

# **Keith Harris and World War II**

By Dale Harris

Keith lived from 1919 to 1980. Although his life was shorter than many, he was very fortunate to have survived 25 bombing missions over Nazi Germany and occupied Europe. This is the story of his early life and his experiences during the war.

Keith grew up on the family farm east of Earlville along the CB&Q railroad. The farm had been in the family since 1872 when his family moved from Pennsylvania, being sold in 1973.

When Keith was a child he and his grandfather were driving home from Elgin when they saw an airplane operating off a pasture along the road. In those days it was not uncommon for “barnstormers” to fly around and sell rides to the adventurous public. His grandfather, John A. Harris, was known to be reluctant to part with his money, but on this day he decided that he and Keith should have a ride in that airplane.

Once Keith took that ride he was hooked on aviation for the rest of his life. Granddad complained that his hat blew off and was lost.

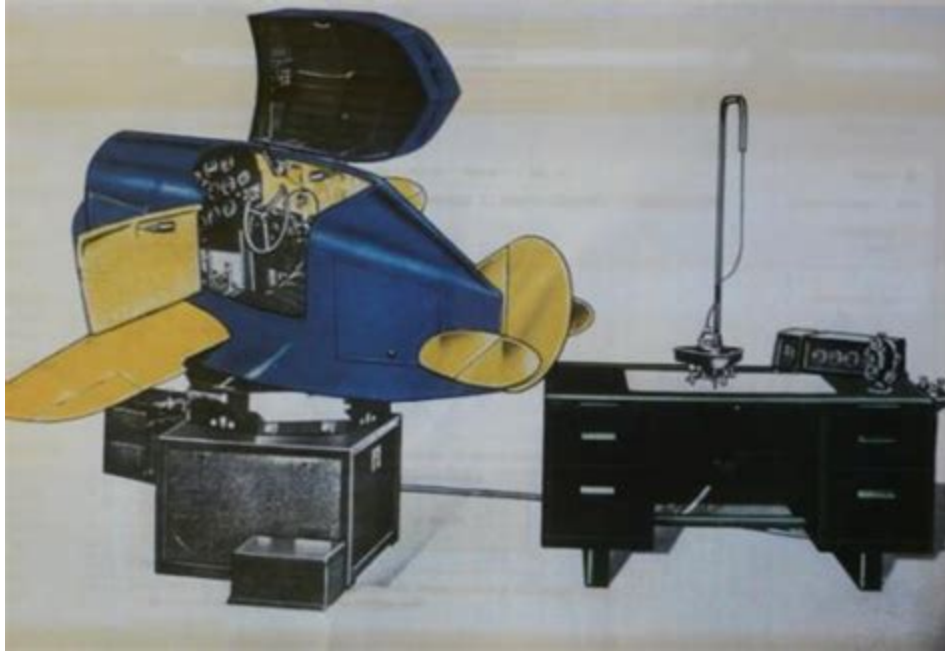
After graduation from Earlville high school in 1937 Keith went to work with George Gould and Janet Worsley at the locker plant, but also attended an aircraft mechanic school in Lincoln, Nebraska. After finishing the course there were no jobs to be found, so he returned to the farm.

By 1940 people knew that the U.S. would probably become involved in the European war and the draft was being used to build up the Army. Keith was exempt until they changed the draft age to include men born in 1919, so he was then subject to being called up. Not wanting to be drafted into the infantry he decided to enlist in the Army Air Corps. He went down to Ottawa to sign up.

Keith's first assignment was to Chanute Field at Rantoul, Illinois. With the rapid buildup of the Army they were a bit disorganized and they did not have much to do. He spent his time at the firehouse and

helped put out the frequent tent fires. The soldiers all lived in tents with oil heaters which caused the fires. Eventually he was assigned and trained to become a Link Trainer instructor. Link Trainers were primitive flight simulators to train new pilots on instrument flight. When his training was complete he was transferred to New York City to await his next assignment. While there he and his colleagues performed menial tasks, but also had plentiful free time.

While stationed at Chanute Keith went up to Earlville and married Margie Green at the pastor's home in Ottawa. It was a small wedding with his brother Bob and the pastor's wife as witnesses. No one had any money for a fancy wedding.



## **Link Trainer**

On one of his free days Keith decided to explore New York City. To ride the subway cost five cents, and he had saved a nickel from his \$17 per month pay. As long as he did not leave the subway he could change trains and continue riding as long as he wanted and wherever he wanted in the city on that one nickel. Most of the subway system is above ground, so he had a great tour of the city.

After several weeks of waiting, Keith was assigned to Elmendorf Field in Alaska, just north of Anchorage. To get to Alaska he rode a troop train from New York to San Francisco via Arizona, then to Seattle. He

wrote a long letter describing that train ride which was published in the Earlville Leader. In that letter he described the real cowboys he saw in Arizona, and how much time passed between telegraph poles so he could calculate the speed of the train.

