

The Fallen Cougars

John Elwood Gay

Pre-WSC Life:

John Elwood Gay was born on March 22, 1915 in Spokane, Washington.¹ John was the first child of his parents, John and Ella, who went on to have two more children after John, Mildred and Robert. John and Ella originated from Iowa and Michigan, respectively, and John supported his family by working as a physician.² The Gays settled in Spokane since at least the birth of their first son and stayed in the community, becoming longtime residents. John's early life in Spokane is not well documented, limited to only small details. He attended Lewis and Clark High School and a memorial states that he graduated with the Class of 1933.³ After graduating from LCHS, it is unknown what John did directly afterwards. Yearbooks from Washington State College in 1939 state that John transferred in from Whitworth College, a small private institution in Spokane, but the dates of his attendance and any other information from his time there is unclear.⁴ When John transferred to WSC, he started his career in Pullman as a junior, meaning he had at least two years of school beforehand. With Whitworth and Spokane behind him, John started classes at WSC in 1937.

¹ "John E Gay in the U.S., Headstone Applications for Military Veterans, 1925-1963," *Ancestry*, https://search.ancestry.com/cgi-bin/sse.dll?indiv=1&dbid=2375&h=231661&tid=&pid=&queryId=fa41a8e55d1c7055ee422065109b6881&usePUB=true&_phsrc=rpm655&_phstart=successSource (Accessed August 15, 2020).

² "John E Gay in the 1920 United States Federal Census," *Ancestry*, https://search.ancestry.com/cgi-bin/sse.dll?indiv=1&dbid=6061&h=70948636&tid=&pid=&queryId=bf592b1f154616e932279c7714b16be9&usePUB=true&_phsrc=rpm657&_phstart=successSource (Accessed August 15, 2020).

³ Classes of 1940-1945, *Memorial to the Fallen Lewis and Clark High School Veterans*, 2001. Plaque. Spokane, WA. July 30, 2021.

⁴ Washington State College, *Chinook* (1939), 89.

WSC Experience:

Though Gay's early life was largely undocumented, his two years at WSC are much better known. He was older than most students, starting his time in Pullman at the age of twenty-two as a Business Administration major, but still made an effort to participate in extracurricular activities. In both years at WSC, Gay played in Band and was also a member of the Phi Delta Theta fraternity. During his senior year, he joined Alpha Kappa Psi, a fraternity for Professional Business.⁵ These activities added to Gay's time at WSC, but the activity that he truly excelled at was Riflery. During both his years, Gay was a key part of the WSC Rifle Team and was regarded as the best marksman of the group. In his first year, the team placed third in a national competition in no small part to Gay's sharpshooting talent. For his efforts, Gay was awarded the Commandant's Medal, given to the best marksman on the team.⁶ In his final season on the team, Gay once again displayed his unmatched talents.

Selection for the Rifle Team was highly competitive, as only twenty-eight were selected to the team out of one hundred and forty that tried out. Gay earned a spot and was elected to serve as one of the team captains.⁷ Gay and the rest of the WSC Rifle Team had another strong campaign, with Gay winning his second consecutive Commandant's Medal. Nationally, the team ranked third among all ROTC teams in the country. The team also competed in the 9th Corps Area match against sixteen other college teams and emerged as the best in the competition.⁸ For his efforts in the match, Gay was one of ten men on the team that was awarded a match medal.⁹ The awards continued as Gay was also made a member of the Minor W Club, signifying his

⁵ Washington State College, *Chinook* (1939), 89.

⁶ Washington State College, *Chinook* (1938), 136.

⁷ "Rifle Matches Start Today," *Washington State Evergreen*, December 5, 1938.

⁸ Washington State College, *Chinook* (1939), 58.

⁹ "Military Men Given Medals At Inspection," *Washington State Evergreen*, May 8, 1939.

excellence on the Rifle Team. At the end of the 1939 school year, Gay graduated with his degree in Business Administration, capping off a successful couple of years at WSC.¹⁰ Now done with college, Gay now looked to the military for the next phase in his life.

