



LIVING LEGACY



FREDERICK GERSTING

Born: December 16, 1924
WWII
Army
Served: 1943-1945



Fred was born in Marshall County, WV, in the small town of McMechen, on Dec. 16, 1924 to parents Albert Charles Gersting and Nellie Leota Bird Gersting. Albert Charles Gersting had previously served in WWI. Fred was the second of three children. He had an older sister, Jane Lee Gersting Dulaney; and a younger brother, William Alvin Gersting. (Note: William Alvin Gersting served in the U.S. Air Force and made it his career retiring as a Chief Master Sergeant. He served during WWII, Korean War and Vietnam serving for a total of 23 years).

Other members of Fred's close family who also served in the military were: Carlyle C. Dulaney (Jane's husband), who served in WWII in the European Theater. He served in the U.S. Army and attained the rank of Spec IV. Carlyle's son Alan C. Dulaney served in the U.S. Navy as an Airman First Class. Alan served two tours in Vietnam on the USS Intrepid aircraft carrier. Robert F. Adair, Sr. (Fred's brother-in-law) served in the U.S. Army in WWII in the European Theater. Bob's son, Robert F. Adair, Jr. served in the U.S. Army during the Vietnam conflict and was stationed in Korea.

Fred remembers, "My family moved to Gary, IN when I was a very small child. Dad went there to get work in the steel mill. Tom Harmon, the great football player, went to grade school at the same time my sister did in Gary, IN. He won the Heisman Trophy in 1940. His son, Mark, also a college football player, now stars on the hit T.V. show NCIS."

"Eventually, Mom brought us back to Wheeling as the depression hit and dad lost his job. He was to stay in Gary, IN to sell our personal effects, but dad remained in Gary, IN. He never moved back to Wheeling but did come to visit us once in a while. He eventually moved to Detroit, MI and continued to visit occasionally."

"I remember spending my 6th birthday in Wheeling as my grandparents had a small party for me. Back then that meant you had a homemade cake and everyone sang Happy Birthday to you. There were no games with prizes, movies, clowns, ponies or even

stars

presents. Times were hard back then so getting together with family meant everything.”

“I grew up in south Wheeling and we lived at my paternal grandparent’s house. My grandfather, William August Gersting, was like a father to me. He was a Police Officer with the Wheeling Police Department for more than 25 years. My paternal grandmother’s name was Amelia Ann Foster Gersting.”

“The flood of 1936 was the “Great One!” My mother knew our house would soon be flooded, so she walked all three of us children down to Caldwell Street in McMechen (a distance of four miles) to stay with the Castilow (my mother’s sister was Lillie Bird Castilow) family. The irony was that Stephen Gracik lived next door to the Castilow’s. Stephen and I would later be assigned to Army Air Corps college classes and room together in the same room for five months. Grandma and Grandpap Gersting stayed with the Foster’s until the flood was over. Then my grandfather cleaned our house from top to bottom after the flood. Our single-story home with basement was flooded almost to the attic.”

“1936 was a traumatic year for us. In addition to the flood, our mother died that same year. She was only 35 years old. Our paternal grandparents were now our parents. I owe them so much as they raised us with discipline and love. They taught us to be honest, responsible, respectful and caring.”

“I attended Ritchie Elementary School through the 8th grade and then went to Wheeling High School for two years. I didn’t finish school, as I went to work at Dulaney Motor Co. located in Center Wheeling. Dulaney’s sold Studebakers. I began learning how to perform body work and painting cars. Several men taught me this trade. John Hewitt taught me for a while, but Bill Conklin stands out as one who helped me the most. These men would start to teach me and then have to leave for the service. Later, I did obtain my GED.”



Left: Fred’s mother, Nell and grandmother, Amelia
Right: Fred’s grandfather, William August Gersting, Wheeling Policeman

stars

“After that, we were all separated and sent to different places for basic training. I went to Jefferson Barracks, MO near St. Louis.” Note: During World War II, Jefferson Barracks was a major reception center for U.S. troops being drafted into the military. It also served as an important basic training site for the Army, then later was the first Army Air Corps Training Site. The six-week training consisted of: Basic military general orders, military conduct, close order and open order drill; Familiarization with all standard weapons, assembly, cleaning and utilization; Physical training with obstacle course; Gas mask training and procedures; Rifle range qualification on the 30 caliber carbine rifle, and one week of field training. “Years later there was a fire at this base and all records were destroyed,” Fred recalls.