From Seattle they took a ship up the Inside Passage to Seward in the Territory of Alaska. Then they were taken by train to Anchorage and finally Elmendorf Field. Once at Elmendorf he began to train pilots in the Link Trainer. While giving one lesson there was an earthquake (his first). The lieutenant in the trainer popped the hood up and demanded to know who was shaking this thing.

On the evening of December 7, 1941 they learned that Pearl Harbor had been attacked by the Japanese. They figured that Alaska may be next so Keith pulled a few nights of guard duty. Things soon settled down and he was back to normal duties.

Since that first plane ride with his grandfather Keith had always wanted to be a pilot and the Army now needed a lot of pilots, so he

volunteered. He was disqualified initially for deficient visual acuity, but apparently standards were adjusted and he was then accepted.

Keith's initial training was done at the Cal-Aero Academy at Victorville, California in 1942. Margie and her widowed father moved near the training base while Keith was in primary training. Throughout his time in the U.S. Margie tried to accompany him where it was allowed. Upon graduation from primary training Keith was commissioned as a 2nd Lieutenant.

During his primary training Keith was between flights and was watching other airplanes in the pattern when he saw one drop out of sight. He told the instructor what he saw, but was not believed, so he ran down to the little lake where he had seen the plane fall. The tail of the plane poked above the water, but the pilot had managed to climb out of the cockpit and was sitting on top. These planes were PT-17 Stearmans with open cockpits, so escaping was not very difficult. Keith waded out to help the pilot who was coughing up mud and water, but otherwise not injured.

On Keith's first flight in the PT-17 the instructor told Keith to check that his seat belt was fastened. Confirming that it was, the instructor turned the plane upside down and had Keith hold his arms outside the cockpit. That was to prove that he trusted his equipment.

After primary training Keith moved up the chain to more complex and multi-engine aircraft, transferring to different bases frequently. Finally he was selected to become a B-17 bomber pilot.

## Boeing B-17



In the mid 1930s the Army determined that it needed a more capable bomber and took bids for a new airplane. The initial requirement was for a twin-engine bomber with certain speed, load and altitude requirements. The Boeing company went beyond the specifications and submitted a bid for a four-engine bomber which exceeded all of the Army's requirements. In testing the first airplane crashed due to pilot error, but they pressed on and continued developing the airplane.



The B-17E was the first model to be used in WWII, but the following model, the B-17F, was the most used until mid-1943 when the B-17G was introduced. Keith's assigned airplane was a B-17F model, named by his crew as the "Spot Remover". The name came from the precision daylight bombing strategy in which they would remove "spots" valuable to the enemy. They flew that airplane to England via Newfoundland, then flew it on most of their missions.

Aircrews could name their own airplanes, and could have what is called "nose art" painted on them. Some of the names and cartoons were nearly pornographic to the point that some had to be modified. "Spot Remover" with its boring name and no cartoon had no such problems. Anyone in downtown Earlville in 1943 may have seen Alan's baby buggy with "Spot Remover Jr." painted on it.



The B-17 was the premier bomber at the beginning of the war, with capabilities superior to anything else in the air. It had a wingspan of 103 feet, The four 1,200 horsepower engines enabling it to outrun and out-climb any other combat aircraft then in use, including both American and German fighters. The B-17 weighed 36,135 pounds and had a maximum gross weight of 65,000 pounds. They had a crew of ten men; four officers and six enlisted. The crew consisted of:

Officers:

Pilot/Aircraft Commander

Co-pilot

Navigator

Bombardier

Enlisted:

Flight Engineer/Top Turret Gunner

Radio Operator

Waist Gunners (2)

Tail Gunner

Ball Turret Gunner

The B-17 bristled with ten 50-caliber machine guns, leading one reporter to call it a “flying fortress” which stuck as the nickname for all B17s. Every crew member had a machine gun to fire except the pilot and co-pilot.

