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Remembering Fred Rosenbaum

By Mike Francis, The Oregonian

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The Oregonian

UPDATE:

Here's the news story for Wednesday editions, written by my colleague Amy Hsuan.

Here's my editorial page tribute, which is very much like the tributes below.

And here's some information about a public memorial service: The Oregon Air National Guard will host it in the Rosenbaum Hangar (bldg. 375), at the Portland Air National Guard Base at noon on Tuesday, Jan. 19. The public is welcome. The Airbase gate is at 6800 SW Cornfoot Road, Portland.

I am sorry to pass along the news that a great man has died.

Fred Rosenbaum passed away in the early morning hours, surrounded by his family.

He spent his life proving and proving again that life is a miracle and freedom is a blessing. I'm writing an editorial tribute to him on deadline this afternoon, but here are a few links to earlier stories.

Fred being honored by having a hangar at the Portland Airbase named after him.

Fred being honored at Camp Rilea, where he established a summer camp for underprivileged children. That camp is now known as Camp Rosenbaum.

There's more, but I want to do him justice. Will post later.

Here's the story I wanted to share ... I wrote this in 2005:

Thursday, August 11, 2005

Edition: Sunrise, Section: Local Stories, Page A01

SUMMARY: Like so many who served in the era, a Portland man remains humble about his role in the fight that shaped his existence

*As a boy, **Fred Rosenbaum** climbed through the window of his school in Vienna to escape the Nazi secret police.*

As a young man, he helped keep order in the Philippines, where he served as a noncommissioned officer in the U.S. Army.

As an older man, he held the rank of brigadier general in the Oregon Air National Guard, even as his civilian life was full with business, civic causes and family.

And now, as a 79-year-old retiree, he continues his long battle with cancer. It's a battle that has taken him all the way back to his native Austria, where a doctor with a pioneering treatment has administered and overseen his treatments.

*Sixty years ago this month, **Rosenbaum** experienced the end of the war in the Pacific. It was a moment at which his family's heavy sacrifice turned into triumph and the path to a long and successful postwar life began.*

As the Allied nations of World War II observe the 60th anniversary of V-J Day next week, the voices of those who participated are falling silent. The Veterans Administration estimates that about 3.7 million U.S. veterans of World War II are alive today. That's down from 4.4 million in 2003, when the agency said they were dying at a rate of more than 1,000 per day.

*Although **Rosenbaum** served in the Pacific theater, he wasn't in the major battles of the war. In fact, he is reluctant to see his story told in connection with the war in the Pacific, in deference to veterans who fought ferocious battles in places such as Guadalcanal, Tarawa and Iwo Jima.*

But his life offers a window into the way the world order changed after U.S. pilots dropped atomic bombs 60 years ago over Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

*The world was closing in on Leopold and Elise **Rosenbaum** and their son, then known as Fritz, in 1938. Kristallnacht, the night of broken glass, had made it evident that it was dangerous to be Jewish in a country where Nazis had ascended to power. The family learned to send Fritz -- a Christian-looking youth -- running down the street ahead of his parents, checking around corners to make sure it was safe for them to pass through intersections.*

*One day in school, when Fritz was 12, the students were herded into a basement to await the arrival of the SS. **Fred** and a few schoolmates decided not to wait. Decades later, during an emotional family visit to Vienna, he showed his children what he did instead.*

*"He said, 'Here's the window I crawled out of when the Nazis tried to round up all the Jewish kids,' " said Mark **Rosenbaum**, **Fred**'s son and partner in **Rosenbaum** Financial LLC.*

*After that day, Fritz **Rosenbaum** never went back to school. His family procured a passport for him, put him on a train and sent him to meet an English family that had agreed to take him in. The Anglican Church-sponsored Kindertransport effort was detailed in the award-winning documentary "Into the Arms of Strangers."*

***Rosenbaum** lived in England for about 18 months before his father, then his mother, were able to join him. Together, they immigrated to the United States, and resettled from New York to Aberdeen, Wash., where **Fred** attended and graduated from high school. Later, the family moved to Portland so **Fred** could attend Reed College.*

*His grandparents Philip and Gisella Weiss never made it. They died years later in a concentration camp in Minsk, in the present-day country of Belarus, something that **Fred Fred Rosenbaum** still treasures the increasingly desperate letters they wrote to his family as the darkness descended on Austria's Jews. didn't know for sure until a couple of years ago.*

Near the end, one of Philip Weiss' letters read: "Our only comfort is that our children are well and think of us, so that we will not be totally abandoned!"

