

was flying the "Oscar" at the time, the precursor to the infamous Zero. "We couldn't out-turn them...we didn't even try to, but we could out fly them. We shot down every one we saw, but I didn't get any. Somebody beat me to it every time," he can barely conceal the disappointment in his voice.

Bob points to another photo of his "flight," the pilots who flew in his four-plane formation, the Bees, the men he led. "They're all gone. All four of these are gone except me. I don't know why. I was the oldest to begin with."

Just about then, Anna Belle, his wife of 62 years, saunters to the doorway of the comfortable enclosed porch at their home outside Orange. "Bob are you telling anything I don't already know?" she mock scolds. "It's been 60 years, and I've heard 'em all."

"Come on, you can correct me," he tells her good-naturedly.

"I can make up an ending myself," she laughs, adding with a huge, stage-sized wink, "Don't believe any of it. He makes up half of it."

Bob Eason...born in Suffolk 1917, attended Hampden-Sydney where he lettered in four sports, and is in the college's hall of fame. "Football and baseball were my best sports, and basketball I had too many thumbs." He adds matter-of-factly, "and track, I ran the half mile and also threw the javelin. I had a good arm."

Bob Eason taught school and coached in Franklin, VA for a year, and then saw that a war was about to happen. He had no idea about flying, but he thought he'd like to try. On September 4, 1941

he entered the Army Air Corps Aviation Cadet Program. Three months later, his prediction came true; the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor.

Everyone from those days remembers what they were doing on Pearl Harbor Day, just as we all remember what we were doing on 9-11. Bob Eason was in basic flight training in Greenville, Mississippi. "Several of us went in to a movie. We came out and people were running up and



Above, among the many medals that Bob Eason earned during World War II were the Distinguished Flying Cross, the Air Medal with two Oak Clusters, and the Silver Star, the latter for a daring rescue of his commanding officer in Burma.

Photo by Phil Audibert



Below, the P-51D with its trademark bubble canopy packed quite a punch: six 50-caliber machine guns, two 500-pound bombs or two napalm bombs, even rocket launchers. With external tanks, the plane could fly eight hours straight. Japanese "Oscars" were no match for this deadly force.

down the streets and blowing horns, all excited. Man, we got back to the base in a hurry, you know. And they called a meeting of all the cadets and said, 'Send your civilian clothes home because we're at war. You won't be needing those for awhile.'"

When Eason earned his wings, his assignment to a fighter squadron was the result of a typographical error. "They used to take all the tall guys and put them in bombers and transports, and short guys go in to fighters," explains the lanky, six-foot-

tall Eason. "So we all said we wanted to be a fighter pilot, glamorous and all that sort of stuff. When the orders came out that I was a fighter pilot, I was really happy. So when I got there I was head and shoulders above the other guys." Later he found out, "They had me at five-foot-five inches tall, and that's how I got in. That's how I got to be a fighter pilot." No problem cramming his frame into that tiny cockpit. Bob Eason says, "I LOVED fighters."

From June 1942 to March 1944, Bob Eason was assigned to Madden Field in Panama, ("the greatest flying there ever was") essentially flying missions to guard the canal and intercept incoming aircraft. He quickly worked his way up through the ranks, becoming Operations Officer for the 29th Fighter Squadron. In those days, the Japanese were developing oversize submarines that could carry an aircraft with folded wings that could be launched by catapult. "Their plan was to send these subs close to the Panama Canal and take off and bomb the canal and come back and land in the water and pick 'em up."

It never happened. Instead, Bob was sent home on leave, married his sweetheart from Petersburg, Anna Belle, and by the autumn of 1944 was traveling by ship across the Pacific and Indian Oceans (it took 30 days to get there) to fly from bases in India and southern Burma. All told, Bob Eason flew 63 missions over 263

combat hours. He was awarded the Silver Star, the Distinguished Flying Cross and the Air Medal with two oak clusters, among numerous other distinctions.

When the war ended, Bob became a TWA pilot out of New York but found it, well...boring. "That wasn't the life for me," he says. Besides Anna Belle detested the long hours he was away from home flying airliners. So, he took a job teaching high school math and coaching football, basket-

ball and baseball at Petersburg High School.

