

‘The Promise Kept’ is a son’s tribute to his father

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The title of Michael Pungercar’s just self-published book, “The Promise Kept,” is a celebration but also a cautionary tale.

Although he kept his promise to his father, Frank Pungercar, to transcribe an audiotape the older man made in 2001 of his memories as a radio operator in dozens of B-17 bombing runs over Europe in World War II, the task took the younger Pungercar seven years to begin.

Once he finished the 12-page transcript, Pungercar wanted to know much more — “I found myself with many questions about his time in the Air Corps,” he writes in the foreword to his book — but his dad had died in 2006, two years before he finally retired and got around to doing the transcription. So Pungercar embarked on his own three-year quest to find the documents and people who could help him fill in his father’s history and experiences, culminating in a 300-page book with the subtitle, “A story of life and death in the 91st Bomb Group (H) and in the Eighth Air Force in World War II.”

The lesson from his experience, of course, is simple: The men and women of the World War II generation are rapidly leaving our midst, so if we want to capture their memories and insights, it must be done without delay.

Pungercar’s odyssey, which he calls “walking in Dad’s footsteps,” included a tour of a B-17 in Oshkosh, Wis., as well as an actual flight in one of the behemoth planes that also carried the moniker, Flying Fortress.

“When I took that flight in May 2010, it wasn’t long, but it was an experience I will never forget,” he said. “I was sitting in the radio operator’s seat, just as my dad had on 30 bombing missions during World War II.”

In beginning his research, Pungercar turned to the Internet, where he found the 91st Bomb Group’s website and a spreadsheet of all the group’s missions, including his father’s 323rd Squadron. The information he gleaned was as detailed as how many planes went up, who was on each one, the position of each bomber in the formation and how many of the planes received damage, or worse.

In Frank Pungercar's first mission, on Nov. 16, 1944, the 91st Bomb Group joined and flew with a total of 500 B-27s and 240 B-24s from England toward Eshchweiler in Germany, with the goal of bombing transportation targets to cut off supplies from the German front lines. Pungercar, assigned to be the radio-gunner, flew on a bomber nicknamed the Nine-O-Nine, piloted by Lt. W. Koff. It was the first mission for the entire crew, so their position was a "Tail-end Charlie" in a low squadron.

Flying through heavy cloud cover, the planes couldn't see the results of the bombs they dropped. No planes were lost on that mission, and only 19 of the nearly 750 bombers took on damage, mostly from flak. The mission involved more than 7,000 airmen; two died, and six were listed as missing in action as a result of the foray.

His father's comments on the tape were much briefer. "During the first mission I was on, flak didn't really seem to bother me — not much anyhow," the elder Pungercar said. "I was both excited and scared about going into combat. I had seen enough to know that this was for real, but we had a job to do, and the only way I was going to get to go back home was to get my missions in. I think everyone who went into combat experienced fear and had to learn how to deal with it. Anyone who says they never had fear probably had a desk job!"

Pungercar's research showed that the Nine-O-Nine, so-called for the last three digits of its 42-31909 serial number, "was probably the most famous plane, aside from the "Memphis Belle," to fly with the 91st. Records indicate that this B-17G completed 140 missions, 124 without an abort — thought to be the record for the Eighth Air Force. No crew members were lost while flying on the Nine-O-Nine."

After the war, his father kept a framed photo of the bomber in his office.

"The Promise Kept" includes a description of all 30 of Frank Pungercar's missions, including textbook finishes, crash landings and one mission, his seventh, on Dec. 15, 1944, in which he was hit in the ribs by flak that knocked him from his seat onto the floor, leaving him in great pain and unable to breathe. The pilot told the waist gunner to go check on the radioman, who instructed him to take small breaths to get air back into his lungs. The piece of flak penetrated his flak jacket, leather flying jacket and heated suit, smacked into his body and lodged against his side without breaking the skin.

In that mission, one engine was knocked out and another was running rough, but neither started on fire, so the plane dropped behind the rest of the formation and limped back to its base, without encountering fighter planes from either side.

Pungercar's research led him to several other veterans who served in the B-17s — including Don Fisher of Eugene, Clem Pine of Klamath Falls — and "The Promise Kept" also includes their stories, as well as describing Frank Pungercar's life before and after the war.

"One thing I realized in doing this book is that most of these people were kids just out of high school, maybe just out of college," Pungercar said. "I have tremendous respect and admiration for what these men and women went through, what they endured."

The isolation alone must have been overpowering, carrying on a war with no telephone, e-mail or Skype to bring family members close, Pungercar mused. “Looking back, I find it just amazing — they were just completely separated from home, sometimes for years.”

He has mementos from his father’s service, found in an old cardboard suitcase in the attic after his father died. “My dad had wondered where those things were, so we were all convinced something had happened to them and they were gone,” Pungercar said. “Then I opened up that suitcase, and there it all was. I had tears in my eyes.”