



# World War II veteran is a 'model' citizen

By Julie Wernau  
Staff Writer

If the picture hanging in 80-year-old Edward Avena's kitchen weren't in color, it would be hard to tell that the bomber was a model. The picture is of an exact replica Avena built of the Liberator he flew in World War II, the same type that would later drop the atomic bomb, ending the war.

For each of the 17 missions the plane flew, a tiny bomb is painted like a hash mark. Two hand-painted swastikas signify downed enemy aircraft. On the side, a large rendition of a turkey earns the aircraft its name: The Worry Bird.

It took him 20 years to build.

The replica, which sits in Avena's home-based workshop, looks just like a picture bound into a WWII book the family owns. In the photograph, the barely-adult Avena stands in a bomber jacket beside The Worry Bird while the members of his squadron, the 706 Bomb Squadron of the 446th bomb group of the 2nd Air Division of the 8th Air Force, stand casually chatting and smoking around him.

"You get me going on airplanes and it never stops," Avena said. In 1937, he founded a club called The Prop Busters. The group flew working model airplanes, which run on alcohol, in the area of Bates Woods. He got his first model airplane kit at 10 years old and worked diligently at the craft until he joined the Air Force.

"They took my model training as college-entry experience," he said, training him as an aircraft maintenance engineer.

Looking around Avena's workshop, it is easy to see the talent the Air Force discovered those many years ago. Tools and gadgets flood a room filled with working models, spare parts, and rough drafts. A nearly finished reproduction of the Spirit of St. Louis—the plane in which, in 1927, Charles Lindbergh made the first solo, trans-Atlantic flight—shines silver on a center island, 1/7 the size of the original, made from a box of wood and a set of drawings.

Although he has made many planes of his own design, Avena's planes are purely for his own pleasure. He said he wouldn't think of taking commissioned work. "If you make your business your hobby, you lose your hobbies," Avena said.

Instead, Avena built prototypes and models for such companies as Pfizer and Electric Boat. His business, Shoreline Crafts, once sat on Boston Post Road in Waterford.

According to Avena, a group of engineers would work with him during the development stage of a product, which could be anywhere from an artificial limb to a new submarine part.

He got his customers via word-of-mouth referrals and built the prototypes using a jigborer, a useful tool for producing metal work. "It's like the kitchen sink," Avena said, pointing to the antique machine. Today, Avena said, his machines can't compete with computer-run engineering tools, but back then he said, "All I needed was a pencil and paper. Mostly it was common sense."

Avena built his Waterford home himself. While he was building his home, he owned the only land in the area—there was no electricity running to the unsettled land. Without electricity, Avena had to build his entire home with a hand-saw, contracting out the foundation and plasterwork. Today, his home sits directly between two other houses in a suburban neighborhood.

Recently his son, Waterford Town Attorney Robert Avena, one of five children, discovered that his father's WWII accomplishments had earned him ribbons and medals yet to be awarded.

Always on the case, Robert Avena decided to surprise his father with the medals at a surprise 80th birthday party held Jan. 2. Unfortunately, the medals didn't make it for the party, but a number of other surprises did, including a letter from U.S. Rep. Rob Simmons, R-2nd District.

"Your service speaks clearly to the high value you place on our nation," it reads.

First Selectman Paul Eccard declared Jan. 3 "Edward Avena Day" in his honor, issuing a formal proclamation, which sits framed in the Avenas' home.

"Your commitment is a mark of an ongoing lifetime of applied knowledge, insight, planning, understanding and accomplishment," the proclamation reads. Avena has been told that his medals, including one from France for his mission at Normandy, are in the works and



A collection of models in Avena's basement workshop.

on the way.

During his time in the Air Force, Avena was stationed in a wide-open farming village in England with one church, one pub, and a runway large enough to house his squadron. "We had to shoo away the cows," he said. When the men would hang their clothes near the base to air out, the villagers would wash their clothes for them, placing them back in their footlockers, he said.

For the past few years since Avena discovered the event, he has been traveling to an annual bomb group reunion, held in a new location each year. One year, Avena got to visit his old stomping ground at a reunion in England. Traveling by memory alone, he was able to find the base, an area Avena said hadn't changed since he left.

"The right side is spring peas and the left is sugar beets," he said. Since his visit, the airstrip has been removed, making room for more farmland.

Avena said it is difficult to describe his time in the service, the feeling of flying with kid gunners tracking bomber contrails that seemed to never dissipate.

"The fighters came at you all the time," he said. At the time, his copilot was a skinny man, but Avena laughed, "Now you couldn't even get him in the airplane."

At the reunions, Avena's wife, Ruth Avena, said the men enjoy telling one another the same stories time and time again, stories which Avena didn't tell his children until they were nearly full-grown.

Avena's flight at Normandy, the largest air, land, and sea operation

undertaken before or since June 6, 1944, included over 5,000 ships, 11,000 airplanes, and over 150,000 service men. Allied forces suffered 10,000 casualties before winning this decisive battle. For Avena, flying high above the battle in a bomber, the clouds were too thick for combat, but thin enough that he could see the horrible battle taking place below. That day, Avena prepared for what he was told would be a German invasion, filling the bomber with 3,000 gallons of gas, when suddenly, the tides changed. A message from Eisenhower went out, describing the situation, and Avena's bomber was one of the first sent out, leading the 8th Air Force.

"When we came in, the sky was black with clouds and all we could see were battleships shooting at the coasts," Avena said. The mass of ships was so thick, Avena said it seemed possible to walk the length of the English Channel without touching water. "We were supposed to drop bombs, but we couldn't see anything," he said. "It was terrible."

Avena ran three missions on D-Day, but could only work in a few bomb drops near the end of the intense rain, wind, and fog that marked the battle of Normandy. "The theory was that we could drop on the coastlines, but there were too many battles on shore," he said.

This May, Avena's squadron will attend the dedication of the World War II memorial in Washington, D.C. in an unforgettable reunion. In the meantime, Avena will continue to work on his Spirit of St. Louis, adding the final lettering to the plane's wing in a workshop built by his own hands.