



*Morry today (above) and in 1942 (opposite).*



# AS THE CROW FLIES

## Morry Crow Recalls WWII Experiences

Story: Beth Palmer  
Photos: James Van Nuys

Like most people of his generation, Morry Crow remembers exactly where he was on December 7, 1941. Twenty-one years old, and "full of vinegar," he was in Seattle, Washington with a pretty girl in his brand new '41 Club Coupe Chevy. He'd paid \$850 for it, and it was a beauty—with white wall tires, a heater and a radio, from which he heard the first report of the bombing of Pear Harbor.

"Turn up the radio!" he remembers telling his girlfriend.

He quit his job as an assembly line worker at Boeing Aircraft the next day.

"I was registered for the draft but couldn't enlist because I was missing a toe," Morry tells me, as we sit in the kitchen of his Silver City home on an unusually warm late summer morning. "But after Pearl Harbor, I knew I'd be drafted."

My meeting with Morry has been a long time coming. A neighbor of his had written me a letter in late 2005 telling me about a "walking World War II history book" named Maurice Crow tucked away in the sleepy village of Silver City, South Dakota, that I simply had to meet. "He has fascinating stories to tell about his war experiences," she wrote.

I'd wait until after Christmas, I thought, and then give this man a call. But on Jan. 15, 2006, Lucy, Morry's wife of "60 years and six months" died after a long-fought battle with cancer.

I'll give him some time to grieve, I decided, having heard this sad news from his neighbor. But the spring was busy and the summer even busier. I'll call in the fall, I told myself, and jotted down a note in my planner. But in October I received word that Morry, who'd never taken a single pill for anything in his

life, had had a stroke, forcing him reluctantly from his home and into an assisted living facility in Rapid City.

"You should still write the story," his friend coaxed over the phone. "It would take his mind off how miserable he is about not being able to go home."

"I can just call him then?" I asked, dubiously.

"Best to call the nurse so you work around his therapies," she said.

I pictured an old and tired man bedridden and hooked to machines by tubes.

I let some more time pass and then decided in early spring to pop in, unannounced, to Holiday Hills, where he was living during his recuperation. I could talk to the nurse, possibly get a chance to at least introduce myself to Morry.

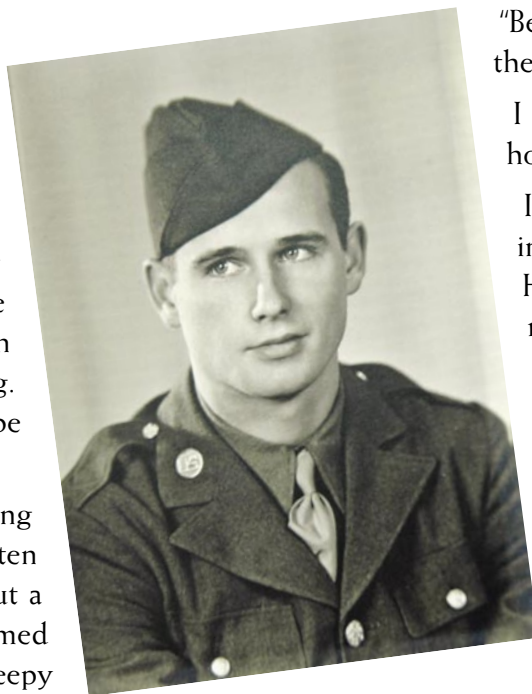
Arriving at the Sheridan Lake Road facility, I stopped first at the front desk. "Is Morry Crow still a resident here?" I asked the woman at the desk.

The answer came in the form of a man's voice, coming from an adjacent office. "He is, but he's not here right now. He's down in Nebraska at his nephew's ranch helping with branding. He wasn't sure when he'd be back."

I thanked them both politely and walked out the door, chuckling softly. Suddenly, I couldn't wait to meet the elusive Morry Crow.

