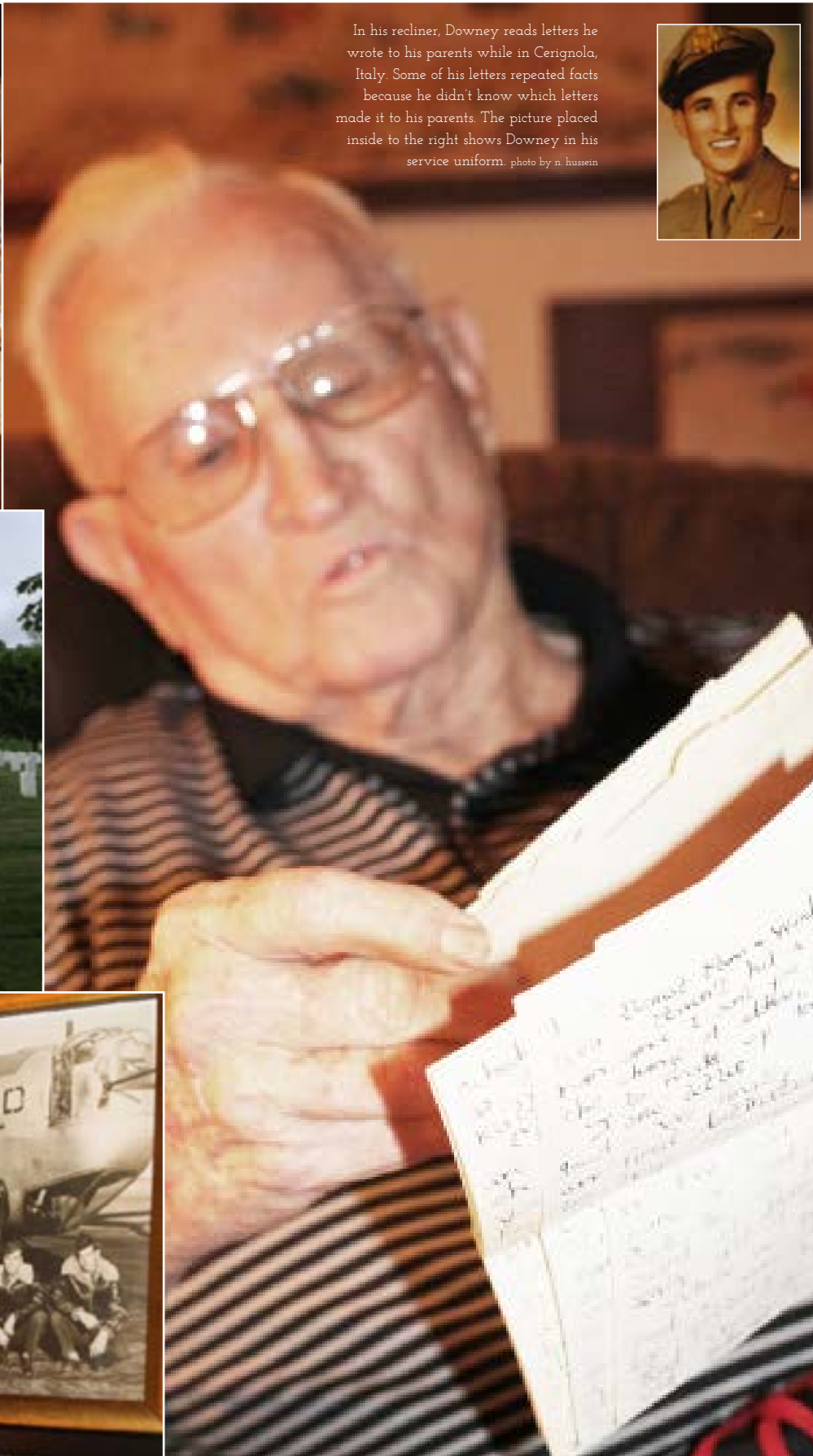


Out of their box, letters Downey wrote to his parents are spread across his living room coffee table. He received the box when relatives cleaned out his deceased mother's home and it also contained other mementos such as West Point Military Academy cuff links. "I had applied for West Point," he said. "I got a telegram from Governor W. Lee O'Daniel and he said to come down to San Antonio and take the test. The other guys failed, and I went to West Point." photo by n. hussein

On one of the honor flight's stops, Downey visited Arlington Cemetery and its over 30,000 graves. Arlington is the only national cemetery to hold the remains of servicemen from every war since the Revolutionary War. The inside photo shows the welcome sign at cemetery. photo courtesy of Earl Downey



