



# The Berkshire Eagle

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## Kevin O'Hara: From above and below

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By Kevin O'Hara, Special to The Eagle

PITTSFIELD

Ten years ago, I was sitting with my mom in her apartment at Berkshiretown, when a thunderous clamor rattled us from above. Hurrying outdoors, we spotted two low-flying World War II bombers passing overhead.

"Oh, my God," gasped my mother, blessing herself. "A Flying Fortress and a Liberator." Dumbfounded, I looked at Mom still squinting into the sky long after the planes had disappeared from view. "How do you know that?"

She took a seat on her small deck, visibly shaken by their sudden appearance.

"Your father and I lived outside Ipswich in Suffolk during the war, near the RAF airbases of Bentwaters and Woodbridge. Allied planes, such as those, flew night and day toward Axis targets. Why, their roar alone would clatter my kitchen delph."

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I knew little about my parent's experiences in England during the war, other than Mom being a nurse there, and Dad mending the runways at Woodbridge. But this surprise flyover by these vintage bombers, part of "The Wings of Freedom Tour," woke memories long suppressed.

"One morning, your father, wearing a Kelly green jumper, was working his bulldozer at the end of a landing strip," Mom shared the remembrance. "He heard an approaching plane and believing it one of our own, he turned and waved, only to see a German Messerschmitt bearing down on him. But rather than firing, the pilot simply tipped his wings and strafed everything behind him. Dad believed his green jumper saved him that day, as Ireland was neutral during the war. But I think his cheery wave had somehow put the pilot off."

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Finding Mom open to chat on this seldom-spoken topic, I asked about the bombings.

"Too many," she sadly confided. "In fact, Cemetery Road, where you were later born, took a direct hit in 1940. And though we were instructed to stay indoors or in bomb shelters during a raid, many of us would fill the streets amid sirens and searchlights, to gaze at the sky in fascination. One winter's night we saw a German bomber go down in flames. But rather than cheer, as one might suspect, the crowd wept, knowing four young men had just fallen to their fiery graves."

"It must have been a great relief when American bombers arrived," I urged her on, "especially after the Blitz."

"It turned the tide, most certainly, but there was no joy in it. We were weary of war, and every other house, it seemed, had a black bow fastened to its door, symbolizing the loss of a loved one. "Besides," Mom paused, "many Irish nurses practiced in Germany during the war."

"Irish nurses? How so? Were they duped by Hitler?"

She waved off my silly notions. "Both England and Germany recruited Irish girls to train as nurses in the early '30s, though neither could be considered a friend of Ireland. A few girls from my native Roscommon were wounded during the horrific bombings of Hamburg and Dresden," she clasped her hands and sighed.

Recently, I was remembering my mother's story at WestEnd Auto with my old friend, Frank Procopio. A hale 91, he had been a flight engineer/gunner on a B-24 Liberator. His mechanic son, Hank, and another customer, Tom Porter of Lanesborough, were listening as well. Tom, an avid pilot, happened to be an organizer of "The Wings of Freedom Tour," and asked if I'd like to be his guest on a Liberator flying out of Oxford, Connecticut, to Pittsfield Airport.

"You'd be a fool not to go," Frank encouraged me. "It's the only flying B-24 in existence."

So last Monday, I found myself buckled up in an ear-splitting Liberator named "Witchcraft," alongside Gary Wilk, my buddy and a former Marine. Behind us taxied a B-17 Flying Fortress with Bob Bianchi on board -- Mayor Dan's older brother. Their father Emile was shot down over Berlin in a B-17 in 1944, and spent a year as a POW before returning home to a hero's welcome. A P-51 Mustang fighter would escort us to Pittsfield, giving our motley crew the feeling of flying a daring daytime raid deep into the Berkshire Hills.

Once airborne, we were free to walk around the historic aircraft during our 45-minute flight. I shed my harness like a giddy Cub Scout, and climbed into the cramped tail gunner's turret, a most vulnerable position during air combat. I crossed over the bomb bay's narrow catwalk, minding its doors, to the bombardier's station. Reliving boyhood fantasies, I peered through its scope and pretended to drop a 500-pounder on the Otis Egg Farm below, leaving a scattering of feathers in my wake. In the nose turret, I shot down two feisty M-109's and a Focke-Wulf 190, giving the pilots a thumbs-up as they "hit the silk."

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After my clowning, I sat behind the cockpit -- Frank's old position. I'd heard many stories about Frank's 33 combat missions on this flying machine, but only now did they flicker to life. I pictured the 23-year-old sergeant, garbed in electrically-heated suit and oxygen mask, essential to survive the 35 below-zero temp at a ceiling of 22,000 feet, donning his flack vest and steel helmet as he braced himself for the bomb run.

Blistered by ground fire and hounded by German fighters, their own .50 calibers spitting lead in all directions, Frank and mates staved off the enemy to pinpoint payloads on enemy rail yards, factories, and oil fields. Mission accomplished, they'd high-tail it over the Mediterranean toward their base in North Africa. Little wonder these memories have figured so large in his life.

The golden dome of Pittsfield High School winked into view upon our descent into Pittsfield, and, as we banked over Berkshiretown, I only wished I could share my high adventure with my mother, now deceased.

When we touched down, Frank was waiting on the tarmac. "Well, Kevin, what do you have to say for yourself?"

I blurted out the truth: "Frank, I've never had such admiration for any man, as I do for you this moment." My dear old friend smiled appreciatively as I gave him a heartfelt salute.

Kevin O'Hara is a frequent Eagle contributor.

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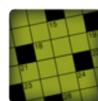
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Poll Released: Mar 12

| RANK | TEAM           | PV RANK |
|------|----------------|---------|
| 1    | Virginia (65)  | 1       |
| 2    | Villanova      | 2       |
| 3    | Xavier         | 3       |
| 4    | Kansas         | 9       |
| 5    | Michigan State | 4       |

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