Fred and his younger brother, Bill
1939

Fred enjoyed his next assignment, “I was sent to Lexington, KY for Pre-flight training. I was now attending college at the Transylvania College located in the midst of Lexington, KY. It was a public college and men and women who were non-military were also enrolled there as students. The campus was large and impressive. We lived in dormitories and there were four men to each dorm with bunk beds. My roommates were: Norman Shofstall; Jerome Heckel; and Stephen Gracik. I found I liked the book work and the ‘spit and polish’ of the place. We had to study, take tests, and pass. We learned about a Piper Cub and were trained to fly it. This training took six months. I graduated as a member of the 322nd College Training Detachment from Transylvania College in Lexington, KY in Feb., 1944.” Fred liked the time he spent at Transylvania College – he liked the atmosphere of learning in an academic setting and he has fond memories of that time in his life. Note: The Piper Cub was originally intended as a trainer, and saw great popularity in this role and as a general aviation aircraft. Due to its performance, it was well suited in a variety of military uses such as reconnaissance, liaison and ground control, and was produced in large numbers during the Second World War as the L-4 Grasshopper.

“My next assignment was to go to San Antonio, TX to take placement tests to see what specialized training we would receive to serve in the Army Air Corps. It was posted on a bulletin board that I was to be trained to become a Pilot! A few days later 40 of us were marshaled into a large auditorium along with several hundred other trainees. We were informed that, due to the course of the war, the Army’s needs had changed. Therefore, we would not be trained to become pilots.

One guy lost it and went crazy as he was so upset. We were all disappointed, but accepted the decision as final. I was told that I was to be trained to become a tail gunner in a B-17 Bomber – The Flying Fortress!”

“I was then sent to Kingman, AZ to Flexible Gunnery School. I was trained to shoot a 50 caliber machine gun at targets. Training started on the ground using mounted shotguns with fixed arcs of fire, and then shotguns mounted on the backs of trucks, which were driven through a course. Then we went up in the bombers, shooting at targets pulled by other aircraft. We were taught to shoot the 50 caliber machine guns in short bursts because if you shot them continuously, the barrel would overheat.”

“I graduated from Flexible Gunnery School on Aug. 26, 1944.” Note: The Kingman Army Airfield, in the Mohave Desert, was founded at the beginning of WWII as an aerial gunnery training base. It became one of the USAAF’s largest, training some 35,000 soldiers and airmen. The airfield and Kingman played a significant role in this important era of America’s history.

“I was assigned to be a Tail Gunner on a Boeing B-17 – Flying Fortress!” Note: America’s direct involvement in war increased production of B-17 bombers dramatically; in fact, they are often considered the first mass-produced modern aircraft. Before the advent of long-range fighter escorts, B-17 bombers flew in box formations so that their machine guns could provide overlapping fields of fire to protect each other, though at a sacrifice of rigidity of flight paths, which led to increased dangers from ground-based anti-aircraft guns. These bombers, after many rounds of improvements, were now known for their durability. Many stories were told where major sections of the bombers, such as the tail fin, were nearly destroyed but the crews still made their ways home safely. The Boeing B-17 developed a reputation as an effective bomber, dropping more bombs than any other U.S. aircraft in World War II. Of the 1.5 million tons of bombs dropped on Germany and its occupied territories by U.S. aircraft, 640,000 tons were dropped from B-17s. Fred’s story reveals the durability of the American B-17.

After training at Kingman, Fred was sent to Alexandria Army Air Field in Alexandria, LA for additional training as a Tail Gunner on a B-17 and to protect the Gulf of Mexico from potential enemy submarines. It was here that he was asked to sign the following government form letter so that it could be mailed to his family before he was sent overseas:

26 December 1944

Amelia Gersting (Fred’s grandmother)
4040 Wood Street Wheeling, WV

Well, it looks as though we’re on our way. We’re leaving here almost immediately for Port of Embarkation. After a few hours’ stop at that point, we’ll be heading for our overseas destination. For a little while you won’t be hearing from me



Frederick W. Gersting

as regularly as you have been hearing. But please don't let that worry you. The Army and Navy will take fine care of me while I'm in route. You'll get official word of my safe arrival very soon after I get where I'm going – and you can bet I'll be V-mailing you regularly from then on.

After you receive this, please don't write or try to communicate with me at this station. Thousands of incoming letters and telephone calls have created a pretty tough situation for the people stationed here – and besides, I won't be here anyway. The folks at Alexandria Army Air Base – Officers and enlisted men's wives and also regular personnel – have helped me prepare this letter and its enclosure so you'll know just what to do in case you run into financial or other difficulties. Probably no one has told you this before, but through various offices and agencies setup for the purpose, Uncle Sam and his Air Corps are eager to help our parents or our wives in any way possible.

It's pretty swell to know this, believe me! I won't have to worry half as much about you when I'm overseas because I'll always have the comforting knowledge that the Air Corps really does take care of its own. And "its own" includes you, just as it does me. So if you have any problem of emergency finances, any questions as to allotments, a desire for employment or a need for advice concerning official matters, just get in touch with the PERSONNEL AFFAIRS OFFICER at the nearest Army Air Forces station or installation. These officers are thoroughly acquainted with the proper procedure for you to follow. And they say you mustn't hesitate to avail yourself of the services they have to offer you. You'll find them grand people, eager and willing to help you in any way.

