LITTLE GUY *IN A* BIG AIRPLANE

A BOY BECOMES A MAN THE HARD WAY

BY **J. DAVID TRUBY**

Back then, junior year of high school should have been filled with coming-of-age memories, football pep rallies, and homecoming dances. Visiting colleges, choosing high-school sweethearts, and exploring possible careers should have been in the thoughts of soon-to-be seniors. Pearl Harbor changed all that. The very real world war and deciding to fight his country's enemies was foremost in the mind of a barely 17-year-old Bernard Sledzik after hearing of the bombing.

The original "razorback" Jugs did most of the early heavy lifting before the Mustang, and "bubble-top" P-47s came on the scene later in Europe. (Photo by Frank Mormillo)

Second Lt. Bernie Sledzik was five weeks past his 20th birthday when the 514th was sent over Normandy to cover D–Day. (Photo courtesy of J. David Truby)

After WW II, P–47s quickly faded from active U.S. military service to soldier on in foreign countries for many years. This was especially so in South America where most surviving examples were found. (Photo by Jake Peterson)

"When our radio told us the bombs had been dropped, I knew exactly what I wanted to do when I got out of high school," Bernie says. "My parents would not let me drop out of school then, or I would have done so."

Growing up in the tiny town of Coal Run in rural western Pennsylvania, Bernie had been always fascinated with flight. As a kid in the 1930s, he spent hours looking up at airplanes, building wooden model planes, and reading aviation books. His goal was to join the army as an aviation cadet as soon as he graduated.

From High School to Sky High School

Skeptical friends and nervous family members thought skinny little Bernie Sledzik had no chance to become a pilot when the majority of cadets were college graduates or civilian licensed pilots, all of whom were at least four years older than him.

In 1943, the recruitment process was not a smooth one for young Bernie. Following a routine physical with good results, the nasty part came when he reported for his U.S. Army exam.

After reading eye charts and offering up samples of his bodily fluids, Bernie sat with a sergeant for his final review. He failed; at a skinny 123 pounds, he was five pounds underweight. The sympathetic sergeant said that he would hold the papers for one week before Bernie would be reweighed.

"I stuffed myself with everything I could think of," Bernie says. "One week later, I stepped on the scale, and it read 125 pounds, still three pounds shy. The sergeant looked at the scale and said, 'I'll be damned, you just made it' and marked down 128 pounds."

Six months later, Bernie boarded a train with 26 other cadets for the first leg of a three-day journey to San Antonio, Texas.

There, the cadets were put through another round of testing that would determine their classification as a pilot, bombardier, navigator, or gunner. The intelligence tests were easy for Bernie. Next, he faced the psychomotor test, which gauged dexterity, depth perception, and color perception. Bernie breezed through them. Finally, the only thing left was the psychological review.

"A psychologist questioned me about my background, my very young age, my desire to fly, and how I would feel about dropping bombs in Poland (my ancestry) under German control," Bernie recalls.

His answers were satisfactory, and he was, by far, the youngest of his group chosen for pilot training. Bernie's duties were to attend classroom sessions, undergo basic training, and to march, hike, and take turns at KP. Upon completion, Bernie was sent to primary training in Colemen, Texas, where he would begin flying in a Fairchild PT-19.

From Classroom to Cockpit

"I was nervous," says Bernie. "I had been in an airplane only once in my lifetime—a Ford Trimotor that took my Aunt Catherine and me for a ride around nearby Indiana, Pennsylvania, when I was a little kid."

(Ironically, Indiana is the hometown of the late James Stewart, at that time a Hollywood and Broadway star, whose own heroic World War II service as a B-24 pilot and flight leader is that of iconic legend.)

After fighting through airsickness, rough takeoffs, shaky landings, and cussing instructors, Bernie made his first solo flight a day before his 19th birthday. Sixty-five hours of flight instruction later, Bernie moved onto basic training at Lackland Air Field in Waco, Texas.

In basic, Bernie stepped up the power by flying a 450hp fixed-landing-gear BT-13.

