

Lemuel Pearson: I just wanted to fly.

BY AMANDA SHELBY
 Item Staff Writer

"I just wanted to fly."

Lemuel Pearson was working as a machinist when Pearl Harbor was bombed in December of 1941. He told his foreman he was resigning, and went to join the military. Pearson said his friends wanted to join the Army and the Navy, but Pearson wanted to fly.

"I just wanted to fly planes. I joined the United States Air Force, and never regretted it."

Pearson started out as a private in the Air Force when he was 21 years old. It was 1942, and he was making \$21 per month. He went into the Aviation Cadets program, which had three stages: Primary, Basic, and Advanced.

Pearson said the aviation program was a tough one, but he was always at the top of his class.

"Lots of people washed out, and couldn't make it through the program.... We had one instructor, we called him the 'Maytag' man, because he washed out so many cadets. He tried to wash me out, but I always gave him a perfect flight," Pearson said.

Pearson tells of his first solo flight.

"The instructor would get out of the plane, and he would tell us to make three full-stop landings. That was considered a solo flight. They usually took about eight hours. I made my first two landings perfect. The third time, I bounced.... I had to use the right rudder, and ended up turning my plane more than 90 degrees to the left. There in front of me was an instructor (Maytag) and one of my best friends. There was a fence there (at the end of the runway), and I didn't think I could get over the fence, but it was either hit the fence or hit them. So I went back up and made it up over the fence. I figured I better not come right back down, so I stayed up in the air about 15 or 20 minutes, and then came back down. They had a meeting later that night about me, and Maytag wanted to kick me out. My other instructor said that I was the best student he had and no one else, including either one of them, could have gotten back over that fence.... I went out flying later twice with Maytag, and he wanted to get rid of me, but I gave him perfect flights."

After Pearson completed the cadet program, he went to B-24 bomber school in Tucson, Ariz., where he trained as a bomber pilot.

"I wanted to be a fighter pilot, but after I started flying bombers, I was glad I was a bomber pilot. I got more flight time as a bomber pilot than I would have as a fighter pilot," Pearson said.

"But the first time I saw a bomber, I said it was too big for me to fly. Of course, it ended up being one of the smaller planes."

After he finished bomber school, he was sent to Denver for training, and then sent to Europe as an extra pilot. In December of 1943, he flew out of England.

"It was exciting times for me. I love to fly. I even enjoyed the combat flying," Pearson said.

Pearson said he flew 31 combat missions during his time served in World War II, and saw many others shot down, but he never was shot down.

"A number of times I had an engine shot out. And when you had an engine shot out, you had to slow down, but the rest of the group didn't wait on you. You had to come in alone. But I always made it in safe. Not everyone did that. Five of my closest friends from Aviation Cadets were killed in combat. There were a lot who were shot down that were able to eject and were held as prisoners of war, but several planes blew up when they were shot," Pearson said.

Pearson talks about going on combat missions.

"The days that you were gonna fly, they gave you real eggs, rather than powdered eggs. I didn't even really like eggs, but I always liked getting real eggs because it meant that I was going to be going up to fly.... When we got on a target run, there would be a lot of flak shot at you. There would be about seven minutes of being shot at. A lot of people got hit on those runs, because you couldn't evade. You had to stay on target. I was never shot down. I had hits, but never crashed. I had a window shot out once, and it was 20 degrees or lower up there. It was pretty cold. Another thing, if another plane got shot up, we couldn't go help him. We had to stay with the group.... On one mission, we had our number two engine shot out from the ground. I cut the engine and held formation until the bombs were dropped. On the way back, we could see Switzerland out of left window. My crew asked me to go to Switzerland, because if you went to Switzerland, you were out of the war, but I wouldn't go. I wanted to go back and fly my missions."

Pearson said each bomber carried ten crew members, and had ten .50 caliber machine guns. The bombers also carried at least eight 1,000 pound bombs, and when they would go on a run, they would drop all the bombs at one time.

Pearson's 29th and 30th missions were on D-Day, and he said he flew over the beach at Normandy, trying to bomb the Germans to defend the soldiers coming on shore.

"I didn't think there were as many ships in the world as there were in the English Channel that day. I was glad I was in a plane, I'll tell you that."

Pearson has numerous medals, including the Distinguished Flying Cross and the Air Medal. He also has a pin from belonging to the "Caterpillar Club", which means he had to bail out of a plane to save his life. Pearson said he received that after the war when he was stationed at Langley Field.

"It was a night flight. I got to feeling something was going to happen to the plane. I got on a heading back to Langley Field, and then the number two engine blew up. The whole wing caught on fire. I thought we were going to blow up. The crew bailed out, and then I bailed out. I landed in a pine tree, and got loose from my parachute, and fell to the ground. I broke my right shoulder."

After his time during World War II, Pearson returned to Covington, La., where he opened a flying school. He kept the school going for about three years, but then had to close it. He was recalled to serve in the Korean War, but did not see combat.

After his service, he got out of the military and came back to Picayune, where he has lived ever since. He lives a full life, and still remains active, although he will soon celebrate his 85th birthday.

"For my 83rd birthday, I went down to the coast and went skydiving at Trent Lott Airfield. I'd like to do that

again, and I told them I would be back on my 100th birthday."



Lemuel Pearson, right and with his crew, below, front row, second on the left.

The group pose in front of their plane called the "Dry Run".

