

REGINA TOLLFELDT

She Gave
Them Wings



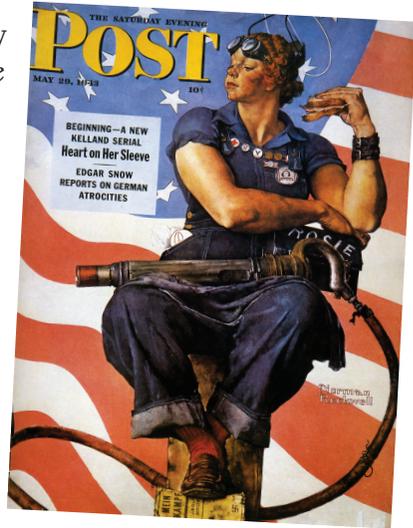
*All the day long whether rain or shine,
She's a part of the assembly line.
She's making history,
working for victory,
Rosie the riveter!
Keeps a sharp lookout for sabotage,
Sitting up there on the fuselage.
That little frail can do more than a
male can do,
Rosie the riveter!*

— “Rosie the Riveter,”
lyric and music by Redd Evans
and John Jacob Loeb, 1942

You can listen to it here:
www.youtube.com/watch?v=D2E613J9moI

The cover girl for the May 29, 1943, issue of *The Saturday Evening Post*, was no leggy starlet. “Rosie the Riveter” was a beefy redhead, muscular arms bulging from the rolled-up sleeves of her work shirt—certainly not the “little frail” working girl of the popular song. Norman Rockwell’s Rosie was taking a brief lunch break on the assembly line, ham sandwich in hand, rivet gun on her lap, one penny loafer resting on a copy of Hitler’s *Mein Kampf*.

The fact was Rosie came in all sizes and colors. She became an icon, symbolizing the six million American women mobilized for home-front factories during World War II. Four million were young, unmarried defense plant workers like 19-year-old Regina Sawina. With her girlish face and boyish



figure—she weighed 97 pounds—Regina could have passed for 14. More like Rosie's coltish kid sister.

At 92, Regina Sawina Tollfeldt of Olympia, Wash., is one of the last of the some 15,000 women who worked in Boeing's Seattle factories during the war. Regina literally gave wings to the American airmen pounding the fascists from 27,000 feet. Eight hours a day, seven days a week at the apex of the war, she wriggled through the wing jigs for the gleaming B-17s leaving Plant No. 2 at the



Regina Sawina as a teenager. *All photos from Regina Tollfeldt's collection unless otherwise noted.*

rate of a dozen a day. Regina's job was to drill the holes for the rivets that fastened the bomber's aluminum skin to its ribs.

Today, she calls herself a "peace-afist." Practically every Friday night during the second Gulf War, Regina stood silent witness against militarism with the Olympia chapter of an international group known as Women in Black. In 1942, however, she had no compunctions about building a lethal warplane. Regina sees no contradiction. The dictators were threatening to extinguish democracy. Hitler and Mussolini had savaged Poland and Slovenia, the homelands of her parents; Imperial Japan had attacked America and subjugated much of the Pacific Rim. "The thing I hate is hate," Regina says. "That's never changed."

Another thing that's never changed is Regina's resilience and appetite for knowledge. She grew up in logging camps and small towns during the Depression and never had the chance to go to college. When you learn more about her eventful life

it won't surprise you that she became an ace stenographer and typist, a talented artist and a respected counselor with the Washington State Division of Vocational Rehabilitation. She is marvelously self-educated, with shelves full of books and a fine collection of classical records. She loves opera. She writes letters to the editor and helped circulate a petition to the U.S. attorney general to "Throw the Wall Street crooks in jail!"

"My mother always said I was nosy. I didn't think I was nosy. I was just curious!" Regina says, laughing at the memory.

Mother was a stubborn Slovenian, father an industrious Pole. Their countries had been shuttlecocked among princes and potentates for centuries. The assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, an heir to the Austro-Hungarian Empire, in the summer of 1914 at Sarajevo lit the short fuse that ignited the First World War. Woodrow Wilson called it "a war to end all wars." That was tragically unprophetic. The war that broke out only 25 years later—the one Regina Sawina helped fight from the home front—soon enveloped the globe. Sixty million people perished, including 40 million civilians. The death toll included 5½ million Poles and a million Yugoslavians. One of Regina's uncles had joined a special Polish American regiment to fight the Nazis before the U.S. entered the war. John Sawina lived to tell about it, but many of Regina's relatives in the old country disappeared in the fog of war. Two who miraculously survived were an educated young Polish couple—a geologist and a nurse. The Nazis tattooed numbers on their forearms and shipped them to an armament factory to toil as slave laborers. They were liberated at war's end and came to America.

