

He Bombed the Nazis. 75 Years Later, the Nightmares Began.

Like most of his generation, John Wenzel returned from World War II with no interest in sharing memories. Just shy of his 100th birthday, he found he could no longer ignore the past.



By Michael Wilson

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The nightmare shook the old man, who was now in his late 90s. He dreamed of falling from the sky. He awoke feeling helpless and afraid.

John Wenzel, a veteran, automotive executive, father and grandfather, had recently moved into a senior living apartment in Brooklyn Heights, the Watermark on Clark Street, a new, frills-and-all building with a Manhattan skyline view. He would soon turn 99 and become the oldest resident there. Since his wife, Alice, died more than 10 years earlier, he had settled into a quiet rhythm, alone with his jazz records and his painting.

And suddenly, out of nowhere, these nightmares. He feared he had suffered a seizure, but his vital signs were normal. His adult daughters, Emily and Abby, were also worried. Their father had always been so steady and predictable and was never prone to this sort of profound disquiet.

Looking for its source would send Mr. Wenzel and his daughters on a journey back more than 70 years, to a time and a place he had worked purposely his entire adult life to leave behind, to World War II and the skies above Italy.

Emily and Abby were young girls when they learned their father had fought in the war. They remember a day the family visited their grandmother's house and she proudly pulled four slender boxes from a drawer. Inside were several medals on bright ribbons.

"She wanted us to take them home," Abby Wenzel, now 63, recently recalled. The girls were intensely curious — the medals were so beautiful — but their father's response was immediate: "He said, 'I got those in the war, and I don't want them.'"

And so the medals stayed out of sight, where he preferred them, for decades.



John Wenzel in his Brooklyn apartment on his 100th birthday. Michelle V. Agins/The New York Times

There are fewer and fewer soldiers, sailors, marines and airmen who lived through World War II. Close to 16 million Americans served in the war; 99 percent of them are now dead. Like Mr. Wenzel, many of these veterans put the war behind them. Much has been written about "the Greatest Generation" and its valor abroad, as well as its humility back home. This narrative masked the individuals and the personal tolls they would pay.

Over the years, the girls came to understand that their father had been a fighter pilot and that he had been wounded — in his rear end. This never failed to make them laugh. Did he need special pants? A special chair? And he would grin and endure their gentle teasing. He was a warm and funny man, but that grin was about all anyone got out of him on that subject.

The family lived in Sea Cliff, on Long Island. Mr. Wenzel had worked at Chase Manhattan Bank in New York City before joining Ideal Corporation, which manufactured stainless steel hose clamps for automobiles and aircraft in East New York. He worked his way up and eventually became president of the company.

He retired and played a lot of golf until his aging body caught up with him. Finally, in 2023, living in Brooklyn and stooped and slowed by a broken hip, his 100th birthday approaching, he was suddenly overwhelmed by the stress he survived as a younger man.

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The nightmares sent his daughters back to those little rectangular boxes they had first seen at their grandmother's. They brought them to their father, along with some typed notes he'd written at some point, as he began to finally speak about his time in the war.

The writings begin abruptly. On Dec. 7, 1941, breaking news interrupted a game of bridge at Lafayette College, a liberal arts school in Pennsylvania. "Train came down from N.Y. with many guys like me," he wrote. "I joined them."

The attack on Pearl Harbor pulled the United States and millions of its young men into uniform. John Wenzel was 19 when he enlisted and was dispatched to flight school in Miami. He had never even been on an airplane, but he emerged in 1944 as a fighter pilot and was sent off to the Italian front to fight the Nazis. He would fly the P-47 Thunderbolt fighter-bomber, the lone occupant of an eight-ton weapon when fully loaded.

"I never got good at marching or saluting," he wrote, "but they made me a pretty good pilot."

Lieutenant Wenzel flew scattered missions in Northern Italy, near Milan, and just over the Austrian border in early 1945. His bombs destroyed Axis railroad cars and a large gasoline truck outside a depot in Trento. In February, he bombed and strafed more than a dozen enemy cars with machine guns in Lienz, Austria. He severed a rail line and fired rockets at stalled enemy train cars in Novara in March.

But it was all just a lead-up to April 1945.



Lieutenant Wenzel's medals, awarded decades ago and only recently displayed. Michelle V. Agins/The New York Times

Fighting was furious then on the Italian ground, with the Allies depending on the roaring Thunderbolts overhead near Verona and along the Po River south of Milan.

Lieutenant Wenzel was flying several attack missions every week, guiding his team through bad weather and, in Air Force parlance, "persistent and accurate antiaircraft fire." "The irony," he wrote later in his notes, "is that we were working harder than ever, flying some of our best missions, but for the first time we talked openly about survival."

He eluded enemy fire for the first 13 days of April.

On April 14, Lieutenant Wenzel led a team of four fighter planes, providing air support for units pushing toward a rail hub in the town of Zocca. Lieutenant Wenzel scored a direct hit with his bombs, destroying enemy guns.

