

Tribute to Oakland native Jack Bonnassiolle

Missing in action WWII airman is buried at Holy Cross Catholic Cemetery in Colma

By JEAN BARTLETT | THE WEEK OF 7-9-18-7-15-18 | STORY ORIGINALLY WRITTEN IN 2016



(photo courtesy of Bonnassiolle family)

Sgt. John P. Bonnassiolle, U.S. Army.

This story was originally written for "Roll Call ~ Reveille" – a book I wrote in 2016 for Holy Cross Catholic Cemetery in Colma. The book offers biographies on 55 individuals, now at rest at Holy Cross, who served in wars dating back to the U.S.-Mexican War and on through the Civil War, Spanish-American War, World War I and World War II.



On August 4, 2010, the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency announced, "*The remains of a U.S. serviceman, missing in action from World War II, have been identified and will be returned to his family for burial with full military honors. He is Sgt. John P. Bonnassiolle, U.S. Army, of Oakland, California.*"

It was with full military honors that Sgt. Bonnassiolle was buried Tuesday, August 10, 2010, at Holy Cross Catholic Cemetery. His brother, Andrew Kelley, 88, his half-sisters, Paulette Gooch and Yvonne Eve Schindler, and four nephews – Shawn Gooch, Mitchell Gooch, Robert Schultheis and Michael Schindler – were in attendance. The fact that Bonnassiolle's remains were found and repatriated to the United States was due to the efforts of his sister, Paulette Kelley Gooch, and those she found to help her in her search.

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Gooch was 7 when her brother became a casualty of the Second World War. In 2003, on the occasion of her mother's 101st birthday, Gooch decided that perhaps through the resources of the Internet she might be able to provide her mother and her siblings some closure, and additionally provide younger family members with memories of the uncle they never knew.

From Oakland, California, Jack, as his family called him, was the son of Jacques B. Bonnassiolle (1883-1941), born in Louvie-Juzon, a commune in the Pyrénées-Atlantiques department in south-western France, and Marie Yvonne Bayet Bonnassiolle Kelley (1902-2005) born in Coulommiers, a commune in the Seine-et-Marne department in the Île-de-France in north-central France. The couple met and married in Oakland. Their son Jack was born on September 18, 1923.

Bonnassiolle attended Santa Fe Elementary and graduated from Woodrow Wilson High School, both in Oakland. Before he turned 18, he enlisted in the U.S. Army Air Corps. His father had died before his enlistment and so his mom signed the necessary parental consent, a decision she regretted giving later on. Following basic training, he was assigned to Aerial Gunnery School, which was then followed by his assignment to the 578th Bomb Squadron of the 392nd Bomb Group based at Wendling, England.

On April 29, 1944, the ball turret gunner and nine other crew headed by 2nd Lieutenant Robert R. Bishop, were aboard aircraft 42-110105, a B-24J Liberator, heading for Germany. Several hours before sunrise, the crew, along with other members of this massive 8th Air Force mission, was briefed on their target - the Friedrichstrasse Railroad Station in the heart of Berlin. The purpose of the raid was to strike a disabling blow to Berlin's railroad passenger traffic system.



(photo courtesy of James T. Blong's family)

The Bishop crew, (l to r): Sgt John Bonnassiolle, S/Sgt Joseph Karaso, Sgt Michael Chiodo, S/Sgt Orus Baxter, 2Lt Robert Bishop, Sgt John Harringer, 2Lt Thomas Digman, 2Lt Arthur Luce, and 2Lt Donald Hess. (Not pictured: Sgt James Blong and S/Sgt Ralph McDonald.) All but Baxter were killed in action.

The B-24 Liberators were the third force of the 751 bombers heading to Berlin that morning. The first force consisted of 263 B-17s and the second force consisted of 236 B-17s. The Bishop crew took off shortly after 7:30 a.m. The journey was treacherous due to winds and clouds and eventually heavy enemy fighter opposition. Approximately three and a half hours after takeoff, the plane of the Bishop crew was shot out of the sky and landed in a field in a blaze of fire and smoke. There were no survivors.

Until Gooch began her search for her brother, she only knew he died somewhere in Germany.

"I didn't know much when I began my search," said Gooch, who was interviewed for this biography. "The only thing the Army told my mother was that Jack was 'Missing in Action' somewhere over Germany."

Sixty years later, Jack's little sister would learn the exact location of the crash site and go to the little town of Meitze, located in Lower Saxony in the District of Hanover, where she could finally stand at the resting place of her big brother, who had so many years ago, swooped her up in his arms every time he saw her.

