

WE KNEW THE PRICE OF FREEDOM

by Paul Grassey, 446th Bombardment Group

This is the story of seven young men who graduated from Ridgewood High School, New Jersey in 1941-42.

These seven had a role model with an unusual military history, Mr. Bill Dolan, who was at that time a 50 year-old successful businessman and the stepfather of two of the boys.

The seven young men, age 17, played sports together and attended classes together and were great friends.

Don McCullough, twins Harry Van Tassel and Ed Van Tassel, Don Haldane and his cousin Bob Haldane, Walt Hays, and Paul Grassey.

These were the kind of young people that you might find on every corner of every town throughout the United States at that time. They had one goal in mind: to put their personal goals of college, sports, or professional careers aside and decide "what branch of military service we wanted to join so that we could

best serve our country". The United States was at war.

Speaking in London on June 16, 1941, British Prime Minister Sir Winston Churchill made the point, entitled *The Spell of Duty*.

"The destiny of mankind is not decided by material computations. When great causes are on the move in the world, stirring all men's souls, drawing them from their firesides, casting aside comfort, wealth and the pursuit of happiness in response to impulses at once awe-striking and irresistible, we learn that we are spirits, not animals, and that something greater is going on in space and time, which, whether we like it or not, spells duty."

I can remember the day as if it were yesterday. At my class graduation in June 1941, war was raging in Europe and the Japanese were causing havoc in the Pacific. Sitting at our graduation ceremony, we had no idea of what effect those dark clouds of war would have on our lives or on our future, but we were thinking about it.

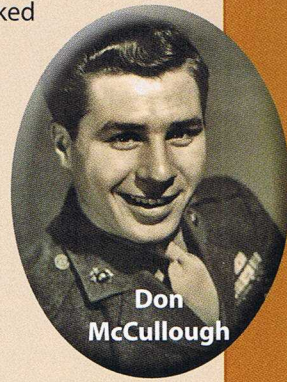
My father's career was in the textile industry and he worked for a time in Havana, Cuba. The family returned to the States so that I could attend Bergen Junior College while also working night shifts at Wright Aeronautical. Harry and Ed Van Tassel were among my closest friends and worked at a local mill while attending night classes with me. Bill Dolan had two sons and was known by the twins as "Pop." I had an older brother who also worked at Wright Aeronautical and who loved to fly. Henry often took me up in a Piper Cub in order to teach me how to fly an airplane. We were at Caldwell, N. J. airport on December 7, 1941 when we learned that our country had been attacked by Japanese forces. Our lives would never be the same.

Henry shortly thereafter became a Navy ensign flight instructor at Memphis Air Station. Our friends were getting into uniforms of different branches

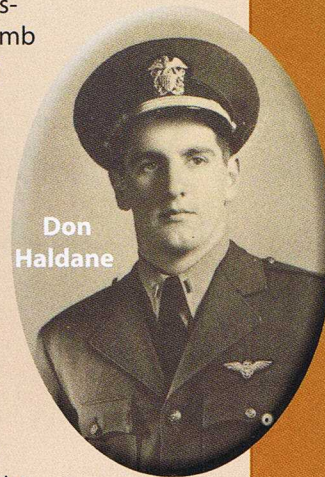
of the service and I liked the Army Air Corps. I longed for the day that I would be able to wear those silver Pilot's Wings.

Don McCullough joined the Marines and was on the aircraft carrier *U.S.S. Hornet* when Jimmy Doolittle's B-25 unit took off on their historic mission to bomb Tokyo. Newspaper headlines screamed "U.S. Bombs Tokyo" following that raid – an inspiration to our whole nation.

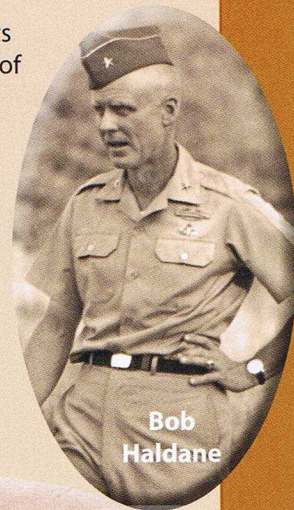
One Sunday afternoon in the spring of 1942, we gathered at the Dolan home to discuss our upcoming enlistments while enjoying some of Mrs. Dolan's delicious cooking. Pop Dolan, a very confident, well-groomed gentleman, walked into the room. Almost in unison we said, "Mr. Dolan, do you think that we ought to enlist?" He replied, "I can't make that decision



