

Bob Ernst

Amid Loss, 95-Year-Old WWII Vet Finds ‘Salvation’ in Volunteering

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY MICHAEL STONE

Toward the end of World War II, Navy plane mechanic Bob Ernst was stationed at Kaneohe Bay near Pearl Harbor in Hawaii, helping assemble Lockheed PV-1 Venturas that had been shipped in parts from the U.S. mainland for use in the Pacific.

Before arriving there, Ernst already had about three years of service, mostly at the Navy’s flight training base in Lake City, where he kept a specific PV-1 in working order for Navy and Marine pilot trainees. But Uncle Sam finally pulled him out to sea and away from his wife and two young daughters.

There on the island of Oahu, the 22-year-old made friends with a few of the other “older” guys — or ones who chose to participate in more wholesome activities, like mountain climbing and shell collecting.

“Six of us that were married men didn’t want to go into town and get drunk, that type of thing,” the now 95-year-old remembered from his Gainesville home near Newnans Lake, the same one he has lived in since 1962. “It was play time — work, but play time.”

Ernst never made it to Pearl Harbor to see the lingering signs of destruction from Japan’s surprise attack three years prior. But he did get a taste of war’s carnage in visits with his gang to the Royal Hawaiian hotel and resort, which was being leased by the Navy for rest and recuperation for sailors.

“It was like going to your local hospital and visiting a friend,” he recalled. “[We] volunteered to do that because we almost felt guilty to be stateside, no bullets, Kaneohe Bay, no bullets flying.”

Some staying at the Hawaiian, he said, were in bad shape and probably didn’t make it.

Those visits with injured sailors were what Ernst remembers as his first major times of volunteerism — but they wouldn’t be the last.

“I came back to the States, home, and beginning working and so forth, with the deep conviction [that the less fortunate] needed help on the home front,” he said.

Today, he can be seen carrying that conviction forward at Gainesville’s Haven Hospice Attic Resale Store, one of five stores in the region that help support the parent not-for-profit organization in its efforts to provide end-of-life care across North Florida.

At the store, he serves as a host, visiting with customers and helping them find particular items.

“When Bob is there, he’s out front. He greets everyone,” said Susie Finrock, Haven’s manager of volunteer services. “He says hello and talks with them. He gives hugs. He just really makes our shoppers feel really welcome in the store.”

