

One of Our Own

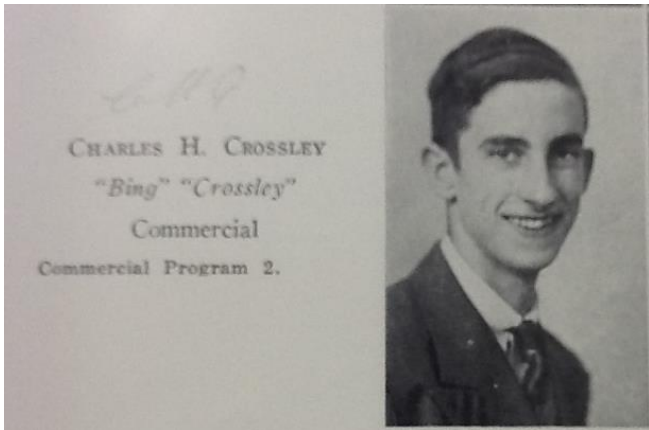
by Dani Crossley



Early this summer, we received a call at the Society from Brian Weaver, a teacher from the Doylestown area. He is participating in the National History Day World War II Education Program: Understanding Sacrifice. National History Day is working with the American Battle Monuments Commission (ABMC) to gather photographs, letters, and other records pertaining to members of the Armed Forces of the United States buried in ABMC administered cemeteries for the purpose of providing the public more information about these individuals who gave their lives in service to our Nation, and to develop education programs for use in classrooms. ABMC administers, operates and maintains 25 permanent American military cemeteries and 27 federal memorial, monuments and markers, which are located in 16 foreign countries, the U.S.

Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, and the British Dependency of Gibraltar; three of the memorials are located within the United States. These cemeteries and memorials, most of which commemorate the service and sacrifice of Americans who served in World War I and World War II, are among the most beautiful and meticulously maintained shrines in the world. (www.abmc.gov)

The participants in this project, spread across the country, chose someone in the above category at random to research and report on. Brian chose Charles Henry Crossley, of Montour Township, son of Harvey and Meta Paul Crossley. Since I've done extensive research on the Crossleys, Bonnie routed the call my way. Charles was my husband, Wally's, fourth cousin, descended from older brother Joseph of the seven brothers who made their way to Montour-Columbia County from Northampton County in the early 19th century.



Brian and I planned a day in which to get to know Charles and his life here in Columbia County before he left for the service. Brian wrote a beautiful eulogy which he delivered at Charles's grave in Ardennes Cemetery. I've included it below. For our day of discovery, we started with the Bloomsburg High School yearbook for 1941. Charles's picture was in there along with a heart wrenching *prediction* at the end of the book.

Class Prophecy

June 1950

Aviator Rescues Admiral of the Navy

The S. S. "Ahoy," a battleship, was sunk off the coast of Norway yesterday. Only five of the crew and the Admiral were saved. The Admiral is William Hyde. The members of the crew were Glen Newhard, Lee Maust, Keith Mericle, Morris Mordan, and Charles McHenry. The men were rescued by Charles Crossley, army pilot, who saw them in the water and arrived in his plane just in time to prevent them from drowning.

Brian had extensive service records for Charles and from these learned he worked at the Maudsley Quarry in Montour Township before his departure. Through the 1940 census records and PennDOT online maps, I was able to determine that he and his family lived on Tower Drive in Montour Township.

I phoned an old friend whose children went to grade school with mine who is Charles's niece. She never met him but there were many family stories about him. She told me exactly where the family homestead was located. It had since been torn down, but her brother was living on the property. After combing the CCHGS resources for all references to Charles and the Maudsley Quarry, we set off. First stop, the quarry. It is no longer active, but you can see exactly where it was located along Quarry Drive. Our pamphlet file had a newspaper clipping showing extensive rigging and equipment. That is all gone now. A quick couple of photos to get a feel for the area and we were on our way to the next stop. Back a shady, secluded lane we gazed solemnly at the acreage where Harvey and Meta Crossley raised their eight children, the last of whom died in 2014. We pondered their daily lives of farming before we pointed the car in the direction of St. Peter's Lutheran Church (or Lazarus) and Cemetery atop Grovania Drive. A small, intimate graveyard made it easy to locate Harvey and Meta in their final resting place under the trees. What would it have been like to receive those letters from the government telling them of their son's demise? I cannot imagine.

Brian brought with him the 155 pages of information about Charles he gleaned from his military service and has donated them to the Society. These include physical examinations, service records, fingerprints, battle casualty reports, pay records, dental records, induction and military qualifications, his bombing sorties (14 in just six weeks), his personal effects, copies of the communications with his next of kin following his death, and the posthumous medals awarded.