After a brief stint with the Civil Service, Bob Eason heard of a job opening at Woodberry Forest, and, starting in 1955, taught math and coached there for 14 years. Then he went to the Blue Ridge School and did the same thing as Associate Head Master for another 14 years. "I loved Woodberry Forest and I loved Blue Ridge, both of them entirely different."

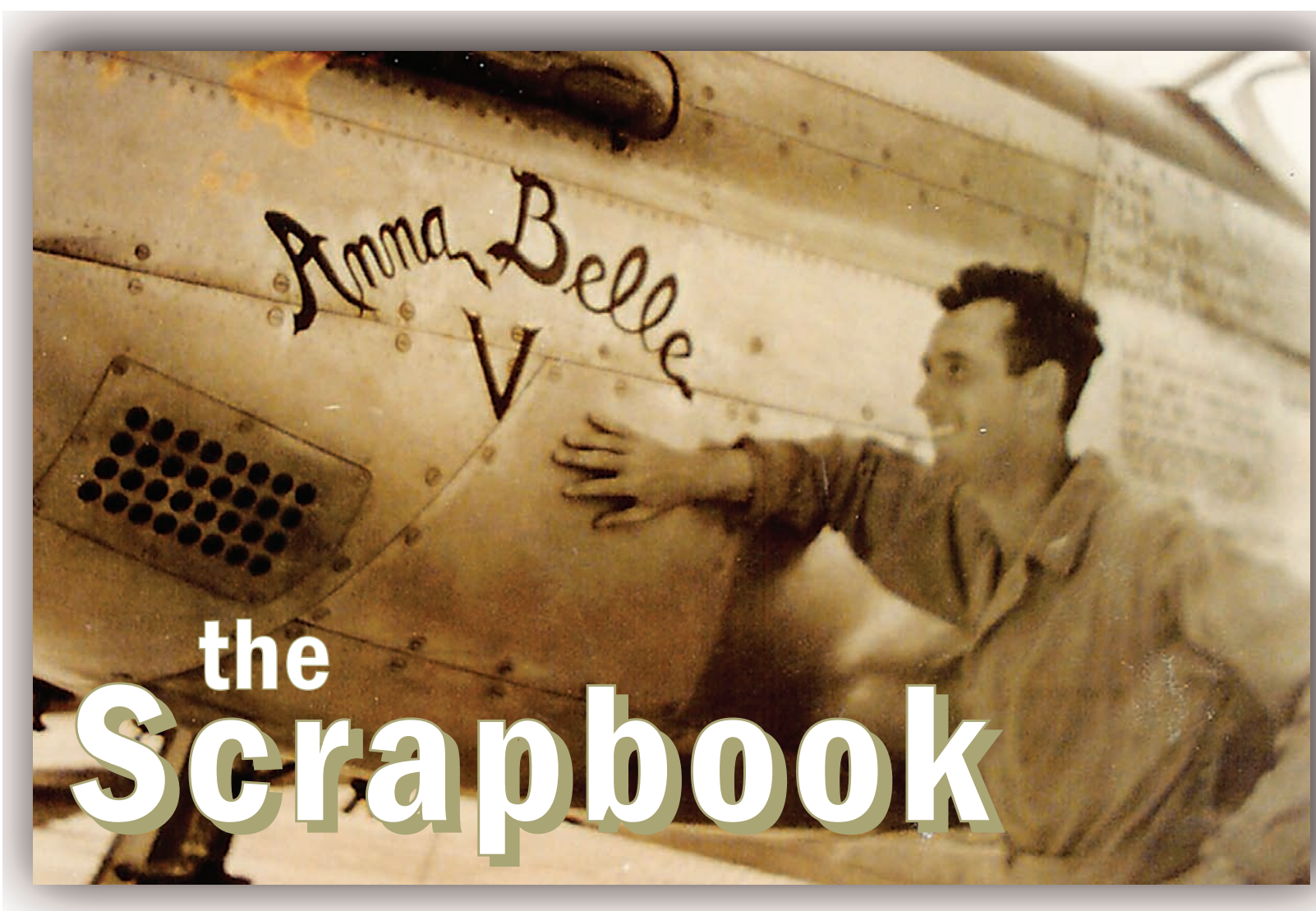
During this time, Bob flew with the Air Force Reserves. "I enjoyed that, I could fly all summer. I'd go up and fly every day...made more money doing that than teaching school." And so after he retired, he and Anna Belle were able to make 10 free trips to Europe on military flights on a "space available basis."

