

World War II photographer leaves legacy through historic images

BY KATHY BROWN
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GILLETTE — Jack L. “Junior” Bennick left his mark on Gillette long before he served in World War II.

The Gillette native grew up with a camera in his hand after his mother gave him his first box camera as a child.

As a senior in high school in 1938, he took photographs of the annual homecoming parade as it wound its way down Gillette Avenue. He also took advantage of the old barnstorming days and his love of aviation to fly in a plane and take photographs of his small town from above.

But it wasn’t until Bennick graduated from Campbell County High School early and joined the Navy in January 1939 that he found his calling, one that led to numerous adventures — and nearly his death in 1942.

He not only took thousands of photographs to record those times — many of them unpublished — but he helped his son and family appreciate those in the community who also served in the war, some making the ultimate sacrifice.

Bennick died in 2003, but he continues to leave his imprint on the community. Hundreds of his photographs have been loaned to the Campbell County Rockpile Museum, which opened an exhibit based on his collection Thursday night. The exhibit continues through May.

Those superb photographs also provide details of the man who shot and preserved them for us to share more than 73 years later.

That, to his son, is the true gift.

Greg Bennick recalls being about 6 years old and pestering his father to let him see his photographs and mementos of the war. He’d see his father’s old uniforms hanging in the closet, take parts of them and wear them when he played “soldier” with his friends.

That’s probably why some of the uniforms are incomplete today, he said.

It would take all day just to unpack the crates his father stored the material in, Greg said. It would take that long to hear his father’s stories.

When he succeeded in getting his father to open the treasures in his collection — usually on one of those stormy winter days in Gillette — it fed Greg’s combined interest in the military and history.

He could picture his father as a young man taking those photos, one who enjoyed



Greg Bennick shows Rockpile Museum’s collections assistant Cara Reeves photos his father Jack Bennick, took during World War II as they choose items to go into the new exhibit “Views of Vanuatu: WWII Through the Lens of Jack Bennick” in Gillette Wednesday Jan. 31, 2018.

COURTESY PHOTO | KELLY WENZEL/GILLETTE NEWS RECORD

life to the fullest and was as adept photographing stars like Bob Hope and Jack Benny touring the Pacific in USO shows as he was with Eleanor Roosevelt visiting wounded GIs, native tribesmen, sailors, women (at least his many girlfriends) and as a crewman on Navy jets and planes.

“In my perspective, he was a bigger-than-life guy,” Greg said. “But most young men see their fathers in that regard.”

Greg was one of five children in the family, sandwiched between two older and two younger sisters. He learned, as they all did, that his father valued hard work. Jack Bennick rose from being a janitor at Stockmens Bank after the war to retiring as its first vice president.

He was an honest, respected and dignified man, Greg said. He felt, as did many of his era, that you could beat any odds with hard work. He demonstrated that with every challenge he took on.

“I know that his military service had a profound impact in his life because when he went in for heart surgery ... he talked about that before he went into surgery,” said an emotional Greg, wiping away a tear. “He said second to our family, his service was the most valuable thing he felt like he had done. What he did in

the service stayed with him the rest of his life.”

When Bennick entered the Navy, most likely in San Francisco, he was assigned to the flight deck on the USS Lexington, an aircraft carrier built in 1921. He worked to recover and launch planes.

Bennick was a child of the Depression. He was seeking opportunity and was in a rush to get there with the Navy. At 18 years old and on his first adventure beyond Wyoming, he loved romping in the sun on the beach with his friends. He loved Hawaii and the Pacific.

Assigned to help out in the photo lab on the Lex, Bennick tried out to become a photographer’s mate. He was good at it, and he was soon sent to photo school in Florida.

When he graduated from there, he was assigned to the newest aircraft carrier in the Navy, the USS Wasp. The ship was in Grass Bay, Bermuda, on a training run when the attack on Pearl Harbor happened.

Briefly assigned to the Atlantic to help ferry British Spitfires from Scotland to Malta, the ship was sent to the South Pacific as the United States lost valuable aircraft carriers to Japan, including the Lex. The Wasp joined part of the Eastern Solomons campaign, including supporting the island-hopping invasion of Guadalcanal. She sailed often in a corridor soldiers had nicknamed Torpedo Junction. And it was there she met her end.

On Sept. 15, 1942, the Wasp fell in the sights of Shogo Narahara, commander of the Japanese submarine I-19. If Bennick hadn’t crossed over the international dateline, it would have been Sept. 14, 1942, his 21st birthday.

Shogo sent off a full contingent of six new long-lance torpedoes toward the Wasp. Three struck the ship within 30 seconds of each other. Another missed and nine minutes later hit the

destroyer O’Brien, which later sank. A fifth traveled even farther, striking the battleship North Carolina a minute later. Many officials thought it had to be the work of two submarines because of how far the torpedoes traveled in the Pacific.

But it was the work of one submarine that caught the Wasp as she was turning and finishing recovering aircraft. That set off the aviation fuel lines and tanks on board in an explosion so violent that it shook airplanes off the deck on the first hit. It was eerily similar to the death of the Lex.

