

1st Lieutenant Ralph William Dennings

Crew 731, 787th Bomb Squadron, 466th Bomb Group (H), 96th Combat Wing, 2nd Air Division, 8th Air Force, U.S. Army Air Forces

Officers Reserve Corps, Army

Medals: Distinguished Flying Cross, Air Medal with 3 Oak Leaf Clusters, European African Middle Eastern Theater Medal with four Bronze Stars for Normandy, Northern France, Germany and Ardennes Campaigns; World War II Victory Medal



MHS Class of 1940

When Dorothy "Dot" Dennings passed away in May 2025 at the age of 99, her children, Gary and Christy, began the arduous process of cleaning out the home Dot had shared for almost 70 years with her husband, Ralph. To their astonishment and great pleasure, they discovered a collection of over 700 letters written during World War II between their parents. Neither knew the letters existed. Dot had lovingly stored the letters in the attic for decades along with military documents from Ralph's time in the Army Air Force during World War II, his uniforms and medals, mementos, post cards, and photographs. It was a gold mine, an intimate look into the lives of a young, engaged couple in 1943 who were separated by a world war and who wanted nothing more than to be together.

It took many months to read, scan, and ponder over the hundreds of letters between Dot and Ralph. Above all, Ralph's love and longing for Dot sears each page of every letter and offers a glimpse into the life of a young, 21 year-old cadet who was desperate to earn a commission in the Army Air Force, complete 35 combat missions over enemy occupied Europe, and return home to the woman he loved. For Dot, the letters show an 18 year old girl older than her years, engaged to a man who was heading into a war zone. She had to abandon her wedding plans at the last minute to travel alone, 2,000 miles to El Paso, Texas, to get married before her "new" husband left for war-torn Europe. She faithfully wrote to Ralph every day that they were separated for three years, and their correspondence sustained Ralph during the most difficult moments of his life. It's quite a story.

Ralph William Dennings was the seventh of ten children born on May 1, 1922, to John Howard Dennings and Nina Loretta Siefert Dennings. Ralph's father, John, was born in Anna but moved to St. Marys where he was the proprietor of the J.H. Dennings Service Station on East Spring Street. He rented a farm in the country where he and Nina raised their ten children during the height of the Great Depression, where food and money were scarce. The children attended Noble school, several miles north of St. Marys. John Dennings died unexpectedly at age 50 in November 1931, when Ralph - who was the third of four sons - was just 8 years old.

**Ralph William
Dennings**

After his father's passing, the family moved back to the city of St. Marys where they rented a house on Beech Street. Ralph helped to support the family by working as a caddy at Northmoor Country Club. He walked several miles each way on the railroad tracks to Northmoor. There he developed a lifelong love for golf. In fact, when he passed away in 2019, his family had an image of a golf player



Ralph as a Roughrider.

engraved on his tombstone.

Ralph excelled in high school, serving as class Secretary all four years. He was also active in Hi-Y, the Debate Club, basketball, and was the left halfback and Captain of the Rider football team. He graduated in 1940, alongside many classmates who would serve in World

War II, including Franklin Eberle, Janet Kite, William Koenig, Herbert Kohlhorst, Thomas Reiher, and Thomas Vanderhorst.

After high school, Ralph worked as an Inspector at the St. Marys Manufacturing Company (the predecessor to Goodyear Tire & Rubber Company) while his older brothers, John and Frank, enlisted in the Army Air Corps and Navy respectively. Ralph did not want to be drafted into the Army where he likely would have been assigned to the Infantry. In an interview he gave to a newspaper,



With teammates featured in the 1940 Mirror.

Ralph William
Dennings



At Ft. Hays, Kansas.

he stated, "If I had been drafted, I would have gone into the infantry, and I didn't want to go into the infantry. So (by enlisting) I pretty well planned the way I was going to serve." (Newspaper article, undated)

Instead, Ralph enlisted at Patterson Field on September 8, 1942, joining the Army Air Force as a cadet. He later explained that by joining in September, he realized he would not be called to active duty for four or five months. This allowed him time to spend with his girlfriend, Dorothy "Dot" Valentine. On Christmas 1942, Ralph proposed to Dot, then a senior in high school, and she happily said yes.



Dot (center) with high school friends.

Shortly after the new year, Ralph received orders to report to active duty on January 16, 1943. He was inducted into the service at Ft. Hays in Columbus, Ohio, and was sent first to Fort Knox, Kentucky, and then to Sheppard Field in Wichita Falls, Texas, for Basic Training. Ralph wrote to Dot in January 1943, telling her that he joined the Army Air Force for her. He wanted to secure a commission and earn money so they could be married. He wrote, "I gotta get that commission though so you & I will have plenty of money to live on after we're married, which will be soon, I hope. I think you know, honey, that there is only one reason I'm taking all this crap in this cadet training & that reason is you, darling. I joined this in the first place so I could spend a few extra months at home with you & swell months they were too." (January 13, 1943, letter from Ralph Dennings to Dorothy Valentine)

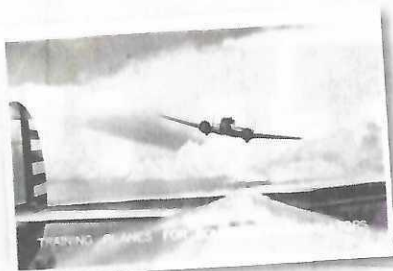


Private Dennings was sent in mid-March 1943 to Lewis Field in Hays, Kansas as part of the 83rd College Training Detachment. He received 10 hours of flight training in a Piper Cub and took freshman classes at the Fort Hays State College.

Ralph kept his Pilot Rating Book from this time. For his first lesson on April 6, 1943, Ralph flew 30 minutes in an Aeronca 20C single propeller plane. The instructor noted

that Ralph was "Eager to learn" and gave him an 86% grade on his first flight lesson. He continued to earn grades in the 70s and 80s, and his instructor noted that he "Reacts quickly, seems to have good knowledge for no more time than he has had." Ralph later recalled that after flying for an hour, the instructor would take over, flying at a low altitude, and aim for jack rabbits that Ralph claimed were dog-sized. ("Replacement Crew, The Training and Combat Experience of a Typical 8th AF Replacement Crew - 1944," Richard C. Baynes, p. 26)

Ralph William
Dennings



Ralph was sent to the San Antonio Army Air Corps Classification

Center in San Antonio in May 1943 where he qualified for pilot training. In a postcard to Dot on May 19,

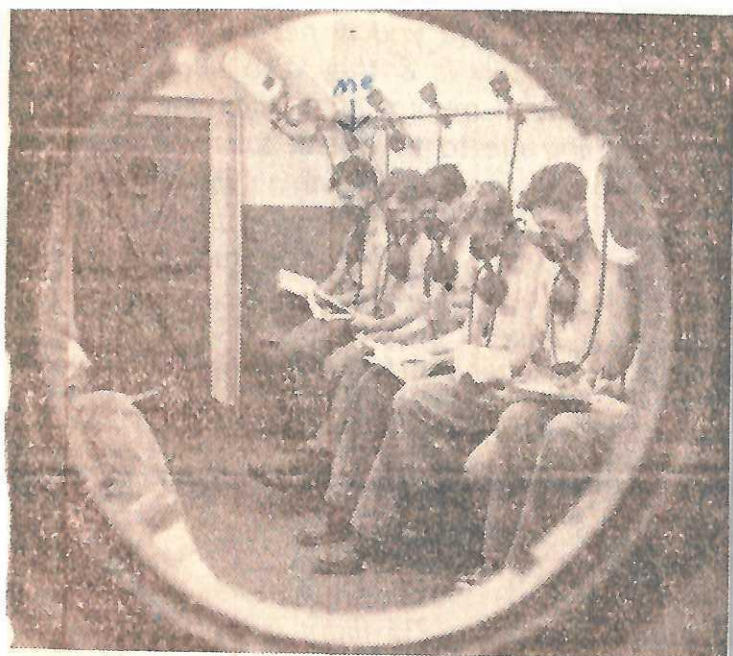


1943, Ralph wrote that they took a seven-hour mental health assessment so that pilots could be placed for advanced training. He sent Dot another postcard with a picture of a large, twin propeller training plane for Bombardiers and Navigators. He noted that he had "detail" about every day, three hours of drill, two hours of physical training and a lecture following by policing the area. Another postcard showed a B-17E and Ralph wrote that he wanted to fly it. He wrote, "These babys [sic] are really big & sturdy. You've probably read about the flying fortresses bombing in all areas of the war." A week later, Ralph asked to reclassify to Bombardier when he learned that the course was shorter than that for pilot training. Ralph said, "The thing that I'm most thankful for is that had I stuck with my first choice, I would not have had the opportunity to know and fly with the great bunch of guys that made up our crew, and the sad truth is that I may never have made it through pilot training, so I count my blessings, and have never regretted my second choice." ("Replacement Crew, The Training and Combat Experience of a Typical 8th AF Replacement Crew - 1944," Richard C. Baynes, p. 26-27)

Bombardiers trained at Ellington Field in Houston, Texas. During a hurricane, he and others were called out to hold onto the plane's tie-down ropes to keep the plane anchored and upright. He wrote Dot telling her how hard training was, and that a large percentage of cadets wash out during training. Ralph worked hard in class and, although 52% of his class washed out, Ralph persevered and made it through. Ralph's mother, Nina, and fiancée, Dot, traveled to Texas for his graduation in September 1943. Ralph was then sent to Harlingen Army Air Field, formerly known as Aerial Gunnery School, located 27 miles north of Mexico as part of the Class 44-4. He was assigned to the 2nd Training Detachment. Ralph wrote home describing seeing orange groves and palm trees for the first time, of the intense heat and sunburns, parched lips, huge mosquitos, and what he described as "bad water."

