

A Remembrance Of Joe Sarto

**Colonel Joseph M Sarto, USAF (Ret.)
Group Pathfinder – Radar Navigator / Bombardier
545th Bombardment Squadron
384th Bombardment Group (Heavy)
8th Air Force, WWII**

**On The Occasion Of His Memorial Service
3 October 2007**

**Including A Historical Narrative
Written By Joe Sarto**



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Dear Family and Friends of Joe:

Dad would have appreciated that you are here today to bid him farewell and reflect on his life. Anyone who knew Dad recognized that he was one of the earth's truly honorable, gentle, and noble people; a hero who fought for his country and who offered his life to help others in need. He was a devoted husband and a loving father. As Myron Smith told me at Dad's retirement, Mike and I won the parental lottery -- we couldn't have been born into a more supportive and caring family. May we all take comfort in believing that he is reunited with Mom, Mike, John, and his brothers, parents and many other friends, in a far better place.

Recently Dad wrote about his experiences in World War II in hopes that one of the military magazines would prepare an article on the critical role that "Pathfinding" played. I have included it because it shares much information about his early years and his valor for our country.

"I recently watched a Discovery Channel feature on B-17s during World War II. The narrator talked about the 10-man crews and the types of sorties that they flew. What was dismaying is that no mention was made of the 11th person on some of the crews, the **Pathfinders**, and the function they performed during the war. Over the years, I have found very little information about **Pathfinders**, especially when compared to the important role they played in the success of the aerial war in the European theater. Perhaps this had to do with the secrecy surrounding **Pathfinding**, its introduction, and strategic usage during the war.

“**Pathfinding**, the use of airborne Radar systems known as H2S (or later H2X) Radar, was introduced in the Second World War, thereby providing an important strategic advantage to the allies. **Pathfinders** were navigator/bombardiers, who were always assigned to the Lead or Deputy aircraft, the 11th man on the regular 10 man B-17 crew. While other crews were generally assigned together, **Pathfinders** were assigned to Radar-equipped aircraft and flew with varied crews. The **Pathfinder**’s job was to lead the formation of B-17s to the target in any kind of weather.

“The accuracy of bombing and the success rates of hitting primary targets increased dramatically with the addition of **Pathfinding**. Prior to the use of Radar, Bombing Groups would follow the Lead Aircraft and drop their bombs where the Lead Aircraft dropped its. Bad weather or cloud-cover significantly impaired the Group’s ability to locate bomb sites using standard NORDEN or Sperry bombsight equipment, which depended upon ground visibility. In inclement weather Groups would often be forced to fly to a secondary target or if that too was overcast to return to base, find other sites, or drop their bombs over the coast of Europe. With the advent of Radar-equipped **Pathfinding**, B-17 crews could locate targets through cloud-cover and enable Bombing Groups to experience a much higher probability of hitting targets.

“I am writing you about this because it is my hope that your magazine will consider an article about **Pathfinders** and their crucial strategic role before the collective memory about their efforts is lost.

“I know something about **Pathfinding** since I performed that function with the 384th Bombardment Group (Heavy) of the 8th Air Force from the Grafton Underwood Airfield (Grafton Underwood, Northamptonshire, England) during 22 May 1944 until 8 May 1945. The 384th Bombardment Group was highly decorated, flying B-17s on 314 combat missions with 9,348 sorties over Europe, dropping some 22,415 tons of bombs, as part of the 8th Air Force's strategic bombing campaign against Germany. Its attacks concentrated primarily on airfields and industries in France, Germany, and other Nazi occupied areas. On 25 April 1945 the 384th dropped the last bombs of the 8th Air Force in World War II.

“Having flown 30 missions as a **Lead Pathfinder**, I would like to tell you my story; so, let me start from the beginning.

“In 1939 I attempted to join the Army Air Corps, but I failed the eye examination. I was most distressed because I had always aspired to be just like my back-yard neighbor who was in the Corps. I would see him when he came home on weekends with his swagger stick and pointed hat. He also had a part of an aircraft in his garage that he worked on -- *the stuff of fantasies for a young lad who wanted to fly!*

“The day after Pearl Harbor was bombed by the Japanese (*my 23rd birthday!*), I was fueled with renewed desire to join the military and traveled to Chicago from my home in Elgin, Illinois, and was almost recruited by the Navy. Once I had time to think it over (*and remembering I don't even like swimming pools*), I decided to check out the Army Air Corps once again. I later discovered that the Navy was prepared to send me to medical school due to my 13 years of experience as an apprentice pharmacist in a local drug store to help my family with expenses.

