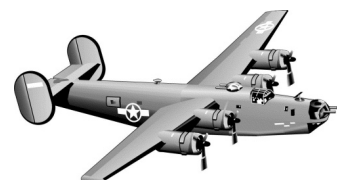




# Flightline



Newsletter of the 780<sup>th</sup> Bombardment Squadron of WWII

June 2018

***Will you be next?***

## **20-year-old interviewing as many World War II combat vets as he can**

*Editor's note: I found this April 11, 2018 article on CNN.com. The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs has featured Rishi Sharma on their Facebook page. I encourage our squadron veterans and their families to go to Rishi's website to learn more and to set up an interview with him.*

*By Mercedes Leguizamon and  
Brandon Griggs, CNN*

Ever since he was little, Rishi Sharma has enjoyed learning about the Second World War. Now he's taken his passion a big step further.

The 20-year-old from Agoura, California, is on a mission, and he's got a time crunch. He's trying to interview as many living World War II combat veterans as he can, to document their stories before they are lost forever. In the past four years he has traveled to 45 states and Canada to interview more than 870 veterans. But Sharma, who considers these vets his real-life history book, is still looking for more. He wants to preserve their stories for future generations. And he's grateful to them for their sacrifice.

"They've given us the world that we have," he said. "It's truly amazing." Sharma, who doesn't come from a military family, has bitten off a big job. According to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 558,000 of the 16 million Americans who served in World War II were still alive in 2017. But the youngest of them are in their late eighties, and some are more than 100 years old. The VA estimates an average of 362 of them die each day.



*Rishi Sharma, right, interviewing a World War II veteran. His GoFundMe page has raised more than \$192,000 to date.*

Sharma was a sophomore in high school when he began what he calls his "mission." He heard about a decorated veteran, Lyle Bouck, whose tiny unit had held off a much larger German battalion during the Battle of the Bulge. Sharma tracked Bouck down and interviewed him. Then he took it a step further.

He began biking to retirement homes to get to know the veterans in his community. Sometimes it was as simple as showing up and asking to speak to them. Many aging veterans don't get many visitors and are eager to share their stories, he said. Sharma records the interviews on video and burns them to DVDs, which he gives to the veterans. Some

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# Your News & Letters

Hello,

*I'm so sorry I didn't get this to you sooner. Life has a way of moving along and I got caught up in it. As of March 31<sup>st</sup>, our father Francis (Frank) passed away two years ago. He went quietly in the early morning, at age 93. I am his daughter, Doni, and he was living with me. He loved where we had moved to, the Sierra National Forest, Bass Lake area, in Central California mountains. We came here two years earlier from Southern California. I know how much he enjoyed receiving this newsletter and my apologies for not notifying*

*you sooner. I'm attaching his obituaries. One for here and one from So. CA. He is with our mom, whom he missed dearly, and all the flyers from World War II, who were dear friends.*

*Thank you for caring about these amazing men and yes, they were the Greatest Generation!*

*Doni Bastiani*

Editor's note: I'm sorry to hear this news about your dad, Doni, but thank you so much for sharing it with us. Frank sent me an article for *The Flightline* that I published in

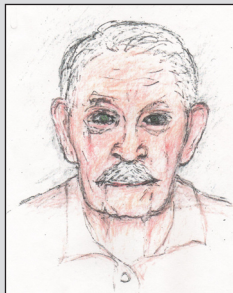
March 2014, along with a self-portrait. I have include that portrait in his obituary, below. What interesting lives all the men of the 780<sup>th</sup> led.

## Contact Me

Notes, news or just to say hi.  
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## TAPS



Francis (Frank) C. Diederichs, 93, passed away on March 31, 2016. Frank was born August 13, 1922, in Columbus, Nebraska. He moved to California in 1941 to work for Douglas Aircraft. He married Katherine (Tottie) in 1943, just before joining the Army Air Corps. He flew 34 combat missions over Europe as a bombardier with the 780<sup>th</sup> Bombardment Squadron. After the war, Frank

and Tottie settled in Los Angeles where he studied at the Otis Art Institute. Frank became an architect, designing residences for clients ordinary and famous, including many entertainment celebrities and business leaders, and all became dear friends. He proudly never fully retired, always taking on small projects. Frank also enjoyed traveling and making friends worldwide. He was preceded in death by his dear wife of 48 years, Katherine (Tottie). He is survived by daughters, Denise Diane (Dee Dee) Niblet and Doni Bastiani; son, Dorn; 12 grandchildren; 22 great-grandchildren, and brother, Robert Diederichs.

*...continued from front page*

of them want to make their stories public, while others prefer to keep them within their family to help their descendants understand what they went through on the battlefield. He also has begun posting the interviews to his YouTube channel.

The stories are powerful, told with emotion by men who seem to recall them vividly.

Among the hundreds of men Sharma has interviewed was Don Pullen, whose unit was attached to the Air Force. Pullen recounted a story about befriending a family in Velten, Germany. The father was beaten to death by German soldiers who were trying to get information out of him. The soldiers also whipped the daughter. Pullen says the daughter showed him and another American soldier the welts on her back where the Germans had whipped her.