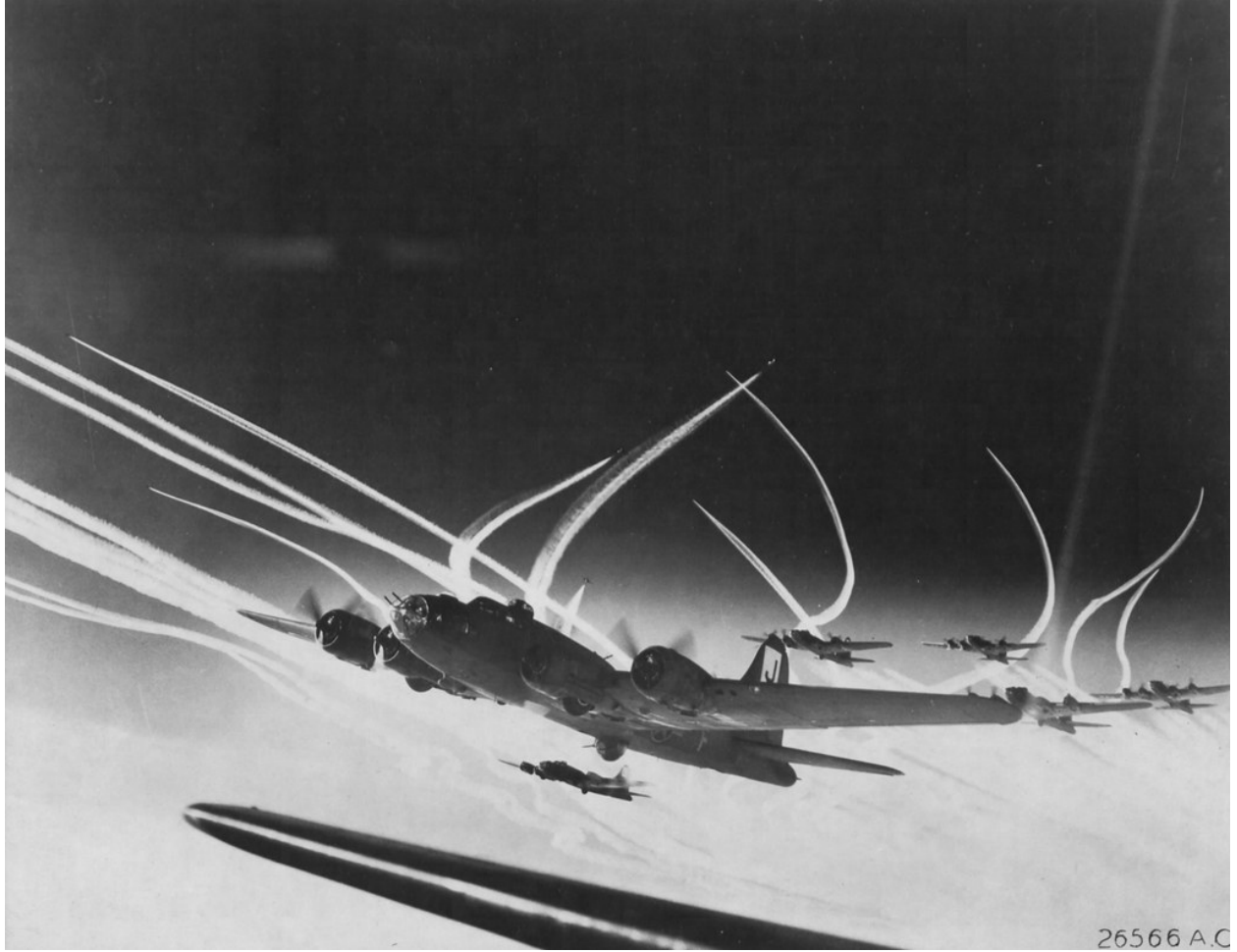
B-17 training was the last before going into combat. As such they stressed formation flying and simulated bombing missions.

In the summer of 1943 the 390th Bomb Group (Heavy) was created and Keith with his crew were assigned to the 390th. A bomb group consisted of three squadrons with about 24 aircraft per squadron. The men in the aircrews were supported by maintenance men, cooks, bakers, administrators, chaplains, armorers and everything else that went into putting bombs on the target. The aircrews, of course, faced the greatest dangers.

Keith and his crew flew over the Atlantic to their base at Framlingham, England. Soon after arriving they attended a briefing in which the speaker told those attending to look at the men to their left and their right. Then he said that only one of those three people would survive to complete the 25 bombing missions that were required of each of them. Later studies showed that in WWII those least likely to survive were German submarine crews, but second place went to 8th Air Force aircrews. The odds were definitely not in their favor.

The 390th flew its first mission to Bonn, Germany on 12 August, 1943. On 17 August the 390th flew the Regensburg portion of the famous Schweinfurt/Regensburg mission. The losses at Schweinfurt were very bad and the Regensburg aircraft were also severely attacked. After that mission the Air Corps was seriously questioning the viability of their strategy to use daylight precision bombing as opposed to the nighttime area bombing that the British were using.

One of the weaknesses in the U.S. strategy was that the P-47 fighters could not carry enough fuel to accompany the bombers all the way to the target and back. When they reached their fuel limit they turned back to England leaving the bombers alone until they were close to home on the return.



**Top Cover photo taken from Keith's airplane**

### **Belly landing**

In September the Spot Remover was assigned to fly, but the mission was scrubbed after the planes were in the air, and they were ordered to return to the base. This was not unusual, but this time it was a bit different.

As the Spot Remover approached the base they prepared to land by lowering the landing gear. But this time the gear would not go down. The crew tried everything they could to get the gear down, but were not successful.

