

Owen Burgess, the 390th Bombardment Group (H), and "Old memories": October 8, 1943

Old memories flooded back, almost to tears when the Colonel read the orders of commendation "his display of personal bravery and devotion to duty".

We refer, of course, to the awards ceremony when Pvt. Billy L. Wright was honored posthumously at the home of his parents, who live in Stanton.

Our memories went back to Hiram C. Skogmo of Milwaukee, Wade Hampton Sneed of Georgia and Merle C. Cloud of Rule, Texas, and many many more comrades and friends of the 390th Bomb Group, whose families surely experienced similar ceremonies a quarter of a century ago.

Back then, we had a cause.

Now, Billy and the thousands of others who will not return from Southern Asia have only intangible uncertainty as to why they were there.

They only knew that their country called. They went. They died.

They are honored.

The small bits of ribbon and the bronze medals are left.

That and the memories.

—Owen Burgess, July 12, 1968, *Brownsville (TN) States-Graphic*

<https://tinyurl.com/October-8-1943>

"October 8, 1943 - Part One"

(originally published on October 7, 2019)



Owen Burgess had been born to an Episcopalian missionary couple in the small town of Eagle, Alaska Territory, in October, 1915. In his family memoir, apparently written in the late 1980s, Owen wrote about his parents and his early years in Alaska:

The Yukon River had not yet frozen for the winter; however, ice was forming in the shallows, when John Owen Burgess came into this world on October 11, 1915. . . .

My parents took care of me in the church rectory, where we lived on a bluff high above the river which, at that time, was the interstate highway of the Yukon Territory.

Before she married, Owen's mother Caroline had lived with her mother in Brownsville, Tennessee, about sixty miles northeast of Memphis. Young Owen Burgess moved to Brownsville, with his mother, in about 1919; his father joined them later. After graduating from high school there in 1936, attending the University of Tennessee at Knoxville, and working with a Memphis pharmaceutical firm and the Tennessee Highway Department, twenty-six-year-old Owen Burgess was working at the new Milan Army Ammunition Plant in the late fall of 1941. In his memoir, Owen Burgess remembered December 7, 1941, and his brief career as an Army flight school trainee:

One Sunday, Dec 7, 1941 news came of Pearl Harbor. Oh! how all of us young people stayed glued to the radio all day listening to the news. We were at war. I planned to join the Air Corps and become a pilot. Did so in January but did not have to report to the Army until late February. . . .

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<https://tinyurl.com/December-11-1941>

"October 8, 1943 - Part Two"

(originally published on December 10, 2019)



Owen Burgess had summed up his experience as an aviation cadet and pilot candidate at the primary flight school operated by Hangar Six at Garner Field in Uvalde, Texas:

I had a tough instructor who cursed me a lot. Kept me upset most of the time.

Anyway, he thought I couldn't fly for the Army. I was checked by Army pilots and they said I was OK. Another civilian pilot was not pleased with the way I performed stalls and spins so he eliminated me. . . .

My written tests showed I was qualified for Navigation School so I was sent to Ellington Field south of Houston for Navigation Pre-Flight training. I eventually was sent to Hondo Texas where I graduated in the class of 43-3.

The *Hondo Anvil Herald* issue of Friday, February 19, 1943, carried the front-page report of the graduation and commissioning of now-2ndLt. Owen Burgess and his fellow cadets in Navigation School Class 43-3. As calendar year 1942 came to its end, aviation cadet Owen Burgess had spent the last ten months training at three Army Air Forces (AAF) installations and one civilian field in south and southeast Texas, all located along a line running 270 miles, almost due east, from Uvalde, through Hondo and San Antonio, and on to Houston. . . .

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<https://tinyurl.com/March-4-1943>

"October 8, 1943 - Part Three"

(originally published on March 3, 2020)



In April, 1940, Emil Mateyak was living at home in Chicago with his widowed mother and two of his older sisters. He had graduated from Lindblom High School the year before, but he was still looking for work. Between that April, 1940, and his enlistment with the Merchant Marine, in June, 1942, Emil would spend one summer working with the Civilian Conservation Corps in the vicinity of Teton National Forest in Wyoming. He would also work with Liquid Carbonic and with Crane Co., both of which had invested heavily in major new plants on Kedzie Avenue in Chicago, two-to-three miles from the Mateyaks' Southwest Side (Gage Park) home. But in June, 1942, twenty-one-year old Emil had enlisted in the Merchant Marine. He would become a seaman after a three-to-four month training course at one of the US Maritime Service training schools. . . .