“In any event, I returned to Chicago during swearing-in day and joined the Army Air Corps as a cadet. I told them again that I really did want, in the very worse way, to become a pilot; but, to my disappointment, they again said, 'No'.

“When I took my entrance physical, I was asked if I had ever had a military physical before. I thought about that question and asked myself, 'Should I tell them the truth?' My concern was that they would automatically fail me because of the prior eye exam. After a moment of deliberation, I said 'Yes' and they really gave me a long test, which I passed! That experience taught me a lesson since a few years later I had the opportunity to see my military records and the failed eye exam and the one I passed were on top of each other in my record book. They must have had it when they asked the question. That experience taught me to always be truthful!

“After passing the physical I was placed on home-leave for a couple of months. Once called in March 1942, I was assigned a seat on a train headed to California for preflight training.

“The day after arriving in California, I was assigned guard duty at a remote and very dark area of the base. After about an hour in pitch-black darkness, I spotted two headlights making their way toward me. I had the rifle and one bullet I had been assigned. As taught, I shouted 'Halt!' but that did not stop the vehicle. So, with the bullet inserted, I cocked the trigger, pointed the rifle at the vehicle and shouted 'Halt!' again. The vehicle, now in sight-range came to a screeching stop. Out piled an 'elderly' uniformed man who started shrieking at me. I yelled 'Corporal of the Guard' several times and was soon swamped with uniformed, armed, military police. They quickly retired me with 'Thanks.' Later, I learned that the 'elderly' guy was a guard coming in for evening duty. I also learned that he was hard of hearing and quit his job that very night!

“After a couple of months, I had completed preflight training and was assigned to bombardier school at Williams Army Air Field in Arizona for another three months, after which I received a commission as a second lieutenant. From there, I was shipped to San Marcos, Texas, to attend DR (Dead-Reckoning) Navigation for two months, followed by a transfer to Midland, Texas, where I was assigned to 5th Flight as Senior Instructor, teaching NORDEN and Sperry bombsight operations. I then returned to my base at San Angelo as an instructor, but I never missed an opportunity to volunteer to be shipped overseas.

“However, instead of being shipped out, I was once more assigned stateside, this time to Boca Raton, Florida, to begin additional training as a Radar Operator (**Pathfinder**). We called it PFF or H2S in those days. I soon discovered what a great instrument Radar was as it allowed you to 'see' through the clouds and overcast skies. The new Radar was placed in a specially equipped and modified B-17 that housed a receiver and antenna in a radome where the ball turret would normally be situated. The Radar set or transmitter was positioned next to the bomb racks to the right rear of the fuselage in a darkened room with no outside visibility. The Radar unit was a big black box that some thought looked like a mouse, so the **Pathfinders** also became known as 'Mickys.'

“The rotating Radar antenna allowed us to look forward and see the ground -- roads, structures, formations and terrain. It was like having a map in front of you. And, the better skilled the Mickey, the more he could make out from the size and intensity of the blips on his screen.

“Anyhow, after completing **Pathfinding** School in Florida, I was sent to Langley AFB in Virginia for two more months of Radar training. On a more personal note, at Langley on April 16, 1944, Dorothy Bowles, an Army nurse whom I had met in Boca Raton, and I married. Less than one month later, *finally*, I picked up a B17, equipped with Radar, a flight crew of 10, and navigated us across the Atlantic to Alconbury, England. The aircraft and I stayed in Alconbury and the aircrew was dispatched to a Bomb Group.

“After about three weeks of more training, I was dispatched to the 384th Bomb Group in Grafton Underwood, England, where I stayed a year to complete 30 combat missions. I was the Lead **Pathfinder**, the person who assigned **Pathfinders** to missions. I flew regularly with my Bomb Group Commander, Colonel Dale O. Smith. In fact, when he and I both had six missions left to finish, he grounded me because he was called elsewhere and he wanted us to complete our final missions together. Well, once he left, I managed to schedule myself into three other missions. When he reappeared, he was quite angry with me. We did, however, complete our last three missions together. *(His anger must have dissipated; because, once we disbanded he went to the Pentagon and me to Alconbury to complete my tour. I then went back to the United States and was summoned to Washington, D.C. I checked into the office where requested in my summons, and who greeted me but Col. Dale Smith with the question: Do you want a job?!)*