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Not surprisingly, it takes most of the summer before Morry and I can find a time to get together that works for us both. For a man nearly 88 years old, he has an amazingly busy schedule. He's happily back in his Silver City home for the summer, and





*Morry and his tail gunner congratulate one another on receiving the Distinguished Flying Cross for "extraordinary achievements."*

between drives to Rapid for appointments and the massive community garden he tends, the retired contractor and former top-turret gunner has very little down-time.

As I drive into the tiny town of Silver City, I'm not sure which place is Morry's, but I find it fairly quickly. The carved wooden sculpture captioned with the words "The Old Crow" in the front yard is a dead giveaway.

"You'll have to excuse me, I've had a stroke," he says politely, as we sit down at his kitchen table. "I talk slower and sometimes have trouble finding my words."

But if there are post-stroke deficits in this engaging gentleman, I am hard-pressed to find them as we spend a delightful couple of hours talking about his life.

I'm always struck by the impressive work ethic of the generations that precede mine, and this man is no exception. Even as an older teenager, prior to his job at Boeing, Morry navigated the Depression by moving around and finding jobs. "I went where the dollars were," he tells me, with a grin.

He liked shingling houses in particular. "It was the kind of work I liked because the more you worked the more you made," he says.

It is qualities like this that explain why on June 3, 1942, in his hometown of Arlington, Washington, Morry was appointed leader of the 38 men that were inducted that day.

Following basic training in Ft. Lewis Washington, Morry was sent to air mechanics school at Sheppard Field, Texas before returning to Boeing for additional training.

Remembering how much he loved his first flying experience



*Morry and his crew in a new model B-17 called "Myassimdragon."*

as a four year old in a barnstorming plane, he volunteered as a gunner, and was sent to gunnery school in Las Vegas for six weeks in late 1941.

Among the many memories of those early months, he recalls sitting in a roomful of flight volunteers placed ten to a bench. "Look at the nine men next to you on the bench," an officer commanded, "only one of you will come home."

Forty men in the crowded room backed out that day, but not the young man from Washington. "I was young, full of vinegar, not too smart and patriotic. I didn't know better," he says.

He chuckles when he describes his first experience in the decompression chamber, which simulated flight at 35,000 feet. "I passed out the first time. I'd been out too late the night before."

He wouldn't make that mistake again—acing the test the next day after sitting in the chamber for a full thirty minutes. He came out of gunnery school as a staff sergeant with four stripes, the top of his class.

His first duty station was Walla Walla, where he was a 1<sup>st</sup> aircraft engineer and became part of a 10-man flying fortress. It was a crew with whom he would see the world from high in the sky, forge close, family-like bonds and complete difficult, "suicide" missions.

"We were a close-knit crew. We needed to know each other well to know our capabilities," he said.

Of this original crew, only one man was lost. It was their second mission, in a B-17 called "Stud Duck," and one Morry, who was injured in the attack, will never forget.





*Morry receives the Oak Leaf Cluster in Rapid City.*



*Morry and Lucy Crow*

"We were bombing targets at 24 to 26,000 feet and decided to go down to 7,000 feet to get a better view. The next thing I knew, I woke up, the floor was gone, and I wasn't in the turret. The co-pilot was giving me first aid and sharing his oxygen. I had a piece of metal in my leg."

Initially one of 21 planes in a formation, the "Stud Duck" crew found themselves all alone in the sky with one man lost, and two engines gone in the right wing.

A newspaper clipping from Morry's scrapbook quotes the then-24-year old's account of the incident, which interestingly was the first of a record three oxygen explosions on three separate combat missions that the young man would survive:

"We were attacking airfields around Bordeaux and, just as we were leaving the target, we were attacked by 12 FW 190s and had the number 1 and 2 engines shot out by a fighter attack. The engineer and waist gunner were wounded. A 20 mm. shell burst right in the oxygen tank underneath the cockpit and blew the heavy floor boards to pieces. It even wrecked the armor plating there. We had to leave the formation and come home alone. Just before we hit the coast we met another crippled B-17 and we flew formation with it over the coast."