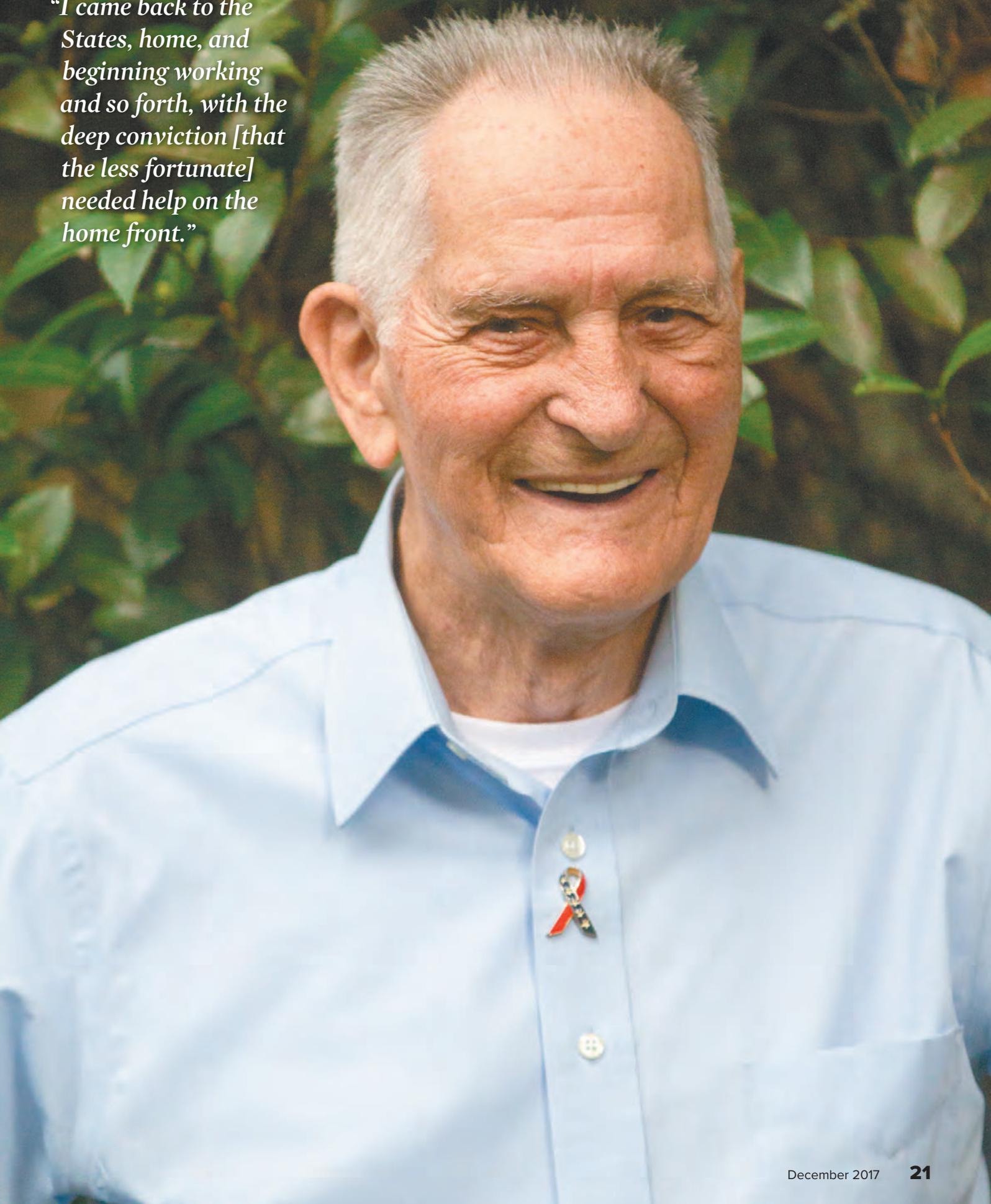
In addition, Ernst works as repairman, restoring donated frames, clocks, and other items so they can go on the sales floor and be used again instead of ending up in the landfill.

To-be-repaired items are placed in what’s known as “Bob’s box,” and then he sees what he can do in the store or at his at-home workspaces.

“I appreciate the fact that they think I can fix it,” Ernst said. “And when I do, then I feel good, they feel good.”

He has volunteered at Haven for 11 years now, starting soon after the worst of several times of serious loss and hardship

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Ernst and his wife, Marion (top left), and the couple in a photo with their first two daughters (bottom left). The two met while Ernst was visiting Gainesville for some time away from training on plane mechanics. "It was just one of those things," he recalled of seeing her in a restaurant at the intersection of Main Street and University Avenue. "She was attracted to me, and I was attracted to her." Ernst showing historical documents (top right), the primary plane he worked on as a mechanic, the Lockheed PV-1 Ventura (center), and his discharge certificate from the Navy (bottom right).



that have stacked intense trial throughout his life. But such doesn't seem noticeable to the customers and the roughly 130 other volunteers at the Gainesville store.

"He is happy and smiling all the time," Finrock described. "This is somebody who's gone through a lot of strife in his life, and he just has really turned it into something positive by giving back and sharing himself with others."

Ernst was born in blue-collar Ashland, Ohio, at 3 a.m. on Sept. 12, 1922, when Warren Harding was president, the beginning of the Great Depression was seven years out, and \$10.90 would buy a new tire.

He was the only one of his parents' seven children who entered the world in a hospital instead of at home, planned so only because of potential complications with his birth.

Growing up, Ernst formed and furthered an interest in aircraft. He read magazines featuring World War I flying aces and built model planes, and his dad, who owned an auto-mechanics shop, took him to plane and blimp shows.

Ernst graduated from Ashland High School in June 1941. That December, the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, and in January 1942, he signed up for the Navy, preferring that to being drafted into the Army.

“I didn’t want to crawl around in the mud in the Army,” he explained, “and I figured, ‘Well, in the Navy, you’ll be aboard ship. You’ll have a dry bed unless the ship goes down.’”

Ernst went to Cleveland for processing; Newport, Rhode Island, for boot camp; and then Naval Air Station Jacksonville for training on how to be an airplane mechanic. (He had wanted to be a pilot instead, but his math scores weren’t high enough.)

“When you went through that course, you could’ve worked on any airplane they had in the Navy — fighters, bombers, transport planes,” he remembered of his 26 weeks in Jacksonville.

