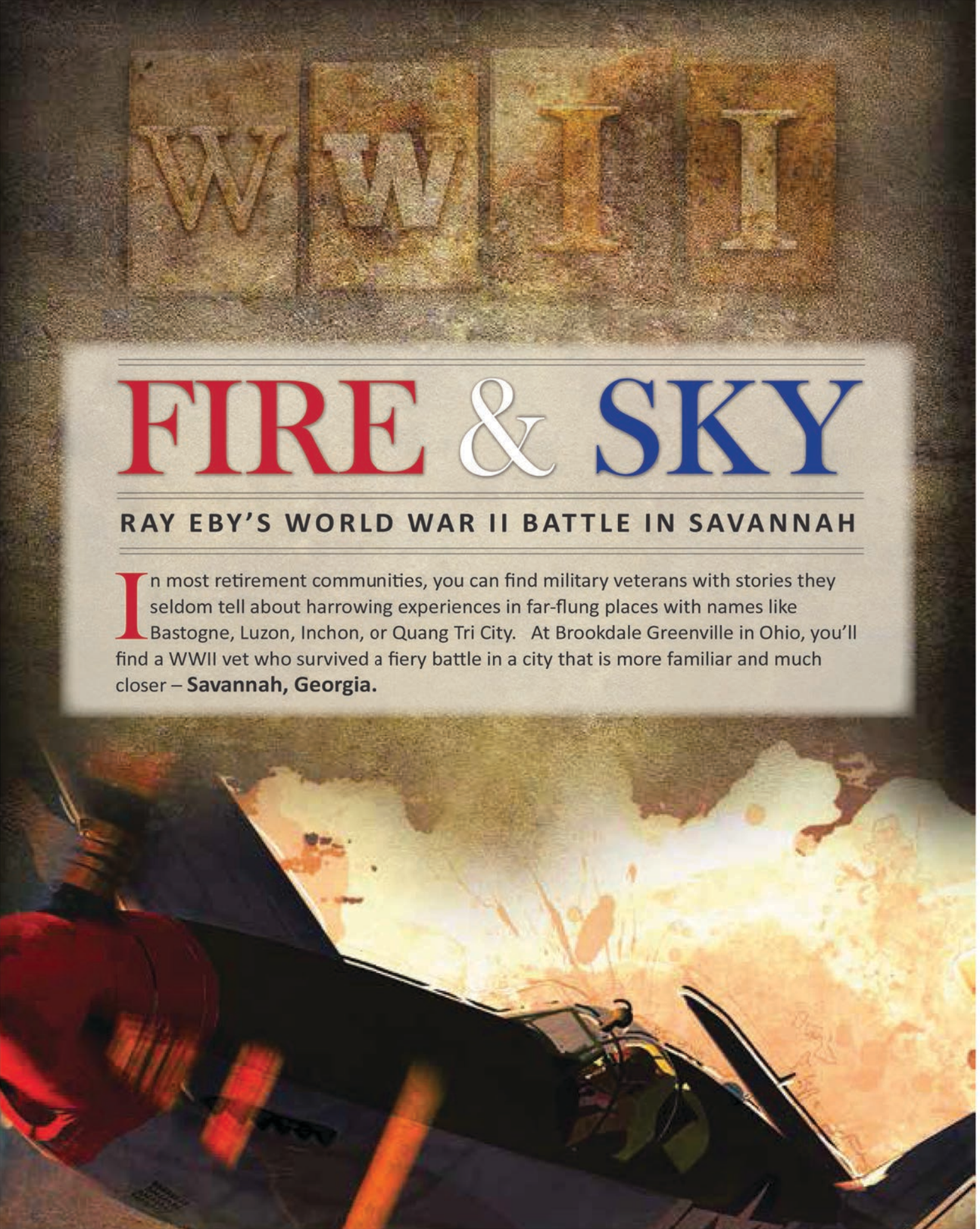

FIRE & SKY

RAY EBY'S WORLD WAR II BATTLE IN SAVANNAH

In most retirement communities, you can find military veterans with stories they seldom tell about harrowing experiences in far-flung places with names like Bastogne, Luzon, Inchon, or Quang Tri City. At Brookdale Greenville in Ohio, you'll find a WWII vet who survived a fiery battle in a city that is more familiar and much closer – **Savannah, Georgia.**

SEEKING FLIGHT

In December 1942, Ray Eby felt a call of duty to enlist. Newspaper reports painted a grim picture of a world where Germany controlled Europe, bombed England, and invaded a large swath of the Soviet Union.

