

TWO PILOTS, TWO DAUGHTERS, ONE BOND

Written by Lowell L. Getz

The time, 1520 hours. The date, 22 March 1943. Eighteen four engine B-17, "Flying Fortress", bombers of the 91st Bomb Group (Heavy) are winging their way out of Germany towards the North Sea and their home base at Bassingbourn, East Anglia, England. They are accompanied by 51 B-17s from three other Bomb Groups, also heading for their bases in East Anglia. Nineteen minutes ago, at 1501 hours, the olive-drab fortresses dropped their pay-loads of five, one thousand pound bombs on the port facilities at Wilhelmshaven and the German pocket battleship, "Admiral Speer." The American bombers were swarmed upon by German fighters on the way into the target and are still engaged by Messerschmidt (ME) 109 and Focke Wulf (FW) 190 fighters. Flak over the target was heavy and accurate. Nine of the 91st Group bombers have sustained major battle damage from flak and fighter fire. All are still airborne and in formation.

Captain Robert K. Morgan, in No. 41-24486, "Memphis Belle", is leading the Low Squadron in the 91st Group formation. On his left wing is No. 42-29659, "Liberty Belle." In the left, first pilot's, seat is Captain Hascall C. McClellan. 1st LT. Glenn Brooks, Jr. sits to his right in the co-pilot's seat. As Operations Officer of the 324th Squadron of the 91st Group, Captain McClellan normally does not fly on bombing missions. Because of a shortage experienced pilots, Captain McClellan is in the air today. This is his eighth mission over the continent. Lt. Brooks is a first pilot assigned to the 92nd Bomb Group, temporarily attached to the 91st Group for combat training. Lt. Brooks has flown four prior missions with his crew before coming to Bassingbourn. This is his first time as they boarded their aircraft this morning. Six of the other eight crewman aboard "Liberty Belle" are also from the 92nd Bomb Group, all members of Lt. Brooks' crew. They have flown two or three prior missions with other pilots of the 91st. The remaining two crewmen, on their fourth mission, are from the 91st Group.

As the bombers float out over the North Sea near Heligoland Island, German Fighter Command experiments with a new tactic to disrupt American bomber formations, aerial bombing. 1st Heinz Knoke, commander of 5th Staffel ("Squadron") of Jagdgeschwader ("Fight Wing") 11, maneuvers his ME 109 fighter 3,000 feet above the 91st Group formation. Slung in an undercarriage on his plane is a 500 pound bomb armed with a 15-second timed fuse. Lt. Knoke slowly edges his fighter forward until he is directly over the front of the enemy formation. He presses the release. The bomb free, hurtles downward and explodes near one of the fortresses.

"Liberty Belle" is in the path of the exploding bomb. A wing crumples. The aircraft begins spiraling downward. In spite of their frantic efforts, the two pilots are unable to regain control of the plummeting plane as it begins breaking apart. All crewman are trapped in the flailing aircraft. The wreckage splashes into the water 30 kilometers west of Heligoland Island. "Liberty Belle" and the ten-man crew disappear forever in the cold dark waters of the North Sea.

Three months earlier, Captain. McClellan's wife, Harriet, back in Pasadena, California, had given birth to a daughter, Clarette. On 22 April 1943, Lt Brooks' wife, Jean, in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, also gave birth to a daughter, Jeanne.

Captain McClellan was an only child. His parents took Harriet and Clarette under their wings to ensure they had the love of a caring family. When Harriet later remarried and had another daughter and a son.

The McClellan's embraced the new husband and children as a part of their immediate family. They paid the college expenses for all three children and for the weddings of the two daughters. For Clarette, the grandparents' generous giving of themselves and a devoted stepfather eased, in part, the loss of her father. Clarette did not lack for love and attention as she passed through her formative tears to maturity.

Jeanne and her mother lived with her grandmother (her grandfather had died before Jeanne was born) and were an integral part of the families of two aunts, three uncles and ten cousins. The cousins were more as brothers and sisters than cousins to Jeanne. Lt. Brooks' parents spent much of the year working in Washington D.C., only an hour and a half drive away. Jeanne visited them often, when they would show her the sights of the nation's capitol. During the summers she would visit her grandparents at their home in St. Petersburg, Florida. There, her father's twin sisters and their husbands also took Jeanne into their fold. Neither did Jeanne lack for a loving family attention as she grew into adulthood.

As was true for so many "war orphans" (children without fathers), Clarette and Jeanne felt the ache of not having a father. Each missed his being there for important events in her life- the first day of school, the first date, seeing her off to senior prom, graduation from high school, visiting her a college on parents' weekends, walking her down the aisle to give her away at her wedding, and for the birth of the first grandchild. No one else really could fill that void. Each often wondered what it would be like to crawl up into her father's lap and fell his arms around her as she snuggled her head against his chest. Just once, to hear his voice.

Still, because of the support of their families, their lives were good. Clarette attended college, married, became an office manager for a general contractor, and had a daughter and three grandchildren. Jeanne also attended college, married, had three children, five grandchildren, and a career as an office manager in a veterinarian hospital.

