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## *World War I's Polar Bears Fighting at the Top of the World*

By Laurel Post

Kenneth Skellenger's diary from March 9, 1919, addressed to the Bolshevik soldiers:

*Officially we Americans know we have been ordered out of Russia by our President.*

*We are under the damned British control until May 17th. This we do not understand. We are only fighting for our lives. There are practically no English soldiers in the front lines or in Russia.*

*We would join hands with you to down crowned heads. It is all for the majority of human beings.*

*The US soldiers hear many stories about the inhuman "Bolo" but we do not believe all we hear.*

*Homes and dear wives wait for us and no doubt for you.*

*We won't make an attack on you. If you wait 2½ months we will be out of Russia.*

*Signed Soldier Boys of the U.S.<sup>1</sup>*

James Siplon. Russell Hershberger was in the Machine Gun Company. Floyd Lewis was part of the Pioneer Platoon of Headquarters Company. Rudolph Marxer

was a supply sergeant and George Petropolous was a member of the 310th Engineers.



*Charles W. Grace, 1919*

The men of the Polar Bear Association were interviewed in 1977 and 1978. Their stories have been recorded and tell a tale that is not well known. What follows is an account constructed by oral histories of some of the brave men who fought in Russia during World War I.

Let's set the stage: About 5,500 U.S. Army soldiers, where 90% of the draftees were from Michigan and the rest from the greater Midwest area, came together at Camp Custer in Michigan.<sup>2</sup> Some men like Albert Slagh trained there for two months, whereas others had a shorter stay, like Levi Bartels who trained there for seventeen days.<sup>3</sup> From there, they were sent to New Jersey and then

New York in July 1918 for more training at Camp Mills. In August, they set sail for Liverpool, England.<sup>4</sup>

The 85th Division, which included the 339th Infantry, the First Battalion of the 310th Engineers, the 337th Ambulance and Hospital Unit, were sent to England in the summer of 1918 to finish their training at Camp Cowshot.<sup>5</sup> The troops were there for about two to three weeks before setting sail again. While in England, the

The Polar Bear Oral History Collection is filled with the stories of those who fought in Russia from September 5, 1918, to June 1919. The following men were a part of Detroit's Own, which later in history became known as the Polar Bear Association. In Company D of the 339th Infantry Regiment: Albert Slagh, Martin Rotman (corporal), Alfred Larsen (sergeant), and Charles Grace (mess sergeant). In Company K: Levi Bartels (private). In Company E: Radus Kemperman (private) and Frederick Kooyers (corporal). In Company I: Cleo Colburn (corporal) and

*(continued on page 2)*

## From the Director



In this issue of the *Quarterly* is an article researched and written by one of our student staff, Hope College senior Laurel Post, using several of our archival collections. I asked her to write this article to commemorate the beginning of the United States' involvement in World War One in

1917 and to revisit some local veterans' involvement in the other conflict in Russia that lasted from 1918-1919. Midwestern states, like Michigan, sent many men into this conflict, with little news of their plight until they returned home in 1919. In 1977 and 1978, Hope College professor of history, Larry Penrose, headed up an oral history project to record the experiences of local Polar Bears. These interviews are in the Joint Archives, and also available online for reading and listening via the Digital Commons site: [http://digitalcommons.hope.edu/polar\\_bear/](http://digitalcommons.hope.edu/polar_bear/). I hope Post's article will enlighten you on its importance in American and local history.

The second article comes from one of our researchers, Kurt Byers, about his father's (Bruce Byers) time at Hope College during World War Two when he was involved in the one of the military training programs called the Civilian Pilot Training Program. Byers combined his research findings found here with personal papers and memories left by his father to write this article. This research is part of a larger book project on the subject, and one we hope to add to our library in the future.

Geoffrey D. Reynolds

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### *Polar Bears (continued from page 1)*

men thought they were going to France. According to Marxer and Petropolous, they even sent their equipment to France, which was never sent back to them while in Russia.<sup>6</sup> Hershberger claimed, "We figured we was going to France, the big show. But all we got was a little side-show."<sup>7</sup>

The fact that most of the men came from the Midwest was no coincidence as "military authorities assumed they could best withstand the cold of northern Russia and Siberia."<sup>8</sup> Unfortunately for the men, they did not realize that they were heading for Russia until they were practically there. Kemperman stated, "You know, it's funny they don't explain it to anyone. Just pile on the boat, and part of the time you don't know where you're going."<sup>9</sup>

Men like Larsen and Bartels figured out they were not headed to France a day or two before setting sail, but they were still unsure of where they were going. Larsen said that he knew he was not going to France when they issued the troops heavy underwear. "That kind of threw us off, too; you know in August we didn't need any heavy underwear in France."<sup>10</sup>

Some found out through rumors while on the boat that was headed to Russia. Lewis said that the direction of the boat was certainly a clue, and others figured it out when seeing icebergs as they sailed through the Arctic Circle.<sup>11</sup> Then there were some men, like Kooyers who did not know until they actually landed in Russia.<sup>12</sup>

