

May 6, 1996

Bettie F. Thomas
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Dear Mrs. Thomas:

I have read your father's heartbreaking account of his search for the lost B-24 on which your brother was radio operator. As you may know, it is reprinted in the April Newsletter of the 307th Bombardment Group Association, along with your wish to hear from anyone who may have known a member of your brother's crew.

I was a member of the 371st Squadron and 307th Group and was on Noemfoor, waiting for orders to go home, until just two days before your brother's last flight. I did not know Donald, I'm sorry to say; but I did know Lester Kornblum who, in fact, was a tentmate until I left to go home. We had flown on the same crew while based on Wakde, he as bombardier, I as co-pilot. Both of us were grounded by the time we got to Noemfoor and waiting for orders to go home. The squadron moved from Wakde to Noemfoor on September 18, 1944.

As you may know, the missions from Noemfoor to Balikpapan, Borneo, began on September 30. I remember watching all 72 planes taking off at 4AM that morning, one by one, then returning to Kornasoren Airdrome that evening to await their return. Not one of the planes made it back: four were shot down, all the others had made emergency landings en route. I wonder if Donald flew any of those missions. If he did, he may have used up his luck surviving that experience.

I did not volunteer for any of those missions but knew a crew that did. Its pilot was named Kates, and he offered to lead the squadron on the raid. His plane was first over the target and the first plane shot down.

While these missions were being flown, I was on a crew flying war-weary B-24's to a glorified "junk yard", an abandoned air strip in southern New Guinea. Kornblum, being a bombardier, had a more difficult time keeping busy, but he did manage to talk his way aboard a plane that was sent to Sydney, Australia, for a load of liquor and fresh milk and vegetables. He came back with a stack of phonograph records, including Shostakovich's 1st Symphony and an album of songs by someone we had never heard of, Peggy Lee. We borrowed a wind-up phonograph from Special Services and played the records for all to hear. Peggy Lee was clearly the favorite; I hope Donald heard her that night.

I expect you have learned by now that Kornblum survived a disastrous mission to Rabaul New Year's Day, 1944. All ten members of the crew were casualties, including two deaths. Lester suffered severe wounds to an arm, shoulder and leg.

And you must have known about Gayle Kizer's near fatal mission to Yap on July 15, when he was forced to crash-land his plane in the ocean. A life raft was dropped to the survivors of the crash, but only Kizer and four other men were saved.

A few days after I arrived at Nadzab, New Guinea, to await a flight back to the States, a pilot I knew showed up in the mess hall, just arrived from Noemfoor. He said the missions to Balikpapan had been put on hold for the time being because of the heavy losses, and that the squadron was now conducting single-plane strikes on shipping in the Makassar Straits. He said hunting had been good, that only one plane had been lost so far. He said that plane simply disappeared on the 22nd. No one saw it go down. They were still searching for it when he left. The only name of a crew member he could remember was "Kornblum", because he had flown with him a couple of times. He said the crew was made up of volunteers, some of whom were already grounded and waiting to go home.

Like Kornblum. I remember his telling me that he could have taken a ground job after the Rabaul mission. He decided not to, he said, because he felt that regardless of where he was or what he was doing, he knew he would be found when the time came

Lester was not a close, personal friend, but he was special---as your brother would have known---because that life, those experiences, set us apart from others while at the same time bonding us one to the other. I've spent several years writing a memoir of that life, trying to explain the unexplainable. I call it The Spectator, a title suggested by the dancer, Martha Graham, whose letters kept me sane while I was overseas.

The Spectator has not yet been published---may never be---but writing it was the important thing, just as your father's quest, your search for answers, may be more important than the answers you are seeking.

Sincerely yours,



David Zellmer

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