

## Tribute to WWII U.S. Army Air Force aerial gunner Frank Hughes

Raised in a New York tenement, this devoted family man, now at rest at Holy Cross Catholic Cemetery in Colma, CA, flew the 530-mile India-China air route that replaced the old Burma Road.

By JEAN BARTLETT | THE WEEK OF 6-3-19-6-9-19 | STORY ORIGINALLY WRITTEN IN 2016



photo courtesy of the Hughes family.

**Francis P. "Frank" Hughes (1922-1971)**  
(Section T, Row 28, Grave 24, Holy Cross)

and 1945, the "Burma Road of the Sky" delivered food, troops, fuel and 70,000 tons of goods into China each month – but the cost was high. In its 42 months of operation, more than 630 flights went down over the Hump and 81 were never recovered.

U.S. Army Air Force aerial gunner Frank Hughes was on a transport plane that was shot down. On the ground, any drinking water had to be purified by iodine. There were headhunter tribes in certain locations. Humidity during monsoon season caused clothes and shoes to mildew within days. Missteps could send one plummeting over a cliff or into a raging river.

Frank broke his back when the plane crashed and the presumption is search and rescue aircraft found him. But he never said. He only told his family that during his ordeal he did not have to use one of the survival skills taught during training – to watch

*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.*



The Japanese Zero was once one of the most feared long-range fighter aircraft in the world. Able to carry two 132-pound bombs under its wings, two 20-millimeter cannons in its wings and two 7.7 millimeter machine guns, it could dive at 350 miles per hour and its pilots were top-of-the-line. Those Allied pilots who flew the dangerous Himalayan "Hump" to China – a 530-mile trek that originated in northeast India and traveled over the Himalayan Mountains to Kunming, China – would use every pilot's trick in the book to take those planes down or out maneuver them by diving from 12,000 feet and higher to just above the treetops.

But it wasn't just the possibility of Zero fighter planes that made the China-Burma-India (CBI) airlift one of the most dangerous flights in the world. It was also the summer monsoons which brought winds of 300 mph (general winds often exceeded 100 mph), the 150-foot tall trees, the peaks which rose to 16,500 feet, poor visibility, heavy ground fog, thunderstorms, freezing rains, and ice that could form on the wings at 12,000 feet – and then there were the airfields that came up too fast. The airlift replaced the Burma Road, a 712-mile stretch that linked Lashio in British Burma to Kunming in China. The road was built between 1937 and 1938, following Japan's 1937 invasion of China. It was the only land supply route to China. That route was closed by the Japanese in 1942. Between 1942

what primates eat and then follow their lead. Had he not been kicked out of radio school at Keesler Air Force Base in Biloxi, Mississippi, perhaps he would never have known this vast daunting stretch of unforgiving terrain.

Francis Peter "Frank" Hughes was born in Manhattan on April 9, 1922 to Francis and Catherine (Ferry) Hughes. His father was born in Ireland in 1882, and in 1905, he headed from Castleblayney, County Monaghan, to New York. He was a steamfitter and his jobs included work on the Empire State Building. However, one year after the Great Depression, the New York Census finds him "unemployed." His wife Catherine was born in Ireland in 1888 and in 1909 she immigrated to New York from Letterkenny, County Donegal. (Catherine died on July 18, 1940. Francis died on May 20, 1941.)

Francis and Catherine had seven children: Catherine (Hughes) Valentino, 1915; John, 1917; Edward, 1919; James, 1920; Patrick, 1921; Frank, 1922; and Margaret (Hughes) Powers, 1928. All of their children but Patrick, who died in infancy, lived into adulthood. Of the remaining six siblings, Edward was the only child who did not marry and have children. Four of the Hughes children, including Frank, made it through tenth grade. Edward left school after ninth grade and the youngest, Margie, completed high school with the support of her siblings.

"My dad grew up in a tenement very close to Central Park," his daughter Mary Hughes Stone said, "127 W. 63rd Street. A priest from his childhood parish, Church of St. Paul the Apostle, told us that in the early 20th Century, boats of immigrants would disembark at the Upper West Side harbor and settle in Hell's Kitchen."

The living conditions of Frank's childhood were rough. There were a lot of people in the family's small space, including lodgers and boarders, and there were numerous infestations of bed bugs and lice.

"My dad dropped out of high school to help the family out. He lied about his age and volunteered for the CCC (Civilian Conservation Corps) which was part of the WPA (Works Progress Administration)."

Instituted by presidential executive order, the purpose of the WPA was to generate public jobs for the unemployed. Hughes worked in the CCC from approximately 1938 to 1940. During that time he built bridges in Idaho, a place where decades later he would bring his wife and their two daughters on a family vacation. His daughter believes he moved back in with his family in 1940 (now living in Queens), to take help take care of his youngest sibling, Margie. At that point, Frank and his brother Johnny were working at a chain grocery store, his brother Eddie found work as a butcher, and his sister Catherine was working as a switchboard operator at an appliance store.

Following the United States entry into the Second World War on December 8, 1941, Frank signed on with the U.S. Army Air Corps and was sent to radio school at Kessler Air Force Base. He and another enlistee were late getting back to base on a pass and were thrown out of school. He was then trained as an aerial gunner. By the time he was discharged from the service, his sister Catherine was living in California. Her husband, Charlie Valentino, had been released from the service in California and found work as a correctional officer on Alcatraz. When Frank discovered California, he referred to it as "heaven," and thereafter only returned to the East Coast twice to visit family in 1950 and 1965.

