

Keeping a Promise

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Mike Pungercar, author of "The Promise Kept: A Story of Life and Death in the 91st Bomb Group and the Eighth Air Force During World War II," holds up his father's photo and his book. Pungercar's interest in his father's experiences in World War II led to writing a book, involvement in Honor Flights, and even taking part in meeting Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe.

Sometimes a book can change your life. For Mike Pungercar, author of "The Promise Kept," writing a book about his father changed his life.

He calls himself an accidental author because he didn't think he was writing a book. What drove him to writing was his father. Growing up, he didn't know much about what his father did during World War II.

"When I was 15, he took me up to the attic, one Saturday and said, 'I want to show you something,'" Pungercar said. "He started to share a couple of stories and then all of a sudden he got a faraway look, stopped talking and that was it." His father mentioned the box again when he was 70 years old and asked if Pungercar had seen the box from World War II. "I was actually looking for a box of

old baseball cards that were from the 1950s that were probably worth about \$60,000, \$70,000," he said.

After going on a fishing trip, during the drive back, his dad opened up a little about his time (in the Army Air Corp in WWII). That led Pungercar to suggest that his father record his stories. "You gotta cut a tape and tell these stories," he recalled telling his father. "I'll tell everyone in the family so they're aware of the sacrifices you made.'

He didn't think he was a hero, however. He said he had a job to do and was lucky enough to survive."

In late August, 2001, a box arrived for Pungercar. It was a box of tapes. "To Mike, from Dad. Nov. 2 '42 to Oct. 9 '45, my three years in the Air Force," the writing on the box said.

He put them on a shelf.

Two Years later, his father passed away.

"It's a great gift to have," he said. "I can play it any time and listen to my dad talk." Pungercar said he and his family were going through his (Dad's) house, preparing it for an estate sale. That's when he found the box of his father's wartime memorabilia. "There was a metal tin. When I opened that up, there was his dog tags, his wings, the Air Medal, the piece of flak that hit him," he said. "I just couldn't believe it!" His sisters didn't argue with him, he added. It was his to take.

After a year of research, interviews, and taking notes, his wife came in (to his office) and said, "You have enough information that you could write a book." That's when it hit him that he really could. "The reason for writing the book was to share my Dad's story, as I promised I would," he said. "Obviously his story had gone beyond the family."

"The Promise Kept" tells the experiences of his father as a radio operator on a B-17 in the air war during World War II. "What was it like from 1942 to 1945? To be a young man, away from home and suddenly finding yourself flying in an unpressurized, unheated plane, up 25,000 to 28,000 feet in the air," he said.

Pungercar added that the book isn't just focused on his father. He weaved in photos from the war and stories from seven other veterans. He said he wanted to provide insight into the air war over Europe because it doesn't get as much publicity as Pearl Harbor or the Pacific. "Everybody knows about D-Day and the Battle of the Bulge," he said. "The 8th Air Force flying out of England - over Fortress Europe - lost more men than the Marines in the Pacific."

Pungercar told himself that after finishing his book, he needed to find something else to keep him busy with.

That's around the time he got involved with Honor Flight. He said he first heard about the program when he was interviewing a veteran in Wisconsin. The veteran had told him about how a charter flight to Washington, D.C. along with other World War II veterans was the trip of a lifetime.

Honor Flight is a non-profit organization that provides veterans with the opportunity to be transported to Washington, D.C. to visit their memorials. More than 150,000 veterans have flown (on their Honor Flight) since the organization's founding in 2005. "With this Honor Flight program, I've met some fantastic veterans," he said. "When you hear some of their stories, your heart just goes out to them."

Since working with the Honor Flight, he's noticed that taking the World War II veterans out to Washington, D.C. has allowed them to open up to their families. "A lot of families say they knew their dad served but never talked about until they got to D.C. with the other veterans," he said. "And that camaraderie and fellowship of other veterans, they opened and started talking for the first time and they continued to talk after they get home. So families are recording these stories and getting these histories down, just like I did with my dad."

Since he knew of the benefit of the Honor Flight, he went on to being an instrumental member in founding the South Willamette Valley branch of the Honor Flights, the 113th hub of the national program.

Without writing the book (*The Promise Kept*), Pungercar wouldn't have gone to Japan along with the OBON Society, an organization based out of Astoria, Oregon, that returns souvenirs collected by allied soldiers in the Pacific during World War II back to their ancestors in Japan. Pungercar said it's a way for the spirit of the deceased to come back home.

"They called and wanted to gather veterans to take 70 of these flags and take them to Tokyo, and we were going to present them to someone in the government," he said. "We returned the flags to Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. I was fortunate enough to be one of the six for the presentation. I never thought I'd be shaking hands with the Prime Minister of Japan!"

What began with Pungercar wanting to communicate what his father did during World War II to the rest of the family, it led him to meet with many other World War II veterans throughout the country, as well as in Japan.

"Writing *The Promise Kept* has been a gift to me," he said.