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Author presents previously unknown stories, photos of Michiganders in WWII

By Darcell Brown



The crew of the Memphis Belle being congratulated on a job well done for completing 25 missions. Her crew included Capt. Charles B. Leighton of Lansing, Mich., navigator; and Staff Sgt. Casimer A. Nastal of Detroit, Mich., waist gunner. Photo courtesy of the National Museum of the United States Air Force, from "Michigan in World War II" by Daniel W. Mason (The History Press, 2021).

As Daniel Mason kept his schedule cruising the highway as a tractor-trailer driver for FedEx Express, his thoughts were about getting his packages to their destination on time — but he also was thinking about a deadline to turn in his new military history book.

The Trenton native, who studied history at Lake Superior State College, grew up watching war movies with his father, mostly about World War II. Mason's father and his ancestors served in the military dating back to the Revolutionary War. Mason loves to read military books about Michigan, but noticed most of them focused on the automotive industry and the Willow Run bomber plant in Ypsilanti.

In his recently published book, "Michigan in WWII," Mason wanted to represent the small towns and factories and the people in those towns who helped contribute to the war effort.

Mason's book shares hidden and forgotten stories, such as a top-secret U.S. Navy project in Traverse City. The Navy developed a camera-guided assault drone there. Fifty of them were used in combat, and 37 destroyed their targets. The Japanese thought the United States had deployed its own kamikazes.

Another Navy story, undisclosed until the 1990s, was that aircraft carriers were set afloat on the Great Lakes. Ships and boats were built for wartime service in cities from Escanaba to Mount Clemens, and "about 250 training planes rest at the bottom of the Great Lakes," according to the book. A Trenton boat company built sub-chaser ships, one of which was used by the Norwegian Navy on the Lend-Lease Act. Strategic sites such as the Soo Locks in Sault Ste Marie were considered potential targets of the Germans, and were guarded accordingly.

To gather all of these unknown stories and photos, Mason attended history conferences in his free time, and whenever he finds himself in small towns he seeks out their museums to learn what had happened in the community's history.

"Talking to some of the patrons in person or by phone helped bring the information together," Mason says. "One of the things I inherited from my father was the gift of gab."



Lt. Col. Alexander Jefferson in his retirement years, stands in front of his uniform at the Tuskegee Museum in Detroit. Photo personal collection Daniel W. Mason, from "Michigan in World War II" by Daniel W. Mason (The History Press, 2021).

Mason compiled more than 180 images for the book, including many never seen before. Among the more interesting is Lt. Col. Alexander Jefferson, a member of the Tuskegee Airmen, the first unit of all-Black aviators in the United States Armed Forces. Jefferson learned to fly before the war, and after stunt-flying under the Blue Water Bridge in Port Huron said that if you weren't scared doing it, you were "just dumb," Mason wrote. Jefferson became a POW after being shot down and captured in southern France in 1944. He was liberated from a camp nearby the infamous Dachau concentration camp at the end of the war. His liberators told the men about the killings at Dachau, and so Jefferson walked with a friend to witness the Nazi genocide there, Mason wrote.

Also included in his book are photos and the dramatic story of popular Detroit TV weatherman Sonny Elliot, born Marvin Eliot Schollossberg, who also was a flier captured by Germans. Elliot was piloting a B-24J that was built at the Willow Run plant when he was shot down.

The mission was to bomb a factory in Gotha, Germany, “that produced ball bearings for the Messerschmitt ME109 fighters,” Mason wrote. “He and his crew dropped their bombs on the factory and started for home, when a German fighter headed straight toward them and shot them down. One of the waist gunners was injured, but the high altitude slowed the bleeding. ... The crew attached a parachute to the injured man and pulled the ripcord as they pushed him out of the plane.

“Sonny was the last to bail out. He landed in a snow-covered field and lost his boots when he bailed out.” Running to a barn, which he found locked, he was stopped by an armed civilian, who turned Elliot in to local authorities. “Sonny and his co-pilot were sent to Stalag 1.”

Elliot lied to the Germans, and said that he was Lutheran, but “felt guilty about not being with his fellow Jewish people,” so he spoke to a chaplain, who “ordered him to keep his mouth shut,” Mason wrote.



Marvin “Sonny” Elliot was a weatherman on Detroit television until the 1980s, and hosted “At The Zoo.” Photo courtesy of Sonny Elliot, from “Michigan in World War II” by Daniel W. Mason (The History Press, 2021).

Later, Elliot adopted the name Sonny, vowing to remain sunny and entertain people instead of dwelling on the depressing aspects of his life. But he kept a journal he had bound in leather from a boxing glove and adorned with pilot wings marked with a K for Kriegsgefangenen, German for “prisoner of war.” He spoke about his experiences in an [interview for the Holocaust Memorial Center](#), which is now in Farmington Hills. He died in 2012 at the age of 91.

Other local heroes highlighted in the book include former Gov. William Milliken, President Gerald Ford and Detroit Tigers broadcaster Ernie Harwell. TV game show host Bob Barker

trained here, at the Grosse Ile Naval Base, but never saw combat. Barker later wrote, “The Japanese heard I was coming and decided to surrender,” according to Mason’s book.

But the Japanese had an effect on Michigan, news of which the federal government suppressed for morale reasons. Bomb-carrying balloons called Fu-Go landed in Byron and Farmington Hills in 1945. A resident found what he thought was a tin can in his yard near Gill and Eight Mile roads, and tossed it aside — until he read in the newspaper that anything suspicious should be reported. What he had found turned out to be a 5-kilogram incendiary bomb, according to the book.



Lt. Col. Matt Urban, one of the most decorated American soldiers of World War II, receives the Medal of Honor from President Jimmy Carter. After the war, he moved to Michigan, where he served as Recreation Director in Port Huron and Director of the Monroe Community Center. He died in Holland, Mich., in 1995; war injuries were believed to have been a cause of his death. Photo courtesy of the Holland Historical Museum, from “Michigan in World War II” by Daniel W. Mason (The History Press, 2021).

It was important to Mason to share these stories.

“I want for the people of Michigan to learn what their parents or grandparents did during the war, and what they endured,” he says.

When Mason is not interviewing people for his military writings, he serves as the president of the Downriver Historical Organization and he is the president of the newly formed Detroit Metro Airport Historical Society.

For more information about this and other Michigan history books, visit historypress.com.