

# Flying High at 95

By Daniel Smith



Len Snyder gets ready for a glider flight his friends surprised him with on Aug. 12 at Williams Soaring Center to celebrate his birthday. Photo provided

Just over a week before his birthday, World War II pilot, Len Snyder, found himself 5,000 feet above the Earth, once again at the controls of a glider plane. Then on Aug. 22, 62 friends joined the longtime Orinda resident and illustrator to celebrate at Walnut Creek's Buttercup Grill and Bar. He had just turned 95.

These figures seemed as unbelievable to Snyder as they do to anyone else. "When they say '9' and '5' ... those numbers don't compute!" he said.

Snyder was lucky to have made it to his 30s. He piloted a glider plane over the beaches of Normandy in the first wave of the 1944 D-Day invasion. "We came in fast, at 100 miles per hour," he said. He landed his crew of 101st Airborne Division infantrymen behind enemy lines, amid a thicket of German snipers. Though he survived, two of his friends were lost that day. They now rest in a Normandy cemetery.

During an ensuing mission over German territory, Snyder's glider was shot down and he was grievously injured. A bullet entered his right hand, taking off his dominant index and middle fingers, and continued through

his lower abdomen. Of the 23-man crew, only five survived.

Snyder underwent a long rehabilitation, which included numerous surgeries and the reattachment of his middle finger. "It took them four years to put me back together again," he said. This time was not a total loss for Snyder, who took a liking to the recovery ward's head nurse, Louella Fox. She was the apple of every patient's eye, but once again he beat the odds. He married Louella in 1950 — on his birthday.

Together they toured the U.S. in a 1951 Pontiac Catalina, and spent time living in the Bay Area. A random lunch stop in Orinda brought them into a conversation with a friendly real estate broker. "He said to Louella and I, 'I've got one home on Hall Drive.' Louella always couldn't say no to anything. She said, 'Let's give it a go.'"

But the broker left out one minor detail. "There were buffalo up on the hills!" exclaimed Snyder. "Orinda was so rural in those days." The buffalo would stomp around Snyder's porch, and despite neighborhood complaints, the sheriffs were understandably hesitant about trying to cor-

ral them.

During this time Snyder, an artist who attended Chicago's Art Institute before the war, began his 25-year career as an illustrator for Hewlett Packard. When asked how he was able to professionally illustrate following his injury, he nonchalantly responded, "Once I could get my middle finger to touch my thumb I could draw again. ... I could never convert to my left hand."

Snyder still spends two hours a day in his drawing room. He generously makes portraits for both old friends and the new friends he always seems to be making.

In this same outwardly-focused vein, Snyder refused this article be a profile about him. "Don't give me the big flash," he insisted. "If it has too much jazz in there," he jokingly threatened, "I'll get you."

Rather, Snyder implores people to remember those who served, but never came back. He reserves special praise for the infantrymen of the 101st Airborne Division and the 442nd Infantry Regiment, comprised mostly of Japanese-Americans who, in the face of internment, still loyally served their country.

When asked about the future, Snyder lists off a social schedule busier than most teenagers. He remains actively involved with senior and veteran groups and regularly goes out with friends.

It seems Snyder's recent flight rekindled his interest in flying. He mused out loud about possibly taking a solo flight, but when asked if he was serious, he slapped his knee. "I shouldn't be doing these things," he laughed. "I'm living in a 95-year-old body! It doesn't register."

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Snyder makes a point about World War II, as Warren Jensen of Concord listens, at a Feb. 2 event organized to salute 14 East Bay residents who fought in the June 6, 1944 Allied Invasion of Normandy. Photo Ohlen Alexander

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