Settled in California, Frank took the GED and began classes at the University of San Francisco in business accounting and would find work as a tax accountant in the Land Valuation Department of Pacific Gas and Electric (PG&E) in downtown San Francisco. He met San Francisco native Frances O'Donnell, born June 29, 1922, at a Hibernian Dance in San Francisco, November of 1947. They married on October 9, 1948, at St. John's Catholic Church in San Francisco and held their reception at the Alexander Hamilton Hotel on O'Farrell Street – a building which was converted to condos in the early 1960s.

"My dad was a bit of a risk taker and when he met my mom and decided they should get married, he needed to save for a ring – platinum, the only precious metal my mom could wear," his daughter noted. "He loved the horses, as did my Uncle Eddie, and he bolstered his savings with his winnings. Once he and my mom married, he told her she would get his entire paycheck and he would get an allowance. They did that until the day he died."

Mary said her 5-foot-9 dad was stout, wore horn-rimmed glasses and was a meticulous dresser, whether in business or casual wear. He was passionate about his Irish heritage and loyal to his siblings and many friends. He did crossword puzzles nightly, loved to read and went to the library every week. He was a strong advocate for education and believed he might have been a teacher had his childhood circumstances been different. He was a very good husband and father and was devoted to his wife and his children.

## BARTLETT'S BRIEFS

Businesses, Events and Profiles | Feature: Frank Hughes flew the Army Air Force's most dangerous airlift during WWII | A3  
[www.bartlettbiographies.com](http://www.bartlettbiographies.com) | from the book "Roll Call ~ Reveille" written by Jean Bartlett for Holy Cross Catholic Cemetery, Colma

"He was opinionated, organized, punctual, a man of principle and he had a strong Catholic faith," his daughter recalled with a smile. "He laughed really loud and my mom loved that about him."

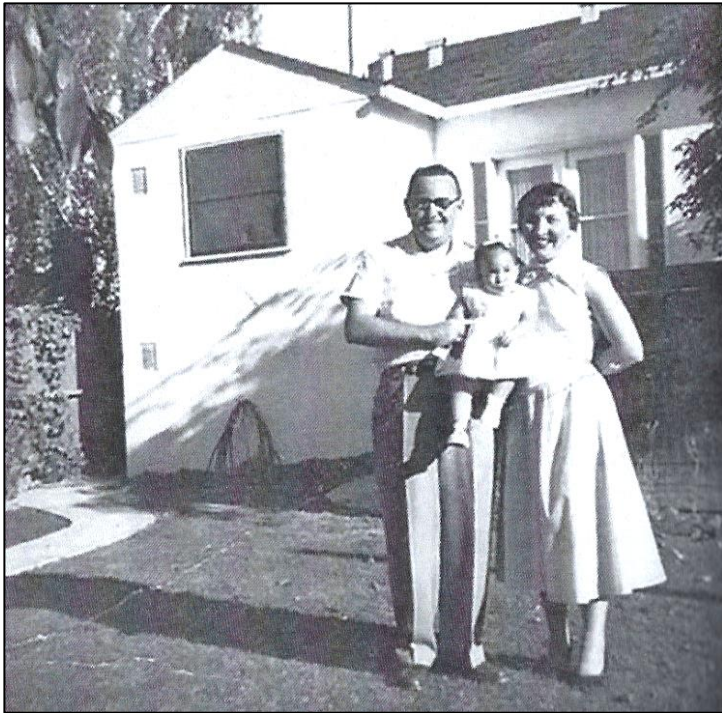


photo courtesy of the Hughes family.

### **Frank Hughes, his wife Frances and their daughter Kathy, 1955.**

His wife, who celebrated her 94th birthday during the time of this interview, still misses him 45 years later. He was the love of her life.

"If my father were able to have a voice in this story, I think there are some things he would like to get across. That your childhood does not have to define you, that family is important and hard work is essential and expected. Your Catholic faith will see you through difficult times. Read. And finally, you do not have to have money to be neat and clean. All you need is one really good pair of shoes!"

*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.*



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. Contact her through her website, [www.bartlettbiographies.com](http://www.bartlettbiographies.com).

His door was always open to help out family. If any of his siblings had financial struggles, their kids stayed with his family as long as needed. Both he and his wife were extremely generous and were very involved with St. Gregory's Church in San Mateo, where she still attends. He sang in the church's choir and was part of their big musical productions. He felt very blessed that he was able to buy a small summer home in the Santa Cruz Mountains. He never forgot his humble beginnings.

The couple had two daughters, Kathy and Mary, both of whom made him very proud. Kathy, who went on to be the mother of two and grandmother of four, died in July of 2011. Daughter Mary is married to Frank Stone and they have five children.

Frank Hughes died on June 24, 1971, of an aneurysm that followed a surgery to repair an aortic tear just 12 days earlier. His daughter Kathy had just completed her junior year in high school and Mary was entering her sophomore year. He was 49. The family was devastated.

"He had hypertension from the time he was in his 30s. He had quit smoking but he did like his cocktails and he loved a good meal – his homemade marinade for his backyard BBQ chateaubriand was legendary. But he was not the poster child for healthy living."