

Jerry Festa's flying skills kept the troops supplied in China

EDITOR'S NOTE: In recognition of the 50th anniversary of the end of World War II, the Lawrence Township Memorial Committee, in cooperation with The Ledger, will feature a column each week during the anniversary year profiling a Lawrence resident.

Kunming, Luichow, Kweilin, Chanyi — all faraway places with strange-sounding names to a kid growing up in the Eldridge Park section of Lawrence in the 1920s and '30s. But to the same kid that became a C-47 pilot in China in 1944 and 1945, they would become an unforgettable part of Jerry Festa's life.

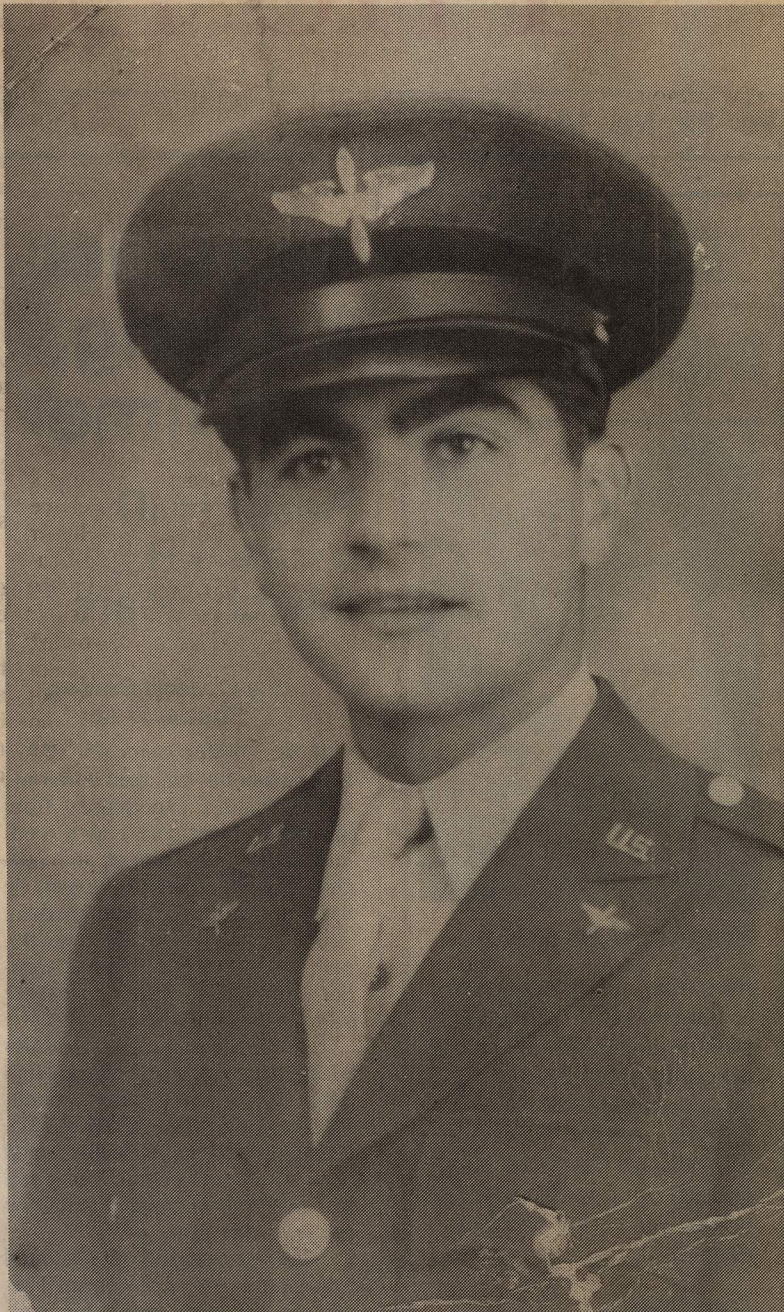
Gennaro A. Festa was born in Lawrence on March 2, 1923, attended Eldridge Park School and gradu-

VETERAN PROFILE

Nicholas Loveless

ated from Trenton High School in 1941. Orphaned at the age of nine, Jerry has many fond recollections of his father, Carmine Festa, and how proud the elder Festa had been to have served as a bugler in the U.S. Infantry in France in World War I. Jerry became interested in flying at an early age and upon graduation from high school took flying lessons at the old Mercer Airport. Earning only \$25 a week at that time, each lesson cost him \$11 an hour leaving him very little for other expenses, but proved his love of flying.

At the outbreak of World War II, Jerry applied as an aviation cadet and was inducted into the Air Corps on Dec. 7, 1942. On completion of basic training he was classified for pilot training, attending various phases at a number of locations in the country, and received his silver pilot's wings as an instrument-rated pilot on Aug.



A 20-year-old Jerry Festa in a photo taken at pre-flight school at the Aviation Cadet Center in San Antonio, Texas in 1943.

The Lawrence Ledger

Thursday, April 6, 1995

as an instrument-rated pilot on Aug. 4, 1944. An accident at Enid, Okla., during his training, killed two of his classmates, leaving a sobering effect on the other pilots, and taught them a lesson Jerry would never forget — never to be overconfident while flying. It was a lesson he did not fully appreciate until he flew in the combat zones of China and Burma.