As it became clear that the gear would not deploy they knew they would have to attempt a belly landing. This was a dangerous thing to do as the bombers that tried it often broke up when they hit the ground and crashed. The ball turret suspended below the fuselage seemed to be the weak point.

Keith flew the Spot Remover out over the North Sea while they worked on removing the ball turret. They eventually got it free and dropped it into the sea.

As they flew around, the colonel at the base knew that their odds were long. Perhaps thinking that the B-17 would crash and burn anyway, he asked Keith if he wanted to loop the airplane, which sounds a little crazy considering its size. Over the intercom Keith asked the crew if

they wanted to do a loop and they were unanimous in declining that opportunity. Then Keith offered them the opportunity to parachute down. They all declined that as well.

Headquarters decided that it would be good to get a motion picture of the belly landing to help with training and/or the crash investigation. There was no movie camera at Framlingham so they had to have one delivered from another base forty miles away, which took some time.

Eventually, everything was ready and Keith proceeded to make the approach. He landed on the grass next to the runway to avoid fouling the main runway and perhaps have a more forgiving surface. The landing was written up in the Stars and Stripes newspaper as the “perfect belly landing.” They facetiously wrote that in the future they should just grease the bellies of the bombers and land them without wheels. The result was a successful landing with bent propellers and some sheet metal damage. No injuries.



The movie of that landing was made it into a newsreel where the mother of one of Keith's crew saw it at a theater, not knowing that her son was on that plane.

### **“I was going to drop him”**

On another mission there was a mishap that could have been very serious, at least for one crew member. As they taxied from the hardstand parking area Keith thought the tail wheel tire seemed soft. When they got to the runway he asked one of the crew to jump out and check that the tire was not flat. One did so, and signaled that it was good to go. Learning that, Keith pushed the throttles forward and began the takeoff roll. What he did not know was that the crew member had not made it back into the airplane when Keith started the takeoff. On the B-17 the waist door is hinged on the front side, so the wind would try to force it closed. The man tried to jump into the accelerating airplane but was caught by the closing door and with the pressure he could not get in. Another crew member grabbed his parachute straps and tried to pull him in, but did not have enough

strength. The Spot Remover took off and began to climb with the crewmember being held by his straps outside the airplane. Eventually enough muscle power was used to get him aboard and they proceeded on with the mission. Keith did not know anything about this until the end of the mission, and was upset that no one had told him. One of the crew members published a magazine article describing the event.

## **Geary**

Jim Geary, one of the pilots in the 390th, was known as quite a character. He was frustrated that as a pilot he never had the opportunity to shoot at the enemy. To compensate he obtained a Tommy Gun, a shoulder-fired .45 caliber submachine gun, and carried it on at least one mission. When the fighters attacked he poked the barrel out the pilot's window and began firing. His crew immediately protested that he would shoot off a propeller or hit a fuel tank, and that was the end of Geary's shooting at the enemy.

## **Shuttle mission**

On 17 August 1943 the 390th was assigned to a unique mission. The plan was to fly from England to Regensburg, drop their bombs, continue flying over the Alps and land in North Africa. The plan was at the maximum range for the B-17 so fuel was critical.

At the beginning of a bomber mission the B-17s, heavily loaded with bombs, fuel, ammunition and crew struggled into the air, then flew a holding pattern as the other aircraft took off and joined with them. This process could take up to two hours before they headed over the channel to Europe and of course burned a lot of fuel. The joining up was very dangerous in itself as bombers came up through the clouds, tried to find their group, and moved into formation. There were many mid-air collisions, mostly fatal, in this part of the missions. Once the formations were ready they headed east.

On the shuttle mission two of the groups were the 390th and the 100th. According to Malcolm Gladwell in "The Bomber Mafia" the 390th had been practicing "blind" takeoffs so they could get in the air while the field was fogged in. In a blind takeoff the pilot cannot see down the runway ahead of him and must keep the airplane centered on the runway using the compass. The 100th group had not developed that skill as well, so they could not take off until the fog had cleared while the 390th was circling above, burning fuel, waiting for them.

When the formations were ready they flew on to Regensburg and dropped their bombs. From there, they continued south over the Alps and the Mediterranean toward Africa. With the delay in forming up over England fuel was critical and many of the bombers ran out of fuel forcing them to ditch into the sea. Keith's crew were more fortunate in that they made it to the African coast, though they did not have enough fuel to reach the base. They landed on a dry lake bed where eventually more fuel was dropped to them. While at the lake bed some natives approached and told them about another airplane that had

crashed not far away. Some of Keith's crew hiked through the jungle to the crash site and found the wreck but only the deceased bodies of that crew.

After receiving the fuel they flew to the base where they prepared to return to England. One of the crews "adopted" a local donkey and loaded it into their B-17. They rigged up an oxygen mask for the donkey and got it to England. There is no word as to what happened to the donkey in its new home.