"This training determined if I would get to fly a single-engine fighter or a multi-engine bomber-transport. Being 125 pounds, there was little doubt that I was to be a fighter pilot."

First, however, he had to learn to fly heavier and faster planes on more difficult training missions, including night flights and triangular cross-countries. After approximately 70 hours of training in the BT-13, Bernie arrived for advanced training at Eagle Pass, Texas. The advanced trainer was the fabled 650hp AT-6 Texan with retractable

landing gear.

"That baby helped me hone my skills with stalls, spins, chandelles, loops, slow rolls, barrel rolls, snap rolls, and formation flying. I loved it all. It was also equipped with a 30-caliber machine gun, for aerial and ground gunnery. That was sure to became useful to me a bit later!"

Up, Up, and (Hopefully) Away

The final training at Eagle Pass was in the P-40 fighter made famous by the Flying Tigers in China. Bernie had to memorize all the positions of the instruments and then identify them blindfolded. After passing this inspection, Bernie was cleared to fly the Warhawk.

"After takeoff, I pulled up my wheels and climbed for altitude," Bernie recalls with a chuckle. "Suddenly, a P-39 came alongside, lowered his landing gear and then retracted them. I pressed my landing gear to raise it, and in a few seconds, the P-39 pilot waved and swung away from me.

"When I landed, I was told that my left wheel had retracted, but the right wheel was still down. On the P-40, there is a peg in the wing, and when it is extended, the wheels are down. What I didn't realize was that there was a peg in each wing, and I was looking at only one of them."

After receiving his wings, Bernie reported to Dale Mabry Field in Tallahassee, Florida, for assignment overseas. He was chosen to attend P-47 training in Venice, Florida. At the time, the P-47 was the largest single-engine fighter in the world. Bernie received a 30-minute orientation flight during which he heard a Mayday call over his radio.

"The tower told me to circle the field, while a plane that was on fire was given approval to land," Bernie says. "The pilot came over the Gulf of Mexico and turned his plane to line up with the runway. However, he was overshooting, and he tightened his turn and lost control as it spun into the Gulf. This was the first time I had witnessed a pilot being killed, and it scared the hell out of me."

Bernie was then given the green light to land. Following the same path that the other pilot had taken, Bernie began to overshoot the runway. He did not, however, tighten his turn; he, instead, pulled up and tried again. Starting his turn sooner, Bernie was able to land his plane.

"We quickly realized that the turning radius of the P-47 was wide, unlike the previous planes we had flown that turned on a dime."

The 514th Fighter Squadron's distinctive patch. Bernie's 514th was a distinguished part of the 506th Fighter Group. (Photo courtesy of J. David Truby)

Bottom: In a lighter moment, when not dodging buzz bombs or German aircraft, Bernie and his buddies from the 514th had some fun posing for their own cameras. (Photo courtesy of J. David Truby)

Real War—Off to England

In January 1944, Bernie boarded the *Queen Mary* for England as a replacement in the 514th Fighter Squadron, 406th Fighter Group, at Ashford. There, he completed his first orientation flight on May 9, barely five days after his 20th birthday.

Less than a month later, Bernie Sledzik would be flying his first combat mission. The date: June 6, 1944. He was to be part of history in the making.

At 0200, the 514th Squadron was alerted for its first D-Day mission. Taking off at 0430, the main objective was to provide tactical air support for the invasion. As Bernie flew over the English Channel, he was awestruck and amazed at the sight below him.

"There were thousands of ships of all sizes and shapes heading for Normandy," he says. "My first thought was that I had a ringside seat above the greatest spectacle the world had ever seen. I also thought that if my engine failed and I had to bail out of the plane, the chances were better than 50/50 that I would land on a ship."

Assigned to give top cover to the invasion at altitudes of 8,000 to 12,000 feet, the Allied forces dominated the sky; the Luftwaffe was seldom seen during the invasion. Bernie flew two missions on D-Day and followed with two over France the next day.