I can't tell you who is going with me, of course, but I can tell you the names of my closest friends and their parents' names, in case you might have any desire to communicate with them or their parents.

FRIEND

HOME ADDRESS

PARENTS

The enclosure's a pretty handy thing. It will give you a good idea of how our personal affairs stack up – insurance, will, and other important matters. Take very good care of it, for I'll feel very much better knowing you have it.

Love, Fred



Front L-R: William J. Hill (pilot); Earl L. Martin (copilot) (KIA); George Durnford (navigator); Jarvis Murphy (bombardier)

Rear L-R: A.G. Roper (engineer); Eugene F. Evans (radio); James T. Keith (right waist) (KIA); Sidney B. Scott (left waist); Fred W. Gersting (tail gunner)

Fred was now assigned to the 775th Bombardment Squadron of the 463rd Bombardment Group as a Tail Gunner. He was headed for the European Theater of WWII. Sailing out of Newport News, VA on a Liberty Ship (the SS Cornelius Harnett) on Jan. 14, 1945, Fred arrived in Naples, Italy on Feb. 1, 1945. Fred remembers "We never found out where we were going until we got there. We did get a hint from the guys in the Merchant Marines." A news article with Fred's military picture appeared in the Wheeling News Register on March 6, 1945, stating the following: Sergeant Frederick W. Gersting, Tail Gunner on a B-17 Flying Fortress is now in a combat area somewhere in Italy. He has been in the service for the past two years and received his training at Alexandria Army Airfield, Alexandria, LA before being sent overseas last January. He is a former employee of the Dulaney Motor Company, he is the grandson of Officer William Gersting of the Wheeling Police Department and Mrs. William Gersting with whom he made his home at 4040 Wood Street.

Fred explains, "We were called 'Allyn's Irish Orphans'. We were named for our Commander who happened to be Irish. Taken by railcar across Italy and then transported by truck to the Foggia Airfields, we noticed that the land around Foggia was very flat. These airfields were heavily bombed by the United States Army Air Force and Royal Air Force in 1943 before being captured from the Germans."

Note: The facilities were repaired by the United States Army Corps of Engineers (COE) to make them usable for heavy bomber operations. The conditions in southern Italy were much better than in England where the Eighth Air Force was conducting daylight strategic bombing of Occupied Europe and Nazi Germany. Using the Foggia Airfield Complex for strategic bombing missions would allow Allied heavy bombers to attack targets in France, Germany, Austria and the Balkans which were inaccessible from England.

Fred remembers, "These airfields had Pierced Steel Planking runways, with support structures quickly constructed out of wood or tents, along with a temporary steel control tower. Six-man tents were used for living quarters. Five men lived in ours. The tents were lined up in rows with the mess hall at one end. There was one, dimly lit, light bulb at the center of each tent. The tent floor was plywood. Wooden cots were used for beds, and a 55-gallon drum was converted into a stove."

"We began our bombing missions always flying out of Foggia. We would go out on a sortie in our B-17 - Flying Fortress, drop our bombs on our targets in Austria, Italy, Czechoslovakia or Germany and then return to Foggia. We were bombing enemy oil refineries, airfields and factories."

"I recall being up in a B-17 and in the Tail Gunner position. As Tail Gunner, I sat on a seat like a bicycle seat up on my knees. I could hardly fit into the tail position. We wore coveralls and at 20 to 30,000 feet, it was very cold. Our suits had electrical wires with snaps to provide heat. Your suit literally plugged in so that you had heated gloves, heated shoes, heat in your face



