

RESEARCH TIPS - FINDING THE CREW OF THE B-17 "WANITA"

by Julie Belanger

My husband's father was Victor H Belanger. One day a neighbor asked me if there was any information about Victor's Bomb Group and Squadron. The family had a few stories that he was in Italy because Victor would sometimes visit (Laurier) Larry Roy, his brother-in-law. Larry was a B-24 Liberator Top Turret Gunner with the 461st Bomb Grp 765th Bomb Squadron at a nearby air field in Italy. Larry always enjoyed Victor's visits and he brought ice cream. We also knew Victor was a Radio Operator on a B-17 Bomber .

I decided to start a research project to find out about Victor's military history. I asked Victor's wife if she had his separation papers. She said yes so I made a copy of all the military material she had. I went over the paperwork one day and found the abbreviation 2BG. Just on a hunch I punched in a search for 2nd Bomb Group. There it popped up on the search. Accessing the database on the site, I found Victor's bomb missions. This was really exciting. I couldn't wait to tell my husband. Of course it is in my nature to leave no stone unturned, so scoured the 2nd Bomb Group Database and found all the crew members he flew with the most. I printed all this information. Then I looked up the plane A/C#231665 "Wanita", the plane he was on the most missions.

A few days later I got up and decided that I would try to find a crew picture. The family didn't have a crew photo. A big help in this task was that I was a full member of Ancestry.com. If you have done any research on there it is easier to dig up information. I started looking for the pilot because he might have more information. I started a family tree with his name. I then put in his date of birth around 1920 because most of the enlisted men were in their 20's in WW2 era. I then only started searching for the name and birth date in military data. When I had found a name that matched up I put that information in his tree. The next step was to only search for death information. Someone who was in the military would be around 94 in 2016. I had to assume most of the crew had passed unfortunately. Ancestry.com is linked with a great memorial site called Find-A-Grave (findagrave.com). People volunteer to go out and record GPS locations of graves, pictures of hardstones and links to dead relatives. In a lot of cases, a family member will copy the obituary and add pictures. They would also have an email address at the bottom. Sometimes it is just the recorder's email. Many add portraits of the person and family pictures. I was hoping because he was a pilot that maybe someone would have posted a military picture. Well I did find that Robert J Terrey's granddaughter, Bethany had posted a wonderful story about her grandfather and his history. He was a pilot on a B-17 Bomber. I could hardly believe it. Then I punched on the photo file and there was a crew picture. There was my father-in-law in the front. It was so exciting to share this. I also emailed the granddaughter. It was a big step to do the email so I would suggest you be as courteous as possible. The pilot's wife, Margaret is still alive and she remembered Victor's last name.

It wasn't long before all of the Terrey family wanted to know about Victor and his family. I also looked on Facebook to find the Terrey Family. I had found one. Maybe I could find others using the same methods. So far, I have located three crew member families of the "Wanita" plus Victor's. I have some information on most of the members because they each have their own tree in Ancestry.com. I believe I have found the Bombardier, Seth L Griffin. I know where the families are located. I still have to get more address information to make contact. Wish me luck.

Bethany and I are the group administrators of a Facebook Closed Group for B-17 "Wanita" Crew Family Members. We share pictures, stories about crew members and general information about the missions, operations, planes etc. We have a group of 97 members and counting.

Tips that may help locate crew family members

1. Don't give up. Be positive and
2. Talk to your family they may have photos, addresses and stories about their crew member.
3. Get the separation papers to find out what military group they were in.
4. Once you find the Bomb Group and Squadron, look it up on the 2nd Bomb Group database if they served there. Most military divisions have a similar site to preserve the history.
5. Print out the list of missions, crew lists and planes on most. Victor flew on 7 different planes, but 31 missions were on "Wanita"
6. Use Ancestry.com, or find someone who is a member, to help you make a tree for each crew member. Check the 2nd BG Database also for how many missions that crew member made. They may be MIA or KIA.
7. Find a person with same name and age and has military enlistment. There may be more one with same name.
8. Do search in Find-A-Grave (findagrave.com). Look for obituaries that may name family members and where they live. Many relatives post photos. Check for a name linked to picture. A family member may maintain the site.
9. Also, look for military burial cards. A lot of veterans take advantage of the burial benefit. It will list branch of service, where buried, military dates, date of death and birth. It will list rank, serial number and some even medals awarded.
10. On Find-A-Grave (findagrave.com), they may have links to spouses. If the spouse has passed, she may have information on her obituary about family.
11. If you find out where the person is buried, you may be able to access newspaper obits or funeral records for that area.
12. Do a search on Ancestry.com for siblings of crew member. They may have offspring that have information.
13. Do a person search if you know where the people located, or do a person search. It is only about \$1, then cancel service. I found my cousin Philip, who I had not seen in over 40 years, for a dollar. We still joke about it.
14. If you do a person search online, they may list names of people who may be related to the search person. Also, a lot of younger people are on Facebook.
15. Try and do a search on Facebook. Line up the names of relatives or where they are located until you think you have something that seems to fit. Check out their friend-list for family. Then friend-request or send a note in Messenger, or if you have the email address, send a courteous message. Most people want to know about their relatives. In my case, it was a wonderful experience. They were in disbelief that I had found them.
16. Take good notes so you can use as a reference later and maybe you will come up with more methods of research. This has been working for me. It has been a great adventure. The families have learned so much more about what happened to the Greatest Generation. Many of the soldiers did not share their military life with their families. There were a few who documented events for history's sake.
17. If you really want to experience what it was like, take a ride in a B-17 Flying Fortress Bomber. My husband and I went for a ride for our anniversary. It is a thrilling and emotional ride of a lifetime. I would do it again in a heartbeat. There is no way to describe the experience so go before it is too late. There are only about 20 flying B-17s left.