

*Lumir Joseph Prucha Memories as told by his son, Rick Prucha*

---

## Memories of Lou Prucha - WWII 416th Bomb Group Pilot

Lou Prucha was born April 29, 1917, the first of three sons of George and Clara (Martinek) Prucha, in the small town of Dodge, Dodge County, Nebraska, where George was the Town Marshall. On June 3, 1917, he was baptized Lumir Joseph Prucha at Saint Wenceslaus Church in Dodge. His brothers were baptized George and Edward and would both serve in the Navy.

In the early 1920's, the family moved to South Omaha, Douglas County, Nebraska for a while before moving to the Benson neighborhood in Omaha, Douglas County, Nebraska where they stayed and the boys grew up. As a child, Lou loved hunting and fishing. He soon learned to be an accurate shot because he had a single-shot gun, so he only got one chance to hit the target.

Since Lou's father came to the United States in 1906 at age 16 from Nemcice, Bohemia in Czechoslovakia and his mother was born and raised in a Czech community, Lou's first language was Czech. He had to learn English pretty quickly when he went to school, but once he learned English, he soon forgot his native language. Lou graduated 8th grade from Benson Junior High in 1933 and from Omaha Technical High School in 1937.

He was working as an usher at R.D. Goldberg Theater Corporation in 1936 when he met his future wife Mary Brennan (they dated for more than 5 years before they were able to marry.) In November of that year, he also applied for a Social Security card for tax purposes. Other jobs included working on family farms and service stations. One winter in the 1930's, after working on a farm he hopped on a train boxcar to get back home, but nearly froze to death during the long cold ride home. From November 1939 until April 1940, he worked for Cherry Garden Garage in Omaha. He helped repair automobiles and made minor mechanical repairs. From February 1941 until December 1941, he worked for Standard Oil Company of Omaha as a gasoline attendant. He also greased cars and changed oil and made minor repairs to vehicles.

Lou signed up for the Army Air Corps on December 9, 1941 after hearing of the report on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. Testing landed him in the pilots seat of an A-20 Havoc and the beginning of a brilliant WWII career.

He was in Basic Drill Instruction for 3 months, Clerical School in Ft. Logan, Colorado for 4 months, and graduated from the Air Corps Clerks course of instruction at the Air Corps Technical School on April 29, 1942, marking his twenty-fifth birthday.

Lou was promoted to Aviation Cadet on August 15, 1942, attending the following Pilot training programs:

\* Preflight Pilot Training, Maxwell Field, Alabama - August 15, 1942 to October 17, 1942. \* Primary Pilot Training, Souther Field, Americus, Georgia - October 21, 1942 to December 27, 1942. \* Basic Pilot Training, Greenville Army Flying School, Greenville, Mississippi - December 27, 1942 to February 27, 1943. \* Advanced TE Pilot Training, George Army Air Field, Lawrenceville, Illinois - February 28, 1943 to April 29, 1943.

He graduated as a member of Class SE-43-D, received his "wings", was rated Pilot, was officially appointed 2nd Lieutenant and ordered to active duty on his 26th birthday, April 29, 1943. He remained stationed at George field until the end of May when he was given 10 days leave, during which time he returned to Omaha and married Mary Margaret Brennan on June 2, 1943.

Lou reported back to duty on June 9, 1943 and continued training on the Douglas A-20 "Havoc" twin-engine light bombers at various bases stateside along with gunners Sgt. Leland C. Ferguson and TSgt. Glenn C. Wilson. In September, 1944, they were assigned to the 668th Bombardment Squadron (Light), 416th Bomb Group of the 9th Air Force, just as the group was moving from England to station A-55 at Melun, France.

The Ninth Air Force was primarily responsible for air-ground support of the Allied troops and "tactical" attacks against Germany, vs. the "strategic" missions of the Eighth Air Force (AF). According to The Official Guide to the Army Air Forces, "Strategic operations, based on long range planning, are designed to prevent the enemy from obtaining the weapons he must have to make war, and to destroy his will to fight. Main objectives of AAF tactical operations are to achieve and maintain air supremacy, to destroy or disrupt enemy supply and communications lines, and to participate in a combined effort of the air, ground and sea forces on the immediate battlefield or adjacent to it."