"That was the most godawful thing we've ever had to witness ... what happened when the Germans beat those people," he said.

Sharma also has talked to many veterans about their struggles after the war. In another video, Joseph Diamond, a combat medic, recounted the difficulties he faced upon his return home.

"The nightmares were there," he said, "and you couldn't go to sleep at night without fighting the war all over again."

To further his mission, Sharma in 2016 founded Heroes of the Second World War, a nonprofit organization dedicated to preserving interviews with World War II combat veterans for future generations.

That same year he also set up a GoFundMe account to fund his efforts. So far he's raised more than \$181,000 (\$192,000 as of June 11: editor), which helps pay for his travel expenses and video equipment.

This has become Sharma's full-time job. He got a boost in late 2016 when CBS News did a story on his work. After it aired, he received thousands of emails suggesting new veterans to interview.

One of the biggest obstacles that Sharma faces when traveling is the fact that his tender age prohibits him from renting cars or checking into many hotels unaccompanied.

"I live out of the car when I'm on the road," he told CNN. "(It) makes my job a lot harder."

Sharma likes to say that he doesn't need to go searching for celebrities -- there are plenty of real-life heroes just a phone call away. He stays in contact with many of the men he's interviewed and counts them among his best friends.

Sharma also knows he can't do it all himself. He encourages anyone who is interested in his work to reach out to World War II veterans in their areas and document their stories.

"We don't need to use iPhones to take selfies," he said. "We can actually document history with them."

After four years, Sharma's passion for his work doesn't appear to be waning anytime soon. He is looking for more World War II veterans to talk to and could use your help here.

"I was in Canada until this morning and now I have some interviews (in) San Diego, and I'm going to Texas and then Oklahoma," he said Monday. "I'll go wherever the World War II combat veterans are."

## **More information**

**Want to know more, or set up an interview with Rishi Sharma?**

**Call him at 202-813-0992 or email him at: [heroesofthesecondworldwar@gmail.com](mailto:heroesofthesecondworldwar@gmail.com)**

**You can also see his GoFundMe page at: <https://www.gofundme.com/ww2heroes>**

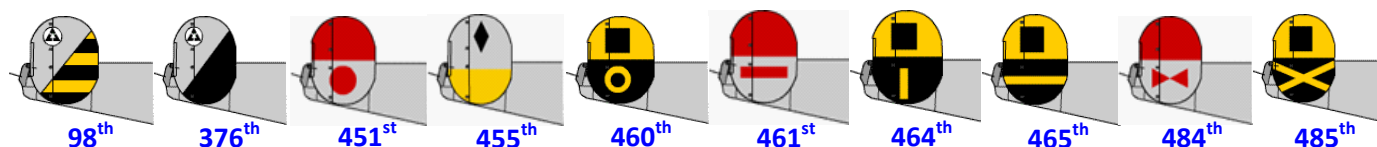
**His website is [heroesofthesecondworldwar.org](http://heroesofthesecondworldwar.org).**

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## *Flightline*

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### **2018 15 AF BOMB GROUPS JOINT REUNION ITINERARY** **Dayton, Ohio • Sept. 13-16, 2018 Hotel reservations due by Aug. 16.**

**Thursday, September 13:** Registration and Hospitality Room open 10 AM to 5 PM & 8 PM until ?? with usual heavy hors d'oeuvres and beverages. Hotel Welcome Reception 5 PM to 7 PM with light snacks and drinks. All-Group Welcome Meeting at 7 PM to review Schedule of Events.

**Friday, September 14:** Tour of National Museum of the United States Air Force. Private "ropes down" visit with *Strawberry Bitch* - original B-24D assigned to 376BG, "Flash" Gordon Byfield, pilot, one of our participating veterans and bomb groups. Special presentation of commemorative Presidential Unit Citation medals to each of our veterans by a general officer from Wright-Patterson AFB. Traditional military memorial ceremony, conducted by Capt. Chris Cairns, chaplain, grandson of last CO of 485BG and reunion chaplain. Lunch on your own. Buses leave museum at 1:15, 2:30 & 3:45 PM to return to hotel. Friday evening individual group banquets. Social hour 5:30 PM with a cash bar in commons area. Dinner served 6:30 PM.

**Saturday, September 15:** "Stay in house" to relax, visit, attend speaker presentations or do whatever your heart desires. Lunch on your own. Evening all-groups banquet. Social hour 5:30 PM, dinner served 6:45 PM.

**Sunday, September 16:** Church service at 9 AM hosted by 376BG's Rev. Bob Oliver. 10:15 AM return to museum or alternate tour of Art Institute and Second Street Market. Lunch on your own. Farewell dinner served 6:30 PM.

**I'm planning to go. Are you?**

**Registration form and hotel info at <http://465th.org>. Or email me: [johnkath5@comcast.net](mailto:johnkath5@comcast.net).**