

FROM TUBERCULOSIS *to* SKYDIVING

World War II veteran Harry Dresser talks about his years in the war and then some

BY ALLISON CANDREVA

At 10 years old, Harry Dresser found himself in a tuberculosis sanitarium.

After doctors found a few spots on his lung, they sent him to Chicago's municipal sanitarium. The long room he was in fit about 25 to 30 people and was fairly cold. One of the walls was simply a screen with the option of a pull-down shade when rain or snow came around. On either end of the beds, there were warming rooms that helped make the cold more acceptable.

Dresser spent 14 months in the sanitarium and emerged ready for the next step in life.

As World War II approached, Dresser was going to be drafted. After seeing horrifying photos in the Chicago Tribune, he was determined to be a navigator and not a foot soldier. But in 1931, he wore glasses and no one was permitted to fly without perfect vision. Eager to change that, he saw an ophthalmologist to get his eyes corrected.

In June of 1942, at age 25 he was one of thousands to enlist in the WWII effort.

Dresser began training and went to school in

Monroe, La., at Selman Field Army-Air Force Navigation School. As the navigator for a B-24 Bomber, Dresser had a picture of the target area. He said his job was to tell the radio operator — who would then radio back to base — what percentage of bombs fell in the target area.

During his first year in the military, Dresser said he had been at six different bases. After gunnery school, he took a seven-day leave and went to see his wife in Chicago. Dresser and his late wife Evelyn met in 1933, while they were in high school. About two years later, they had their first date, and in June of 1940, they were married.

"I used to tell her that I chased her until she caught me," he said.

After Dresser's seven days were up, Evelyn said she was going back with him. He was hesitant, but she insisted.

They went back to Monroe, but Dresser had to leave her immediately to go back to the base. After three or four days, she called him to say she found a lovely place to live.

"She told me she just got in a taxi and told the driver to take her to the best residential

area in town," Dresser said. "When they got there, she just started knocking on doors trying to talk to people."

Evelyn had found a bed at the second house she visited, Dresser said. The woman she talked to later spoke to her husband, and then offered Evelyn a room with a bathroom for \$7 per week. She developed such a good relationship with the woman that she only paid the \$7 once.

"They were like mother and daughter," Dresser said. "It was a pleasure to know that she had a decent place to live."

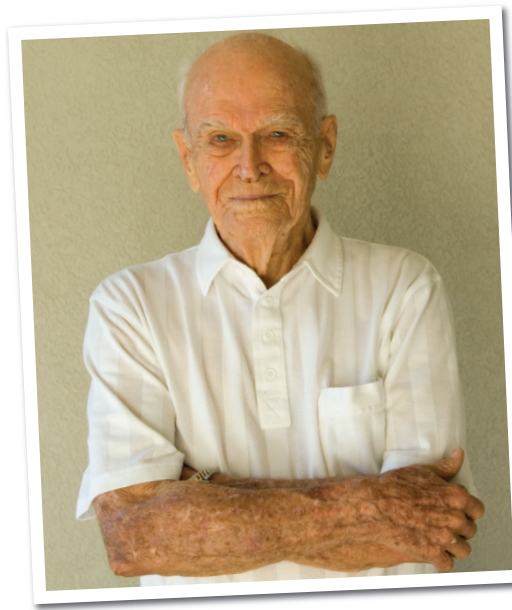
After Dresser graduated

from navigation school, he had a 10-day leave and went to Chicago with his wife. When his time was up, he was to report to Tonopah, Nev., with 10 other navigators. Of course, Evelyn followed along.

"It had mountains on both sides," Dresser said. "We had to keep straw and heavy planks on the grounds to keep the dust down."

After Tonopah, he went to Hamilton Army-Air Field in San Francisco, and then to the Fairfield Suisun Army-Air Force Base.

"Evelyn followed," he said. "My wife always found a way."



Left:
Photo by Allison Candreva
Veteran Harry Dresser spent three years in the military during World War II.

Right:
Photo courtesy Harry Dresser
World War II veteran Harry Dresser is pictured here in November of 1945 at 29 years old. He spent three years in the Air Force.

It was 12:30 a.m. on December 25, 1944, when Dresser was first deployed.

"Our last words on base were 'Merry Christmas,'" he said.