Their journey to Russia was not a smooth one by any means. In addition to the American troops, the ships also carried English, Canadians, and Italian troops. The boats that traveled from England to Russia included the *Nagoya*, the *Northumberland*, the *Somali*, and the *Grampian*,<sup>13</sup> all of which had an outbreak of the Spanish Flu (also known as the Influenza Pandemic of 1918-1919 that killed between 20-40 million people worldwide.) Some of the men deduced that it did not help that the boats that they and the other troops were being carried on where suspected to be old cattle boats.<sup>14</sup> According to many of the men interviewed, the ships did not have adequate medical supplies and many men died on the voyage to Russia. Upon landing in Russia, those who were infected with the flu were sent straight to the hospital, which Hershberger claimed was simply an old hay barn. When Lewis described the flu outbreak, he told a story about how one of his buddies got really sick. "Matter of fact, like many others, when he woke up in a Russian hospital, he was surprised and considered himself lucky—for many did not wake up."<sup>15</sup>



*Floyd Lewis, ca. 1919*

The boats arrived in Archangel, Russia, around September 5th, 1918. Archangel is located on the east bank of the Dvina River and overlooked the White Sea to the North. Upon arrival, the companies went their separate ways. It should be noted at this point that many of the men had no idea why they were there. Sure, they were given vague answers, but when asked about it in the interviews, none of them really knew why they were fighting in Russia until they got back. Hershberger stated, "I don't know why we were there at all. Nobody ever has been able to answer the question that I know



of.”<sup>16</sup> Lewis remembers a time when the Russians posted a sign that said “Why are you here?” and Lewis had no answer.<sup>17</sup> Some explanations were either given out or deduced by the men eventually, but the explanations still did not help with the confusion over why they were fighting in Russia.



*Russell W. Hershberger,  
1919*

One reason that many of the men heard was that the British had a lot of stores of ammunition, guns, and food that they did not want the Bolsheviks to have and the troops were there to guard the supplies. Hershberger indicated the following as the reason he was given for being in Russia, “They were trying to establish an Eastern front to relieve the pressure on the Western front... And then we had big stores of ammunition up there in Russia, and we was supposed to go up there and guard that ammunition. The only way we could get it was to go out and have the Bolsheviks shoot it back at us because they had it all!”<sup>18</sup> Similarly, Colburn stated, “We didn’t know why we were sent to Russia. Supposedly to do guard duty at the supply depot, but instead of doing guard duty we did active engagements.”<sup>19</sup> Lewis claimed, “The soundest reason I have found, and it’s all the way from President Wilson: we, the Allies, were there to make it safe for the conservative White Russians to come together.”<sup>20</sup>

Another alleged reason for being in Russia, discussed by Siplon, Kooyers, and Marxer in their interviews, was because of the German army. Siplon stated that he thought they were there to protect parts of Russia to keep Germans out and to keep their submarines from having bases in the White Sea and the northern part of Russia.<sup>21</sup> Marxer claimed they were there to keep the Germans from coming in the back way to Europe through the North Sea.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, Kooyers thought they were there to stop Germans from shipping their stuff across Russia for their U-boats. All of this was rumored and in the end, as Kooyers stated, “we never run into any Germans” while in Russia.<sup>23</sup>

In actuality, a big part of the reason why the troops were fighting in Russia was that they were there to help the English. Rotman claimed that the troops were sold to Russia for a year. “We wasn’t under our own command at all. We found this out later on, that the reason we were in Russia, the Bolsheviks were going to overthrow

the government you see and England had a lot of money invested in Russia. The Bolshevik government, well if they’d overthrow it their money would go down. That’s why they hired us for a year.”<sup>24</sup> Bartels seconded this statement claiming that they were borrowed to England and that “England was the pusher to that whole thing.”<sup>25</sup>

Attitudes towards the British troops were negative, mainly due to the fact that they dragged the Americans into this war and they themselves were hardly fighting. Rotman claims that they “got in more fights with the British than we did with the Russians!” This was because “the British never took the front line. We always had to do all the fight and they stayed in back of us.”<sup>26</sup> Kemperman stated that the American troops took the British’s place when they were to the front lines in Russia.<sup>27</sup> Larsen claimed, “I don’t think the British had near as many troops over there as we had American troops.”<sup>28</sup>



*Alfred Larsen, ca. 1919*

In addition, Hershberger stated, “the Americans had to do about all the front line work. The British set back in Archangel, most of them. There was a few British got out, but the Americans did most of the fighting.”<sup>29</sup> No one was happy to be there, and it did not help matters that the British, who were the reason that the Americans were there in the first place, were hardly doing any of the fighting.

Rotman recalls a story of how his company was to relieve Company B, twenty-eight miles away. The English all got a sleigh and the Americans had to walk. The sleighs, not much bigger than a wheelbarrow and usually pulled by reindeer, could still hold the troop’s load, which included a barracks bag, blankets, machine gun and ammunition. Rotman remembers saying “I’m not walking. If the English walk, we’ll walk too, but not if they each get a sleigh for themselves.” And when the English officers came to find out what was going on, Rotman told them the deal and they swore at him so Rotman hit the sergeant in the jaw and Rotman was put under arrest since he hit a superior officer. An American officer was sent for and when he heard the whole story, he told the troops not to move unless they got sleighs. The American officer eventually found the troops sleighs six miles away in the next town, which they were willing to get as long as the English cooperated. The company was then able to go and relieve Company B.<sup>30</sup>