For some time away from training, he hitchhiked down to Gainesville and, while there, popped into a restaurant at the intersection of Main Street and University Avenue. Inside, a young woman named Marion caught his eye.

“It was just one of those things,” Ernst remembered. “She was attracted to me, and I was attracted to her.”

Less than a year and a few Greyhound bus trips later, the two married, on Jan. 29, 1943.

At some point during the couple’s courting, the Navy transferred Ernst to Naval Air Station Lake City, and once married, they got an apartment in Lake City.

His mechanical specialty at the base was the PV-1, a bomber and patrol plane that also carried machine guns and a crew of five. Lockheed Martin ended up building 1,600 of them for the Navy.

“All the people that were going to use that airplane in World War II in the South Pacific ... had to go through training in Lake City, Florida,” he said. “They were young men, and we were all young men — 18, 19, 20, 20-something.”

During his three years at Lake City, Ernst was in charge of the upkeep of a specific PV-1, No. 66, on which he painted a Little Lulu comic.

He doesn’t recall how many fresh pilots and crews trained in his plane (Lake City was a “pilot mill,” he said), but he does remember a few being nervous and getting a feel for the plane’s condition by requesting the mechanic to join them.

“They would even invite you to fly along with them, and if you were the mechanic responsible for that airplane and if you said no, then they wouldn’t sign up for that airplane,” he explained. “That would be their red flag.”

Yet he encountered only two accidents in his whole time working in

Florida training fields.

One — a man killed by a moving propeller — he heard about secondhand from an officer and thinks it might have instead been a scare-tactic story.

The other — the crash of a Beechcraft training plane, which killed the crew of maybe three — was during Ernst’s brief stay at Naval Air Station Green Cove Springs en route to Jacksonville. He didn’t see it actually go down but watched firefighters rush to the crash site.

“All the men aboard died,” he said, “especially the ones that were up front.”

The transfer to Kaneohe Bay in late ’44 was tough for Ernst especially because he and Marion by then had two daughters. But he was thankful for not being moved into a combat zone.

“It was a sense of gratitude to have such a safe job,” he said.

There, Ernst’s specific job was assembling PV-1 engines; others focused on different parts shipped over from the U.S., like the radio, hydraulics, and propellers.

Aside from times with his gang of married men, a favorite memory is of a sailor he spotted in a Honolulu department store while looking for bathrobes to send to his family.

“Sitting in amongst all the shelves and racks of women’s garments and things of that sort, here’s a sailor with his knitting [supplies],” Ernst recalled.

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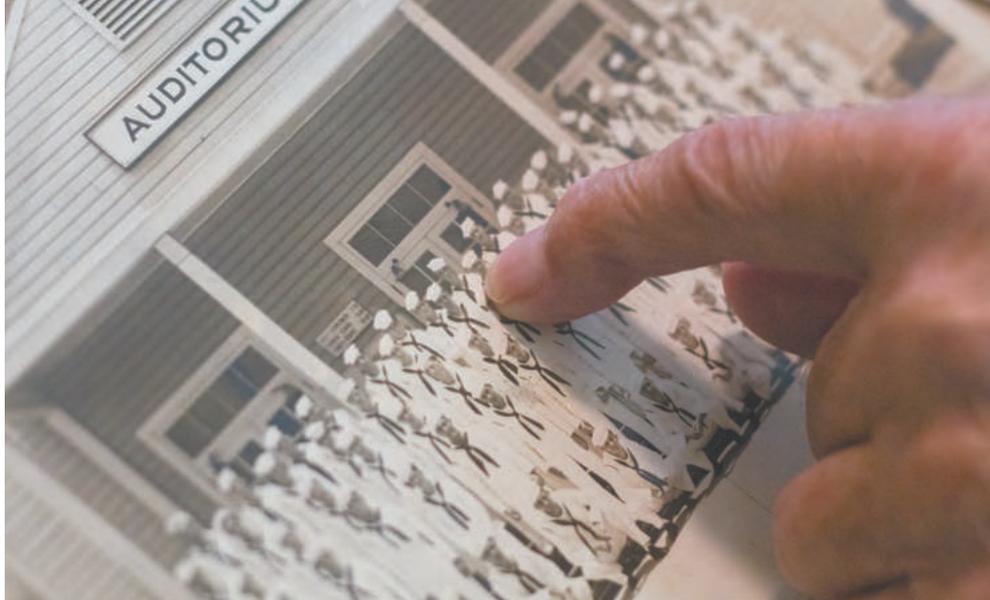
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(Clockwise from top left) Ernst pointing to himself in a Navy group photo, a more recent photo with Ernst and family members, his four daughters as children, and Ernst holding a PV-1 model and then an article that mentions him while he was in high school.

