

Of War and Life: Army couple served during World War II

By Jannette Jauregui

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On D-Day, Wayne Downing flew behind the front lines in France and bombed the German replacement troops making their way to the coast. Norma Downing later landed on Utah Beach to recover and treat the wounded.

His wife was sitting in her wheelchair waiting for him to answer the door. After welcoming me into their home, he led me to where she sat.

He gently rubbed her back and asked if she was finished with breakfast.

“Do you want to stay in your chair or go into bed,” he asked in a soft tone.

“My back is starting to hurt,” she said.

He pulled the breakfast tray to the side and began to prepare to lift her into bed.

“Norma had a stroke nine years ago,” he told me. “It paralyzed her entire left side.”

He lifted her up and helped her into bed, pulling one leg slowly under the blankets and then followed with the other. Patiently, he asked if she was comfortable, and with a nod she answered yes.

Each morning, Wayne Downing of Thousand Oaks wakes up in a bed he placed just behind her home hospital bed to care for his wife of 65 years. Because she is immobile, he has moved most of what they need to the downstairs family room where they sleep.



COURTESY PHOTO

Wayne Downing of Thousand Oaks, served as an Army pilot during World War II.

“I do what I need to do to give her what she needs,” said Downing, who turned 90 just over a month ago.

Norma was used to caring for others.

She worked as a nurse for most of her life, beginning her Army career in England during World War II.

That's where they met.

Downing had enlisted in the Army Air Corps in the summer of 1941 after finishing his third year at the University of Denver.

He was sent to Fort Logan, Colo., as an aviation cadet and then to the San Antonio Cadet Center in Texas, where he completed his initial cadet training.

Then came Pearl Harbor. Downing was on a weekend pass with friends.

"It was a Sunday morning and a cadet came up and yelled, 'Report to your base,'" Downing recalled. "We got back, lined up in formation behind the commissary and were told to put our civilian clothes in a box and send them home. They told us we were at war and that we wouldn't need them anymore."

Soon after, Downing was sent to the Spartan School of Aeronautics in Tulsa, Okla., for primary flying school and to Goodfellow Field in Texas, where he completed basic flying school. He completed advanced flying school at Moore Field in Texas.

By the fall of 1942, Downing was combat ready as a member of the 85th Bomb Group Dive.

"We were told we were going to San Diego to get ready to be sent to the war in the Pacific," he said. "We stopped in Louisiana and by the next day, we had been told that there was no longer a need for dive bombers in the Army. Our group no longer existed."

By February 1943, Downing was on his way to war, and this time it was for real. He was to be a member of the 8th Air Force, 67th Reconnaissance Group, 2911th Bomb Squadron.

"We flew C-54s over," he said. "We went from Tennessee to Maine to Goose Bay to Greenland, Iceland and then England."

By October 1943, Downing had been transferred to the 9th Air Force, 416th Bomb Group.

While training in England, Downing heard about a dance hosted by American Army nurses. He went and met Norma, a nurse with the 298th General Hospital. The two began dating, but the war was getting closer.

“We knew eventually we were going to invade,” Downing said of the D-Day attacks. “We just didn’t know exactly when until the night before.”

Downing and his crew were given orders to paint black and white stripes on their plane to help the Allied forces recognize friendly aircraft and avoid being shot down by their own men.

On June 6, 1944, Downing flew behind the front lines in France and bombed the German replacement troops making their way to the coast. Each day for a week, he and his crew flew the same mission trying to stop as many Germans as possible and to lessen the amount of ammunition they had available.

Norma also played a role in the D-Day attacks.

Three weeks after the invasion, Norma landed on Utah Beach to recover the wounded and treat them in the makeshift hospital made from tents.

“It was never something she liked talking much about,” Downing said. “I know she saw some terrible things.”

By October 1944, Downing had flown 65 successful missions and was given the opportunity to go home.

“I decided to stay,” he said. “I wanted to fly a P-38 and thought I would stay to have my shot at that.”

But first he had one thing left to take care of.

He travelled to Cherbourg, France, where Norma and the rest of the 298th had taken over a German hospital. The two were married soon after he arrived.

They had two ceremonies. The first was in the mayor's office at 11 a.m. It was a ceremony that fulfilled France's requirements. The second was with an American chaplain in the living room of the chateau where the nurses had their quarters.

Downing never got the chance to fly a P-38. Instead he was assigned to an A-26 and flew in 21 more missions over France, Germany, and into Czechoslovakia. On March 3, he flew his 86th and final mission.

When the war in Europe ended in May 1945, both Downing and his new wife were sent home. Norma was discharged soon after. Downing decided to remain in what was soon to become the Air Force.

After returning to the United States, Downing enrolled in the University of Minnesota, where he completed his degree in engineering. In the summer of 1950, he received orders to report for active duty flying a B-50 Superfortress in the Korean War. From 1954 through 1963, he flew missions from the United States to England and to Guam as part of the Cold War efforts.

He retired from the Air Force in 1963. He enrolled in the University of Maine that year and completed his master's degree in mathematics. He worked as a math teacher for 20 years and retired in 1985.

It may be easy to look at him now and not realize his contribution to this country, and I am almost sure that most people don't know what he does each day to care for Norma.

Quiet acts of heroism overseas and at home.

— Of War and Life is a twice-monthly column that tells the stories of area veterans. Contact Jannette Jauregui at jannette@jannettejauregui.com or by mail to Jannette Jauregui, c/o Ventura County Star editorial department, P.O. Box 6006, Camarillo, CA 93011. For information, go to her Web site <http://www.jannettejauregui.com>.

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NOTE: The article above erroneously states that Wayne Downing completed his undergraduate degree at the University of Minnesota. His education at UM was interrupted by the Korean War and he finished his undergraduate work at the University of Arizona.

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