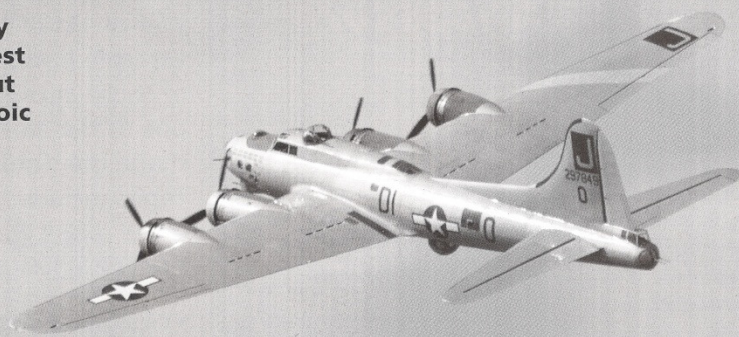


## Military Research

# Lt. Mark L. Golden: A Case Study in WWII Research

**Mary Kircher Roddy documents her quest to learn more about the fate of the heroic B-17 pilot.**



*Photo of a B-17 over Seattle, May 2011. Photo by Mark Roddy*

MY FATHER PASSED away in 2008. Two years later, going through boxes from his house, I found one I had never seen. Inside, were newspaper clippings about love and faith and humor; a handful of photographs of Dad in uniform, some with a girl on his arm; a couple of rocks from the desert where he had been stationed; and six letters, signed, "As ever, Mark." There were no other letters in the box — none from his parents, nor any of the girls in the photos. Dad never spoke of Mark, but I had a brother, Mark. Perhaps these letters had something to do with his name?

Most of the letters were written on letterhead — Camp Callan, Santa Ana Army Air Base and others. Only one had an envelope with a return address, "Lt. M. L. Golden." A last name! The correspondent mentioned Christmas leave in San Francisco, "...Bob McCarthy & I did manage to hoist a few doubles before we visited the Kiernans... I didn't see Gene

O'Meara to speak to in San Francisco..." From the tone, it sounded like Mark might have been a college friend, so I pulled out Dad's University of San Francisco yearbook and found photographs — McCarthy, Kiernan, O'Meara, Golden and Dad, all Second Lieutenants in the Coast Artillery Reserve.

In other letters, Mark mentioned brothers, Paul and Bill. In the 1930 census in San Francisco, I found William P. and Grace Golden with children, William, Paul, Mark and Catherine. I wanted to find Mark alive, tell him about Dad. There was no "likely" Mark Golden on the California Death Index or the SSDI. I took that as a good sign.

Trolling more databases, I found a record in "World War II and Korean Conflict Veterans Interred Overseas": Mark L. Golden, inducted from California, First Lieutenant 708th Bomber Squadron 447th Bomber, death date 18 Jun 1944, buried in the

Netherlands.

Ouch.

I finished reading through Mark's letters. In the last of them, 22 January 1944 from Ardmore Army Air Base, he wrote, "...our last station before the high seas & foreign duty — that is, if we still have a war to win in April or so... I'm 1st pilot & airplane commander of a B-17 with 9 men to train & weld into a fighting unit that will bring me back after 25 or 50 missions over Europe. It sounds great, but from casualty reports of the 8th Air Force, I wonder sometimes just what I'm in for." Five months later, Mark did not make it back. I had to know what happened.

I cursed myself for not having asked Dad more about his WWII experiences. Where could I get answers? Mark was a San Francisco boy. Surely *The Chronicle* would tell me all about his fate. I went to the University of Washington's library and read casualty lists from microfilmed newspapers, hundreds of names, but



never Mark Golden. Without more information on Mark's mission, newspaper research would take a finer toothed comb than I had the patience for.

I wondered about Mark's brothers. I found SSDI records for Paul in 1997, and Bill in 2009. I was 19 months too late to talk to Bill. But I found obituaries of both, with names of survivors. In Bill's widow, Violet, I struck gold.

Violet said she never knew Mark, having met Bill after the war. Later, she wrote to me of Bill's high regard for Mark. She enclosed three letters — from Mark to his parents as he anticipated imminent deployment, from Alvin Long, dated 19 June 1945, and from J.A. Walton-Black, dated 12 August 1945. It was from the last two letters I learned Mark's fate.