"I was 4 when I met Jack," Gooch said. "My mother and his father were divorced, my mother had remarried and Jack was living with his father. I thought he was really tall when I met him, but now I know he was really a slim guy who wasn't so big, just big to me. I remember that he was so kind, and he was also very shy, just a sweet guy. He meant a lot to me. He sent me letters after he went into the service. Jack's brother Andrew, my half-brother, also went into the service and every day we all listened to the news."

The list of those who stepped forward to assist Gooch in her search, and to help her 101-year-old mother find answers, is long and heartfelt and it includes: Annette Tison, 392nd Bomb Group Researcher; Army Air Forces veteran Bud Guillot, a waist gunner on another B-24 who was there that day; Everett "Jim" Marsteller, a B-24 historian; Enrico-Rene Schwartz and Svetlana Reimer, founders of Missing Allied Air Crew Research Team (MAACRT); the U.S. Military Cemetery in the Netherlands; and Willy Gudehus. Gudehus was 7 when he witnessed an air battle overhead and saw a B-24 land in the horse pasture of his family's farm in Meitze, a property which the Gudehus family still owns. It was the MAACRT crew, after a summer of dedicated digging, that discovered the strip of leather at the Gudehus farm. It was a name patch from a flight jacket and it read: J. Bonnassiolle.

"My mother was stunned, but happy," Gooch said. "We were all so happy. Had my mother been able to find her son, she would have."

Gooch, the mom of three sons, said the Gudehus family opened their hearts and their farm to the search efforts of the MAACRT team. Gooch and Willy Gudehus are the same age.

"Willy saw my brother's plane spiral to the ground. He was running for cover to the family's bomb shelter."

About an hour after the impact, Gudehus said a bomb detonated in the wreckage sending debris far and wide through the little town.

"Immediately after the incident, the German forces removed all the visible pieces of the wreckage as well as the remains of three crewmen who they buried in a cemetery in Hannover," Gooch said. "As to the crash site, Willy's father plowed over the land. But all these years later, Willy and his family were so happy to help us. When my son Shawn and I arrived the whole town came out."

After MAACRT found and identified the airplane, the Army took over the dig in 2005. Following an order from the White House, the Army did a second excavation at a nearby site in 2007 and Jack was found. Through the use of *"forensic identification tools and circumstantial evidence, scientists from the Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command (JPAC) and the Armed Forces DNA Identification Laboratory used mitochondrial DNA – which matched that of Bonnassiolle's sister – in the identification of his remains."*

Through MAACRT's tireless research, a second B-24 was also discovered at the site, the Kamenitsa Crew, 576th Squadron, William T. Kamenitsa, pilot. Seven of the ten Kamenitsa crew survived, one of those was Sgt. Oliver "Bud" R. Guillot, left waist gunner. Both crashes took place the same day and were separated by about a minute in time. Gooch and Guillot would meet through the efforts of MAACRT and became great friends.

Because of all the press coverage, Gooch was contacted by the family of one of her brother's crewmates, 2nd Lieutenant Arthur W. Luce, copilot.

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"I wish the Army would look for these lost veterans," Gooch said. "It meant so much to find Jack. The military wants us to support our troops and I do. But I also want to support those who have been lost."

The Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency notes, "*At the end of the war, there were approximately 79,000 Americans unaccounted for. This number included those buried with honor as unknowns, officially buried at sea, lost at sea, and missing in action. Today, more than 73,000 Americans remain unaccounted for from WWII.*"

"If I could talk to Jack, I would tell him how much the whole world appreciates what he and all the other men did to keep our countries free," Gooch said. "To sacrifice your own life – there is no greater love for your country and your family."

Sgt. Bonnassiolle is buried alongside his father.

This particular biography can be found in Jean Bartlett's 2016-released book, "[Holy Cross Catholic Cemetery, Colma: Roll Call ~ Reveille](#)," which offers 55 biographies on individuals, now at rest at Holy Cross, who served in wars dating back to the U.S.-Mexican War and on through the Civil War, Spanish-American War, World War I and World War II. The book is available at the reception desk at the main office of Holy Cross: 1500 Mission Road, Colma, CA 94014. Phone: 650-756-2060. All mail inquiries should be sent to: Holy Cross Catholic Cemetery, Colma, P.O. Box 1577, Colma, CA 94014.



A Bartlett's Biographies Headliner

Jean Bartlett is a longtime Bay Area features writer: Pacifica Tribune, Oakland Tribune, San Jose Mercury, San Mateo Times, Portraits & Roots, Marin Independent Journal, Twin City Times, Ross Valley Reporter, Peninsula Progress, Coastal Connections, Contra Costa County Times, Bay Area Business Woman and Catholic San Francisco.