

# POP'S STORY

I graduated in Spring, 1939 from Breckenridge High School. I was next to last in the graduating class. The Breckenridge football team was known as the Cowboys and I played for three years. At that time, farmers' sons were expected to miss the first part of the school year for harvest and the last part of the school year for planting, so I missed lots of school time for football and from work. One of the local bankers provided a hired hand to help my father when I was playing football.

I then went to the State School of Science in Wahpeton, North Dakota but ran out of money in the second semester. I wanted to study aviation mechanics to become an aeronautical engineer. I dropped out and began working at odd jobs like driving a tractor all day for \$1.00 per day. Plenty of time to think on that tractor. I enlisted in the US Army Air Corps in very early 1940, January or February. I received my notice to report in June 1940. It was delivered by Uncle Ralph Berg who drove up to my job (I was cutting potatoes up for seed) in his 1928 Model A Ford holding the letter out of the window. That was what I had been waiting for and I dropped my work and left on the spot.

I was to report to Missouri but at that time, the Jefferson Barracks near St. Louis was quarantined and so we went directly to Chanute Army Airfield near Champaign/Urbana, Illinois. We underwent our initial training of two weeks in tents. It was a hard basic training. I was a private making \$17 per month. I began to learn airplane mechanics and, on the weekends, would work at a local airfield in exchange for flying their airplanes. To get to the airfield, it was only necessary to stand outside the gate at Chanute and someone would pick you up and take you where you wanted to go. You weren't in uniform but you had that "military look". One weekend I was picked up by a couple of girls who were disappointed that I only wanted to go and work on airplanes.

In December 1940, I was transferred to Brooks Army Airfield in San Antonio, Texas. At Brooks, I became part owner of a very fancy 1932 Auburn. I used the car to ferry people around to pay for the car. While at Brooks, I removed a broken bolt from an engine, much to the delight of an older tech sergeant and was promoted to sergeant. At that time my pay was \$72 per month as a 2<sup>nd</sup> class airplane mechanic. In March 1941, I was sent back to Chanute to study fuels, oils and carburetors. We learned about the Pogue Carb. (It was a remarkable invention, said to allow up to 200 miles per gallon – it was also a fraud).



In April 1941, I reported to Ellington Army Airfield, at that time being re-built south of Houston, Texas. I was to be a crew chief over two airplanes. I would stay at Ellington until January 1942. A friend I had met in the service (consecutive serial numbers) was Bob Briggs. He had many lady friends. I had purchased a green 1937 Lincoln Zephyr four door (Jane called it the “Green Hornet”) in Evanston, Illinois. He had the girls and I had the transportation. To keep from having to pay me as a taxi, he got his girlfriend,



Jo Thomas (Kosar) to get me a blind date. The first date didn’t work out but the second date was with a beautiful young lady, Jane Yarrington of the Houston Heights. (The rest is history.) Our first date was a trip to the San Jacinto Monument. When we first met, Ellington had no airplanes so there was not much work to do. I saw Jane at that time almost every day. At Ellington, I met Nick Martin Nicholson, Jane’s cousin who was later killed in the war.

On December 7, 1941 I was called to a meeting and informed that the Japanese had attacked Pearl Harbor and we were at war. On January 12, 1942, I was reassigned to Midland, Texas for 3 months. I was the base tech inspector. Shortly thereafter I was given the opportunity to become a pilot in the Flying Sergeants Program and I reported for pre-flight training in Santa Ana, California. I was on my way to becoming an officer and a gentleman, but more importantly, a pilot.



I was then transferred to Hemet, CA and began training in a Ryan PT22 low wing monoplane – cruise 105 mph, stall at 105 mph and land at 105 mph. It had 160 horsepower.



In August 1942, I was reassigned to Bakersfield, CA and flew the Vultee BT13 – 450 hp with radio and adjustable prop. Quite a hot rod after the Ryan.

In October 1942, I was sent to Roswell Army Airfield in New Mexico. I flew the Curtiss Wright AT9 and the Cessna AT17.





During the period away from Houston, I talked to Jane as often as possible on the phone but hectic schedules and great distances kept us apart. I was moving during this period about every two months. In September 1941 I sold the Lincoln and bought a 1938 Buick Century four door sedan with side mounts. We would own this car until 1954.

On November 23, 1942, at St. Peters Church in Roswell, New Mexico, I married Jane Yarrington while on leave. Jane came by train with her father Frank Yarrington from Houston. My best man was Cliff Pazdernik of Breckenridge. He had ridden the train to New Mexico – very difficult for a civilian during war time. The maid of honor was Mary Williams. She had been provided as a witness by the priest. We met her at the front door of the church. We had five days to report to Salt Lake City, Utah and drove there in the 1938 Buick with Cliff. In the process we went by the Grand Canyon and glanced into it. We were only in Salt Lake City for one week. We used the high-altitude chamber and got our “overseas” shots.



