

LOCAL

'It didn't even feel like a shot.' 101-year-old World War II vet receives his COVID vaccine

By Louis Berney Special to the Daily News

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Joseph Innes has tasted danger and flirted with risk before in his 101 years.

The North Naples resident flew 35 missions over Nazi Germany during World War II as an Air Force navigator aboard B-17 bombers.

“We dumped a lot of tonnage of explosives,” he recalled of the perilous forays above enemy territory.

So confronting the coronavirus pandemic, even as a high-risk individual due to his status as a centenarian, does not seem to phase him. Nor does getting a shot in his arm.

“No problem,” he said, minutes after being inoculated Thursday with the COVID-19 vaccine at North Collier Regional Park. “It didn’t even feel like a shot.”

The Czech native, who has lived in the United States since he was 10, said, “I’m in good health,” as he and his wife, Elena Troianovskia, 82, sat in their new Lincoln MKZ during the 15-minute mandatory waiting period after being vaccinated.

They each were buoyant once they had received their shots in the parking lot, having taken a big step toward circumventing the virus, which has been especially lethal for older people.

The couple expressed gratitude to the Naples Senior Center for helping them get the inoculations against the deadly disease.

“We could not have managed this by ourselves,” said Troianovskia. “We’re thankful to the organization for arranging it for us.”

Naples Senior Center is a nonprofit serving the elderly in Southwest Florida, offering social and emotional support, as well as several dozen weekly programs. The center is staffed by

about 200 volunteers.

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After making arrangements for 150 people, all but a handful older than 90, to get their vaccinations last week, the center registered another 500 seniors for shots Thursday and Friday, with 500 more to be vaccinated next week.

Like many in Naples and around the country, Innes and Troianovskia initially had found the procedure and the process of gaining access to the vaccinations for protection against COVID-19 both confounding and exasperating. “We have been waiting since the vaccine was initiated,” Innes added.

Troianovskia sought help so the couple could receive the vaccines, but without any luck. But finally a friend wrote to the Naples Senior Center on their behalf, and the center was able to arrange vaccines for the couple Thursday.

“We’re happy to do this,” Troianovskia said of the vaccines. “I think we just needed to do this.”

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And: Naples Senior Center helps its vulnerable members get COVID-19 vaccine

The couple moved to Naples from Washington, D.C., in 2005.

Innes was part of the squadron that flew bombing raids from London over German cities like Dresden in 1944 to weaken the Nazi machine as the Allies planned their invasion of the country.

He had been a tool and die maker before deciding to enlist to join the effort to defeat Adolf Hitler. Innes said he could have become an infantryman but chose the Air Force “because it was more prestigious.”

He “earned more as navigator on B-17’s than as a tool and die maker,” he said.

Although his B-17 exploits during World War II certainly elevated him to an elite status as a military hero — among his awards is the French Legion of Honour — they do not qualify as the most momentous acts of his long life. That distinction goes to becoming an American.

“The highlight of my life was coming to the U.S. in May of 1930 during the Great Depression,” he explained. He could not speak English at the time but learned it over his first summer in the states.

After the war, Innes worked for a company that brought radial tires to the United States and then wrote automotive safety standards as a division chief for the U.S. Department of Transportation. Innes also worked as a research and design engineer for Ford Motor Co. in Dearborn, Michigan.

He played tennis into his 90s and still drives and walks regularly and is not the type to worry.

“It happened,” he said of the coronavirus pandemic. “We have no control over it.”

The couple, who live five minutes from North Collier Regional Park, had to wait 15 minutes after receiving the vaccine to assure they were not adversely affected by it.

Before Troianovskia took the wheel to leave, Innes was asked if he planned to rest when he returned home.

“No,” he quickly responded. “Why?”