Gunnery school was long, hard work - 10 hours a day in training plus night classes. Sometimes, class was held in the Sperry gun turret which is the gun turret on the belly of the flying fortress and B-24 planes. They were taught "flexible gunnery," which meant that the gunner was trained to swing his barrels around in any direction to shoot at enemy targets. General H.H. Arnold described the gunner's role in a speech in August 1942:

In the bombers it's the combat crew that counts. The navigator gets them to the target; it's the bombardier who drops the bombs and determines the hits or misses made. It's the gunner who sits in the turret all cramped and tense with his eyes



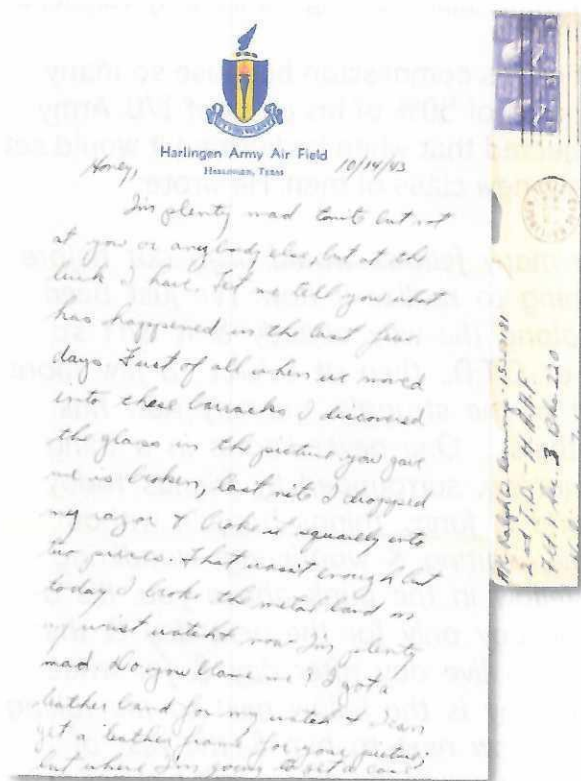
UNDER PRESSURE — Reading magazines or studying their lessons, these aerial gunnery students at the Harlingen Army Air Field pass the time while the atmosphere becomes more and more rarefied in the low-pressure chamber at the gunnery school. Pressure changes approximate conditions of high-altitude flying. Through the porthole in the chamber gunnery instructors watch the reactions of their students in this early phase of the comprehensive gunnery course.

peeled in all directions watching for the enemy diving out of the sun.

(“A Picture Book of Harlingen, Army Gunner School, Texas”)

They learned to fire .22 caliber rifles at moving targets, B.B. compressed air operated machine guns at moving airplane models, and .50 caliber M2 machine guns that are used in the gun turrets of bombers. He loved training and firing from the gun turrets, and he discovered that he was good with weapons, writing, “We now know every one of the 134 parts & where they go. We’ve been taking it apart & putting it together now for eight hours & I’m getting pretty fast at it.... By the way we have to take that cal. 50 M.G. apart & put it together blindfolded at the end of two weeks.” They also trained in a pressure chamber to learn about the conditions of high altitude flying. Ralph sent a picture of himself in a pressure chamber and was excited to share that he excelled at weapons training and aircraft identification. In fact, he earned an expert medal in aerial gunnery.

Ralph wrote to Dot that Army training had changed him, “made a man” out of him. He wrote:



... deep down inside me I have grown many years in the few months I've been in the cadets. It takes something more than the army to make a boy a man, it takes something rough & tough & hard to take & the cadets have furnished all three. In civilian life it takes a person a long time to age into manhood, mentally at least but in the cadets or anything similar it's a matter of a few months. It was indeed fortunate for me you came along when you did. You know very well that I joined the cadets so I could spend a few more lovely months at home with you. A better thing couldn't have happened, honey, I did get to spend those lovely months with you & when I did have to leave I came into something that was all too soon to make me a man. I'm not saying I like the cadets & I'm not saying I don't, but I only know this, that they have made a man of me, they have made me

Ralph William Dennings

other person could have done, the job of making a man of me or nearly so. I guess maybe that's the only change the Army has brought to me you didn't notice it I don't think but I've had a lot of time to think about different things & well if you think enough & get any thing out of your thoughts it's bound to change you some & it certainly has me; it so you can notice it, but deep down inside me I have grown many years in the few months I've been in the cadets. It takes something more than the Army to make a boy a man, it takes something rough & tough & hard to take & the cadets have furnished all three. In civilian life it takes a person a long time to age into manhood, mentally at least but in the cadets or anything similar it's a matter of a few months. It

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New York, N.Y.

realize how much I love you & need you & just how dear home really is & they also allowed me these last wonderful months at home. Now they are still teaching me to take it & take it some more, I'm grateful for it. Now I'm on my way to a commission & a place in this man's army if I just stay on the ball. With graduation comes the real beginning of our lives darling, yours & mine, & it will be swell, darling, I promise."

(October 14, 1943, letter from Ralph Dennings to Dorothy Valentine)

By November 1943, Ralph's training had advanced from firing weaponry on the range to training on flights over the Gulf of Mexico. He described the experience to Dot:

I just got back from a 2½ flight in an AF-18 on gunnery mission. I fired 200 rounds from a Matlin Upper turret & 100 rounds from a waist gun & got 35 hits. ... We also shot at an AT-6 with camera guns & this is really a lot of fun. We were about 8000 feet up & far out over the gulf & it's the first time I could look for miles & miles & not see any

land, nothing but water & often the horizon was hidden by clouds. Saw a few harbor towns on the coast & things really look beautiful from up there. The orange groves are remarkably systematically laid out & it's a really beautiful sight. As you probably guessed there are many lakes, lagoons, swamps & rivers to add to the many strange & wonderful figures below."

(Nov. 6, 1943, letter from Ralph Dennings to Dorothy Valentine)

Ralph's main concern during this time was about getting his commission because so many cadets washed out in training and advanced training - upwards of 50% of his class of 170. Army doctors urged Ralph to have his tonsils removed, but he rejected that when he learned it would set him back three weeks and he would have to start over with a new class of men. He wrote:

Honey, when I first came into this & they told me how many fellows would drop out before we got through I could hardly believe it, but I'm beginning to realize it now. I've just been sitting here thinking of all the fellows who've dropped along the way already & it isn't so hard to believe. There were several wash outs at C.T.D., then at S.A.A.C. a few more washed out, Ellington Field saw more drop out of the struggle, gunnery now has caught a few more & injuries claimed many others.... One never knows in a thing like this. You're here today & maybe gone tomorrow, surrounded by friends today swarmed by enemies tomorrow. It's a funny world & funny things happen without any reason day after day & it's rather awesome, waiting & wondering, wondering if maybe tomorrow is your day or maybe the fellow in the bunk above you. It's a hell of a life, honey, living one day, existing one day only for the next day & the day after & the day after that. Living & striving to live day after day & for what. What am I taking all this hell & high water for, why is the fellow next to me taking the same thing & feeling the same way, & the fellow next to him & the rest of the fellows on down the line, why, honey, does it have to be this way? I guess

Ralph William
Dennings

nobody really knows & maybe nobody ever wonders very much. I guess maybe I shouldn't be wondering myself, maybe it isn't my place to be wondering; it is a funny world isn't it, honey, but still we fight for the right to live in it."

(Oct. 31, 1943, letter from Ralph Dennings to Dorothy Valentine)

Ralph continued to practice with the bombsight, explaining that it took long hours to be a proficient bombardier. He wrote: "The course here is very tough, especially navigation. Everyone is having plenty of trouble, but I'll get it in time...."

Our instructor told us that they are teaching us in one day what they used to teach in 2 days & I believe it." (Nov. 19, 1943 letter from Ralph to Dot) He studied Theory of Bombing, Bombs & Fuses, Navigation, E-6-B computer, and Norden Mk. VX Bombing, known as the Norden M. The Norden Bombing combined optics, a mechanical computer and autopilot to both identify a target and fly the plane to it. "The bombsight directly measured the aircraft's ground speed and direction, which older types could only estimate with lengthy manual procedures. The Norden further improved on older designs by using an analog computer that continuously recalculated the bomb's impact point based on changing flight conditions, and an autopilot that reacted quickly and accurately to changes in the wind or other effects."

(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Norden_bombsight)



Scan to learn more about the Norden Bombsight.

was indeed fortunate for me you came along when you did. You know, my old that I joined the cadets so I could spend a few more lovely months at home with you. A letter thing couldn't have happened. Honey, I did get to spend those lovely months with you & when I did have to leave I put into something that was all to some to make me a man. I'm not saying I like the cadets & I'm not saying I don't, but I only know this, that they have made a man of me, they have made me realize how much I love you & need you & just how dear home really is & they also allowed me that last wonderful month at home. Now they are still teaching me to take it & take it some more, & I'm grateful for it. Now this is my answer to a commission & a place in the main army of I just

At Ralph's Army 15-2011
2nd T.D. - H.H.H.
701 1 Dec 3 1943

His hard work and practice paid off. Ralph graduated from Gunnery School on November 13, 1943, with an expert medal in aerial gunnery that he sent home to Dot. It wasn't only Bombardier and Gunnery School that Ralph passed. He felt that the Army had changed him. He wrote:

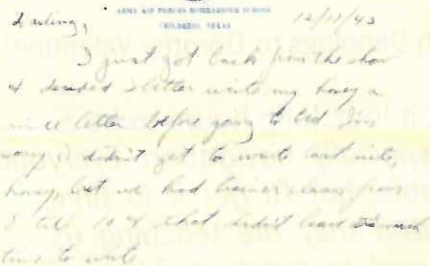
I guess maybe that's the only change the Army has brought to me. You didn't notice it I don't think but I've had a lot of time to think about different things & well if you think enough & get anything out of your thoughts & it's bound to change you some & it certainly has me; not so you can notice it, but deep down inside me I have grown many years in the few months I've been in the cadets.