Regina's life story begins in the third wave of immigration that swept America at the beginning of the 20th century. Her father, Valentine Sawina, left Poland for America at the age of 18 in 1907. Fifteen percent of the U.S. population and 24 percent of the labor force was now foreign-born. Sawina worked his way across the continent to Grays Harbor on the coast of Washington State before backtracking to Libby, Montana. Fourteen years later, fleeing the chaos that followed World War I, Regina's 21-year-old mother, Gizela Stor, arrived from

Slovenia and ended up in the same timber town.

Valentine (“Val-in-teen”), a proud naturalized citizen, had joined the U.S. Army when America entered the war. He was bitterly disappointed not to make it overseas before the armistice. Gizela saw the carnage and it seared her soul. More than 30,000 Slovenian men conscripted into the Austro-Hungarian Army were killed in combat during World War I; thousands of refugees died in squalid camps. “Mother didn’t do a lot of talking about her life in the old country,” Regina says, “and Daddy was just glad he got out. He loved this country. To him, this country could do no wrong.”



Regina’s father joined the U.S. Army in 1917. To his disappointment, he never made it overseas.



Roy Tollfeldt of Aberdeen as an infantryman in Europe during World War II. He saw heavy combat.

Regina’s future husband, Roy Tollfeldt, who saw heavy combat as an American infantryman in Europe during World War II, was the handsome son of a Swedish father and Norwegian mother. You will not be surprised, then, to know that Regina Sawina Tollfeldt knows her world history. There’s another thing: She’d like you to pronounce her names correctly: It’s “Reg-eena Sah-Veena Toll-felt,” with a strong “g” and “v” and a silent “d.”

“Sawina” in Poland is pronounced “Sah-Veena,” Regina explains. “That was a problem for me growing up because people wanted

to pronounce it 'Sah-Weena.' When I worked at the National Bank of Commerce in Aberdeen right after the war, the manager was Tony Savina. His father had changed the 'w' to a 'v.' Sawina with a 'w' is very unusual in America. My Uncle Frank changed his name to 'Savina' when he came to Aberdeen to avoid a lot confusion. But I'm stubborn. For Heaven sakes! If my name is Sawina and pronounced 'Sah-Veena' I'm not going to change it."

Valentine Sawina was one of four brothers drawn to Grays Harbor by the promise of steady work in the logging camps, lumber mills and canneries. Though they weren't

as numerous as the ubiquitous Finns, hundreds of other Poles were already there along the muddy banks of the Wishkah, Chehalis and Hoquiam rivers—the Kalinowskis, Malinowskis and Zelaskos, to name a few. "The older brother came first," Regina says. "He worked hard and earned money to send for the next one. Then they worked together to earn the money to bring over the next." Valentine found a job at a whale-rendering plant, but couldn't stand the smell and soon set out for Montana.

Valentine changed his often-mispronounced first name to Walenty and homesteaded near Libby. He was working at a lumber mill when Regina's mother arrived to live with an uncle. Walenty was 14 years her senior. His English was better than hers. She spoke Slovene and passable German, which was all Greek to him. For Walenty nevertheless it was love at first sight. For Gizela it was, all things considered, a proposal based on slim alternatives. The work available amounted to being a



Regina's parents, Walenty Sawina and Gizela Stor, on their wedding day in 1922.

maid in a boarding house or a cook at some roadside greasy spoon. “It was hard for a woman to make a living,” Regina says. “I always used to think she should have been born a man because she loved traveling. Wanted to go places. She finally gave in and married Daddy. She didn’t want to be a homemaker, but that’s what she ended up being.”

Regina Jeanne Sawina, the first of Walenty and Gizela’s three daughters, was born in Libby in the spring of 1923. The following year, encouraged by relatives

in the Midwest, Walenty packed up his family and moved to Detroit where he landed a job on Ford Motor Company’s new Lincoln assembly line. Henry Ford had created a sensation in 1914 when he doubled his workers’ pay to \$5 a day and shortened the workday from nine hours to eight. His goal was to reduce turnover. It worked. The bonus was that more workers could afford to buy his cars. Walenty always told his friends and kids it was the best job he ever had. Then he got sick. Very sick. “The doctors didn’t know what was wrong with him,” Regina says. “But they concluded he needed to have a job outdoors so he could breathe clean air.”