*When World War II began, **Fred Rosenbaum** wanted to enlist and fight for the United States. "I wanted to kill as many Germans as I could get," he remembers now. He thought his German-language skills would help the war effort. Instead, the Army sent him to the Pacific.*

The war years

Rosenbaum became a first sergeant and eventually became the noncommissioned officer in charge of security for inner-city Manila. He remembers V-J Day for the pyrotechnics.

"Guns and everything firing, and rockets' flames," he said. "It was like taking Manila all over again."

Back in Portland, Jane Schlesinger, the woman who would become Fred's wife, had come downtown with her father to watch the spontaneous celebrations in the streets.

The Schlesingers had fled Berlin soon after Kristallnacht, lived for a while in New York, then relocated to Portland. Like other Portlanders, they had been living a life of self-sacrifice, using ration stamps for their necessities. But on V-J Day, everything changed. She called it "the letting go of fear."

"A sailor was walking by, and he took my hand somehow and gave me a nickel," she said. "He said, 'Here's a nickel. Call me when you grow up.'"

In the Philippines, Japan's surrender broke the tension for U.S. soldiers, sailors and airmen. "Everybody gave a huge sigh of relief," Rosenbaum said. "There were thousands of troops in Manila ready to invade Japan."

After the atomic bombs fell and Japan surrendered, Rosenbaum's job was to help keep the region's new peace. The pressure had eased.

Activism

Rosenbaum came home after the war and worked for his father, who was a jewelers representative. He joined the Army National Guard, but later quit. He went on to get a bachelor's degree in political science from Portland State University and took courses at Lewis & Clark's Northwestern College of Law.

In 1953, when he heard that the Oregon Air National Guard was staffing up to support its new 142nd Fighter Group, Rosenbaum joined as a second lieutenant. He was an officer at last, although nobody claimed it was glamorous duty.

"You got to do what nobody else wants to do," said Hal Howland of Tigard, who joined about the same time and remains a fast friend of Rosenbaum's. "It was sort of like basic training for officers."

In December 1954, Rosenbaum took part in a production of "Die Fledermaus" at Portland's German Friendship Club. Jane Schlesinger's friends urged her to get involved in the show.

"The girls liked him and I had heard about him," Jane Rosenbaum remembered. "He was from Vienna and I was from Berlin. It wasn't really that large a community."

So Jane signed up, too, and the pair started dating immediately afterward. They were engaged in February 1955 and married in May. This May, they celebrated their 50th anniversary.

Fred Rosenbaum's military career got a boost from his growing portfolio of civic activities, as well as his successful insurance business. His resume from the Oregon Military Department archives is four pages, and cites achievements and activities ranging from his 13-year stint as chairman of the Housing Authority of Portland to his associate national commissionership of the Anti-Defamation League.

He continued to get military promotions -- he was ambitious, said Howland, but never stepped on anybody's toes -- moving up the ranks until he became a brigadier general in the Oregon Air National Guard. He served as a prominent public face for the guard, both in uniform and as a civilian.

"It's the quintessential American success story," said Mark Rosenbaum, who was recently appointed to the Portland Development Commission. His father has worked hard in the civic and professional arena because it's "essential to foment change," he said.

As an Air National Guard officer, Fred Rosenbaum launched the summer-camp program for at-risk kids from the housing projects. Except for an interruption of a few years, it has continued at Camp Rilea, on the northern Oregon Coast. Now, though, the camp is known as Camp Rosenbaum. Fred was there last month for visitors day, riding a cardboard sled down a grassy hill and telling the campers, "You're here because we love you."

Gov. Ted Kulongoski, who shared the podium and the cardboard sled with Rosenbaum, said Rosenbaum remains genuinely humble.

"Fred is one of those guys who's never forgotten where he came from," Kulongoski said.

Up on the dais, Rosenbaum surveyed the faces of the pre-teens who were arrayed before him on folding chairs. He had something important to tell them.

"This is a wonderful, wonderful country," he said. "It's up to you how high you go."

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