

# Out of the Archives

a newsletter from the Washington State Archives

July 2016



SOS

Office of the Secretary of State

## Saluting Our Brave - A Veteran's Tale



### John Q. Murphy

*as told by Jamison Murphy*

His garage smelled of age old lumber scraps, even older tobacco, and the tall pines lining his Innis Arden yard in Shoreline. Everything was organized to his liking, and you'd better not change a thing. His garage housed tools, sports equipment, storage boxes, and everything else you would expect to find in a garage, including – novel idea – a car. But, to me, Grandpa John's garage wasn't full of those things. It was filled with stories. World War II stories. Whenever we were in the garage together we found something to spark a story. Sometimes it was the same story he told last time, but it was always worth hearing again. His remarkable ability to exude pride and humility at the same time was unlike anything else I've seen. He bragged about the record number of missions flown by the "Milk Wagon," one of the B-17s he navigated during the war; and promptly passed the credit to anyone else. I don't know if that's something he picked up from the Army Air Corps, or not. Either way, he spoke the voice of a great story teller.

My favorite story was one grandpa told many

times. It may not have been the best tale he ever told, but it left the biggest impact. He always slipped into a solemn moment when he was about to reminisce on this one. Then he donned an expression I call "grandpa face"; similar to, but not to be confused with, "angry grandpa face."

He would begin with a fitting, movie-like, raspy narrative, such as, "The year... was 1944. I was less than halfway through my tour when I was stationed at Rattlesden in England." This could be the start of any number of stories. It never failed to captivate.

"One day, the crew and I were getting ready to fly another mission over Germany," he continued. "B-17s were used for daylight bombings so we had to be at the airfield early in the morning. I was in a rush that morning, and it was crucial that we arrived on time."

He found the nearest place to sit, and met me at eye-level—I was seven. "We were prepping the plane and getting all the mission details, and just about ready to take off," then he would

pause a moment. "I couldn't find my glasses. Turns out I left them behind when I hurried off to the airfield. The colonel told me I had to sit this one out. I didn't like that one bit. You don't let your crew go into battle without you. But, I had no choice. They grounded me." He was shaking his head by this point.

"They found another navigator, and he took my place. They took off on the mission, and I waited at the base. I waited for them to return." He stared out the garage window, into the sky.

"They never returned."

That was the first time I ever got goosebumps from something other than cold weather.

"The plane was shot down over Germany. The navigator was killed instantly," he concluded. The story really hit home for me. Obviously, had he remembered his glasses and got shot down that day, my dad wouldn't be here, much less myself.

Later on, I would find out there were actually three survivors out of the eight crewmembers onboard. They were taken as POWs, and never flew again. My grandfather would go on to far exceed the standard 25 missions required to complete a tour. He ended the war with 37 completed missions (if I recall correctly), including several with the famed "Milk Wagon" bomber, recognized for completing a record 129 consecutive missions during the war.

John Q. Murphy was a generous, humble, caring old man. That's how I knew him. There are many who attest to his stubbornness and hard head, but those things never shone through with me. It took a long time, but I learned, underneath the kind old man's surface, there was a hardened veteran who had seen and done things I couldn't, and never will, imagine. Every once in a while, something would remind us of that. This was perfectly illustrated a few years before he passed away. When he was about 85 years old, he took a trip to California and delighted my sister with a day at Knott's Berry Farm. They have an attraction called "Supreme Scream," the tallest standing structure in Orange County. It is a thrill ride that takes 12 people, strapped to a cart, slowly lifts them over 250 feet up a tower and drops them into a free fall. Not for the faint of heart. 85-year-old Grandpa John decided to go on the ride. As he was strapping in to the ride, my sister asked him, "Are you sure you want to do this?"

Quickly he replied, "I was once in a B-17 tail spinning over Germany, on fire, I think I can handle your little roller coaster." He proceeded to hand his cane to a speechless ride attendant.

**To all the Washington veterans, and veterans everywhere: thank you for your service, and happy Fourth of July!**

John Q Murphy	
in the U.S. World War II Army Enlistment Records, 1938-1946	
Name:	John Q Murphy
Birth Year:	1917
Race:	White, citizen (White)
Nativity State or Country:	Montana
State of Residence:	Washington
County or City:	King
Enlistment Date:	22 Apr 1941
Enlistment State:	Washington
Enlistment City:	Tacoma
Branch:	Branch Immaterial - Warrant Officers, USA
Branch Code:	Branch Immaterial - Warrant Officers, USA
Grade:	Private
Grade Code:	Private
Component:	Selectees (Enlisted Men)
Source:	Civil Life
Education:	2 years of college
Civil Occupation:	Mechanics and repairmen, airplane
Marital Status:	Single, without dependents
Height:	67
Weight:	151