

# Community Voices

Editor's Note: Community Voices is a monthly feature in the *Siuslaw News*. It consists of viewpoints from people in the Siuslaw region. *Siuslaw News* welcomes these opinions as part of its goal to encourage community discussion and exchange of perspectives, but they should not be interpreted as the views of the *News* or its staff.

## TOP FLIGHT: WITH A STORIED AVIATION CAREER, TERRY TOMENY IS INSPIRING A NEW GENERATION

By LINDA KC REYNOLDS  
THE EPOCH TIMES

ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED  
JULY 20, 2021  
USED WITH PERMISSION

As a preteen, Terry Tomeny and his father, Edward “Ted” Tomeny, had no clue that one flight in a Cessna 172 would send the youngster up a path that would lead him to approximately 10,000 hours of flying time in more than 80 types of aircraft.

“Flying was the coolest thing I have ever done, and to this day it is still my biggest passion and interest,” said Tomeny, 72.

His father worked as an accountant and his mother was a homemaker. “We had no aviation in our family, but my dad would do some work for a bachelor who owned a Cessna 172, a V-Tail Bonanza, and several other planes. One day, my dad asked him if he would take me up for a ride.” After one flight, Tomeny was hooked and flew whenever a flight was offered.

In high school, he excelled at math and science but hated languages, English, social studies, and history.

“Physics, calculus, chemistry—I loved that stuff,” he said. A high school counselor encouraged him to become an engineer. Upon high school graduation, he accepted a full scholarship to an engineering college, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, New York, about a three-hour drive from his hometown of Syracuse. Tuition was about \$16,000 a year so Tomeny felt extremely fortunate. “No way would we ever be able to afford that.”

Walking down the hallway with his parents during orientation, they happened upon three ROTC tables. The first was an Air Force recruiter who asked him if he had 20/20 vision. “Yes, I do!” answered Tomeny. Then the recruiter then asked if he would like to be a pilot.

“Cool!” He signed on the dotted line, and that began the next 31 years of his life.

College was not as easy as high school. He liked to party a bit, and every once in a while,

he skipped a few classes.

“I was an average college student but because of ROTC, I had to toe the line while everyone else was going through the Vietnam-long-hair-hippy freak-smoking marijuana phase of their lives,” he said.

### A NATURAL ABILITY

In his fourth year of college, he had to take a 35-hour flight instruction course in a Piper Cherokee to see if he had any ability to fly.

“You can like to fly, but that does not make you a good pilot,” Tomeny explained. His instructor was a WASP (Women Air Force Service Pilots) during World War II.

“Ms. Virginia Sweet was in her 50s and wore these big skirts with petticoats under them. She was an excellent pilot and instructor,” Tomeny said. After only a few hours of instruction, Ms. Sweet asked him if he wanted to fly solo.

“Today? Do you think I’m ready?” he replied nervously. The air was quite turbulent; the plane was unsteady and bobbing.

“If you can fly today, you can fly any day,” she said. “We landed, she got out and I soloed.”

Impressed after only 35 hours of instruction, the instructor called an examiner for Tomeny’s 1 1/2-hour check ride who happened to be in the area. After fulfilling the requirements of laying out a cross-country flight plan, Tomeny and his examiner took to the sky. Tomeny performed a few maneuvers and short, planned engine stalls, when the examiner pulled back the throttle and said, “You just lost your engine—now land.”

Spiraling down to reduce speed, then gliding toward the airport without power, Tomeny started to get nervous, calculating whether to go over or under the approaching power lines.

“At the last moment the examiner said I could use a little power, so I went over the power lines and landed. We probably only flew 30 minutes but he said I was good to go.” It was confirmed: Tomeny had a nat-



Retired U.S. Air Force Col. Terry Tomeny has had a passion for aviation since he was a young boy. He has nearly 10,000 hours of flight time in over 80 aircraft. (Photo courtesy Tomeny Aero Inc.)

ural ability to fly.