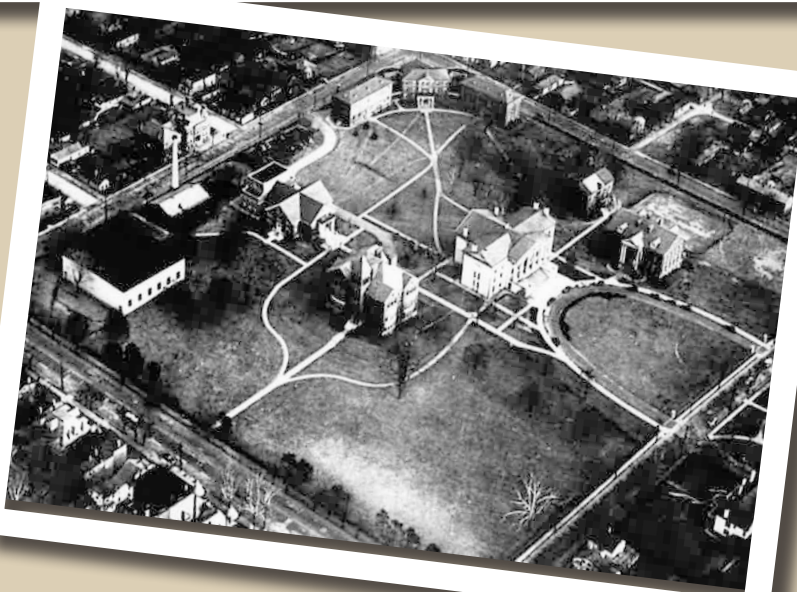
Fred at Alexandria Army Airfield, LA



Front Row: Alfred M. Lawson "Clinton, Ind.; Thomas L. Hood, Detroit, Mich.; John McGraw, Mullins, W. Va; Richard E. Fitch, "Huntington, Ind.,
 Arthur M. Ferrare, New York, N. Y.; Whitford C. Fletcher, Philadelphia, Pa.; Benjamin, Jr. " Clinton, Ind.; Mario M. Contri, Clinton, Ind.; Robert E. Austin, Greencastle, Ind.
 2nd Row: Roy Hutcheson, Jr., Elwood, Ind. ; Wayne N. Foster, Mountain Home, Ark; Stephen Gracik, Wheeling, W. Va.; William A. McKenna, Akron, O.; Norman L. Shofstall, Leeward,
 Mo.;
 Homer H. Hees, Jr., Toledo, O.; Donald O. Bolon, Jerusalem, O.; Robert F Tighe, Chicago, Ill.; Richard L. McQuain, Belington, W.Va.
 3rd Row; James M. Campbell, Wellington, Ill., Jerome F. Heckel, Youngstown, O.; Orland Call, Bountiful, Utah ; Roland S. Yungbans, Vincennes, Ind.; Thomas Holmes, Detroit, Mich.;
 William J. Lies, Fort Recovery, O.; Harry C. Wilson, Chicago, Ill.; John E. O'Brien, Owensboro, Ky.; James J. Carneghi, Detroit, Mich.; Raymond J. Mohr, Ft. Morgan, Col.;
 John C. Schmoller, Jr., Waukeshesha, Wis.
 Back Row; Robert A. Soules, Kalamazoo, Mich.; Randall E. Lough, Fairview , W. Va.; Howard K. Weber, Merrill, Wis.; Frederick W. Gersting, Wheeling, W. Va.; Robert E Timmerman,
 Chicago, Ill.; Bernard C. Nolan, Richland Center, Wis.; Emmitt B Martin, Borden, Ind.; Lavern W. Henning, Chicago, Ill.; William R. Lounsbery, Dayton, O. James J. Boyd ,
 Chicago, Ill.

Above:
 Class 44-C-2
 322nd College Training Detachment
 Transylvania College
 Lexington, KY
 Oct. 1943 - Feb. 1944

Right:
 Transylvania College
 Lexington, KY
 1944



Fred and Mary as Newlyweds



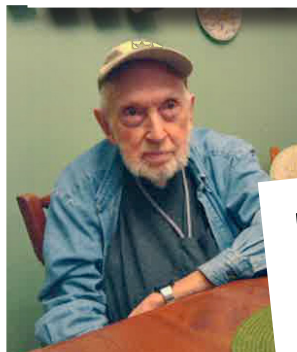
Fred, Jane, Bill and Grandmother Amelia



Fred • Correctional Officer • 1983



Fred and Grandmother, Amelia



Fred



Fred • 1925



Fred, Mary and Grandmother Amelia



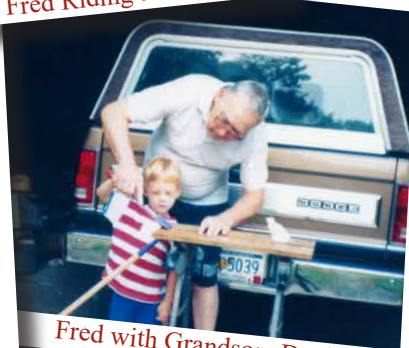
Fred • 1928



Fred Riding a Bike



Fred and Mary • 50th Wedding Anniversary



Fred with Grandson, David



Fred and Mary

Fred and Son, Billy • October 21, 1951



Fred



Fred and Neighbor, Kenneth



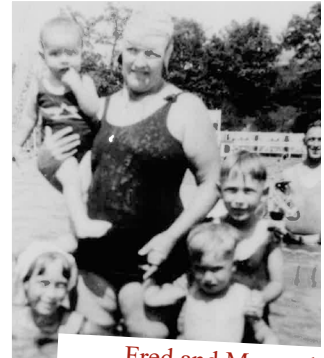
Fred's Son, William, with Wife Vicki and Kids David, William and Crystal



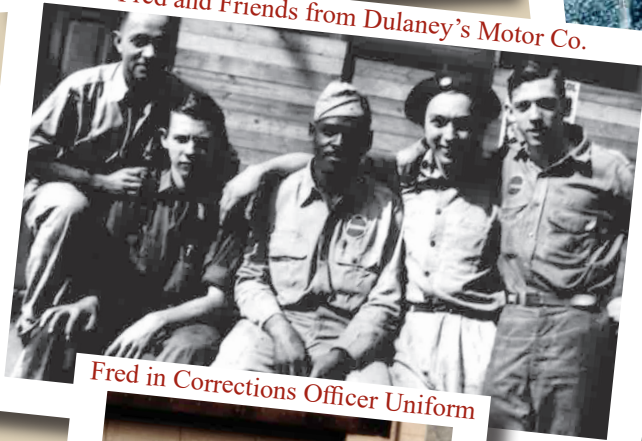
Fred and Friends



Swimming with Grandmother



Fred and Friends from Dulaney's Motor Co.



