

Book tells saga of crew 'Shot Down Over Italy'

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John Lanza meets with Amerigo Sarri, left, and Riccardo Becattini, the two Italians who helped his uncle, Willie Lanza, evade capture from the Germans during WWII and the subject of Lanza's book, "Shot Down Over Italy."

CALDWELL - John Lanza planned to write a book about banking when he retired.

That made sense, since he was in the business for about 40 years, working in New York until his retirement in 2006.

However, while caring for his elderly father in Massachusetts, where Lanza grew up, he spent some time with his "Uncle Willie." That's when his plans for a book changed.

You see, Lanza never knew much about his uncle's war experiences during World War II. His Uncle Willie just never talked about them. When John found out the pilot of his uncle's plane died while saving the lives of the rest of the crew, and that two Italian families risked their lives helping his uncle and another crew member, Alfred Todd, hide in a cave for two months, he thought there was a story to tell.

"Shot Down Over Italy" is a well-researched, well-documented true story about a seven-man crew of a B-25 Mitchell bomber shot down over Nazi-occupied Italy on May 26, 1944. It took about four years to research and write the book.

With assistance from the mayors of three towns in Italy, he found the families who helped the two Americans. On a trip to Italy in 2007, he personally thanked Amerigo Sarri and Riccardo Becattini for helping his uncle and Todd evade capture by the Germans.

The book shows how the crew prepared for air combat, describes what it was like to fly combat missions, and tells the story of the crew's last flight and what happened to each crew member after the plane was shot down. The fate of each member depended on who reached them after they hit the ground: Mussolini's Fascists, Hitler's Nazis, or partisans that formed the Italian Resistance.

Lanza not only visited the two Italian families involved in this story. He connected with the only other surviving crew member, besides his uncle, the bombardier Laverne Reynolds, along with the families and friends of the five deceased crew members.

The result is a captivating true story about a pilot who sacrificed his life for his crew, airmen who trusted partisans with their lives, and prisoners of war who survived inhumane conditions. Lanza said the book shows that our freedom was not free.

Asked what he enjoyed most about writing the book, he says, "Probably bonding with my Uncle Willie. My uncle can't believe he's in the book and I can't believe I've written it."

His favorite chapter of the book, chapter five, is when the plane gets shot down. That was also the most difficult chapter to write. "I must have rewritten that chapter at least five times. A good friend, a former Air Force pilot, helped me."

Lanza's book led to Amerigo Sarri and Riccardo Becattini receiving gold medals on Liberation Day in 2008: "It was gratifying that my curiosity led to two men being honored for their courage and humanity on Liberation Day, April 25, 2008 – a public holiday on which Italians celebrate the day in 1945 on which they were liberated from Fascist rule and Nazi occupation."

Lanza says researching and writing the book gave him a greater appreciation of what it takes to remain a free nation. "I'm glad I had the opportunity to tell a story about some of the people we have to thank for the freedoms we enjoy today."

John Lanza and his wife, Diana, live in the Cedars. The four Lanza boys and one girl all attended James Caldwell High School.

Brian Bromborsky, also a James Caldwell graduate, drew three illustrations for the book, and Caldwell resident Todd Slater, also a James Caldwell graduate, helped with the layout. The cover painting was done by artist Gregory Stone.

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