

World War II flier, Opelika native, finally gets overdue recognition



Retired U.S. Air Force Lt. Col. Orrin Brown holds up his uniform for a photo in his home on Thursday as he stands in front of photographs, honors and awards.

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Orrin “Boody” Brown will turn 98 on April 4 and still looks like he could climb into the bombardier’s seat of a B-24 bomber much as he did in the 1940s during World War II.

His secret to a long and healthy life?

It’s just that, a secret, he says, and the United States government is giving him a medal next week in a Congressional ceremony for being good at keeping secrets.

Before there was a CIA working for America, there was an OSS.

Before there were Navy SEALs, Special Ops teams for the Air Force, Army and Marines, and before there was an official organization of professional spies, there was the OSS.

The Office of Strategic Services was created to conduct secret operations during World War II, and because its mission was declared Top Secret, it wasn’t until 50 years after the war that “Boody” Brown could tell his family and friends what he did during the war.

Congress on Wednesday will recognize his heroics and that of others who served the OSS with a gold medal ceremony at the Capitol.

Boody Brown will be there.

Retired U.S. Air Force Lt. Col. Orrin Brown skims over the faces in a photograph on Thursday of members in the squadron he was first assigned to after graduating cadet school.

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Protecting the mainland

Ask Brown, an Opelika native and resident, if he graduated from Auburn University, he'll smile and correct you.

"API," he says with a grin.

That would be Alabama Polytechnic Institute, an earlier name for Auburn University when Brown graduated there in the summer of 1941.

Brown earned a degree in aeronautical administration. He applied and was approved by the military for the aviation cadet program, eventually becoming commissioned as an officer and being assigned to bombardier duty in charge of dropping bombs and payloads from bombers.

His first duty station was in North Carolina, where he was assigned to a squadron that patrolled the coast hunting for enemy submarines and escorting allied ships.

They flew antiquated Lockheed 829s, an older plane that didn't impress Brown.

Then in early June 1943, things began to change. "We somehow had our aircraft replaced by the B-24Ds," he said, as if still surprised almost 75 years later.

The B-24 Liberator was a four-engine bomber used throughout the European and Pacific theaters of war.

But that wasn't the only thing about to change for Brown and his squadron.

Battle in the skies

"We were soon ordered to Britain," Brown said, and their initial duty was to patrol for submarines there, in the waters between Great Britain and France. It was a bloody war zone.

There was one particular close encounter that Brown remembers in vivid detail.

Flying alone, "we suddenly were encountered by 13 German J-88s, the best twin-engine bomber-fighter the Germans had," Brown said.

The enemy fighters may have noticed that this newer model of the American B-24 bomber had front-mounted guns, and not particularly spoiling for a fight, the planes closed in and the first 12 moved away.

But not enemy plane No. 13.

A B-24 Liberator bomber similar to the one Orrin Brown flew on secret missions during World War II.

(Courtesy photo.)

"He came in and made an attack," Brown said. But the pilot approached from the rear and continued his flight forward of the B-24 after making his attack run. That proved to be a mistake.

The gunners on Brown's plane opened fire, including from the forward mount as the German aircraft passed them and flew in front.

The sky was filled with bullets racing through the air, with gunners in each plane trying their best to kill and destroy the other.

Both planes were hit. But the German fighter suffered the most, at least for the moment.

“The last we saw of it, he left a plume of smoke and went into a dive, and that was the last we saw,” Brown recalls, still unsure of why the other 12 didn’t re-engage and take down the outnumbered bomber.

Perhaps they were out of fuel and ammunition from previous action. Perhaps they were student aviators and their instructor was just shot down. Perhaps it was the surprise of the forward gun mounts or a more important mission.

Whatever the reason, Brown feels fortunate to have survived the encounter.

During the attack, however, the B-24 was hit hard and lost its No. 4 engine. “It was just windmilling,” Brown remembers. “The pilots shut it down, and we made an emergency landing in England,” near the famous white cliffs of Dover.

They survived.

A different type of mission soon awaited the veteran and battle-ready crew, however, and it would present additional dangers beyond deadly air-to-air combat.

A new mission

“In early fall 1943, a Navy crew relieved us, and we were sitting there, with no duty,” Brown recalls.

British Prime Minister Winston Churchill had earlier in the war charged his own secret agency, the Special Operations Executive known as SOE, to “raise hell with Hitler,” so that the Germans would be distracted, especially leading up to D-Day and the planned Allied invasion to retake continental Europe.