(Oct. 14, 1943, letter from Ralph Dennings to Dorothy Valentine)

Ralph was asked about his role as a Bombardier once in an interview. He said, "I had the best seat in the house. I rode in the turret all the time; the bomb site was right in the nose of the plane, and so was I." (newspaper article, undated)

After graduation, Ralph immediately took a train to Childress, Texas to attend Advanced Training for Bombardier School. He noticed that some of his former classmates joined him there direct from Pre-Flight. They did not get gunnery training like Ralph did, but Ralph was glad he had it. "...[S]ome day their life may depend on what they know about a gun & in their case it will be very little, but in my case I'll have a chance to fight for my life cause I know the guns & I'm glad of it." (Nov. 27, 1943,

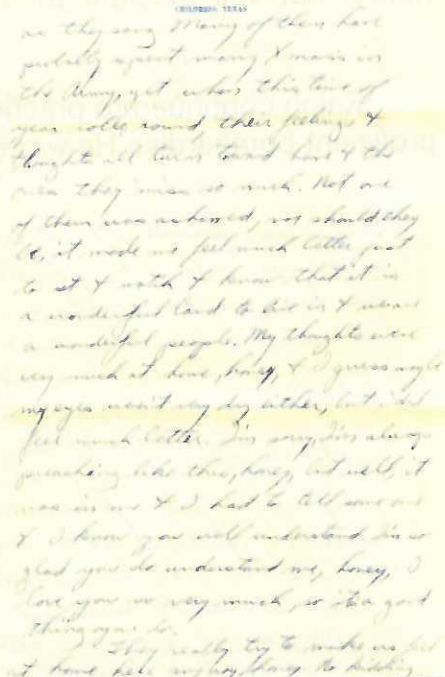
Ralph William
Dennings



I had planned to write after
5 L. yesterday but we had a special
P.T. workout. The P.T. was scheduled
to go with the officers here on the
field in football. Well, you know what
happened first of all, you're right I
got in the game & it lasted longer
than the regular P.T. period so that
the reason I didn't write. Say the way,
honey, we won 24-6. It was a well game
& I had lots of fun, but I was kinda
sore today. I guess it's old age creeping
up on me, but you know

The show I saw tonight was "Happy Land" & gee, honey, if you haven't seen it, don't miss it. It's really very good. We seem to get the shows out here much sooner than they do at home. I'll go to all these shows & then I'll tell you the good ones & the bad ones & then you won't be disappointed or surprised in any of them.

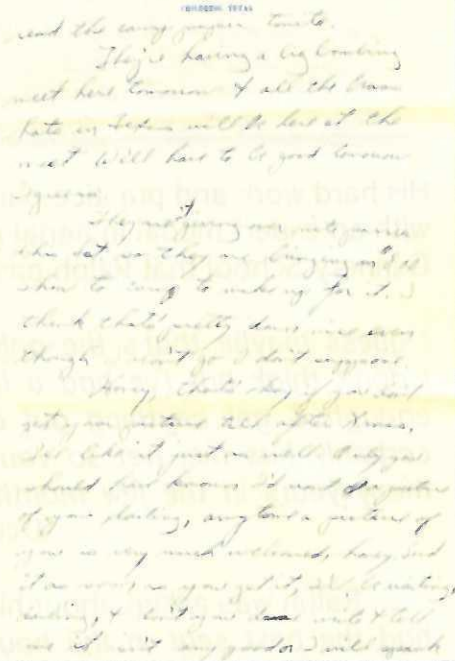
I had a community singing
the show tent & it was one of the
most wonderful sight in our lives.
You know, King, the U.S. has the
hardest, toughest & best soldiers in
the world; but if you could hear our
choral song, rough & tough soldiers of
these show tents, singing there was
nothing, just the King, singing, ~~that~~
a man, no matter how rough & tough
he is, has a heart & feelings. He sat
there & looked at the different
fellows around me, it was really a good
night to see that so many of these fellows
it is not so many as you think it is.



they try to make us feel as happy as possible. I wish it or not, they set up a X mass tree in each room here & put angels, stars & lights on it they also decorated the mess hall with green & red crepe paper & paper balls. It looks grand & it doesn't at all seem like the army to be thing like this; but here they are doing this thing like that for the ladies. Why, honey, & this is against all army rules, & they don't ever make us go to church on the morning & we don't have any will any more, so we don't have to get up till 10.30 if we don't want to. It's not a very good looking range & it's not very modern, but the cleaning below is very good to soldiers. I like it here ever though it is tough & rough, but I want to come home to your place, & ever, let's hope, I will be coming home to you, we'll head into Texas, the more soldiers as the field today, but I don't all here, but I don't know who was there.

As his Christmas away from home and his fiancé approached, Ralph expressed how he and his fellow soldiers were feeling homesick. He wrote about a community show he attended where soldiers were moved to tears by Christmas carols. He wrote:

They had a community sing in the show tonite & it was one of the most wonderful nights I've ever seen. You know, honey, the U.S. had the hardest, toughest & best soldiers in the world; but if you could have seen these same rough & tough soldiers of Uncle Sam's tonite, singing those Xmas carols; you'd know, darling, that



you when I get home
 I wasn't surprised at you saying
 an elephant for yourself, honey, in fact
 I half expected it. I'm glad you did,
 darling, because if you wouldn't have
 I'd have known you had changed &
 I don't want that to change, darling,
 not for anything. Just being the
 thing, like that I'll know you
 aren't changing, honey, I'll know
 that you're still my sweet & will
 still be my sweet & I love you very much
 my very sweet & I love you very much
 Oh, honey, I gotta shut up
 I go to bed so I better stop now
 I'll write tomorrow though, at
 goodnight, darling, & try to dream
 of us. I love you, darling
 All my love & kisses to my
 darling, the last girl
 ever.
 (Love, my girl)
 Ralph

a man, no matter how rough & tough he is, has a heart & feelings. As I sat there tonite & looked at the different fellows around me it was a really a good sight to see that so many of them, believe it or now, were wiping tears from their eyes as they sang. Many of them have probably spent many Xmas's in the Army, yet when this time of year rolls round, their feelings & thoughts all turn toward home & the ones they miss so much. Not one of them was ashamed, nor would they be; it made me feel much better just to sit & watch & know that it is a wonderful land to live in & we are a wonderful people. My thoughts were very much at home, honey, & I guess maybe my eyes weren't very dry either, but I did feel much better.

(Dec. 17, 1943, letter from

Ralph Dennings to Dorothy Valentine)

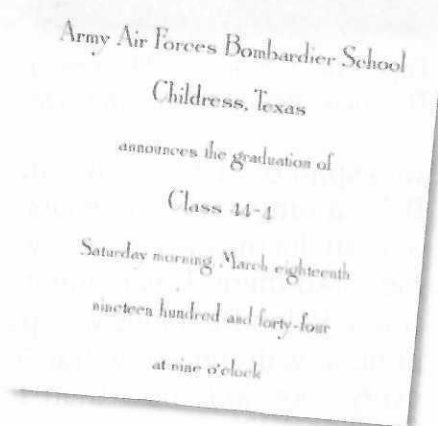
Meanwhile, Ralph and Dot continued to make plans for a church wedding in St. Marys. Ralph sent out an invitation to his family and Dot for graduation from the Army Air Forces Bombardier School in Childress, Texas set for March 18, 1944. He was part of Class 44-4 and was commissioned as a 2nd Lieutenant. He had been approved for several weeks

leave before he was supposed to report to the 18th replacement Wing Army Air Base in Salt Lake City, Utah. He had planned to use this leave to travel to St. Marys and get married. Orders, however, changed unexpectedly, and Ralph's leave was cancelled. On March 6, 1944, he was ordered to report to the 306th Base Headquarters and Air Base Squadron, Army Air Field, El Paso, Texas - known as Biggs Field. There he was assigned to the B-24 Liberator Crew #3686 as the Bombardier. Crew 3686 consisted of:

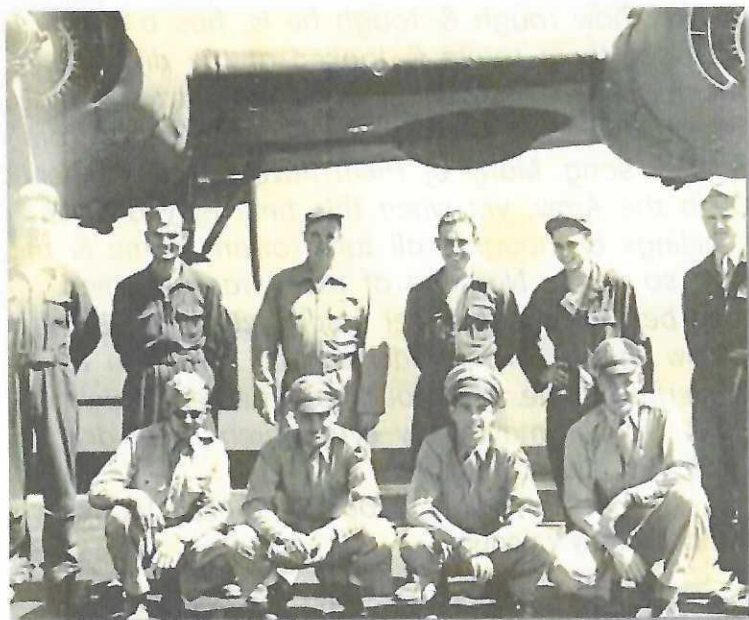
Pilot - 2nd Lt. Richard C. Baynes (age 19)
 Co-Pilot Flight Officer - Seymour Friedman (age 22)
 Radio Operator - Sergeant Lester O. Nicholson (age 19)
 Navigator 2nd Lt. Lloyd B. Holden (age 24)
 Flight Engineer - Staff Sergeant Lester R. Walters 9 (age 21)
 Gunner and Assistant Radio Operator - Sergeant John H. Gattis (age 23)
 Armorer Gunner - Corporal Harvey B. Walton, Jr. (age 28)
 Bombardier - 2nd Lt. Ralph W. Dennings (age 21)
 Flight Engineer - Staff Sergeant Lester R. Walters (age 21)
 Tail Gunner - Sergeant Harold D. Bailey (age 19)

Dot once described the situation as: "We had the wedding all planned here at home, and then at the last minute his leave was cancelled, so all our wedding plans were cancelled. I hopped on the bus and went to El Paso, Texas and got married because that's where he was. Things were a lot different during the war."

(newspaper article, undated) Ralph and Dot were married by a Justice of the Peace as soon as she arrived on April 5, 1944, in El Paso. After the brief ceremony, they went to see a movie - "The Woman of the Town" and "The Sullivans" were



**Ralph William
 Dennings**



playing at the local Plaza and Ellanay Theaters at the time – and dinner after. Ralph even kept a copy of the movie ticket stub where they sat in the Balcony, Section M, Row 2, Seat 8. His daughter, Christy, said Ralph frequently talked about going to the movie that night because he had the misfortune to sit on gum someone left on the seat, and he had the devil of a time trying to get that off his brand new uniform!