Long, the navigator, wrote: "I have delayed writing this letter, hoping first to be able to receive more definite information. I have decided not to wait any longer, however, and to tell you as much of the story of the mission of June 18, 44 as I know to be of fact. In the morning of June 18, Mark took off on what was to be our seventh mission... On approaching our target we were hit by flack in the nose of our ship. Mark managed to keep our ship up in formation however, enabling McColgan, the bombardier to drop our bombs... Immediately after bombs away, we were hit again in the open bomb bay, injuring our radio operator and starting a fire in the radio room. A few seconds later we received our third direct hit, in the number two engine... Mark gave orders to fight the fire with extinguishers but then seeing this was to no avail, gave the order... to bail out. The engineer went out the nose first, McColgan followed and I followed him. On the ground, the Germans picked us up, and put us in solitary. I never saw Mark after I left the ship, but I have always had hopes that he had just evaded capture. This is all of the story that I saw myself... From that time until about May 5 of this year, I remained in a prisoner of war camp. Now I am at home with my wife and baby on a 60-day leave."

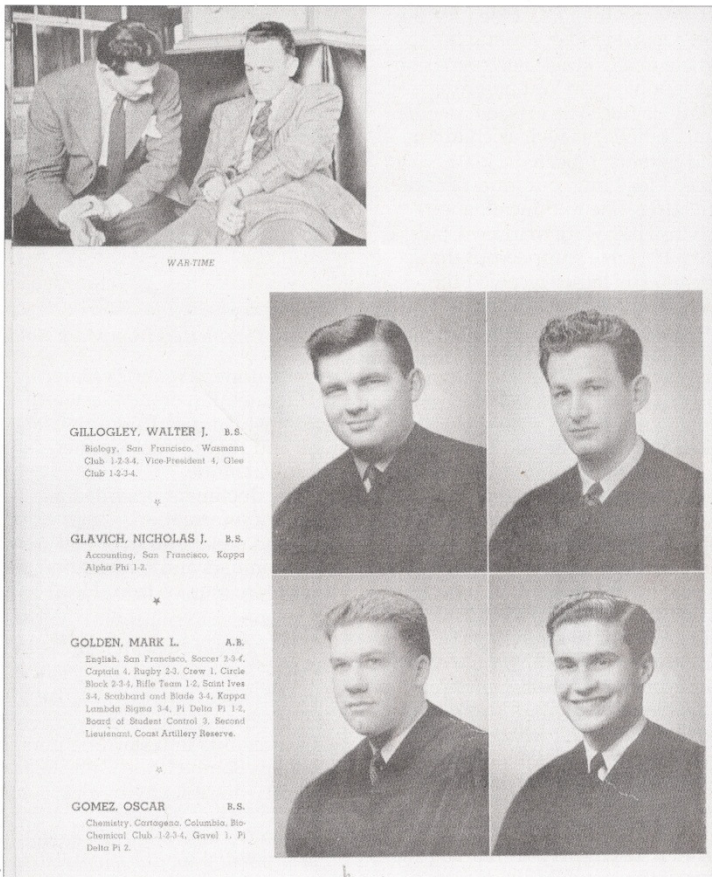
Long went on to extol Mark's

character and thank Mrs. Golden for presents she sent to his son and encouraging letters to his wife, while he was interred. When Mrs. Golden sent those letters and gifts, did she know Mark had been killed or was he still MIA?

In Walton-Black's three-page, typed letter, he added details to Long's account, "After the fire had been fought unsuccessfully for some minutes... the pilot (your son, and my commanding officer and very dear friend), gave the order which undoubtedly saved the lives of his crew...". He explained that Mark was ready to bail out, but he was still struggling with his parachute. Mark was reluctant to jump first, but Walton-Black waved him on and indicated he would follow shortly. "In another moment, I had

fixed my leg strap and followed. The smoke was now terrific, and I very nearly passed out. In the act of pulling myself through the hatch, I looked at my watch. After my chute opened, I saw the plane peeling off, break in two, and blow up in several directions. I then checked my watch, and found it to be only 40 seconds after I had bailed out. Thus you can see what would have happened, to all of us, if Mark had not made the right decision and given the order to "bail out" in time for everything to get clear..."

After stating all the facts, he wrote it was his opinion that Mark exited the plane safely, but may have been killed or injured landing on some obstruction, or by brutalities perpetrated by German civilians or SS troops.



Yearbook photograph of Mark L. Golden from The Adios, published by the Senior Class of 1942, University of San Francisco.



