler High School in 1938, he was given an engineering scholarship to attend the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, intending to graduate in 1942 and begin working as a plant engineer for RCA Victor in Camden, N.J. "I was in my senior year and preparing for final exams when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. I was appalled. I wanted revenge. That's why I chose to enlist in the Navy. I wanted to be in the war in the Pacific," said Mr. Davis, who enlisted in January 1942 but wasn't called up until June, five days after graduating with a bachelor's degree in mechanical engineering.

After four months of flight school at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Mr. Davis was transferred to Willow Grove Naval Air Station in Pennsylvania, about 10 miles from his childhood home, and then to Naval Air Station Pensacola in Florida, where he was told he would become a fighter pilot. "I couldn't believe my good luck. I had watched movies like 'Dawn Patrol' about World War I aces as a kid. It was all so exciting," said Mr. Davis, who was stationed at the naval air station at Los Alamitos near Long Beach before being sent to the Pacific, where he flew 50 combat missions.

During the year he was at Los Alamitos, he frequently flew over Santa Barbara. "I saw the Biltmore Hotel and the plantings and told myself that if I survived the war, it was where I wanted to live," Mr. Davis said. Not only did his wish come true in 1982 when he retired and moved to Montecito, but he was informed recently that the ship he sank all those years ago was the Zuikaku, the last Japanese carrier afloat that had taken part in the Pearl Harbor attack. "I got the revenge I was seeking when I enlisted in the Navy so many years ago," Mr. Davis said with a smile.

A graduate of the prestigious Newton High School in Newton, Mass., Mr. Rogers, 90, gave up a scholarship to equally prestigious Brown University in Providence, R.I., to get involved in the war by trying to join the Royal Canadian Air Force in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada.

"I was 18 and wanted to be a fighter pilot, but I couldn't join the U.S. Army Air Corps because I didn't have two years of college, which was a requirement then. I left Brown after a semester to go to Canada and join the RCAF. My mother sent my brother to pick me up at the bus station in Boston and bring me back home," said Mr. Rogers, the 10th of 11 children — eight girls and three boys.

Pointing out that fighter pilots have a "special ethos" because they are trained to engage in air-to-air and often air-to-ground combat while at the control of a fighter aircraft, Mr. Rogers said he grew up with the "romantic concept of flying alone. We were the Knights of the Sky. Our heroes were the Red Baron and Eddie Rickenbacker. (Baron Manfred von Richthofen, known as the Red Baron, was the most feared and celebrated pilot of the German air force in World War I. Edward Rickenbacker was an American fighter ace in World War I and Medal of Honor recipient.)

"Hearst newspapers encouraged aviation among young men and women. They sponsored Junior Birdmen of America. I became a squadron commander in the Junior Birdmen. I earned my tin wings and wore them proudly. My squadron met in my father's barn," said Mr. Rogers, adding that he found out recently that many of his contemporaries were Junior Birdmen, among them John Glenn, the former astronaut and former senator from Ohio.

When the Army Air Corps changed its rules about the two-year college requirement, he became an aviation cadet in 1942 and earned his real pilot's wings in 1943 at Yuma Army Airfield in Arizona. Later that year, Mr. Rogers was sent to the RAF Greenham Common Airfield in England, where he was assigned to fly P-51s, escorting bombers to Germany and France. (The P stands for pursuit.)

"We had never seen or heard about this new plane before. All our training had been on P-38s and P-39s. I had two-and-a-half hours of training before I flew one into combat," he said, recalling the experience in greater detail in the Honoring Our War Heroes column written for the News-Press on Feb. 14, 2011, by Frank Cox:

Mr. Rogers, who came under machine-gun fire while on his first combat mission and assumed it was from German fighters, "radioed my leader telling him we were under attack and to break left, which we did. We could not find any German planes, and about this time, I looked again at the bullet holes in my wings and much to my dismay realized that the bullets were coming from below me because the metal around the holes was bent upwards. I looked downward and saw that one of our B-17 top gunners was firing at me "... the P-51s silhouette was very similar to that of the main German fighter, the Messerschmitt 109. As a result, headquarters ordered P-51s to visit all of the English bomber bases so that the bomber crews could become acquainted with the P-51's appearance."

In April 1944, Mr. Rogers was sent to Italy to fly A-36s (A for attack) to prepare for D-Day by learning how to dive bomb.

"The night of June 5, we flew night missions, protecting our paratroopers who were dropped at 4 a.m. June 6. I never saw a German fighter plane. Three days later, I was assigned to help build the first field for fighter planes on the cliff above Normandy Beach. I was the only fighter pilot to walk across that bloody beach. I felt very uncomfortable. I was used to being in the air," said Mr. Rogers, who ended the war as a fighter ace with 12 enemy kills.