The second time Morry's oxygen tank exploded was on another Bordeaux raid. A 30-calibre bullet ripped through the right side of the aircraft and hit the tank, blowing it up. The fact that the plane didn't start on fire baffles him today like it did at the time. "Why? I don't know. That's the way luck runs, I guess," he said after the attack.

Luck was also on the crew's side during the third tank explosion, which occurred over Brunswick, Germany. The half-empty

tank was struck by a rocket fragment and the oxygen oozed out. Incredibly, it didn't ignite. "I guess that's what saved us," he said.

All told, Morry and his crew completed 27 missions during eight months of flying combat with the 8<sup>th</sup> Air Force in the European Theater, and based on the difficulty of the missions, got credit for 30.

With their missions accomplished, Morry and his crew parted ways in England, assuming they'd never see each other again. And aside from one out-of-the-blue call from his waist gunner years later, he never did. For a number of years, Morry received a telegram every December 5 from his co-pilot George Foster, the man who tended to his injured comrade, with a two-word message: REMEMBER BORDEAUX.

When Morry returned stateside, his mother had a surprise for him, a scrapbook of photos, newspaper clippings, meritorious citations, telegrams home, his draft card—a veritable treasure trove meticulously documenting Morry's service to his country. The poignant note that accompanied the scrapbook seemed to speak to mothers all over the country during those turbulent years:

*"Dear Morry- This may seem an odd birthday gift. You can never know unless you have a son of your own how many hours of worry and love goes into a book like this. You have every thing that I can afford so I thought you might like my scrapbook of you – and all the love that is possible to give to a fine son goes with it. A late birthday greetings, Morry – Love, Mom."*

(Morry's scrapbook received a facelift for his birthday in March of 2003, a gift from longtime family friend Kamala Brennick of



*Morry, home on leave, poses with his mother.*



*Morry looks through his treasured scrapbook.*

Sturgis, who, Morry says, is like the granddaughter he never had.)

His combat days over, Morry's next stop was Rapid City, South Dakota, where he served as an engineering instructor at the Army Air Base, wearing, among many ribbons and awards, the Distinguished Flying Cross, a Purple Heart, an Air Medal with two Clusters and an Oak Leaf Cluster.

Morry was discharged in October 1945, but never left the Black Hills, having met a local girl, Lucy Lang, "an amazing horsewoman," whose family owned 640 acres north of the interstate near what is now the Fountain Springs area northwest of Rapid City. They married in the spring of '45.

A whirlwind of a young woman who graduated from high school at the age of 15, Lucy attended National College and spent the next 44 years working at U.S. Bank in downtown Rapid City. "She was the operations officer and practically ran the bank for years," Morry boasts. "She started out making \$16 a week and was making more than that per hour when she retired."

Suddenly a civilian, Morry needed a job. With mechanics making less than \$1 an hour, and being his enterprising self, he discovered that the best pay was for machine operators. "I'd been around machines all my life. They were looking for bulldozer operators. I said 'you teach me how to start it, I'll work for 30 days. If you like what you see you can pay me then,'" he recalls. Needless to say, Morry got a paycheck two

weeks later.

The rest of Morry's story is west Rapid City excavating- and landscaping-history. "I roughed in lots of streets in west Rapid, excavated hundreds of houses on hundreds of acres," he said.

He sold his business, Crow Construction, in 1960 and worked another 20 years as a carpenter. After spending numerous summers in a rented cabin in Silver City, Morry and Lucy bought their Silver City place in 1972, which provided Morry with more opportunities to engage in his favorite pastime, fishing. "I've fished every creek from Mystic to Rapid City," he says. "If I hadn't fished so much, I'd have made more money!"

With Lucy gone and his stroke rehabilitation behind him, Morry has settled into a simple life of spending the cold months at Holiday Hills and summers in the familiar comfort of his Silver City home.

By all accounts, Morry is a quietly contented man with the wisdom of one who has lived a long and happy life, served his country, and traveled around the world and back again.

"I've been here for 64 years," he says, with a grin. "I'm not going any place."

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