Walenty found a new job with his former employer, the J. Neils Lumber Company, in a place about as different and far from Detroit as one could imagine.

“When I was 5, we moved to the Gifford Pinchot National Forest along the Columbia River just south of Mount Adams,” Regina fondly remembers. “Every winter we had



Regina, right, with her mother and sisters around 1927 in Detroit.



The school kids at Camp 5 in Klickitat County around 1930. Regina is fourth from left in the middle row.

six to seven feet of snow. For a while we lived at Camp 5 at Glenwood, just a little dot on the map in Klickitat County. The nearest town was White Salmon. My first job was when I was 12. I worked for the teacher at Camp 5. When she was on vacation, she needed someone to watch over her cottage and water her flowers. I earned 10 whole dollars a month that went to my parents. Mamma and I worked for a farmer, delivering milk to 32 families every morning; then we got our milk for free. We kids—there were now three girls—helped Mamma. That’s how we learned to cook. We worked hard. Daddy always said, ‘Don’t be ashamed of anything you have to do to earn a living. Just do it.’

“Life in a little logging camp was wonderful. The cottages were built on skids so they could be moved by rail. Daddy was at Camp 5 first, then at Camp 7. We played outside. All the kids, all the time. When it was Halloween, we built big bonfires; during the winter we had skis someone made for the kids. I don’t envy children nowadays. They don’t have the kind of life I had growing up, even during those hard times.” J. Neils Lumber Company was good to its workers, continuing operations at Klickitat during the depths of the Depression despite steep losses.



Regina, left, and her sister Viola along the Columbia Gorge around 1940.

Concerned that the logging camp school wasn't accredited for high school courses, Regina's parents moved the family to White Salmon in 1938 after her freshman year. "Daddy stayed in camp during the week. Then in the summer months we girls would take turns going up to camp and cooking for him." Regina remembers how diligently her parents kept up with her schoolwork. "It started when I was in First Grade. When we brought our schoolwork home, they did it with us. That's how they learned the language. My father was very loving,

and a more fervent Catholic than my mother. When we lived at Camp 5, he's the one who taught us the catechism, the Way of the Cross. We would kneel at the edge of the bed every Sunday and he would teach us our prayers. We learned manners, too. We were never allowed to call our neighbors by their first names. It was always 'Mr.' or 'Mrs.' And Daddy always said 'Eat what's on your plate. Don't take more than you can eat. You can always take seconds.' He was very strict about waste."

Regina Sawina was a bookish, practical girl who rejected her mother's attempts to make her frilly. Regina loved history and geography. Two of the 34 students in the Class of 1941 at Columbia Union High School at White Salmon were Japanese. "They were my friends. When their families were interned in Idaho during the war I couldn't understand why."

Regina's Uncle Frank, who had a good job at Rayonier's pulp and paper mill in Hoquiam, had been prodding her

father to move back to Grays Harbor. “I think they purposely waited until I could graduate, then they loaded up the car—a ’36 Plymouth—with what they could, leaving everything else behind, and drove to Aberdeen.”

Regina found part-time jobs at five-and-dimes and was contemplating business college when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. The five Sawinas were living in a tiny house along the street that funneled traffic to the ocean beaches. A nighttime blackout was immediately ordered along the coast. “Everyone was told to pull their blinds at night,” Regina remembers, “because there was the fear that the Japanese might start their invasion of the West Coast by coming ashore along the beaches on either side of Grays Harbor. And we were just a few miles inland. Someone said Japanese submarines could come right up the harbor. One night a few days after the attack, here came the Army in their camouflaged trucks, moving through the night with blue headlights. We were scared to death, peeking out the windows.” The Army set up an anti-aircraft installation near Westport and manned the beaches at Pacific Beach and present-day Ocean Shores. The airfield under construction on an island off Hoquiam was hurriedly completed. “I think what scared me the worst was that I had lived such a peaceful life, and to think that we were going to go to war against these terrible people with their massive militaries, I was frightened.”

