

Governor Bruce Sundlun (1920 -)

World War II Bomber Pilot, Business Aviation Executive



In addition to his aviation background, Governor Bruce Sundlun has led a long and successful life in business, politics, and the practice of law. He was born in Providence on January 19, 1920 and attended local public schools as well as Tabor Academy. He then entered Williams College in Massachusetts. His final year was interrupted by the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. "There were 278 seniors in our class [on Sunday, December 7] and by Monday night there were only 11 still in college," Sundlun says, "and all of them had some physical disability which prevented them from being in the military."

The rest enlisted.

Sundlun had already earned his pilot's license in the Civilian Pilot Training program and tried to join the Aviation Cadet Program at Westover Field. A captain there washed him out, saying Sundlun's eyes didn't converge and he would see two runways instead of one if he tried to land. But another officer told him to bring a knife towards his eyes at mealtimes for the next week - an exercise that developed the proper coordination.

After multi-engine training and B-17 qualification he was assigned to the 384th Bomb Group in England in early 1943. He named his Flying Fortress *Damn Yankee*, and collected a crew from all over the United States. Speaking of his crew, Sundlun said. "I was 22 at the time and they called me 'Pappy,' "

Returning from their 13th mission on December 1, 1943, they took a hit in #3 engine and became a straggler, a sitting duck without fighter protection.

German fighters were quick to pounce on the wounded *Damn Yankee*. Sundlun recalls hearing his tail gunner say "Fighters at 6," dying before he could spit out "o'clock".

The Fortress was dying, and Sundlun knew it. He ordered the crew to bail out, and watched as a handful of men parachuted out. Sundlun was the last to leave the doomed plane, which was then on its back. He hid himself in a furrow in a recently plowed field until dark. After learning that all the other surviving crew members had been captured, Captain Sundlun began a harrowing six month trek through occupied Belgium and France. Trying to elude the Germans, he became Andre Pierre Deman, a shoemaker.

After two failed attempts to get to Spain, Sundlun realized the French underground must be strong near the Swiss border, where the Germans had brought in artillery and aircraft to counter the Maquis. He made his way there and wound up leading a 35-man resistance unit near Belfort, harassing German units moving from Italy to counter the Normandy invasion. He finally escaped to Switzerland.

After being interned for several weeks, he was transferred to the American Embassy in Bern, where he worked for Allen Dulles, head of the Office of Strategic Services. On August 12, 1944 he re-entered France, assigned the task of relaying radio instructions to American planes flying in support of the invasion of southern France.

Captain Sundlun eventually returned to England, then back to the United States. He spent the last year of the war flying in the Ferry Command in the Pacific Theater of Operations. His last assignment was to fly released American POWs home from Tokyo. For his wartime service he was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross, the Air Medal with Cluster and a Purple Heart, along with the French Legion of Honor.

Despite the demands of his burgeoning civilian career, Sundlun stayed active in the Air Force Reserve. In the late 1940s his Harvard Law School professor W. Barton Leach recruited three students who were aerial combat veterans to help reorganize the Air War College at Maxwell Air Force Base in Alabama, and Sundlun was one. (Another was Ramsay Potts, portrayed by Gregory Peck in the famous movie "12 O'clock High".)

In the Reserve Sundlun commanded a troop carrier squadron at Hanscom Field, then a wing at Andrews Air Force Base. After a final assignment in the Office of the Secretary of the Air Force, he retired as a Colonel in 1980. President Carter then appointed him to the US Air Force Academy Board of Visitors.

Wearing his other hat, Sundlun finally finished that BA at Williams College in 1946, and received his law degree from Harvard in 1949. He served as an Assistant U.S. Attorney, then Special Assistant to U.S. Attorney General in the Department of Justice Civil Division. During his time in Washington he served as Vice Chairman of the Inaugural Parade Committee in 1961, and President Kennedy later appointed him as an Incorporator of Communication Satellite Corporation, on which



“Pappy” Sundlun and his B-17 Flying Fortress crew, 1943

board he served for 20 years. As a testament to his aviation knowledge and expertise, Sundlun also was asked in 1961 to serve as a member of the Advisory Group on Aviation Goals.

After a number of years in private practice, he returned to the aviation business when he assumed the presidency of Executive Jet Aviation, Inc. (for whom he had been general counsel).

Six years later Sundlun returned to Rhode Island as President and CEO of The Outlet Company. He served as Chairman until 1988, while still serving on a number of boards, commissions and authorities.

He entered politics and was elected Governor of Rhode Island on November 6, 1990 with 75% of the vote, the largest majority in state history. He was also reelected Governor in 1992. During his tenure as Governor, he was responsible for providing a home for the Quonset Air Museum, which owes its very existence to his support.

Sundlun resigned most of his community posts when elected Governor. He still serves, however, as Founding Member of the Board, Providence Facilities Management and as a board member of Fort Adams Trust.

He now holds the title of Governor-In-Residence at the University of Rhode Island, where he teaches two political science courses. He lives with his wife Soozie in Saunderstown.