Bennick was inside the Wasp at the time, putting clean laundry into his locker when the first torpedo hit, he told the News Record in 1942 after being sent home to recover. He started above deck, then returned, locked his locker and went to look for his life preserver.

Later, the story said, he was in the water with eight shipmates battling the waves for four hours.

“I knew someone had to stay awhile, so I thought it might as well be me,” he said at the time.

“This aircraft carrier was one of the largest ships in the United States Navy and for it to shudder and shake like that, he knew something really bad had happened,” Greg said. “So he grabbed his camera and ran out on the flight deck and started taking photographs of everything that was going on. All he told me was the ship was on fire and they couldn’t get the fire under control.

“As you can imagine, there was an explosion, there was fire and the ship was completely engulfed from about the middle of the ship to the bow,” Greg said.

Capt. Forrest Sherman tried to put the Wasp into reverse to back the ship away from the fire roiling on its deck. He hoped to keep the fire isolated in the bow, Greg said. It didn’t work.

A short time later, knowing the crew couldn’t contain the fires, he ordered his men to abandon ship.

“All this time, dad is taking photograph after photograph and they’re trying to launch all the aircraft before the (ship’s) list becomes so bad they can’t see the flight deck anymore,” Greg said.

His father told Greg he grabbed several rolls of exposed film, put them in a canister and handed it to one of the pilots of the planes.

“He said, ‘Get these to a photo lab somewhere.’ And those pictures, unfortunately, were never seen again,” Greg said. “We don’t know what happened.”

His dad ran back to his quarters to grab the waterproof case he had made for his camera. He was unable to reach it, however, because of the fire.

“He didn’t know what to do with the camera, so he threw it into a gun tub that was there for one of the anti-aircraft guns and went over the side,” Greg said.

“When he got into the water, there was oil on the sea. There was fire on the sea. He swam a ways,” Greg said.

A strong swimmer, Bennick quickly realized there was a major problem. The ship was still making slow turns on one of her screws, and it could pull him in. He was wearing an aviation lifebelt around his waist.

“So somehow, in all of this excitement, he had torn a hole in this thing,” Greg recalled. “It wouldn’t hold air, so his little lifebelt wasn’t any good. But he swam around the bow of the ship then. He actually swam alongside the ship until he got up and crossed over in front of the bow to get on the side where the ship was now turning away from him.”

He was safe then and tread water for about four hours with other sailors until he was picked up by a destroyer. The Navy later

had to scuttle the Wasp to make sure she sank.

Covered in oil, Bennick was wrapped in a blanket and given a cup of coffee and a carton of cigarettes.

“He said that was when he started smoking cigarettes, but I knew he smoked cigarettes before that,” Greg said.

Bennick also had a different view of the incident than many history books.

He said it was uncomfortable, even painful, to be in the water while the destroyers set off depth charges trying to sink the Japanese submarine. But he disagreed with accounts that said the I-19 wasn’t sunk then and went down more than a year later after being attacked with depth charges by the USS Radford.

“He says definitely for sure the I-19 was sunk. He didn’t know it was the I-19 at all,” Greg said. “That didn’t become known until 25 years later or whatever from Japanese records.

... But he knew that the Japanese submarine had been sunk because at one point there was a huge underwater explosion and then they saw the bow of that submarine broach the surface and then go down. That was his story. He believed that.”

To add credence to the story, he notes that the I-19 never reported on the success of the new torpedoes it deployed in one of the most damaging salvos of torpedoes in history.

The Navy conducted a hearing afterward to determine what had happened and Sherman’s role in the sinking that cost the lives of 193 men and wounded 366. Still, most of the ship’s contingent of 1,969 men survived.

Sherman, Greg said, went on to become the chief of naval operations for the United States.

“The miracle of this whole thing, the sinking of the Wasp, and it goes to Capt. Sherman’s credit, is that so many of these sailors were saved,” he said.

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Wed Pool Tournament	9:00 a.m.	Billiard Room
Thurs -Old Stuff Day	10:30 a.m.	Café
Fri - Dominoes-Mexican Train	1:00p.m.	Café
Sat- Billiards Open Play	9:00 a.m.	Billiard Room
Mon- French Beading	1:30 p.m.	Art Studio

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SENIOR HAPPENINGS |

- Old Stuff Day, March 1 from 10:30 a.m. – 12:30 p.m. Bring in one item to display and attach a brief description of where you got it, who you got it from, why you got it and why you keep it. If you plan to participate, sign up at the front desk.
- Trivia Thursdays, This is JEOPARDY. If trivia is your game, join the Hub on Smith on the first and third

Mondays of each month with host Barbara Blue. It all begins March 5 at noon in the café.

- Watercolor painting class, Tuesdays, March 6 to April 10 from 10:00 a.m. – noon. Gail Sidletsky is offering a six-week spring session. \$25.00 suggested contribution for registered seniors, \$30.00 fee for unregistered folks.