

DELAYED *Legacy*

By Conrad J Netting IV



Lt. Netting, Conrad J. III stands next to his P-51 Mustang, nicknamed ConJon IV after his son.

The day of July 4, 1994, didn't start momentously. It did, however, turn out to be a day for discovery — and the beginning of a new relationship with my father who was killed in World War II just before I was born. After my mother, Katherine, died in 1993, my wife, Pauleen, and I tackled clearing out her belongings, including six World War II-era footlockers. Stenciled on the olive-drab outsides were the names of their owners: my three uncles and my father. All had headed off to war in 1943. My uncles returned safely, but my father was killed in France on June 10, 1944, just after D-Day. Fifty years later, Pauleen and I invited some cousins over for an Independence Day picnic and had a small family reunion. Each claimed his or her family's footlocker, while I claimed my dad's. Videotape running, we opened one container after another,

finding dusty uniforms, shirts, shoes, shower clogs, a Mae West life preserver, monogrammed sterling silver comb and brush set, a smelly navy mattress, and a set of tools. Everyone oohed and aahed, but the contents generally were unremarkable. The final footlocker, my dad's, yielded the unexpected.

There, amid hundreds of antique mothballs that were packed with obvious love and reverence, were his Purple Heart and Air Medal, uniforms with insignia, stationary set, military file, and debriefing reports. In short, everything that was with him in England during those tense days before and after D-Day. We also found letters he wrote to my mother, carefully bundled and tied with ribbons. We wondered how those could have been with him, then realized that my mother must have sealed the footlocker after adding her treasures to it.

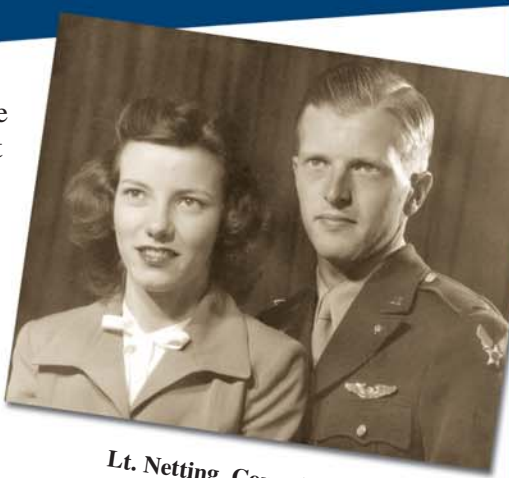
I picked up my dad's flight log, in which he had recorded each hour in careful, measured handwriting. My family crowded around and I wondered what would be written on the date of his death. Until this moment, my knowledge of my father's Army Air Corps service had been limited to scraps of data gleaned from my mother. She and my dad, Conrad John Netting III, were married on July 17, 1943. He was ordered to England in February of 1944, leaving her several months pregnant with me. My dad confidently assumed their child would be a boy, Conrad John Netting IV. For a nickname, he chose ConJon. I had heard that as a P-51 Mustang fighter pilot he was the envy of all flyers. He used my shortened name, ConJon IV and painted it on his plane (instead of the standard pin-up girl).

I was born in July of 1944, six weeks after he was killed in France. He was buried there in an American cemetery, which my mother and I visited in 1963. That was all I had known previously.

I turned the pages of the flight log to June 10, 1944. The entry, in a different handwriting from the others, read:

"Today was Con's last flight. He flew as an extra (volunteer), and in his eagerness to stop an enemy truck convoy from reaching the beachhead, he gave his life. Con was going in on a truck, leading the rest of the squadron to it, and while

he was firing, he got too close. When he pulled up, his ship (plane) hit the trees, turning it over and it was seen to crash and explode. I lost a very good friend today and the squadron will miss him as a valuable man, but it will be nothing as compared to the loss to Katherine and ConJon IV.”



**Lt. Netting, Conrad J. III
and his wife Katherine**

By sentence two, my eyes had welled up. One or two more attempts were no better, so Pauleen read the rest. After she finished, no one could speak. But the story wasn't nearly over.

Almost eight years later, on a quiet Saturday in February, an unusual envelope with a French postmark arrived in the mail. I opened it to find a gaggle of papers, all wrapped in a hand printed letter:

“Dear Sir: My father is looking for more information about a brave soldier called Conrad J. Netting, killed in action, during the second World War in Normandy and buried in France. We hope you are maybe his son, or his nephew, or next to him. You will find enclosed some documents and letters to show you the research my father has done on Mister Netting. It is so important for my father who, a few months ago, asked for a memorial to be built in Saint Michel des Andaines (place of death).” The letter was signed by Sylvie Grandin.