“The 30 missions I flew as Pathfinder were two (2) Air Force Leads; one (1) Division Lead; five (5) Wing Leads; twelve (12) Group Leads; two (2) Squadron Leads, and eight (8) regular missions with these destinations:

1. 7-16-44 Munich, Germany
2. 7-18-44 Peenemünde, Germany
3. 7-21-44 Schweinfurt, Germany
4. 7-28-44 Merseburg, Germany
5. 7-29-44 Leipzig, Germany
6. 7-31-44 Munich, Germany
7. 8-04-44 Peenemünde, Germany
8. 8-09-44 Pirmasens, Germany
9. 9-09-44 Ludwigshafen am Rhein, Germany
10. 9-19-44 Hamm, Germany
11. 9-25-44 Frankfurt, Germany
12. 9-27-44 Cologne, Germany
13. 9-30-44 Munster, Germany
14. 10-05-44 Cologne, Germany
15. 10-14-44 Saarbrücken, Germany
16. 10-18-44 Cologne, Germany
17. 10-30-44 Hamm, Germany
18. 11-01-44 Hamm & Gelsenkirchen, Germany
19. 11-08-44 Merseburg, Germany
20. 1-09-44 Cuve de Serbie, France
21. 11-25-44 Misberg, Germany
22. 11-30-44 Meuselwitz, Germany
23. 12-12-44 Merseburg, Germany
24. 12-18-44 Koblenz, Germany
25. 12-31-44 Neuss, Germany
26. 1-01-45 Derben, Germany
27. 1-02-45 Gerolstein, Germany
28. 1-15-45 Ingolstadt, Germany

“These missions, characteristic of the flights of the 384th, were primarily bombardments concentrating on airfields and industries in France, Germany, and other Nazi-occupied areas. I flew missions that included the Air Offensive Europe, Air Offensive Normandy, Air Offensive Northern France, Air Offensive Rhineland, and Air Offensive Ardennes.

“During some of these missions we took a crewmember who would photograph bombings for documentation and instruction. Many of these shots may be found on Websites, documentaries and in books about WWII.

“I have many memories of events that occurred during this time; such things as early morning briefings, taking off in massive formations, flying through ;FLAK so thick you could get out and walk on it', figuring out how to out-maneuver the FLAK, studying Radar blips closely enough to distinguish building materials and the types of structures or formation I was seeing on the screen, and meeting the men onboard.

“I also remember some of us using our FLAK jackets as seat cushions; smoking cigarettes after sorties by removing our oxygen masks, blowing a quick breath of oxygen onto our lighters, firing up our cigarettes and then alternating a breath of oxygen from the mask and a swig from the cigarette. I also remember my flight suit shorting-out and having to strip down to my skivvies to put on a new one in subzero temperature. It was clear that although we held tremendous responsibilities, we were nonetheless *young* men.

“Not one to miss much, I survived being shot down and crash-landing over Brussels after losing three engines in a bombing raid. As good fortune would have it, our entire crew was able to walk to safety to a base just captured by the allies. We were flown back to our base, Grafton Underwood, after about a week and continued flying missions.

“While serving as Lead PFF Navigator, I was able to complete successfully almost every one of my missions. I was cited by Commander, Lt. Col. Theodore R. Milton, for being 'greatly responsible for the setting up of a system that fully utilized and coordinated with highly beneficial results the use of PFF GEE-H and aerial bombing equipment' and 'for saving the Group from receiving excessive damage or losses by evasive and accurate navigation.'

“On July 29, 1944, while flying as Deputy Group Lead to Merseburg, Germany, the Lead PFF's equipment malfunctioned and I was able to take over the Lead, turn the Group around and complete a successful bomb run.

“On another sortie on July 21, 1944, I served as Group Lead PFF Navigator to Ludwigshafen, Germany. I had learned from close observation that it was possible to avoid FLAK by carefully choosing a navigation pathway through a dead zone that existed between the ground fire and exploding missiles. On this trip practically no anti-aircraft fire hit our formation; and, our exact bombing was recorded by a strike photo taken between clouds of the direct strike in the center of the city on industrial developments along the river.

