

# Veteran Carlos Crews

## World War II Airman Readied Planes for D-Day, Other Major Operations

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY MICHAEL STONE

**O**n Ponce de Leon Avenue in Lake City, Carlos Crews lives on a mini farm, complete with donkeys, goats, geese, chickens, ducks, oranges, lemons and alligators, if you count the one that once snuck into the pond.

Crews has owned the property since 1964, and family and friends now help the 95-year-old with the upkeep.

In a storage building, one of Crews' passions — cars, which he also built a career around — takes the form of a Model T and a Ford truck from the early 20th century.

All this is hidden by the house's façade and a quaint front yard that's accented by an American flag fluttering atop a flagpole. The flag is a symbol of Crews' sacrificing a few prime years of his life, a reminder of so many others' sacrifices — which, for 416,800 U.S. service men and women during World War II, was life itself.

“We had no choice in the matter, [but] we were proud to help,” Master Sgt. Crews said of his three years in the war, during which he helped ready C-47 troop transport planes for the D-Day invasion and to reinforce the encircled town of Bastogne. “Back in those days, I guess we were proud, not realizing what we were getting into, how dangerous. But you don't think about those things.”

Crews grew up on a farm in the rural southern Georgia city of Folkston. The fourth of eight children [two others died in infancy], he said being in the middle prepared him for the hard knocks of military service.

“Momma, she did her best to raise me,” Crews said, “but the older ones got to the table before I did. ... I was a runt. I was

the runt of the whole family.”

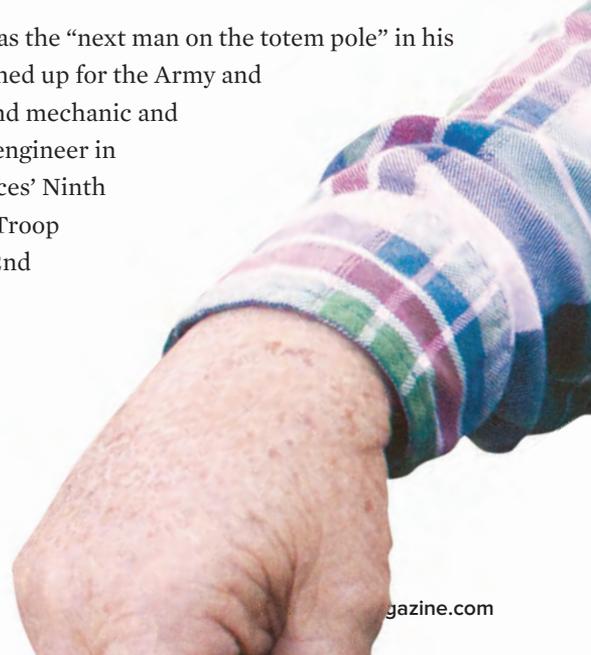
Farm life didn't offer many career skills, so he signed up for the New Deal-era National Youth Administration, which, to help combat youth unemployment, gave teenagers and those in their early 20s skills training.

But he wouldn't get very far in the NYA, for soon after signing up, while in the hospital to have his tonsils removed, a nurse came into 21-year-old Crews' room to deliver some shocking news.

“She said the Japanese have just bombed Pearl Harbor,” Crews remembered. “What's Pearl Harbor? I don't know what Pearl Harbor is, for Pete's sake. ... I know one thing: The draft was going there, and they had drafted my brother in October [1941].”

Knowing he was the “next man on the totem pole” in his family, Crews signed up for the Army and was made a ground mechanic and eventually flight engineer in the Army Air Forces' Ninth Air Force, 439th Troop Carrier Group, 92nd Squadron.

(In historical photos, if a C-47 has “J8” painted on the side, which signified it was in the





D-DAY June 6, 1944  
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On his mini farm at the southern edge of Lake City, Carlos Crews maintains a diverse mix of animals and plants, including donkeys and a few different types of oranges. (Right) A model C-47 stands in Crews' living room.