Except for the British, for the most, the Americans got on fine with the other troops. Siplon recalls a story about the Frenchmen, who were “fine soldiers... and they were fine soldiers until the armistice was signed. And then they quit. Now when the armistice was signed, they just quit everything... And they couldn’t do anything with them ‘cause their war was over. Then right afterwards, they took the English out, too. And then they left us alone with the White Russians.” The White Russians, also known as the British Legion, were Russian citizens trained by the English to fight on their side. Siplon states, “they were training these White Russians to take our places and be the future Russians.”<sup>31</sup> Lewis recalled some of them refused to fight on account of they would be fighting their own relatives.<sup>32</sup> Siplon recalls that around November 7th, a false rumor was going around that the armistice had been signed and that was when the French first started quitting. “But then on the eleventh of November when they did come through, why, then they quit for good.”<sup>33</sup>

While in Russia, amongst the rumors of why they were fighting there, there were also rumors going around of mutiny. Many have stated this already but it should be stated again: American troops were not involved in any sort of mutiny. On the other hand, the French and the British did have a few cases of mutiny. According to Harry Costello, author of *Why Did We Go to Russia?*, “The French trouble was the first to start.” While on the front line, waiting for relief, only one platoon of French soldiers arrived. “The French officers accompanying it showed no hesitancy in admitting that the French soldiers of the battalion were ‘practically in a state of mutiny.’” Many of the soldiers had been placed under arrest and were sent to Archangel for refusing to fight. The French’s reason was that “the war is over in France. Why should we be fighting here in Russia when France has declared no war on Russia or the Bolsheviks?”<sup>34</sup> Siplon understood the French’s reason because the Americans did not want to fight either, but as one of his officers said, “It don’t mean the end of it for us.”<sup>35</sup>

The British mutiny’s was kept quiet, but it happened nonetheless. According to Costello, when the English reached Kadish, they refused to attack for several days. General Ironside, who was in command of the Allied Expeditionary Force in Russia, personally handled the situation and after several days, the British were back to fighting, but the French troops “could not become reconciled to the task of fighting in North Russia.”<sup>36</sup>

The American mutiny supposedly occurred in Company I of the 339th Infantry on March 30, 1919, under the command of Captain Horatio G. Winslow.<sup>37</sup> The men were ordered to load up the sleighs with the rest of the

equipment (the kitchen equipment and supplies, as well as some platoon property that had been loaded already). Instead, the men remained in their barracks. When Captain Winslow inquired what was going on, “the men replied that they didn’t see why they should go to the front when the Russian troops were not being sent there. They also said they didn’t see why they should be fighting on the front lines while the Russians remained in Archangel.”<sup>38</sup> In response, Colonel George Stewart stated, “whatever other reasons there may be, there is one good reason why we must fight now. We must fight now for our own lives. If we don’t fight we will all be wiped out.”<sup>39</sup> In short, the only order that was disobeyed was the preliminary order of loading up the sleighs, which as obeyed after being repeated.

Siplon supports this story by claiming that the White Russians were supposed to relieve them on the railroad front up on the front lines. The Bolsheviks, also known as Bolos, had already started attacking, which caused the White Russians to run. Siplon stated, “Well, that’s really what the whole thing amounted to was that they were promised relief and they were promised a vacation, and the White Russians got in trouble up there and then started retreating... So, it was really blown up all out of proportion in this country.”<sup>40</sup>



*James F. Siplon, ca. 1919*

The armistice for World War I was signed on November 11, 1918, but that did not mean that the troops in Russia could stop fighting. Siplon was one of the only men interviewed who knew about it the next day.<sup>41</sup> In fact, most of the men did not hear about the signing of the armistice until a couple of months later. Larsen and Hershberger heard about it around Christmas or New Year’s.<sup>42</sup> Unfortunately, Larsen claimed that “after the armistice we had harder going than we had in the beginning... We lost more— casualties.”<sup>43</sup> Grace stated that when the armistice was signed, “that’s about the time our fighting started... they kind of forgot about the North Russian boys, I guess.”<sup>44</sup> Kemperman supports this statement for when he finally got home, many people “said our outfit was a ‘lost battalion’, you know—got over there and they didn’t know where they was for a while... they claimed that the 339th was a lost battalion.” In addition, Kemperman said that the day it was signed, they were on their way to fight on the front line for the

first time.<sup>45</sup> Rotman claims that they did not know it was signed until late January and they were still fighting until July.<sup>46</sup>



Frederick M. Kooyers, 1918

One of the main reasons that the troops stayed in Russia so long after the armistice was signed was because they simply could not get out. Siplon recalls that everything was iced over and they could not get a boat in until spring. Some of the men were able to start leaving in June while others were not able to get home until July. “As soon as they could get a boat in, why, they’d take us out. So that’s why we had to stay there. In other words, we were fighting for our lives. As long as we were there, we had to fight for our lives.”<sup>47</sup> Kooyers states, “we couldn’t get out. They couldn’t take us out of there because you can’t get out of the White Sea.”<sup>48</sup> According to both Kooyers and Kemperman, they had two ice crushers to break the ice on the White Sea so they could get out.<sup>49</sup>

Many of the men were okay with leaving Russia without the war really being finished. Both Lewis and Kooyers believed that they should not have been fighting in Russia’s civil war. Kooyers stated, “we had no reason to fight Russia. It was their war and we had no right to be there.”<sup>50</sup> In addition, both Larson and Slagh compared this expedition to Vietnam.<sup>51</sup> The men claimed that they had no business being there.