The Ninth AF bombers were mostly the light to medium, twin-engine aircraft like the A-20 "Havoc"™, A-26 "Invader"™ (the two main types of planes Lou flew " A-20 during his training, A-26 in combat), B-25 "Mitchell"™ and B-26 "Marauder"™. The Eighth AF primarily used the heavy bombers like the four-engine B-17 "Flying Fortress"™ and B-24 "Liberator"™.

The "A-" aircraft type designation indicates an "attack-bomber", sometimes called "fighter-bombers". These planes were designed to fly typical formation bombing missions, but were fast, agile and heavily armed enough to also be used to strafe targets, using their forward nose and wing mounted machine guns.

In a V-mail letter to his parents dated October 8th, 1944, Lou wrote from France, "Really not much news around here and I'm perfectly alright so don't worry." As with all service members, he still couldn't tell his parents what was happening because of security reasons. Less than 2 months later, he would experience his first bombing mission and there would be plenty going on.

From December 6, 1944 to April 26, 1945 Lou flew 37 combat missions; primarily against German railroad, communications and marshalling yard targets from air bases in France. While the majority of his training was performed flying A-20's, he piloted most of his combat missions in "Sugar Baby" (plane 5H-S, serial number 41-39274, tail number 139274) the new Douglas A-26 "Invader". He advanced his formation flight position throughout his missions and was designated flight leader for his last three missions.

Life at the airbase between missions wasn't™ always easy, particularly during the German Ardennes Offensive (aka Battle of the Bulge), as noted in the following story related by Ralph Conte in his book "Attack Bombers We Need You! A History of the 416th Bomb Group": "Early in the morning of 27 December, at 0100 an air raid alert sounded. Everybody who could hear, or awaken, jumped in the fox holes. After thirty minutes with no action, all returned to their sacks. About five minutes later, machine gun fire and cannon shots were heard, and everybody jumped back into the foxholes, in their underwear, covering themselves up as a strafing job by German fighters, raked the field for about ten minutes. No casualties nor damage was reported. It was determined that someone had lit a flare near one runway, luring the planes toward our field, and the strafing began. Plans were drawn up in the event of an emergency evacuation. The group stands on strict alert, with doubling of the guards. Also, foxholes were manicured and cleaned out, just in case. All personnel were confined to base for a two week period."

Lou also had the responsibility of being the assistant supply officer for the squadron.

Lou flew in the first 416th group mission on January 21st after a five day lull due to bad weather. The target was the Euskirchen Railroad Bridge and the flight received a superior bombing rating. Wayne Williams described the mission in his Operational History 668th Bomb Squadron: "A break in weather gave us group Mission # 188 today. Filling out the loading list from our squadron were: B/N Team of Carl Stanley & Judson Blount, Lt Otto Jacobsen, Lt. Albert Harris, Lt. Lou Prucha, Lt. Roger Russell, Lt. Thomas McCready, and Lt. W.L. Hale. Flying "window" for the formation was the B/N Team of Charles Mish & Robert Shaft. Lt. Carl Stanley led our crews in the second flight of the first box. The target bombed was the railroad bridge at Euskirchen. The bridge was an important target on the supply route from Cologne to the German front. "Marauders" had hit it before, but the Jerries had repaired the damage and run a track across it again. Moderate accurate heavy flak was encountered just before the target was reached, damaging the planes in formation. None were hit seriously, and the bombs were dropped with precision. The bombing was done by flights from/on Group lead from 11,000 and 12,000 feet. The return journey was made without any interference of any kind, and the

formation landed after a journey of four hours. Photos taken and later developed gave the results of the mission. Of the six flights, two scored "superior", one "excellent", two "undetermined", and one A.P.N.B. F/O Judson H "Judd" Blount Jr., who guided our flight's bombs, brought back a "superior" to the squadron. He is rapidly making himself a name as a bombardier. This mission ended the day's activities."

January 25th, Lt. Prucha participated on the attack on the road and rail junction at Kall, Germany. Flying his 9th mission, the bombs hit their mark, disrupting much needed communications lines going east from the Malmedy Sector of the Ardennes Salient winning him an air medal.

Lou was promoted to 1st Lieutenant February 9, 1945 and the next day the 668th Bomb Squadron moved to base A-69 near Laon/Athies, France to be closer to the front lines.