While Ralph continued to live and train on base, Dot lived in the Roosevelt Hotel in downtown El Paso where the wives of crew members, Seymour Friedman and John Gattis, lived. When Ralph was

able to get away, they spent this honeymoon time exploring the El Paso area, visiting the Carlsbad Cavern. Ralph's photo album from this time includes many postcards with his handwritten notation, "Our only honeymoon trip" in El Paso, Texas.

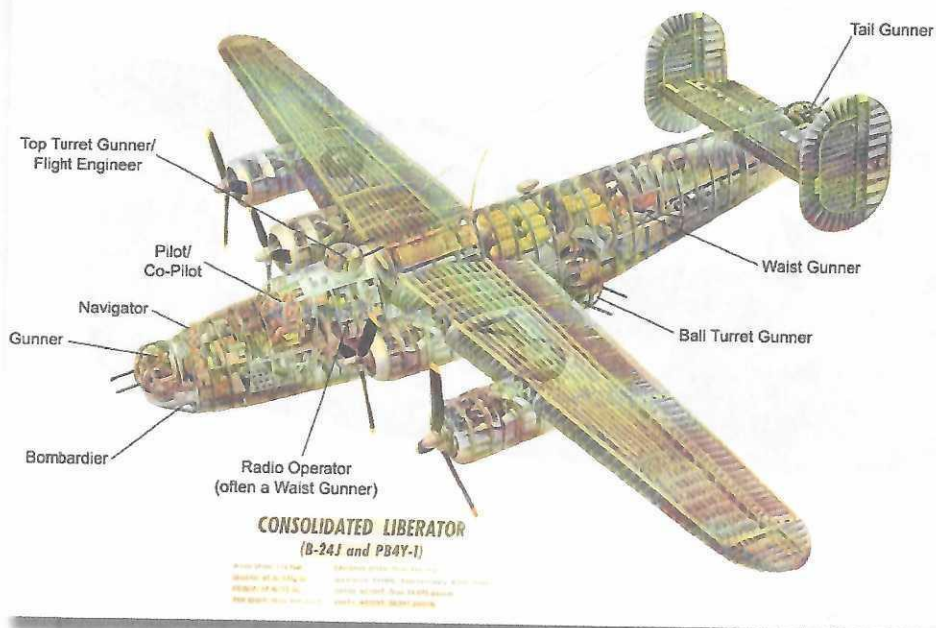


Another photo of Ralph in uniform.



Top: The Baynes B-24 crew. Bottom: The new Ralph & Dorothy Dennings.

The new crew began training together in the B-24 Liberator – also known as "The Flying Coffin" on March 12, 1944. The B-24 bomber was a workhorse of the Army Air Force during World War II. The B-24D model had a crew of 10, a wingspan of 110 feet, maximum speed of 303 miles per hour, four engines similar to the B-17, a range of 2,850 miles, and a capacity to hold more bombs than any other Allied aircraft. Its main weakness was its Plexiglas nose that held a single swivel .50 caliber gun mounted there. This made it vulnerable to frontal attacks. The nose turret was exactly where Ralph Dennings was positioned on the B-24 as the Bombardier. The plane was so popular with the Army that "At its production peak, one B-24 rolled off the assembly line every hour, with more than 18,000 built – more than any other heavy bomber in history." ("The Tragic Reason So Many B-24 Liberator Crews Didn't Return From WWII Missions," John Lerit, Oct. 13, 2025)



Layout of the Consolidated B-24 Liberator. It packed a large payload and was sometimes known as "The Flying Coffin."



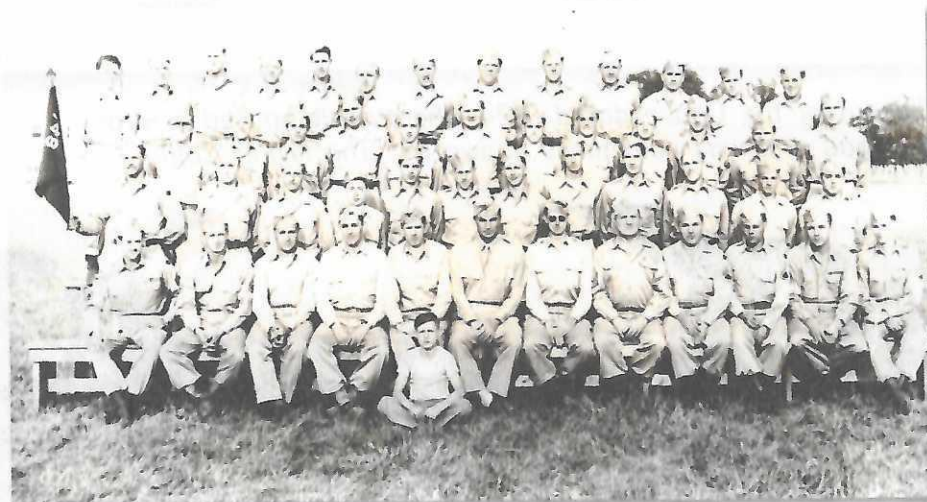
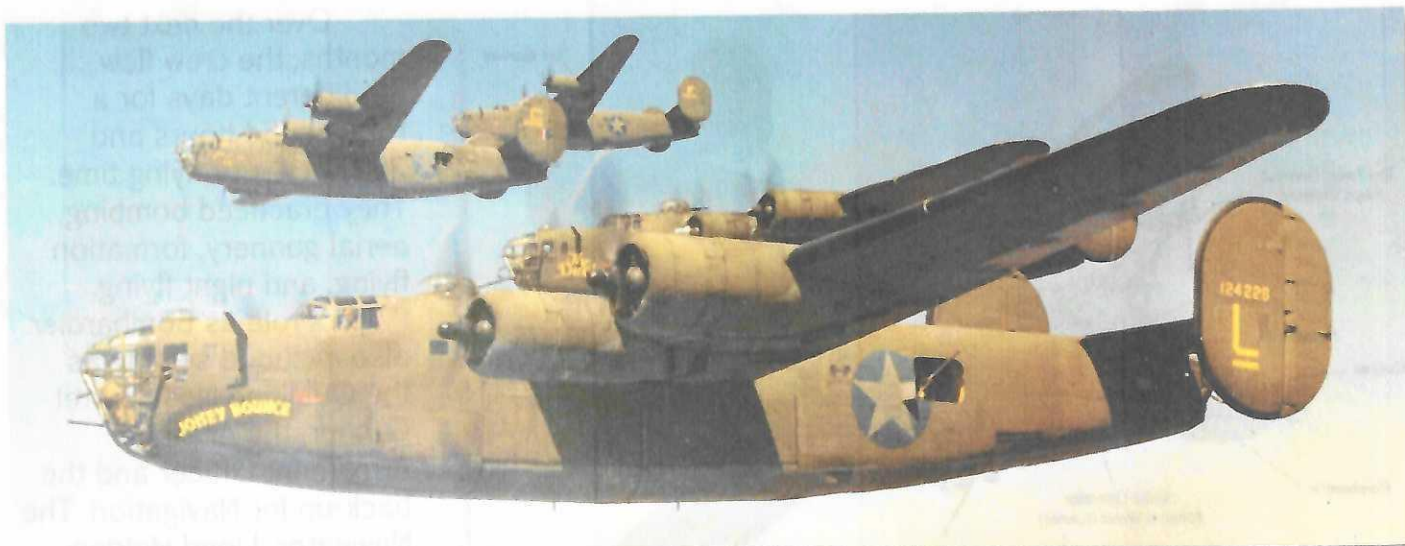
Dorothy with Ralph's crew at Bigg's Field.

("Replacement Crew, The Training and Combat Experience of a Typical 8th AF Replacement Crew - 1944," Richard C. Baynes, p. 38)

On May 16, 1944, Ralph and his crew received Special Orders Number 137 transferring them to the 3rd Heavy Bomb Processing Headquarters, Army Air Base, Topeka, Kansas. Immediately after graduation ceremonies for the Class EP 5-20 Heavy Bombardment at Biggs Field, they left by train on May 20 and reported to the 270th Staging Wing at Topeka two days later. Ralph's wife and the wives of the other crew

Over the next two months, the crew flew 38 different days for a total of 154 hours and 25 minutes of flying time. They practiced bombing, aerial gunnery, formation flying, and night flying. Ralph's role as Bombardier also included serving as the Qualified Nose Turret Gunner, the Airplane Armament Officer and the back-up for Navigation. The Navigator, Lloyd Holden, also served as Ralph's assistant Bombardier. Ralph remembered "the low level gunnery missions we had while at Biggs field for the waist gunners and the tail gunners to fire at near billboard size targets on the ground. He [Ralph] also remembers one of the training planes coming in for a landing one night when it caught fire just before it touched down, and all you could see was the twin tail stabilizers as it rolled to a stop. Luckily the crew got out unhurt."

Ralph William
Dennings



Top: B-24's in flight. Now with training over, it was time to join the fight overseas. In the group photo, Ralph is in the front row, 3rd from left.

followed by train and stayed at the Jayhawk Hotel in downtown Topeka. The couple spent their spare time bowling, going to professional wrestling matches and playing golf. All too soon, the order came through dated June 1, 1944, transferring Crew FO-333-BJ 113 to an undisclosed "Overseas Destination." What they didn't know at the time was that American and Allied forces would begin the massive invasion into Normandy in less than a week.

Even though they had been married less than two months, Ralph had been ordered overseas. This meant leaving his young 19 year-old



Ralph with members of Flight A-2. He's in the first long row, 2nd from right.

**Ralph William
Dennings**



Back row: Baynes and Friedman.
Front: Ralph, Gattis and Holden.



L to R: Holden, Ralph, Friedman and Baynes.

bride, alone in Topeka, to fend for herself as he and his crew left on a B-24 bound for Bangor, Maine. Ralph later wrote to Dot about how hard it was to leave her at the hotel in Topeka:

It does seem like ages since I kissed that beautiful brown haired, brown eyed little Irish girl goodbye on that very unpleasant morning. I remember so well sitting in the hotel lobby where it was dark; we had moved to the darker part only because the manager had suggested it, remember? He was quite an understanding fellow although the darkness didn't do much to make things any merrier. We sat & held hands & kept looking at the clock more than we did at each other. I was so afraid I was going to miss the bus & even deliriously happy at moments when I thought if I did it would just mean extra added precious minutes I'd have to spend with you. The bus was late & for awhile I was another happy, foolishly happy I guess; it only put off & make worst [sic] the misery we were both seem to feel. I can never forget how little & unimportant everything other than us seemed to be. In that last moment before I got in the bus I wanted to relive all the swell times that had passed before, I wanted to say so much, to tell you so many things, but nothing could come to my lips. When I saw that first tear stealing into your ever beautiful brown eyes, I knew it was time for me to act & fast. I did only what my heart told me to; I remember holding you tight for just a moment, then kissing you; I was on the bus & it was moving away & I could see you walking the opposite way, hanky in hand, at irregular intervals wiping the tears from your eyes. I started to cry, I sat down & closed my eyes trying to shut out of my mind some of the pain I had just felt; I never quite succeeded, that pain was once removed, but now it's back again to taunt me till the day when you & I are together again.