"We were running strafing missions against German troops, trucks, panzers, and gun emplacements. We shot at anything we could find. And they were shooting back, which was both scary and exciting for a 20-year-old rookie fighter pilot," he adds.

Guided by a ground crewman on its right wing, P–47D Thunderbolt O7+B of the 514th Fighter Squadron taxies down the PSP taxiway to its place with others of the 406th Fighter Group prior to takeoff for a mission over the Normandy beaches on June 6, 1944. (Photo courtesy of Jack Cook)

His First Victory

Bernie well remembers June 9. "We were flying a recon mission seeking tactical targets about 40 miles east of Paris in our P-47Ds—four on top, eight below. *Whacko!* We were jumped by 10 FW 190s coming down at us out of the sun, guns blazing."

Bernie saw his best friend's plane get hit and go down.

"Thank God, he got out, but I went after the Kraut who shot him: jumped his tail and cut loose, kept on firing, no let up...dumb rookie error...burned out my P-47's gun barrels. But," he adds, "I shot him down in a big, fiery crash."

Bernie's buddy was rescued by the French Resistance and was back with the squadron in less than two months. Plus, young 2nd Lt. Sledzik had his first confirmed kill.

From Air-to-Air to Tactical Air

"Within a few days, the Germans launched their first 'buzz bombs.' With speeds up to 400mph, those V-1s flew until the fuel ran out, then down and BOOM! They were not accurate; their only use was to strike terror into the hearts of Londoners, which they sure did. Unfortunately, the V-1s' path ran right over our Ashford air base, but we rarely got hit."

By the middle of June 1944, the P-47s began carrying fragmentation bombs on their ground-support missions. With three bombs under each wing, pilots could not go beneath 1,200 feet when they dropped the bombs, owing to fragment patterns. On one such day, Bernie experienced a scary mission due to cloudy weather.

"Unfortunately, there was 1,000-foot overcast, and we had to seek out targets at that altitude," Bernie says. "My target was a marshalling yard, but another P-47 was headed for the same target. I saw him, but he didn't see me."

Seeing an impending collision, Bernie throttled back and allowed the other plane to drop its bomb load, immediately followed by his own. Now at an altitude of not more than 500 feet, Bernie felt a jolt as the bombs detonated.

"I looked out at my wings and saw that they had been peppered with bomb fragments. When I got back to base, they found 87 holes in my airplane."

As the Allied forces drove the Germans eastward, the 406th Group moved to its forward base at Bayeux, France, before moving to advanced field A-13, Tour-en-Bessin on the Normandy peninsula, the closest to the front lines that it dared go. At that point, the 406th began losing aircraft to enemy ground fire.

"Another of my close buddies, Lt. Elmer Springer, went down and was found by the French Underground. He hid for six weeks before the American Third Army rescued him. One of our majors was killed during a strafing run, and

Like other 9th Air Force units, the 406th Group's move to the continent in the summer of 1944 often subjected its ground and support groups to austere operating conditions. As the front lines advanced into France and the Low Countries' fighter and bomber units were kept on the move to stay close to the Allied front lines they supported. (Photo courtesy of Stan Piet)

another went MIA. Every mission was tight and scary," Bernie recalls.

Lt. Bernie Sledzik had one such close call of his own.

Airborne to (Nearly) Cow Patty Cake

"I made an emergency landing on one mission due to a fuel shortage, and another landing because of loss of engine power. It was quite the adventure. Then, this one...Wow!

"We were about five minutes into enemy territory when my P-47's engine just plain quit. I jettisoned my bomb and started losing altitude. From 12,000 feet, I had dropped down to 3,000 and kept coming down. It was time to make a decision to bail out.

"But I was afraid of my chute not opening, which happened more than you'd think. As I continued to contemplate my options, I spotted a very primitive, frontline landing field. I had no time to prepare or announce myself and just let her down on the side of the muddy runway.

