

Carroll Stearns

His 25th combat mission lasted 10 months

By **DON BOLDEN**
Times-News

On May 30, 1944,
Carroll Stearns flew his
25th mission in a P-51
fighter plane over Europe.

He flew target support for a flight of bombers over Berlin.

It would be his last mission of the war.

On the way home from that mission that spring afternoon, Stearns' war took a strange turn that would put him on the "missing in action" list for the next 10 months.

It was 50 years ago this year that his ordeal ended – just a short time before the end of World War II.

Stearns, now well-known as an Alamance County auto dealer, sat in his office at County Motors recently and remembered the events which began that day in 1994.

He was based in southern England and was flying escort for bombers over Europe, strafing and dive bombing enemy targets. There were three types of escort missions, he remembers – escort in, or flying with bombers when they were over the target; and escort out, flying out to meet bombers and return home with them.

On May 30, 1944, Stearns and others in his 363rd Fighter Group flew to Berlin and provided protection for the bombers while they were over the target. With that mission accomplished, they started home. Along the way, as was often the case, they spotted what looked like a possible target on the ground. There was a German airfield, and it appeared there was a plane sitting there. So his group circled and began a treetop-level run at the field.

The Germans threw up curtains of anti-aircraft fire around their airfields, and on this day, "I was the one to get hit," Stearns remembers.

Anti-aircraft fire slammed into his P-51 just in front of the cockpit, hitting the compartment which held the coolant. The P-51 had a liquid-cooled engine, rather than air-cooled, and when Stearns' plane was hit, the fluid began to leak out.

That, of course, caused the engine to begin to heat.

He was flying over Holland when hit, and he decided he would try to get too the North Sea, where he could ditch and be picked up by rescuers. But as his plane heated, he began to lose altitude quickly. As he went lower, he realized he was not going to make the North Sea, so he tried to open his canopy so he could bail out. The canopy was jammed, and while he tried to get it open, he suddenly found himself at 800 feet and dropping. He knew then he was going down with the plane.

Stearns had to crash land, and he was able to bring the plane down in a smooth belly landing. He was not injured beyond a few scratches.

Remembering his long hours of training, he knew the first thing he had to do was to get out of the plane as quickly as possible.

He got out of the burning plane, threw his parachute in it and began running from the P-51, and he continued to run for a couple of hours until he found some heavy woods which provide cover for him. He hid until late in the evening.

At that point, Stearns began a strange journey which would give him a view of World War II quite unlike that of most others who were in Europe. He was going to spend the next 10 months behind enemy lines trying to avoid capture, trying to stay alive and trying to get back to freedom.

World War II had begun for the Burlington youth in July of 1942 just a few weeks after he graduated from Burlington High School. He went to Winston-Salem to take an examination to enter pilot training and fulfill a long desire to be a pilot. He passed that test, but it was not until January of 1943 that he was ordered to Nashville, Tenn. to enter the air corps. From there, he was moved to Maxwell Field at Montgomery, Ala. From there, he went to Avon Park in Florida for two months of flight training, and then he took advanced training at Cochran Field in Macon,

GA., and Spence Field in Moultrie, GA.

He graduated at Spence in October of 1943, and then he was given training in flying the P-51 at Barrow, Fla.

From Florida, he was moved to New York and left there in January of 1944 for overseas duty. He joined the 363rd Fighter Group in Cambridge, England, and the unit later moved to the south of England.

Stearns flew routine missions until May 30, and then life was anything but routine for him.

After hiding out for a while in the woods that first night in Holland, Stearns approached a remote farm house, and two men were there. They gave him milk and bread, and he slept in a haystack that first night. He was very much alone, and it would be a long time before he got back to England.

It would be a long time, too, before his family knew of his fate.

Back home there was his wife, Norma, who was expecting a child. She would soon get the routine telegram informing her that her husband was missing in action over Europe. It was one of those dreaded messages which so many families in Alamance County received during the war years.

Those telegrams were pretty cold and not very reassuring. But a bit later, Norma received a letter from the flight leader with Stearns that May afternoon. He wrote that he had seen Stearns' plane go down, and he also had seen the pilot get out of the plane and run for cover. That told Norma that her husband was alive and on the ground. And that gave her hope that all would end well.

It would be a long time, however, before the saga ended.

Back in Holland, Stearns awoke the next morning to more milk and bread from those in the farm house.

He then began working his way south, and he remembers that about 3 o'clock in the afternoon, he came to a field where a larger group of men were working. He watched from a concealed spot until the younger men in the group had left. Then he called to the older men. One who spoke no English came over. After seeing the American, the man went back and told the others who brought him food and blankets.

Stearns was looking for the Dutch underground. They might help him. But these men gave no indication they were part of the underground. They had to be very careful. The Germans often dropped their own operatives into Holland, just as Stearns and other Allied pilots came. The Germans posed as downed flyers to discover the identity of underground operatives.

After a couple of days, Stearns had received no help, so he decided that he would leave. But word then came from the underground for him to stay put. They came and brought him food and civilian clothes.

On June 6, he was moved to the home of a teacher. He learned that day that the Allies had invaded Europe. The underground heard the news on their radios.

After three days at the home of the teacher, Stearns was moved to another location, the home of a doctor and his wife. They had a small loft over a garage, and Stearns stayed there until near the end of August.

A British pilot joined him after about a month, and they were moved to a location which was nothing more than a hole in the ground with a cover over it. Stearns was there two days. The next move was to what he called a refugee camp, an area in the forest where there were small huts.

There he lived in a two-room hut with an American from Brooklyn, a Russian prison of war who had escaped after being brought to Western Europe, and five Jews. Others in the location included an Italian deserter, a German deserter, a South African and a Canadian.