(Sept. 25, 1944, letter from Ralph Dennings to Dorothy Dennings)

Dot made her way back to St. Marys where she lived with Ralph's mother, Nina Dennings, and worked in the offices at St. Marys Manufacturing Company. She and friends would drive 30 miles one-way north to Lima to donate blood, while she waited and worried about her husband's fate.

On June 2, 1944, Ralph and his crew flew almost nine hours nonstop to Maine on a B-24. Ralph had hoped to pass over St. Marys and drop a small parachute with a note attached but weather rerouted their flight path north. They were attached to the Air

Ralph William
Dennings

Transport Command, Headquarters Station No. 3, North Atlantic Wing. On the same day they arrived, they received Secret Operating Orders No. 53 directing them to fly the North Atlantic Route from Bangor, Maine to the European Theater of Operations in London. There they were ordered to report to the Commander of the 8th Air Force Service Command for further assignment. Somewhere 8,000 feet above the Atlantic, Ralph wrote to his wife from the warmest place on the B-24 – the radio operator’s desk - listing his location as “Faraway.” They landed at Goose Bay, Labrador, although Ralph wasn’t allowed to tell Dot where he was. He described it as a very barren land with no trees and little grass. They left two days later for Iceland, narrowly surviving a harrowing event over the icy cold Atlantic when they lost altitude from ice that formed on the plane’s propellers and wings. Chunks of ice struck the plane and the radio operator, Nick, in the head causing him to bleed and pass out. Ralph described it in a letter to his wife on June 8, 1944: *“The first piece hit Nick in the head & knocked him out, the second piece just took the rest of the window out.”* (June 8, 1944, letter from Ralph Dennings to Dorothy Dennings) They were able to activate the deicers before leveling off at an altitude where the plane wouldn’t ice up before landing in Reykjavik, Iceland.



466th Bomb Group patch.

They flew to the British Isles five days later, landing in Valley, Wales, only to be given new orders to fly to Northern Ireland where they were assigned to the 466th Bomb Group. They would spend the rest of June in Northern Ireland living in a hut, sleeping on an Army cot with no sheets or pillows, and enjoying the beautiful countryside. Upon arriving they were given 4 candy bars, 1 bar of soap, 2 razor blades, 2 sticks of gum and a package of mints. Ralph described the remote area, three miles to the nearest village, in a letter to Dorothy:

You can easily see that the civilians of the British Empire have given up much for the War. New clothes are very rare & in most cases extinct. Soap & water are a rarity & it is also very noticeable. People wear their clothes longer now & make the things they have last many times longer than before. Their store windows aren’t crammed with wonderful fresh food, clothing, candy, hardware etc such as are ours. Most of the windows are rather bare & the few windows that are blessed with articles are blessed only with stale fruits or vegetables & old very old personal articles.... Money is very scarce & candy, chewing gum & good cigarettes are even more scarce. After seeing only a few of the people & places of England, an England at War, I can say with greater sincerity than ever before I’m damn glad I live in the U.S.A.

(June 14, 1944, letter from Ralph Dennings to Dorothy Dennings)

Less than two weeks later, Ralph wrote requesting Dot to send candy and chocolate, because food was scarce and chocolate was good for energy.

In July, Ralph’s crew and three other B-24 crew – headed by Pilots Adam Underlich, Louis Wieser and Stuart Peace Jr - took a ferry back over the Irish Sea to Scotland and then a train to Attlebridge, their base in East Anglia, England. There, they would remain for the rest of their deployment assigned to the 466th Bombardment Group (H), known as the “Flying Deck.” They were designated as Crew 731. Ralph told Dot that, *“The new base here is where the bombers take off from to bomb Hitler’s domain & soon I’ll be taking off with them.”* (July 5, 1944 letter, from Ralph Dennings to Dorothy Dennings) In a book, Replacement Crew, Ralph’s crew Pilot, Richard Baynes, noted that of the four crew that arrived together, the Wunderlich crew crashed on its third mission killing everyone aboard, the Wieser crew was shot down, and the Peace crew survived a harrowing two plane collision where only 4 of the 20 crewmen were able to parachute to safety.

Ralph's crew was alerted to fly its first mission on July 9, 1944, in the B-24 "Gallop-in' Ghost," but the mission was scrubbed because of bad weather. Less than 48 hours later, they were awakened just before midnight to fly on an historic mission with 1,100 planes – including 2 12-ship formations of B-24's from the 466th – to bomb an airfield in Munich, Germany. Pre-flight briefing told crews to expect a lot of flak, which the crew countered by releasing "chaff" – fine shards of aluminum foil which are used to mimic the formation of planes and trick ground radar. Their first combat mission proved interesting on many levels. First, the length of the mission was 1,300 miles, almost 9 hours of flight time, over the English Channel and into enemy occupied Germany, escorted by P-51, P-47 and P-38 fighter planes. These planes were especially helpful for Bombardiers such as Ralph because they helped defend against enemy fire. The nose of the B-24 is where the Bombardier is stationed. It is made entirely of plexiglass and is particularly vulnerable to enemy fire, especially as the Bombardier is exposed and unable to defend himself while calculating the coordinates for the bomb drop. While the B-24 approaches its drop point on a bomb run, the Bombardier takes over to get a fix on the target and let the bombsight determine to drop the 40 x 100 bombs.



The 731 Crew – Back row: H.B. Walton, L.M. Wheeler, L.O. Nicholson, H.D. Bailey, L.R. Walters, J.H. Gattis. Front row: R. W. Dennings, L.B. Holden, S. Friedman and R. C. Baynes.



Nose section of the B-24 Gallop-in' Ghost.

Second, the co-pilot suddenly became ill and passed out on the floor of the flight deck at 22,000 feet. Ralph and his crew saw a couple of B-24s go down ahead of them, and other planes were crippled from flak and flew towards the Swiss border where they would be held until the end of the war. They dropped their bombs at the secondary target in Munich and began their return to base. Unbeknownst to the crew, flak had struck the gas tank. Engine #4 gave out. Crew 731 had to leave formation and cut back on power as they descended over the English Channel. Worried about ditching in the water, they asked the radio operator to contact air-sea rescue but all he could get was music. Two engines on the right side then gave out. Their B-24 was losing altitude and the only thing Pilot Richard Baynes could see was trees and uneven ground. The crew was told to brace for a crash landing. The Flight Engineer, Lester Walters, managed to climb to the rear of the flight deck to the gas transfer control panel, transfer gas to the two dead engines, and power was restored when they were no more than 100 feet off the ground. The pilot, Richard Baynes, later wrote that he climbed out of the plane and kissed the ground they landed on. Disaster averted. They refueled, had "tea and sandwiches" and flew the short distance home to Attlebridge. Their first – and almost last – combat mission was in the books. Ralph wrote to his mother, downplaying their near disastrous landing, writing,

**Ralph William
Dennings**

"I've started my missions Mom, & it's not too bad. Hope my luck lasts."

(July 13, 1944, letter from Ralph Dennings to Nina Dennings)

The crew barely had time to be debriefed and rest before they were awakened at 2 a.m. the next day for their second mission. Back to Munich on the Gallopin' Ghost, loaded with six 500-pound bombs and four M17 incendiary bombs. As they crossed the Belgium border - well into enemy territory - they lost the #1 engine and had to abort the mission and return to base. They never flew the Gallopin' Ghost again.



Another group photo of the 731 Crew.

For the third day in a row, Crew 731 was alerted to fly at 1:30 a.m. on July 13, 1944. A new Army rule required that all Bombardiers must be cross trained as navigators, so Ralph missed the third mission with the rest of the crew. It was on this mission that the Wunderlich crew, who they trained and lived with, crashed killing all aboard. Ralph noted in letters home that he flew on five more missions over the next week, telling Dot that "they've been flying us long & hard. I practically live in an oxygen mask, heated suit & a B-24." (July 20, 1944, letter from Ralph Dennings to Dorothy Dennings). Ralph's personal flight diary shows the dangers the missions presented:

Ralph William
Dennings

July 16, 1944
(3) Saarbrücken, Germany
PFF 900 miles
12 x 500 bombs
Intense flak
No fighters 6 1/2 hrs
No. 1 engine ran out
of gas & whole plane
ran out of gas.

(4) July 17, 1944
Pas de Calais, France
Visual 500 miles
20 x 250 bombs
Moderate flak
No fighters 15 hours
Wolstein hit & crash
landed in Southern Eng.

Hit prop wash over
target & flipped engine
Engineer dropped rocks
& Sperry ball gunner
lowered ball & fired.

(5) July 18, 1944
Bathelmont East of Calais
in France
Visual 600 miles
240 x 20 lb. frag.
Intense flak
No fighters 6 hours
English shooting at
us over Chateaubourg, Penn.

(6) July 19, 1944
Kempden, Germany
Visual 1300 miles
52 x 100 incendiary.
No flak
No fighters 17 hours
Me-109 factory
leathered No. 2 engine
at target; first bomb

(7) July 20, 1944
Aachen, Germany
Visual 1000 miles
52 x 100 lb. incendiary.
No flak
No fighters 7 hours
Carried 5200 lbs. of
bombs & engineer had
100 lb. of rocks

(8) July 24, 1944
St. Lo Battlefront entrance
Not dropped 600 miles
32 x 260 lb. frag.
Moderate flak
No fighters 5 hours
Lost engine before we
started, but went anyway.
Flare mother fr. blew up.

July 16, 1944. Saarbrucken, Germany. PFF 900 miles. 12 x 500 bombs. Intense flax. No fighters. 6½ hrs. No. 1 engine ran out of gas & whole plane ran out of gas.