Britain’s Royal Air Force, already famous for its defense of the island nation in the Battle of Britain, which was fought over the skies of London, had two squadrons assigned to secret missions with the SOE.

“They needed help. It wasn’t enough,” Brown said. His squadron would be the one to answer the call, and orders came to train with the RAF.

Along with the new assignment came a new nickname: Carpetbaggers.

“Carpetbagger was just a code word for these type missions,” he said.

It didn’t take long for the Carpetbaggers to leave their calling card on the Germans.

B-24 bombers fly during a mission in World War II.
(Courtesy photo)

Behind enemy lines

It wasn't just the flight crews that made adjustments. Their air ships got a makeover, too.

"We were going to be doing night flying, on clandestine missions," Brown said. "Our aircraft were modified, painted a solid black with no markings on them."

The front gun was removed, as well as the bottom gun turret, as the B-24 was engineered to make low-level drops of material and personnel, something different from its previous high-altitude bombing design or submarine hunting over the sea in daylight.

"We were trying to avoid fights," he said. "Of course, the Germans did send up night fighters looking for us."

One of the most important cargo loads often carried was secret agents, "mostly French resistance," Brown said.

There were code names for male spies and resistance fighters dropped, and for females, who also were dropped, all at low altitude in efforts to avoid detection and ground fire.

Containers, which the air crews seldom knew what was inside, were dropped from only about 400 feet in altitude. Secret agents and fighters were dropped from only 600 feet, Brown said.

"We wanted to get them on the ground as quickly as possible. We also wanted to get out of there as quickly as possible," he said, given that every flight was made far behind front lines and deep into enemy-controlled territory.

Flash-light codes were used on the ground by the resistance groups alerted and expecting the incoming air drops. Brown remembers when the flashing signals didn't match the code.

"It was the Germans on the ground and they had taken the site," he said. "They were trying to trick us into making our drop. The pilot would pull out and we'd go away."

That would result in gunfire from the Germans below, trying to shoot down the B-24 and its Carpetbaggers inside.

Brown still has a deep respect for those on the ground in the resistance movement whose lifeline depended on his air crew and others like it making successful drops, and the secrecy that was required to protect them.

Many years later, a 3 a.m. phone call proved the feeling is mutual.

Nations give thanks

Many of the missions Brown flew took them on dangerous low-level night flights over the small nation of Belgium.

A few years ago, long after the war and what Brown felt was distant history, he was awakened in his Opelika home from a predawn call.

It was someone in Belgium inviting him to a ceremony. Brown didn't fully understand the conversation nor the ceremony, but he nonetheless agreed to attend and felt honored. He was

more honored when the Belgium government presented him with a medal representing one of that nation's highest honors.

Further, and perhaps even more meaningful to Brown, the family of one of the resistance fighters Brown had helped on the ground participated in the ceremony.

The French government earlier, soon after the war, also had presented Brown and his squadron with medals and citations.

But regrettably, the United States government had made no such recognition of Brown, of the Carpetbaggers, or even of the OSS itself.

Much like it had done in keeping other Top Secret programs off record for half a century, such as the Navajo Code Talkers and their role with the war's only never-broken secret code, the U.S. was slow to shed light on these heroes and their brave efforts.

The Carpetbaggers finally get their day on Wednesday.

Act of Congress

Congress on Dec. 14, 2016, approved an Act that called for a gold medal to be created honoring those who served in the OSS, an agency long gone but not before spawning various contemporary agencies, from the CIA to special-op military units, all critical to America's defense today.

Wednesday afternoon inside the Capitol in Washington, D.C., Brown, said to be the only surviving member of the original, first Carpetbagger squadron, will be among the few War World II veterans on hand to accept the honor in a Congressional ceremony.

House Speaker Paul Ryan (R-WI), Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY), and House Democratic Leader Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) will take part in the bipartisan ceremony.

"The Congressional Gold Medal is the highest civilian honor the United States can bestow," a statement on Ryan's website said.

Brown and his three daughters, all scattered from Opelika to Alaska, will gather and attend the ceremony together.

"I'm pleased that people are going to finally know what we did," Brown said during a peaceful, sit-down interview in his quiet Opelika home.

Brown left active duty at the end of the war, but he remained a reserve and committed to service for 20 years. He retired a lieutenant colonel.

Orrin "Boody" Brown still has – and looks fit enough to wear – his old uniform.

This week, the almost 98-year-old will get a shiny new medal to go with it.