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Piloting in WWII gave local man a lifetime of stories

By ANGEL McCURDY
Northwest Florida Daily News

FORT WALTON BEACH — Charles Coons’ stories sound like the stuff of movies but, to him, they are memories.

The World War II Army Air Corps veteran can still remember vivid details of his wartime adventures, from the time he crash landed a plane to jumping out of a B-17 just before it caught fire.

But the 93-year-old will never say he was brave or courageous. He was just doing his job.

“I think I was probably too dumb to know what was going on,” said Coons, sitting on his walker.

The walls of Coons’ Neptune Court home are decorated with personal memorabilia, from photos of planes he flew to many medals displayed in a shadowbox. Nearby, a black-and-white photo shows Coons alongside the rest of the 303rd Hell’s Angels Bombardier Squadron.

While his glory days are behind him, Coons’ blue eyes still light up at a chance to tell his tale from the very beginning.

When he was just 3 years old, his father took him to see an airplane show — one of the first to occur, according to Coons. It was the moment the plane soared into the sky that Coons knew what he wanted to do for the rest of his life.

He was going to be a pilot.

“I thought, ‘I’ll bet this will be fun. I’m going to fly me one of those things.’ And that was the start,” Coons said. “I wanted to fly and be a pilot all my life. So when I could, I did.”

At the ripe age of 22 in 1943, he joined the Air Corps and after a short training session was made to be a co-pilot of a plane he said he had never flown. It would be two more years before the war would end.

“I remember being in the barracks in a bed that was in the middle when I saw that all the beds to my left were empty. Those were all the people that had gotten shot down,” Coons said. “That’s when I thought I might have volunteered for the wrong thing.”

On one of his final missions while in Frankfurt, Germany, Coons said he was flying when the No. 2 propeller “took a bad lick.” He said the crew heard an “eerie sound” when the propeller stopped and the plane went out of formation.

From there, the crew fought off a German fighter plane behind them and thought they were done when they saw a second fighter plane coming at them head on.

“I thought the end had come,” Coons said. “I remember thinking, ‘Oh crud, this is it.’ ”

The second plane, as it turned out, was a P-47, an American plane coming to the rescue. But that was not the end of the journey for Coons. Soon after the German plane had left, the crew had to deal with their second dilemma — a propeller not working and no electronics functioning in the plane.

Coons said at that time he was ready to steer the plane home and hope for the best. After a battle with the pilot, they were headed home when the entire engine seized.

“Wouldn’t you believe it?” Coons said.

That’s when the crew spotted a British runway and made a crash landing. The crew was able to manually work the landing gear and the plane stopped without a single injury.

In another episode, Coons said he and his crew were testing a B-17 that had been patched up after being shot in the fuel tank. A self-described “showboat,” Coons was doing tricks in the plane when gasoline started leaking.

Before he was able to get the plane to a stop, the back of the plane had caught fire.

“The two guys in the back shouted at me that it was getting hot, and before I knew it they had jumped out of the plane that was going 30 mph on the runway,” Coons said. “That was a close one. I was the last one off and just when I reached everyone else that plane exploded.”

Coons laughed at the memory. He kept a copy of the magazine that published the story when it happened in 1944.

During his time in the military, Coons saw the air fire during D-Day at the invasion of Normandy, fought in the Korean War, flew for the 303rd Bomb Squad and the 360th Bomb Squad and retired as a lieutenant colonel after testing droids with Eglin Air Force Base.

He earned a Distinguished Flying Cross and an Air Medal.

“To him, it’s no big deal,” said Coons’ son, Pat Coons. “To me, it’s the stuff right out of the movies and
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**Mortar training**

STAFF SGT. RAMON M. MARRERO | U.S. Army

Green Berets from the 7th Special Forces Group (Airborne) fire Mortars at Range C52C1 on Eglin Air Force Base, on Jan. 16.

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**Above,** Green Berets from the 7th Special Forces Group (Airborne) along with an instructor from the Infantry Mortar Leader Course from Fort Benning, Ga., prepare data in the Fire Direction Center to be sent to the firing positions. **At right,** Green Berets from the 7th Special Forces Group (Airborne) fire Mortars at Range C52C1 on Eglin Air Force Base on Jan. 16. Instructors from the Infantry Mortar Leader Course at Fort Benning, Ga., travelled to Eglin to give a refresher course on 60, 81 and 120 Millimeter Mortars to enhance the Soldiers ability to shoot before an upcoming deployment.