"We stayed there a couple of months and moved again," Stearns recalled. He often hid in barns, and his companions changed frequently. There were many Allied troops who were in circumstances similar to those in which Stearns found himself.

At one farm house, he stayed with two surgeons, one British, one South African.

In November of 1944, it appeared that his ordeal might be

over. A major allied airborne attack was launched at Arnhem on the Rhine River. The underground gathered 90 men they were protecting and took them to a location where the British forces could pick them up. But the Arnhem attack failed. The Allies had to pull out, and the Dutch just left them. There were several days of rain and no food – a miserable time, Stearns remembered. But they soon began to move out a few at a time and begin their trek anew.

Eight of them ended up in a rabbit hutch about a half-mile from a Dutch farmhouse. They would go to the house each day and get a bucket of food and then pass time any way they could. "I learned to play bridge there," Stearns recalled. There was a Royal Air Force officer there. He had been a Scotland Yard agent. And there were Americans from Boston, Iowa and Brooklyn. As cold weather came, Stearns also learned to ice skate a bit on a pond on the farm.

In December, he moved to a new farm, and he slept in a barn loft. A long period of bad weather broke one morning, and he was awakened by the sound of waves of German planes. They were heading to the battle which became known as the Battle of the Bulge.

Gradually, Stearns was making his way south to the Rhine River with the help of the underground. After several days in one place, he would be moved to another location.

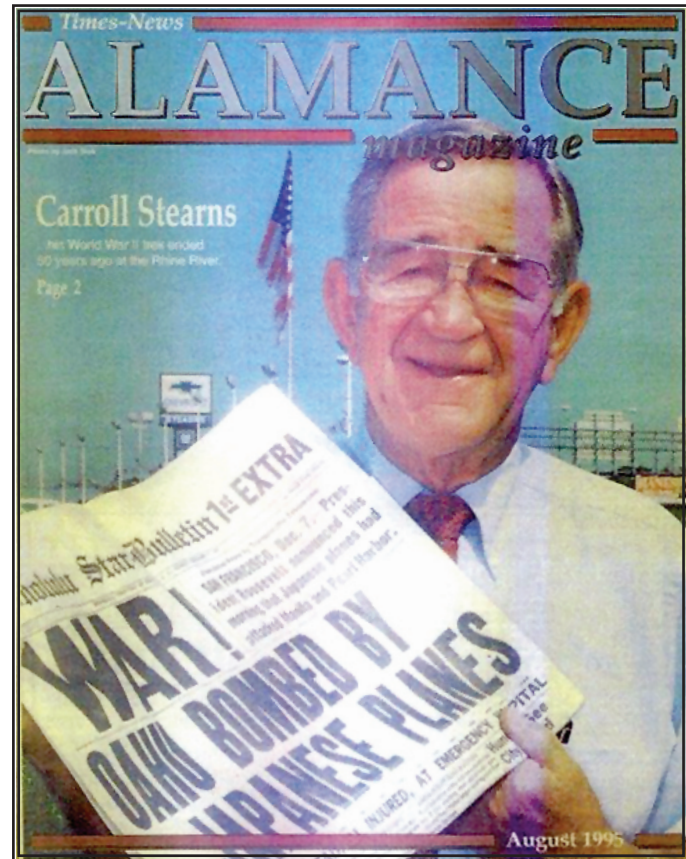
The underground often used girls to help move the men. The girls were a diversion, keeping the German troops distracted to make it easier for the men to pass. Stearns said there were always German soldiers around when he was moved, and he even spoke to them as they passed and made eye contact.

His worst moment came when a girl was leading him and a Canadian past a bridge to a new location. There was a German barracks at the bridge – 14 men who guarded the structure. A sergeant came out when the girl passed on her bicycle. He did not stop her. But he stopped the Canadian soldier who came behind her. He asked for papers, and the soldier had none, and the German became quite angry.

Stearns moved closer and saw what was happening, so he turned down a little road next to the bridge, and as he went, sweat poured over his face. He felt a bullet might hit him in the back any second. But nothing happened. He went back to the house he had left and told the underground, and they all fled the area. The Canadian was allowed to pass, by the way.

Finally, on March 17, 1945, he was taken with the one other soldier to the edge of the Rhine River, and they were put into a rowboat. A Dutchman rowed them across the river, and there they were turned over to Canadian forces.

Stearns' long journey was over. He was safely among Allied troops. He laughed as he recalled being examined. "They gave us



a physical, and I weighed 144 pounds. They said I was suffering from malnutrition. But I had only weighed 142 when I started," he laughed.

He was sent to Paris. From there he was able to send a telegram home, and only then did his family know he had been alive all those months. Stearns then was moved to England, and there he boarded a ship for the trip home to New York. A train brought him back to North Carolina and a happy reunion with his family – wife and his eight-month-old son, Carroll, Jr., whom he had never seen.

After six weeks at home, he went back to duty in Miami and possible duty in the Pacific. But that situation ended before he was sent over. Stearns remained in service until January of 1946.

His ambition had always been to become a pilot, and he thought of staying in the Air Corps. "But I saw all the good mechanics getting out," and he got out as well.

Stearns, who had missed promotions while missing in action, received the Air Medal and Purple Heart.

After service, he worked at Rhodes-Collins Furniture Store, and then was in the appliance business for himself for a while. It was in 1950 that he entered the automobile business; and today his name is synonymous with that industry in Alamance County.

The couple with whom he stayed in Holland, the doctor and wife, divorced later, but the wife and her new husband came to visit Stearns in the 1970s. Her son later came to visit several times. And people from the village where his plane crashed also came here to visit a number of years ago

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*County Ford thanks Carroll Stearns for his legacy and vision
in 1950 that began the automotive industry.*