July 17, 1944. Pas de Calis, France. Usual 500 miles. 20 x 250 bombs. Moderate flax. No fighters. 5 hrs. Wolstien hit & crash landed in Southern Eng.

July 18, 1944. Battlefront East of Caen in France. Visual 600 miles. 240 x 20 lb. frag. Intense flax. No fighters. 6 hours. English shooting at us in Cherbourg Penn. Hit prop wash over Target & flipped on wing. Engineer dropped rocks & sperry ball gunner lowered ball & fired.

July 19, 1944. Kempden, Germany. Visual 1300 miles. 52 x 100 incend. No flax. No fighters. 9 hours. Me-109 Factory Feathered No. 2 engine at Target; first back

July 20, 1944. Eisenach, Germany. Visual 1000 miles. 52 x 100 lb. incend. No Flax. No fighters. 7 hours. Carried 5200 lbs. of bombs & engineer had 100 lb. of rocks.

(Ralph Dennings Personal Flight Diary)



Left: They had come a long way since sorting bombs in Texas. The aircraft is a Beechcraft C-45 Expeditor used for training and transport. Right: A good view of the B-24's nose showing the bombardier station protected with nothing more than plexiglass and 50 caliber machine guns.

The flight engineer's personal diary reflected much of the same information. He recorded that two planes on their left went down on fire in the southeast of England and another ditched in the channel on the July 17 mission to France. One of the crews that crashed was the Wollstein Crew, who had travelled to England with Ralph's crew and whose officers bunked with them in the same hut. Seven additional B-24 planes sustained Class "A" battle damage and one crew lost their ball turret gunner who died on the way to the hospital.

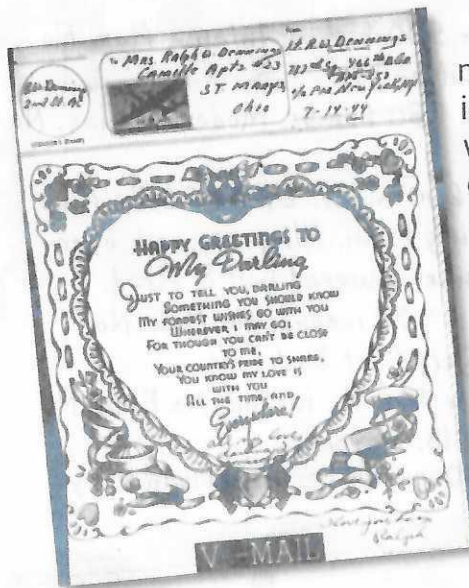
On the second mission to France on July 18th, their mission was to bomb German troops west of Caen, France on the front lines. Lester Nichoson noted in his diary that "We hit Jerrie troop installations. Only three Flak guns at target but on the way back the damn Limies shot hell out of us. Nearly went into a spin from prop wash. The crew strafed enemy troops. Saw a lot of scarecrows today. I dropped rocks on target I've went nearly 48 hours without washing or sleep."

(Replacement Crew, Diary of Lester Nichoson for July 18, 1944)

Nichoson noted another close call on the July 19, 1944, mission to bomb a German aircraft factory at Kempton, Germany. He wrote, "Whole squadron in front of us was nearly shot down. We had 51s and 38s. Twenty min. after target we lost no. 2 engine. I thought we were done for awhile."

(Replacement Crew, Diary of Lester Nichoson for July 19, 1944)

Ralph William
Dennings



Crew 731 was exhausted. They had completed seven combat missions in eight days, often with little to no sleep, encountering intense flak and sustained battle damage on every run, and watching men they knew and shared barracks being shot down or crashing on landing. Ralph, meanwhile, wrote nothing of this in his letters home, censoring and protecting his wife from the danger he encountered every day. He wrote,

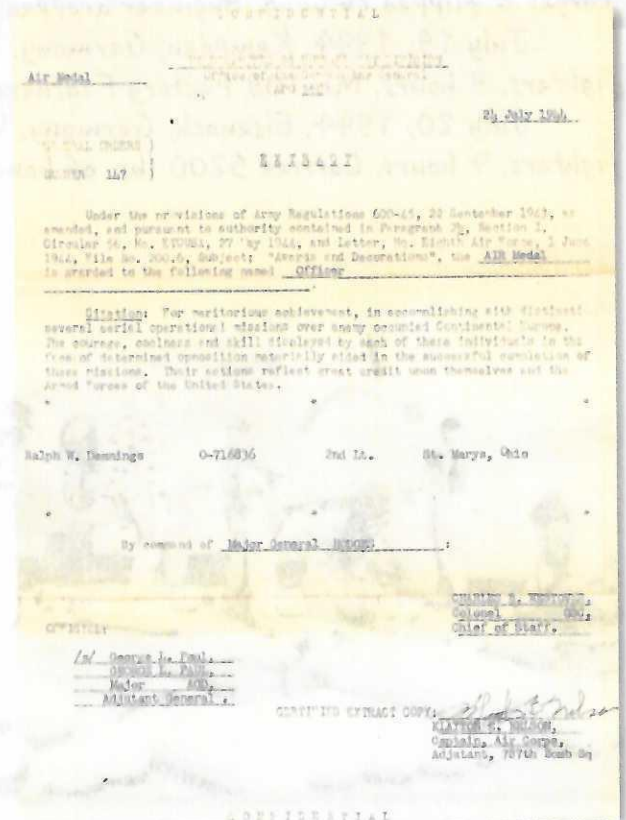
"As for our missions, I can't say much about them; they're plenty tough & of course dangerous, but

they're not too bad. I wasn't scared at all on my first mission, much to my surprise, but as mission after mission goes by I get more scared each time & plenty nervous & I guess you'd call it "high stressing" & "cross."

(Aug 7, 1944, letter from Ralph Dennings to Dorothy Dennings)

On July 24, 1944, Major General Hodges issued General Order Number 147 awarding 2nd Lt. Ralph W. Dennings the Air Medal. The citation states:

For meritorious achievement, in accomplishing with distinction several aerial operational missions over enemy occupied Continental Europe. The courage, coolness and skill displayed by each of these individuals in the face of determined opposition materially aided in the successful completion of these missions. Their actions reflect great credit upon themselves and the Armed Forces of the United States.



First of many citations.

Ralph and Crew 731 completed eight additional missions from July 24 - August 4, flying almost daily. They bombed a robot base in France and German troop concentrations on the invasion front lines in France. They bombed a Me-262-163 fighter factory in Germany and participated in saturation bombing that required low altitude visual confirmation around the French village of St.Lo. Ralph's crew was not able to visually confirm the drop sites and came back to base with their bombs. Ralph's flight diary notes observing a plane in another group blow up on July 24; they flew deputy lead and dropped about 8,000 tons of bombs on July 25; a plane stalled at the end of the runway and exploded on July 28; and they incurred battle damage to an engine on August 3.

The bravery and dedication of the 466th Bomb Group (H) did not go unnoticed. Lt. General J.H. Doolittle transmitted his commendations and personal appreciation to the Commanding General for the 2nd Bomb Division, Lt. General Carl Spaatz. Lt. General Spaatz in turn sent a Letter of Commendation stating, *"The continued all out efforts by your heavies day after day is most gratifying."* On August 6, 1944, Brigadier General

6 August 1944 - 96th Combat Bombardment Wing

My heartiest congratulations to the Officers and men of the 466th Bombardment Group for your brilliant bombing of the past thirty days.

Your outstanding record is a reflection on the efforts of your entire command.

-- Brigadier General Peck --

UNITED STATES STAFFING IN EUROPE
Office of the Commanding General
APO 813

201.22

27 July 1944

SUBJECT : Letter of Commendation.

TO : Commanding General, Eighth Air Force.

1. The following message has been received from General Arnold:

"The continued all out efforts by your heavy day after day is most gratifying. I show to all of us that your combat and maintenance crews are true teams. Please convey my appreciation to all concerned for their untiring efforts and my congratulations for the splendid results obtained".

2. I desire to add my appreciation to those of the Commanding General, Army Air Forces. The results of your efforts speak for themselves.

/s/ CARL SPALTE
Lieutenant General, USA
Commanding.

201.22

1st Ind.

G-4-12

HEADQUARTERS EIGHTH AIR FORCE, APO 834, 30 July 1944.

TO : Commanding General, 2d Bomb Division, APO 83, U.S. Army.

It is a pleasure to transmit to you and your command the commendations from General Arnold and General Spalte, and I wish to add my personal appreciation and congratulations.

/s/ J. H. DOOLITTLE
Lieutenant General, U. S. Army
Commanding.

Peck singled out the 96th Combat Bombardment Wing - the group that included Ralph and Crew 731. He wrote, "My heartiest congratulations to the Officers and men of the 466th Bombardment Group for your brilliant bombing of the past thirty days. Your outstanding record is a reflection on the efforts of your entire command."

Around this time, Dot wrote to Ralph about local boys they both knew who had been killed in action during the ground invasion of Normandy - Frankie Sommers and Vernon Schnelle. Ralph responded, "It's really too much to believe, but I've seen it happen only to [sic] many times here to try to tell myself it isn't true. It's the horrible truth I guess & they're

nothing we can do about it." (August 7, 1944, letter from Ralph Dennings to Dorothy Dennings) He didn't mention that at the back of his private combat journal, Ralph kept a list of the pilots and men he knew who had been killed while at Attlebridge with him.

The ball team vs. Bomb.
was talking, I was the
nife before.

(6) Hammond - Never gotten
formation, never heard
of on team after takeoff.

(7) Wolstein - direct hit
by flak east of Caen, went
down burning, lived in
our barracks, two of his
men are back, even though
he crashed.

(8) Archer - went down
burning over Zuiden Zee
when hit by fighters; was
from Cleveland & lived in
our barracks.

(9) Suchie - Exploded over
Zuiden Zee when hit by
fighters; lived in our
barracks, Dorst was with
him.

(10) Starnes - shot down over
Zuiden Zee by fighters, both
riding with him; Starnes was
from Cleveland & lived in
his crew.

(11) Greenwood - shot down
over Zuiden Zee by fighters,
Crew was flying with Phoenix;
Greenwood safe, crew killed
in Zuiden Zee.