Walenty Sawina, newly employed by a lumber merchant, was turned away at the enlistment office. He was 59 years old. His wife and oldest daughters were hired by Boeing, which established a training facility in Aberdeen a few months into the war. It was a precursor to eight Boeing subassembly factories in Western Washington, including plants at Aberdeen, Hoquiam, Chehalis, South Tacoma, Everett and Bellingham. Regina and Viola were soon learning how to use power tools. *The Girl Mechanic’s Manual* “emphasized the importance of safety around heavy equipment to prevent losing an arm, ‘for after all, arms are nice things to have—both on and around you.’”

Imagine their excitement when they moved to Seattle that summer to start work at Boeing’s mammoth B-17 factory



Boeing's subassembly plant in Aberdeen receives a production award in 1944. The plant employed 750 workers in two shifts.

near Boeing Field along the east bank of the Duwamish Waterway.

When the prototype for the B-17 was rolled out in 1935, its “elegance and impression of power caused a media sensation.” Surveying its four big engines and array of machine guns, *Seattle Times* reporter Richard Williams dubbed it the “Flying Fortress.” Fourteen were delivered to the U.S. Army Air Corps in 1937. For the next two years, War Department bureaucracy, inter-service rivalry and isolationism limited its production. The Navy jealously maintained “that it was its task, and its task alone, to counter any seaborne threat.” Boeing had to haggle to get past the break-even point on the plane. After deleting some features, the company reduced its rock-bottom price by \$2,500 to \$202,500, but the War Department was still bullheadedly demanding a \$199,000 airplane. (One B-2 stealth bomber costs the Pentagon about \$2 billion.) The inertia was a major blow to Boeing. It had used its own funds to build the prototype “in anticipation of large orders for the production aircraft.” Then with war clouds gathering and the big bomber

setting speed and altitude records, Boeing received orders for nearly 80 more. By comparison, Hitler's armament factories produced 700 bombers and nearly 2,000 military aircraft all told in 1939. Charles Lindbergh, America's famed "Lone Eagle" aviator, toured the Third Reich's warplane plants, piloted a new Nazi bomber and pronounced the *Luftwaffe* unbeatable. That summer, when Roosevelt named General George C. Marshall Army chief of staff, the U.S. Army was the world's 19th largest, "behind Portugal and only slightly ahead of Bulgaria."

In September of 1939, Germany and the Soviet Union, in a devil's pact that would boomerang on Stalin, crushed Walenty Sawina's homeland. They divvied up Poland, perpetrated mass atrocities and touched off six years of slaughter. Great Britain and France declared war. Nine months later, France surrendered. The Brits bravely hunkered down, facing the juggernaut alone. In his year-end Fireside Chat on December 29, 1940, FDR declared that America would become "the great arsenal of democracy." Boeing had 8,400 workers. A month later it was 10,500. A year later, when America entered the war, it was nearly 29,000. Polly Reed Myers, a scholar who analyzed Boeing's World War II manpower campaign, writes that the company's Seattle employment peaked at 31,750 in 1945.

As the labor shortage intensified nationwide after the attack on Pearl Harbor, women began to fill jobs traditionally done by men. The defense industry and government agencies such as the War Manpower Commission intensified their efforts to recruit women workers in 1942, when it became clear that the number of men leaving jobs for the military was outweighing the number of women entering the work force. ...Boeing managers had long resisted the idea of hiring women for the production lines. ... Amidst the growth, Boeing's supply of men ran out.

In January of 1943, when Regina Sawina was drilling



Boeing camouflaged Plant 2 to make it appear a suburban neighborhood from the air in the event enemy planes made it past the coast. *Washington State Archives*

holes inside the wing jigs and her sister Viola was working on a plane so secret she couldn't breathe a word (it was the B-29 "Superfortress") there were 14,874 other women on the production lines at Seattle and Renton—44 percent of Boeing's workforce. And it needed more. "WOMEN!" a help-wanted ad declared, "Even if you've never done anything except housework there's almost certainly a job for you here at Boeing—a clean and pleasant one—and you can take pride in being a Boeing worker. Your husband—your son—your brother or boyfriend will be proud that you are doing your part in building the axis-blasting Flying Fortresses."

The ad didn't mention that to help blast the Axis you had to buy your own tools—in Regina's case a power drill and an assortment of bits. "But we didn't have to pay up front. We paid them back out of our wages—72 cents an hour when I started in the summer of 1942."