## **Munster**

On Sunday, 10 October 1943 the target was Munster, Germany. Keith said it was a beautiful sunny autumn day. When they were briefed on the mission they were informed that the aiming point was the front steps of a church in central Munster. Normally the bombs were aimed at industrial centers, railroad yards, and submarine pens. Keith and others thought that aiming for a church on a Sunday morning was inappropriate and said so, but those were the orders.

Years later, it was mentioned in an Air Force briefing that intelligence had learned that there was a meeting of “heavy water” scientists in Munster at that time so the intention was to slow the German progress toward the atomic bomb by eliminating the scientists who were developing it. That could also help explain the furious fighter defense sent up against the bombers that day.

When the assignments for this mission were posted in the pre-mission briefing Keith saw that his plane was not on the roster for the 390th. Then he saw that he had been assigned to fly with the “Bloody 100th”. The 100th Group already had a bad reputation for losing aircraft on missions and Keith’s crew were not happy to be flying with them. He approached the colonel commanding with his objection and was told that the 100th could not muster enough planes for the mission so Keith’s crew needed to fill in the gap. Of course, some would say that the reason the 100th could not launch enough airplanes was because they kept losing so many.

The colonel understood Keith's complaint, but told him that he was needed there. If he did not like the way they were flying he could climb another thousand feet and join the 390th.

A note about the Bloody 100th: There was a story circulating that on an earlier mission a plane from the 100th was so badly damaged that it needed to land. The standard signal was to lower the landing gear of the disabled plane, then German fighters would escort it to a base to land and surrender. In this story, as the B-17 descended the fighters formed up to escort them. However, before they landed the gunners on the B-17 opened up on the fighters as the intercom was out and they did not know of the surrender. The Germans were not pleased about this failure to comply with the protocol, and it was thought that after that they specifically targeted the 100th planes.

On the Munster mission Keith, of course, was flying with the 100th. As they approached the target, a large swarm of fighters attacked. They quickly hit the lead aircraft of the 100th and probably killed the pilot and copilot. The lead plane slowed down and began losing altitude,

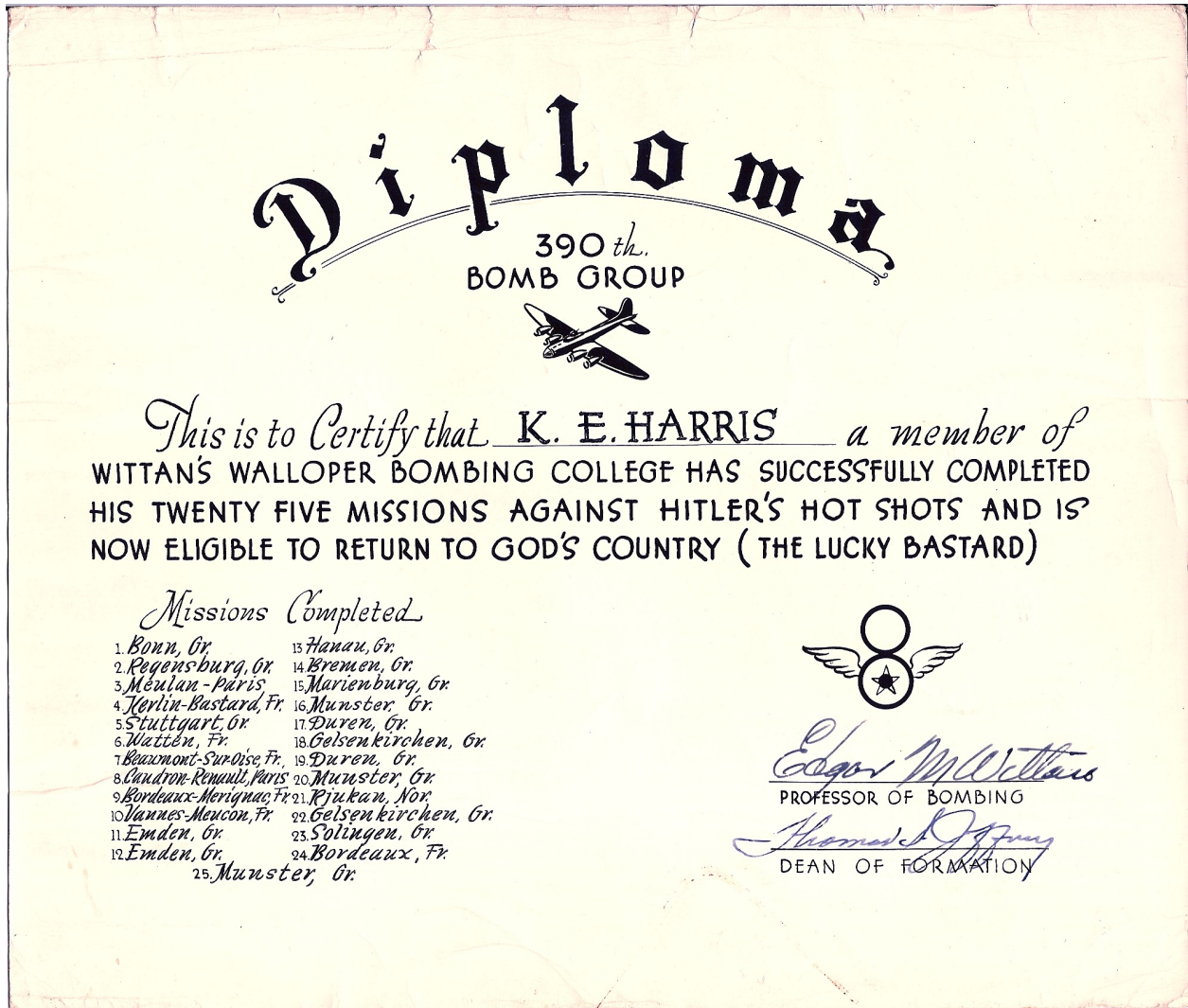
which caused all of the other planes in the formation to start following them down. This caused a big disruption in the bomber formation, but that was short-lived because all 13 of the other 100th group planes except one and Keith's were quickly shot down.

