

# Byers pays 60-year debt of gratitude

By Dee Dellenbach  
Staff writer

The day the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, Ralph Byers was getting treatments for polio at Riley Hospital for Children. During his recovery, he started building models of the war planes.

One of Byers' favorite models was the Avenger, a fighter bomber used by the Navy to avenge the Japanese. It was a heavily armored plane built to destroy Japanese subs, and it was pretty hard on the Japanese fighter planes as well.

"Their (Japanese planes) only defense was that they were lighter and more maneuverable," said Byers. "But the Avengers shot 90 rounds per minute, and if they got a Japanese in their sights, they would blow it out of the sky."

Byers said Riley hospital was like a beehive the day the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor.

"I was just about nine years old. Everyone around was going silly. It was as bad as the day the

World Trade Center was attacked," he said.

Recently, Byers had an opportunity to see an Avenger when he worked as a volunteer at the Indianapolis Air Show.

The show was sponsored by Thrivent Financial for Lutherans. For years, Byers has held investments with the institution, and when he learned that they were sponsoring the air show to benefit Riley Hospital for Children, he jumped at the chance.

Well, he didn't jump really; Byers never made a full recovery from polio. He underwent painful treatments, wore a turn buckle cast which was tightened every day, wore many braces and underwent surgery. But the disease left him with a bend in his back and a hitch in his stride.

Still, the 74-year-old has managed to put three kids through college and still puts in a full day of work at his repair shop.

A three-way certified welder and mechanic with an eighth-grade education, Byers grew up in Cass County. When he was eight, he and another local child

were diagnosed with polio and were sent to Riley. Doctors killed the virus in 21 days, and he was able to go home for Christmas. But Byers was to see a lot more of Riley hospital. Much of his body was paralyzed for two years, and he lay on a frame, in braces.

He recovered enough to go back to school but wore the braces until 1944. Later, he met Etta Swank of Lucerne, and they wed in 1957. The couple moved to Burrows and raised three daughters, and in 1990, Byers retired from Small Parts in Logansport, where he was the maintenance foreman.

**The air show**  
When Byers arrived at the Indianapolis Air Show, he was looking forward to the day and was ready to work. The volunteer coordinator asked him what he'd like to do.



Byers

"Doesn't matter to me," Byers remarked offhandedly.

"So the coordinator gave me a stack of cards and told me to choose one. I took the one off the top and got the job of helping the handicapped park their cars. No kidding!"

After a couple of hours on his feet in a 50-acre field of cars, Byers took a break. What he saw next surprised and thrilled him. An Avenger taxied past him, unfolding its wings.

"It was impressive!" he laughed. "And I had a wonderful day. I had made models of those planes."

Pretty soon it started raining, and when the show was over, the mud in the parking field was ankle-deep.

"It was two hours getting all those cars out of there," he said. "Fifteen got stuck."

But the day was well worth it, Byers said.

"It means a great deal to me. I owe Riley a great debt."

**Heart of giving**  
This year marks the tenth anniversary of the Indianapolis

Air Show and the fifth year that Thrivent has sponsored it. The air show has made just shy of \$1 million for Riley. This year the

air show was again a success and, in addition, the Indiana regional office of Thrivent "personally" gave Riley a \$100,000 donation.



The Avenger makes an appearance

The Avenger was built as a fighter bomber by Grumman for use during World War II. They entered service in January of 1942, shortly after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, thus the name Avenger. American Air Power Museum describes them as "superb sub hunters." They were used "to hunt German submarines which preyed upon Allied shipping in the North Atlantic and Arctic Ocean. In the Pacific, Avengers hunted down the Japanese surface fleet and supported Marine and Army troops during island landings." Source: photo and text from www.americanairpowermuseum.com

## County farm couples are finalists in FB contest

Comet staff report

Two Carroll County farm couples have been selected as finalists for a statewide award from Indiana Farm Bureau.

Ty and Sacha Brown and Mark and Kathy Justice, all of Carroll County, are finalists, along with Matt and Heather Allyn of Posey County for the Young Farmer Achievement Award.

The Young Farmer Achievement Award recognizes

young farmers whose farm management techniques and commitment to their communities set a positive example for those involved in production agriculture, while the Young Farmer Excellence in Agriculture Award recognizes young farmers who are involved in agriculture in ways other than as farm owners.

The Browns own their own independent farm and are also involved in the farming operation owned by his parents. Together,

the two operations include a 2,000-head feeder-to-finish hog operation, a Beck's seed dealership, corn and soybeans, and a grain merchandizing business. They have three children, Hannah, Jayden and Landon, ranging in age from seven to one.

The Justices have been farming on their own since they bought a farm a couple of years after graduating from college. They now raise 780 acres of soybeans and specialty corn varieties. While

Mrs. Justice helps out on the farm, she also manages a retail store for hog equipment in Camden. The couple has a two-year-old daughter, Morgan.

The winner will be announced at the Indiana Farm Bureau convention, which will be held Dec. 8-9 in downtown Indianapolis. The state winners will then represent Indiana at the national Farm Bureau convention in Salt Lake City, Utah, in January.

## Canal gets \$10,000 grant



Comet staff report

Carroll County Wabash & Erie Canal Inc. has received a \$10,000 grant from the Efroymsen Fund - a family trust administered by Central Indiana Community Foundation.

Dan McCain, president of the canal association, said the association's early efforts to retrieve the Winamac/Stearns truss iron bridge from Pulaski County had been recognized by Historic Landmarks Foundation of Indiana and then their endorsement of the restoration efforts helped win this \$10,000 grant.

"With this money we will delve deeper into our rehabilitation of the 76 ft. long 1913 bridge," McCain said. "Volunteers have been working two-three days per week on 'pack rust' removal, riveting, loosening rusted turnbuckles, assessing metal restoration needs, and planning for the eventual re-erection of the bridge."

Next year, volunteers want to re-erect the historic span across the canal, the old-fashioned way - with no cranes or modern hydraulic lifts. McCain said this would be the method used to put a bridge in place 100 years ago, using gin-poles and ingenuity.

"We have been consulting with Vern Mesler, a volunteer from Michigan who brings expert

experience," McCain said. "He has guided and inspired us onsite in Delphi with his restoration techniques and background."

McCain said site preparation for the bridge will begin this fall

behind Dairy Queen and Pizza Hut in west Delphi.

"We are well into the restoration of the chords and tightening rods," McCain said. "Our project needs time (about another year of labor by the volunteers) and donations. If you care to help out with our restoration of this one-of-a-kind treasure (no other known remaining in the US), then make out a check to the Wabash & Erie Canal Association, 1030 West Washington Street, Delphi, IN 46923."

"If anybody has some seasoned six-inch channel steel or wrought iron in one to three-foot pieces that we could have to repair the damaged chord members where heavy rust is taking its toll, please let us know," McCain said. He can be reached at 765-564-6297.



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