Finally free of Russia, the men traveled back to France, then to Boston, and finally arriving in Detroit. Upon returning home, a common question that was asked to the men was “What’d you do there?”, for no one knew exactly what the men were doing there. Marxer tells a story of how when he first came home, people wondered if he had been in prison because everyone else had been home for almost a year by then. “‘Where in the hell was you, Marxer?’ I says, ‘I was in Russia.’ ‘What the hell did you do wrong? They must have had you in the coop up there!’”<sup>52</sup> Besides all the questions, the men were thrown parades in their honor, especially in the towns of Michigan. When asked how people reacted upon them returning home, Hershberger states, “Well, they was really friendly, and everybody was happy to see us. They was happy to see us home.”<sup>53</sup>

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Kenneth Skellenger, 1919, Hope College Polar Bear Oral History Project (H88-0239.5), Joint Archives of Holland, Hope College, Holland, MI.

<sup>2</sup> James Ricci, “Polar Bears’ War in Russia Forged Enduring Brotherhood,” *Detroit Free Press*, 7 April 1985.

<sup>3</sup> Glen Johnson, Oral history interview with Albert Slagh, 12 June 1978, Paper 13, Hope College Polar Bear Oral History Project (H88-0239.5), Joint Archives of Holland, Hope College, Holland, MI; Glen Johnson, Oral history interview with Levi Bartels, 1 January 1978, Paper 1, Hope College Polar Bear Oral History Project (H88-0239.5), Joint Archives of Holland, Hope College, Holland, MI.

<sup>4</sup> Darlene Groen Winter, “Western Michigan Men Recall Expedition into Frigid Russia,” *Holland Sentinel*, November 1991.

<sup>5</sup> Deborah A. Lenning, Oral history interview with Floyd Lewis, 11 July 1977, Paper 9, Hope College Polar Bear Oral History Project (H88-0239.5), Joint Archives of Holland, Hope College, Holland, MI; Deborah A. Lenning and Nancy L. Johnson, Oral history interview with Alfred Larsen, 13 June 1977, Paper 7, Hope College Polar Bear Oral History Project (H88-0239.5), Joint Archives of Holland, Hope College, Holland, MI.

<sup>6</sup> Deborah A. Lenning and Nancy L. Johnson, Oral history interview with Rudolph Marxer, 16 June 1977, Paper, Hope College Polar Bear Oral History Project (10H88-0239.5), Joint Archives of Holland, Hope College, Holland, MI; Deborah A. Lenning and Nancy L. Johnson, Oral history interview with George Petropolous, 23 June 1977, Paper 14, Hope College Polar Bear Oral History Project (H88-0239.5), Joint Archives of Holland, Hope College, Holland, MI.

<sup>7</sup> Deborah A. Lenning and Nancy L. Johnson, Oral history interview with Russell Hershberger, 23 June 1977, Paper 4, Hope College Polar Bear Oral History Project (H88-0239.5), Joint Archives of Holland, Hope College, Holland, MI.

<sup>8</sup> Richard Bak, “Michigan’s War on Bolshevism,” *Newsletter for Teachers*, (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Center for Russian and East European Studies), Fall 1983.

<sup>9</sup> Deborah A. Lenning and Nancy L. Johnson, Oral history interview with Radus Kemperman, 23 June 1977, Paper 5, Hope College Polar Bear Oral History Project (H88-0239.5), Joint Archives of Holland, Hope College, Holland, MI.

<sup>10</sup> Lenning and Johnson, Oral history interview with Alfred Larsen.

<sup>11</sup> Lenning, Oral history interview with Floyd Lewis; Lenning and Johnson, Oral history interview with Alfred Larsen.

<sup>12</sup> Deborah A. Lenning and Nancy L. Johnson, Oral history interview with Frederick Kooyers, 13 June 1977, Paper 6, Hope College Polar Bear Oral History Project (H88-0239.5), Joint Archives of Holland, Hope College, Holland, MI.

<sup>13</sup> Nancy L. Johnson, Oral history interview with Charles Grace, 14 June 1977, Paper 3, Hope College Polar Bear Oral History Project (H88-0239.5), Joint Archives of Holland, Hope College, Holland, MI; Lenning and Johnson, Oral history interview with Frederick Kooyers; Lenning and Johnson, Oral history interview with Russell Hershberger; Lenning and Johnson, Oral history interview with Rudolph Marxer.

<sup>14</sup> Nancy L. Johnson, interview with James Siplon, 6 July



1977, Paper 12, Hope College Polar Bear Oral History Project (H88-0239.5), Joint Archives of Holland, Hope College, Holland, MI.

<sup>15</sup> Lenning, interview with Floyd Lewis.

<sup>16</sup> Lenning and Johnson, interview with Russell Hershberger.

<sup>17</sup> Lenning, interview with Floyd Lewis.

<sup>18</sup> Lenning and Johnson, interview with Russell Hershberger.

<sup>19</sup> Deborah A. Lenning and Nancy L. Johnson, Oral history interview with Cleo Colburn, 17 June 1977, Paper 2, Hope College Polar Bear Oral History Project (H88-0239.5), Joint Archives of Holland, Hope College, Holland, MI.

<sup>20</sup> Lenning, interview with Floyd Lewis.

<sup>21</sup> Johnson, interview with James Siplon.

<sup>22</sup> Lenning and Johnson, interview with Rudolph Marxer.

<sup>23</sup> Lenning and Johnson, interview with Frederick Kooyers.