When Keith saw what was happening he remembered the colonel's suggestion that he could join the 390th. He applied maximum military power, salvoed his bombs to lighten the load, and climbed toward the 390th. He said that he and the copilot pressed so hard on the supercharger levers that they bent the tabs that limited their travel. The single surviving plane from the 100th stayed on Keith's wing the whole time. That pilot later wrote a book about the mission where he described the events, but somehow failed to mention Keith.

Keith's airplane was badly damaged but did manage to stay in the air and return to England. When they arrived, the field at Framlingham was socked in with fog so they diverted to the nearby 100th base where they could land. After they landed they went to the debriefing room to report what they saw. The 100th had launched 13 airplanes



that day and only one of theirs plus Keith's returned. Keith said it was a very sad time at the debriefing as there were a lot of empty tables and idle debriefers for the missing crews. Keith said that for a few days after that no one felt much like flying.



Keith finished his 25th mission on 22 December 1943 with another trip to Munster, though the defense was much weaker this time. He was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross and the Air Medal with four

oak leaf clusters plus several other citations. He also received the “Lucky Bastard” diploma that was awarded to anyone who had completed his missions. He hoped to be sent back to the States, to his wife and six-month old son, Alan, but that was not to be. After his last mission the colonel invited him to volunteer for another 25 missions. He declined, but then was told he could not go home yet. He would remain there to train replacement pilots. He did that for a while, but was then assigned to ferry new airplanes from Scotland where female pilots would deliver them from the States. Females were not allowed in the war zone.

### **Wes Coss and A. P. Moore**

While Keith was ferrying airplanes something of the “small world” phenomenon occurred. There was a B-17 pilot named Wesley Coss from Paw Paw, Illinois, stationed in Italy, who had been shot down over France. With a lot of help from the French Underground and some luck Wes had traveled across France, then walked over the Pyrenees Mountains into “neutral” Spain, and then was transported to England. On arrival in England the authorities could not confirm his

status as an American aviator and kept him in custody until his identity could be established. Wes was based in Italy so he had no base to connect with in England.

While in custody of the MPs Wes was being transported on the back of a truck. As luck would have it, a soldier from Earlville, Ambrose Moore, recognized Wes, chased the truck on a bicycle and called out to him. The MPs soon sent Moore away from the “prisoner” and Wes went on to his custody location. As he was talking with the MPs, claiming to be who he was, the interviewer asked if there was anyone in England who could vouch for him. Another prisoner reminded him of the chance meeting with Moore and suggested he could vouch for him.

Wes did connect with Moore and also learned that another Earlville man was there; Captain Keith Harris. It was arranged for Keith to go to London to vouch for Wes along with Moore and all was resolved. Wes Coss’s story is the subject of his book “Stardust Falling”.

## B-29s

After returning from England Keith was assigned to fly the new B-29 with training at Columbus, Ohio. The B-29 was a much larger and more capable bomber than the B-17. It was pressurized, had more powerful engines, could carry a larger payload, and flew higher, farther and faster than the B-17. It was also much more complex and more difficult to fly.