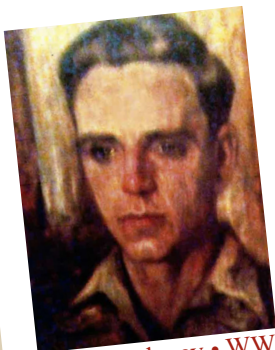
Fred in Corrections Officer Uniform



Fred and Step-Mother, Carolyn



Fred and Mary • 1947



Carlyle Dulaney • WWII



Fred and Grandson, David



Fred with Friends

L-R: Charles Schnelle, Bob Suckles & Fred

mask, etc. One day I felt my foot getting very cold. I panicked as I thought my suit was malfunctioning and my foot was going to freeze. But when I reached down, I found that the electrical wire had come unsnapped from my shoes and when I plugged it back in – there was heat!”

A typical crew of a B-17 Flying Fortress bomber consisted of 10 men. The commanding officer was the pilot, and the executive officer was the co-pilot; these two officers received equal training, and their difference in status was largely only due to the luck of the draw. The bombardier was also an officer, manning the chin turret during flight but taking control of the entire bomber during the actual bomb run, even flying the aircraft at that time, via the connection between his Norden bomb sight and the auto-pilot system. The navigator, another officer, kept the aircraft path during the flight and manned the cheek guns when attacked. The flight engineer, a non-commissioned officer, was trained in the basic mechanics of the entire aircraft, and manned the top turret when attacked. The radio operation, a non-commissioned officer, handled communications and served as the first aid giver when necessary. Finally, the four remaining crew members, all non-commissioned officers, manned the ball turret

gun, left waist gun, right waist gun, and the tail gun; although these bombers were durable, to call them ‘fortresses’ was an exaggeration, thus the gunners served an important role in the defense of these actually vulnerable bombers. Note: The B-17 was a well-armed aircraft. Armament consisted of thirteen 50 caliber machine guns. The gun placements were: chin turret (twin), L/R cheek (single barrels), dorsal (top) turret (twin), radio compartment (single), L/R waist (single), ball turret (twin), and tail (twin). The Navigator, Bombardier or Togglier, Engineer, and Radio Operator were assigned gun duties when the aircraft was under attack. Bombardiers and Toggliers both are responsible for dropping bombs. Bombardiers are officers that utilize the Norden bomb sights to identify and fly the plane to the target. Toggliers (Non-commissioned officers) release their bombs when they see the Bombardier dropping their payload.

“On our crew, we had the Pilot – Lt. Stanley Juracich ; Co-Pilot – Lt. W.J. Hill; Navigator – Lt. George Durnford; Togglier – Sgt. W.F. Donaldson; Engineer - Sgt. A.G. Roper; Radio Operator – Sgt. E.F. Evans; Left Waist Gunner – Sgt. S.B. Scott; Right Waist Gunner – Sgt. James Keith, Jr.; Ball Gunner – Sgt. Teague; and Tail Gunner – me – Sgt. Fred W. Gersting. While Lt. Hill had been our crew’s pilot while training in the U.S., once we were assigned to go out on bombing sorties, the more experienced Lt. Juracich became our Pilot and Lt. Hill was our Co-Pilot.”

“When you work this close to nine other men who are all putting their lives on the line each time they take off in a B-17, you get extremely close to one another. You trust each man to do his specialized job to the best of his ability and to have your back at all times. That fact was never more important than on March 24, 1945 when we flew out of Foggia to bomb Berlin, Germany. This flight proved to be the longest mission flown over Europe during WWII!”

“Lt. Juracich wrote a narrative about the Bombing Mission to Berlin that was taken from his diary. It was published in Allyn’s Irish Orphans – A History of the 775th Bombardment Squadron, 463rd Bombardment Group.”

Fred tells his story, “Thirty-one B-17 Bombers left in formation from Foggia, Italy to bomb Berlin, Germany on March, 24, 1945 – a distance of 1,500 miles. We were in plane 402. One plane was in the lead. The second row had two planes. We were in the 3rd row with a total of four planes. Ours was the 2nd plane from the left – so we were in the front of the formation as we had 24 planes behind us in formation. We were told we would make history as we would be bombing Berlin. We couldn’t believe it. Torn between excitement and fear, emotions ran high. Our target was the Daimler Benz Tank Works in South Central Berlin. The weather was perfect. We checked our plane and equipment and were anxious to get in the air. We all stood around talking, waiting to be told to get into our plane. Sgt. Keith (Right Waist Gunner) and I were off by ourselves talking. Keith showed me two candy bars that he had in his hat and offered one to me – giving me my pick. The conversation we had over that candy bar would prove to be the last time I talked to him.”

