

World War II Vet Lives On In Book

By MARK STUART ELLISON

Editor's Note: The following piece was submitted to the Brooklyn Spectator as a reflection on the life and service of World War II Fighter Control Squadron member Eli Ellison, the author's late father.

Longtime Coney Island resident Eli Ellison is gone, but not forgotten. Ellison, 81, a semi-retired Board of Education home instruction teacher who sometimes worked in Bay Ridge, died July 6 after a long bout with prostate cancer.

His memory lives on in "Dear Mom, Dad & Ethel: World War II Through the Eyes of a Radio Man," a novel on which he and I collaborated.

Eli Ellison was my dad.

FROM 1943 TO 1945, my father served in Western Europe with the 327th Fighter Control Squadron, which played a critical role in the war effort.

The Fighter Control System was developed by the British. It was the single biggest factor enabling the RAF to defeat a numerically superior Luftwaffe in the Battle of Britain in 1940.

Fighter Control directed fighter pilots to targets and brought them home when they were lost. Targets for air defense, as in the Battle of Britain, were enemy aircraft. Targets on the ground included bridges, railways and enemy convoys.

Soldiers manning radio trucks acted as liaisons between lead pilots in airborne fighter squadrons and controllers in operations blocks.

By manipulating a series of dials on his radio equipment, a transmitter truck operator enabled a controller to speak with a lead pilot. Receiver trucks allowed the controller to hear



Eli Ellison in a photo taken in 1994.

the pilot.

If a flyer was lost or hit, three radio vans located his position. Monitoring the signal from the aircraft, each fighter control technician would determine the pilot's angle relative to his truck's location. He would then transmit that information to the controller, who would plot it on a chart.

The controller, who had a map of all truck locations in the area, could pinpoint the pilot by observing where the three angles intersected and then direct him to safety.

DETERMINING ANGLES was tricky. The fighter control technician manipulated a wheel in his radio truck attached to a 75-foot antenna until the pilot's signal reached the



Young Eli Ellison pictured in his uniform as a member of the World War II Fighter Control Squadron.

"null" or softest volume. This sound was very similar to one emitted from a plane whose bearing was 180 degrees off. If the radio man supplied the wrong angle, a pilot could fly out to sea, where death was almost certain.

Radio trucks were spaced at least a mile apart. If a truck was hit, another vehicle would take its place so that the system could continue to function.

During the Battle of the Bulge, the 327th Fighter Control Squadron was moved from Verviers, Belgium, which was in danger of being overrun, to Liege, a much larger Belgian city 13 miles away. But instead of being safer, the squadron was in much greater danger.

Dad was usually five to ten miles behind the front lines, but in Liege he was right on the front lines and buzz bombs were coming in at about 100 a day.

Like today's roadside bombs in Iraq, buzz bombs were weapons of terror. They were very inaccurate and deadly. Nobody knew when or where they'd hit.

POWERED BY NOISY pulse-jet engines, they flew at 400 miles per hour, the upper limit of World War II's conventional fighters. When an internal counter reached a certain number, the bomb's motor would usually stop and change from flying to diving mode, giving soldiers and civilians on the ground about 15 to 30 seconds to take cover.

But all buzz bombs were not created equal. Some would go into diving

mode, restart and continue on a horizontal flight path. Others would keep droning until impact. Then there were those that flew in coiled patterns before hitting their targets, fiendishly mesmerizing bystanders below.

During this period, 327th Fighter Control Squadron members put in tough, 12-to-18-hour days. My father took up smoking.

After the war, Dad cherished the safety and comfort of America as never before. To him, the peace and prosperity of the United States was blissful compared to the pulverized cities through which he had passed.

Whenever I was bothered by a personal problem, Dad always reminded me that no bombs were falling and nobody was shooting at me. To this day, that admonition helps me keep things in perspective.

Another key aspect of Dad's service was that it connected him to all soldiers, past and present, in a visceral way that only those who were in a war zone can truly understand.

He mourned every U.S. troop death in Iraq. Even he, a rear-guard technical support soldier, was part of a band of brothers at whose fortitude I can only marvel.

"Dear Mom, Dad & Ethel: World War II Through the Eyes of a Radio Man" can be ordered at www.iuniverse.com or by calling 1-877-823-9235. Mark Stuart Ellison can be contacted on the Internet at www.momdadandethel.com.



Radio men Eli Ellison, right, and Sal Neri pictured in England in 1944.