Jane and I then reported to Boise, Idaho to start training in the Boeing B17E Flying Fortress. We were living off base in the basement of a private home. From our apartment, you could see a spectacular mountain top in the distance. December 14, 1942 at Gowen Army Airfield, we began in Boise, Idaho.

We were flying from Wendover Field near Salt Lake City, Utah in questionable weather. On our way back to base, the area got “socked in” with fog. This was dangerous due to the mountains in the area. A number of planes had crashed into the mountains in similar circumstances. We were flying, trying for a visual on the landing strip and beginning to run out of gas. You could hear the tension in the crew’s transmissions to each other. I began to pray for help. Then I looked down through a hole in the overcast sky and saw the landing field. We were safe.

One day we were practicing our formation flying over the states and were “intercepted” by a group of Air Corps fighters practicing their “intercept” tactics. It was the first time I realized what the whole thing was about and what we were heading toward.

On our way across the states, we lost an engine. We stopped at Griffiss Air Force base near Binghamton, NY. The base mechanics were surprised when I put my coveralls on to help them replace the motor. An officer and a mechanic!

During training, I asked Henderson (our pilot) if we could deploy the life raft to get an idea as to how it looked. With a switch, it was popped from the plane and inflated. A lot of work to deflate and replace in the plane. He humored me and we did it. One other time he humored me. There were established protocols for flying the plane with one or two engines disabled. I asked for the opportunity to practice flying the plane with only one operating engine. He argued that if we needed it, the Air Force would have required us to practice it. He eventually relented and allowed me to do it. (Could that have made the difference June 26, 1943 over France?)

On our way over the ocean to England, I wouldn’t sleep. I was retracing the steps of my hero, Charles A. Lindberg. Our navigator was supposed to take his own headings to maintain a separate path for our plane. We would then be able to navigate through low ceiling clouds if the situation arose. Of course, it was easier just to follow the planes ahead of you and let them do the work. When we got to England, Henderson (pilot) and I found out that he had not taken any headings. We could have been lost if weather would have turned bad. Additionally, the

Germans sent out false signals to crossing planes. Many that depended solely on their Loran ended up landing at German airfields. We went to Bud Peasley, outfit CO and asked that our navigator be replaced.

On arrival in England, the 484<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group H(eavy) was stationed at Grafton-Underwood, a village of less than 100 people. We had a British officer assigned to us to help. (They had been at war since 1939 and were more experienced.) He was giving take-off and landing instructions to our planes from the control tower. He did not understand our formations and urgently called for a certain plane to “pull up, pull up”. The pilot responded as ordered. His plane collided with another resulting in a crash that killed 10 Americans uselessly due to his error. Our commanding officer Bud Peasley had to escort the English officer off the base with his 45-pistol drawn. Some members of our squadron were after him with their weapons. I never cared for the English, their country or their products after that incident.

In our formation flying training, we formed up into a complete squadron and flew out over the “Wash” on the coast of England. We saw actual German planes for the first time. They were practicing also and did not engage us.

I had always been kidded because I took things more seriously than most. My marriage, my religion and my commitment to doing my best while flying. As we got ready to board the plane for our first combat mission, one of the crew said: “Red, could you lead us in a prayer?” Things were about to get very serious. On our first mission we lost one crewman. The plane was so badly shot up, we barely made it back to base. Lykes Henderson did a great job of landing it. It did not fly again for several years and was used for spare parts. When it did get up in the air again, it was called the “Salvage Queen”.

Our second mission took place on June 26, 1943. We were attacked as we crossed the French Coast at Dieppe and suffered several major hits from ground flak and cannon fire from enemy planes. Engines #1 and #2 were disabled and props feathered. Engine #3 was shot out of the air

