

Braathen served two countries Ciceronian describes tension of war

Finn Braathen of Cicero served two countries during World War II.

Born in Norway, Braathen came to the United States at 7 years old. But by the time he graduated from Lane Technical High School in Chicago, his parents still had not become American citizens. And so, shortly after his high school graduation in 1940, "a knock came on the door on a Saturday morning and two guys in Norwegian uniform told me I was drafted into the Norwegian Air Force (in exile)."

Two months earlier, the Germans had invaded Norway, and under a reciprocal agreement with the United States Braathen was subject to the Norwegian draft. He reported on "Little Norway," an island off the coast of Toronto, "for the toughest training God ever devised."

As Braathen prepared for service as a bilingual commando to be set ashore in Norway, his draft number came up in the United States. He wrangled a transfer to the U.S. Army/Air Force and at airplane mechanics school in Lincoln, Neb., received his American citizenship.

Because of his technical-school background, Braathen was selected to serve as flight engineer in addition to his role as aerial gunner aboard a B-17 bomber.

Between December 1943 and May 1944, Braathen flew on 29 missions for the 351st Heavy Bombardment Group based at Polebrook, England. He received the Distinguished Flying Cross and the Air Medal with three oak leaf clusters and his unit received the Presidential Citation.

But in those six months, 40 per cent of the men in his unit were lost.

"We had six crews in our barracks, and on two separate occasions our crew was the only one to come back," Braathen recalled. "The graves' registration people would come in and take the personal effects of those soldiers. The next day somebody else would be sleeping in those beds."

Because of the repeated personal losses, it became all the more important in postwar years for the survivors to remain in touch through newsletters and conventions, Braathen said.

As a member of the 351st Bombing Group's Lost Soul

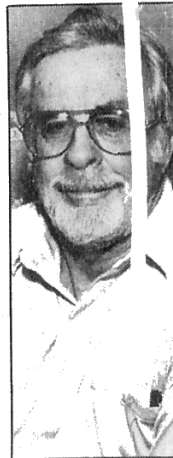
Committee, Braathen was able to locate all of his flight crew members except one. That one, Leslie Baim, was a Berwyn native whose last known address was a cleaning and tailoring shop on 26th Street. Braathen still hopes some Berwyn resident will recognize the name and know Baim's whereabouts.

"When you think about those soldiers who have given their lives, you wonder what was the purpose of it all," Braathen said. "Now we are buddies again with the Germans."

"All these years, I am enjoying life, and those men are six feet under. We think about it, all of us. That is why we maintain these associations. We don't want to forget these guys."



Braathen in Norwegian uniform



Braathen today

A diary kept by Ciceronian Finn Braathen describes the tension of the 29 missions he flew with the U.S. Army/Air Force's 351st Heavy Bombardment Group between December 1943 and May 1944.

Perhaps the most dramatic account is of a Feb. 22, 1944, bombing mission to Oscherleben, Germany, which he recorded in a staccato, almost machine gun bullet style.

Flying in the vulnerable tail end Charlie position without fighter escort because his combat wing was one-half hour late to the rendezvous point, Braathen's plane had just jettisoned its bombs in a farming area to conserve fuel when there was

"... a sudden attack out of the sun on our ship by two (German) Messerschmitts. Tail gunner badly wounded. Right side of fuselage damaged. Belly gunner wounded. Oxygen tanks back of radio room leaking. Tail gunner pulled out of position by radio operator.

"Both Messerschmitts coming in again from 8 o'clock (right rear). Opening fire, 500 yards. Steady fire from my turret and from left waist gunner. Both Messerschmitts hit at 400 yards. Both burning badly.

"More fighters intercepting. Running fight to coast. Bombs don't close. Losing speed. No oxygen in rear of ship. Emergency oxygen supply bottles empty. Waist gunner unconscious from lack of oxygen. Formation pulling away from us. German fighters, all kinds, attacking from all angles. Messerschmidt damaged from my turret. Ball turret gunner scored. German bailing out.

"French coast sighted. Flak batteries opening up (from the German forces then occupying France). No damage. Crossing coast and dropping altitude.

"Fuel very low. Jettisoning all equipment to conserve gas. English coast sighted. Trying to find emergency landing field. Preparing to bail out. Emergency field sighted, still under construction. No fuel to circle. Coming in without warning. Construction crew scattering. Landing on flat tire. Everyone OK."

Fifty years later, Braathen finds the most interesting aspect of his account is its contrast with the official description of the mission in military annals in Washington.

What was of such vital importance aboard his own aircraft received no mention in the official account of a mission involving 1,000 bombers or more.

"The fate of an individual gunner is of little importance compared with the fate of an entire unit," Braathen noted "That is just life."