“That was the one place he could find. ... He knitted whatever he wanted to knit to send back to his wife or whatever. Very nice man. That was the safe place for him to do that knitting; otherwise, they would’ve run him out of the barracks.”

Following the two atomic-bomb drops in early August 1945, Japan announced its surrender on the 15th and made it official with a ceremony aboard the battleship USS Missouri on Sept. 2.

Ernst’s memories from this time include the rush to get service members in Hawaii back home and waiting in a tent community for his name to be posted on a bulletin board for a ride back.

That posting finally came for him and 26 other sailors, and they hopped on a Merchant Marine oil tanker, which carried them across the Pacific, through the Panama Canal, and to their first spot back on the mainland, Aransas Pass, Texas. There, at a little Western Union shack, Ernst wired to his family that he was back home.

He eventually boarded a train for Jacksonville, where he was discharged at the rank of aviation machinist’s mate second class, and then headed back to Gainesville, where his wife was staying with her family and their two daughters.

Ernst lived a varied life after the war, but these years are ones he doesn’t like to discuss in much detail.

“If I ever write my memoirs, I would put some of it in that — from birth to death.” He laughed at his word choice. “Or later years, not death. I may be writing by the time I go, I don’t know.” He is willing, though, to offer several anecdotes. In 1950, he and his wife had two more daughters, twins, one of whom was invalid. And that year, he also enrolled at the University of Florida on the GI Bill of Rights.

In 1952, they joined First Presbyterian Church of Gainesville, which Ernst still attends.

He graduated from UF in the mid-’50s with a degree from the College of Education’s Department of Industrial Arts and became a shop teacher for area educational institutions.

Those included Tacachale special-needs center (then known as the Florida Farm Colony for the Epileptic and Fee-

bleminded), UF's workshop-style lab for engineering students, and lastly, in the late '60s, Howard Bishop Middle School.

On Tacachale, Ernst doesn't have fond recollections.

"They didn't allow anyone, teacher wise, to chose who they were sending to you," he remembered. "For three hours, you were doing a babysitting job for some pretty tough characters — a few that could learn, a few that wanted to learn, and some that didn't want to be anywhere, and some that were medicated to ... where they were like a zombie."

Later, holding onto his convictions of helping those in need, Ernst started a mission in downtown Gainesville.

"I gave up my teaching to try to set up a workshop for disadvantaged ... and it didn't go," he explained. "I tried to get board members. They'd pat you on the back and say, 'Well, that's good what you're doing and so forth.' But it was too much of a burden."

Afterward, Ernst made a living as a self-employed painter and at Publix before having to give up work in the late '90s to care for Marion, who began suffering from a prolonged illness and eventually passed away in 2006 at 79.

By the time she died, they had already lost three of their four daughters.

But he still visits regularly with Barbara, his and Marion's first, a retired teacher who lives in Merritt Island, and he now has seven grandchildren and 15 great-grandchildren.

And the same year his wife passed away, Ernst found a new calling in Haven Hospice, which he said became "a salvation" because "I had been through so many tough things with the family."

It's there that special moments spring up regularly, including one in October, when a woman with connections to Ernst's

"I'm proud that I was a part of it, my little part."

mission stopped in to drop off donated items.

"I happened to be in the back," he said, "and she just broke out in a smile. She said, 'Oh Mr. Ernst, Mr. Bob,' and started renewing memories of the '60s, when her momma and her people ... would come into our little store to buy clothes."

Yet the memories of the war are the ones that seem to stick out the most for Ernst, one of an estimated 600,000 living U.S. vets from the war's original 16 million-plus.

Others, like those who stormed the beaches of Normandy on D-Day, went far beyond a mechanic's call of duty, Ernst said. But he's nonetheless thankful he was able to contribute.

"I'm proud that I was a part of it, my little part," he said. "We were safe, almost feeling guilty to a point, but not guilty because we were doing what we were told to do." ■

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