Ray left his father's farm near Hollansburg, Ohio to join the Army Air Force. But after he completed cadet training, the only air crew instruction available was in the Radio Operators School, which wasn't Ray's first choice. He was only two weeks away from graduating that program when flight school openings were announced.

He immediately dropped out of radio school to grab an open slot for one more year of training to become a bomber pilot.

Ray's introductory flight course went easily as he trained in a Stearman PT-13 biplane and passed his solo test on the first try.

Intermediate training placed him in the pilot's seat of a twin-engine bomber. In his test for that phase, the instructors completely covered the windshield of his plane. Ray had to take off, and make course changes in direction and altitude, essentially blindfolded.

Finally, Ray moved on to the big prize — advanced training in a state-of-the-art "Flying Fortress" B-17 bomber. He was the co-pilot of a nine-man crew that would train together, then fly together in combat. They christened their plane "The Green Hornet."

EAGER FOR WAR?

During the two years Ray spent in training, he missed the D-Day invasion and the liberation of France and Belgium. Many of his friends were impatient, worried that the war would end before they had a chance to see combat.

But Ray was a 22-year-old married man, not quite as eager as his single crewmates. His wife Norma was ready to start a family and that made him more cautious. He thought about the possibility he could be hit by anti-aircraft flak or strafed by a Messerschmitt fighter over Germany.

In January 1945, Allied armies were poised to invade Germany, and training for Ray's crew was finally completed. They were ready to join the war.

A FLYING FORTRESS IN FLAMES

In the early morning of January 19, it was still dark at the Army air base near Savannah as the Green Hornet taxied out to the runway in the rain. Ray's crew was about to embark on the first leg of their journey, the "puddle jump" over the Atlantic to an air base in England.

The four engines revved up, and the B-17 began its roll down the runway. As co-pilot, one of Ray's tasks was to retract the landing gear immediately after takeoff. He had done this so often, he had a sense for the length of time the plane would accelerate before lifting off the runway.

But they went far beyond the usual number of seconds for takeoff. Could they have actually lifted off and Ray simply didn't feel it? He asked pilot Henry Hale, "Should I pull up the wheels?" Henry replied, "No. We're not in the air yet."

Finally, after an anxiously long delay, the B-17 slowly rose a few feet above the runway. In the darkness and rain, they could not see the trees ahead.

A sudden crash broke off the bomber's left wing, igniting 2,200 gallons of 100 octane fuel. Ray saw a fiery explosion, coupled with the sound of crunching metal and breaking glass. In those first microseconds, he thought they hit another plane. Then, a blow to the back of his head from a loose turret gun knocked him out. Only unconscious for a few moments, Ray awoke to smoke and fire all around him and said, "It's over with. I'm done for."

Everything that should have been in front of him — the bomber nose, windshield, instrument panel, the pilot, and even the pilot's seat were no longer there. The exit behind the cockpit was blocked by flames. So Ray jumped out of the gaping hole in front to the ground.

To his left, Ray could see a path through the woods, illuminated by the flames. As he ran, the rain on his skin felt like fire. He stopped in a clearing to try moving his arms around into different positions. His limbs seemed to be working properly. There in the darkness, Ray concluded he had not been hurt.

A NINE-MONTH BATTLE

An ambulance arrived 10 minutes later to rush Ray and three other survivors to the military hospital in Savannah.

He didn't see how badly he had been burned until he was wheeled into the light of the hospital. Skin from his fingers was barely hanging on. Second or third-degree burns covered 80 percent of his body. All the hair on his head was gone, and the edges of his ears were burned off.

The doctors went to work, only adding to Ray's pain. They sliced paper-thin sheets of skin from his stomach to perform skin grafts on his right arm and left leg. In recovery, his entire body was wrapped in bandages, with openings for his mouth and eyes. Ray said, "I looked like a mummy."

His fiery WWII battle became a long and painful nine-month struggle in the hospital, marked by special days. One day in April, Ray's medical discharge from the Army Air Force was delivered to his bed.

Five months into Ray's stay, comedian Bob Hope included a visit to the Savannah base hospital during a USO tour. Hope stopped at Ray's bedside to talk with him for a few minutes. Ray was star-struck, and later admitted, "I can't remember anything either of us said."

Ray was still in the hospital in May when word came that Germany had surrendered, followed by Japan in August. There would be no more B-17 bombing missions. Savannah was Ray's first and last battle. Finally, in October 1945, he was released from the hospital to go home.