The Sawina sisters went house-hunting and scored a find, a rental on Queen Anne Hill. "It was a *house*, not

an apartment,” Regina remembers, still marveling at their luck. “The fellow who owned it was in the service. There were five of us girls—all working for Boeing: Viola and me, another girl from Aberdeen and two others. All we did was work, eat and sleep. In the beginning, I worked the graveyard shift, which started at 11:30 p.m. Viola was working swing shift and the other girls were on the day shift, so we were always coming and going. The house came complete with a



Viola and Regina heading off to work at Boeing on a snowy day in Seattle.

player piano, which was our entertainment whenever we were all together. We got a big kick out of that. It was all innocent fun—not going out drinking and taking drugs like today. We were innocents, really.”

They all rode the bus. “From Queen Anne I had to transfer at the Pike Place Market to catch the bus to South Seattle. It was dark when I went to work and dark when I came home, which was scary to a kid who had never lived in a big city. Coming home, the bus stop was three blocks from the house. I walked down the middle of the street. But it was exciting, too. Seattle was working around the clock. Later, when I worked the swing shift, we’d stay downtown after we got off work and eat and go to a movie. We’d take any breaks we could because we worked seven days a week for a long time, putting out plane after plane after plane.”

While defense plant workers all along Puget Sound cheered the U.S. Navy’s headway in the Pacific, the specter of a Japanese attack on the mainland prompted Boeing to camouflage Plant 2 by creating a three-dimensional faux suburban neighborhood over its roof tops. “Grass” grew over



A Rosie works inside a B-17 wing. *Courtesy Boeing Images*

burlap and chicken-wire; make-believe houses were fashioned from plywood. “We had a real scare one day when all the sirens went off and we thought we were going to be bombed. We ran down into a tunnel. When we got the all-clear, it turned out there were two unidentified planes in the vicinity. Relieved, we got back to work.”

Her uniform was coveralls—a one-piece blue jumpsuit—and a hard hat that wasn’t all that hard over a bandana. Here’s what she was doing:

“When you build a B-17 wing, there’s the tubular ribs called trusses; there’s the corrugation over the ribs and there’s the aluminum skin. Each process requires that the person who goes through first marks where the holes should be drilled. Little X’s. I would lie down and wriggle in. We used spring-loaded fasteners called ‘clekos’ that held the corrugation to the ribs after we drilled the holes. It was a temporary rivet. I’d go through first and do all that; then come back when the corrugation was on. Next came the skin. You got through one



At the peak of production, Boeing Plant 2 in Seattle produced sixteen B-17G's a day. *Boeing Images*

level, then there were two more. So you were going up and down, up and down, back and forth. It's funny I don't dream about that! I think I can still feel the heat if I close my eyes and think about it. It got so terrifically hot in the plant during the summer months, even with the doors wide open. One day I wasn't wearing my hard hat because it was so hot. There I was, inside the wing tip, wriggling my way through the ribs. A worker on the next level dropped her bucking bar—the tool used to form the head of the rivet—and it hit me on the head. I've got a scar." She points to her head. "I had to go to the nurse's station and get patched up. I learned a lesson! Wear your hat!

"The riveters followed us, and the noise rattled your head: rata-tat-tat! They never told us to wear earplugs, so I have a hearing loss. They were more concerned about us getting dehydrated, so we had to suck on these salt balls the size of a gumball." She makes a face that tells you they tasted awful.

“Sometimes I would be drilling on one side of the wing and somebody would be drilling on the other side of the wing. I almost got jabbed in the butt once. When I felt my coveralls being twisted by the drill bit, I yelled ‘Stop it!’ Luckily they did. If I hadn’t yelled, the drill bit would have gone right into my bottom.” She laughs. “But that was only two incidents out of three years, so that’s not bad. I did the same work on the wings all those years. I was small and that’s what they needed—someone small. It was monotonous, but we all knew it was important work.” The B-17’s wings carried 2,700 gallons of fuel and four engines.

Nevertheless, Regina and other Rosies recall the chauvinism they encountered at Boeing. “Women were considered too stupid to know how to do anything,” one said. Another, who finally quit in disgust and frustration, said, “I had to work with a man who had never had a woman helper before. ...He hated me.”

“The guys were pulling things on you all the time,” Regina remembers, “like sending you off to fetch some tool when there was no such thing. But I worked with one young man who was great. He told me, ‘Regina, just tell me what they’re asking you for before you go. They’re pulling your leg.’ Then he got drafted. We were sorry to see him go. Mostly, they were guys just being superior. Not all men are that way, but there were a lot of them at Boeing who resented that they were there working with women instead of fighting the war. But the thing is, we were all fighting the war, and the women helped immensely. Some women even flew the bombers across the country.” (They piloted practically every military aircraft, including experimental jets; 38 died in accidents.)

