



BULLETIN

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An Unlikely Family Meeting

A One-In-A-Million-Chance Story

In July 1943, future museum volunteer docent and Board member, Second Lieutenant Richard Bushong, began intensive training at Ephrata Air Base in Washington with 9 other men to form the cohesive cadre of a B-17 bomber crew. Richard trained as the co-pilot, serving under the leadership of 28-year-old Second Lieutenant Clarence Gill. Clarence was “old” compared to the other members of the crew; Richard was only 20 years old. During the following months, Clarence became his commanding officer and close friend in ways only those that serve together during a time of war might fully appreciate. All four of the officers were very close. As Richard remembers “We went everywhere together. We did everything together.”

The ten men trained in Washington until mid-October and then began travel by train to New Jersey to await their transport ship. They stopped at an Air Base in Kansas and had their flight crew photograph taken in front of B-17 “Moonlight

Cocktail.” The luxury passenger liner Queen Elizabeth, recently adapted to hold thousands of American troops, would convey them across the Atlantic Ocean to Glasgow, Scotland. From there, it was a train ride to Framlingham, England and the nearby 390th Bombardment Group Air Base. Clarence’s crew and others sent over at that time were to replace crews lost since the 390th’s first combat mission on August 12th. They were assigned to the 569th bomb squadron, one of four squadrons comprising the 390th.

Days before their first combat mission, Richard was stricken with what the base flight surgeon believed to be hepatitis that left him in a nearby hospital for about two and a half weeks. Unknown to him, his nine friends would fly their first and only combat mission in the B-17 “Royal Flush” on December 16th without him. They would not return to the 390th base nor would Richard ever see his commanding officer and friend again.



Moonlight Cocktail and Crew: Pilot Clarence Gill (back row, far left), Co-Pilot Richard Bushong (back row, 2nd from left) From the John Moeller Library

Fast forward eighty years to summer, 2023 where Richard, in a “one-in-a-million-chance” meeting, hosts for the first time the son and grandson of his former friend and pilot, Clarence, in the 390th Memorial Museum. How do we go from a B-17 not returning to base at the end of 1943 to a first meeting in 2023 between the offspring of Richard’s former commanding officer and friend?

On Thursday, June 8, 2023, William “Bru” Brubaker visited the 390th Memorial Museum and spoke at length with Richard. He purchased Richard’s book “My Wars: B-17s to F-4s WWII to Vietnam” and had a snapshot taken of him with Richard under the nose of the museum’s B-17 “I’ll Be Around”. Brubaker had already developed an interest in WWII history and, in fact, it was the opportunity to view a B-24 aircraft on display in Hangar 3 that brought him to at the Pima Air and Space Museum. That’s where he and his old college roommate “discovered” the 390th Memorial Museum.



Photo by: Yvette Bolla

After returning home to Weems, Virginia, Bru emailed his friend retired Major General Clair F. Gill, to tell him about his visit to the museum. Clair and Bru had been close friends since 1976 through their service and work together in the US Army, the Department of Energy, and the Smithsonian Institution. Bru had met Clair’s father once in 1976 during a visit in Germany. Clair, the second

son of B-17 pilot Second Lieutenant Clarence Gill, was intrigued by his friend’s meeting. He penned a letter to the museum asking for Richard’s contact information; we forwarded that letter to Richard so he could decide how or whether to respond to the request.

As Clair describes: “My wife and I took an oft-postponed Viking trip to England, Scotland and Norway, departing on 23 June 2023. On 5 July, while at sea, I was surprised to receive a very welcoming email from Richard, to which I responded with a phone call, after disembarking and returning to the U.S. on 8 July 2023. We had a wonderful get-acquainted conversation for twenty minutes or so that set me on a path to find and meet this person who knew my dad some eighty years ago!”

Once home in the United States, Clair contacted his oldest son, U.S. Army General Clair A. Gill, to tell him of the accidental discovery of his dad’s co-pilot, Richard, at the museum in Tucson. His son’s immediate reaction: “You and I are booking a flight in the next couple days and flying out to meet this man!”