“This was our 6th mission. We flew from Foggia, Italy through Yugoslavia, Austria, Bohemia and were entering Germany. We were in the Brux area...near a town later identified as Komotau, just a little west of Brux, when all Hell broke loose without warning. We had not expected to run into flak so no one in the crew had on flak suits. (Note: 8.8 cm FLAK 41 was the anti-aircraft weapons used by the Germans. The shells each weighed 20 pounds and could be fired 20-25 each minute. The ceiling for these shells was 37, 100 feet). We had no flak counter-measures in use. The flak we ran into over Komotau was the deadliest our group had ever encountered. The flak gunners below really poured it on us.”

“Our plane was being constantly hit. I could see the bursts all around me – red, black, blue. The first bursts to hit us wounded the Engineer, A.G. Roper, in the leg. In the meantime, we were being hit continuously. The Navigator, Lt. Durnford, had his left arm almost severed at the elbow. Sgt. Donaldson, the Toggler, had also been seriously hit in the chest. The Right Waist Gunner, Sgt. James Keith, was seriously hit. When flak hit the nose of the plane, the entire plane shook. I found out later that hit had smashed the front window and damaged the oxygen lines.”

“Both oxygen systems in the waist were also cut. I was busy looking for enemy aircraft to keep them off our backs. We took turns administering first aid to our wounded friends. We were boxed in by all the other planes and the flak never let up from below. All at once, our plane nose-dived at full power, I thought we were going to crash. But Pilot Juracich had navigated the plane from 23,000 feet to 16,000 feet to get our plane out of the formation. I didn’t know where he was going, but I knew we were now alone deep into enemy territory as the formation went on without us. I found out later that we were heading for Yugoslavia.”



In Foggia, Italy, this plane is a B-17, parked on the pierced steel sheets used for non-permanent landing strips. You could hear those sheets rattle as the plane went down the runway.

Note: Pilot Juracich filled out a report once he safely landed. In that report he described that two morphine tubes had been used previously on another mission – and not replaced. Thus Plane 402 had only half the morphine it should have had. While they had two First Aid kits, one was destroyed by flak during the mission and not usable when crew members needed it. He also reported that the First Aid Kit in the nose had no sulfanilamide in it.

“James Keith died before we hit the Yugoslavian border. Donaldson was in bad shape, and Lt. Durnford, wounded as he was, attempted to navigate but had it extremely difficult as his maps were in shambles and his vision was blurred. He navigated mostly from memory and got us where we needed to go.”

“At Zara, Yugoslavia, we made a not so good landing because of the loss of the No. 4 engine controls and a flat tire. We had to cut our engine to get down and stop. An ambulance was waiting for us, and we immediately removed the wounded from the plane. They were given treatment, and we removed our equipment from the plane. Both nose and waist of the ship were in shambles and covered in blood. Keith’s body was also removed. Keith had bled to death from an artery that was cut near his crotch. We waited around Zara until the wounded were fixed up, and then took off that evening for Bari via a C-47. On the way to Bari, there was total silence. No one talked. We all kind of sat in a state of shock. I remember looking at Donaldson who was several feet away from me. He looked back at me. We were both hurting. I



Fred's younger brother, William Gersting
Chief Master Sergeant



Fred by a B-17 Bomber at Wheeling
Airport • July 1996

think we both knew he was not going to make it. He died just about ten minutes before we landed. Our two wounded guys were taken to the 26th General Hospital and our two dead to the cemetery. We spent the night at the 22nd Replacement Depot. I don't think anyone slept."

"The next day, Sunday, March 25 – We came back from Bari. We found that the Group had gone on to Berlin after we left it, minus eight planes. At the target (Daimler Benz) they encountered very little opposition from flak. The mission was deemed a huge success." (Note: Pilot Lt. Juracich wrote in his report that he wanted to commend his crew for their coolness under fire and the way they all stepped up to administer first aid to the wounded.)

"In the afternoon, we went to the funeral of Sergeants Keith and Donaldson. The service was simple but impressive. Again, there was total silence from all of

us. The Chaplain was the only one to speak. Later, we visited the men in the hospital, and then came back to Foggia. Hill and Teague had to go to the doctor because Hill hurt his back while giving first aid and Teague had suffered windblast and damaged his eyes. Both men eventually healed. Of the crews that came back, we were told that ours was the worst beaten up. Our original crew now had lost two men dead. It is something I'll never forget and something that will always remain in the back of my mind."

"We went on 11 Bombing Missions total before the war ended. I was sent home on June 20, 1945. The government wanted us to fly home, but none of us wanted to get back on an airplane. However, I did come home by airplane, but have not been up in an airplane since that time and have no desire to do so. My grandparents, brother and sister wrote to me faithfully while I was overseas. My father also wrote an occasional letter."