In his recliner, Downey reads letters he wrote to his parents while in Cerignola, Italy. Some of his letters repeated facts because he didn't know which letters made it to his parents. The picture placed inside to the right shows Downey in his service uniform. photo by n. hussein



Framed in his living room, a picture shows Downey with his entire flight crew. Downey lost his co-pilot to a non-combat-related crash while stationed in Florida after coming home from Cerignola, Italy. "We were waiting those three months [in Florida]," Downey said. "He went out to run a small little plane, and as he went up, he ran into a plane above him and crashed in the water." photo by n. hussein



UNBROKEN

Local veteran honored with trip to capitol, receives closure 70 years later

story by m. malone

On Swan Street, a ninety-year-old man lives with his calico cat. He keeps a box of mementos, filled with yellowing letters to his parents, a bracelet that belonged to a fallen friend and a frayed New King James Bible from his childhood. On the armrest of his recliner, a carton of Seneca Blue 100s cigarettes sits. He picked up the habit in the '40s, and it gives the living area a sweet and smoky odor.

Time made him into a new man, far removed from the one who flew missions out of Europe during World War II. Those weren't his last flights. He made another important flight. But instead of taking care of his country on that flight, his country took care of him. **Earl Downey** visited Washington, D.C. May 8 and 9 on an honor flight, visiting memorials and sites in the nation's capitol.

"When I got home, I didn't do anything for a week," Downey said. "I believe I was worn out. They took us every place you could think of."

The Honor Flight Network paid for his expenses, including food, travel and lodging. On the two-day trip, Downey visited the war memorials, not to mention Arlington National Cemetery.

"That was beautiful," he said. "They have over 30,000 graves now, and everything's landscaped."

A pilot in the army air corps, Downey also visited a large arena in D.C. filled with old planes, including the one he flew, the Consolidated B-24 Liberator. It had four engines, 10 .50-caliber machine guns and a bomb bay that could accommodate up to eight 1600-pound bombs. And 18-year-old Downey flew it.

"I always wanted to fly a four-engine plane," he said. "I went to Albuquerque, and sure enough, I was going to get to fly a B-24. It was the largest plane they had, and here I was 18, flying it."

After graduating from Albuquerque, he eventually made it to Cerignola Airfield in Italy, a part of the Foggia Airfield Complex, out of which he flew 27 missions. The airfields threatened the Austrian capital, Vienna, which defended itself with anti-aircraft batteries to shoot down bombers like B-24s.

"Vienna, Austria was the worst," Downey said. "We'd throw down bundles of tin foil and jam their

guns. I got into Vienna once and they knocked one engine out, and I had 105 holes in my plane. I couldn't keep up so I took a shortcut home. I had to go over the Alps, and we came across some German fighters."

With the plane in its fragile position, Downey knew the fighters could come underneath his plane and shoot him down.

"They saw us throwing out our ammunition," Downey said. "Then, they wagged their wings at me, and I wagged mine at them. That's a friendly gesture in the air corps. They escorted us back to Italy and waved at me. I can still see their faces."

Others weren't as lucky. Downey lost friends to plane crashes. But he coped with the war. He bought a dog in Italy which he named Ish, purchasing him from an Italian for two packs of cigarettes. He even kept the spirit of his home alive, naming his B-24 Miss Joy after a high school girlfriend.

"I called Joy after one of our flights [in Pecos, Texas]," he said. "We had a load of pig iron to simulate carrying bombs. It was nine p.m. I rammed the engine and went right down main street in my town. She told me I shattered every glass in town."

The war didn't shatter Downey, though. After the war, he finished school at Rice. He was admitted into West Point. He built houses with his brothers. He started playing volleyball and began refereeing in 1967. He even ran for mayor of Houston once.

"I'm 90 years old, but I don't feel like it," he said. "I think volleyball has helped me over the years. I've seen people when they retire and they just sit and die, but I keep busy all the time. My doctor gave me exercises to do everyday. I do them faithfully."

At 90 years old, when most of his fellow veterans were dead or dying, his honor flight seemed long overdo, a moment of closure after 70 years of waiting. When he left D.C., a surprise waited for him, a reminder to him that people still cared about what he did.

"I can't believe it, but at the lone ramp going up to the plane were all these people," Downey said. "I had to shake all their hands, and these kids gave me notes and pictures. It was an amazing trip."

Job # &JN& School &SN&

Special Instructions &SPL&

Black Ink Includes Spot Color(s) Process 4-Color (CMYK)

HJ Template HJ Template

WICS55901L ©2011 Herff Jones, Inc., All Rights Reserved WICS55901R ©2011 Herff Jones, Inc., All Rights Reserved

Job # &JN& School &SN&

Special Instructions &SPR&

Black Ink Includes Spot Color(s) Process 4-Color (CMYK)