<sup>24</sup> Glen Johnson, Oral history interview with Martin Rotman, 13 June 1978, H88-0239.5, Hope College Polar Bear Oral History Project, Paper 11, Joint Archives of Holland, Hope College, Holland, MI.

<sup>25</sup> Johnson, interview with Levi Bartels.

<sup>26</sup> Johnson, interview with Martin Rotman.

<sup>27</sup> Lenning and Johnson, interview with Radus Kemperman.

<sup>28</sup> Lenning and Johnson, interview with Alfred Larsen.

<sup>29</sup> Lenning and Johnson, interview with Russell Hershberger.

<sup>30</sup> Johnson, interview with Martin Rotman.

<sup>31</sup> Johnson, interview with James Siplon.

<sup>32</sup> Lenning, interview with Floyd Lewis.

<sup>33</sup> Johnson, interview with James Siplon.

<sup>34</sup> Harry J. Costello, *Why Did We Go to Russia?* (Detroit, MI: H.J. Costello, 1920).

<sup>35</sup> Johnson, interview with James Siplon.

<sup>36</sup> Costello.

<sup>37</sup> Joel R. Moore, Harry H. Mead, and Lewis E. Jahns, comps, *The History of the American Expedition Fighting the Bolsheviks*, (Detroit, MI: Polar Bear Publishing Company, 1992).

<sup>38</sup> Costello.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Johnson, interview with James Siplon.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Lenning and Johnson, interview with Russell Hershberger.

<sup>43</sup> Lenning and Johnson, interview with Alfred Larsen.

<sup>44</sup> Johnson, interview with Charles Grace.

<sup>45</sup> Lenning and Johnson, interview with Radus Kemperman.

<sup>46</sup> Johnson, interview with Martin Rotman.

<sup>47</sup> Johnson, interview with James Siplon.

<sup>48</sup> Lenning and Johnson, interview with Frederick Kooyers.

<sup>49</sup> Lenning and Johnson, interview with Radus Kemperman.

<sup>50</sup> Lenning and Johnson, interview with Frederick Kooyers.

<sup>51</sup> Johnson, interview with Albert Slagh.

<sup>52</sup> Lenning and Johnson, interview with Rudolph Marxer.

<sup>53</sup> Lenning and Johnson, interview with Russell Hershberger.



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*Hope College played an important role in training young men to be pilots in World War II. Told by his son, this is an account of how one Grand Rapids boy, Bruce B. Byers, started on his path to becoming a decorated P-47 Thunderbolt fighter pilot in WWII, a journey in which Hope College played a fundamental role.*



*1st Lt. Bruce Byers, G Flight Commander, 411th Fighter Squadron, and his crew chief, Staff Sgt. George "Red" Gormly, Germany, 1945*

## West Michigan Fighter Pilot

Dad's compulsion to fly dates to his childhood growing up with two younger brothers, Donald and Herbert, and their parents, Elizabeth and Leon, in a rural setting near Grand Rapids, Michigan. He fantasized about the exploits of legendary World War I pilots Eddie Rickenbacher and Frank Luke. He loved building balsawood-and-paper airplanes powered by rubber bands. Artistic, his youthful serial cartoons featured themes of war and outdoor adventure. And Dad's relationships with many friends showed a knack for sociability and leadership.

The 1920s and 1930s were relatively good for the Byers family as Leon, a WWI Navy veteran, held a stable job with the Michigan Consolidated Gas Company. But by Dad's late teens, Americans were becoming increasingly anxious about Nazi expansionism in Europe and Japanese conquests in East Asia.

### *The Ascent Begins*

Prior to graduating near the top of his 1939 class at Catholic Central High School, Dad scored fourth in a scholarship examination whereby the top three scorers would get full-ride scholarships to Notre Dame University. In 1988, two years before his passing, he mentioned the exam in an account he wrote about his pilot training years:

*"This near-miss notwithstanding, I had indeed absorbed a good deal of book learnin' in my primary and secondary phases of parochial schooling. My inquiring mind and ability to absorb the written and spoken word were no doubt enhanced by the attentive and demanding requirements of the good Dominican Sisters."*

Instead of college, he set his sights on aviation and enrolled in an aircraft and engine mechanics course. But the class was cancelled before he finished.

Undeterred, he joined the Civil Air Patrol. A turning point arose when he accompanied a pilot to a fly-in in Lansing. The pilot suggested that Dad earn his private pilot's license by taking flying lessons at Northern Air Service in Grand Rapids. Dad took the advice. He mentioned the company's curriculum in his 1988 account:

*"Navigation was a primary concern. Radio communication was virtually non-existent in private flying. Hand-eye coordination was a must. We were flying by sight, compass, and airspeed indicator—and the seat of our pants."*

At that time, he managed the North End Market, working seven days a week with Thursday and Sunday afternoons off—pulling down the princely sum of \$11 per week.

He soon discovered a more economical way to become a pilot:

*"I was happily spending my free Thursday afternoons attempting to qualify for my private pilot's license at Northern Air Service when the opportunity arose to enlist in the U.S. Army Air Corps Reserve. This would conveniently allow me to continue my training at government expense, with the payoff—as I understood it, anyway—of becoming a civilian flight instructor for the government."*

The new opportunity was the Civilian Pilot Training Program (CPTP). As a naive 21-year-old, Dad did not realize that it was a quasi-military training program which would be his first step toward becoming a U.S. Air Force fighter pilot.

