



Don't Let That Shadow Touch Them
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 Vermillion



PLAIN
 TALK

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Defender of the Red Dragon

EDITOR'S NOTE: This story was first published Nov. 7, 2003. Ralph passed away Monday, Sept. 6, 2010.

BY DAVID LIAS

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They were called "Flying Fortresses."

In their day, the B-17 heavy bombers designed and constructed by Boeing were among the largest airplanes built.

They bristled with machine guns to fend off German enemy planes long enough to reach their targets and make it back home.

They played a key role in helping to stop the Nazi sweep through Europe in the 1940s.

They, in effect, restored freedom to that continent.

Ralph Knutson, 79, of Vermillion played a unique role in that process.

Repeatedly 31 times to be exact Knutson would squeeze into the ball turret located on the belly of his crew's B-17, named the Red Dragon, and do his best to fend off smaller and faster German fighters intent on shooting down his slow, lumbering aircraft.

It was arguably one of the worst jobs one could have on a B-17. The round bubble that Knutson sat in originally was designed with armor plating by Boeing.

The Army Air Force ultimately removed most of the plating, however, to make the planes as light as possible in efforts to make them deadlier.

That alone nearly cost Knutson his life.

"The 8th Air Force had taken most of the armor plating off the airplanes, so they could get the planes lighter to carry heavier bombs," he said. "The only armor plating I had around me was the seat that I sat on, and that got hit."

At other times, Knutson's control wiring was hit by enemy fire.

"Our plane, according to our ground crew, got roughly 350 holes shot in it all together," he said. "We caught on fire at least once."

Knutson's war adventures have been captured by Paul B. Otto in his book *Berlin to Spirit Mound* along the Lewis and Clark Trail.

The book is a compilation of Knutson's life based on his personal journal as well as interviews Otto conducted with him in



The names of the crew of the Red Dragon B-17 are scrawled on the back of this photograph. They are (back) R. Kirk, bombardier; Ryall "Smitty" Smith, pilot; E.J. Dagnay, navigator; H.M. Weston, co-pilot; William T. Houghton, waist gunner; and (front) Red Kemit, engineer; McClain, radio operator; Rups, tail gunner; and Ralph Knutson, ball turret gunner.

(Photo courtesy of Ralph Knutson)

1999.

Knutson grew up near Albert Lea, MN, and graduated from high school in 1944. He followed his brother to California, and they both briefly worked in aircraft plants.

"When World War II was getting started, he got a draft notice so he came back to Minnesota, and I came back with him and enlisted," Knutson said.

He was originally trained as a B-17 waist gunner. In that role, Knutson would have been located in the center of the plane and fired at the enemy through doors in the aircraft's sides.

While traveling to England by ship, however, the Red Dragon's ball turret gunner became ill and had to be hospitalized.

"We were always trained as a 10-man crew," Knutson said. "When we got over there (England), they changed from a 10-man crew to a nine-man crew."

That meant that either Knutson or another waist gunner would be kicked off the crew, and a stranger would join the Red Dragon to fly in the ball turret.

To stop the crew from being dismantled, Knutson, a short, small-framed man, volunteered to be the plane's ball turret gunner.

"I had never been in the belly turret," Knutson said. "They had a mock-up in the hangar. I got the hang of it after about a half hour or so, and the next time I was in the turret, I was in combat."

The ball turret was an aluminum and Plexiglass semi-sphere with flat surfaces on each side. It was 38 inches wide with a

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Thank you,

It's fair to say that the brainchild of this special edition, which celebrates the heritage of our military veterans, is Donna Schafer.

It was over two years ago when Donna approached us with an idea for writing a column for regular publication in the Plain Talk. At the time, she was a leader of VFW Post 3061 Ladies Auxiliary in Vermillion, and felt it was important to share the stories of the men and women – people who in many instances are also friends and neighbors – who have helped preserve our nation's freedom by serving in the military.

We never really dwelled much about one important circumstance of Donna's idea, but I

think we both sensed it – many of the veterans from Vermillion and surrounding communities are of the greatest generation, who were attending school or working on the family farm before that fateful day in December 1941, soon found themselves plucked from the prairie to arrive in boot camp on their way to the front lines in Europe and in the Pacific during World War II.

Donna has preserved many of these people's stories. It was a task she approached with vigor, and many times, it involved hours of work. She visited people at their homes and, at times, in their rooms at nursing homes. She gathered their stories, and she gave them to us, so they could be told to you regularly in the Plain Talk.

Some of Donna's stories appear in this edi-

tion, along with articles relating to local veterans we researched especially for this publication.

We are thankful to Cleo Erickson, who once again provided personal recollections along with finding us gems of information at the Austin-Whittemore House.

Thanks go out, also, to individuals who told us their stories: Walter Reed and others.

We reserve the greatest respect to individuals who put their lives on the line and lived to come home, help build our communities, but today, are no longer with us. You'll read about them, too – men like Ralph Knutson.

There are so many stories to be told. We've likely only scratched the surface with this edition, and this may be a topic we revisit some time

in the future.

We're proud to present these stories to you, with gratitude to everyone who assisted us. As Donna noted years ago, these stories are too important, and they must be told.

Carol Hohenthaler, Media Consultant; Travis Gulbrandson, Staff Writer; David Lias, Editor; Susan Forma, Office Manager; Micki Schievelbein, Advertising Director; Gary Wood, Publisher; The Vermillion Plain Talk

COVER PHOTO:

Members of the VFW Post 3061 rifle squad stand at attention as "Taps" is played at the conclusion of the 2012 Memorial Day observance in Vermillion on Monday, May 28. The ceremony was held at the Clay County Veterans Memorial at the Clay County Courthouse. (Photo by David Lias)