

On a wing and a prayer

Oneonta man recounts day he fought Japanese Zeros and death

By SANDRA FENTIMAN
Community Editor

The Sunday morning dawned clear and bright. Setting out on a routine mission from New Georgia Island in the South Pacific, Oneonta native Samuel Bertuzzi didn't know Sept. 14, 1943, would be a day he would never forget.

Navy flyer Bertuzzi had been in the Pacific since 1941. Fifty years ago, at the height of World War II,

fighting in the Pacific was fierce and had been for months.

Day after day the lieutenant flew missions against Japanese targets. But



Sept. 14 was different, and he hasn't forgotten a detail.

That morning, when the Oneonta man took his place in a group of 18 Grumman Hellcats, his target was a Japanese airstrip roughly 150 miles northwest — Ballale, in the Solomon Islands.

After reaching its target, the squadron was attacked by 60 Japanese Zero fighters. After Bertuzzi shot down one Zero, three others surrounded his plane. A 90 mm shell smashed through the right side of his Hellcat, exploding into the cockpit and shattering his right arm as well as the communications and instrument panel.

"The panic was just incredible," he said. "I thought, 'Christ, I'm going to die. What can I do? What can I do?'"

"Of course my first impulse was to bail out. The plane wasn't burning, or anything else, but my arm was all shattered, and my leg, so I knew that I couldn't fly.

"The hood was controlled by a crank that was up on the right-hand side," he said, reaching forward in his chair as if to turn it. "You had to do it with your right hand; if you cranked it back, it came off. There was an emergency release that you could use, but I couldn't reach it with my left hand."

By this time the dogfight was miraculously over — the other planes had disappeared, both his squadron and the Zeros.

"So all of a sudden I calmed down," he said. "I knew I couldn't get out. If I had bailed out, I

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Star photo by Julie Lewis

At home on Clinton Street in Oneonta, Samuel Bertuzzi wears his Navy dress blue uniform from World War II. He holds a photo of himself taken after being wounded in the South Pacific.

Pilot

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probably would have landed with the Japanese and been killed anyway. So I thought I had to try to fly back.

"At that point I could see no other plane in the whole sky. Evidently I had fallen off to the side," he continued. "All the instruments were gone, nothing there. The only thing that was working was the motor, thank God. And I looked down in the bottom of the cockpit and it was just covered with my blood. And I kept thinking I was going to bleed to death. And I almost did."

After a while his bleeding slowed down.

"Later on I found out that sometimes the shells, when they explode, have a little bit of powder that acts like a cauterizing agent," Bertuzzi said.

But he had no idea where he was going now.

"The only thing I could do was look at the sun and fly south, southeast, so it's got to be over my left shoulder. There are so many islands, my God. Here and here and here," he said, pointing.

"By that point I had calmed down enough so I knew approximately how far I had to fly, if I could find the landing field."

So, Bertuzzi flew toward what he hoped would be his base.

"The only place of protection, so to speak, when you're out over the water is to fly right on the water. Then, of course, if a plane tries to attack then it can't come down because then it would go in."

"All of a sudden I see these tracers go by — tracers are bullets. And I look back and here are two Zeros chasing me. And one of them just creased this shoulder," he said, pointing up to his left. "Thank God it didn't knock my left arm out, because that was the only thing I had to fly with."

Desperately he started "jinking" the plane from left to right as he flew, making it hard for his pursuers to hit him.

"The good old Grumman motor kept going and going," he said. "I was looking back and they would try to raise up to get a run on me, but as they would raise up they'd lose a little speed and I'd pull away. And after about 50 miles they gave up. Now I have absolutely no idea where I am."

All of a sudden he saw another plane following him off to one side.

"Then I could see it was one of ours. And who was it? It was my wingman. And after it was all over with and I got talking with him I

said, 'How the hell did you ever find me? I looked around and I couldn't see anybody.' And he said, 'Sam, I looked off as we were finally regrouping and starting back. I looked out and I saw a little glint on the water. I knew you got hit, so I came over and there you were.'"

After putting his wrist up to his forehead, the signal that he was hurt, Bertuzzi followed his flying partner to the base.

"Now he was a little confused at this point. So where does he lead me but 200 feet right over a Japanese airfield! At least at that point, I knew where we were because this field was on an island only about five miles from where we were. And I looked down and there were these Japanese gunners looking up, saying who are these dumb dodos flying over here? So they never even opened up — they were so surprised," he said.

Though he was almost safe as he neared home turf, Bertuzzi had another crisis coming. A plane had crashed on the landing field, and Bertuzzi's landing gear wouldn't come down. A metal matting was used on top of the fields for support, but to land a plane on its belly on the matting could spark an explosion.

"The only alternative I had was to land in the water next to the field, as close as I could," he said. "And finally, after working the lever, I can still feel my finger being all cut, trying to release this emergency mechanism. And finally just before coming into land in the water, the mechanism worked and the canopy went off. So I thought, 'Well geez, I'm not going to drown now.'"

"Here again, landing in water, if you don't hit it at the perfect angle, you cartwheel and go over," he said. "But I landed on my belly and I tried to land as close to the landing field as I could because I could see my buddies; they were all out there."

"When the plane sank, the water was so shallow I could stand up in the cockpit. That was another plus."

"Then they pushed out a rubber boat and they got me and they put me in the boat. And that was the last thing I remember until I woke up in the foxhole in the middle of the night after we'd been shelled. They just tried to patch me up; we were getting bombed and shelled all night long."

"But with all these things, if any one of them hadn't worked out I'd have been a dead duck," he said.

"I've got a good crease right here in the top of my shoulder: If it had been a half an inch lower, this arm would have been out."