Unfortunately, the owner of the little airport where Tomeny trained was killed a few days later in a crash, in an aircraft that he had recently flown. While driving toward the woods to check out the wreckage, Don McClean’s “American Pie,” which was recently released, played on the radio.

“I stood there and looked at the yoke [control wheel] of the airplane that I was behind just a few days ago, all ripped apart.” He paused and cleared his throat. “Anyways, whenever I hear that song, it brings me back to that time.”

With a 2.9 GPA, Tomeny believes it is the social skills he learned from being in a fraternity that were most important. Ready to go into the Air Force pilot training program, he ran into the dean of engineering, Carl Westerdahl, at a fraternity party a few weeks before graduation.

Westerdahl asked him if he was interested in grad school, which would only take one more year. Tomeny discovered that when he went to class regularly and actually studied, it was actually pretty easy—and he did quite well.

“I think everybody should have a time, sometime in their life, that they feel they are the No. 1 guy,” he said. With his parents and two sisters present at his graduation, he had that moment.

“I was the No. 1 graduate and the top academic guy. Boy,

my parents were so proud. I thought that was pretty cool.” He has had “that moment” several times throughout his life, graduating with top honors from every flying school he has attended.

### HOT AIR BALLOONS AND SUPERSONIC JETS

He is a past president and fellow of the Society of Experimental Test Pilots and is the recipient of the Doolittle and Kincheloe awards. He also received the Liethen-Tittle Award, awarded to the top pilot in a given class at the U.S. Air Force Test Pilot School, among numerous other accolades.

Tomeny’s successful aviation career includes becoming a commander and director for several programs at Edwards Flight Test Center in California. He has flown everything from hot air balloons to supersonic fighters, and he has worked for the Pentagon and companies including Lockheed Martin, Boeing, Calspan, and Eclipse.

“The difference between a manager and a leader is that a manager tells you what to do, a leader asks you what you think needs to be done. You listen and work together as a team. Sometimes you have to be both. I think one of the biggest compliments you can have is when someone says, ‘I will work for you anywhere, doing anything,’ and that has happened quite a bit.”

He and his wife, Winette, now live in Florence, Oregon, on

Lake Mercer only a few miles from the ocean and their hanger. Winette volunteered for Seacoast Entertainment and is now the president, booking bands and entertainment from around the country for the community.

They launched Tomeny Aero Inc. and Aero Legends Biplane Rides, offering tours in their vintage Stearman biplane, exploring the beautiful Oregon coast. Tomeny is now a world history buff and very knowledgeable about the history of Florence, which he shares with his passengers while flying over sand dunes and landmarks.

### INSPIRING THE NEXT GENERATION

In 2017, the Tomenys and retired airline captain Sam Spayd opened the Florence Aviation Academy, an annual, two-week charitable event accomplished in partnership with the Boys & Girls Club of Western Lane County. Students are introduced to the basics of aviation and its history. They learn math skills that are required to determine fuel usage and flight times, basic airplane maintenance, and flight instructions. Upon graduation, students fly with their instructor and actually pilot the aircraft.

“We find that so many kids do not have goals or visions, and all it takes is a little spark to set them off of a successful career and happy life. So in addition to exposing the kids to my passion, flying, we also encourage them to follow their own passions. We use the following saying—and it has already inspired four years of graduates: ‘Find something you love to do, that you’re good at, that somebody will pay you to do, and you’ll never have to work a day in your life.’”

“We find that most of the kids have never thought about it—or think they don’t have a chance. My belief is that if you really want it, go for it, and never, ever quit. Make them drag you out by your heels!”

— Story courtesy —  
[www.TheEpochTimes.com](http://www.TheEpochTimes.com)

## MILITARY HERITAGE CHRONICLES — FLORENCE HOMEFRONT DEFENSE EFFORTS

By CAL APPLEBEE  
Military and Vehicle  
Historian  
Special to *Siuslaw News*

When researching material for historical articles, it can sometimes be a challenge to separate actual and accurate historical information from urban legends and local community lore, not to mention sometimes misinformation on the internet.