Local 751 of the Aeronautical Mechanics Union, an affiliate of the International Association of Machinists, also obstructed the hiring of racial minorities for as long as it could, with Boeing management claiming it had no jurisdiction over union eligibility issues. The unions “finally lifted the ban on African American union membership in April 1942,” but their “system of work permits underscored the temporary nature of employment for white women and African Americans at



Workers pose with “Five Grand,” the 5,000th Boeing-built Flying Fortress, on May 13, 1944. Regina signed her name on the fuselage, and she’s in there somewhere. *Boeing Images*

Boeing and across the defense industry,” Polly Reed Myers notes, adding:

Although racial tensions at Boeing ran high, the number of African American workers there was low. In July 1943, Boeing employed 44 African American men and 285 African American women out of a total work force of 29,393. Even those few workers experienced discrimination. [That month] managers reported “continuing racial problems surrounding the use of negroes in present facilities” at Boeing.

For Regina, it was disconcerting and confusing. “I was colorblind. But until I started work at Boeing, I’d never really been around a black person. One time there was a furor in my area of the plant. I looked over and there was a black woman

and a white woman facing off. I turned away because I didn't want to see what was going on. I heard later that the white woman said something she took objection to. She pulled a knife on her, so it must have been something awful. A lot of Southern blacks came up here to work in war production plants. They weren't being treated decently down there, but some ran into prejudice up here, too. There are racists everywhere. My parents had impressed on us that racism is wrong—that all people are human beings. You have to be taught to hate.” Ironically, when comedian Jack Benny visited the plant it was his hilarious black “valet,” Eddie “Rochester” Anderson, who made the biggest hit, Regina remembers.

Boeing produced 6,981 B-17s. There were thousands of upgrades—a new tail, more firepower, better armor, improved propellers, a chin turret—but the basic design never changed. “The wing, in fact, was exactly the same on every model,” Edward Jablonski writes in his history of the Flying Fortress. Small-town boys from Aberdeen, Olympia, Klickitat, Walla Walla and Wenatchee—many barely out of their teens—were flying Regina Sawina's wings. Had they known about her handiwork they might have added her name to one of their planes. The famous “nose art” of World War II saluted sweethearts and taunted the enemy—and fate. Given the appalling losses aircrews were experiencing, the brass in the 8th Air Force figured anything that boosted morale couldn't be bad, even bare breasts and double entendres. There was *Our Gal Sal*, *Piccadilly Lilly*, *Alice from Dallas*, *Bastard's Bungalow*, *BigAss Bird*, *Phartzac* (GI slang for sleeping bag) and the all-encompassing *Horny*. When the censors cracked down, as they did periodically after a racy B-17 appeared in *Life* magazine, the 100th Bomb Group's talented artists added diaphanous negligées to their mascots.

“The fighters are our salvation,” Winston Churchill said in 1940, “but the bombers alone provide the means of victory.” The Royal Air Force early on flew Boeing B-17s but claimed supremacy for its Lancaster bomber, which took the fight to the Third Reich while the Yanks were amassing airpower. The



On May 10, 1945, Boeing employees in Seattle celebrate the Allies' victory in Europe by rolling out a B-29 bomber carrying an "On to Toyko" sign. Viola Sawina, Regina's sister, is somewhere in that crowd. She was a Rosie on the B-29 production line. *Courtesy Boeing Images*

blunt-nosed RAF machine—like Consolidated Aircraft's slab-sided B-24 "Liberator"—was a fine airship, but a plain Jane compared to the graceful B-17. With its aluminum fuselage, gun turrets and pinup girls, the star of *Twelve O'Clock High* and *Memphis Belle* is the all-time classic bomber. "It came with a high tingle factor: Just looking at it could prickle a man's scalp," Geoffrey Perret writes in *Winged Victory*. Brigadier General Ira Eaker, who headed the U.S. Army Air Force's VIII Bomber Command during some of the bloodiest missions of the war, believed the B-17 was "the best combat airplane ever built. It combined in perfect balance, the right engine, the right wing and the right control surfaces. The B-17 was a bit more rugged than the B-24. It could ditch better because of the low wing and it could sustain more battle damage. You wouldn't believe they could stay in the air."