Anna Belle does not like to fly...claims she even has trouble going down stairs. But she flew to Europe because "you couldn't beat the price." Has she ever flown in a small plane with Bob at the controls? Bob laughs heartily. "She flew twice," he says, "the first and last time." Big laugh all around.

Anna Belle gestures over her shoulder in the general direction of the Orange Airport. "And we got in this plane, and I was in the back seat and I felt like I was sitting on top of the steeple at the Presbyterian Church," she says aghast. "We came down to make another swoop and he said 'Do you want to go up again?' and I said, 'NO! I was green as grass.'" Bob teases, "I said 'next time we'll get an open cockpit and we'll fly upside down.'" Anna Belle just shakes her head.

In 1982, Bob joined the World War II Air Commando Association (he was inducted to its Hall of Fame in 1996). In 1985, he became its newsletter editor and treasurer. For the next 21 years, Bob Eason faithfully produced the association's newsletters, filling them with anecdotes and accounts, news of veterans...and obits... and most of all, photographs of the handsome young men, full of vitality posing in front of their flying machines, goggled helmets cocked back at rakish angles.

"I'm sorry to say most of them are dead now," says Bob somberly. And so, with the good sense to know when to quit, Bob Eason who turns 89 next month, mailed out his last WWII Air Commando Newsletter a couple of weeks ago. Plans for one more "last reunion" had to be scrapped because only 12 men responded "yes."



The photos show handsome young men, full of vitality, posing in front of their flying machines, goggled helmets cocked back at rakish angles. In others, groups of smiling fellows in khaki share a beer and a laugh at a bar, or stand shirtless underneath palm trees, showing off their physiques. You can almost hear the Andrews Sisters singing "The Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy of Company B" in the background.

W.R. "Bob" Eason has a great scrapbook. It must be fully four and a half inches thick, well-organized with typewritten captions to the black and white photographs. He even has his old Social Security card, his "short snorter," and his instrument rating preserved between the pages. He flips slowly and thoughtfully through this book of memories, reliving his years flying fighter planes in the China-Burma-India Theatre during World War II. It was a helluva time.

"That was our flight surgeon. What a great guy," he says affectionately. Of

another, he says "This was a pilot in my flight, and he was shot down near Rangoon, captured by the Japanese and later was beheaded." He imparts this shocking information in flat, unemotional tones. It explains why he makes no apology for trying his best to kill as many Japanese as he could.

Bob flips the page again. "Oh, the short snorter," he smiles broadly. He points to a creased and crumpled dollar bill covered with signatures. "You went into a bar and they'd say, 'Lemme see your short snorter.'" If you couldn't produce it then you had to buy the drinks. "Everybody had a short snorter," and his even has concert violinist, Jascha Heifetz's autograph on it. Or, how about the time they barbecued a sacred cow in India, which resulted in a police investigation, a \$50 fine, and something of a delicate diplomatic situation. "We had a great barbecue," he shrugs mischievously.

These cocky guys were the best...World War II-era Top Guns...



Top photo, Captain Bob Eason named all five of his fighters after his wife, Anna Belle. After World War II, Eason remained in the Air Force Reserve and retired a full Colonel after 30 years service. He and Anna Belle have three children, three grandchildren, and a great grandson. Above, Anna Belle and Bob Eason relax in the den of their home just outside Orange. Bob flew 63 missions during World War Two in P-51D fighter planes. He later coached and taught math for 14 years at Woodberry Forest.

Photo by Phil Audibert

He flips slowly and thoughtfully through this book of memories, reliving his years flying fighter planes in the China-Burma-India Theatre during World War II. It was a helluva time.

"Highpockets," they called themselves...Air Commandos flying the state-of-the-art P-51D fighters out of exotic places like Kalaikunda, India and Cox's Bazaar in Burma. Orange resident Bob Eason, 88, was one them, and he can remember it like it was yesterday.