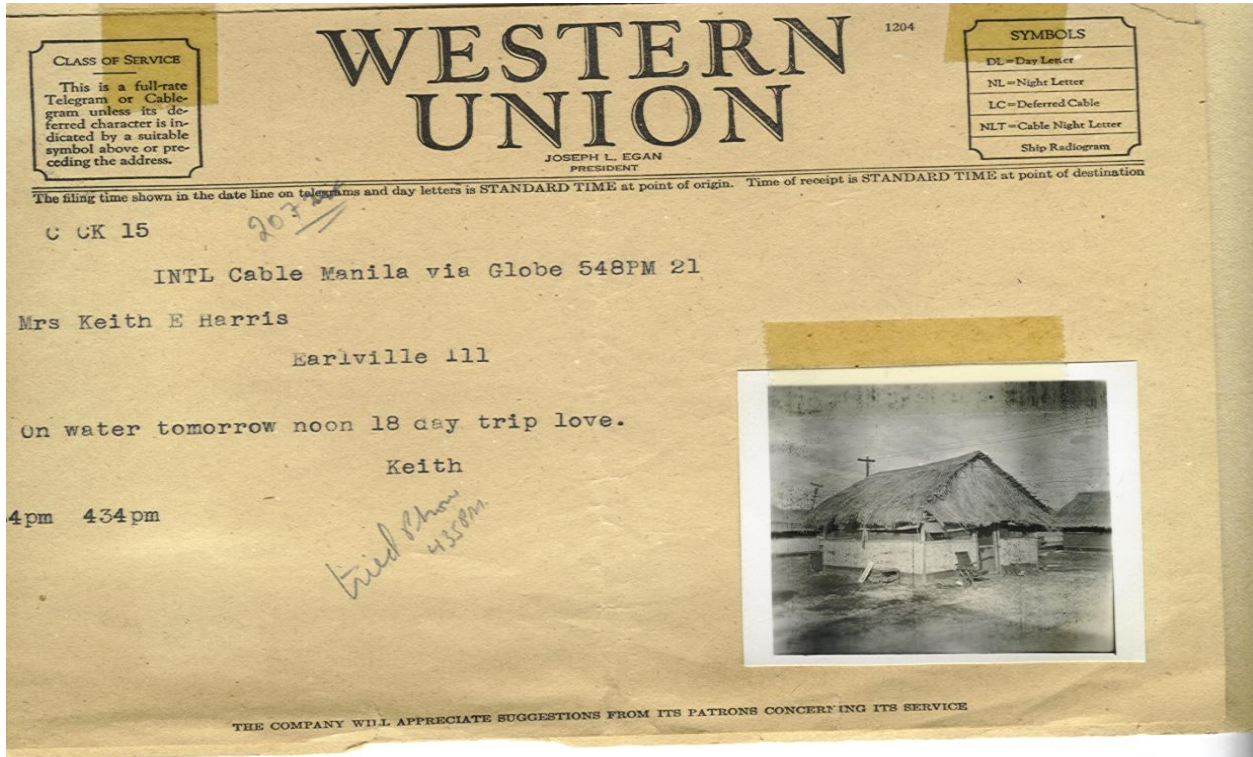
After that training Keith was then transferred to El Paso, Texas to prepare to go to the Pacific Theater for another set of missions over

Japan. However, in August of 1945 the atomic bombs were dropped on Japan and the war ended shortly thereafter. Keith was very pleased about that.

## **Philippines**

After the war ended there was a time of reorganization in the military as they adjusted to peacetime and the occupation. Keith was then transferred to Clark Field in the Philippines. Things were primitive at Clark Field and he did not enjoy that assignment. As an officer, he lived in a thatched hut and still had rats running across him during the night. One wonders how well the enlisted men lived. This was before the racial integration of the military, and here he was made commander of an all-Black company. For a farm boy from Earlville this

was quite an adjustment.

