

Barbara Spork

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Written by Rod Hupp

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95TH BOMB GROUP (H)

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Barbara Spork

JM: My name is Janie McKnight. I'm with the 95th Bomb Group Legacy Committee. And today we are here with Barbara Spork of Burbank, California. Barbara, for the record, could you say your name, today's date, and where we are.

BM: My name is Barabara Spork. Today is September 11th, 2004, and we are at the Hilton Hotel in McLean, Virginia with the 95th Bomb Group Reunion.

JM: And Barbara, can you tell us what your connection to the 95th is?

BM: Yes, I'd be glad to. The connection that I have with the 95th is that my husband, Staff Sergeant William D. Starns, was a crew member on a B-17 during the latter months of 1943 and early 1944, airbase Horham, England with the 8th Air Force. My husband went on his eighth mission on February 6th, 1944. It happened to be the last mission of the whole crew. The pilot's name was Leo G. Hanby. The co-pilot's name was Horace Pei. The bombardier was Richard Day, and the – I'm sorry, I've made a mistake. The bombardier was Lieutenant Dominic Dinero, and navigator was Lieutenant Richard Day. I will also give you the names of some of the other crew members. Francis Blandburg was the radio operator who manned one of the guns during combat. Claude Godet was the top turret gunner, and my husband, William D. Starns, was the electrician and also manned the tail guns. This was their eighth mission, and their target was Villa Coublay, France, which a Nazi airfield and a repair depot. It evidently was a very important target. So the whole 336th Bomb Squadron was involved in this bombing raid. According to our local newspapers, which was the Los Angeles Times, it was written up the next day that that particular mission was very successful and that they absolutely demolished the Nazi airfields and the repair depot, which I was very happy to hear that at least they had mission accomplished – very successful. On the way back to their base, in Horham, England, of course they flew in formation to the best of their ability. Everything went along pretty well until somewhere on the way home, my husband's plane started to falter and fell out of formation. There was a nearby plane, and their crew, who were able to observe what actually happened to the plane. And according to the following debriefing of that morning of their return, it was stated that two or three of the engines were on fire. And that subsequently, there was a large explosion. The right wing fell off. The tail section was completely severed from the fuselage. There were two men who miraculously were able to escape this. They were the two waist gunners. One of them was Donald Rebolay. The other one was a fairly recent replacement. His last name was Lesley. I believe his first initial was G. Those two men were able to get out of the plane and parachute down. The remaining eight had to stay with the plane until it crashed. Of course it was disintegrating on the way down. It was later discovered that the co-pilot's brother, whose name was Homer Pei, was stationed in an area of France somewhere nearby when the plane crashed. This was at the end of the war, which ended in May of '45. This brother who was right there in the area in June of '45. It was his very great desire to find out as much as he could about the details of what happened to the crew in the plane that his brother was the co-pilot. Actually what happened, he was able to discover that where this plane went down – and as far as we know it was called Arbon, the town or the village – and it wasn't a very small village. Homer was able to talk to the chaplain there, which I believe would be an American military chaplain. Because, the war being over, they were trying to find as many men who had been buried in non-military cemeteries during the previous months before the war was actually over. And so he was able to talk to a chaplain. He also talked to the pastor of the church where the parish churchyard was. And I believe the mayor of the town or the village. So he was able to get pretty much information regarding what happened. What he discovered was that the plane, having the explosion as well as actually crashing, the debris and the pieces of the plane were strewn over a distance of over a mile – a mile and a half, at least. And the villagers of this little town there knew what happened. They had observed it. And so they decided that it was their duty to gather up the bodies of the men that did go down with the plane. And they carried them to the little church cemetery there. And they were able to identify the men, their name, because of the dog tags that were still around their necks. There was one man who did not have his dog tag. However, when they did bury the men in their church cemetery, they erected little wooden crosses over each grave. And they hung the dog tags over the top of the cross so that each man's body was identified by his dog tag. The one man who did not his dog tag, and they couldn't locate it – they put a little wooden heart on the cross. So that was all that established the identity of the unknown eighth man. However, later, when the military came in there, they immediately were able to know who the eighth man was because they knew the names of the crew. So the American military naturally did want to have their men buried in American cemeteries. So the arrangements were made through the church cemetery and the pastor of the church. And the nearest American military cemetery, which was