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**WWII FROM PAGE 2**

I think other men like my father are the same. It’s just what they did. He got paid. “But what these 20-something year olds did was just amazing.”

Coons doesn’t like to talk about the men who didn’t make it home. He prefers to share the stories that keep his audience on the edge of their seats until the happy ending — making it out just in the nick of time.

“I was the most naive little boy.” Coons said. “I was just the boy from a small town in Kentucky and I wasn’t prepared for what I was getting myself into. When I went to war it was like I was in ‘Alice in Wonderland,’ except people got hurt.”
Some retirees to lose TRICARE Prime Oct. 1

The military’s managed-care option — TRICARE Prime — will be ended Oct. 1 for retirees, their family members and military survivors who live more than 40 miles from a military treatment facility or a base closure site, TRICARE Management Activity announced Wednesday.

Most of these 171,400 beneficiaries will need to shift health coverage from Prime to TRICARE Standard, the military’s fee-for-service health insurance option. For beneficiaries who use more than preventive health care during the year, the shift will mean higher out-of-pocket costs.

Defense officials expect the move to save the health care system up to $55 million a year.

The rollback in the number of Prime service areas will not affect active duty members or their families living far a military base for tours as recruiters or in other remote assignments. Their health insurance through the separate TRICARE Prime program will not change.

But grown children of members or of retirees who elected coverage under TRICARE Young Adult insurance will, like retirees, lose access to managed care providers under Prime if they reside more than 40 miles from a base.

TRICARE had considered ending Prime in remote service areas of the West Region on April 1 to coincide with changeover for that region’s TRICARE support contacor. On that date, the TriWest Healthcare Alliance will give way to UnitedHealthCare Services of Minnetonka, Minn.

“The primary concern was the beneficiaries. We didn’t feel like we had enough time to notify them and help them through the transition,” said S. Dian Lawhon, director of beneficiary education and support at TRICARE Management Activity headquarters in Falls Church, Va.

Congressional committee staffs also had complained about a staggered start across regions to a major benefit change. So the Prime service area rollback will occur in the North, South and West regions simultaneously next fall.

This will cause another set of challenges in remote areas of the West Region that an April 1 start there would have avoided.

TriWest needed years to build its current network of providers far from military bases across the region. UnitedHealth will now be paid additional money under a contract change order to build its own remote networks of providers. Those networks will only operate until October.

How successful United-Health can be in luring providers, or even beneficiaries, to new networks that will be dissolved quickly is anyone’s guess, but the scheme has skeptics.

“They are just kicking the can for six months at significant expense to the government,” said one TRICARE contracting official with knowledge of the move.

“When they have a (defense budget) sequester looming, proceeding down that path really doesn’t make a lot of sense.”

However, TRICARE’s far more critical challenge is to educate affected beneficiaries that their Prime coverage will end and most of them will need to shift to TRICARE Standard. An aggressive information campaign is planned with the first of three letters of explanation and warning to be sent to affected beneficiaries.

SEE TRICARE PAGE 5

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and families within 30 days, Lawhon said.

Under Prime, beneficiaries get their care from a designated network of providers for a fixed annual enrollment fee, which for fiscal 2013 is set at $269.28 for individual coverage or $538.56 for family. Retirees and family members also are charged a co-pay of $12 per doctor visit.

Under TRICARE Standard, beneficiaries choose their own physicians and pay no annual enrollment fee. When in need of care, retirees must pay 25 percent of allowable charges themselves. They also pay an annual deductible of $150 for individual or $300 per family. Total out-of-pocket costs, however, cannot exceed a $3,000 per family catastrophic cap.

Some beneficiaries who see local Prime coverage end will be able to enroll in a remaining Prime network near base. To do so, they would have to reside less than 100 miles from that exiting network and would have to waive the driving-distance standard that TRICARE imposes for patient safety. That standard when enforced required that an assigned network provider be within a 30-minute drive of the beneficiary’s home.