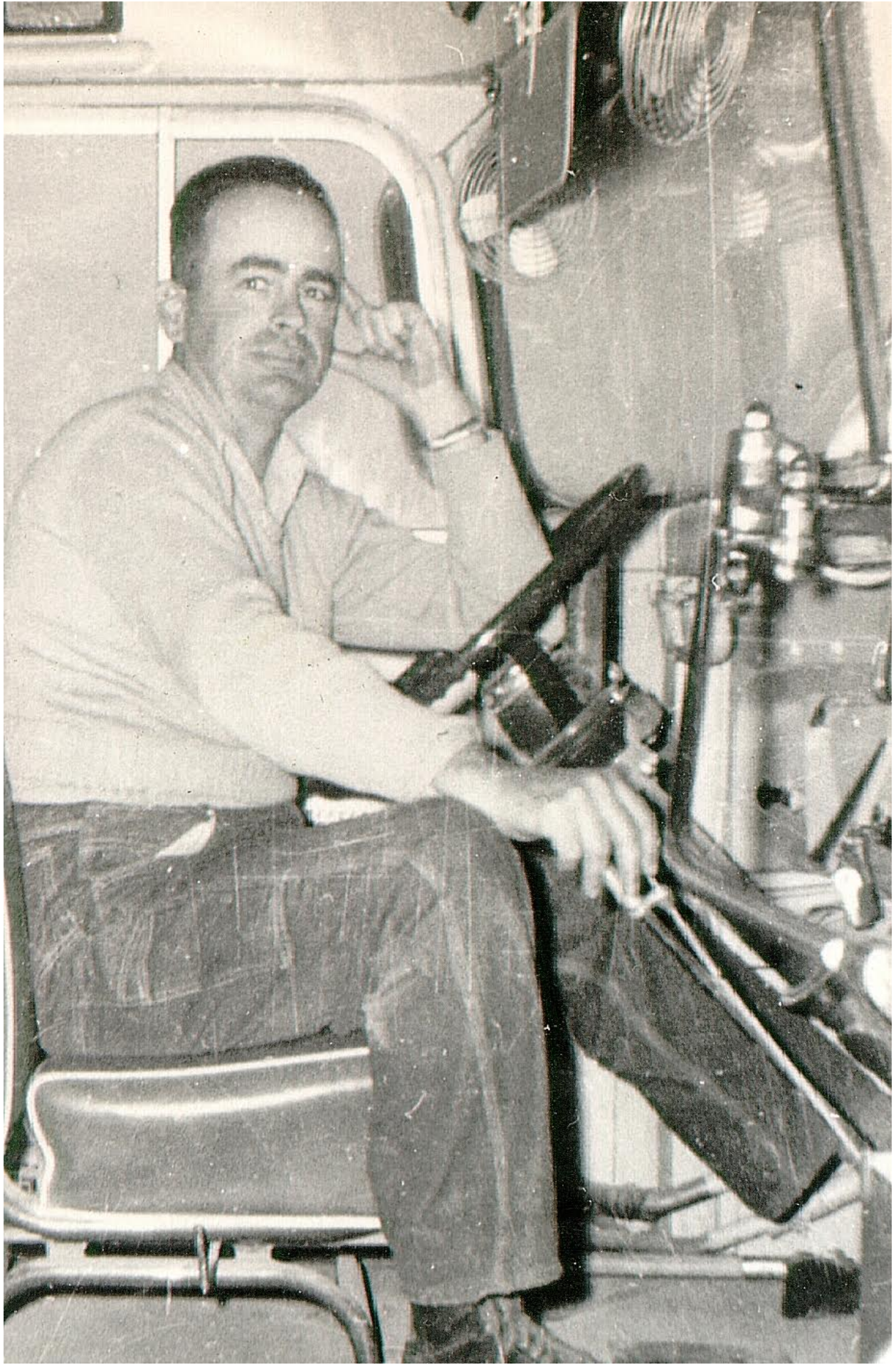


While in the Philippines he hoped to bring his family (now with two young children) over to join him. He signed up for family housing, but noticed that as his name moved up on the waiting list it would just as often move down when a higher ranking officer inserted his name.

Keith was getting only the minimum of flying time there and decided that a career in the Air Force may not be his best option.

After the war the Army had a large surplus of pilots and went about reducing their number. Not having any college education Keith's career prospects were limited, and he submitted his paperwork to leave the Army. He was returned to the States, was promoted to Major, and discharged from active duty in 1947. He returned to work with his father on the farm.

The Earlville school system consolidated in 1948 and began busing students to town rather than use country schools. Keith became one of the first bus drivers in 1948 and continued until his health forced him to retire in 1979. He loved driving the kids and watching them grow up. Eventually he had passengers whose grandparents had ridden his bus as students.





## How Driving a School Bus is like flying a B-17

As told by Keith Harris

1. You start out early in the morning
2. Behind you are people who really do not want to go where you are going
3. The ambient noise level is about the same
4. Everyone is happy when they return home at the end of the day



**N3499N 1946 Piper J3 Cub**

In about 1961 Keith and his brother Bob bought a 1946 Piper Cub from Stanley Humm. Keith loved giving rides to Earlville people, especially kids. He kept a notebook of all the many kids who had their first airplane ride in the Cub with him.

In 1974 he and Margie flew to Dwight for lunch with their son and family. Unfortunately a storm came through, pulled the plane loose from the tie-downs and wrecked it. And that was the end of Keith's flying.

## **Other information**

Audio recordings by Keith about his experiences:

Keith's World War II scrapbook compiled by Margie:

[alharris.com/scrapbook/index.htm](http://alharris.com/scrapbook/index.htm)

Munster Mission narrated by Keith:

[alharris.com/stories/munster.htm](http://alharris.com/stories/munster.htm) (text and audio)

Air Force Odyssey before flying B-17s, narrated by Keith:

[alharris.com/stories/odyssey.htm](http://alharris.com/stories/odyssey.htm) (text and audio)

## **Twelve O'clock High**

Veterans say it was the most realistic movie about flying in the 8th Air Force in WWII

## **Memphis Belle**

Documentary and TV series

Available on YouTube.

Theatrical movie

Available on YouTube

*Pilot of the Memphis Belle, Bob Morgan: "Everything in that movie probably happened at some point in the war, but if it had happened on one mission I would have to be sent to the looney bin."*

**Stardust Falling** by Wes Coss, Available from Amazon

**Munster, The Way It Was** by Ian Hawkins