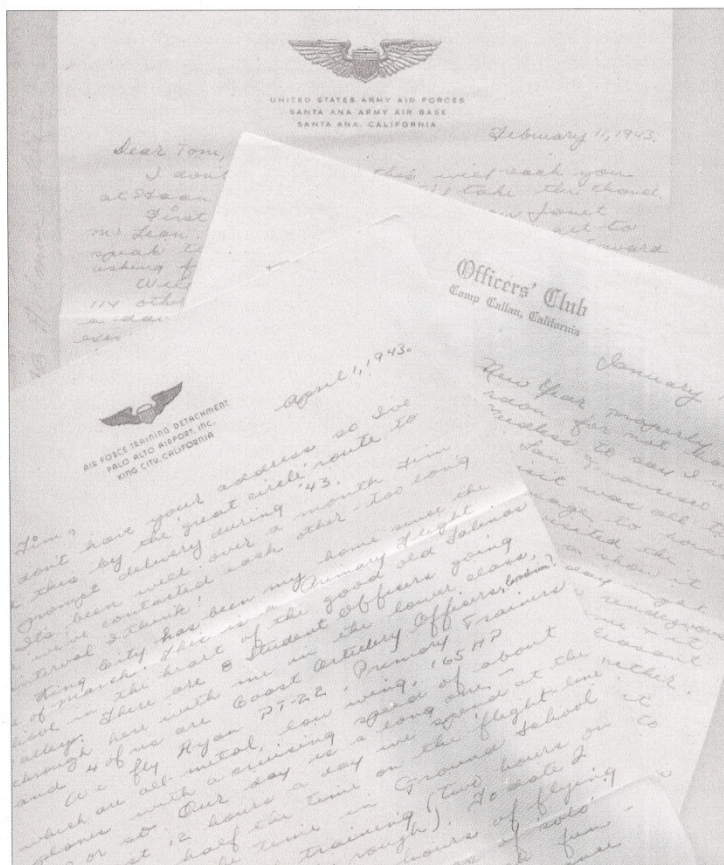
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I yearned to know about the rest of the crew. From these two letters, I had three names — Walton-Black, Long and McColgan. In his letter, Mark had mentioned a crew of nine. I had more to find. Both Long and Walton-Black mentioned POW camps. In a database of WWII Prisoners of War, I found “Alvin W. Long, report date 18 June 1944, European Theatre, Detaining Country: Germany.” I searched again, leaving the name blank, but adding those other details. 1,156 hits! No wonder *The Chronicle* was so full of war news. Undaunted, I examined all 1,156 names and found Long, McColgan, Walton-Black, and 53 others with an incident date of 18 June 1944. I was left wondering which of those might be Mark’s crew.

Meanwhile, I searched for the three names I had. I found an article in a Chicago newspaper online about Alvin W. Long receiving a law degree. The article named a wife, Ethelle, as well as children and parents. I located a 2001 SSDI record for Long, but found Ethelle still alive. She told me all about Alvin. They were married 1 January 1944. He shipped out that spring. His father received the telegram from the War Department that Long was missing — he was listed as next-of-kin, because no one wanted a young, pregnant wife to get the dreaded telegram. Ethelle recollected the bombardier liked the night life and the copilot was English, but couldn’t help me with names of other crew.

I found a website, [www.accident-report.com](http://www.accident-report.com), selling military aviation incident reports. I could buy a report for the mission of June 18, AIRCRAFT: B0-17G 43-37714, LOCATION: 16 km NE of Hildesheim, Germany, REMARKS: Shot down by anti-aircraft fire. This looked like Mark’s mission, but I couldn’t tell what would be in the report. I was reluctant to spend \$31. Was there another way?

On [www.fold3.com](http://www.fold3.com), I discovered a 52-page report naming the rest of the crew: Radio operator, John J. Kauffman, Jr.; Top Turret Gunner, Homer S. Howes; Ball



Three letters from Mark Golden to Tom Kircher, written in 1943.

Turret Gunner, Frederick Slater; Tail Gunner, Raymond Gaswint; Left Waist Gunner, Rudolph Giannoni; and Right Waist Gunner, Guido Valentine.

The document provided a wealth of information — name, rank, and serial number of all crew members and information on next of kin; memos from Head-

quarters about interrogations of Giannoni on casualties, Valentine, Golden and Kauffman; Individual Casualty Questionnaires, detailing information reported by Walton-Black, Giannoni, Howes, and Long. Also included were several “Report on Capture of Members of Enemy Air Forces” containing various notes, including, “...insolent

### Other Research Ideas to Bring a Military Story to Life

- B-17 websites include [www.b17queenofthesky.com](http://www.b17queenofthesky.com), and [www.b17.org/history/interactive\\_tour](http://www.b17.org/history/interactive_tour) with an interactive tour of the B-17. B-17s tour the country. There is nothing like being in one to bring dry accounts into startling perspective.
- 447th Bomb Group website, [www.447bg.com](http://www.447bg.com), has crew lists, photographs, diaries, day-by-day details of missions and a combat mission chart.
- Military base websites, including [www.militarymuseum.org](http://www.militarymuseum.org) and [www.brightkot.net/~gsimmons/remember.html](http://www.brightkot.net/~gsimmons/remember.html), provide histories, maps, photos of bases and recollections of personnel.



behaviour, speaks some German."