On his first leave home since he entered the service, Jerry swept his high school sweetheart, Elvira Amenta, off her feet and they were married on Aug. 13, 1944. Vera was able to accompany Jerry to Rosecrans Field, Miss., where he was assigned as a co-pilot on C-47 aircraft. The newly-married couple's bliss was brief, and by November, the 21-year-old flier was taking a C-47 over the 'fireball' route from Miami to South America, Ascension Island, Africa's Gold Coast, Khartoum, Yeden, Karachi, Calcutta and then 'over the hump' to Kunming, China, in time for a canned turkey dinner on Thanksgiving Day.

'After a short stay in Kunming,' Jerry recalls, 'I was assigned to a permanent base at Chanyi, about 90 miles northeast of Kunming. It had been an old Flying Tiger base early

in the war and now served as a base for 14th Air Force fighter planes. Our mission was to fly supplies that were flown in 'over the hump' to Kunming from India, to other bases in free China. I flew as co-pilot from December to May, 1945 and then checked out as first pilot after that.'

Flying the 'Hump' was one of the largest airlifts in history. Although the China-Burma-India Theater of Operations was given a lesser priority than Europe and the Pacific, it was no less important. The Japanese occupied most of China and Southeast Asia and a blockade prevented supplies reaching U.S. bases and the Chinese as well. The American goal was to establish an air supply route from Northeast India to China by flying over the Himalayas, or 'over the hump' as it became known. Flying at night as well as day, the cargo planes flew at high altitudes over mountainous terrain and in treacherous weather, and so many were lost, the route was referred to as the 'Aluminum Trail' for all the wrecks along the way.

'Our C-47s had a ceiling of 21,000 feet,' Jerry continues, 'and we couldn't make it over the high Hima-

layas, but we did fly to Burma over the lower mountains and to other parts of free China. Our missions were usually three to 3½ hours one way, and at all hours of the day and night. We flew to Hankow, Luliang, Kweilin, Nanning, Chungking and other U.S. bases as well as to both Nationalist and Communist bases. Our crew consisted of the pilot, co-pilot, and radio-operator. One of the places was Sian, which was in the news in 1990 when the demonstrations for democracy erupted in Beijing and spread to Sian and other cities. The Chinese Nationalists under General Chiang Kai-shek and the Communists under Mao Tse-tung were both fighting the Japs as well as each other. Many of our missions were flying gasoline and bombs to the B-29 bases, and they in turn were bombing the Japanese homeland. Supplies all over China were always scarce, because the only way they were brought in was by flying 'over the hump.' The Burma Road had been closed down early in the war by the Japanese.'

'After Burma was re-occupied by

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Troops

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the Allies, we were able to shorten the air route. We flew Chinese troops into northern Burma that had helped General Stillwell and Chiang Kai-shek defeat the Japanese at Lashio and after that the Burma Road was re-opened that led to Kunming. Our airfield at Chanyi was bombed twice while I was there, and one of our pilots was killed and others injured. My plane was never attacked on our missions, but the threat was always there.'

Jerry completed 750 flying hours in August, 1945, the required amount for rotation back to the States, just as the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima. It was not until early December that he was able to return to be reunited with his bride back in Lawrence. He was given a furlough and finally discharged from active duty on Jan. 6, 1946. Among his military decorations are the Distinguished Flying Cross, Air Medal, Asiatic-Pacific Campaign with service stars, WWII Victory Medal, China War Memorial Medal, issued by the Chinese Government, Army, Air Force and Chinese Air Force pilot's wings, NJNG Medal of Merit and most recently, the N.J. Distinguished Service Medal.

In 1948, Jerry's love of flying led him to join the N.J. National Guard as an army aviator. Assigned to the 696th Armored Field Artillery Battalion at Eggert's Crossing Road, he flew L-19 aircraft which were used in support of the division's artillery.

In 1949 he opened his own insurance agency which he operated until 1983. He retired from the Guard in 1958, having amassed 1,997 flying hours during his military career. He is a member of the A.F. Association, American Legion Aviator's Post, Hump Pilot's Association, Distinguished



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gished Flying Cross Society, Italian War Vets Post 2, past president of the Italian-American Civic Association and past commander of Legion Post 414.

Jerry and Vera have made their home at 50 Roxboro Road for many years. They have three children, Mary-Ellen, Carol-Ann and Gerald, in addition to four grandchildren. Jerry fully retired in 1994, and the couple, in addition to looking after their real estate investments, travel whenever they are able to do so. Although

he still has a love for flying, whenever he travels these days, he places his trust in the hands of others at the controls.

The Veterans Memorial Committee is asking veterans from World War II and other conflicts to provide a photograph in uniform, along with their name, present address, branch of service and unit, where and when they served, their principal assignment and a summary of their service. Their individual experiences or unusual stories are also welcomed. All photographs will be returned. Families of deceased veterans are also encouraged to submit articles.

All material should be sent to The Lawrence Township Veterans Memorial Committee, P.O. Box 55966, Trenton, N.J. 08638. Inquires may be made by calling 882-9108.



Jerry Festa on leave in Lawrence with his new bride, Elvira.

The Lawrence Ledger

THURSDAY
April 6, 1995