

The Journey of Quentin Aanenson By **Patricia Brennan** August 27, 1995

Quentin C. Aanenson was a 20-year-old student at the University of Washington in December 1941, planning to become a radio announcer and working at Boeing aircraft factory in Seattle, when Japan bombed Pearl Harbor. That event changed his life. Fifty years later, so did "A Fighter Pilot's Story," the televised account of his World War II service. But, first things first. Eager to serve his country, Aanenson had hoped to become an Army fighter pilot, and he got his wish. At 22, he was assigned to fly P-47 Thunderbolts in Europe. He was highly successful and very lucky: Unlike most of the pilots in his squadron, he survived. His 366th Fighter Group lost 90 of its 125 pilots. Like a lot of World War II veterans, he had been reluctant during much of his civilian life to talk about that world of death. He had recurring nightmares, and the injuries he suffered in three cockpit fires and shrapnel hits continued to bother him. But he was intent on putting that behind him in civilian life. In 1987, Aanenson retired from his successful career as an insurance and investment marketing executive here. Finally, he had time to tell what was hidden in the back of his mind. It would be the story of one man's war, as well as a love story about a pilot and the woman who waited for him. "My story was about death," he said, "but her story is about life and love and vitality." Intending to make a private, filmed memoir for his son and two daughters, Aanenson set out to recount his wartime experiences using his own photos and memorabilia and letters that he and his wife had written to each other as well as archival pictures, newsreels and combat footage with music from the era. Using Aanenson's script and materials, his son-in-law, Tom Pyers, a videotape editor in Chicago, produced a 3-hour, 40-minute video. The story recounted Aanenson's Army training and combat service and is, in large part, about death and near escapes. He narrates in a calm, measured voice that belies the fear he felt then, acknowledging in the program, "I killed too much." Since then, he said, he no longer experiences fear. Aanenson took the finished production to a reunion of the 366th Fighter Group Association in autumn 1992, where those who viewed it encouraged him to look for a wider outlet. WETA agreed to consider his presentation if he trimmed the show to three hours. "A Fighter Pilot's Story" aired in November 1993, to coincide with Veterans Day. By that June, the 50th anniversary of D- Day, more than 300 PBS stations had aired it. Aanenson was deluged with 25,000 letters and, he estimated, between 7,000 and 8,000 calls from people who wanted to talk to a man

they believed would understand their psychological burdens. Children and wives of veterans told him they had gained insight into the men who came home from war. He heard from old friends and relatives of comrades, and he heard from former enemies who saw the tapes. Nearly two years after the first airing, viewers still write and call. Last week, a former German soldier called him from his home near Berlin and discussed their combat participation in the Battle of the Bulge. "A Fighter Pilot's Story" also brought Aanenson formal recognition. He already held the Distinguished Flying Cross, the Purple Heart and the Air Medal with nine oak leaf clusters. But as PBS stations aired the show, often for pledge drives, more honors arrived. On July 14, 1994 -- Bastille Day -- to acknowledge the contribution of Americans toward the liberation of France, Ambassador Jacques Andreani made Aanenson a commander of the Legion of Honor. He accepted, he said, on behalf of all American pilots, living and dead, who served in the war. In October, the Air Force invited him to the 391st Fighter Squadron's home field at Mountain Home Air Force Base, Idaho. A passenger on a training mission, Aanenson rode in -- and, for 45 minutes, took the controls of -- an F-15E fighter. Last April, Aanenson spoke to the International Congress of Stress & Trauma meeting in Baltimore. In May, he gave the annual Charles A. Lindbergh Lecture at the National Air and Space Museum to a standing-room-only crowd. Aviation artist William S. Phillips is finishing a painting of Aanenson's P-47 Thunderbolt, Rebel Jack, to be reproduced as prints for public sale. On Sept. 18, at its convention here, the 175,000-member Air Force Association will give him its Citation of Honor "for exceptional dedication and zeal in personally writing and producing a three-hour filmed documentary, based on his own experiences, . . . {that} has contributed significantly to a greater public understanding of the role of airpower in World War II." Aanenson said the Air Force plans to send "A Fighter Pilot's Story" to 275 training centers and bases. Assigned to the 391st Fighter Squadron, part of the 366th Fighter Group, Aanenson flew his first combat mission on D-Day and participated in the Battle of the Bulge and in the other major campaigns on the Western Front. He flew P-47s low across the French and German countryside, attacking tanks, bridges and other targets. The first time he fired on a column of German soldiers along a roadside, the impact of his shells pitched their bodies into the air, and after he landed, he got sick. Aanenson was caught in three cockpit fires; his planes were hit by flak on more than 20 missions; and he endured two major crash landings. Once, his plane was hit by an 8 mm cannon