"No enemy bomber can reach the Ruhr," Reichsminister

Hermann Göring boasted in 1939. “If one reaches the Ruhr, my name is not Göring. You can call me Meyer!” When Allied bombers began pounding the Ruhr’s synthetic oil refineries in 1943, Germans sarcastically referred to the air raid sirens as “Meyer’s trumpets.” A B-17 dubbed *Rosie’s Riveters* was helping make Göring’s name mud with Hitler. It was piloted by Lieutenant Robert “Rosie” Rosenthal, a Jewish kid from Brooklyn.

By the fall of 1943, America’s factories were producing a new military aircraft every five minutes. The brave men who flew them suffered appalling losses. “Of the 416,800 American battle deaths in World War II, 79,265 were airmen,” historian A.J. Baime writes in *The Arsenal of Democracy*.

May 13, 1944, was a proud day for Regina and her co-workers. Before it was rolled out, they all signed their names on a B-17G, serial number 43-437716. It was the 5,000th to leave Plant 2. Regina’s scrapbook contains a photo of the christening of “5 Grand.” She’s there somewhere in the sea of happy faces. “We were all in it together. We were gonna win this war!”

And they did. A year later, Germany surrendered, and on August 15, 1945, Japan gave up, too. The high-altitude B-29 Superfortresses Regina’s sister helped build had decimated two cities with atomic bombs. Regina remembers being simultaneously happy it was over and frightened at what man hath wrought. “The propaganda was that the A-bomb saved the lives of hundreds of thousands of American GI’s,” she says. “And it probably did, but look at the lives that were lost—innocent civilians, and the way they had to suffer. The thing that bothers me now is that we don’t want anyone else to have nuclear weapons. But we’ve got ’em. We need to get rid of all of them!”

With the war won, “naturally we were all fired by Boeing,” Regina says with a wistful shrug. “Contracts were cancelled and the men returning from overseas would want their jobs back. But women had done all kinds of work during the war, and I think ultimately that’s what opened the eyes of a lot of women and changed society. The thing is, a woman has got to consider the future, too. I survived my husband. My income was crucial.”



Newlyweds Regina and Roy Tollfeldt on November 11, 1955. Fittingly, it was Veterans Day.

Regina invested her last check from Boeing in four months' of business school. She worked at the bank for \$91 a month, met a handsome young carpenter just home from the war and landed a new job as secretary to the director of the State Board for Vocational Education in Olympia. "I took shorthand at 80 words a minute and typed at 140 words per minute," she recalls. "I had a heavy touch, maybe from drilling all those holes, so no one could type a stencil like I could. Regina got

all the stencils! Which was OK with me. I was a workhorse. I think my success had a lot to do with the fact that I was ready to do anything they gave me."

Regina Sawina and Roy Tollfeldt didn't rush into things. In 1955, they were watching *My Sister Eileen* at the D&R Theater in Aberdeen when he slipped an engagement ring on her finger. It wasn't happily ever after. Roy was haunted by things he'd seen during the war. They lost an infant to a miscarriage and planned to adopt. Then Roy developed Crohn's Disease. But he built them a cozy home, and worked too hard too long. They both loved music. Roy sang with the Choir of the West at Pacific Lutheran University. Regina was a mainstay at the vocational rehabilitation office in Aberdeen until her retirement in 1978. "In all, I worked for the state for 32 years. I loved vocational rehabilitation. We were one of the departments that spent money on people, found them jobs and kept them as productive taxpayers. We had to find them jobs, and that's where I really excelled because I love people.

All they had to do was come in one time. I'd write their names down and then I knew them. I treated them like an equal—the way everyone should be treated.”

Regina and Roy moved to Olympia in 1980. Regina had been a caregiver to her mother, father and father-in-law. In 1999, Roy was gone, too. And in 2009, her sister Viola—the other Rosie—died of leukemia.

Regina Sawina Tollfeldt is resilient and of good cheer. She has her record albums, her books, her paintings, blue ribbons from the county fair, good friends, caring neighbors and a delicious sense of humor.

What's the secret to her longevity?

“I have no idea,” she says, eyes twinkling. “Why should I be the one to live this long when I was the skinny kid?”

The one who helped win a war.

John C. Hughes
Legacy Washington
Office of the Secretary of State
Published 2015



Regina's painting of Roy using his helmet as a wash basin during World War II.

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