(12) Guy - lost on Korbach
mission, never heard from.
(13) Williams - had mid-air
collision with Bell on a

practice mission, lost his
rudder on takeoff, crashed, plane
broke out, Peck, feared co-
pilot killed; they were
riding in war as observed.
Bell - mid-air collision, lost
tail, went down burning
& crashed, Bell & 3 men safe,
Co-pilot jumped with his chute,
not fastened, pulled out of
chute & fell to earth, Navy
burned badly before he
jumped, died later.

(15) Lewis - crashed during
a gas mission to France,
Reason unknown, French
say he spent in south
of Paris.

(16) Drampart - lost on gas
mission to France, never
found or heard from.

(17) Harmer - lost on
gas mission to France,
never found or heard from.

(18) Krick - direct hit by
flak over Maastricht,
went down burning,
direct hit in bomb bay.

(19) Bailey - direct hit hit
over Osnabruck, flak
took wing off, went
down burning & crashed.
Dawn good guy.

(20) Nelson - ran out of
gas 3 miles from field
& crashed.

(1) Wunderlich Killed
while forming, hit prop
wash lost tail & crashed
into a small lake.

(2) Vogel crashed on take
off, pulled ship up too
soon, stalled out &
exploded at end of runway.

(3) Baker direct hit by
flak over St. Lo; exploded
& burned.

(4) Kayes direct hit by
flak over Saarbrücken,
crashed in flames.

(5) Mc Gregor direct hit
by flak over Saarbrücken,
lost two engines, went
down burning, lived nears

(21) Carter - Crashed in
English Channel &
exploded. Ground
support mission.

785th Bomb
Squadron
patch.



Ralph William
Dennings

Boast, Wunderlich's bomb,
went down with Suchin.
Gatling, Boast's roommate,
went down with Starnes.

(19) Bailey - 6 missions
(20) Nelson - 1 mission

Crews Lost
1. Wunderlich - 3 missions
2. Vogel - 29 missions
3. Baker - 22 missions
4. Hayes - 1 mission
5. McGregor - 29 missions
6. Hammond - 4 missions
7. Wolstein - 28 missions
8. Archer - 33 missions
9. Suchin - 31 missions
10. Starnes - 34 missions
11. Greenwood - 9 missions
12. Guy - 10 missions
13. Williams - 15 missions
14. Bell - 1 mission
15. Lewis - 8 missions
16. Diamanti - 6 missions
17. Harmon - 0 missions
18. Krick - 5 missions

July 10, 1944
Terries strafed
nearby air field.

July 7, 1944
Flying bomb hit
nearby air field.

He also kept a running list of flight crews that had been lost and how many missions they had completed.

Amidst the insanity and loss of war, what drove Ralph to tears was the day he received pictures in the mail from his wedding to Dot. "I'll admit, darling, when I looked at those pictures of you I cried for the first time since I've been over here." (August 11, 1944, letter from Ralph Dennings to Dorothy Dennings) He wrote that food was scarce and not very good, that he spent most of his time as a "fortified gunner" in the nose of the plane, and that once he finished his missions, he never wanted to get on an airplane again. He wrote, "I'm fine physically but just a little haggard mentally, there's been a lot of things

happening lately that tends to stick on your mind ..."

(August 12, 1944, letter from Ralph Dennings to Dorothy Dennings)

The Flight Surgeon grounded Ralph's crew for 48 hours for some much needed rest. Crew 731 had arrived at Attlebridge just one month ago. They stood alert for every day except for one, and they had already completed 15 combat missions - many of them long range and all of them over enemy territory. Three crews who shared their barracks had been shot down or were missing in action. Ralph's list of missing crews that he knew already stood at six. Six crews of 10 men each, all gone or missing.

15 combat missions down. 20 yet to go.

Ralph was awarded the first of three Oak Leaf Clusters to his Air Medal on August 5, 1944, followed by his second Oak Leaf Cluster on August 21, 1944, and his third on September 14, 1944. The 466th Bomb Group (H) also received an official commendation from Lt. General James Doolittle, commanding the Eighth Air Forces for combat achievement on its first mission. On this mission, 1,100 bombers battered Munich in southern Germany in what was the longest initial attack ever flown by any unit in the history of the European theater and one of the heaviest

1,100 Bombers Batter Munich; Toulon Raided

Luftwaffe Shuns a Fight, But Flak Over Reich Is Intense; 20 Heavies Lost

More than 1,100 American heavy bombers—one of the largest forces ever to strike a single German target—flew from Britain yesterday to batter objectives in the Munich area of southern Germany as a Liberator contingent struck from Italy at Toulon, main French Mediterranean naval base.

Escorted by up to 750 Eighth Air Force P47s, P38s and P51s, the British-based Fortresses and Liberators did not encounter a single German fighter on their 1,000-mile round-trip through heavy cloud. Flak, however, was intense and 20 heavies and two pursuits failed to return.

daylight bombardments of the German capital on record. Ralph didn't mention Munich in his letter, but he enclosed a newspaper clipping with a headline that read, "1,100 Bombers Batter Munich; Toulon Raided." His flight record book also verifies that he and Crew 731 were part of this historic bombardment as part of their first ever combat mission. Quite an introduction to the war.

Additional Citations were issued recognizing the outstanding performance of the 466th Heavy Bomb Group. On August 12, 1944, Major General Kepner issued General Orders Number 184 stating:

The 466th Bombardment Group (H) is cited for distinguished and outstanding performance of duty from 22 March 1944 to 9 August 1944. Overcoming adverse weather conditions and fierce enemy fighter opposition on many occasions, the Group attacked forty-one (41) targets in Germany and fifty-nine (59) targets in enemy occupied Continental Europe, dropping over four thousand seven hundred (4,700) tons of bombs on vital enemy installations. During this period the Gunners of the Group were credited with the destruction of over twenty-five (25) enemy aircraft. The devotion to duty, determination and tenacity of purpose exhibited by the ground and combat personnel of the 466th Bombardment Group (H) reflect great credit upon themselves, their organization, and the United States Army Air Force.

Ralph wrote to Dorothy that the rest did them all good, but all they could think about was completing their 35 missions so that they could go home. That was every crewman's goal - home. Ralph wrote that 20 missions seemed to blur his vision of the

future, but he was starting to see "a dim outline of the finish line far ahead, we still have many rough & dangerous roads to tread before we acquire that coveted goal, 35 missions

completed & a promise of going home soon. It's a goal that's worth working for & though many fall by the wayside we'll keep working, flying, hoping & praying till we all have that goal firmly in our hands, and then, darling, I'll be coming home, yes, darling, coming home to the home I've always known, to the home that means so much to all of us, to my home." (August 20, 1944, letter from Ralph Dennings to Dorothy Dennings)

2ND LT. RALPH W. DENNINGS BOMBER GROUP IS CITED BY MAJ. GEN. KEPNER

An Eighth Air Force Liberator Station, England - The B-24 Liberator Bomber Group in which 2nd Lt. Ralph Dennings of Canille Apt. 23 St. Marys Ohio is a Bombardier recently was cited by Major General William E. Kepner, commanding 2nd Bombardment Division "for distinguished and outstanding performance of duty".

The citation in part reads: "The devotion to duty, determination and tenacity of purpose exhibited by personnel of the Group reflect great credit upon themselves, their organization and the United States Army Air Force."

The Group, which recently completed its 100th combat mission, is commanded by Colonel Luther J. Fairbanks of Burt, Iowa, and had previously been cited by Lt. James H. Poolittle, commanding Eighth Air Force, for low-level destruction of a bridge across the Loire, near Blois, France. Demolition of the span was ordered "regardless of cost." To achieve visibility necessary for destruction of the bridge it was necessary to descend below clouds to 6500 feet, an altitude usually considered extremely hazardous for four engine bombers. From this height the target was reduced to heap of smoking rubble. It was the first low-level bombing ever performed by four engine bombers from England.

Earlier the group had been officially commended by General Poolittle for combat achievement on its first mission, an attack on Berlin and the longest initial assault ever flown in the European Theater. The attack was one of the heaviest daylight bombings of the German capital on record.

During its first 100 missions, "overcoming adverse weather conditions and fierce enemy fighter and anti-aircraft opposition," the group attacked 41 targets in Germany and 59 targets in enemy-occupied Europe. Over seven hundred (4700) tons of bombs were dropped on vital enemy installations.

22 July 1944 - 2d Bombardment Division

It gives me great pleasure to forward the following message from Lord Trenchard: "My very best congratulations on the great air work in the battle. It has saved thousands of army casualties. It is splendid. I congratulate you. All good wishes to all commands".

--Trenchard--

MEMORANDUM FOR THE COMMANDER, 2d BOMBARDMENT DIVISION
Office of the Commander, General
APO 806

12 August 1944

GENERAL ORDERS)

NUMBER 184)

22 JULY 1944

SECTION I

The 466th Bombardment Group (H) is cited for distinguished and outstanding performance of duty from 22 March 1944 to 9 August 1944. Overcoming adverse weather conditions and fierce enemy fighter opposition on many occasions, the Group attacked forty-one (41) targets in Germany and fifty-nine (59) targets in enemy occupied Continental Europe, dropping over four thousand seven hundred (4,700) tons of bombs on vital enemy installations. During this period the Gunners of the Group were credited with the destruction of over twenty-five (25) enemy aircraft. The devotion to duty, determination and tenacity of purpose exhibited by the ground and combat personnel of the 466th Bombardment Group (H) reflect great credit upon themselves, their organization, and the United States Army Air Force.

By command of Major General KEPNER:

CHARLES W. WESTOVEN
Colonel GSC
Chief of Staff

OFFICIAL:

/s/ Raymond E. Strong
RAYMOND E. STRONG
Capt
Asst's Adjutant General

Ralph William
Dennings

In the interim, Dot wrote to Ralph about the death of his friend, Thomas Reiher, in the South Pacific. Ralph responded,

"He was a darn good guy, it's hard to see all the fellows you know so well going out the hard way There are going to be a lot more gone before it's all over, it's all so foolish, too, that's what makes it so hard." (October 28, 1944, letter from Ralph Dennings to Dorothy Dennings). Also, he wrote, *"I've seen many of my friends go down & though their loss is felt greatly by all their fellow flyers, we somehow come out of our sullen & mourning mood in rather a surprisingly short time. It's just the fact that over here we are losing friends, fellow workers, every day & we've come to see it as a thing that was intended to happen."*

(October 17, 1944, letter from Ralph Dennings to Dorothy Dennings)

Shortly after that letter, Ralph lost a friend from his Advanced Bombardier training days at Childress, Texas – Frank Cser, when his plane crashed into a mountain in Scotland, killing all aboard.