This was Bertuzzi's second time being wounded in the Pacific. Seven months earlier, in February 1943, he crashed in a Hellcat after running out of gas.

"We were heading for Guadalcanal and I landed in a bunch of coconut trees," he said. He had flown into the sun for five hours and suffered sunstroke as well as a broken jaw, multiple facial cuts and a concussion. Bertuzzi has no memory of that accident — only of waking up in the field hospital later.

He spent about three months in a stateside hospital that time before returning to the Pacific.

Born in Oneonta in 1918, Bertuzzi graduated from Oneonta High School in 1936 and from Middlebury College in 1941. It was August of that year before he joined the Navy.

"Right after the Battle of Midway, they said 'We need some reinforcements' so every one of us that had had a minimal amount of training were being shipped out there," he explained. "I'll never forget when I first got out there, our Pacific fleet was practically nil. We only had one carrier that was still afloat — I think that was the Enterprise."

"I think if the Japanese had ever realized how weak we were, how annihilated, they would have started invading the West Coast, but thank God they didn't know," he said.

Bertuzzi says he isn't a hero. He was doing his job. After the war, he came back to Oneonta to live. He got married, had a family, and was postmaster in the city for 32 years, retiring in 1982.

The thing that amazes him now is how much time has passed since that day he was hit.

"No matter if I live to be 150, I guess, the experience would be as vivid as it was then," he said. "I was one of the fortunate few."

Local WWII hero Bertuzzi dead at 77

Served as Oneonta alderman, postmaster

By DENISE RICHARDSON
Staff Writer

ONEONTA — Oneonta lost a civic-minded, decorated World War II hero when Samuel J. Bertuzzi died Wednesday.

Bertuzzi, formerly a postmaster and city alderman, died at his 87 Clinton St. home at age 77 after an extended illness.

"We've lost a big, dependable community citizen," said Tony Drago, a fellow Oneonta native. "It's a great loss to the community."

Bertuzzi was born in Oneonta in 1918. He was the youngest in an Italian-American family and was proud of his Italian heritage. He traveled to the Pacific with the Navy, and returned to his hometown a medaled officer bearing a Purple Heart. He was wounded during a mission as a fighter pilot attacking Japanese forces, an episode vividly recalled.

Bertuzzi made a career in the post of-

fice and was active in civic groups. He retired as Oneonta city postmaster in 1982, after 32 years.

"I have nothing but good things to say about Sam," said Michael Hubbs, a letter carrier hired by Bertuzzi in 1973. Bertuzzi was from the "old-school" postmasters who were political appointees after World War II, Hubbs said.

Bertuzzi had good working relations with his staff, said Hubbs, president of local Branch 97 of the National Association of Letter-Carriers. Bertuzzi expected a day's work, resolved problems at the office, recognized hard work and was ready with a pat on the back for a job well done, Hubbs said.

On a recent day off, Hubbs said he happened to be at the Oneonta post office when Bertuzzi stopped in. The former postmaster asked how he was and seemed amazed at how time had passed when Hubbs said his daughter was in college.

"Sam was a very outgoing, likeable guy," Hubbs said. "I have a very high regard for him ... the best of the best."

Bertuzzi graduated from Oneonta High

School in 1936 and from Middlebury College in Vermont in 1941. Drago said Bertuzzi was an outstanding athlete in football and baseball at OHS, and later, at Middlebury.

Bertuzzi married Angie Lambros from another well-known local family on Oct. 24, 1953. She died Sept. 7, 1995.

On summer evenings, Bertuzzi could be found at Damaschke Field, home of the Oneonta Yankees, where he had box seats.

"Sam Bertuzzi was a great baseball fan," said O-Yanks President and former city Mayor Sam Nader. Bertuzzi was First Ward alderman in the late 1940s, and Nader said, he was a scholar and outstanding person who had all the attributes of a polished gentleman.

Bertuzzi taught Italian at the State University College at Oneonta and was a co-founder of Il Circolo Italiano, a group that met for more than a dozen years in the basement of St. Mary's Roman Catholic Church to read and speak in Italian and discuss current events in Rome. In 1995, he was named "Citizen of the Year" by the Oneonta Italian-American Club

for his service to the city and to the Italian community.

He was widely recognized for his war experiences.

On Sept. 14, 1943, as a 25-year-old naval combat pilot, Lt. Bertuzzi was flying a Grumman Hellcat against the Japanese in the South Pacific and was wounded by enemy fire.

"Bertuzzi was encircled by six enemy aircraft closing in for the kill," Joseph Fiorvanti of Oneonta wrote in a recent newspaper article. "A 25mm shell blasted a hole in his fuselage."

Wounded, weak and thinking death was near, Bertuzzi managed to fly to safety without an instrument panel. Later, his ordeal was recognized when he received the Distinguished Service Cross and a Purple Heart.

On Feb. 18, 1945, a picture of Bertuzzi in full-dress uniform, with his mangled right arm and shoulder in a sling, appeared in a Revere Copper and Brass advertisement run in the New York Times. The ad, a testimonial to U.S. military, read, "God Flew My elicat for 150 Miles."

In a February 1994 Daily Star article



Sam Bertuzzi

commemorating World War II and area veterans, Bertuzzi minimized his heroism and relished the years that had past since his dangerous flight.

"No matter if I live to be 150, I guess, the experience would be as vivid as it was then," Bertuzzi said. "I was one of the fortunate few."

Calling hours are at the Lewis-Hurley Funeral Home in Oneonta at 2-4 p.m. and 7-9 p.m. Friday. A mass will be held at 12:30 p.m. Saturday at St. Mary's Roman Catholic Church in the city.

Fireman