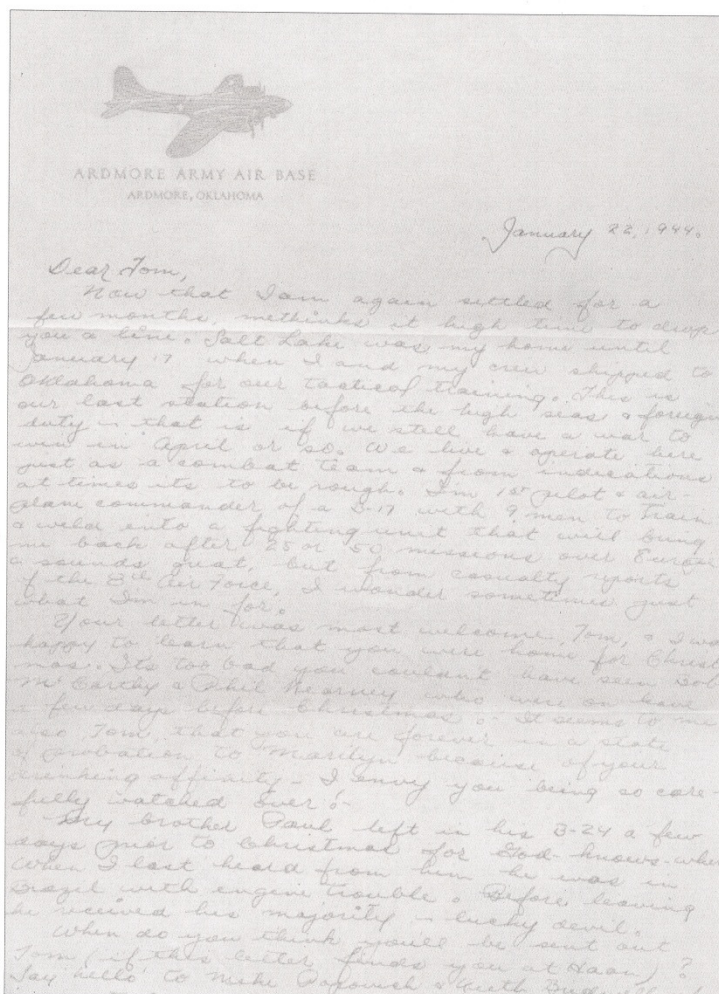
The next of kin list proved helpful in locating the crew as I used census records to identify families, birth dates and places. The SSDI led me to the deaths of Gaswint in 2007, Valentine in 1997, McColgan in 1991, Walton-Black in 1975, and Howes in 1969. I found obituaries for some, and spoke with McColgan's son. An online family tree revealed Kaufman's 1963 death.

My greatest successes came with the two living crew members, Slater and Giannoni. When I spoke with them, among the first thing each asked was, "What happened to Kauffman?" Slater had dragged him from the flames in the radio room, put a parachute on him and helped him to bail out through the waist escape hatch.

Giannoni meets weekly with other seniors to write their life stories. He sent me "The Life Story of Rudy Giannoni and the German Black Death March." He included a map of Stalag Luft IV, where he spent seven months, before the 600-mile march from Poland to West Germany. Giannoni described his deployment, sailing to Liverpool in a convoy of 20 ships, and training in the North Sea where they shot 12-gauge shotguns for two weeks. "The pilot was the only person to score better than me." Finally, they were stationed in Rattlesden, England. Concerning June 18, he wrote:

"...We're on a bombing mission to Misburg, Germany, which is an oil refinery ...The flak ...was very thick and our group was flying at around 20,000 feet...a shell hit us in the left wing ...setting it on fire. We had just dropped our bombs as we got hit ...I rushed to see the damage and if the fire could be put out ...there was nothing we could do. We notified the pilot, and he said over the intercom for everyone to bail out. We all bailed out, nine of us, except the pilot, who was killed. As I was floating down in my parachute, I saw the plane explode."

I found another name in Mark's letters, 'Ez Geddes.' He's now 91 and told me a bit more about Mark, "I remember swimming with him in the ocean near La Jolla



Letter from Mark Golden to Tom Kircher, dated 22 January 1944.

...to a floating marker and back to the beach. He swam effortlessly while I ran out of fuel and was exhausted with some distance still to go." He wrote, "I am saddened to learn of Mark's disappearance and likely death. He was a moral person, intelligent, and of above average physical health and well-being. I thought he had considerable potential for success in whatever he chose to do."

It was due to Mark's courage and leadership that his crew escaped the plane and their lives were spared. I hope in reading Mark's story, you are inspired to conduct some research on a hero of your own.

FC

Mary Kircher Roddy has been a genealogist for about 11 years, becoming interested in her roots in anticipation of an extended trip to Ireland. She has a Certificate in Genealogy and Family History from the University of Washington. Her main areas of research are Ireland, California and Ohio. By trade, Mary is a Certified Public Accountant.