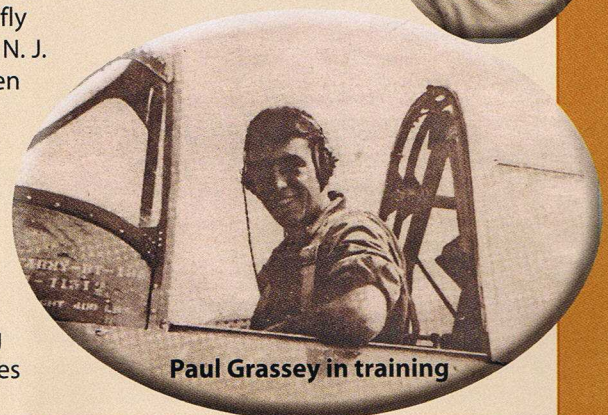
Don McCullough



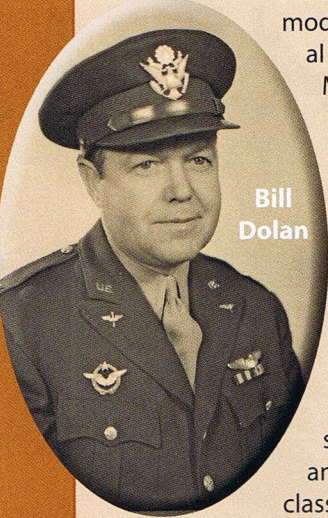
Don Haldane



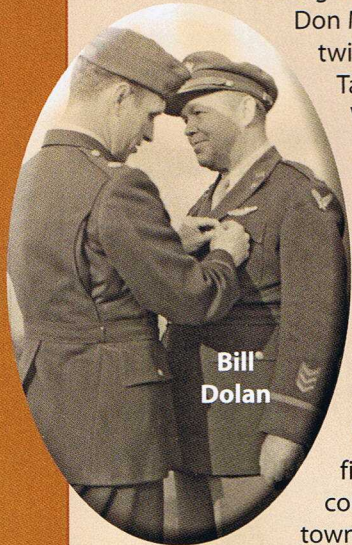
Bob Haldane



Paul Grassey in training



Bill Dolan



Bill Dolan

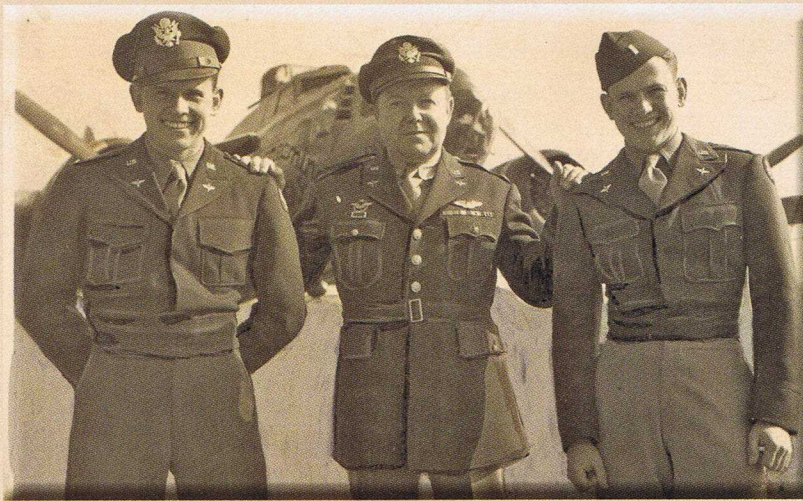


Walt Hays

for you, but I want to show you guys some things." We had known very little of his past, but he returned to the room with pictures of himself from World War I. He had served as a pilot in the Lafayette Escadrille with Eddie Rickenbacker, Carl "Tooy" Spaatz, and other early flyers. Pop Dolan had gone through the intense French training course at Issoudun, undergoing their unusual but effective training methods. We were impressed with his tales.