frame. This caused the fuel lines to rupture and generated a fire. Lykes was badly hit (I thought he was dying) and I took the controls. I dived the plane, part of the protocol for putting out a fire. Because it was a gasoline fire, this didn't help. It was obvious that we weren't going to make it back to England and were losing altitude. The plane was hard to fly on only one engine. Plus the hole in the right wing from the missing engine caused an aerodynamic drag that I could hardly control. I rang the "bail-out" bell and the six crewmen that could do it jumped out of the plane. We found out later that one had died in the parachute drop. Henderson was unconscious and the cockpit was covered in blood. Windows were shot out. The bombardier had been knocked out in one of the attacks. At that point in the war, a plane could be "surrendered" in the air by dropping the landing gear. When #3 left the wing, the landing gear dropped down. A FockeWuffe 190 came up on our wing in an attempt to guide us to a nearby airfield. We certainly couldn't resist. Attacks against us were halted. Andy, the bombardier, woke up about this time, saw the German on our wing and didn't understand the situation. He fired a burst from his machine guns into the German and knocked him out of the sky. Then it seemed like every plane concentrated its fire on us. I looked for smooth field to put the plane down. I saw a field with hay stacks in it. It must be a cultivated field and relatively smooth. I landed the plane with wings level and nose up. The plane slid across the field and stopped near a concrete fence. I pushed Henderson out of a window and then followed him. I suffered a separated shoulder crawling out of the window and falling head first to the ground. Over 60 years later, a second injury to my leg required serious surgery. The calf of my leg was damaged by the window frame as I crawled out. The hay stacks in the field turned out to be camouflaged German Flak guns. A German officer came up to me and said: "For you, the war is over." Just like in the movies. He then offered me a Chesterfield cigarette! He took my arm and put his boot in my arm pit. He gave it a jerk to snap the shoulder back in place. Never had a moments problem with that injury. I did suffer minor cuts from flying glass. I was taken to La Bourget field in Paris for interrogation. A friend said "Lindberg landed at La Bourget in glory. Paul landed at La Bourget in jail."

My son once asked me why I didn't jump out with the rest of the crew. Two people weren't answering the intercom and were probably dead. I thought the third, Lykes Henderson was dying. I responded that staying with the plane and landing it was "the right thing to do".

Editor's Note: Under normal circumstances, his actions would have been rewarded with a Distinguished Flying Cross. He wouldn't let me pursue it.

From Paris, I was imprisoned in Sagan, Germany (now Zagan, Poland) at Stalag Luft III. The "Great Escape" originated from this prison. Because the order of escapees in the tunnel was determined by seniority, (and I was a relatively new arrival) I did not have a chance to use the tunnel before it was discovered. Almost all escapees were recaptured and 50 of them murdered. I'm not sure that I could have forced myself into that small tunnel over 30 feet underground! While in camp, I grew tomatoes and what vegetable seeds were available to us. The guards were amazed that an American officer knew how to do these things.

As the Russian Army approached Stalag Luft III, the Germans forced us to march toward Mooseburg, Germany. It was cold. We had little food, no transportation and no protection from the extreme weather. I was sick but plodded along the road. One of the nights I was on the road, I stayed in the house of a German farm family. They shared what little they had. They were amazed that a farm boy could become an army officer and a pilot.

I kept myself going by promising that someday Jane, Paul Jr. and I would come back and drive along these same roads in comfort. When Patton liberated the camp on April 29, 1945, He visited every building containing American POWs. I was too sick to get out of my bunk. From there, I was taken to Paris to a military hospital. I was in a giant ward with many others. I remember hearing the bells of Notre Dame Cathedral. I bought Jane a bottle of Chanel #5 while I was there.

When I reached the States, I traveled by train to San Antonio for treatment for pneumonia. Aunt Maude got Jane a hotel room when I became ambulatory. I can't describe the feelings



when we saw each other for the first time in years. Our love was stronger than ever. Jane returned on a later trip with Paul Jr.

One of my jobs after the war was training Chinese aviators. They were not natural pilots. Several times, I thought that I was about to die. Jane would have a group of them to our place for dinner. I asked if they were Nationalist or Communist. They replied that they were “intellectuals”. That title would not serve them very well in the eventual communist state.

Immediately after the war, Jane, Paul Jr and I went to visit a family in central Texas named Dinkins. I had known their son in the service and unfortunately, he had been killed in the war. I wanted to offer comfort with information about their son, but Mrs. Dinkins said “But you came back.” We left immediately.

Decades after the war, Jan and I were visiting New Orleans. Our tail gunner, Lally, had been from that city. He was one of the six that jumped out of the plane when I rang the “bail out” bell. As a lark, I opened up the phone book and there was his name and phone number. He would not talk to me and refused to believe that I was still alive. Jane got on the phone and tried to convince him but to no avail. He kept saying “I saw that plane on fire and going down. No one could have lived through that. Paul Shinsky is dead!” We could not convince him otherwise.

Editor’s Note Again: Around 2000, I (Paul Jr) was contacted by Caroline (Spunky) Henderson. She was trying to locate Paul Shinsky. Her father was Lykes Henderson and he had died before coming to terms with his war experiences and could talk about them. She wanted to talk to dad to find out what had happened. She told me that her dad only knew the co-pilot as Paul Shinsky and that as he lapsed in and out of consciousness during the battle, Paul was flying the plane and praying out loud. I told her that that was certainly my dad. She had used the internet to try and find him.