

America's warriors: Pilot: Holladay man 'always happy' to share stories of WWII

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HOLLADAY — There's a "me" room in World War II veteran Jack Bering Schade's basement where papers, mail, books, awards and war memories in myriad forms overflow from shelves and his desk and on to the red shag carpet.

After chatting about the 26 missions he flew over Japan in 1945 as a co-pilot in a B-29, Schade plucks from a dusty shelf a safety tag he took from a bomb before it made its deadly drop over a target. The tag produces one more story from Schade, 86, who has just spent two hours talking — and only scratching the surface — about his wartime experiences.

And that's the way it is with Schade, as Alene, his wife of 63 years, will attest. Once you get him going on the war, she said, it's hard to stop him.

"He is always happy to talk about it," she said.

Which is different from many World War II vets, most well into their 80s, who are dying off at a rate of about 1,000 a day and taking their war stories with them. About 3 million World War II vets are left. It's the reason why the University of Utah Saturday chose to honor Schade and 10 other World War II vets in a special Veterans Day ceremony. (Related article: U. rite to honor veterans)

These days Schade considers himself to be in good health, despite needing a hearing aid and 13 surgeries to correct a broad range of health problems. He says he's a happy person, mostly because of how lucky he's been in life.

Lucky that Alene said "yes" to his marriage proposal, sent via telegram from Kansas to Utah just before he left for Cuba, then Guam and war in Japan. Lucky his B-29 didn't get shot down. Lucky he was able to make a career of flying planes after the war. Lucky to have raised two daughters with Alene.

In the war room of his basement, he peppers vignettes about disturbing battle images with a joke or sarcastic remark that catches the listener off guard. Sometimes the crack comes by way of a single word.

When asked whether he thought much about the people and places — the targets he never saw from 18,000 feet in the air — he frames his answer in the context of saying what he would have done if he was shot down and captured by civilians instead of the Japanese military. After destroying some guy's "shed," he said, his chances of survival with that civilian probably wouldn't be so hot.

His answers about specific events are sometimes short as he moves from one memory to the next. In the company of a reporter, there are things he talks about but doesn't want recorded. You don't ask "why" to the man who, even at 86, still looks as tough and intimidating as the young uniformed man with the thick, dark handlebar mustache pictured in black and white photos at his home.

There is a softer side to Schade, the man who said he was never interested in marrying anyone else other than Alene.

He was 14, playing football with a group of guys in a park near 9th Avenue and M Street in Salt Lake City, when he first met Alene. She was 13, playing tennis with some girls. He went to West High School — she was a student at East. The two groups stopped play for what would be a well-timed timeout.

Three pairings formed and eventually married after that day in the park.

"We're the only couple left," Alene noted from a chair just off the kitchen in her home.

While they were dating, Jack recalled how he would sometimes drive Alene out to the airport near Salt Lake City to watch planes take off and land — a cheap date, Schade admitted. That was back, he added, when a gallon of gas was 20 cents and you could get a hamburger for a nickel.

"He'd say how, 'Someday I'm going to do that,'" Alene said about Jack's reaction as they watched the planes at the airport from his Ford.

Schade caught the flying bug from his grandfather, John Sullivan, who shared with his grandson his appreciation of Charles Lindbergh's accomplishments as an aviator. As a young man Schade read everything he could on aviation. In 1939 he joined the Army Air Corps, telling the recruiter, "I want to fly," Schade said.

Schade boarded a train for California before his worried, upset mother had the chance to snatch her son and bring him back home. His first meal in the military was pork and beans and corn bread. His first deployment, where he stayed until 1942, was to the Panama Canal. He said the canal could have been a strategic point of attack by the enemy during World War II. The enemy strike never came, but it was there Schade's path toward the skies began, on the ground as an airplane mechanic.

He came back to the United States and to Boise, where he applied to be an aviation cadet — he passed a required test and was on his way. He trained around the country in at least three types of planes. His sights were set on the B-17.

But by the time he learned how to fly a B-17, the war effort in Europe didn't require more B-17 pilots. Instead, the United States needed people to fly bombers in the Pacific, planes that could fly long distances and carry heavy cargo, namely high-explosive and incendiary bombs bound for Japanese targets. The B-29 was the answer.

Schade had been training for combat and was in Kansas at the time he questioned whether it would be fair to Alene to ask her hand in marriage before going off to war. If she had said no, Schade remembered, he was prepared to marry the military instead.

"I wasn't interested in anyone else," he said.

She said "yes," and on Nov. 23, 1943, they married. They didn't have time for a honeymoon then, and, as Alene noted, they still haven't had a "real" one. There was Cuba, then home for a short time, then in 1945, Guam and Japan.

Schade's war stories and anecdotes he collected in the air and on the ground come out fast and splintered these days. Some thoughts are bits of wartime shrapnel he lets fly inside his home, memories he'd just as soon not make public. He's being pressured to write it all down, but it's been a slow process.

What he doesn't mind sharing with the masses is that he flew 25 bombing missions, leading up to the two B-29 missions that killed more than 100,000 Japanese and brought an end to war there. Paul Tibbets, who at the age of 92 died this month, piloted the Enola Gay, dropping the first atomic bomb in August 1945 over Hiroshima. Schade said he didn't learn — or even believe at first — that the second atomic bomb had been dropped until several days after the highly secretive mission.

The missions got to him. After his 17th bombing run, he sought help.

"I'm getting frightened — I'm wondering if I can make it all the way through," Schade told someone. He was told that feeling that way was normal. "It didn't help much."

But he did make it all the way through the war, with the only serious wound to one of the B-29s he helped pilot inflicted by his own gunner, who accidentally shot a hole in one of the engines — something the gunner didn't admit until long after the war was over while at a reunion. Schade was also a co-pilot in the B-29 named Sentimental Journey, which is now on display at a museum in Tucson.

Schade's 26th and final mission over Japan was not to drop bombs. He was part of the "Show of Force" as planes flew over Tokyo Bay while Japanese leaders signed surrender documents.

Out of 11 men aboard his B-29, all made it home alive. Over the years he's kept in touch with them. One became a police officer, another repaired appliances — one became an alcoholic and after a while wasn't heard from again. Today, there are five men left.

Schade, who earned a Distinguished Flying Cross, came home and worked a few jobs, including nine months for Western Airlines in 1946. He stayed in the Reserves and would eventually retire as a major from the Air Force after 22 years in the military. In 1981, he retired from Frontier Airlines after flying 35 years for them.

Now he has two granddaughters that he and Alene say they're not afraid to spoil. And inside a home where the decorating hasn't changed much over the years, they still have each other.

Down in his war room with the red shag carpet are the material synapses that, 62 years later, jog Schade's memory. The memory of how intense heat and powerful updrafts created by incendiary bombs he dropped carried the smell of burned human flesh into his plane. The memory of bombing a factory in Japan that manufactured planes for the war effort.

In that small room, wearing the same uniform he wore six decades ago, Schade is reminded of how lucky he was, and how he lived to tell about it. Reminded of how, while once watching a squadron commander write letters of condolences, he asked himself back then, "How come I'm so lucky?"