

Obituary for Eli Setencich

Eli Setencich was a longtime Fresno Bee columnist whose work showcased his love of language and appreciation for all things humorous, whether he was covering politics or writing about harvesting figs as a youngster in the Sanger area.

Mr. Setencich died Saturday morning at a nursing home. He was 90.

News of his death brought tributes from a wide range of Californians.

"I'm saddened to hear of Eli's passing," Gov. Jerry Brown said. "He exemplified the best in journalistic integrity, insight and intelligence. He'll be missed."

Friends and newspaper archives shed light on Mr. Setencich's long and productive life, which began on April 10, 1924 in Sacramento. His mother died when he was young, and he went to live with relatives on a farm in the Sanger area.

He attended Granville School on Kings Canyon Road and noted in one of his columns that he was named salutatorian — in a graduating class of 15 students — a feat that did not reoccur.

Mr. Setencich graduated from Sanger High in 1941 and joined the Army Air Corps, which led to a decorated tour of duty in Europe in World War II.

Paul Loeffler, an organizer of Central Valley Honor Flight that takes World War II veterans to Washington, D.C., once interviewed Setencich for Hometown Heroes Radio.

"Eli's humility and self-deprecating wit never allowed him to draw attention to it, but he was by all accounts a phenomenal pilot," Loeffler said. "He flew 142 combat missions in World War II, bombing and strafing German targets in his P-47 Thunderbolt, and was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross. Our Valley has lost a heroic and special man."

That number of combat missions — 142 — is very high, Loeffler said.

"Most guys I interview, the bomber usually flew no more than 30 or 40 missions and sometimes with fighters, maybe 60 or 70. To have 142 ... that's a lot of missions where he put himself in harm's way."

After the war, Mr. Setencich continued flying with the Air National Guard in Fresno. He attended College of the Sequoias in Visalia, where he played football, and the University of California at Berkeley, friends said.

A brief stint in radio and television was followed by a 41-year career at The Bee. His work included the column, "Through a Glass Lightly," in which Mr. Setencich wrote about common, everyday themes — ostracizing smokers, getting more exercise, Fresno's hot summers — and also themes that spoke to the Valley's heart and soul.

During his career, "generations of San Joaquin Valley residents knew Eli intimately through his column, which offered readers a delightful take on the issues of the day," Executive Editor Jim Boren said.

"He was a generous man who mentored many young reporters. I was one of those whose career was boosted by Eli's guidance. From war hero to journalist, Eli left a huge mark."

Longtime friend and former Bee co-worker Joe Rosato praised Mr. Setencich's unique and whimsical way with words. "One time, he was asked to do a straight news story on a forest fire," Rosato said. "Eli couldn't help himself from writing that 'it was almost too smokey to bear.' He had a way of turning a phrase that was unmatched."

Mr. Setencich's columns ended in 2002 when he retired from The Bee.

Rep. Jim Costa, D-Fresno, called Setencich an "unsung American hero — a veteran of America's greatest generation. Eli never told anyone or bragged about his 50-plus fighter missions over occupied Europe."

As a journalist, Costa said, Setencich "stuck to the facts and was a very informative reporter. As a Fresno Bee columnist, his insightfulness and biting humor always made the point.

"From a Serbian immigrant family, he was truly a son of the Valley. Those who knew Eli will miss him greatly."