newly established at that time, was in Solais, France, and that's spelled S-o-l-a-i-s. As far as I know, it's fairly near the outskirts of Paris. So the men were all reburied there. And they had new white crosses on their graves, with each man's name printed on there – black letters on white. And so the brother of the co-pilot who made it his mission to find out what happened to his brother and the crew, took pictures, snapshots of the cemetery – the local cemetery where the men were originally buried. The later, he also went to the Solais cemetery and took pictures of each individual cross and sent the photo or the snapshot to each of the men's families, which was a very gracious gesture, and I think was greatly appreciated by the families. There was one other incident that was involved when the men were first buried in the first cemetery. And that was the villagers were very grateful to the Americans and considered them as their liberators. And to show their tribute to these men, they put flowers on the graves of the men when they were in the original French cemetery. And when the Germans discovered that they were having flowers brought to the graves of Americans, that angered them. And so they stationed German guards at the entrance of the cemetery to prevent flowers from being put on those graves. And the villagers were so determined to show their tribute to the Americans, that they climbed over the walls at night and put flowers on the graves. And that is what Homer Pei was able to find out from the pastor and the chaplain and so forth. So that is how I know this, is through the brother. And the details of what he found out by the pastor and the chaplain. And of course as far as what happened on the way back, that was due to one of the crew on the return to Horham who observed what happened to the plane. That's how I have that knowledge and how I have the knowledge of what happened to the men after the plane crashed. And actually, I did make arrangements through the War Department to have my husband's body brought back to the United States as soon as it was possible to do so. So in 1948, my husband William Starns' body was brought back to his hometown, which is Glendale, California, and we had a memorial service. And he is now buried there. And his father, who attended the memorial service for his son, is buried – 10 years later he passed on – he's buried beside his son. That's all that I know that I can tell you about my husband.

JM: Thank you so much. How did you receive the news that your husband had been killed?

BS: I received the news through the traditional War Department telegram stating that my husband was missing in action as of February 6th 1944, and the sympathy, etc. of the _____ General. And then about five weeks later I got the second telegram which read pretty much the same, except that it said that we have found through the International Red Cross that your husband, who was previously reported missing in action has now been found to have been killed in action. So that's how I got that part of it. And the rest of it was through, like I say, the plane's crew who observed what happened on the way home, and the brother's pursuit of the information when he was over there in France.

JM: Have you had any contact with families of the other crew members at all?

BS: Well, yes, we did meet. The pilot's mother, who I believe was from Texas, came out sometime during late 1944, maybe early '45. And she came to visit her daughter, which was the pilot's sister. And so we made arrangements to meet. And she was a very charming lady. And then my husband's father, of course. The two parents were there to see each other. I met the mother. That's really all of anyone that I personally was in contact with. But I did correspond with the co-pilot's family, the Pei family, who lived in Ada, Oklahoma. And we wrote letters back to one another several different times. I also corresponded with Francis Blandburg who was the radio operator – I wrote letters or we exchanged letters with his mother. And also with Claude Godet, the man whose dog tag was missing. And he was from New Orleans, Louisiana. And I wrote letters and we exchanged with his mother. And that's about all. I did try to contact Don Ribolay, who was one of the waist gunners who escaped, and of course because of that he became a prisoner of war for the remainder of the war, from the date of the crash in February '44 up until the end of the war. And the other man, who I really didn't know at all, Leslie, he was a prisoner of war too, but they were not in the same prisoner of war camp. I did want to talk to Don because I knew him slightly, and I wanted to get his version of what happened. I made it a point to go back to Ohio where he came. I talked to his sister first. And I was hoping that I would get a first hand story of what did happen. But after I got back – I went to Chicago first to be with some relatives before I went to Ohio – his sister told me that he couldn't talk to me. That it was beyond his emotional capacity to be able to relate what happened. So I was disappointed on that, and a little hurt. But later on I realized that those young men, some of them were so very young that it was such a traumatic experience that it was understandable how he couldn't do it. So that was the only other time. In the meantime, since I have belonged to the 95th Group, which fortunately my son was able to locate on the Internet and find out that there was such an organization and delve into it a little further. And so we decided that it would be a very nice thing to join and be members of the 95th. When I got one of the newsletters, it had a roster of some of the men that had been – well, some of them are still in it, of course – some of them were in it and passed away a few years back. And that's where I found Don Ribolay's name and address. So I thought he might still be living. I also found the navigator's name, Richard Day, in the roster. So I've tried to contact both of the names, and I found that both of the men were no longer living, but their wives were still with the 95th. And so I've corresponded with both of them, Don Ribolay's wife, and also Richard Day's wife. And I've talked to them on the telephone. I thought perhaps they were coming to this reunion, but I haven't been able to locate them. I've tried, but I don't think they've made it. But that's the only contact I've had with any of the crew members or relatives.