The USAAF 416th Bomb Group Historical Summary discusses the new field and move: "The field was in very poor condition. Only one of the three runways was fit for operational use. One runway and 110 bomb craters in it which had never been repaired. The other runway had been partially repaired. These two runways were to be used as parking areas. Of the five hangars still comparatively undamaged, four were assigned to the Squadron for use as mess halls. The fifth was to house the photo Laboratory and gunnery and bomb training equipment. Taxi strips were full of holes and generally unserviceable. The Group had occupied the base for a matter of only a few days, however, before French Laborers were hired to begin repairing the damaged roadways. Before the month had passed, work had progressed beyond expectations. Captain Bailey, Station 5-4, had succeeded in securing the equipment and labor that was so gravely needed. Getting back to the movement, on the 9th, the 668th and 670th Bomb Squadrons left Station A-55 by train and truck for Station A-69. The 40/8 cars that had been part of every story of the First World War were used to carry our men and equipment. The trip was long and uncomfortable. The one redeeming feature was the comparatively mild weather. The snow had stopped falling and a few days of clear weather had dried the ground. The tents were taken down and set up again without too much difficulty. On the 14th, the 669th and 671st Bomb Squadrons departed for the new base. They were the last units to leave and cleared the field thoroughly. It was to be occupied by a troop carrier group. An inspection by the office of the Inspector General of the 9th Bombardment Division found the base in excellent condition when the 416th departed. Our rating was later changed to "Superior". The advantage to the new base was immediately apparent. First, it was only about 100 miles from the Front. Secondly, the field had frequently been used as a diversionary field because the weather usually permitted flying. With this good weather upon us and the nearness to the Front lines, our planes would be able to complete more missions than at any time previous. As far as living conditions were concerned and office space on the new Base, it offered many opportunities. We continued to live in tents, except the headquarters personnel who occupied a small group of barracks buildings still useable. The Group, which had occupied the Base before us, left quite a bit of usable lumber and a few shacks."

The first mission Lou flew after returning from a 7 day leave was on March 18th against the town of Worms, Germany, a mission that turned out to be very deadly for the 416th. Four aircraft were lost from flak hits on this mission, including two A-26B planes from the 668th Bomb Sq. - aircraft S/N 41-39361 flown by 1st Lt. James P. Kenny and his gunner SSgt. John "Jack" J. Sittarich, and aircraft S/N 41-39213 manned by 2nd Lt. Clifford J. Vars and gunner Sgt. John J. Griffith, Jr. SSgt. Sittarich survived, was taken prisoner and was repatriated when Patton caught up with the Germans. Lt. Vars also survived, was taken prisoner, and later escaped, making his way back to U.S. lines.

Through his military career, Lou was awarded the European, African, Middle Eastern Ribbon with 3 Bronze Stars; 6 Oak Leaf Clusters and 1st Silver Oak Leaf Cluster to his Air Medal; the American Theatre Ribbon; and Victory Medal. A silver oak leaf cluster award represents an equivalent of five bronze oak leaf clusters.

After the European war was officially over, Lou remained stationed in France at bases A-59, Cormeilles en Vexin (May 1 to July 13, 1945) and A-74, Cambrai (July 17 to August 30, 1945), continuing training in preparation for transfer to the Pacific Theater of Operations. Fortunately, the war with Japan ended before he was reassigned. He had logged in 139 combat hours and spent 12 months overseas in the European Theater of Operations.

After the war, Lou returned to the states via the ship S.S. Fayetteville Victory from September 8-18, 1945, and was honorably discharged on January 14, 1946. He remained in the US Air Force Reserve and the Nebraska National Guard until 1951. He worked construction and was licensed as both an electrician and plumber.

Lou and Mary had six children together Ed, Mary Lou, Jim, Nora, Cathy and Rick. They raised their family in Omaha and later Bennington, Nebraska.

Mr. Prucha was very organized with his WWII records and saved all his important papers. After searching through Mr. Prucha's WWII records we were able to add 291 new 416th BG names to our online database and were able to add valuable information to other names already existing there. I cannot express in words how much this means to the GI's loved ones who are searching for information on their heroes of WWII, now extending into the 3rd generation. Now, thanks to Rick and his father, 291 more families will be able to quickly find their loved ones in the 416th. From his plane list I was able to add well over 25 new planes to our online list. On behalf of the 291 GIs and their loved ones, which number in the thousands now. I'd like to thank you and most of all your father and mother for realizing what a treasure these old WWII records are and saving them for us all to enjoy. With more gratitude than I can put into words, thank you and many other generous GI's like you.

Lou passed away January 16, 1981 and Mary followed just over 21 years later on May 9, 2002.