92nd Squadron, Crews said there's a chance he worked on that plane.)

"We had to learn that airplane from tip to toe, nose to tail," he said of C-47s, describing how his life began to revolve around the aircraft and that pictures of them bring tears to his eyes. "We had to know every function of that plane. You knew every bolt, the potential strength of that bolt."

He and his wife stayed in several different states during

***"Once you commit, there's no turning back. You're either going to go, or you're going to crash."***

1943 and early 1944 as he participated in training courses and exercises — plane mechanics, towing and releasing gliders, dropping paratroopers and teaching single-engine pilots how to fly the twin-engine C-47.

Though not privy to exact details, Crews knew such efforts were preparation for the invasion of Nazi-controlled Europe.

The hours were long: Crews would work from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., eat and work more until 1 a.m. And while not carried out in a warzone, the training did provide for some tense moments, like when Crews would be sitting behind new pilots who would have their side of the cockpit blacked out to teach

them how to take off by instrument only.

There was also one freezing night when he and three others flew a C-47 across Nebraska and up to Mount Rushmore in South Dakota. To test mechanics' work, the engines would be cut off and restarted — but that night, one didn't come back on.

"You can land on one engine," Crews said. "I wasn't looking forward to it. ... Talk about prayer, praying, calling on the Lord to help you. When you're in a situation where you can't do a thing about it, you've got to have help."

"Would you believe we made one of the best landings you've ever seen in your life? Just like that — with one engine," he added, noting that a mechanic had installed an incorrect type of gasket.

During paratrooper training, when the green light would come on indicating it was time to jump from the plane, Crews said he never saw one freeze up.

"Paratroopers, man, they're the toughest thing out there. They'd bite nails in two," he said, noting that his brother signed up to become one only because of the position's bonus pay.

He didn't know "he'd have to jump out of an airplane behind enemy lines, in the dark, not knowing where you're going to land, they're going to be shooting at you on your way down, you're lucky if you hit the ground," Crews said. "If you do, you're [likely] to break your neck.

"But that didn't mean anything to him; all he knew, they drew \$50 more a month pay."

In February 1944, the time finally came to get the C-47s



over to England for the invasion of Europe. To cross the Atlantic, the planes were flown along the southern route: down Florida, into the Caribbean, along South America's northeast coast, over to Africa, around Portugal and Spain, and onto England's Balderton airfield.

England provided Crews with his first real taste of war. One night, on a recreational outing to London, he found himself alone at a train station when German bombs started falling. (Though "the Blitz" of 1940 and 1941 is the most well-known German bombing campaign of England, the Luftwaffe managed to put together a final one over four months in early 1944, known as Operation Steinbock.)

"Here I am, ole country boy by myself ... here's these bombs — Boom! Every one getting closer and closer to me!" Crews said, adding that he thought the train station might be the bombers' target.

He saw some lights that led underground and took cover there, and when he reemerged, an Englishman brushed the bombs off, telling him: "Oh, don't worry, old chap. They'll be gone."

One of last tasks to prep for D-Day for Crews and the others of the 439th was to paint white stripes on the wings and fuselage of the C-47s. The U.S. Navy shot down several friendly paratrooper planes in the invasion of Sicily in 1943, so the stripes would distinguish the C-47s from enemy aircraft.

Then, on the night of June 5, 1944, at roughly 10 p.m., paratroopers from the 82nd and 101st Airborne divisions started boarding C-47s to be dropped behind enemy lines in Norman-

dy, France.

Crews said he certified 10 to 12 C-47s as ready to fly that night and was there as hundreds of planes took off one at a time, assembled in the air and flew to France in groups.

"Once you commit, there's no turning back. You're either going to go, or you're going to crash," he said, describing the invading troops' faces as "serious, mad, solemn, business."

"They're putting their life on the line," he added. "Do you understand that?"