But instead, on August 22 of that year—two months after joining the Merchant Marine—Private Emil Mateyak enlisted in the Army. After almost seven months of indoctrination and training, now-Sergeant Emil Mateyak, the son of Slovakian immigrants, would be in B-17 crew training (Crew #10), stationed at Walla Walla (WA) Army Air Field. The date was Thursday, March 18, 1943, and Sgt. Mateyak was flying a training mission in a B-17F Flying Fortress, serial number 42-3068. His duty was listed as "AG," or Armorer Gunner. It appears that Sgt. Mateyak was serving as a Waist Gunner on this flight. . . .

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<https://tinyurl.com/April-13-1943>

"October 8, 1943 - Part Four"

(originally published on April 12, 2020)



THIS WAR IS DONE. The guns have ceased their cough and the dead are restored to the dust from which they sprang. The earthbound living struggle on—snarled in ruthless strife and shabby prejudice.

Once more the needle chatters in the roughened groove of peace.

But in his brief moment of selfless freedom the warrior widened our horizon. He revealed the unity and strength of which we are capable.

This book is more than a record of high achievement. It is of the future no less than of the past. It is prophecy. It marks the altitude to which the spirit of man can soar. It is a portent of what life may be when we have learned to labor, as these soldiers did, for the common good.

It will remain a fount of refreshment when the heart grows heavy and the light of hope burns dim.

The author of this piece was clearly a man of letters and, at the same time, he was a man who had experienced war both as a combatant and as the father of a fallen soldier, for the foreword to *The Story of the 390th Bombardment Group (H)*, published in 1947, was written by Howard Vincent O'Brien—Yale graduate, World War I veteran, columnist for the *Chicago Daily News*—and father of 2ndLt. Donel O'Brien. Second Lieutenant O'Brien was killed in action on February 10, 1944, when the B-17 he served as Navigator on, with the 570th Bomb Squadron, 390th Bomb Group, was shot down over Germany. His name appears on page 158 of *The Story of the 390th Bombardment Group (H)*, "In Memoriam."

There are no ranked white crosses in the sky,
 No earth-bound markers set for men who fly;
 But when, against the heaven's endless blue,
 In myriad form, and limned with glorious hue,
 The sun-swept clouds roll up their summits high,
 Remembered, those who left the earth, to die. . . .

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<https://tinyurl.com/SSgt-Emil-Mateyak>

"October 8, 1943 - Part Five: S/Sgt. Emil Mateyak"
 (originally published on July 12, 2020)



Over May-June, 2020, I worked with Bob and Allan Jesko, Emil Mateyak's nephews, on some recordings then-Sergeant Mateyak had made while in training at Gowen Field, Boise, Idaho, early in 1943. Staff Sergeant Mateyak would go on to become the Tail Gunner for the original 568th Bomb Squadron, 390th Bomb Group crew that would be led by Captain James Pedersen and would include Lts. Owen Burgess and Harry Gorden, F/O Joseph Carter, and S/Sgts. Frank Grubb, Robert Redding, and Anton Kohler. S/Sgts. Mateyak, Grubb, Redding, and Kohler would not survive the crash of *Blood, Guts, and Rust II* near Bremen, Germany, on October 8, 1943. All but S/Sgt. Redding are buried in the Ardennes American Cemetery in Belgium. S/Sgt. Redding is buried in the Beverly National Cemetery, Beverly, New Jersey.

In then-Major Pedersen's official postwar interview about the crash, he stated:

Just after turning on bomb run Sgt. Mateyak called me on interphone and told me that #2 engine was on fire. . . . Sgt. Mateyak usually talked quite a bit over the interphone, but after my last contact with him (above) he was not heard from. That was about five minutes between then and my command to bail out.

The voice that you hear in this recording is the voice that was silenced over Bremen, Germany, on October 8, 1943. . . .

