

Elfrieda and Herbert — *a war story and, ultimately, a love story*



The girls of Jasper Wood Products, front row from left: Esther (Werne) Stenftenagel and Sally (Gerner) Mundy.

Back row: Carrie (Hasenour) Toby, Dorothy (Stenftenagel) Oeding, Emma (Buechler) Wilmes, Elfrieda (Mehling) Hedinger and the mystery women.

For the last 25 or so years, the Ferdinand News and Spencer County Leader have tried to memorialize the veterans who served and fought so valiantly in World War II, as well as other conflicts.

But we've sort of neglected those left behind who kept the home fires burning, rationed food, worked in defense plants and did their very important part for the war effort.

The following started with a photo, as many stories do, and an attempt to identify one person who had been forgotten over time. But as the story evolved an even more important tale emerged, that of the woman waiting patiently at home for the love of her life to return to her. Who treasured the letters he wrote daily — yes every single day from places neither one had ever heard of before Pearl Harbor was bombed and all they ever knew changed in an instant.

Herbert Hedinger is no longer on this earth, but his memory lives on through his wife, the former Elfrieda Mehling, and through his children and grandchildren.

This is Herb and Elfrieda's story. Truth be told it's a love story — one that was repeated throughout this land. Sometimes the story did not have a happy ending, when the woman waiting at home never laid eyes on her beloved again in this lifetime.

That was not the case for Herbert and Elfrieda. Theirs had a happy ending. This is their story.

by Kathy Tretter

Elfrieda Mehling was a looker, no two ways about it. The attractive miss with the sparkling eyes and wavy brown hair had been born in 1922 on a farm in Spencer County. She attended the Deller School for the first eight grades ("We lived close and I walked,") then Dale High School. By 1941 she was keeping house for Claude Gramel-spacher's family in Jasper when she decided to have some fun by attending a free wedding dance.

Apparently, back before weddings became big business, when Catholics had to wait 12 hours after eating to receive communion at mass, couples would marry in the morning, host a wedding breakfast following the service for family (or more accurately, mom and dad hosted), and then hold a wedding dance to which everyone — whether they knew the couple or not — was invited.

At one of these dances — Elfrieda cannot remember who tied the knot but at one of the many everyone attended — she met a handsome young man by the name of Herbert Hedinger who also grew up on a farm but was employed in the woodworking department at Jasper Seating, running a sander, wood shaper and boring machine.

The two hit it off, as young people do, and began dating.

Then the unthinkable happened. On December 7, 1941, Japan made a

surprise aerial attack on the U.S. naval base at Pearl Harbor on Oahu Island, Hawaii.

Admiral Yamamoto Isoroku, the commander in chief of Japan's Combined Fleet, had planned the attack against the U.S. Pacific Fleet with great care. Once the U.S. fleet was out of action, the way for the unhindered Japanese conquest of all of Southeast Asia and the Indonesian archipelago would be open.

On November 26, Vice Adm. Nagumo Chuichi led a fleet including six aircraft carriers, two battleships, three cruisers, and 11 destroyers to a point some 275 miles north of Hawaii. From there about 360 planes in total would be launched on the appointed day.

The first Japanese dive-bomber appeared over Pearl Harbor at 7:55 a.m. (local time). It was part of an initial wave of nearly 200 aircraft, including torpedo planes, bombers and fighters. Within a quarter of an hour the various airfields at the base were subjected to savage attack. The U.S. military aircraft were packed tightly together at the Naval Air Station on Ford Island and adjoining Wheeler and Hickam fields, and many were destroyed on the ground by Japanese strafing. At Wheeler Field in particular the destruction was fearful. Of the 126 planes on the ground, 42 were totally destroyed, 41 were dam-

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