*"My fellow reservists and I were invited to two days of screening at the Grand Rapids Armory. We were told that we were expected to pass a college equivalency test, whatever that was. It was academia at its most demanding. Afterward, an Air Corps lieutenant congratulated me and indicated that I was*

*one of ten boys from the 21 examinees to have passed the test. I was elated, as only two non-college-educated boys took the test. Both of us made it!"*

### *Civilian Pilot Training Program*

In the late 1930s as the United States drifted closer to war, the federal government realized we probably would need thousands of military pilots. The military could not quickly fill that demand. One idea was to set up pilot training programs at academic institutions. After heated debate in Congress, in 1939 the Civil Aeronautics Administration got the green light to set up CPTPs at colleges and universities. Hope College was one of them.

Flight instructors were civilians affiliated with the institutions. For-profit companies ran the flight training under contract with the U.S. government and with nominal oversight by the Air Force. Hope's CPTP encompassed several training tracks:

Navy Trainees: Graduates assigned to naval air stations.

Army Trainees: Students would select one of four concentrations—flight instructor, glider pilot, airline co-pilot, or liaison/service pilot—and after graduation receive duty assignments.

Hope's inaugural CPTP class officially launched in July 1942—although Dad's CPTP logbook shows four flights dating from late May. Four more classes would matriculate into the program. Most trainees came from Michigan, Illinois, Indiana, and Ohio.



*Hope College Civilian Pilot Training Program students at the Park Township Airport: Raymond Teusink, Bruce Byers, Michael Sheehan, David Perkins, and Gerald Buist, 1942*

While Dad thought that he was going to be trained as a civilian flight instructor for the government, his CPTP application in the Joint Archives of Holland at Hope



College shows that he selected elementary glider pilot training. Whatever his initial understanding, he would be groomed as a prospective glider pilot and earn his private pilot's license via Hope's CPTP.

Holland Air Service conducted Hope's flight training at Park Township Airport. The company utilized the tandem seat Piper J-3 Cub and the similar Aeronca Chief, both powered by 65 HP Continental engines.

Glider trainees received 240 hours of ground school, 35-45 hours of flight instruction, and boot camp-style military training. Glider training did not include flying gliders. It focused solely on flying the Piper Cubs and Aeronca Chiefs.

Dad had five flight instructors: Howard Page (42 flights), Frank Redmond (11 flights), Robert Harding (2 flights), Kyle Sinclair (1 flight), and Chief Pilot M. Bliss (final check ride and solo). Dad recalled the training regimen in his 1988 account:

*"We were provided instruction in advanced navigation, meteorology, aircraft identification, aircraft maintenance, military code-of-conduct, Morse code, and more. We also were issued military style uniforms with no insignia. I thought the accent on the military was a trifle odd."*



*Byers kneels by a Piper Cub wreck during Preliminary Light Plane Gliding School, Artesia, New Mexico, 1942  
(Byers was not the pilot)*

Dad recorded his first ground instruction session on July 22, 1942, under Howard Page. Six days later, he recorded his first hands-on, stick-and-rudder aerial training session: a 40-minute flight in an Aeronca Chief with instructor Page. The session included taxiing, takeoff, executing the proper traffic pattern over the field, flying straight and level, gliding and gliding turns, looking around, holding altitude, throttle and elevator coordination, and landing approach.

After each flight, instructors ranked student performance in four categories. Here is Page's assessment of Dad's first piloting job:

Coordination and Control: *Mechanical*

Judgment: *Dependable*

Aptitude: *Retains instruction, eager to learn*

Flying Habits: *Skids habitually*

By August 7, Page began giving Dad a "smooth" grade in Coordination and Control, and wrote "Confidence improved" and "Landings and patterns improved." In his August 7 and 8 entries, Page noted that Dad's attitude was "Cocky." The other Attitude choices were Dependable, Uncertain, Indifferent, and Erratic. Dependable was the most frequently checked box.

Following are four instructor remarks and Dad's responses, their tone characteristic of him. I suspect that Dad penned his responses after the instructors no longer had access to his logbook.

Stage A, Lesson 5: Tired. No indication of initiative.

Dad: *Must have been Monday.*

Stage D, Lesson 5: Good crosswind landing.

Dad: *Storm! 90-degree crosswind at approximately 50 mph. Generous with their "remarks," weren't they?*

Stage D, Lesson 8: Failed to use good judgment to return immediately to the airport when storm approached.

Dad: *Another g-- d--- storm! Was congratulated by the other boys for getting back at all!*

Stage D, Lesson 9: Good spots.

Dad: *Thank-you.*

Dad completed his CPTP training in September 1942, and was ready for the next big change in his life.

*"I passed the flight test and received my private 'ticket,' aka license. Happy day! The world was my oyster! I was put into a cadre of aspiring glider pilots awaiting assignment and sent home to wait until called."*

He didn't wait long. Soon the Army summoned the CPTP graduates back to the Grand Rapids Armory. An Army representative told the guys that they had two choices: resign from the Reserve and re-enlist in the U.S. Army Air Forces, or resign from the Reserve and take their chances getting drafted into the "walking army." As Dad put it, "Needless to say, the Air Force gathered ten privates to its bosom tout de suite."