One week later we all re-convened in the large sunroom for further discussions, when Dolan walked in wearing his Air Corps officer's uniform with Captain's bars on each shoulder and his pilot's Silver Wings. He had re-enlisted during the week and said to us, "I'm leaving for duty on Tuesday – you guys will have to make up your own minds." That motivation was all we needed. Bill Dolan was the first recruit of the 8th Air Force's 384th Bombardment Group. After lengthy training in the States, he soon became the spirit behind the men who made up this Heavy bomber group. In England, Dolan went on to become one of the top Intelligence officers during the war.

Intelligence officers led the Briefing sessions to the airmen preparing to fly the day's mission. They described the target and related the type of enemy airplanes the group would encounter that day along with time, place, and altitude at all points of the operation. They discussed the headings from the initial point and along the bomb run to the target as well as what to do if shot down and landing in enemy territory. These and other details were covered by Intelligence on every mission before taking off. Pop Dolan also took over the Chaplain's duties himself as the 384th did not as yet have a chaplain assigned to them. In addition to



Twins Harry & Ed pictured with Stepfather Bill "Pop" Dolan

publishing the base newspaper "Plane Talk", he flew nine early missions as an Intelligence officer so that he would know first-hand what the flyers faced.

In his later years, Pop Dolan recalled that in World War I there was an element of mutual respect among pilots of both sides. Regarding the Armistice signed on November 11, 1918 ending The Great War Dolan commented, "That marked the end of an era. The French, British, and Americans all loved each other. Even the Germans were conceded a certain tragic grandeur by our American pilots. There was a good bit of camaraderie then. When I was an Intelligence officer in WWII, I always told the pilots, 'If you get shot down and can't evade capture, try to get to Luftwaffe airfields. There is a certain amount of understanding on their part. Above all, avoid the Hitler Youth; the kids are the worst.'" He noted that time had changed the world of aviation that he knew. "Even the people have changed," Dolan said. "Young people today are entirely different."

The story of what happened to the seven young men who followed Colonel Dolan into the service of his country centers around one concept – it was their duty to their country. Don Haldane was both inducted into the Ridgewood, N.J. Sports Hall of Fame and was outstanding in college sports. He earned his Navy Wings of Gold and was commissioned an Ensign. He was killed while on a training mission in July 1944. Walt Hayes flew combat missions as a tailgunner

with the 8th Air Force's 95th Bomb Group, was shot down over Germany and ended the war as a Prisoner of War in a German Stalag. His B-17 crashed in Denmark but not before Walt shot down the German fighter pilot who had ended their flight. After the war Walt and the Luftwaffe pilot Gunther Sinnecker met, as friends, to relive their most memorable wartime mission.

Bob Haldane, Don's cousin, had a distin-

guished 40-year career in the U.S. Army, graduating from West Point and retiring as a Lt. General. During his career he served in Korea and Vietnam, making 97 parachute jumps and landings in the Army's 82nd Airborne and winning 17 Air Medals, 7 DFC's and the Silver Star in helicopter gunships of the Big Red One. He had also served as Chief of Staff in post-war Germany. Bob was honored as the featured banquet speaker at the 25th Anniversary reunion of the 8th Air Force Historical Society. Pop Dolan's stepsons, twins Ed and Harry Van Tassel, both achieved the rank of Captain, serving with the Ninth Air Force Troop Carrier Command and in France after the invasion.

Pop Dolan's two sons, Bill and Walt Dolan, also served in the Air Force, Bill flying the Berlin Airlift postwar.