He turns the page and sees a picture of his flight crew. It sparks a story. Each pilot received a ration of 3.2 beers every month. "We'd get the beer and couldn't cool it. So we took a belly tank, cut a hole in it and we put in several cases of beer and would fly up at altitude to chill the beer and then we'd come down and drink the beer," he roars with laughter. "We would drink the beer up on the first night, and then we'd sit around for 29 days moaning about when we would get our next beer." The pilots also received a bottle of whiskey every month. But Eason wisely gave that to his crew chief as a thank you for taking care of him. Bob looks at the picture of the crew chief and says, "He died not too long ago." He's having to say that more and more these days.

Bob flips the pages. There's a photo of him by the Anna Belle 5. Bob named all five of his planes for his wife, even before they were married. What an aircraft. Carrying two 500-pound bombs or two napalm bombs ("put a hand-grenade on it and when it hits it explodes,") the P-51D also had six 50-caliber machine guns, three on each wing; it could even carry rockets.

"It really was a beauty, the greatest plane of World War II," says Bob as he points to a picture of one with its signature bubble canopy and lightning bolts painted on the wings. Bob led the "B" group of four aircraft, and so they all adopted a "Bee" theme. Bob's was Queen Bee, another guy was Buzzing Bee, and then one had to be a "Son of a Bee." And speaking of funny plane names, another of the pilots called his aircraft "Big Gas Bird." And speaking of gas, these planes, with external tanks, could fly for eight hours straight. In fact, Bob's unit conducted the longest raid so far in the war, 1,600 miles round-trip to bomb the Japanese airbase in Bangkok, Thailand.

The Air Commandos' primary task was to provide air support for the Brits as they forced the Japanese back from Mandalay to Rangoon... "going in machine gunning, dropping napalm and bombing ahead of them." Bob pauses a beat and adds with a curious smile, "If you call war fun, that was fun. It was really fun going in strafing. We'd go in right on the deck and strafe and see them running."

The Japanese had no match for these machines. Bob's group shot up 100 or more planes sitting on the ground. "I got six all together on the ground, and then we got about 18 in the air, but we didn't see many. We shot down every one we saw. They wouldn't go against us because we were too much for them. We were too powerful with the P-51's." The enemy

Of belly landings and rice paddy rescues



Captain Bob Eason, on the right, and Lt. Bob Spann, on the left, flank their commanding officer, Colonel Levi Chase, center, who they rescued after his plane was forced to belly land in a rice paddy in Japanese-held territory in Burma. Eason and Spann were awarded the Silver Star for the feat. Note how much taller Eason is compared to the other two.

It was just before graduation from flight school when Bob Eason was told he and two other cadets needed a few more hours night flying to earn their wings. So, despite threatening weather, they took off in the middle of the night from their field in Alabama with an instructor leading.

"Well, we started hitting the weather and pretty soon we were right down on the deck because of the rain clouds and fog. Pretty soon the instructor started circling. And I said, 'I believe we are lost.'"

"Safe at second"

They spied the small town of Lumberton, Mississippi and circled. A good soul started flashing his car-mounted search light at them and drove out of town "and lined up his car in an open field, indicating that's where we could land if we had to." The instructor with his cadet passenger went in first "wheels up, a belly landing...a real sudden stop; the prop digs in." The second plane did the same in another field.

Bob was last. "I was desperate for gas," he recalls. Then he noticed that someone had turned on the lights in the Lumberton baseball park. He spied two rows of lights with the bleachers at the far end. "I said I think I can go through that opening (between the lights) and land on the baseball field."

Bob came in as slowly as he could. But blocking the opening "was a dead tree, and I gave it the gas and pulled up, and when I did I stalled 'cause I was going so slow, and I stalled and went down one wing low and spun around a couple of times."

In those days the trainers had seat belts but not shoulder straps. "It threw me forward and I hit the canopy over the instruments with my

nose. When I stopped, I was just bleeding like a cut hog." About 50 people came running out. Having taken the precaution to cut all the switches, Bob got out and noted that, "I ended up at second base...a safe landing at second."

Bob was taken to a doctor, was reunited with the instructor and other two cadets and was later transferred to an army base hospital. Meanwhile his family had driven all the way from Suffolk, VA to Alabama for his graduation. When they learned that he'd been in an accident, "my mother just went all to pieces...airplane crash, all she could think of was that was it." They drove all night to the army base in Mississippi to find Bob "all black and blue," but otherwise in fine fettle.