The 13,100 paratroopers started to land shortly after midnight, but many were scattered away from their intended drop zones.

"We got criticized for that: They claim we scattered them," Crews said. "Well, they were. [The] Germans said that was a good thing, but for us, it looked like a lot bigger invasion than it actually was."

When the planes returned, Crews helped fit them with gliders carrying troops, guns, jeeps and other supplies to also be dropped into France.

Combined, the 82nd and 101st incurred roughly 2,500 casualties in the invasion, with about 1,500 of those killed or captured by the Germans, according to historian Joseph Balkoski's book *Utah Beach*.

Almost one-third of the 1,134 C-47s that participated in the troop and glider drops were shot down or severely damaged, with 128 plane and glider crew members killed, the book says. The overall D-Day invasion on June 6 cost 3,450 American soldiers, sailors and air crew members.



Three of Crews' World War II medals — the French Legion of Honor, a D-Day commemorative medal and U.S. Army Air Forces wings — lie on his bedroom desk. (Above) Crews during his military service.

Throughout the war in Europe, Crews helped prepare C-47s for other notable events: the failed Operation Market Garden, which dropped American and British troops behind Nazi lines at the Dutch-German border; supply drops to the 101st Airborne troops encircled at Bastogne, Belgium, during the Battle of the Bulge; and the troop drops in southern France from planes taking off from central Italy as part of Operation Dragoon, which is often overshadowed by the D-Day invasion of northern France, Operation Overlord.

After Dragoon, Crews rode as a passenger on a C-47 to get back to England. It's a "good thing I was on that airplane," he said.

Over the Mediterranean, maybe 3,000 feet over the water, Crews was sleeping in the back but awoke when both engines shut off. The pilot, co-pilot and flight engineer apparently weren't paying attention and let the fuel run out. So the plane would dive down, but the autopilot would send it back up, like hills and valleys.

Crews instantly identified what was wrong and grabbed an extra fuel tank to put in the plane.

"We were out of fuel. I knew that. ... The pilot had no idea what was happening," he said, adding that the crew might have otherwise ditched the plane in the sea. "Would you believe by the grace of God those engines picked up because I put more fuel, I changed the gas tanks."

Crews has a single memory of Germany's surrender in May 1945: being told, while stationed in France, that he was selected for service in the Pacific.

"My group," Crews said, "of all people, were called out, assembled, the whole 92nd Squadron. 'This group has been selected to go direct to the Pacific from Europe.' I said, 'You say what?' 'Yes.' I said, 'I know who's not going. I'm not going.'"

Crews explained that his points from successful combat missions, total time in the service and rank of master sergeant meant he could figure a way out. And he did: transfer from the 439th to the 440th, which was headed back to The States.

He eventually made it to Hilliard, Florida, where his wife awaited him, and got a job in Jacksonville with NAPA auto parts, starting with labor work at a distribution center but, over decades, working his way up to regional positions.

"I wanted to work, and I wanted to work hard," he said. "I did. I'd work day and night if they'd let me. ... I don't care what kind of job you're doing: If I work with you long enough, I'll steal yours."

He and his wife had three children, and she passed away in 1975. He remarried in 1976 and became stepfather to four more children. He now has seven grandchildren and at least six great-grandchildren.

"He grew up in a time that I think we've gone way away from, when everybody had a duty to the country, and that's how his generation was," stepson Charles Roberts said, calling Crews not only his stepfather but also his mentor. "They call it the Greatest Generation for a reason. Many of these were boys that went off to war and came back men."

Crews is a member of the D-Day Normandy Veterans of North Central Florida, a group of area veterans who get together once a month for lunch at Conestogas Restaurant in Alachua. As he looked over a group photo on his kitchen table, Crews pointed to each member, men of World War II, in their late 80s and 90s, naming them as he went from face to face.

"It's just like a family reunion, every month we get together," he said. "We respect each other, and we like — I'll tear up if I don't shut up." ■