

Collateral Damage

Karen Edelman Williams had never been here before, never seen unending fields of corn and soybeans amid the tawny prairie grass, never seen anything like the yawning openness all around. So when, sometime later, she wrote a letter to those people she'd met on a visit out here, she told them she'd never forget the place. "I will never forget the kindness of the people we met there," she told them, "or the beauty of your Nebraska skies."

In a roundabout way, what brought her here was those Nebraska skies. She was only six months old when her father became a casualty of World War II way out in the middle of America, thousands of miles from Normandy or the Philippines. Out here, her father trained for the bombing runs that would end wars in both theaters. Her father, and sixteen others with him, fell to their deaths from those same Nebraska skies.

So the only way Karen Edelman Williams knew her father was by way of her mother, who, she says, never really got past her husband's shocking death. There wasn't much to say because she and her husband had been together for such short a time that when, years later, Mrs. Williams thought about it, she told her daughter their relationship seemed almost like a long date.

When skies clear over the plains, barely a day goes by without a jet trail painting a cloudy swath through bright azure; but if you stand out there for a week you'll not see what people saw day after day during World War II, skies full of B-24s, then B-29s, in perfect formation, as if Berlin was just beyond the Missouri River.

The state of Nebraska hosted eleven Army air fields during the war, requiring industry that's almost impossible to imagine in farm country today. Thousands of workers poured concrete and built barracks and command posts, as well as a hospital of some 300 beds. Today, very little of that remains. Today, the only engines grunting on the land power tandem-wheel tractors pulling 18-bottom plows.

In 2003, Karen Edelman Williams took her mother along when she went out west on the 60th anniversary of her father's death. Local men and women helped the family through what had always seemed mystery, the government's unwillingness to say much about what had happened. Eventually, those B-29s out of rural Nebraska became part of the squadron that delivered the atom bombs to Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

But locals knew what happened, because when planes crashed into farmland, the crews died on ground those farmers worked. You can't hide a plane crash in all that open sky and land. Descendants of those farmers showed Lt. Williams' family where the planes had crashed, even, mercifully, described the seeming peace of the dead crew.

Four B-24s were flying in tight formation on October 23, 1943, late afternoon, when one of them moved out and another, as required, filled in. Something happened, mid-air—two of them touched, collided. They were 20,000 feet up.

Lt. James Williams was four years older than his wife. He'd been in night school, wanting to be a lawyer. When he died in these open fields, Karen's mother was just 19—a new wife, a young mom, and an instant widow.

She says her mother always blamed herself for her husband's death. The doctors told her taking a train all the way out to Nebraska was not good for a young mom—she'd have to wait six weeks. Her husband had begged her to come earlier, but she'd waited, listened to the doctor.

He was killed when she was on the train to Nebraska.

Sixty million people died in World War II, including 419 thousand Americans, 26 of whom died, almost secretly, on open land beneath beautiful Great Plains skies.

They've not been forgotten. There's a road marker out there in Fillmore County, three of them, one for each crash.

And the families remember. Karen Edelman Williams, who grew up without a father, says, "My mother never really recovered. Train whistles made her cry."

They're all heroes, every one of them.