

Gus and Guy

And their Many Air Force Friends During World War II.



By
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Dedicated to:



Technical Sergeant Gaston G. Poulin
323rd Bomb Group, 453rd Bomb Squadron
USAAF 1941-1945

And:



Staff Sergeant Joseph Guy Poulin
390th Bomb Group, 570th Bomb Squadron
USAAF 1942-1945

And all the men who served in the Air War.

Table of Contents

Chapter One – Boys into Airmen	page 5
Chapter Two – On the Road to War	page 33
Chapter Three – The Marauder War Begins	page 58
Chapter Four – The Battle to Rule the Skies	page 96
Chapter Five – Clearing the Way for D-Day	page 136
Chapter Six – The Invasion and the Breakout	page 176
Chapter Seven – The Battle for France	page 206
Chapter Eight – The Battle for Germany	page 233
Chapter Nine – Victory Europe, Victory Japan	page 257
Bibliography	page 281

Cover photo courtesy of Willis Lee Brainard. The eight men who generously contributed their personal experiences toad to this book were Gaston Poulin, Willis Lee Brainard, Samuel Findley, Casimier Sochocki, Nelzo Cassano, Frederick Mingus, Manfred Blumenthal, and David Goss (via his book).

INTRODUCTION

Many of the accounts listed herein are the stories I grew up on. I found that some facts I had misremembered and others had been miss-told, but based on the material at hand, this is the truest account I could set down.

Gus, my Dad, became a top turret gunner in a B-26 Martin Marauder, 453rd Bomb Squadron, 323rd Bombardment group, Eighth and Ninth Air Forces, in the European Theater of Operations 1943-1944. He never talked much about the war, except in a few sparse and usually humorous references. Oh, he would talk about it generally, but not in terms of his personal experiences - never enough to satisfy me. He would just let others make their comments and change the subject. But one night he began to talk, and by an unbelievable coincidence, I had a tape recorder nearby. I turned it on. I don't know if it was the recorder that caused him to continue talking that night, but talk he did, almost all night long. But if I was expecting to hear the nuts and bolts of a combat mission, I was to be disappointed. He talked mostly about the good things he could think of, avoiding the bad as much as possible.

His narrative, although good, was difficult to put in perspective. I needed background material to make it '3-dimensional' as well as chronological. If you go to your local library you will find very few books about Martin Marauders, and if you get a book on WWII airplanes in general, chances are, it will not have much information on those types of planes. There are several books (I only found three specifically about Marauders, and two of them I already had, thanks to Mom), but one of them, by Retired Major General Moench, was incredibly helpful as it focused largely on the 323rd Group - Dad's Group! Because of this book I could vicariously understand what Dad had really gone through - much of what he did not talk about, so I borrowed heavily from Moench's book "Marauder Men." I'm grateful for his work.

My Uncle Joe, who was called Guy by the family in those days, (Frenchie, Tiny, or Joey by his crewmates) became a ball-turret gunner in a B-17, 390th Bomb Group, 570th Bomb Squadron, Eighth Air Force. Unlike Dad, Uncle Joe talked about the war all the time, which is probably why no one ever wrote anything down. Luckily, however, he did receive very good press and a lot can be gleaned from there. Danny, Joe's son, had a book of Joe's unit; and I had one by Bowman about B-17s. Danny also did considerable research on the internet, finding valuable information there, including Uncle Joe's Mission List. Between the books and the press, and what Danny and I could remember, a pretty fair account could be reconstructed.

Two other books I borrowed from heavily were Ernie Pyle's "Here is your War" and "Brave Men," because he could describe so well what the fighting men in Europe were experiencing. I also hired a professional B-26 Historian, Trevor Allen (B-26.com, hosted by Michael E. Smith), who has access to the 323rd's official records. He sent me a Mission Log of Dad's flights complete with dates, destination, crew names and plane designation. This work answered many confusing questions. Other information about 453rd planes was furnished by Alf Johanneson.

