



## SHOT DOWN OVER ITALY

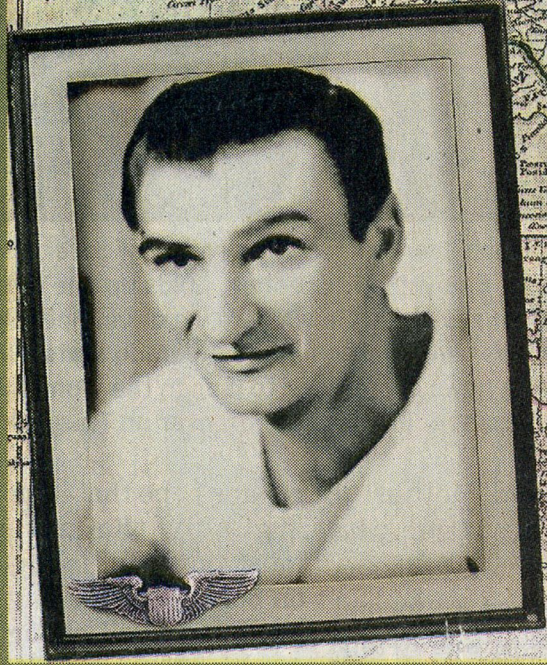


PHOTO COURTESY OF JOHN LANZA / PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY MARTIAL HAPROV

For 66 years  
the story  
of how an  
Apple Valley  
man eluded  
Nazis during  
World War II  
remained a  
secret. Now his  
story is told ...

BY HOLLY LA PAT  
SPECIAL TO THE DAILY PRESS

**W**alter Brickner lived in Apple Valley for more than 25 years, but few people knew him well.

None of them knew his secret.

Brickner was the co-pilot of a B-25 Mitchell bomber that was shot down over Italy in World War II. He evaded the enemy for a month and a half, but after his rescue, he signed an agreement never to talk about it. So when Brickner died in 2002, the tale of his escape and evasion went to his grave with him.

Author John Lanza unearthed Brickner's secret after discovering his own uncle had been in the same crash. Their story is told in Lanza's book, "Shot Down Over Italy," scheduled for publication in June, just after the anniversary of the May 26, 1944, crash.

The B-25 was on a mission to bomb a bridge south of Florence, Italy, when it was hit by enemy flak, disabling the engine.

"When the engine goes out, there's a risk that it will go into a dive and spin. If it does,



# SHOT DOWN

FROM PAGE 1

the centrifugal force is such that you can't get out," Lanza explained. "They were a mile high. It was a frightening situation."

Based on the information Lanza pieced together from survivors' accounts and declassified reports, Brickner was the last one out of the plane, which was falling at 1,500 to 2,000 feet per minute.

"He fell into a tree, and when he got down, three guns were drawn on him," Lanza said.

Two Germans and a fascist took Brickner to a hut where another German began to interrogate him. As the interrogator ordered Brickner to hand over his dog tags, the hut was attacked by gunfire. His captors fled under a shower of bullets.

Fortunately, the attackers were on Brickner's side.

They were partisans, members of the resistance movement against the Nazis. They took Brickner under their protection, and he hid with them in the woods

until he was liberated by British troops July 12, 1944.

"The partisans wanted him to join their gang," Lanza said. "He said he preferred to just get liberated."

Brickner was one of four men in the crash who successfully evaded the enemy until their rescue. Two others were taken to separate prison camps and eventually freed. The pilot died in the crash.

Lanza's uncle, William Lanza, hid for two months in a cave with Alfred Todd, another man from the bomber's crew. The local partisan leader sheltered them, sending his daughter with food every day.

"My uncle would say, 'We're going to get killed,' " Lanza said. "(The partisan leader) would say 'Be calm, be calm.' "

William Lanza didn't speak about his experience for decades, and Brickner never did. All enemy evaders signed an agreement when they were rescued, promising their silence in order to protect the people who aided them. In 2006,

author John Lanza learned the documents were declassified in 1995, making his uncle and other survivors free to speak.

Of all the stories Lanza researched, he said Brickner's was the saddest. He gave up a career in professional baseball to enlist after a promising start in the minor leagues. He eventually settled in Apple Valley, marrying very late in life to a woman who died just a few years later.

Jim Wood of Apple Valley golfed with Brickner for 25 or 30 years, but said he learned very little about him.

"He was not a man to tell a lot of stories," Wood said. "I knew him as a golfer, I knew him as a friend."

But Wood wasn't surprised to learn about Brickner's harrowing adventure. "I knew all along there was some kind of secret involved," he said.

Lanza said he wished he could have talked to Brickner before his death. "I related to him more than most because I'm a ballplayer," he said. "He gave that up. He signed up for his country."