Fred arrived in the Carolinas on July 1, 1945. He was sent to Drew Field near Tampa, FL, and this is where he was honorably discharged at the Drew Field Separation Center on Dec. 1, 1945. For his dedication to duty and exemplary service, Fred received the following awards and medals: American Theater Ribbon; European-African-Middle Eastern Ribbon; WWII Victory Medal; the prestigious Air Medal; and the Good Conduct Medal. Fred was given credit for fighting in the following battles/campaigns: Apennines; Po Valley; Rhineland; and Central Europe.

A Unit Citation was issued July 3, 1945. Headquarters Fifteenth Air Force US Army Number 3638. It states the following: Under the provisions of Circular No. 333, War Department, 1943, and Circular No. 73, MTOUSA, 12 May 1945, the following unit is cited for outstanding performance of duty in armed conflict with the enemy:

463rd BOMBARDMENT GROUP. For outstanding performance of duty in armed conflict with the enemy. On 24 March 1945, this group was notified to prepare maximum aircraft to lead a Wing formation on a mission to attack and destroy Daimler-Benz Tank Works in Berlin, Germany. A successful completion of this mission would materially red line the enemy hopes of a prolonged defensive against the Red Army then deployed on the eastern bank of the Oder River. Realizing the strategic importance of this undertaking,

the deepest escorted penetration ever attempted in the European Theater of Operations, and one hitherto deemed all but impossible from bases in Southern Italy, the ground crews enthusiastically and sedulously labored day and night to bring all the available aircraft to the peak of mechanical efficiency despite the extensive battle damages incurred in the almost daily operations of the preceding month. Operations and Intelligence personnel indefatigably applied their greatest efforts to supply the carefully selected crews with vital bombing target data. On 24 March 1945, thirty-one (31) B-17 type aircraft loaded with maximum bomb tonnage took off, made rendezvous with other groups of the wing, and after assuming the lead, set course for the objective. The Alps crossed, and having bypassed all known flak areas in Austria and Czechoslovakia, the group had almost entered Germany proper when suddenly and without warning it was savagely opposed by a concentrated and sustained anti-aircraft barrage which inflicted heavy damage to nearly the entire formation and destroyed four heavy bombers. Despite the intensity and accuracy of the heavy guns, the gallant crews battled their way through the enemy defenses, reformed the temporarily demoralized and scattered aircraft on the wing, and were successful in holding the entire formation intact at this critical stage of the flight. Passing out of the effective range of the gun emplacements, the battered group was immediately attacked by fifteen (15) propelled enemy fighters, firing cannon and rockets, which were only dispersed by the belated but aggressive appearance of friendly fighters after another bomber was destroyed in the running battle. As the flight continued, the crippled planes were realigned into three squadrons for the dual purpose of protective cover and bombing accuracy. Nearing the specific target, the flak-riddled formation was for a third time subjected to a stiffened enemy resistance and a sixth ship shot down, but notwithstanding the severe damage sustained by the aircraft, the unnerving experiences just passed, the improvised change of the formation, the last minute changes of bombing calculations, and the weariness induced by the many hours spent at high altitude, the 463rd Bombardment Group relentlessly and unswervingly led the entire wing formation through for an exceptionally successful bombing run. With the complete bomb tonnage of its formation concentrated on the target area, inflicting extensive damage to vital enemy installations and supplies so greatly needed by the enemy in its defense of the capitol city. Turning off the target, the doughty but damaged formation rallied and turned for home. The long and still hazardous trip through heavily defended enemy terrain, over mountainous regions and finally over water was too great a task for six of the twenty planes which had reached the heart of the enemy's productive system, and these were forced down in friendly fields in northern Italy and Yugoslavia for

northern Italy and Yugoslavia for medical treatment to the many wounded men as well as mechanical repairs to the crippled aircraft. Only fourteen (14) of the original attacking force were successful in reaching their home base, and in no instance was there a reported case of insufficient gas supply, so brilliantly has this mission been planned and so skillfully flown. By the conspicuous courage, airmanship and determination of the combat crews, together with outstanding professional skill and devotion to duty of the maintenance crews, the 463rd Bombardment Group has upheld the highest traditions of the Military Service, thereby reflecting great credit upon itself and the Armed Forces of the United States.

By Command of Brigadier General Hollison



B-17 Bomber that Fred's son, William, rode in to experience what it was like for his father.

Fred returned to South Wheeling after being honorably discharged. "I took advantage of the 52/\$20 (\$20 per week for 52 weeks) club for a while and got acclimated back to civilian life. I was working at a Gas Station in South Wheeling owned by Tony Mateo. He fixed me up on a date with him and two sisters. That is when I met Mary Groskopf. We dated for several months and were married on Oct. 19, 1946. Our son, William, was born one year later on Oct. 21, 1947. After working at the gas station, I then went to work at Hopkins Motor Co. (Dodge and Plymouth dealer) located in Center Wheeling. I also worked at Dulaney Motor Co. in center Wheeling.