Then a German shell burst right outside his cockpit. Fragments sliced into his plane, tearing his uniform. Bleeding from his neck, he circled around for another attack before guiding his heavily damaged aircraft back to the base.

His actions that day would earn him a Purple Heart, but first, Lieutenant Wenzel returned to the air.

“German troops were on both sides of the river and were beating our guys up with all kinds of guns,” Lieutenant Wenzel wrote later. His team flew toward a farmhouse that held a machine-gun nest.

“On our first pass, there were plenty of tracers coming at us, and I got hit from underneath,” he wrote. “It felt like somebody had paddled my rear end.”

He asked another pilot to fly under his plane to eyeball the damage. Looks OK, the pilot reported, even as smoke started to fill Lieutenant Wenzel’s cockpit and his parachute seemed to be on fire. He radioed his fellow pilots to coordinate another pass on the farmhouse.

An officer got on the radio: “‘Don’t be a jerk, John. Go home.’” The officer, Joseph Dickerson, was a captain and outranked the lieutenant. “But I didn’t have a military discipline handbook with me,” Mr. Wenzel wrote. “We told him we were having too much fun to go home.”

The team attacked their target again until, satisfied, they turned toward Pisa and their air base. But Lieutenant Wenzel’s troubles were mounting.

“I began to think that old Joe was right,” he wrote. “The fire had consumed most of my chute, plus the seat of my pants, and was starting on my seatbelt, which burned like the wick to a cheap firecracker.”

He couldn’t eject without a parachute, and opening the cockpit would feed the flames with oxygen. His only option was to push on to Pisa.

He finally landed, and a crew hurried to extinguish the flames. A doctor “pulled a few steel splinters out of me” and treated him with burn ointment. He wisecracked: “My request for a replacement pair of trousers was denied.”

Earning a Purple Heart is usually a source of great pride, a testament to surviving an injury in combat. Earning two Purple Hearts in eight days would seem to place a man in the company of the very, very lucky.

Lieutenant Wenzel shipped back home in late 1945. He graduated from Swarthmore College, in Pennsylvania, and ended up in New York City. He found an apartment on Macdougall Street in Greenwich Village. But for a buddy or two from the service, he was alone.

He liked to paint in a studio he rented for \$20 a month on the Lower East Side. After a day of painting, he would walk toward home, but not quite get there. The first stop instead was the San Remo Cafe, also on Macdougall.



After the war, Mr. Wenzel spent time in Greenwich Village, where he devoted himself to painting. Here, a self-portrait. Michelle V. Agins/The New York Times

The place, like the surrounding city, would have been thick with unmoored young veterans like himself, and Mr. Wenzel found comfort in their company — “people like me,” he’d say later — without exactly interacting with them. He drank a lot, and he kept to himself.

He would go on to call this “the dark times,” and once told a grandnephew that he was “a mess” then.

Eventually, he discovered his instinct for business. He met a young social worker, Alice Newman, and they married and started a family. He stayed busy, and the war faded into the background.

And, for more than 70 years, that was where the war stayed. The nightmares arrived when he moved into his Brooklyn apartment — so vivid he believed they were real and scolded his home nurse for not saving him. Doctors could find no physical cause for the panic. A sleep specialist suggested he speak to a therapist.

His daughters set him up with a counselor over Zoom, who suggested he consider opening up more about his past. And the stories slowly revealed themselves. The Wenzel daughters found their father, far out of character, eager to share.

In early March, shortly before his 100th birthday, Mr. Wenzel agreed to an interview, conducted in his living room. Beside him were his medals, the first time he'd seen them in decades — a Distinguished Flying Cross, an Air Medal, a Silver Star, his two Purple Hearts. His vision and hearing diminished, he spoke with effort about staying quiet for so long.

“There was no place to talk about it, and no way to express myself,” he said. He glanced toward the medals. “For many years, these were tucked away. We didn’t have much reason to pull them out.”

He said that right after the war, even in a downtown bar filled with other soldiers, it was unbecoming to seem to seek attention. “Nobody asked me about it,” he said. “I didn’t bring it up.”

He became aware of reunions of his old fighter squadron. He rarely went. “I didn’t see why I should spend my time ...” His voice trailed off.

Years ago, his wife wanted to visit Italy and, in particular, Venice. No, thanks, he said reflexively. Not Venice.

“There were certain places you weren’t supposed to bomb or shoot up,” he explained recently. “Venice was one of them.”

He recalls flying over the untouchable city. “German soldiers had occupied Venice, and were enjoying the sunshine and whatever else they got in Venice,” he recalled. It angered him.

Eventually, he relented and visited the city with Alice. “She liked Venice,” he said. “I didn’t.”

He chuckled. He said he hoped stories like his would keep the war from being forgotten.

“I’m afraid people are going to take it lightly — it shouldn’t be taken lightly,” he said. “They’ve got their own wars, and World War II is getting to be smaller and smaller.”

The bravado he had once shown in his writing — “too much fun to go home” — long ago fled him. The medals, for years hidden away, have filled that space. “I found I needed to look at them,” Mr. Wenzel said. The nightmares have stopped.

Audio produced by Parin Behrooz.