I started out for this article intending to cover our local community’s efforts of coastal protection during WWII, based on stories I’ve heard over the years about beach patrols and groups like the Vine Maple Savages, which actually didn’t come into existence until the 1950s. I soon learned there was a lot of misinformation out there, and to some degree, a lack of information as well.

I had heard of “The Sand Pounders” before, which was a moniker sometimes given to the U.S. Coast

Guard members who conducted beach patrols just prior to and after our nation’s entrance into the war. Sometimes these were conducted via jeep and sometimes on horseback, with the livestock provided by the U.S. Army. I had also heard of the “Tillamook Rangers” or sometimes referred to as the “Tillamook Guerrillas,” as well as the “Portland Veteran’s Guard,” but had to really dig to learn about the efforts of Florence and Western Lane County.

When it was anticipated the Oregon National Guard would be pressed into our nation’s defense duties after the start of WWII, there was great concern about the home defense within the state itself. So the “Home Guard” concept was created at a state-level as early as 1940. I dug into the pages of the *Siuslaw Oar*, predecessor to the *Siuslaw News*, to learn what I could about this local effort, and really enjoyed the journey back through time.

Other communities around the state created their own Home Guards.

A Jan. 16, 1942, *Siuslaw Oar* article announced that 500 men answered the initial call to mobilization for what was initially named “The Siuslaw Rifles,” with nearly half showing up at its first meeting with rifles. It would be the only authorized armed civilian group in Lane County. Its original mission was “to hold back a possible invasion or at least harass any enemy force.”

The Siuslaw Rifles was soon organized along the lines of the state’s newly organized Home Guard concept, and eventually the count settled much lower under 100 members. In mid-June 1942, it was mustered locally in Florence with a local drill demonstration, and throughout the following months and years, regular training meetings were held.

However, I found no coverage of actual patrols or incidents the local Home

Guard encountered.

In August 1943 the Ladies’ Auxiliary of the State Guard was planned and initial meeting held, although not much information was gleaned following that. Beyond that, not a lot of news coverage existed about the Home Guard or State Guard, depending on which source you refer to.

There were other attempts at local coastal defense efforts, including an airplane spotters class taking place in June 1943, presumably linked to a group in Eugene. This would eventually evolve into the post-war Ground Observation Corps in the late 1940s through the 1959, of which local women did in fact serve, according to area resident Steve Saubert, who recalls his own mother’s participation.

In 1942, the U.S. Army announced plans to designate an area along the Siuslaw River up to Swisshome as a “Defense Area,” and in March 1943, another “Re-

stricted Area” along the beaches west of Highway 101 in the Siltcoos area to be used for target practice.

Other war-related coverage seen regularly in the pages of the *Siuslaw Oar* included guidelines and reminders for blackout regulations, including a trial blackout exercise held in December 1942.

A January 1942 article described efforts in Western Lane County to mobilize women to join the work force for replacing the men who had marched off to war. Gas and tire rationing were covered, as were scrap metal and wastepaper drives. Multiple War Fund drives saw consistent coverage on the front pages throughout the war years as well.

One aspect of the war which I found surprisingly absent was coverage on national war events such as the Pearl Harbor attack, Doolittle Raid and VJ Day. There was coverage in late 1944 and mid-1945 about VE Day celebration plans.

Unfortunately, there was a lot of coverage on hometown boys who were lost in service to their country, and rightfully so.

Of course, the *Siuslaw Oar* was covering the entire Western Lane County region with its reporting, and the amazing support and response by our residents at that time was astonishing, considering the official population count for incorporated Florence city limits in 1945 was only 605!

The skeletal type of news reporting of the day gave me a much greater appreciation for the level of coverage our current *Siuslaw News* staff gives us today.

For more military heritage, visit the Oregon Coast Military Museum located on Kingwood Street adjacent to the Florence Municipal Airport, open from noon to 4 p.m. Thursday thru Sunday, or by visiting the Museum’s website at [www.oregoncoastmilitarymuseum.com](http://www.oregoncoastmilitarymuseum.com).