shell and nearly demolished. He landed, he said, "but the plane couldn't bear its own weight and it collapsed. It was broken in two." He suffered skull injuries, which have nagged him ever since, when the straps that held him in his seat broke and his head hit the gun mount behind him. But a week later, he was back in the war. That time, he got his own P-47 and named it Rebel Jack, for Jacqueline Greer of Baton Rouge, La., whom he had met two weeks after he arrived for training at Harding Field, where she worked. Once in combat, Aanenson realized the chances were great that he could be killed. He wrote farewell letters to his parents and to Jackie. She did not read hers until last April, when the couple marked their 50th wedding anniversary. In April 1945, after 75 missions -- most in P-47s, some in P-51s -- Aanenson was sent home for 45 days to recuperate. Of the 20 pilots who had trained with him, 15 were dead or missing and two wounded within the first 10 months. Wasting no more time, he and Jackie married and went to visit his Norwegian-American parents in Luverne, Minn. But he was restless, he recalled. He picked up the hunting rifle he had used as a boy and shot a pesky gopher. As he watched it die, "something snapped, and I resolved never to kill again," he said. As it turned out, he didn't have to. Although Aanenson expected to be reassigned to the Pacific, the United States dropped atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan surrendered, and World War II was over. Although he would have become an officer in the new United States Air Force, Aanenson, like most World War II veterans, decided after the war to return to civilian life. At 24, he finished college at Louisiana State University. "When the war was over, I went through the guilt complex that many did," he said. "I remember going out by myself to City Park in Baton Rouge and I thought through a lot of things. I must have been there three hours. I came to a conclusion that I cannot waste this life. I had intended to go into radio, but I thought, What can I do to help people?" He decided to join Mutual of New York, the nation's oldest mutual life insurance company. "That helped me come to peace -- this sounds strange -- with the dealing in death. You have to choose life over death. I don't mean to be melodramatic about it, but that was the motive." Aanenson managed MONY's Washington office for 32 years, building one of the nation's largest insurance and investment marketing operations. He is now enjoying a comfortable retirement at his home in Bethesda. World War II had been a life-changing experience, but one that many participants tucked away. Aanenson's story helped them unpack that baggage. One woman asked how her husband, a pilot in his squadron, had died. "She

said I will not have peace until I know how he died.' Fifty long years." As gently as he could, he told her. "Maybe she'll have some peace with that," he said. "I have a feeling of responsibility about it. I want to make sure I don't say anything that would damage anyone's memory, and yet they do need closure." Others may be surprised at the impact of Aanenson's personal story on viewers, but he isn't. "I think the thing that has helped more than anything is that it recorded a piece of accurate history," he said. "A lot of people were walking around carrying a piece of that history, but they weren't able to verbalize it to their families or to record it." Among the letters was one from a former German soldier who now lives in Heidelberg and who saw "A Fighter Pilot's Story" on cassettes sent him by relatives. The man believes that Aanenson shot at him; Aanenson thinks that the soldier, a wireless operator at the headquarters of an anti-aircraft tank division in Normandy, coordinated the guns that fired back. Eventually, the German spent three years as a prisoner of war in England. "Germany has lost the war; you have won the war. My congratulations. The Allied forces have fought for the better moral," wrote the old enemy. "Yes, Quentin, you may have killed thousands of German soldiers, nearly me too, but the way to victory leads over graves, and your personal fight has helped to save the life of millions which had lost liberty, freedom and a life in humanity. So you have no reason for having nightmares; on the contrary, you have all reason to be proud of all you have done for the rights of mankind." Aanenson said the letters "came to me out of the blue. When I got that first letter, it was sort of emotional for me. I hope to meet him." Last June, Aanenson went home to become only the eighth person to be inducted into Rock County (Minn.) Historical Society's Hall of Fame. Luverne renamed its airport Quentin C. Aanenson Field. Half a mile away, near the south end of the airfield, Aanenson could see the farmhouse where he grew up, the second youngest of Oliver and Olga Aanenson's six children. When he was little, he had attended a one-room schoolhouse. Of all the honors that came his way as a result of "A Fighter Pilot's Story," he said, this tribute from the placid town where he grew up was perhaps the sweetest. There are those -- including a quarter of those who sent him letters -- who suggest that Aanenson was meant to live and tell their story, but he disagrees. "That's too heavy-duty," he said. "There's no way in the world I can accept that. I think of all the wonderful guys I served with who died over there -- they were better men than I was." But tell the story he did. Last week, Maryland Public Television carried it again; on Monday and

Tuesday at 9, WETA gives it another airing. This time, the program will include an 800 number viewers can call to buy tapes. CAPTION: Fighter pilot Quentin Aanenson. CAPTION: Jacqueline and Quentin Aanenson: Telling a war story.