Other facts come from what I call 'the scrapbook,' a pile of Dad's and Uncle Joe's pictures and newspaper articles, mostly unidentified and undated. I was surprised to learn that family members didn't know Dad had a scrapbook. Other comments and pictures came from the family. Thanks to all those who furnished their photos and memories, Aunt Martha, Aunt Solange, Aunt Bunny, and Uncle Vic; and especially to my wife Angelina, Uncle David and Aunt Martha for helping with editing. And thanks also to my sister, Diane who has a degree in 'Shrinkology', for her words regarding Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. And a special thanks to Porter Swentzell who helped me so much with scanning and cropping photos.

Then I wanted to talk to some of the veterans. My Mom said Dad's friend, Willis Lee Brainard was living here in Albuquerque (actually in Rio Rancho), so I looked in the phone book and he was listed. I went to see him. When I walked in, his son, Dar, said, "I grew up on stories of Frenchie." I said, "I grew up on stories of Willie." And everybody laughed. We swapped stories and photographs. Some of the quotes and many of the pictures in this book are his. As the reader will see, it was impossible to tell Dad's story without telling Willie's too. Then Willie, who I found out prefers to be called Lee (I have continued to irritate him by calling him Willie), invited me to go to a 453rd reunion in Colorado Springs and how could I refuse?

So Willie and I drove up to Colorado Springs for the weekend of October 5th, 2003. Willie can barely see and barely walk but he wanted to go to this last reunion. There were about a dozen guys there and many of the wives came. Four pilots, one bombardier, two engineer/gunners, a maintenance chief, a

crew chief, and two ordnance men who volunteered to be Toggliers [bombardiers without bomb sights] in late '44, and one or two guys I didn't get to talk to. I was surprised that one nephew of a veteran who had died during service came, as well as the wife and daughter of a deceased veteran. All the veterans there were very spry and fit mentally, still telling stories and sipping on their favorite drinks, and going over old times. What a great spirit these guys had, even Willie, who was always positive in spite of his difficulties. He'd laugh at himself when he made a mistake and say "Watch it, old man." Most of Willie's present physical difficulties come from an accident that happened during service. When he remarked about what good shape the others were in compared to him, I reminded him that they didn't have a bomb fall on them. About half of the guys present at the reunion had known my Dad and they were happy to meet me. One of the guys who knew him was Samuel "Tex" Findley. He gave me his story, all typed up. Another was Casimir V. Sochocki (pronounced 'so-hockey') whose name I had heard many times in my youth. He had helped to keep the 453rd Squadron Association together and was very active in various roles in the association. He sent me a letter and some pictures later. I can't believe I never thought of going to one of these reunions before, and I really regret it now.

The veterans present at the reunion were:

Richard Inman – ordnance/toggler
Casimir V. Sochocki – ordnance/toggler
Nelso F. Cassano – crew chief
Willis L. Brainard – engineer/gunner
Samuel Findley – engineer/gunner
Calvin Coats – bombardier

Robert Gregor - pilot
Lewis Williams - maintenance chief
Oran Begwin - pilot
Horace Chriesman - pilot
Henry Dunston - pilot
Family of Ben Lasky - radio/gunner

(Names courtesy of Ronni Cassano)

Aunt Martha and Uncle Victor recalled events at home before Gus and Guy enlisted:

"There was lots of talk about the possibility of our entering the war on the side of the allies," relates Aunt Martha. "Gus and Guy talked together and looked into enlisting in the service. Guy and a friend went to Canada to join the RCAF, but he was too young by a year, and as the story goes, he would not pledge allegiance to the Queen. He returned home and had to wait until his 18th birthday before enlisting. Meanwhile Gus had already made his plans and was to leave our home on October 1, 1941."

"Gus was supposed to have a tryout with the Boston Bruins hockey team," recalled Uncle Vic. "He started to go to Boston but decided to join the Air Corps instead because war with Germany was imminent."

"I remember my father trying to talk him out of it," continued Aunt Martha, "because my Dad had been sent to Vladivostok, Russia, during WWI. He knew what the boys would have to endure in basic training, and in facing the enemy. However, nothing would change Gus's mind because he wanted to join the Air Force. He was sure that war was on the horizon. And it proved to be true two months later with the attack on Pearl Harbor. I vividly recall seeing my father cry for the first time when we all said goodbye, not knowing if we would see Gus again. We were saddened to see our parents cry and linger in their farewells."