A dozen or so documents were enclosed, including burial reports and a copy of a letter that her father, Michel Grandin, wrote to the U. S. Army. In it he said, “My father, who was a cabinetmaker, made the casket for this brave soldier’s burial. (I was a little boy, 11 years old, and with all my family we went to the funeral. I will never forget it.) We are so grateful to this young man for fight for a land that was not his own, and so sorry that he died far away from his homeland. I regularly visit the tomb (grave) and lay flowers on it, paying tribute to this soldier fallen to liberate my country.”

This time, I couldn't even make it through the first sentence. Was it really true that someone saw the crash? That I now knew what town my father died in? That he had a Christian burial? That he was lovingly and compassionately cared for? Why had God laid this in my lap? Why hadn't all this surfaced

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years before when my mother or even grandparents could have been comforted by this news? Or, would the story have been too raw, too recent, for them to handle?

Seeking answers, I searched the internet and found Sylvie Grandin's phone number. Gathering my nerve, I called. During our conversation, Sylvie excitedly repeated again and again how grateful her family was for my father. I said I was the one who was grateful. After all, how many families in France have kept watch over the memory of an American fly-boy for nearly 60 years? She explained that her father and the people of Saint Michel des Andaines, the village nearest the crash, believed that the fuel trucks my father strafed were destined to destroy French villages and many French people. So this small village had adopted my father as a hero.

The next day, I received an e-mail from Sylvie, which filled in more details. "My grandfather ran with some neighbors to the cemetery, just by the place of the crash to help the pilot, but unfortunately it was too late. As I told you, my grandfather made the casket and took care of your father. On his grave was a mountain of flowers."

Sylvie's poignant phrase "...my grandfather ... took care of your father" would eventually come to define for me the French Normans and, in particular, the Grandin family. She also told me that the townspeople of Saint Michel would dedicate a plaque that Mr. Grandin spearheaded in my father's memory. And so, Pauleen, our three children, two sons-in-law, and I headed off to France on June 5, 2002, to attend the dedication.

Our first evening there, June 6, the anniversary of D-Day, we met Sylvie, as well as Michel and Louissette Grandin, her parents. The next day, my father's birthday, our first stop was to the Brittany American Cemetery, my dad's final resting place. The 4,410 crosses and Stars of David, stark white against the rolling green grass, faced west, toward the United States. The caretaker, as quiet as they come, dutifully led us to E.13.5 and my dad's cross. His was no different from the others, not taller, nor brighter and not any more distinguished. But he is ours! We were all drawn to it and him like magnets. Crying now was OK. I wondered aloud why we cry here, yet not when we visit relatives in other cemeteries. My daughter, Cynthia, said it was because we never had him and that we feel the deep emptiness, unlike other ancestors we have had and lost. She's right, I think.

We then drove to Saint Michel where, along the wall of the town's cemetery, we were to dedicate the plaque honoring my father. The town seemed as though it hadn't changed much over the decades since the war. About half the village residents, 135 people were there. My son, Conrad, and I unveiled the plaque. Anchored at the top left corner was the Eighth Air Force emblem and at the top right, an American flag, both in full color.

*A la mémoire du
Lt NETTING CONRAD J.
8th U. S. Air Force No. 0694174
Mort pour la liberté
Le 10.6.1944
Repose à St-James E.13.5*

Despite my attempts to be stoic, tears again filled my eyes. I didn't need French lessons to know what it said. Everyone turned toward the plaque and the flags above it, the American banner at the peak, and two French tricolors at its sides. Fully expecting to hear the "Marseillaise," the French national anthem, I was stunned to hear "The Star-Spangled Banner." The crowd audibly caught its collective breath and a quick glance revealed a tissue in nearly every hand.

For the remainder of our trip, we visited the site of my dad's crash, the D-Day beaches, memorials, and of course Paris. But our experience in Normandy had been magical. Knowing just how my dad died, and how his body had been so lovingly cared for, brings me a personal peace that has been so long delayed.

by the author Conrad John Netting IV
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**Conrad J. Netting IV with Michel Grandin
Below: Conrad J. Netting kneels by his fathers grave**