"Five kills are needed to become an ace. A triple ace has 15 kills," explained Mr. Rogers, who made the Army his career and became a four-star general before he retired in 1978.

His awards included the Distinguished Service Medal with two Oak Leaf Clusters, Silver Star, Distinguished Flying Cross with Oak Leaf Cluster, Bronze Star Medal and Air Medal with 20 Oak Leaf Clusters. (An oak leaf cluster is placed on military awards and decorations to denote those who have received more than one bestowal of a particular decoration.)

As Mr. Rogers told of his youthful enthusiasm for the Junior Birdmen and how it inspired him to become a fighter pilot, Mr. Dow, 89, nodded with a smile.

While growing up in Fort Worth, Texas, he, too, was a member, and like Mr. Rogers, it inspired him to be a fighter pilot because of the "threat to the world" when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor,

A 1939 graduate of Polytechnic High School in Fort Worth, he attended Texas A&M University for one year, dropping out to join the RCAF for the same reason as Mr. Rogers. "I couldn't join the Army Air Corps because I didn't have two years of college, so I headed for Windsor, Ontario, Canada, to join the RCAF. They needed fighter pilots because England was fighting the war in Europe," he said.

After earning his wings at St. Huberts RCAF Station near Montreal, Quebec, Canada, Mr. Dow was sent to a Royal Air Force replacement depot in Bournemouth, England, where he saw his first Messerschmitt when the base was attacked by German fighter pilots soon after he arrived. "That was my introduction to combat," said the soft-spoken Silver Star recipient, who became part of the U.S. Army Air Corps when the rules about minimum years of college were changed.

Several months later, he was sent to North Africa as part of Operation Torch, the British-American invasion of French North Africa, which began Nov. 8, 1942. "The distance between England and North Africa was 1,200 miles, and because the planes couldn't carry that much fuel, we had to fly with the tail wind," said Mr. Dow.

On Jan. 22, 1945, while stationed in the Mediterranean, his plane was shot down over northern Italy by German anti-aircraft guns, and he became a prisoner of war. "The tail of my plane caught fire. The elevator controls burned in two, and smoke and flames filled the cockpit. I bailed out at 2,000 feet, landing amidst a light explosion of flak and

spraining my knee slipping on the powdery snow. About 30 minutes passed between the time my feet touched the snow and my capture," recalled Mr. Dow, who was imprisoned in Moosburg, Germany, until he was liberated on April 21, 1945, along with 33,000 other POWs.

By the end of the war, Mr. Dow had decided to make the Air Force his career. He retired as a colonel in 1973, continuing to fly until five years before he left the service.

When asked for their thoughts on that tumultuous time in their lives, the trio responded:

"It was the most challenging time, just trying to stay alive. If I had to do it over again, I would have been a helluva lot better pilot," said Mr. Dow.

"I realize how lucky I was that I survived and that I had gotten revenge," said Mr. Davis.

For Mr. Rogers, "It began as an adventure. I would do it again with greater purpose and greater realism. The spirit stays with you. I agree with Tom Brokaw that we are The Greatest Generation. We strove to excel. In the 1960s, this country took a terrible turn. It has never been the same. It has been going downhill for several decades."

email: mmcmahon@newspress.com

IF YOU GO

"70 Years On — A Tribute to Three of Santa Barbara's Most Highly Decorated Fighter Pilots 1942-45" will begin at noon April 19 in the Reagan Room at Fess Parker's Doubletree Resort, 633 E. Cabrillo Blvd. The deadline for reservations is April 16.

Honored at the luncheon will be Gen. F. Michael Rogers, Col. Hugh D. Dow and Lt. William E. Davis III.

The event is co-sponsored by the Channel City Club and Pierre Claeysens Veterans Museum & Library.

Tickets are \$30 for members and \$35 for nonmembers.

For more information, call 884-6636 or email channelcity@earthlink.net.



In order from top to bottom, Col. Hugh D. Dow joined the Royal Canadian Air Force before transferring to the U.S. Army Air Corps. Gen. F. Michael Rogers was a squadron commander in the Junior Birdmen, inspiring him to become a fighter pilot in World War II.

Lt. William E. Davis III joined the Navy to get revenge for the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor.
COURTESY PHOTOS



After being shot down in northern Italy, Mr. Dow was a prisoner of war in Germany.
COURTESY PHOTO



A Silver Star was awarded to Mr. Davis after he dropped the bomb that sank a Japanese aircraft carrier.
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