JM: Did you ever travel to Europe to visit the village?

BS: Well, I did go to Europe in 1980, but our tour did not include France. The second time I went was in 1990, and it did

include Paris. And I tried to find out where the village was, but I just wasn't certain of it, the name of it. I thought it was Arbon, but we weren't anywhere near Arbon. I would have loved to have seen where the village was that the people were so gracious to do what they did. But I just don't know exactly the name of it, or its whereabouts. And of course because it's so many, many years later, it might not be called the same thing. And of course the people, most of them, would either have passed on, or if they were not, they might have been such a young age they might not remember. So that was kind of a dead end, which was kind of too bad, really.

JM: How long have you been coming to these reunions?

BS: Well, this is the second reunion I've come to. Before that, we didn't even know that the 95th Bomb Group existed. So I think it's been about two years that we've belonged to it. So we've gotten in on two. The last one was Reno. We went to that one, which was my first one. And it was very good and very enjoyable talking to some of the men. And the second one also. And I met a man by the name of Elmer McGinty who was a crew member.

JM: Lucky?

BS: Lucky, that's right. And he went on the same mission that my husband did. He was very nice about giving me some of his debriefing papers. He was very good at keeping everything that had to do with his time over there. And so he had this mission all done on his little debriefing thing, February 6th, 1944. And he stated in there that one plane was lost and it exploded and the wing went off. So I really think that Lucky was the one who gave the information back at the base when they returned on the debriefing. I think he was responsible for that.

JM: You think he was the witness?

BS: Yes, I do – he and his crew members, wherever they were situated in the plane. But it was in his notes, so I really feel that he was the one that was responsible. And incidentally, he's a very nice man, and I've enjoyed talking to him about the experiences over there, and to know that he went on so many of the same missions that my husband did. I guess we talked to some other men also that were familiar with that particular year, or those many months that my husband was over there. And these reunions have been wonderful as far as I'm concerned. I've talked to certain men and heard from their experiences. It kind of made me know a little bit more what really happened when my husband was over there.

JM: How old were you when he was over there?

BS: Well, I was not quite 22, no I guess I was 22 when he was over there. He had his birthday when he was over there. In went over there in November of '43, and in December he turned 28. Actually he was the papa of most of them, you know. So many of them were only 20, 21, 22. He was about five years older than a lot of them.

JM: What position was he in the airplane? What was his job?

BS: Well, he was actually an electrician, and the electrical systems. I believe they call it an engineer. But he did have a choice, according to some of the other crew members, he did have a choice of what position he preferred, as far as the guns. And he preferred the tail, which to me would seem the least desirable part of the plane to be in, but there must have been something about it that he liked because he did have a choice. So he was the tail gunner.

JM: Well, any other comments before we...

BS: There isn't anything that I can relate in regard to my husband's experience over there, except that he was there about three months and had his eight missions. And as I understand, they're planning to have kind of a reunion tour in May of 2005. And Charlie Gallagher's wife, Marilyn, is trying to get everybody signed up that would be interested in going. And so I had my name put on the list. And my son also wants to go if it's at all possible. So I'm looking forward to that, because I would very much like to see the surroundings and the actual situation of where my husband spent his last few months before he got killed. But one thing I do want to say is that the 95th Bomb Group organization is very wonderful and I'm very glad to be in it.

JM: And we're very glad you're here. Thank you so much for sharing your story. And thank you for your contributions during. I know it was hard to be left at home, but it's very much appreciated by this generation.

BS: Well, it's what we really would hope for, so we're happy about that.