From a letter to Charles's mother dated August 5, 1944 from the Assistant Chief of Staff, Personnel:

I am writing you with reference to your son, Staff Sergeant Charles H. Crossley, who was reported by The Adjutant General as missing in action over France since June 23rd.

Further information dated June 26th has just been received which indicates that Sergeant Crossley was a crew member of a B-24 (Liberator) bomber which departed from England on a bombardment mission to Juvincourt, indicates that while returning from this mission your son's bomber sustained damage from enemy antiaircraft fire and was last seen Southwest of Brussels, Belgium at about 8:40 p.m. These facts constitute all the information presently available in this headquarters.

And this telegram dated 28 August 1944:

Report now received from the German Government through the International Red Cross states your son Staff Sergeant Charles H Crossley who was previously reported missing in action was killed in action on twenty-three June in the European arena. The Secretary of War extends his deep sympathy.

Brian Weaver and his compatriots traveled overseas in July to visit the cemeteries involved in the project. He wrote his family with updates about their experiences, took photos and spoke inspiring words at the graveside. Here is his eulogy for Charles:

Bloomsburg Boys don't leave Bloomsburg. Charles Crossley's family had been there for generations, and when he graduated from Bloomsburg High School in the summer of 1941 he took a job at Maudsley Quarry driving a cinder truck. Bing, as his classmates called him, was right in his comfort zone – he loved engines, cars, motorcycles, and he had driven buses, taxis, and virtually anything that he could get his hands on. He liked

hunting, but tinkering with engines was his passion. He even went to night school at the local college to learn more about them.

After working for a year and a half, Charles received his draft notice in November 1942, and in February the Bloomsburg Boy left home. He would have been happy working his job and tinkering with engines. But something bigger called, and he answered.

From the mountains of Pennsylvania, Charles got his first shock—basic training in Miami, Florida. Over the next year, as he completed training and aviation schools, he wound up in locations like Utah, Florida, New Mexico, and Texas. Along the way, Charles landed in the spot that made the most sense: assistant engineer on a B-24. The tinkerer had a giant new toy.

To get overseas, the plane took a route from the United States down through Trinidad, Brazil, Senegal, and Marrakesh before arriving in Lavenham, England, an airbase in Suffolk, in the spring of 1944. In just over a year, Charles had flown all across the country, and to three different continents.

But he would never see home again.

On May 7, Sgt. Charles Crossley and his crewmates took part in the 487th Bomb Group's first mission, attacking German targets in the city of Liege, Belgium. For the next 6 weeks he took to the hostile skies of Europe, earning an air medal and a promotion to Staff Sergeant along the way. While on the ground, Charles found time to socialize in the Sergeant's Club, with at least one photo showing the handsome Bing at the center of the action, surrounded by fellow airmen.

The pace of missions was torrid, and June 23 found Charles and crew taking off for the 14th time, headed for Juvin-court Airfield, a German base in northeastern France. The attack went well, but as they passed through Belgium on the way out the squadron hit an unexpected wall of flak. Many planes were damaged, though only one plane was lost.

But it was Crossley's.

A single shell found Charles's plane, exploding in the bomb bay and literally blowing the plane apart. Multiple first-hand accounts confirmed that there were no survivors.

In July, Harvey and Meta Crossley received a telegram and letter indicating that their son was missing in action. Within weeks the German government had telegraphed the International Red Cross, informing them that they recovered the remains of the entire crew.

Charles was gone, at just 21 years old.

After the war, Charles' family decided to bury his body overseas, where he had fallen. Perhaps it was because of the expense of buying and maintaining a grave—the Crossleys only had a meager homestead. Perhaps it was because they had already buried two children before the war, and couldn't bear another. Or perhaps it was because they felt he should lie with his comrades.

Either way, Charles was moved from a temporary cemetery to this plot, buried here with two of his crewmates. It was a fitting end—he started his defense of freedom in Liege. Now, he lies just down the road from that city.

We can't all be George Patton. We can't all be Audie Murphy. We can't all be legends or heroes.

But we could be Charles Crossley.

We can be people who follow their passions, landing a job that allows us to do what we love.

We can be an American who doesn't seek conflict, but who turns his tools to a different engine when that conflict comes.

We can be selfless, hurling ourselves through the skies toward the most dangerous of foes, because that action may allow another man to live.

We could be the Boy from Bloomsburg: an ordinary person putting his dreams on hold for the greater good.

Charles Henry Crossley was born on April 20, 1923 and died June 23, 1944. We thank him for his service. The military records, eulogy and photos taken and donated by Brian Weaver are now part of the Crossley Genealogy File at the Society.