

AVIATION WALL OF HONOR



Captain Arvid Hemmila

Born June 24, 1920 in Negaunee to Andrew and Femme Hemmila, Arvid worked as a miner at the Maas and Negaunee Mines while taking flying lessons from Marquette's Sig Wilson. "Sig gave me my first ride when I was 17," Arvid said. "I continued to take lessons after I went in the iron mines. I'd take lessons on payday, once or twice a month." Arvid married Irene Hintsala in October 1942, and they were

expecting their first child when he joined the Army Air Force in April 1943.

During World War II, the Allies were fighting their way west across the Pacific Ocean, rolling back Japanese gains. In September 1944, Gen. Douglas MacArthur decided to capture the Molucca Islands south of the Philippine Islands to protect his left flank in his drive to recapture the Philippines. The island of Halmahera was cleared of enemy troops and became a home base for the U.S. 13th Army Air Force.

One of its leading pilots was Arvid Hemmila, a 9th grade dropout from Negaunee, Michigan. The ex-iron ore miner piloted a B-24 Liberator bomber with a 10-man crew through 41 bombing missions with the loss of only one crew member.

Despite his unfinished education, he was accepted for flight training. "They passed him because he's a real smart guy," said his wife Irene. Arvid trained at Central Air Command in

AVIATION WALL OF HONOR

Texas, LeMoore Field in Fresno, California, and Walla Walla Air Force Base in Washington before leaving in the fall of 1944 on a 36-hour trip to New Guinea. After two training missions out of New Guinea, he was off to join the 13th Army Air Force on Halmahera Island in the Moluccas.

Targets for Arvid and his crew were Japanese shipping and military bases on enemy-held islands. Bombing efforts helped support Allied invasions as they marched closer to the Japanese mainland. Some trips ran 1200-1400 miles one way, and as far west as China. On every 11th mission, it was Arvid's turn to take along a military cameraman.

"I only lost one crew member. He was a ball turret gunner who rode in the bubble under the plane. He was killed by a direct hit from a 135mm shell. It blew him right off the plane at an elevation of about 10,000 feet." Arvid had to negotiate a landing at sea, far from home. All the crew members were dumped in the ocean for later pickup by the Air-Sea Rescue Group.

On another occasion, their plane was damaged by enemy fire and had to make a forced landing on Mindoro in the Philippines. Although the brakes were shot, Arvid said he was able to bring the plane in safely. He greatly understated his own efforts in this drama.

George McGill, Arvid's navigator on the B-24, elaborated on what happened: "Our tail section was moving up and down like a yo-yo," he said. When the plane reached the end of the landing strip, "it broke in two!"

Said gunner Al Lipusch: "He [Arvid] maneuvered a miraculous landing on that battered air strip. He should have gotten a medal for that accomplishment, but regrettably he never did."

The group hitchhiked to Leyte Island just north of Mindoro and eventually got back to the Moluccas. After returning safely from his 41st mission, he got a 30-day furlough home to

AVIATION WALL OF HONOR

Negaunee. As his train was passing through Milwaukee in August 1945, he looked out the train window and saw newspaper headlines proclaiming that the war was over.

When his furlough was up, he returned to San Antonio, Texas for mustering out. He was discharged with the rank of captain. His decorations included the American Campaign Medal, World War II Victory Medal, Asiatic Pacific Campaign Medal, Air Medal, and Honorable Service Lapel Button. "In all the confusion after the war," said Irene, "Arvid never got the medal for heroism that he earned on all those missions."

After the war, Arvid flew as a pilot with Cleveland Cliffs Iron Company's charter service, then took a job as a welder in the CCI maintenance department while attending night classes at Negaunee High School to earn his high school diploma. He retired from CCI in 1982.

He kept his interest in flying, however. "He had two Piper Cubs parked in the yard," said Irene. "We'd take one and go to pick berries somewhere." He and Irene also operated the old Marquette airport for several years.

In 1999, after suffering a stroke while plowing snow, Arvid became a resident of Jacobetti Home for Veterans in Marquette. He died October 19, 2000 at the age of 80. He was survived by his wife and five children.

Larry Chabot, 2004