FORGETTING THE FIRE

When Ray returned to the family farm in Hollansburg, his father bought another 80-acre farm nearby for Ray and Norma, where they worked and raised a son and daughter.

When Ray wore long sleeves, there was no obvious sign of his fiery ordeal. In those days, "post-traumatic stress" was not in the national vocabulary. If a veteran suddenly woke in the night, thinking he was back at the scene of the battle where he was shot, he never mentioned it. If a former soldier became nervous around the flames of a campfire that reminded of a narrow escape from a burning tank, he would never show it. Ray simply and quietly plodded on, providing for his family as a farmer.

LIVING TO FLY

In his 10th year working his farm, Ray was surprised when a farmhand announced he was learning to fly. Since the employee knew about Ray's background, he asked him to come and watch. While standing at the side of the runway at East Richmond Airport, Ray met three investors who were planning to buy a plane and start a charter service.

He looks up at the clear blue sky and remembers how it feels to rise off the ground like the morning mist and escape the confines of earth, lifted by wings into the heavens.

They were very interested in getting his advice as a pilot.

Ray began to imagine a different career for himself in which he could provide for his family while fulfilling his long lost love of flying. So he began a new chapter by selling the farm and partnering with the three other investors to buy the plane and run the charter. Although his new career required tedious tasks of operations management, he had opportunities to fly from time to time.

One day, Ray met Chet Wagner, the inventor of the high-pressure, deep-fryer who founded the Henny Penny company to manufacture and sell those fryers to restaurants and fast food chains across North America. Wagner's success enabled him to buy a new top of the line six-seat Piper Aztec. He came to Ray's airfield ready to pay top dollar to hire a full-time pilot.

Ray imagined what it would be like to escape desk work and just fly for a living. So he sold his share of the charter plane to his partners and became the Henny Penny company pilot. Ray flew to cities all across the U.S. and Canada, sometimes for business, and sometimes just because the CEO felt like enjoying recreational visits to cities like New Orleans, New York, Miami, and San Francisco. Ray says that job "felt like a year-round vacation."

After a few years, Ray decided to settle down in the final phase of his career by buying a Piper plane dealership and opening a flying school. He got to fly every day and be home with Norma each night.

As Ray was nearing retirement, one of his young students decided to fly over his girlfriend's house during his first solo flight. Ray recalled, "The kid went too low and was waving at his girlfriend in her front yard when he flew into a tree. He wasn't hurt, but the plane was totaled."

The first and last years of Ray's flying career were marked by planes flying into trees. The first crash was traumatic and fatal. The last crash was merely expensive.

BACK IN A B-17

Ray is now a longtime resident at the Brookdale Greenville retirement community. He first moved there when it was named Sterling House Greenville.

The Resident Programs Coordinator at the time heard about a B-17 bomber coming to the Richmond Airport as part of a national tour of vintage aircraft. They were charging $350 for rides on a short recreational flight. That price was too steep for Ray, who only charged $3 an hour back in the day when he rented planes. But because of Ray's wartime service, the operators allowed him to sit in the cockpit for a while.

A few years later, Kristin Stephens, the Resident Programs Coordinator for Brookdale Greenville included Ray on a day trip to the National Museum of the U.S. Air Force. Once more, Ray got to see a B-17.

FORGETTING & REMEMBERING

At 93 years of age, Ray forgets and remembers his past in the best ways possible.

When he sat in a vintage B-17 cockpit once again, he remembered the excitement of flying the most advanced aircraft of his day — the biggest and best toy any young man could ever want. Memories of the crash and his World War II battle in a Savannah hospital faded and lost their sting. He reached out and touched the flight controls once more with wrinkled skin that now hides the scars.

When he looks at a photo of his late wife Norma, Ray's memories of the 72 years they had together are in sharp focus, but the nine months they were separated during his painful recovery are now a distant blur.

This early riser goes outside every morning with his hoe and trowel to tend the gardens around Brookdale Greenville, finishing his daily tasks before the day shift associates arrive at 7 a.m. As the first rays of sunlight streak across the sky, Ray's doesn't think of mornings on the farm that promised another long day of toil.

Instead, he vividly recalls daybreak on the airfield, heralded by the roar of an awakening engine, the smell of a freshly filled fuel tank, and the glint of sunrise reflecting off the windshield of his old favorite yellow Piper Cub. He looks up at the clear blue sky and remembers how it feels to rise off the ground like the morning mist and escape the confines of earth, lifted by wings into the heavens.

The experiences and events described herein are the firsthand accounts of the person who is the subject of the article.