

Cardenas Faced Challenges, Danger Throughout Remarkable Air Force Career

Robert L. Cardenas was born in 1920 in Mexico's Yucatan state and moved to San Diego with his family when he was five years old. He was an adventurous youth who enjoyed hiking, camping and swimming. An excellent student, he satisfied his interest in aircraft by building models and learning about gliders.

Cardenas was attending San Diego State University in 1939 when he enlisted in the California National Guard Coast Artillery. The next year he was designated an aviation cadet, and was commissioned a second lieutenant in the Army Air Corp in July 1941.

In March 1944, 24-year-old Capt. Cardenas led a squadron of B-24 bombers that took off from England to attack a factory in southern Germany. It was his 20th mission. During the first bombing run, the aircraft he was flying in was hit by anti-aircraft flak. Shrapnel slashed his scalp and damaged the plane, but he ordered the pilot to turn back for a second pass over the factory.

As he later told a reporter, he thought, "As long as you're here, you might as well finish it."

Completing the second run, Cardenas and his crew stayed with the crippled plane – two engines ablaze – as it flew south toward neutral Switzerland. When it became obvious that the bomber was going down, he bailed out and landed in German territory.

Cardenas was separated from his crew, so he hid his parachute and hiked toward Lake Constance, a large body of water on the border between Germany and Switzerland. He stood on the shore of the lake and remembered the La Jolla rough-water contests he participated in as a youngster. Those were three-mile swims, and the distance to the Swiss shore looked about the same. Kicking off his shoes, he walked into the lake.

Midway across and nearing exhaustion, his luck held out and he was picked up by a boatman who landed him safely in Switzerland. With the help of partisans, Cardenas was spirited out of Switzerland into Grenoble, France,

entering Paris not long after the Allied D-Day landings. He eventually was flown to England and then to a rehabilitation center in the U.S.

On Oct. 14, 1947, Maj. Cardenas was officer in charge of the Air Force unit that launched Capt. Chuck Yeager into supersonic flight over southern California. At a signal, the tiny plane dropped out of the bomb bay of the B-29 Superfortress Cardenas was flying and zoomed into history at Mach 1.06 – 700 mph at 43,000 feet.

The following year, Cardenas was named chief test pilot for the YB-49 “Flying Wing” – an experimental eight-engine jet bomber with a 172-foot wingspan and no fuselage. It resembled a huge boomerang. An inherently unstable aircraft, an earlier version had crashed killing all five crewmen.

Cardenas became famous as the Air Force’s “Flying Wing” pilot when President Truman ordered him to show off the giant bomber by flying at rooftop level down Pennsylvania Avenue. The risky flight made national news, but during a later test flight the plane almost cost him his life when it spiraled out of control. He recovered only a thousand feet above the ground.

In December 1969, now a brigadier general and vice commander of the 16th Air Force in Spain, Cardenas was dispatched to Libya where he confronted Col. Muammar al-Gadhafi, who had just taken over the country in a coup.

Gaddafi wanted Wheelus AFB and he wanted all personnel to leave, but he demanded that aircraft and other equipment remain. Cardenas was adamant that no equipment would be left behind and, in the end, he prevailed. An orderly withdrawal was completed.

Brig. Gen. Cardenas retired from the Air Force in 1973 with 34 years’ service. For the next ten years, he worked as an executive in private industry but remained active in military and veterans’ issues. (For a complete biography and photos of the aircraft he flew, go to www.bobcardenasyb49.com/biography.htm.)

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