*Byers in a Taylorcraft TG-6 training glider at the Arizona Gliding Academy, Wickenburg, Arizona, 1942*

Dad's training mates were Gerald J. Buist, David Conger, James J. DeVries, Albert E. DeWitt, A. Donald Leenhouts, David B. Perkins, Michael E. Sheehan, Raymond J. Teusink, and Robert D. Walters. On September 23, 1942, all of them were sent to Roswell Army Airfield, Roswell, New Mexico. After a two-week stay, they were dispatched to glider training fields.

Dad was sent to the Glider Pilot Replacement Center at Kirtland Army Airfield, Albuquerque, New Mexico. After a few days, he was ordered to Big Spring, Texas, to start Pre-glider Training. Two weeks later, the training was moved to Artesia, New Mexico.

Pre-glider Training consisted of ground school and practicing dead-stick (engine shut off) landings—day and night—in the trusty Piper Cubs. Actual glider flying would commence in late October 1942, at the Arizona Gliding Academy (AGA), Wickenburg, Arizona.

Upon graduation from AGA in late February 1943, Dad was awarded his coveted silver glider pilot wings and was promoted from private to staff sergeant. The next step was supposed to be Advanced Glider Training at South Plains Army Airfield, Lubbock, Texas. But it didn't happen.

### *Why Gliders?*

In the late 1930s, U.S. Army Air Corps (later renamed U.S. Army Air Forces) chief, Maj. General Henry H. "Hap" Arnold, recognized that the United States could use gliders to spearhead invasions and perform other special missions.

Not everyone agreed, but Arnold prevailed. By the end of 1940, the Air Force launched a glider program. But where would all the facilities, equipment, tow planes, gliders, instructors, mechanics, and pilots come from, and when?

As for pilots, an obvious source was the CPTP. Because Dad had signed up for the glider training option at Hope

College, he was quickly drawn into the Air Force glider program. He was to train for duty as a Waco CG-4A combat glider pilot, one of the most hazardous—and some say most unappreciated—duties in the Air Force.\*

### *Flying Coffins*

Under enemy fire, like parachute drops, gliders would land (or crash) all over the place, especially on nighttime missions. Hundreds of glider pilots and their airborne troops were killed in gliders, which were called "flying coffins" and "tow targets." During four missions on D-Day—two in pre-dawn darkness and two in daylight—20 percent of the glider pilots were killed or seriously wounded.

Glider pilots were easy targets while being towed by their low-and-slow-flying C-47 tow planes or after the gliders cut loose from their tows. Frequently, gliders would cut loose okay, but crash on the ground or water. Other times, air turbulence would cause gliders to crash while under tow. During the D-Day invasion, a glider was accidentally blown out of the sky by a bomb dropped from a U.S. fighter plane. And even after successful landings, scores of men were shot as they scrambled out of their gliders.

A young war correspondent named Walter Cronkite rode into the war zone aboard a CG-4A. Cronkite said it provided "a lifelong cure for constipation." And General James Gavin, commander of the 82nd Airborne Division, said that flying in CG-4As "gave a man religion." Glider pilots claimed that the "G" in the center of their pilot wings stood for "Guts." All glider pilots were volunteers, and they gained a reputation as a wild bunch.

### *New Flight Path*

For reasons beyond his control, Dad's fate was not to play out with the U.S. glider program. When he was poised to start Advanced Glider Training, the Air Force determined it had too many glider pilot trainees. The Air Force reviewed qualifications of some 7,000 elementary glider pilot trainees and re-assigned the best to air cadet training. As air cadets, they would try to become fighter pilots. That included Dad. It was not an easy gig. Air cadet training had a 40 percent washout rate.

Through it all, Dad maintained his sociable bearing and artistic bent. In the Basic Flight Training air cadet class book from Rankin Aeronautical Academy, his profile read: "Caricaturist, cartoonist and humorist personified. Never unhappy, never a complaint, always has time to stop and make some totally un-sarcastic, humorous ad lib."

After nearly a year of air cadet training—which culminated with flying the Curtis P-40 Warhawk—on February 8, 1944, Dad was awarded his powered flight wings and 2nd lieutenant's commission at Luke Army Airfield, Phoenix, Arizona.

Then he was assigned to fly the Republic P-47 Thunderbolt, at Abilene Army Airfield in Texas. Equipped with eight .50 caliber wing-mounted machine guns and bombs, napalm, or rockets, the Thunderbolt was the biggest and most heavily armed single-engine fighter plane of WWII, and finished the war (P-47N) as the longest-ranged and fastest.

Six months later—nearly two years after he finished his training at Hope College—he started flying combat missions in Europe. He joined the 411th Fighter Squadron (FS) in the 373rd Fighter Group (FG), 9th Army Air Force, in late July 1944, when it arrived at a newly constructed airfield at Tour-en-Bessin, France. The airfield was located about four miles inland from Gold Beach, one of five adjacent D-Day invasion beaches. The airfield would be the 373rd's first of seven on the European Continent.

Dad's fighter group specialized in dive-bombing and strafing, along with escorts of medium bombers and transports. The group was first assigned to support Lt. General George S. Patton, Jr.'s Third Army as it marauded through France.

In October 1944, the 373rd FG was assigned to support Lt. General William H. Simpson's Ninth Army. In that role, while stationed at Venlo, Netherlands, on March 14, 1945, the 411th FS earned the distinction of being the first Allied air unit to attack German targets from German soil. (The Venlo airfield straddled the Dutch-German border.)