Ralph was finally cleared and flew a combat mission on November 29th, finishing his last seven missions with the Anderson crew. The 466th Bomb Group (H) was cited for distinguished and outstanding performance of duty by Major General William E. Kepner in November 1944 after the Group completed its combat mission.

As combat missions resumed, Ralph developed

a severe cold, which made flying at high altitudes difficult.

Even though he should have taken time to rest and recuperate, Ralph refused. He was determined to complete his missions and get home as soon as possible. He turned down a weekend pass as well because *"I'm afraid I'll miss a mission & they're too hard to get to miss one on account of a pass."* (December 20, 1944, letter from Ralph Dennings to Dorothy Dennings) He flew missions 33 and 34 on December 23 and 24 respectively. Mission 33 was one of the roughest missions he had ever been on. They flew to Jukareth, Germany, a six-hour mission, in support of ground troops that were being pushed back. They bombed roads and railroads with good results, but they encountered *"continuous, terrific, intense flak for 15 minutes & I mean it was the worst flak I've ever seen & I hope to never*



Ralph (left), pictured with friend Frank Cser (center) in at Biggs Field.

NO.	DATE	TARGET
1.	12 July 44	Munich, Ger. ✓
2.	15 July 44	St. Lo, Fr. ✓
3.	17 July 44	Wadiouert, Fr. ✓
4. *	11 July 44	Munich, Ger. ✓
5.	18 July 44	Troarn, Fr. ✓
6.	19 July 44	Kempten, Ger. ✓
7.	20 July 44	Eisenach, Ger. ✓
8.	24 July 44	St. Lo, Fr. ✓
9.	25 July 44	St. Lo, Fr. ✓
10.	28 July 44	Amiens, Fr. ✓
11.	29 July 44	Bremen, Ger. ✓
12.	1 Aug 44	Mil Instl N, Fr. ✓
13.	2 Aug 44	La Grande Valle, Fr. ✓
14.	3 Aug 44	La Housseoye, Fr. ✓
15.	4 Aug 44	Rostock, Ger. ✓
16.	11 Aug 44	Strasbourg, Ger. ✓
17.	13 Aug 44	Lisleux, Fr. ✓
18.	14 Aug 44	Dole/Tauaux, Fr. ✓
19.	16 Aug 44	Magdeburg, Ger. ✓
20.	24 Aug 44	Hannover, Ger. ✓
21.	25 Aug 44	Lubeck, Ger. ✓
22.	27 Aug 44	Oranienburg, Ger. ✓
23.	30 Aug 44	Noball Target. ✓
24.	8 Sep 44	Karlsruhe, Ger. ✓
25.	10 Sep 44	Ulm, Ger. ✓
26.	5 Oct 44	Lippstadt, Ger. ✓
27.	9 Oct 44	Koblenz, Ger. ✓
28.	29 Nov 44	Bielefeld, Ger. ✓
29.	30 Nov 44	Neuenkunschen, Ger. ✓
30.	5 Dec 44	Munster, Ger. ✓
31.	10 Dec 44	Bingen, Ger. ✓
32.	11 Dec 44	Karlsruhe, Ger. ✓
33.	23 Dec 44	Dahlen & Lissendorf, Ger. ✓
34.	25 Dec 44	Prum, Ger. ✓
35.	24 Dec 44	Gerolstein, Ger. ✓

Ralph William
Dennings

For extraordinary achievement, while serving as Bombardier of a B-24 airplane on many bombardment missions over enemy occupied Continental Europe. Displaying great courage and skill, this Officer, fighting from his gun position, has warded off many attacks and has materially aided in the successful completion of each of these missions. The courage, coolness and exceptional skill displayed by this Officer on all these occasions reflect the highest credit upon himself and the Armed Forces of the United States.

Ralph arrived in the United States, after seven long months in the European theater where he was processed at the Army Air Forces Redistribution Station in Miami Beach in January 1945. He was granted a 21-day furlough – his first chance to return home to St. Marys since he left for Basic Training two years earlier. At the end of the furlough, he was ordered to report to Army Air Forces Redistribution Station No. 2 in Miami Beach, Florida for reprocessing. In May 1945, he was reassigned to the 2160th AAFBU in Lodwick, Lakeland, Florida for Pre-Flight Training.



Ralph during pilot training at Lakeland, Florida in 1945.

There, he began training on the PT-13 plane under Instructor R.E. Gormly, Wilbur, and J.P. Lowe. His flight book shows that he flew a solo flight on June 18, 1945. He was then assigned to Primary Pilot Training on July 30,



Ralph and Dot enjoying a round of golf at San Antonio in 1945.

1945, at Spence Field, Georgia. Dot had been able to spend most of this time with him in Florida, but she returned to St. Marys when Ralph was sent to Georgia.

In Georgia, cadets trained from 7:30 a.m. to 7:30 p.m. Ralph wrote to Dot that “a lot of the fellows quit already, about 10 all told I believe.” He trained on a plane which he noted was a lot different from the PT-13 he flew at Lakeland. He wrote, “*There’s an awful lot of procedures to learn & carry out, a heck of a mess of them. I’m so confused*

**Ralph William
Dennings**



The 731 crew with the 466th Bomb Group flew more than 5,600 sorties in 231 missions over France, Germany and Belgium.

right now, I don't know whether I'm coming or going." (August 10, 1945, letter from Ralph Dennings to Dorothy Dennings) He continued, "I don't even care now whether I get through or not; I think I'm getting more scared each day; that's the reason Bob quit; he stalled & flipped on his back, it really scared him, I guess." Ralph contemplated quitting himself, noting how the combat missions had scarred him and he noted

that remaining in pilot training would diminish his chances for a discharge when the war ended. He wanted nothing more than to go home to his wife.

On August 14, 1945, Ralph wrote to Dot, "You know how I've hated to fly ever since I've been back, well, today was the end of it all. I woke up about 2 hours early this morning & couldn't do anything but think of flying & how I dreaded to think of going to the flight line to fly. I lay there just wanting to cry, yell & everything else at once & I couldn't take it.... I've lost all confidence in myself as a pilot & there's nothing I can do about it. I talked with my instructor; flight commander, sec. of the school, director of flying in addition to the flight surgeon & they all told me to do the same thing." (August 14, 1945, letter from Ralph Dennings to Dorothy Dennings) Ralph's decision was prescient. Just a few days later, they called off all pilot, bombardier and navigation training and offered all cadets the choice of staying in the Army Air Force or getting a discharge. All but seven cadets eagerly chose to take the discharge.

It took a couple of months, but Ralph was honorably discharged on November 12, 1945 at the Fort McPherson Separation Center in Georgia. His military records show that he flew a total of 650 hours, 235 of which were combat hours. The 466th flew more than 5,600 sorties in 231 missions over France, Germany and Belgium. They lost 333 men and 100 B-24 Liberators; 171 B-24 crew were taken prisoner and 27 were interned in neutral countries when their planes crash landed there.

Ralph was awarded the Air Medal with 3 Oak Leaf Clusters, the Distinguished Flying Cross, the European African Middle Eastern Medal with 4 battle stars, and the World War II Victory Medal.

When Ralph returned to St. Marys after the war, he and Dot purchased their first house on W. High Street and then built their house on W. North Street where they raised two children. Ralph remained in the National Guard of Ohio, Sup. Off, HQ 3rd Bn, 148th



Ralph said of this photo: "Just one of many snows. On my way to the PX sliding on the ice."

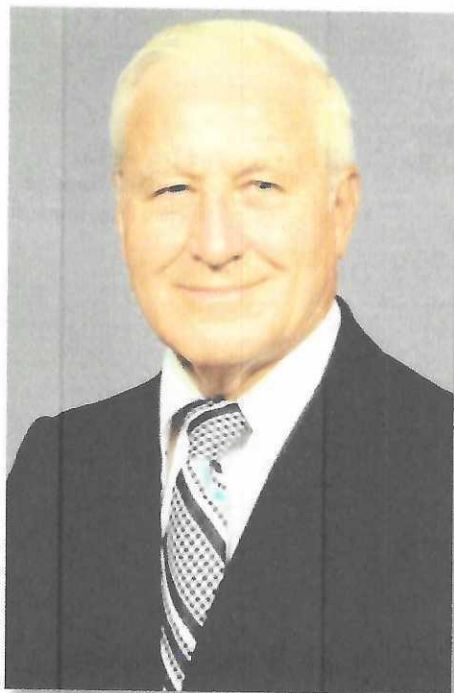
Infantry until he resigned in February 1950. Ralph returned to work at Goodyear Tire & Rubber as a Cost Estimator. He also served as the Golf Coach for Memorial High School for 10 years and coached his two grandsons on the team.

Ralph passed away on August 25, 2019, at the age of 97, and Dot followed on May 16, 2025, at age 99. Theirs is a love story that spanned over seven decades and a world war. Neither ever mentioned to their children that they had saved the 700+ letters they wrote to each other from 1942 – 1945. The Pilot of Crew 731, Richard Baynes, kept in touch with Ralph after the war and, in 1993, Richard published a book entitled, "Replacement Crew, The Training And Combat Experiences of a Typical 8th AF Replacement Crew – 1944." The book includes personal anecdotes from Ralph as well as details about their missions that could only have come from Ralph's letters. In addition, many of the pictures in the book are Ralph's original photographs.

Ralph and Dot's children, Gary and Christy, have loaned Ralph's World War II uniforms, flight book, and other memorabilia to the Veterans Foundation and Museum of St. Marys. In addition, the Veterans Museum has scanned all of their letters, photos, and other documents, and these items will be on display in the museum for the public to enjoy. This is by far the largest collection of World War II letters and memorabilia that the Veterans Museum has, and it is very grateful to the Dennings family for allowing access to these historic items.



More photos of Ralph's crew. All told, the 466th lost 333 men and 100 B-24 Liberators; 171 B-24 crew were taken prisoner and 27 rest where their planes went down in neutral countries.



**Ralph William
Dennings**

