

# A Vet Remembers Coming Home to His Wife and the Farm Crisis

Once upon a time, he shot at surfacing German subs in the North Atlantic, tried to pick off the crews who were aiming anti-aircraft at Navy bombers whose depth charges could blow those subs right out of the water.

In the spring of 1942 he'd gone into flight school after graduation from college, spent a year in series of special schools, then took orders to Norfolk for duty in the North Atlantic. During his years keeping Nazi U-boats away, his unit of fighter pilots knocked off nine subs. "They didn't give you credit unless there was a heckuva oil stain on the water," he told me, a bowl of soup set on a couple of towels draped over his lap--lime chicken from his daughter in North Carolina. They know how to cook in North Carolina, he says.

He should know. He married a North Carolina girl.

I didn't say much at all for two hours while he told me about his life, but what a joy it was to hear a life story he hadn't told all that often in a long time, if he ever did.

He cried twice. Once, when he remembered coming back to Norfolk aboard that cheap aircraft carrier that carried them around for most of the war, a merchant marine vessel worked over into a carrier with barely enough space to land fighters. Held just nine birds, in fact. Made take-offs difficult too. Like it or not, that was home.

What brewed the tears was remembering how that carrier sailed into the harbor and how right there on the pier in front of him coming ever closer was his brand new wife standing among the others. That happened 78 years ago. Just seeing her there in his memory brought tears.

When the Nazis began to recharge their batteries at night on the North Atlantic, he and his buddies had to learn whole new technologies. Where there was once a bomb in the hold, the Navy installed flood lights. To learn the new flying tricks, the whole bunch were sent to Florida. He told his sweetheart to take a train down with the other women. "But, honey," she told him sweetly, "you have to remember we're not married."

"Then that'll have to change," he told her.

And it did. They left for Florida a few days later, married.

The next time that carrier and its nine planes returned to port for resupply was the time he spotted his new wife on the pier waiting for him--that's the moment he'll never forget. He's an old vet, and he doesn't walk or hear well, but the memory of seeing that beautiful woman waiting on the pier brought tears from someplace so deep inside we all wish we held such treasures.

He'd met her in Norfolk, danced with her three times in a row one night, then asked her if next time he was in port he could date her. She said yes. He wrote her address on his sharp white cuff of his uniform.

The picture is just about the most beautiful thing, the two of them, a radiant, happy couple in a full body hug, huge smiles on both faces. There's no sweet side to war, but it can do something great with love.

Couldn't help but note an edge of tears in his eyes one other time too, when he told me how land prices skyrocketed in 70s and early 80s. When they did, farmers loaded up on land, on machinery, on cattle. As long as their paper worth was out of sight, so was good sense.

But the market didn't hold, and when land prices fell the whole works buckled like a house of cards. Good, hard-working people who prayed to the Almighty suddenly found themselves so far gone there was no way out of debt but to wrinkle up your dreams in your fists.

"That was a bad time, wasn't it?" I asked him.

That's when he cried again.

He'd become a banker, a good one. "The Board met every day at six in the morning and go over loans," he told me, his lips shivering in the overheated apartment.

Twice he cried that afternoon, this precious old man who, once upon a time in the inky dark over a cold North Atlantic, pushed a joystick around and it wasn't a game.

Twice he cried. I saw it. Once in joy and once in misery. All in life. All in his life.

It was a blessing to have asked.