

Speech of Suzie Harper Perry (Daughter of SNAFU pilot Lt. James P. Harper)
Merville-Franceville - France - June 7, 2014

When Beatrice first asked my sister and me to say a few words about our father's role in the invasion in Normandy I thought how I would like to honor my father's memory and share some personal insights about his experiences. The problem is, I know very little about his experiences in World War 2. Like many men of his era, my father returned from the war to a happy America and was revered as a war hero. Unfortunately that was just temporary adulation spurred on by the elation of "winning" the big war.

Soon after, America forgot about the sacrifices made by her young soldiers and life returned to normal. The war was over, the lucky ones came home, married, had children and moved on with their lives. No one spoke of Post Traumatic Stress or any of the emotional wounds inflicted in a brutal war. In fact, most men didn't speak of the war at all, even with their families. They were strong men, soldiers, and they put that behind them and got on with their lives.

In reality they were boys barely out of high school. My father was a 21-year-old man, when he entered the Army Air Corps. He was only 22 years old when he earned his wings. In March of 1944, at age 23 he was assigned to the Army Air station in London England, where he was still a carefree young pilot, but that was before he experienced any real combat. His fellow pilots regaled me with tales of his young daredevil ways....he was always the comedian, taking other young British and French soldiers up and telling them, "You want to see how Americans mow their lawns?" and then proceeded to shave the "Grass" by flying low over farmland and shearing the crop with his propellers. As a pilot myself, I realize just how dangerous this was, but he was at war, maybe never to return, and when you are young as these men were, you had nothing to lose, you were invincible.

Hank Moreland, a fellow pilot told my sisters and I about our father's prowess as a pilot, he was an exceptional pilot and he was fearless. During one flight he proposed to fly through the legs of the Eiffel Tower, somewhat horrified, his copilot appealed to my father's better sense, so he settled for simply buzzing the great Tower, which means he did a close fly by. I did look it up though, he could have made it, the wingspan of the C47 is about 95 feet wide and the width of the leg span of the Eiffel Tower is about 243 feet. I wish my dad were still here so I could talk to him about that, it would have been fun, but he never told me any of these stories.

He was very young and as it is with youth, he felt invincible. But that was BEFORE he experienced combat, as I said before. Combat sucked all the youth and daredevil out of him. It made him a man with life or death decisions to make on a daily basis. The little I know about my father's exploits in WW2 was shared with me by the other pilots and crewmen he flew with. They developed a strong bond and camaraderie that lasted a lifetime, even though they did not keep in touch. They knew more about my father than anyone else I knew, including my mother. They shared the fear, anxiety and responsibility of preserving their own lives and the lives of their crew and troops. Such is war. The only story I know that came directly from my Dad was one he shared with my husband many years ago. My Dad was the father to 3 daughters after the war; no sons and I think he felt more comfortable speaking about these things to another man.

Daddy flew the SNAFU, the C47 that has been so meticulously and lovingly restored to her former glory here in Merville. He was flying over Bastogne during the Battle of the Bulge

and towing a glider plane. As they neared their drop, they were surprised by ferocious anti-aircraft fire. The SNAFU and the glider were taking a lot of hits. Daddy knew he had only 2 choices, keep going and risk the lives of his crew and the glider pilot, or cut the glider loose, an ominous decision either way, "What did you do," asked my husband. My father paused, as if reliving that horrifying moment in his young life, "I cut him loose" he replied. "What happened to him?" I don't know said Daddy, but I never forgot him.

My dad returned to Bastogne with the SNAFU full of holes, the tail, the wings, the fuselage were all badly damaged and even the rubber on the tires had been shot off. "I don't know how he flew that plane back and landed it in one piece, " one of the other pilots told me. "He was certainly never the same after that, he said." At the age of 22 I was in college deciding which classes to take, at the age of 22 my father was being shot at in an airplane and deciding whose lives to save.

I am vehemently opposed to War – any War, anywhere. My country should be the harbingers of peace, and although we pretend to be, we are not. My government frequently acts to protect their own interests, it matters little to me what these interests are if people are being maimed and dying to achieve their selfish goals. We should never engage in war.

I know that that is a dream, that as a country who values freedom as the USA does, who's motto is "bring me your tired, your hungry, your poor" that sometimes we must engage in combat to assist the worlds' more helpless, more oppressed people, like the young girls in Nigeria being brutalized by Boko Haram. I know it will take bloodshed to bring them home to their families. I am not naïve, but I am an optimist and I dream of the day when disagreements between countries or political entities can be solved with compromise, with negotiation and with temperance.... never with weapons, mutilation and death. Yes I dream for that world, but at the same time I honor all the men and women who gave up their families, their limbs, their emotional health, and the biggest sacrifice, their lives to serve their countries.

I honor my father, I know he is here today in spirit,

Je t'aime Papa.