Dad received his baptism of fire in early August 1944. He eventually would log 250 hours during 89 combat missions over France, Belgium, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Germany, and Czechoslovakia. That earned him the Air Medal with 12 Oak Leaf Clusters, indicative of various combat mission credits, and five battle stars.

Just three weeks after arriving in Normandy, on August 15, 1944, during a dive-bombing mission over Rambouillet, near Paris, his squadron of seven P-47s was jumped by at least twenty Focke Wulf 190 Luftwaffe fighter planes. Dad shot down one of them.

Three of his six fellow squadron members were shot down. Two pilots bailed out and lived to fight again. One was injured upon bailout, captured, and imprisoned in a German aid station in Paris. Luckily, he was freed when

Paris was liberated ten days later. The other pilot evaded capture and returned to the 373rd FG. He would die later in the war.

Dad's squadron leader that day, Capt. Everett King, died when his parachute failed to open after he bailed out of his shot-up Thunderbolt. King was posthumously awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross for his leadership during that day's mortal melee.

Records indicate that the foes probably were pilots attached to the famed Jagdgeschwader 26 fighter wing—also known as the Abbeville Boys—then stationed at Rambouillet. Dad later shot down a Messerschmitt Bf 109 fighter and an unidentified twin-engine aircraft. The two victories went uncredited.

After being disabled by Dad's machine gun fire, the Bf 109 pilot gave Dad a salute as the Luftwaffe aircraft began its crippled descent to a crash landing in a field. Dad followed and saw the German pilot exit his aircraft. Such crash landings were not deemed aerial victories. Dad told me that he and his fellow pilots' intent was to destroy the enemy "gun platform," not necessarily kill German pilots. The same consideration was not afforded German ground troops.



*Byers' P-47 Thunderbolt wreck, Reims, France, 1944*

On October 14, 1944, the engine blew on Dad's P-47 as he took off on a combat mission from his airfield at Reims, France. With no time to jettison his two wing-mounted 500-pound bombs and external fuel tank, he belly-landed in a marshy area. The bombs and fuel tank sheared off and did not explode. He sustained two separated shoulders and a cracked vertebra. He continued flying combat, but the shoulders were a problem the rest of his life.



Later in the war, Dad was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross for leading the destruction of a German supply train followed by, in bad weather, assembling stray elements of his and two other P-47 squadrons and leading them back to base.

As they set course for home, a pilot radioed Dad to tell him that his engine was spewing oil. The massive 2,000 HP radial engine powering Dad's P-47 had taken a direct hit, fired from a 20mm canon that was mounted in a flak car in the train he and his comrades had just destroyed. After a sweaty-palmed flight back to base, the damage to Dad's rugged Thunderbolt was deemed so extensive that his aircraft was written off as a total loss.

Dad named his last two ships *Maid from Michigan* and *Maid from Michigan II*. Both sported cowl art depicting a bathing beauty diving over an image of our state.

The 373rd FG earned a Distinguished Unit Citation for operations on March 20, 1945, during the Allied crossing of the Rhine River; the French Croix de Guerre with Palms for operations over France in support of Patton's Third Army in August 1944, and the Belgian Croix de Guerre and Belgian Fourragere for operations flown

from Belgian soil in 1944-1945, including during the Battle of The Bulge.

Bruce B. Byers, summer of '42 Hope College CPTP graduate, survived the war as a 1st Lieutenant and G Flight Commander in the 411th Fighter Squadron, 373rd Fighter Group, 9th Army Air Force. Not too shabby for an artistic and ambitious former altar boy and \$11-per-week grocery store manager.

*\*The Fighting Falcon Military Museum in Greenville, Michigan, was created to herald the U.S. combat glider program. The Gibson Refrigerator Company in Greenville was a major builder of WWII CG-4A gliders.*

*Author Kurt Byers is working on a book for family and friends about his father's time in World War II. Kurt retired in 2013 after 25 years as Communications Manager of the NOAA Sea Grant College Program at the University of Alaska Fairbanks, College of Fisheries and Ocean Sciences. He is a 1985 graduate of the University of Michigan School of Natural Resources and Environment. Kurt lives in Fairbanks, Alaska, where he stays warm enjoying swing and ballroom dancing.*

*(Images courtesy of Kurt Byers)*

**Saturday March 25, 2017**

This event supports the exploration, documentation, and interpretation of Lake Michigan shipwrecks

**Eight Years Diving the Carl D. Bradley**  
*by John Janzen*

Explore the largest and deepest dived Lake Michigan shipwreck and hear about the heart-breaking story of the loss of 33 of its 35 crewmen.

**Fire, Wind, and Storm**  
**The Discovery and Exploration of the Venus and Montezuma**  
*by David Trotter*

Dive two newly discovered intact schooners in Lake Huron with the Great Lakes' most renowned shipwreck hunter.

**Shipwrecks, Reality TV, and "The Michigan Triangle"**  
*by Valerie van Heest*

Reality television explores the topic of shipwrecks on Lake Michigan, making for some strange, true, mysteries and secrets of the underworld shared in this program depicting MSRA's recent work.

*The Carl D. Bradley*  
*by Steve Witucki*

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*19th Annual*  
**Beneath the Inland Seas**  
**Knickerbocker Theatre**  
86 East Eighth St. Holland  
7:00 - 9:30 PM  
\$12.50 in advance  
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*Archangel, Russia, ca. 1919*