"I pulled the stick back to my stomach, and hit the brakes as hard as I could," he adds. "It appeared that I would overshoot the field, go across the road, and crash into a herd of cows. However, at the end of the runway was a huge pile of dirt. I plowed the P-47 into it, flipped up in the air, and completely overturned, landing upside down."

Miraculously, Bernie was pulled out uninjured. The plane didn't fare so well. Its wings were gone, the propeller was bent, and the tail was ripped off. If that wasn't bad enough, while being driven back to the base, the truck in which Bernie was riding overturned during a German air attack. Again, Bernie escaped injury.

Over that fall of 1944, the 406th flew many missions that paved the way for the Third Army's advance into enemy territory. The group's attacks were so effective that the region's German command said that they would surrender if the Army Air Corps would stop their bombing and strafing runs. The deal was consummated, and at least 20,000 German troops surrendered. For this incredible victory, the 406th received its first Presidential Unit Citation.

The Brutal Battle of the Bulge

On December 16, the Battle of the Bulge began, but it wasn't until the 23rd that the 406th was sent to support the 101st Airborne Division at Bastogne, Belgium. As they approached their target, they were jumped by 12 Messerschmitt 109s. In the end, five109s were downed, one of which was Bernie's second aerial victory. These missions, among others during the Bulge, earned the 406th Group its second commendation.

That and two more personal awards proved to be the end of Bernie Sledzik's wartime experiences in Europe, but it was not the end of his connection with the land where that boy became a man. But let us come back to that later.

His Career—Up, Up, and More

Returning home, Bernie graduated from the Carnegie Institute of Technology in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, as a mechanical-aero engineer in 1951, then took a job as a flight-test engineer for Chance Vought in Dallas, Texas. He moved up professionally with Minneapolis-Honeywell, Norden-Ketay, and Texas Instruments.

In the 1960s, Bernie was all over the globe working for the Norden Division of United Aircraft. On one such trip to Bonn, then the capital of West Germany, he met the legendary General Adolf Galland, who was working as a consultant for United Aircraft. Galland was among Germany's top aces, whose last missions were in Me 262 jets that Bernie glimpsed in action. Twenty years later, Galland was still a legend.

"When we met in Bonn, I was in awe of him, as his legend deserved, but he and I did what all pilots discuss: flying," Bernie says with his shy smile.

"Shortly after that, however, I bailed out of aviation and joined Eastman Dillon Union Securities, a large New York banking firm's Dallas office. Later, I stayed in finance briefly with Paine Webber as a vice president," he adds. His final tour of corporate duty was 20 years as a vice president with A. G. Edwards and Son, an investment group.

Today, Bernie and his wife, Brink, a U.S. Air Force flight nurse whom he married in Wiesbaden, Germany, in 1953, live happily in Maryland. Both are incredibly active, mentally and physically. And at age 92, Bernie still drives "back home" to western Pennsylvania to visit his two "kid brothers," as he says with a wink and smile about Ed and Herm, both in their 80s. Ironically, one of his Maryland neighbors was a WW II German paratrooper.

The Deeds of His Fellow Pilots Are Not Forgotten

Bernie Sledzik's major WW II honor came long after his last flight, in 2014. During his service, he flew 67 combat missions, shot down two enemy aircraft, and destroyed countless ground targets on tactical support missions. He received the Distinguished Flying Cross, 13 Air Medals, two Presidential Unit Citations, a European Theater Medal with five battle stars, and the Belgian Forreguerre. Then, in 2014, he was the only American pilot able to return to the WW II Ashford airfield site, where he flew his first combat missions, to dedicate that sacred ground and memorialize those who served with him.

Ashford is currently being developed into a town with streets named after fighter pilots who flew out of Ashford and were KIA in WW II. As the then 90-year-old Bernie Sledzik saluted the newly unveiled memorial, a British bystander swore that he felt he could visualize the ghostly spirits of those young men who gave their lives to protect those who could not protect themselves. Like Bernie, this was their coming-of-age moment.

When Bernie related his story the following year, his still sharp, focused eyes more than misted over at those memories.