Despite being an expert marksman with titles to show his aptitude, Gay did not pursue a traditional infantry role in the Army or Marines. Instead, Gay joined the Army but served as a part of the Air Corps. It is not known when he enlisted for service or where he went for his initial training, but he was eventually sent to Army Air Corps Training Center in Kelly Field, Texas for advanced training. In a memorial for the Class 40-A, Gay is listed among the flying cadets that graduated on March 23, 1940.¹¹ After his training, Gay returned to the Palouse for work using his newfound knowledge of the air. In October, Gay was working as a Civil Aeronautics Authority instructor at the Pullman-Moscow Airport.¹² The following year, Gay reached another important milestone in his life. On August 3, 1941 Gay married Dorothy Jean Paine in the town of Cashmere, Washington.¹³ The two had both attended and graduated from WSC the same year and both had been involved in Greek system, as Paine was a member of the Kappa Alpha Theta sorority. By this time in 1941, Gay had reached the rank of lieutenant and was attached to the 116th Observation Squadron in Fort Lewis.¹⁴ Life in late 1941 must have seemed ideal for Gay, as he was an officer in the Air Corps, a husband, and a soon-to-be father. The tranquility and peace of his life and millions of others was shattered by the events of December 7, 1941.

¹⁰ Washington State College, *Chinook* (1939), 89

¹¹ “*John Elwood Gay*, taken June 12, 2017, <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/77801418/john-e-gay/photo#view-photo=156716180> (Accessed August 15, 2020).

¹² Washington State College, *Alumni Powwow* (Pullman, WA: Washington State College, October 1940), 11.

¹³ “John E Gay in the Washington, Marriage Records, 1854-2013,” *Ancestry*, https://search.ancestry.com/cgi-bin/sse.dll?indiv=1&dbid=2378&h=950641&tid=&pid=&queryId=fa41a8e55d1c7055ee422065109b6881&usePUB=true&_phsrc=rpm660&_phstart=successSource (Accessed August 15, 2020).

¹⁴ Washington State College, *Alumni Powwow* (Pullman, WA: Washington State College, October 1941), 9.

Military Experience and Death:

Though Gay's years in college and before the outbreak of war were well documented, his military career is not well known. Few documents mention what he was doing during the war, operations he participated in, and even the theaters of war that he was involved in. Gay was likely involved in the war from the start and information early in the war shows that Gay was climbing through the ranks, being listed as a captain by late March 1943.¹⁵ The documents that best detail Gay's military career are from his final operation and death in the Pacific during 1945. As the war against Japan shifted in favor of the Allies, the United States began strategizing ways to break the Japanese fighting spirit. Air power and the development of more advanced bombers were essential to neutralizing Japan's war machine and morale as the American island-hopping campaign brought the Japanese home islands within reach. In early 1944, Boeing introduced the B-29 "Superfortress," a bomber that was able to fly further, faster, higher, and carry more bombs than any aircraft before it. Though the B-29 was technologically advanced, its effectiveness in 1944 was still hindered by the vast distances crews had to travel and the high altitudes at which bombings took place, diminishing the accuracy of the raids. By 1945, the US had captured islands that cut the distance to Japan and was beginning to try out a new bombing strategy, low-altitude bombings that greatly increased the effectiveness of raids.¹⁶ As the year passed, the air raids against Japan grew ever more fierce and constant, despite the risks to American flyers in every flight.

During March 1945, bombings over Japan were becoming more routine for flyers but the trip still posed risks as nearby islands like Iwo Jima and Okinawa were still under Japanese

¹⁵ "Service Men," *Washington State Evergreen*, March 30, 1943.