"When I was working at Hopkins Motor Co., James Keith's mother came to my home one day. My grandmother called me and said to come home at once. Mrs. Keith wanted to talk about her son: How he died, what he said, who he was with, etc. She was looking for closure on the loss of her son. She traveled all over the U.S. and visited every man who was still alive that was on that plane asking the same questions. She wrote letters to me for many years and I always wrote back to her. We sent Christmas cards to one another until she got too old to continue."

"After Mary and I were married, we lived in East Wheeling, then on Wheeling Island and back to South Wheeling before we bought a house in Elm Grove. We lived there for almost 57 years. When we first moved in, the house consisted of four rooms and a bath. Over the years, I built an addition onto the house, doubling the living space. I also built a large two-car garage, and a storage building. With the exception of the excavation work, I did all the block laying, concrete mixing and pouring, framing, plumbing, electrical, and roofing, etc. with assistance from my wife, brother-in-law, and son.

I worked for many years at Hopkins Motor Company in Wheeling doing body work on Dodges and Plymouths. In the mid-1960's I went back to work for Dulaney Chevrolet Co. at the St. Clairsville, OH location to perform bodywork and manage the body shop. They sold Chevrolet and Oldsmobile automobiles and trucks. In 1983, I started working at the WV Penitentiary in Moundsville. I was a corrections officer for ten months and then I was promoted to Supervisor of a Maintenance Crew. I ran a crew of inmates that performed maintenance work inside the penitentiary. I held this job until I retired when I decided to take an early buy-out offered by the state in 1988.

"During those years, our family enjoyed summer outings to Kennywood Park. We also liked to go to Sunset Beach in Claysville with family and friends. We would go early to get a spot in the picnic area in the back of the park and buy a bracelet to swim all day. We'd swim, take time out to eat, and swim some more until dusk. We made a day of it."

"We did a little fishing and enjoyed watching or listening to the Pittsburgh Pirates ball games on TV or radio. My son and I joined the Lewis Wetzel Gun Club where we shot 12 gauge shotguns, 30-30 rifles and 22 rifles. We never went hunting as we liked to shoot at targets. We even learned to reload our own ammunition."



Fred and Mary Gersting on their wedding day • October 19, 1946

Fred's son, Bill, describes his father, "Dad was always very involved in my life and gave me guidance and direction. He worked hard and set a good example about being loyal to the company that you work for. I recall one Christmas in particular. We were allowed to open one gift on Christmas Eve. I was 11 years old and so excited. I opened my gift and found... a leather hole punch. Who gives an 11 year old a leather hole punch for Christmas? But that was dad – always practical. I still have that leather hole punch. I wanted to experience some of what dad had gone through in WWII. So on Sept. 11, 2016, I took a ride in a B-17 Flying Fortress. I was awestruck by its simplicity. I didn't get to go into the tail section to see where he would have served as a Tail Gunner. But I got a feel for the plane itself. It was very rugged looking and I can't imagine what it would have been like to ride in that machine during wartime over enemy territory with flak being fired continuously."

Fred remembers, "Mary's health failed and then she had a massive stroke. She passed away in 2006. We'd been married for 59 years. She was buried at Greenwood Cemetery. I think about her every day and miss having her with me so much. We were a team. I loved her ox-tail soup and city chicken. Nine years later, my own health started to decline so I moved into my son's home in Dec., 2015. Bill and Vicki, my son and daughter-in-law, assure that I am comfortable and safe and have what I need to live as independently as possible. I like to reminisce about my life and what I have accomplished. When I think about the men I served with in that B-17 Bomber, I swell with pride at their courage and dedication. I am saddened by the loss of lives we incurred and shall never forget those guys who sacrificed all to help keep America free. I still communicate with A.G. Roper. As far as I know, he and I are the only ones remaining from our crew."

When asked what he'd tell his family about living a good, long life, a 92 year old Fred replies, "I quit smoking when I was 38 years old as I listened to the first warnings that came out about cigarette smoke being harmful. I visited my doctor regularly and had check-ups to assure all is working as it should. We always ate good food with plenty of vegetables."

One thing noted about Fred and his longevity is that he keeps his mind sharp by continual learning. He taught himself how to use a computer and gets on line to look things up daily. He even taught himself how to use a computer program to colorize his and Mary's wedding picture from 1946. He plans on colorizing more photos from the earlier years.

Fred Gersting has a legacy of one son; three grandchildren (David, William, and Crystal) and five great grandchildren. He leaves a firm foundation for his family of dedicated service and valor - and exemplifies a life well-lived. Fred is representative of what is great about America and is truly one of the greatest of the Greatest Generation!

(Written May, 2017)



Fred Gersting • May 2017 • Age 92