As a child, Jeanne was told by her grandfather, who had desperately tried to learn the circumstances of his son's death (to no avail), that the other pilot on her father's plane also had a daughter, born three months before he was killed. Since her father was from another Bomb Group, Jeanne's family had no other information regarding Captain McClellan. They did know Captain McClellan's wife's name. Her grandfather referred to her only as "Mrs. McClellan." Throughout her life, especially after she had her own family and career, Jeanne wondered what had become of Cpt McClellan's daughter. Had she been happy? Had she had a supportive family? Had she had an equally successful life? Clarette, on the other had, was unaware that the copilot flying with her father also had a daughter. She did not even know his name.

In March 2000 Jeanne wrote the 91st Bomb Group Memorial Association asking if anyone knew of Captain McClellan's daughter. As one who has a large collection of records dealing with the 91st Bomb Group. I took on the task of locating her. A search of records from the National archives provided a casualty list of the 91st Bomb Group for 1943. Captain McClellan's wife Harriet, was listed next of kin, with a Pasadena, California address.

A check of the Internet phone directory revealed no listing for a Harriet McClellan, nor did an Internet web page search turn up anything. Called Pasadena High and was told records for all city high schools are maintained by a central Pasadena city office. I placed a call to the records office asking for a female student with the last name of McClellan born in December 1942. Within 15 seconds, the one who took my call told me there had been a Clarette McClellan born in December 1942 who has gone to Pasadena High. There was no record of when or if she graduated. But, now we had a name which to work.

A call back to the Pasadena High alumni office provided the names and phone numbers of the class officers of the classes of 1959, 1960, and 1961, the years Clarette most likely would have graduated. The first call was to Judy Trout, president of the class of 1960. She said, "yes", Clarette had been in her class and that she had known her. Unfortunately the class had lost track of her. The 40th reunion committee was in the process of locating missing members, including Clarette. I called Judy from time to time through the spring and early summer, but the committee had not located Clarette.

In the meantime, Jeanne wrote letters to be placed in the major newspapers in the Los Angeles area. She explained she was trying to locate a Clarette or Harriet McClellan and why.

In October the reunion committee of the class of 1960 employed an investigative agency to look for missing class members. The agency eventually reported back that Clarette was married to Charles R. Hook and gave an address in Scotts Valley, California. However, there was no Internet listing of a phone number for a Charles Hook in Scotts Valley or elsewhere in the state. The information operator for that area code told me "At the customer's request, the number is unlisted." At least he appeared to exist and lived somewhere in that region.

Judy wrote a letter to Clarette at that address given the reunion committee by the agency to tell her Jeanne and I were trying to get in touch and why. The class reunion committee also wrote her regarding the upcoming reunion. There was no response to either letter. Jeanne finally wrote her, too, but that letter came back a few weeks later with "Not at this address" handwritten across the envelope. We were afraid Clarette had read Judy's letter and simply did not wish to deal with the situation.

I located via the Internet the phone number of a person living two houses from the address we had for Charles Hook. When I called to ask if a Charles Hook lived at the address, the man who answered understandably would not tell me. After explaining why he would not give out such information to a stranger on the phone and as he was hanging up off-handedly remarked, "I do not know anyone by that name." So I assumed the Hook's had moved sometime in the past. We were at a dead end.

From then on, I ran the names, Charles and Clarette Hook and Harriet McClellan through the Internet phone directory and web page search engines every week or so. Finally on 12 March 2001, a year after receiving the initial requests, "Clarette Hook" appeared on a web page listing, with a phone number! I called the number and asked for her. She was unable to come to the phone, but told the person who answered, to tell me that, indeed, she was the daughter of Captain Hascall McClellan and would like to hear from me. I wrote a letter explaining why Jeanne wanted to get in touch with her and asked permission to give her address to Jeanne. A few days later I received a fax telling me to give her address to Jeanne and that she and her mother, who was still alive and living in Pasadena, would be interested in exchanging information with Jeanne and her mother, who also was still alive.

Jeanne wrote Clarette summarizing her life and describing her family. A week later, she received a letter back from Clarette similarly reviewing her life and family. The two women continue to exchange letters and phone calls. Harriet and Jean also got in touch with each other, exchanged letters and visited on the phone.

Lt. Knoke's detailed account of his actions on 22 March 1943 and his picture were published in a book about the Luftwaffe Fighter Command. I sent copies of these, along with records from the National Archives documenting Captain McClellan's and Lt. Brooks' activities in the 91st Bomb Group, to the families.

There was joy in finding each other at long last learning the details of what happened to their husbands and fathers those many years ago. And, there were tears. But, for the two wives, finally, there was closure. And, none too soon. An ultimate touch of irony. The two wives, whose husbands died together, joined them only forty days apart, almost sixty years later.

For Clarette and Jean there is a new commitment. The bond so quickly forged between their fathers as they piloted “Liberty Belle” through enemy fighter fire and flak was just quickly torn asunder by Lt. Knoke’s bomb and cold waters of the North Sea. Now, nearly six decades later that bond has been reforged by their daughters. Clarette and Jeanne, and their families have pledged that this bond will not again be broken. From the depths of the North Sea, still lives the legacy of the sacrifices of Cpt McClellan and Lt. Brooks bequeathed that long ago late March afternoon.

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