¹⁶ "Victory in the Pacific: B-29s," *PBS*, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/pacific-b-29s/> (Accessed August 15, 2020).

control. Gay, now a major, was to participate in a bombing mission that was strange by all accounts. According to Gay's wife, he was on "a special mission over the Tokyo-Yokohama area" before the B-29 ran out of fuel while over the ocean.¹⁷ The operation sounds more than routine and accounts by those who were on the flight as well as future historians add more complexity to the mission. A memorial for the 500th Bomb Group, the group that Gay, a Squadron Operations Officer for the 883rd Bombardment Squadron, joined for his flight, note the strange nature of the trek that took place on March 7. Initially the mission held that the bombers, stationed on Saipan, were going to fly to Okinawa, then Kure in southern Honshu, before heading back to base. Another order that revised the mission added Tokyo to the list, adding 800 extra miles to the flight. It is unknown why Tokyo was added at the last minute, possibly to gather weather information ahead of the large firebombing raids that were to take place over Tokyo a couple days later, though this has not been substantiated.¹⁸ Though the mission posed many risks, the crew aboard the bomber took off.

Gay's presence as a major added to the atypical nature of the mission and an account by Lieutenants Robert E. Sebrig, Gilbert Easton, and Robert Pope, detail the events that took place. The three were all crewmembers on the bomber called the "Susu Baby," and stated that Gay, "had to 'get in' his mission, went as weather observer on this trip," but later Gay flew in the co-pilot seat. As the bomber began its mission, fuel consumption became an issue as the plane was flying at high altitudes and into the headwind of a jet stream. As the situation got worse and the likelihood of completing the trip looked more unlikely, Sebrig brought the issue of fuel up to his superiors, recalling that, "I mentioned this to Ted and Major Gay, but with Major Gay on board

¹⁷ Dorothy Jeane Gay to Frank T. Barnard, September 8, 1945. C. James Quann Manuscripts. John E. Gay Collection, Manuscripts, Archives, and Special Collections, Washington State University Libraries, Pullman, WA.

¹⁸ "The 500th Bomb Group Day By Day-Part 3-Victory," *500th Bomb Group B-29 Memorial*, <http://www.500thbombgroupb29.org/journal%20-%20victory.pdf> (Accessed August 15, 2020).

there was no way we were going to deviate from the as briefed procedure.” With little fuel left, the crew weighed their options, opting against landing on Iwo Jima as the battle on the island was still being fought and instead choosing to ditch the aircraft in the ocean.¹⁹ In the ensuing crash into the Pacific, six of the crew survived while everyone else lost their lives. Among those that were killed was Gay, who was taken aboard a nearby navy destroyer ship and given artificial respiration for four hours before being pronounced dead on March 8. With his body in military hands, Gay was initially buried at the Army Cemetery on Saipan.²⁰ Three years after his death, Gay’s body was taken from Saipan and formally buried at the Greenwood Cemetery in his hometown, Spokane.²¹ John Elwood Gay was 29 years old at the time of his death. Gay left behind his wife and two young daughters, Marijean and Jonny Joyce.²² Years after his death, Gay’s name was added along with all the other WSC students who fell during World War II to the WSU Veterans Memorial.

Legacy:

The life of John Gay was impactful and important in many different places and people. At WSC, Gay was the best marksman on the Rifle Team and brought honor to the school and himself. He was also a fraternity man and was surely known by many fellow Greek members on campus. But these all pale in comparison to the people who his life touched the most, his young family. Unlike many WSC men who served during the war, Gay was a husband and father. His

¹⁹ “Personal Account: Robert E. Sebring, Jr.,” *500th Bomb Group B-29 Memorial*, <http://www.500thbombgroupb29.org/personal%20accounts/Sebring,%20Robert%20E.,%20Jr.%20883rd.pdf> (Accessed August 15, 2020).

²⁰ Dorothy Jeane Gay to Frank T. Barnard, September 8, 1945.

²¹ “John E Gay in the U.S., Headstone Applications for Military Veterans, 1925-1963,” *Ancestry*, https://search.ancestry.com/cgi-bin/sse.dll?indiv=1&dbid=2375&h=231661&tid=&pid=&queryId=fa41a8e55d1c7055ee422065109b6881&usePUB=true&_phsrc=rpm655&_phstart=successSource (Accessed August 15, 2020).

²² Washington State College, *Alumni Powwow* (Pullman, WA: Washington State College, April 1946), 10.

passing took away a loving father from his wife and two daughters. His legacy lives on in the hearts of his young family that lost him too soon.