Both father and son recognized the incredible odds against such a meeting ever having been even conceivable. As Clair A. notes: “What are the chances that someone we know (Bru) meets Richard? What are the chances someone we know goes to the 390th Museum and happens to catch Richard working his once-a-week volunteer opportunity? What are the chances that they buy his book? And read it? And catch the name of the crewmembers? And make the connection that Gill is related to us? And that that person knows my grandfather’s history? How many WWII vets are still alive? What are the chances one of them might have known my grandfather? Or served in his unit? But, sat in the very same airplane!!! Trained as a crew for combat together?”

This was important to the family on so many levels.



As Clair A. noted, they were “to go meet the last man on the planet who knew my grandfather as a young man; a history all but lost to us.” Clair A. quickly made plans to briefly step away from his duties with the Joint Chiefs of Staff. They made travel plans and arrived in Phoenix, Arizona Friday evening, July 21st. They arrived at Pima Air & Space Museum at 10 a.m. on Saturday, to be greeted by Richard with a golf cart ride to the 390th Memorial Museum.

Flashback now to December 16, 1943 when Clarence and his crew, plus co-pilot Grady Embree, who was filling in for Richard as he recuperated in the hospital, climbed aboard “Royal Flush”. The aircraft was one of 631 bombers that took off for Bremen, Germany to strike the Deutsche Schiff- und Maschinenbau Aktiengesellschaft shipyards. Attacked by German fighters while enroute to the target, and incurring a lot of battle damage, there was no choice but to abandon the “Royal Flush”.



Photo by Bill Buckingham

All ten men survived the bailout and were soon after captured by German authorities. Clarence and the other three officers were imprisoned at Stalag Luft I, outside Barth, Germany, along the coast of the Baltic Sea. Over 7,700 American aircrew were imprisoned in the camp. Other aircrewmen in the bomber stream had seen “Royal Flush” falling back and in distress but did not know its final fate or the fate of the crew members.

On the evening of December 24th, Richard returned from the hospital to his Nissen hut at the 390th base at Framlingham to reunite with his fellow officers from his crew and the other eight officers quartered there. When he entered the hut, he was puzzled to see that the other eleven bunks had been rolled up and all personal property gone, except for his.

He later learned that night from Captain William Pennebaker that his crew and the other two crews in his hut had all been shot down during his hospital stay and their status was unknown. It was shocking news for the 20-year-old second lieutenant. Richard turned pale and was told by Pennebaker to sit down. He was then provided a strong slug of bourbon to help with processing such terrible news. It would be a few months later when Richard learned, with relief, that his crew had survived and were Prisoners of War. As Richard recounts “It felt so good to know they were still alive.” Clarence and the other prisoners would remain in this camp until after the Russian Army liberated the camp on May 1, 1945.

After Richard completed 28 combat missions serving as co-pilot or pilot, he rotated back for other duty in the USA after being stationed at the 390th base Framlingham for 7 months and, according to the U.S. Air Force, went on to serve for a total of 32 years and 8 days. Even in the years after the war, he would never meet up with his pilot and friend, Clarence, or learn what became of him after his liberation from the German POW camp. Clarence returned to his small farm near Patton, Pennsylvania and worked as a businessman. He passed away in 1984 at the young age of 69. He had served proudly in the 390th at Framlingham. As his grandson described he was a “man from small coal-mining town, joins the Army to serve his country, deploys, fights, gets imprisoned, returns home and raises a family on a quaint and quiet farm...drove a tractor, fixed things, worked with his hands, exuded practicality, read voraciously, passionate about shooting skeet and fly-fishing.”



For the grandson, meeting Richard “was a live portal into a man I only knew for 12 years, and that was almost forty years ago. As I don’t live near my own father (I’ve effectively been in the Army for 51 years!), this trip was also a wonderful opportunity for us both to share a special occasion and meaningful connection that had us both pretty excited. Selfishly, we wanted him to tell us about a man we loved and admired, and we wanted him to affirm what we thought we knew, but it was so much more.”

Like so many whose fathers served during WWII, we learned only tidbits about their service during the rare times they would speak about it. This was true for Clair and Clair A. as the family patriarch rarely spoke with them about his U.S. Army Air Force service and time as a POW in Germany. Visiting with Richard was one way to close that information gap. Both men came prepared, including a camera and tripod to record one of their conversations and a list of questions to ask Richard during their hours in the museum.

As Clair describes: “The key dates that most interested us were from the time of crew formation and training in Ephrata and Walla Walla, WA through deployment to England; and the infamous date of 16 December, when Royal Flush was shot down. Richard’s wartime flying/bombing experiences beyond that event were also fascinating as he was among the very few who survived to meet their mission number (28) and go home.”