“On October 5, 1944, while flying as Deputy Group Lead to Cologne, Germany, the Radar equipment in the Lead Aircraft malfunctioned. The Lead Navigator was unknowingly taking the Group into the heavily defended Upper Ruhr area. Subsequently to taking the wrong turn, the Lead Aircraft was hit and slid below the formation. Our aircraft assumed the Lead position. Knowing we were off-track, I led the formation through a 180 degree turn away from the Ruhr Valley toward the bomb target. At the very moment we had completed the turn, the Lead Aircraft could be seen slowly gaining attitude through the clouds to again assume the Lead position. Then, to my chagrin, the Lead turned the formation back to its original erroneous path, once more taking the Group into heavy fire in the Ruhr area. Fate intervened: the Lead B-17 was badly damaged by ground fire for a second time and left the formation. I turned the formation around one final time and we completed a perfect bomb run.

“When we completed the Cologne sortie, I was summoned by the Commander who asked me why I had not followed the standing order to make only one pass on bombing raids. I responded that our mission was to bomb the target, which we had done. Nothing more was said and I was dismissed. Later, the Commander cited me for my professional skill, leadership, and aggression, naming this sortie as one that led him to this judgment.

“For my **Pathfinding** services I was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross, Air Medal with 4 Oak Leaf Clusters, the European African Middle Eastern Theater Ribbon with 5 Bronze Battle Stars, among other citations for these 30 missions.

“The 384th flew its last mission on April 25, 1945, and dropped the 8th Air Force’s last bomb of World War II. General Carl Spaatz, Commander of U.S. Army Air Forces in Europe, declared that the Combined Bomber Offensive was over. The men of the 384th were proud -- as our motto purported -- to have “Kept the Show on the Road.”

“It is my hope that through my personal story as a **Pathfinder** you might see that the small group of men, known as **Pathfinders**, was of significant importance to the war effort in Europe. When the **Pathfinders** entered the war over Europe and were assisted by P-51 fighter escorts, many flown by the Tuskegee airmen, our air crews were able to fly deep into German front lines and successfully bomb strategic targets, even when the targets and the routes were cloud-covered or overcast. **Pathfinding** and the accompanying **P-51 cover**, which permitted B-17s to penetrate deep into enemy terrain, dramatically changed the fate of the war.”

Joseph M. Sarto
Colonel USAF, Retired

After World War II, Dad was attached to Strategic Air Command throughout the 50's and 60's. While in SAC and, as a Major, Dad was sent to European countries to talk to heads of State to set up Tie-Ups between continents, using triangulation navigation, for commercial flight as well as military defense and missile systems. He served on the historic flight that tied the North American continent to Europe, meeting with the heads of State of six countries to facilitate the fly over. He also found that Nassau was characterized on maps one mile off course. He had three Pentagon tours, many temporary tours of duty all over the world, while with SAC. He worked with NATO with the Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers in Fontainebleau, France. He was a Vice Commander for SAC at the time of his retirement in 1970.

Dad came to Prattville, after purchasing a home that he and Mom loved, the “Butler House” on Upper Kingston Road. They were excited for the first time to put down roots in the community. And deep roots they were. Dad obtained his real estate license and worked for George Byrd and started college at the age of 54. He then went on to Jones Law School for his law degree and partnered his first year with Joe Marston before he joined Harold and George Howell, where he spent almost 30 years. Harold characterized Dad as a man of complete honor and integrity, who always sought out -- first and foremost -- what was right and fair in each situation. The Howells were dad’s second family.

Dad loved Prattville and made lifelong friends. As a person who always sought out what was positive and good, Dad devoted his life to helping people, often providing financial assistance as well as good, sound advice.

I have always believed we can learn so much from the people of Dad’s generation and that we have a responsibility to honor the freedom and way of life they helped us to have. Dean Koontz spoke of this in his book False Memory:

The daughter of Smilin' Bob Woodhouse--who had been a genuine war hero, as well as a hero of another kind more than once in the years following the war--was determined to live up to the legacy of honor and courage she had inherited. Of course, life as a young wife and a video-game designer in a balmy California coastal town didn't provide her with frequent opportunities for heroics. This was a good thing, not a reason to move to a perpetual cauldron of violence like the Balkans or Rwanda, or the set of the Jerry Springer Show. **But living in peace and plenty, she could honor her father's memory only through the small heroics of daily life: by doing her job well and paying her way in the world, by commitment to her marriage in good times and in bad, by giving all possible support to her friends, by having true compassion for life's walking wounded ... while living with honesty and truthfulness and enough self-respect to avoid becoming one of them. These small heroics& are the fuel and the lubrication that keep the machine of civilization humming&**

This is the work each of us can do to honor the legacy heroic people like Dad have provided for us.

In loving memory of my Father

Joseph Michael Sarto
1918 2007

Jean Sarto Floten