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Fredericksburg's superb WW II museum takes us back 75 years

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David Lee Tex Hill was a World War II triple ace, flying for the famed Flying Tigers and later as a Navy pilot.

Photo: Courtesy / National Museum of the Pacific War

FREDERICKSBURG — Wandering through the National Museum of the Pacific War in the company of masked museum director Rorie Cartier, I kept thinking about how I had lost my last living connection to World War II when my cousin Bob died at 94 in fall 2017. Like George H.W. Bush, a fellow Houstonian he admired as both combat pilot and politician, Bob had been an impossibly young Navy flyer who was shot down over the Pacific and

A picturesque German town in the Texas Hill Country would seem to be an unlikely location for a museum dedicated to the Pacific War, except for Fredericksburg's connection to a favorite son. Fleet Admiral Chester W. Nimitz, commander in chief of the U.S. Pacific fleet throughout the war, grew up in Fredericksburg. Nimitz's grandfather ran the Nimitz Hotel on Main Street; the historic building housed the modest, little museum when it opened in 1967. A partnership these days of the Admiral Nimitz Foundation and the Texas Historical Commission, the museum underwent a major expansion in 2009 with the addition of the George H.W. Bush Gallery. Today its buildings and grounds cover 6 acres in the heart of town. To do it justice takes at least three hours, maybe twice that long.

According to Shields, Nimitz's friends and family urged him for years to endorse the development of a Pacific War museum in his hometown. He finally, reluctantly, agreed not long before his death in 1966. He said (in Shields' words), "I will do this, but this is not me. The emphasis has to be on the men and women who served."

plucked from the water by an American submarine just before a Japanese destroyer arrived.

Bob would have enjoyed wandering through the exhibits, newsreels, artifacts and interactive features that explain the geopolitical origins of the Pacific war, before tracing its course through Pearl Harbor, Iwo Jima and the Pacific island chain, Hiroshima and on to the formal surrender on the deck of the Battleship Missouri, on Sept. 2, 1945. At least, I think he would have enjoyed it. Like most members of the Greatest Generation, Bob rarely talked about the war years — the formative experience of his long life — unless he was sure you were really interested and unless he was convinced you understood that he did not consider himself a hero. The heroes were the ones who didn't make it back, he used to tell me.

I mentioned that Greatest Generation trademark to David Shields, the museum's director of education. He understood. The museum, he said, seeks to reflect the characteristic modesty of the men and women who served. "They weren't superheroes," he noted. "They were ordinary people who did extraordinary things. That's important to remember."

My cousin never made it to the museum, but plenty of Pacific War vets have visited over the years. Their numbers are dwindling, of course (and they're not showing up at all during the pandemic). Soon they will be gone, and what we'll have left are fading family memories passed down through generations and this superb museum, the only one in the U.S. dedicated to the Pacific War (which also includes the Asiatic Theater).

The museum's collection, fortunately, includes some 6,000 oral histories, more than 2,000 online. "It's a gold mine for researchers," said Chris McDougal, director of the library and archives. "We get documentarians, writers, people doing genealogy. And we're still doing oral histories, quite a few done by phone now."

Thanks to the collection, I got to hear the reminiscences of David Lee "Tex" Hill, one of the legendary Flying Tigers, American pilots who volunteered to fly for the Chinese against Japan before the U.S. entered the war. The colorful Hill was something of a legend himself. John Wayne told him he was the model for the character he played in the 1942 movie "Flying Tigers." He was credited with shooting down 18¼ planes during the war.

Here he is in 2003, age 88, in a Fredericksburg High School classroom, remembering: "My first encounter was Jan. 2, (1942), I believe it was. That was the first offensive mission that went into Thailand. Newkirk was leading and Christman was on the wing and Jeb Howard and I. I was on Jeb's wing. ... We went in there about daylight, and we were going to strafe the field, but we didn't look up and they had fighters above us. So, the first thing I noticed there were three of us in the pack, and this Jap had come in between me and Howard. He was on Howard's tail, and I just pulled right up behind him, fired my machine guns and he blew up. Simultaneously, someone had made an overhead pass on me and shot 33 holes in my airplane. I'm turning into this second guy coming head-on. I shot him down."

Hill recalled that when he got back to the airfield, his operations officer, Charlie Mott, good-naturedly complained, "Tex, you are going to hog all the missions." Mott, who outranked Hill, took the next day's mission. As it turned out, it was his one and only. He got shot down and spent the whole war in a prison camp on the River Kwai. After the war, he told Hill, "Tex, I'll never argue with you about a mission again."

Hill, in later years a Mountain Home rancher, a San Antonio oilman and the youngest brigadier general in the Texas Air National Guard, told his oral-history interviewer that his most important mission was bombing a pontoon bridge over China's Salween Gorge.

“That stopped the Japanese,” he said. “If the Japanese had crossed the Salween River, China would have collapsed.”

Hill, who died in San Antonio in 2007, surmised that if the Japanese had not been thwarted in China, they would have made their way across Burma and India and eventually hooked up with Rommel’s German forces in Egypt. (Education director Shields mentioned that Japan had 3 million troops scattered across Asia at war’s end.)

“I’ll say one thing, they didn’t lack ambition,” Hill told his oral historian, in language a bit saltier than I can quote here.

During these pandemic days, archivist McDougal spends much of his time alone among the invaluable oral histories, private papers, official documents and manuscripts that the museum continues to collect. On the floor below, a limited number of visitors each day walk past a B-25 bomber from the Doolittle raid, a tank, a Wildcat fighter, an atomic bomb casing, a eerie-looking Japanese midget sub captured after the Pearl Harbor attack and much more, all collected in an ongoing effort to make sure we don’t forget.

These days, self-guided tours of the museum are available to groups of up to 12 people. The three-hour tours start at 9 a.m. Wednesdays through Sundays at the Admiral Nimitz Gallery, located in the old Nimitz Hotel building at 340 Main St. in Fredericksburg. The last group will be admitted at 2 p.m.

This Wednesday, the museum will commemorate the 75th anniversary of Japan’s formal surrender and the end of World War II with a YouTube broadcast at 11 a.m., followed by a livestream salute from the museum’s Memorial Courtyard on Facebook.

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