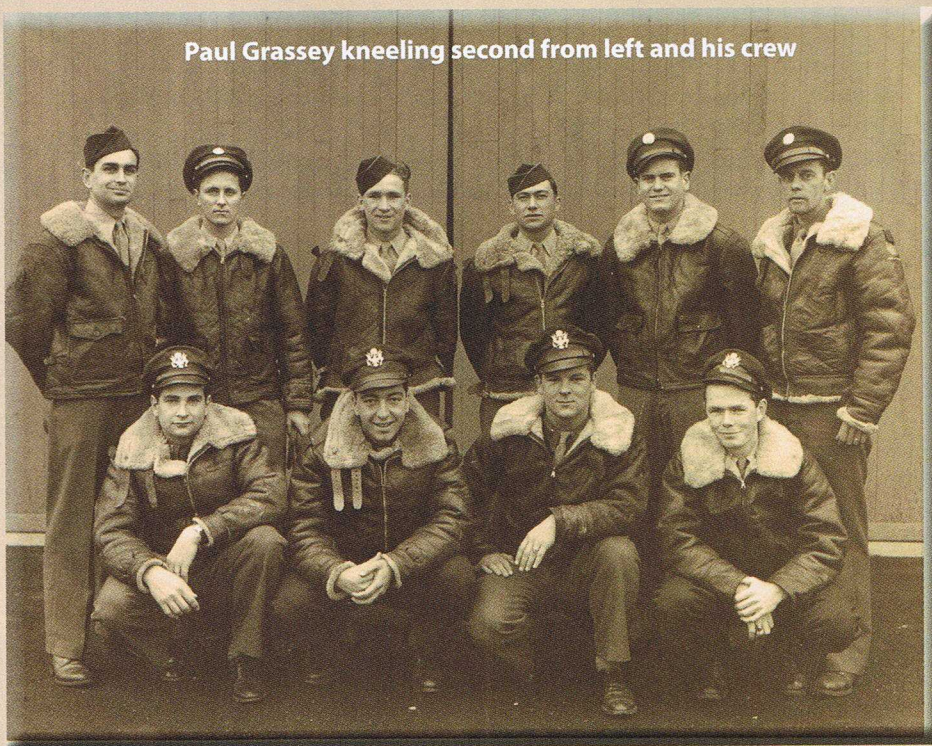
I was fortunate to become a B-24 Heavy bomber pilot after completing Primary, Basic and Advanced training at Air Corps training bases in the southern United States. With several other members of my cadet graduating class, I was assigned to the 446th Bomb Group, 8th Air Force, in Bungay, England. I flew my missions with them during the war. We learned by the technique of on-the-job-training, becoming seasoned veterans as our missions flew by. We developed defensive skills such as always flying in tight formations, but we also felt that luck became a factor when flying into flak. I recall feeling like a "pebble on a beach"

when our huge formations of bombers and fighters headed for Germany. On the bomb runs in particular, we could see all that flak sitting out there and knew that for half an hour going through it the tendency was to think, "Can we leave? Can we get out of here now?" We knew we couldn't. Our training taught us to take commands and follow orders. That is what we had to do and that is what we did.

Flak looks pretty innocent, just puffs of black smoke, but we quickly learned that death and destruction awaited us in those innocent-looking floating clouds. On a typical mission enemy fighters attacked our airplanes before and after we had bombed our assigned targets, but the gunners in the crew felt that at least they had a chance to defend themselves against their attacks. But you didn't have to be over enemy territory to experience danger in a B-24. Flying planes that were loaded to the hilt with bombs, fuel, and ammunition for the twelve .50 caliber machine guns, crews could be lost to accidents on takeoff or in mid-air collisions, since there were often hundreds of bombers attempting to form up in the usually cloud-filled skies over England. Just getting up and into position to go on a mission was some of the most dangerous stuff. There were often 42 of the big bombers in our bomb group taking off every thirty seconds. Prop wash was so deadly it could actually flip a fully-loaded bomber over. It was a pretty big and dangerous job to get all those planes into formation and then get them to the target. And if that wasn't dangerous enough, frostbite played its part. Even though we wore heated flight suits to help encounter the extreme cold - 45 degrees below zero - at high altitudes, I never remember having to turn them on. You were so scared, you'd be perspiring and that kept you plenty warm enough!

It was very tough. You worked hard. You were scared and you had your neck out, but boy - I wouldn't have missed it for the world! My principal reasons for feeling that way were the life-long friendships I developed with my flying buddies and the pride

Paul Grassey kneeling second from left and his crew



which we all shared in our country, like so many of us during that era and in subsequent conflicts that have been fought by American servicemen and women with commitment and bravery.

We put it all on the line because we knew The Price of Freedom!

The six young men who sat in Pop Dolan's living room that day in

1942 were influenced by his example to serve their country and to do their duty. Pop had done that in World War I and had re-enlisted for a combat outfit in early World War II. These men performed admirably as did so many of America's young servicemen during the war. Their lives were changed forever as they became part of the wartime Allied forces of freedom that changed the course of history.



Christmas 1945 with Don McCullough