The 372nd Bomb Squadron of the 307th Bomb group

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flew all over. They were in Nadzab, New Guinea, for one month when they were taken into the jungle for two nights and taught how to survive. Then they went to Morotai Island, which is part of the Halmahera group of eastern Indonesia's Maluku Islands. While in Morotai, Dresser flew 37 bombing missions.

Next, he went to Borneo.

In the summer of 1941, he was the navigator in the lead plane out of 48. There were specific orders not to fly over the coastline, and Dresser was adamant about following those orders. He said he had the three gunners and the radio operator on the plane sporadically check the other planes. When they saw that the planes were three miles off the shoreline, they reported back with an "all clear," which he wrote down in a personal log. Once his plane landed, the major showed up.

"He came up in a Jeep and said 'give me your log, get in the Jeep,'" Dresser said.

Unsure why, he said he got in the jeep, and once the pilot came down, they all went to a briefing that was more like a hearing. Dresser said he had to stand at attention for more than an hour, sweat pouring down his face. Flipping through his logbook, a panel asked him numerous questions.

"They were firing questions at me one after the other," he said, "but I repeated each question and fired an answer right back."



Photo courtesy Harry Dresser
World War II veteran Harry Dresser went tandem skydiving in Palatka, Fla., and has a certificate, picture and video to prove it. He said he wants to go again, when he turns 95.

At the end of the hearing, the major asked Dresser how he would rate himself as a navigator. He replied, "One of the best. One of the very best, sir."

When Dresser was dismissed, he saluted each of the men on the hearing panel until they saluted back, turned on the ball of his foot and left. He later learned the hearing was held because fragmentation bombs had been dropped on the stern of Gen. Douglas MacArthur's ship by the Australian squadron of B-24s.

In July of 1945, he finished his missions and eventually boarded an American Airlines flight to just north of San Francisco. Dresser said he made it home on Aug. 14, just as the war ended. His father was living in San Mateo, Calif., and he headed straight to see him. He hopped on the first bus and then into the first taxi he saw without getting a chance to call his father.

"When he opened the door,"

Dresser said, "I thought he would die when he saw me."

Dresser said when someone is in the military and they are deployed, they think about two things: surviving and being on the winning side. He thought most about surviving.

"I was just glad when it was over," he said. "I think about it now and feel like it was a dream."

Although the war was difficult, Dresser said he would not have missed it. He would not want to do it again, but he was glad he experienced those three years. Following the words of his mother, Dresser insists on always doing his best, whether navigating during the war or skydiving on his 90th birthday. \$



Allison Candreva is a student in UF's College of Journalism. She may be

contacted at:
allison.cand@yahoo.com.

PERSPECTIVES ON AGING



HAPPINESS IN THE GOLDEN YEARS

By Carlos Muniz

Recently a University of Chicago sociologist completed research that found that as a rule the elderly are happier than younger adults. He came to the conclusion that older people are more content with what they have. This has come as a surprise to many people and has made front-page news in many papers. It is research that confirms the conclusion, as another research on the function of the brain has shown, that as people grow older the processing of positive and pleasurable emotions is enhanced.

We also know that humbleness is a prerequisite for happiness, and as we grow in age, we tend to become more humble. As a result we more easily pleased with what we have achieved and what we have. That humbleness goes parallel with age is not surprising, as it is the result of the wisdom of the ages, when we finally realize that many of the so-called successes in life do not make us happy. Accumulation of riches fills our sanity, but does not make us happier. If anything, it adds worries to our life. Accolades bestowed on us by others are often the result of our ability in making them accept us for what is only our artificial self. Deep inside we know better. So honor and accolades do not increase our sense of wellness.

Now, in our golden years, we have come to accept our true self and realize, that like everybody else, we have both positive and negative attributes. We have also learned not to worry about things we cannot change, so most of us elders leave small worries alone. If all of these things put together are what makes us happy, the sooner a person reaches this level of maturity, the sooner he will enjoy the happiness of the old.

It has been said that for people who feel, life is a tragedy, and for people who think, it is a comedy. We, the elderly, have the ability to combine feeling and thinking, and that makes life a pleasurable adventure worth living. \$

Dr. Carlos Muniz is a retired psychiatrist from Gainesville. He may be contacted through the editor at editor@towerpublications.com

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