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<https://tinyurl.com/August-19-1943>

"October 8, 1943 - Part Six"
(originally published on August 18, 2020)



Private Frank Grubb had been in training at Sheppard Field, Texas, on July 1, 1942, where he had been assigned to the 403rd School Squadron, Air Corps Technical (or Training) School. But his official Army files contain no listing of the different bases where he had been stationed in the US, and the next assignment recorded for him is as a member of Capt. James Pedersen's "original crew" with the 568th Bomb Squadron, 390th Bomb Group, in the spring (probably April) of 1943. The 1940 US Census had listed Frank as living with his older brother George and their parents, Dell and Pearl, in Challis, Custer County, Idaho. But the official list of "Emergency Addressees" for members of Capt. Pedersen's crew names Frank's mother as his family contact, with an address in Blackfoot, Bingham County, Idaho. Frank's June, 1942, enlistment record also gives his residence as Bingham County. The *Challis (ID) Messenger*, in its weekly issue of Wednesday, July 7, 1943, reported:

—Mr. and Mrs. Dell Grubb and two sons John and Frank left town Saturday for Blackfoot. John and Frank were on furloughs from the army and Mrs. Grubb came with them from Blackfoot for a few day's visit in this vicinity.

Saturday had been July 3, and Independence Day had fallen on Sunday. On that Wednesday, July 7, S/Sgt. Frank Grubb visited the dental clinic at Smoky Hill Army Air Field in Salina, Kansas. The register for his visit identifies him as serving with Company "Wittan," "390 Gp," "Cr[ew] 14-3." LtCol. Edgar Wittan was the original commanding officer of the 390th Bomb Group. . . .

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<https://tinyurl.com/December-8-2020>

"October 8, 1943 - Part Seven"
(originally published on December 7, 2020)



Owen Burgess' personal memoir includes very few recollections of the period between his arrival at Framlingham airfield, Suffolk County, England, in mid-July and his first combat mission on August 19. He does write that the men of the 390th "were inactive for several days after reaching our base, but did make a few familiarization flights around the area." But even before the 390th's first combat mission on August 12, he and the other men got a palpable taste of what they were in for:

One day the other bomber groups based in England, returned from a mission to the Rhine Valley and several of the planes were shot up pretty bad, landed on our base. It was then that we realized that we were not over there to go sight seeing.

The "390th Bombardment Group (H): History—August, 1943," "Station Bulletin" Number 26, published on August 5, lists the following officer promotions:

1st Lt. Wade Hampton Sneed, Jr., O794590, effective 13 July 1943 . . .
1st Lt. Hiram Campbell Skogmo, O-450120, effective 13 July 1943
1st Lt. John Owen Burgess, O-673474, effective 13 July 1943
1st Lt. Merle Melton Cloud, O-670008, effective 13 July 1943 . . .

Of the four good friends (see page 1), only Owen Burgess would survive the war—after spending nineteen months as a POW. . . .

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<https://tinyurl.com/February-8-2021>

"October 8, 1943 - Part Eight"
(originally published on February 8, 2021)



On Sunday, September 26, the 390th Bomb Group's sixteenth mission targeted the André Citroën factory in Paris. Flak was observed, but there were no attacks on the formation by enemy aircraft, according to the contemporary accounts. Due to the heavy cloud cover over the target, no bombs were dropped. All aircraft returned safely, but T/Sgt. Noel H. Howard, a replacement Radio Operator flying with the crew led by 1stLt. William Cabral, 570th Bomb Squadron, was killed in action. As recorded in the September, 1943, history of the 390th Bomb Group:

T/Sgt Noel H. Howard was killed in action on this mission, on which he flew as radio operator. He was found standing, unconscious, with his gas [oxygen] mask off. Attempts at resuscitation failed and he was dead when the plane landed.

In Special Orders issued the next day, September 27, two enlisted men from the 390th were given travel orders pertaining to the disposition of T/Sgt. Howard's remains:

5. T/Sgt Guy A Ritter Jr 35209771, 30th Sta [Station] Compl [Complement] Sq, WP [will proceed to] 2nd General Hosp, APO 647 thence to Brookwood Cemetery to accompany the remains of T/Sgt Noel H Howard 6296017. Monetary travel alwns [allowance] in lieu of rat [rations] and qrs [quarters] for two (2) days . . . is authorized. . . . GMV [Government vehicle]. . . .

6. Pvt Harold A Pearson 38364981, 568th Bomb Sq (H), WP 2nd General Hosp, APO 647 thence to Brookwood Cemetery purpose of transporting thereto the remains of T/Sgt Noel H Howard 6296017. . . .

The English poet and scholar Laurence Binyon (1869-1943) had served as an orderly in the Red Cross during the First World War, working in a military hospital in France from 1915-1916. He is perhaps best remembered for his war poem, "For the Fallen," which concludes with these lines:

As the stars that shall be bright when we are dust,
Moving in marches upon the heavenly plain;
As the stars that are starry in the time of our darkness,
To the end, to the end, they remain.