

# What little we know

CHARLES PINNING

**M**y Uncle Bernard was 27 when he arrived at Basingbourn, England, in September 1943. After serving as copilot on two bombing raids over occupied France, he was promoted to first lieutenant in the U.S. Army's 8th Air Force and piloted Chief Sly III, a B-17 Flying Fortress.

I grew up with a photograph of Bernard and his crew posing in front of the plane. A bunch of other young guys and Bernard, ironically German-handsome, his officer's cap cocked jauntily to one side. An easy smile. He's wearing his shiny, new leather flight jacket, a tie and dark shirt. Light-colored kidskin gloves are turned down at the wrist. A stylish, pulled-together guy like his brother, my father.

A few days after the photo was taken, Oct. 9, 1943 arrived. The primary target was a fighter plane factory in Marienburg, Bavaria, in southern Germany. To divert the enemy, a secondary target was designated. The city of Anklam, in northern Germany, would be approached at low level to lure German planes away from the main force. Bernard flew to Anklam.

The bomber group did its decoy role well. Flying low, at 12,500 feet, the big, lumbering aircraft were irresistible to the more than 300 nimble Focke-Wulf fighters that rained machine-gun and cannon fire upon them. Bernard's plane was hit and fell into the Baltic Sea off Denmark. All 10 crew members perished. When the Danes recovered his body, they buried him in a local churchyard, the grave secretly marked so that the Nazis wouldn't find him.

These specifics of his death I learned as an adult. As a child I was only told, "Your Uncle Bernard was shot down by the Germans."

I asked my father, who was in the Navy during the war, what it was like for him. He told me that he was on a destroyer in the Pacific. That he was a frogman. He wouldn't elaborate. My father and his brothers had all fought in World War II. I asked him why he never talked about his family. He had four brothers and a sister. He said, "There's not much to talk about."

Most of what was meaningful about my father's history I learned from my Portuguese mother. She told me that his grandparents had immigrated to Baltimore from Bavaria. That his parents had divorced during the Depression and that my father and his four brothers were sent to orphanages. His older sister was boarded out to work for a family.

After graduating from boarding school, I attended college at Johns Hopkins University, in Baltimore. While there as a student, my father's brother Tom died and I went to the funeral. What I remembered best about Tom was my mother telling me that when he was whipped as a boy, he wouldn't cry. He would stand stiff as a board and declare, "Me not care."

Walking away from the burial site with my father, I saw a gravestone that stopped me cold: It was inscribed: Charles B. Pinning, Maryland, 1st Lt., 322 AAF Bomb Sq., World War II, Feb 16, 1916 — Oct. 9, 1943.

"Is that Uncle Bernard?" I asked.

"Yes," said my father.

He told me that, after the war, Bernard's remains were re-interred at the National Cemetery in Baltimore. I'd not known this before, nor, until that moment in the cemetery, had I known that Bernard's first name was Charles.

I graduated from college and went on to create myself. Growing up, I was always called Chuck. Now I assumed my true name: Charles.

Many men of my father's generation thought it unseemly to speak of life's difficult moments, especially the severe deprivations of the Depression and the horrors of war. On my father's side, this was compounded by being German, a people with a particularly stoic nature.

But the Portuguese, of which I am also half, are inclined to be warmer and more open. And so, this Memorial Day, if you find yourself sitting around with family, and you know something maybe of value to that person across the table or off in a corner, consider telling them.

Charles Pinning is a Providence-based writer.



Lt. Bernard Pinning, front row, third from left, with crew of B-17 Chief Sly III