What were their impressions of Richard? As Clair A. writes: “Bushong was truly impressive – graceful, cheery, witty, and a true gentleman. And the staff of the 390th Museum was equally accommodating and even excited for this meeting. This was to be a special day, for sure! Richard Bushong is, indeed, like a long lost relative.”

The gathering at the museum lasted through lunch. It included time examining the detailed scale

model of the 390th Air Base, the Prisoners of War exhibit, and the flight crew photo gallery. Clarence Gill’s name appears in both the POW and flight crews gallery exhibits. Over an hour was spent at the balcony overlooking the museum’s B-17 and videotaping their conversation.

One of the last activities enjoyed by the generals Gill was a tour inside the B-17 to see the family patriarch’s former workspace and travel back to 1943. As Clair recalls, “Climbing into the B-17G was a real treat for me. I was awed by how compact it was and how little was added for creature comforts—it is/was a basic, mass-produced military combat vehicle. It was considerably difficult to move around the cabin and into the cockpit (much less the navigator’s cupola), so difficult to imagine a 10-man crew occupying it for an extended bombing run over hostile territory.”

Later, the two men joined backup with Richard and his girlfriend Nancy at his home in Green Valley for dinner and more conversation.

What did they learn about their father/grandfather? For Clair, one take away was: “my dad taught him to fly the B-17 as he had not gone through the rigorous flight program that he had. Richard related one memorable experience where Dad turned over the controls and he asked if he could put the aircraft into a “stall.” Well, the plane stalled and headed to the ground out of control of the pilots. Finally, with a lot of anxiety and sweat, they managed to right the plane before it crashed. Later, they read the flight manual that forbade stall maneuvers!”

Clair A. continued: “We shared a wonderful day with a man who was everything we wanted, needed, and affirmed. To think that he and my grandfather passed the controls of a B-17 back and forth seems to be unreal. They shared a connection that only men/warriors of that generation know, and somehow, we got a glimpse into 1943 on the 21st of July, 2023.”

Possibilities

The volunteers, staff, and Board of the 390th Memorial Museum work together to make otherwise impossible connections possible. As seen in this story, our museum impacts lives for the better, sometimes in ways difficult to imagine or predict. As Clarence's grandson listed, there were a dozen unlikely chances that would have prevented this first meeting between two 390th descendants and a veteran who not only knew the family patriarch, but was a close friend during the war. All three learned a great deal from one another during their visit. Because the museum uniquely focuses on the human stories of all those who served in the 390th, we continue to introduce descendants to family members they never met and show all other visitors the importance of the sacrifice and bravery of all those who served.

About Our Special Guests

These two visiting 390th descendants have enjoyed highly successful military careers. At the time of his shootdown, Clarence's second son Clair was only six months old. He would later go onto West Point and serve in the Army Corps of Engineers for 34 years and retire as a Major General.

Clarence's first grandson and namesake Clair A. always had an interest in aviation and would also follow his father into West Point. He initially served in the Army's Aviation Branch and went onto duty with the 101st Airborne. He is now detailed with the Joint Chiefs of Staff in the Pentagon and was recently promoted to Major General.

Both men graciously, and patiently, provided extended answers by email to many questions to aid in the preparation of this article.



Clair Gill, Jr., Richard Bushong and Clair Gill Sr. overlooking the museum's B-17 "I'll Be Around"
Photo by Bill Buckingham.



390TH

MEMORIAL MUSEUM

The 390th Memorial Museum is located
on the grounds of the Pima Air &
Space Museum, Tucson, AZ

The Museum is open daily
during the Summer
10:00 a.m. - 2:30 p.m.

Closed Thanksgiving and Christmas



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Join the Torch Bearer Monthly Giving Club and assure your support all year long. With as little as \$10 per month, you can make a big difference in helping us preserve the legacy of the 390th Bomb Group for many years to come!

PLANNED GIVING

As you make long term plans for the wellbeing of your family, we ask that you also consider including the 390th Memorial Museum Foundation in your estate planning.

BE AN AMBASSADOR

One of the most important ways to support the museum is by talking about us on social media, at family dinners, or even in line at the deli. Our very best ambassador is **YOU!**

Your Support is Appreciated!