Many years later, Bob and Anna Belle returned to Lumberton and talked to the sons of the man who had driven out and showed the way to the field. They also talked to some of the witnesses at the ball field. One man told him, "You know right there where you landed at second base, we can't get any grass to grow there because of all the gasoline that was spilled there." Bob didn't know he had any gasoline left in the plane.

That was Bob Eason's first belly landing but not his last. In Panama, one of his main wheels wouldn't go down on the tricycle gear on Anna Belle II. He couldn't even hand-crank it down. So he radioed a base to say he was coming in for a belly landing on the grass. He could see the ambulances and fire trucks line up, and put the plane in just as nice as you please, this time restrained by shoulder straps.

The first person to come out to him was Lt. General, H.R. Harman, who, by the way, later became the first Commandant of the Air Force Academy. Eason, expecting a full dressing-down was surprised when Harman praised his skillful landing. Eason said, "Well, General, this is not the first time. This is the second." The general said good-naturedly, "That's enough, son. You don't need to do that any more."



Bob Eason led the "B" flight of four planes. So, on the right side of his P-51D fighter he inscribed Queen Bee. "I loved fighters," he says of his combat flying experience. He is credited with strafing and knocking out at least six Japanese aircraft in attacks on enemy air fields.

"Rice paddy rescue"

The Japanese in Thailand would fly up to a smaller base in Burma, bomb the Americans and the British at night, and fly back to the base in Burma. The next morning they would leave at dawn and fly back to Thailand, out of the range of the American planes.

So the Air Commandos came up with a plan...to surprise the Japanese at dawn. Eight planes took off at 4 a.m., the first four led by Group Commander, Levi Chase, the second four led

by Eason. "And just as we got to this field, getting ready to strafe it, three enemy planes took off and formed in three-ship formation. And Colonel Chase flew right up their tail and he shot down two of them and his wingman shot down the third one." Bob admits with a hearty laugh, "I was right behind them hoping they would miss." He watched in awe as the three enemy planes spun down "and hit right in three-ship formation...three fires."

But then he noticed something else...coolant leaking from Col. Chase's plane. "You've been hit," he remembers radioing his commander, who at first tried to bail out but because he was so low, had to make a belly landing in a rice paddy, not 20 miles from the Rangoon air base they'd just attacked. "He bellied in safely. I saw

him get out and run towards the woods." Eason then ordered his men to destroy Chase's aircraft, not wanting it to fall into enemy hands.

They flew to the nearest base they could find, a British outpost on Ramree Island. The plan was to commandeer a light two-seater to try to rescue Chase, who if captured by the Japanese, would be a most valuable prize.

Meeting some resistance to "borrowing" the L-5 aircraft, Eason pulled rank, saying, "I'm going to take it anyway." Meanwhile they had heard another pilot had been shot down so Eason and Lt. Bob Spann took two planes. "We only had gas for one way, so we had to load two five-gallon cans in the back seat."

Meanwhile, Colonel Chase had accom-

panied some Burmese villagers back to their headman's hut, where he was given food and water and was told that they were Christians. "The headman feared the Japs would play hell with his people if he let me go," said Chase in his report of the incident.

Eason had memorized the location of the crash site. He sent the rest of his men back to circle, arriving shortly afterwards in the two L-5's.

Chase, hearing the familiar drone, left the village unchallenged and walked back to the rice paddy.

Rice paddies are divided by small dams or levies, in this case about six inches high. "I landed and saw that I was stuck in the mud," remembers Eason. Equipped with a money belt, he paid the villagers to push the plane to drier ground. After refueling

from the two Jerry cans in the back seat, he stuffed the Colonel in, and tried to take off. "Well I was hitting these little dams, bouncing over them, and I really didn't think I was going to take off." He bumps his hand on the table for effect. "I couldn't build up enough speed. I almost drug it off the ground, but I finally got it airborne."

The other L-5 pilot tried without success to find the other lost airman; they later learned he had been captured. They flew the 200 miles back to Ramree, the last 20 of it over open water. "And I landed and I ran out of gas on the runway," remembers Bob. "We had to push the plane off the runway, but we got them back safely."

Captain Bob Eason and Lt. Bob Spann were awarded the Silver Star for their daring rescue.