

Broadband, ‘Bucko’ and the B-29

A World War II veteran with doubts about the Internet discovers an unexpected link to a long-ago event.

By Michael Waldner / *State of South Dakota* as told to Broadband Communities

Dale Coates, my late father-in-law – known to many as “Bucko” – didn’t want to deal with the Internet. He never learned to use it, and he didn’t want to pay for it. But sometimes, when we were going to visit him, he’d say, “Get on that dot-com thing and look this up for me.” Just from our searching things out and printing them for him, the Internet often had an impact on him. This story is about one of those times.

Back in World War II, Bucko was in the Army Air Corps and served on the crew of a B-29 Superfortress, at that time the world’s most sophisticated airplane. He was on a training mission, flying from Kansas to South Dakota, in a formation of B-29s. The military brass in Kansas was supposed to look up, see the formation overhead, and say, “Yup, we have some good airplanes.”

But at 36,000 feet, the instruments in one of the planes started to fog over because of the cold. The pilot radioed the lead commander, saying he wanted to “bug out” of the formation and head back to Kansas. The commander told him to maintain radio silence and maintain his position.

Bucko’s pilot, who had heard the radio conversation, told him to watch for the plane that was flying blind. As the right rear gunner, with a view from the bubble window, Bucko saw the airplane come up underneath them – and saw his plane’s engine propellers cut the other plane in two like a can opener. Bucko watched crew members popping out, propelled by the G-force and the cabin pressure. Some of them didn’t have parachutes. He had nightmares about that for years.

That plane hit them so hard it almost knocked them over. Bucko’s plane was damaged and leaking fuel, and smoke and fire were coming out of the engine, but his pilot put the plane into a pitch and dived, and the crew bailed out safely. Bucko parachuted down and landed in White River, S.D. A young Native American boy came galloping up on a painted pony, saying, “I’ve been tracking you for miles.” Eventually, a rancher picked up Bucko in his truck, took him home and fed him a meal, and the Army Air Corps sent some vehicles from Kansas to bring him back.

A VOICE FROM THE PAST

A year ago, Bucko saw an item in the *Argus Leader*, the Sioux Falls, S.D., newspaper, about the survivor of a mid-air collision that took place over Philip, S.D., on September 28, 1944 – the same date as his mid-air collision. When he calculated the distance between Philip and White River and took into account the fact that his plane flew for 15 minutes after the collision, he realized the survivor must have come from the plane that hit him. He was pleased to learn there was a survivor he hadn’t heard about before.

The newspaper story had appeared because of a chance meeting – the survivor, Bill Clary, was wearing a B-29 cap in a restaurant in South Carolina, where he lived, and was approached by a visitor from New York, a World War II buff who wanted to hear Clary’s B-29 stories. Clary obliged by telling him about his near-death experience over South Dakota. The intrigued New York visitor called the South Dakota Historical Society and the *Argus Leader* for more details – and the *Argus Leader* assigned a reporter to write Clary’s story.

Here comes the broadband part of the story. My 15-year-old daughter, Sydnie, arrived for a visit as Bucko was looking through his Army papers to find the names of the crew members on the plane that broke apart. Using her smartphone and mobile broadband connection, Sydnie searched on Clary’s name and found all his contact information, including his phone number. Bucko called him, and, after 68 years, the two “good ole boys” had a nice long conversation. The two exchanged some of their war memorabilia, and they spoke a few more times before Bucko died.

I could not believe the lift in his spirits from being able to visit with Clary and find out, after all those years, that he had survived that crash. And, of course, the experience absolutely changed Bucko’s perspective about broadband. ❖

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