If displaced Prime beneficiaries meet the two requirements, then an existing network will make room for them regardless of number of beneficiaries enrolled, Lawhon said. But joining a new network also will mean new doctors. So most displaced Prime beneficiaries are expected to choose to use TRICARE Standard instead to get care locally and, in many cases, from the same physicians who treated them under TRICARE Prime.

“People who use Standard are very, very pleased with it,” Lawhon said.

As a group they report higher scores on customer satisfaction surveys than do Prime users, she said.

The push to end Prime in areas away from bases began in 2007 with design a third generation of TRICARE support contracts. But it took years to settle on winning contractors for the three regions, however, because of bid protests and award reversals. Health Net Federal Services has run North Region under the new contract since April 2011. Humana Military Health Services has had the South Region under the new contract since April 2012. Along with TriWest, these contractors have continued to run remote Prime networks under temporary orders while waiting final word from TRICARE on imposing Prime area restrictions written into original contracts.

The driver behind new restrictions on Prime is cost. Managed care is more cost efficient for the private sector but more expensive for the military to offer than traditional fee-for-service insurance. This is true in part because Congress won’t allow Prime fees to keep pace with health inflation. So more beneficiaries using Standard means less cost to TRICARE.

Of beneficiaries impacted by the Prime area rollback, more than half — almost 98,000 — live in the South Region. Roughly 36,000 are West Region beneficiaries and more than 37,000 are in the North Region.

Tom Philpott is a syndicated columnist. You may write to him at Military Update, P.O. Box 231111, Centreville, VA 20120-1111; or at mlupdate@aol.com.

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Quilt fundraiser for local troops

Florida Chapter 7 Blue Star Mothers of America is conducting a quilt fundraiser. The quilt itself is sewn by a Blue Star mother, is red, white and blue, and is 90 x 90 inches or slightly larger than a double bed. Tickets are available through a donation of $3 each or four tickets for $10. The winner of the quilt will be drawn on Feb. 14. To purchase a ticket call a Blue Star Mother you know, find us on Facebook at Northwest Florida Blue Star Mothers or call Treasurer Kathy Newby, 850-585-7059.

Blue Star Mothers of America is a 501(c)(3) charity that raises funds to support local troops. Blue Star Mothers have a son or daughter in the military and Gold Star Mothers have lost a son or daughter in service to our country. A 2013 Calendar was also created by Blue and Gold Star Mothers as well as the Military Order of Purple Heart Association, which highlights local heroes killed in action. Calendars are available for $10. These organizations were originally organized during WWII to support troops and their mission today just as important. The local chapter has over 30 members.

Tops In Blue – ‘Listen’ World Tour

Tops In Blue — the U.S. Air Force’s Premier Entertainment Showcase — is offering a free night of family entertainment at 7 p.m. Tuesday, Jan. 22 at the Emerald Coast Convention Center on Okaloosa Island. Performance seating begins at 6:30 p.m. and the general public is welcome. More information about the current tour is available at www.topsinblue.com. The tour is sponsored in part by Coca-Cola.

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Civilian Retiree Service Center

The Federal Civilian Retiree Service Center is located in Bldg. 10, room 165A on Eglin Air Force Base. The hours of operation are from 9 a.m. – 1 p.m. Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday each week. Walk-ins welcome or for an appointment or additional information, call 882-2720.

Boating safety class set for Jan. 23

A boating safety class will be held Saturday, Jan. 26 at Coast Guard Station Destin, 2000 Miracle Strip Parkway. Pre-registration is required by Jan. 23. Registration begins at 8:15 a.m. Class is from 8:30 a.m. – 4:30 p.m. The cost is $35 which includes the course, book, exam, FWC Safe Boating ID Card, lunch, line handling & knots demo, tour of the station and safety whistle.

To register, contact Stan Smith, Public Education Officer, at 850-865-9130 or auxman14@mchsi.com.

By law, anyone born on or after January 1, 1988 who operates a vessel in Florida powered by 10 horsepower or more must pass an approved boater safety course and have in his/her possession photographic identification and a boating safety education identification card issued by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission.

Most insurance companies discount boat insurance by 5%-10% for taking this course.

This course also satisfies requirements to rent boats from local marinas and military base outdoor recreation centers.

Topics include: Introduction to Boating, Boating Law, Boat Safety Equipment, Safe Boating, Navigation, Boating Problems, Trailering, Storing and Protecting Your Boat.
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