

Hump Pilot Remembered

Several Roundup subscribers have sent in clippings of the following article which appeared about Memorial Day last year in Air Force Times. Perhaps someone will remember John Burton Byron and the circumstances surrounding his ill-fated flight.

By BRUCE CALLANDER
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He wasn't shot down by fighters. He wasn't knocked down by flak.

He just "went down" — someplace between India and China — and they never found him.

There's nothing to decorate on Memorial Day. If there is a grave, it's probably somewhere in those mountains. I doubt he ever found Shangri La. But if memory is a memorial, he has one.

John Burton Byron was about the most decent man I ever knew. He was from Long Beach, Calif., and when I met him at the San Antonio Aviation Cadet Center, he may have been all of 20.

He didn't smoke or drink. He was engaged and he didn't cheat on his girl. He didn't sprinkle his conversation with the four-letter words which are supposed to prove you've reached manhood.

He studied his ground school books, and when we came to fly, flew the old Fairchild PT-19 for all she was worth.

Being a "good boy" doesn't always make for popularity in a male barracks. He would have been a logical target for the put-down artists of the day. But I never heard anybody make fun of John. They all seemed to like him.

We went through primary flight training at Vernon, Tex., and then on to heavier trainers (Vultee BT-15s) at Enid, Okla. We agreed we'd ask for multi-engine advanced training and try to get on the same crew.

But I washed out before I made advanced and that shot the idea. I tried again — this time with bombardier school — and still had some hope of catching up with John and joining his crew.

I didn't make it. He had earned his pilot wings and was in crew training at Pueblo, Colo., when I graduated. I was sent to Salt Lake City and then on to Mountain Home, Idaho, for my crew training.

I managed to see him for an evening in Pueblo enroute to Salt Lake. He was married by then and was about the happiest man I had ever seen. He gave me a book of Shakespeare for graduating from bombardier school. I still have it.

While I was in Mountain Home, John shipped for China. A few months later, I was sent to Italy. We both got the planes we asked for — B-24s — but we wound up in different theaters.

I had finished my missions and was back home when I heard about it. Between missions, John was flying the "Hump" — the Himalayas. They said he had a group of chaplains as passengers. You couldn't go far wrong with a bunch like that aboard, I thought.

But of course, you could. Somewhere enroute they got off course. Other pilots kept an eye out for them for a while, but there wasn't much to be done. There are a lot of mountains out there that can swallow a bomber whole.

I visited John's wife in California once after that. She said that some of the wives were going to spiritualists and having visions. One saw the men walking into some kind of Tibetan village and being taken care of. Just like the movie.

Later, John's wife remarried and I lost touch. I checked the casualty records at the Pentagon after the war and he still was carried as missing. I suppose that, in time, they declared him officially dead.

It's not a dramatic story. John did fly combat and, I suppose, picked up the usual medals for it. But as far as I know, he didn't do anything particularly heroic — just "went down" somewhere and didn't walk out.

That's the way it was with a lot of people. Some bought it on training missions before they ever made it overseas.

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I knew one man who finished his missions and then was killed by a truck.

Does it matter? It would be nice to think that all of them gave their lives in battle. But wars are a peculiar form of insanity. You can't count on giving your life in a particular way — any more than you can count on holding onto it.

Anyway, I think about John Burton

Byron sometimes on Memorial Day and it's a good memory. He was a fine man and he was my friend. He didn't get to have children and mow his lawn and make car payments and all those things.

But he is remembered. Every now and then, people ask my son John how his middle name came to be Bryon. And he tells them.