

They were high school buddies.

But from two very different backgrounds. Leonard Rollin Pierce was a farm boy from Bliss Road in the Town of Canandaigua, and Roy G. Benson lived most of his life on Chapin Street in the City. During their high school years in the late 1930's, they both played for the Cheshire and the Canandaigua Baseball teams. According to Roy "Bunny" Benson "It was about that time when I became good friends with Lenny Pierce. When we played for the Cheshire ball team we would hang out a lot at the barber shop in Cheshire. They had two pool tables and a coal stove at the back of the shop with chairs around it."

Flash forward to 1942. Both chums answered their country's call and joined the Army Air Corp. "Bunny" entered the service on April 15, 1942, Lenny on December 11, 1942, both through Fort Niagara, near Buffalo.

Bunny (27) won his commission and wings at Napier Field, Alabama, and then took advanced flight training in California. He was later assigned to the 9th Air Force, 363rd Fighter Group, 380th Squadron.

Lenny (24) won his commission and wings at Craig Field, Alabama on October 1, 1943. He was later assigned to the 8th Air Force, 4th Fighter Group, 334th Fighter Squadron (formerly known as the Eagle Squadron of the RAF).

Both Pierce and Benson went to England in December of 1944 and had visited each other at their respective bases. At one time, according to a Messenger Reporter, Lt. Pierce wrote: "Everything O.K. here. I haven't seen Bunny again, but hope to soon." And according to Bunny: "December 23, I arrived at Keevil, England in the southwest not far from Bath. . . . Lenny Pierce was at an airbase in central England about thirty miles from where I was stationed and he was already flying missions. I contacted him and made arrangements to go up to visit."

I got the feeling that Bunny greatly enjoyed flying: "I loved doing acrobatics with the loops, spins, rolls and upside down flying.. My instructor took me up once and did an outside loop. I had to hang onto the iron bars in the cockpit and the blood all went to the top of your head. He also showed me how to fly backwards, on a windy day you would slow the airplane down so it would just stay up and the wind would blow you backwards."

In one letter home, Lenny, however, added some realism to the demands of their combat flights: "I guess I am earning my pay now because it's a long, hard ride. It reminds me of setting cabbage plants, and sitting on a folded up burlap bag. Well, if you can imagine sitting in one position for 5 hours or more, you will know how we feel when we get back from a mission. I'm not complaining because some of these boys have been over here nearly 2 years and they don't say much."

Then tragedy struck. Bunny was reported as "Missing in Action, May 11th, 1944", shot down during the 23rd. mission in his P-51 by a German fighter plane while providing escort for bombers. The Daily Messenger: "Second Canandaiguan Reported Missing - Two days before boyhood chum, Lt. Leonard R. Pierce was missing in action on an Eighth Air Force Mission over Europe, Second Lt.

Roy Benson, Jr. , Canandaigua, went down in combat over Belgium, a War Department telegram to his parents Mr. and Mrs. Roy Benson of 39 Chapin Street, reported yesterday."

Lenny was reported as "Missing in Action (2 days later) on May 13th, 1944". It was Lenny's 26th mission in his P-51. He was also on a bomber escort mission over Germany. Enemy fire damaged his plane and he was ordered back to base. About 30 miles from England, he radioed a distress call, "plane on fire - baling out!" After a thorough search of the English Channel, only an inflated rubber craft bearing his name was found.

Bunny's circumstances in his own words: "I just had time to pull the canopy release and struggled to kick myself out as fast as I could. . . . I saw my plane go down, crash and burn several miles away. . . . The landing was very easy and I immediately got out of the chute harness and began to run for the woodswhen I heard a rifle shot and the bullets whizzing past me so I stopped and held up my hands. " Bunny, after spending 11 days in German isolation, spent the remainder of the war, along with his wing man, Neal Ullo from Missouri, being moved from stalag to stalag, until being liberated 8 days shy of a year after been captured.

One day during his captivity "as we were standing there talking, I heard someone mention the name Len Pierce, so I called out 'who knows Len Pierce?' I met the pilot who was flying with Len and he told me all about how Len was killed. I probably knew about it over there in the middle of a field in Germany even before his folks were notified."

On March 29, 1953, the Leonard R. Pierce Memorial veterans Club was chartered and incorporated by a group of veterans and friends of Lenny. In August 1953 the club purchased 6 acres of land which became the Leonard R. Pierce Memorial Park in the Hamlet of Cheshire. They met actively from 1953 to 1968. In 1976 they turned the property over to the Town of Canandaigua for a park in Lenny's memory.

Original comrades who made this park possible were:

Floyd Barnes, Herbert Barnes, William Barnum, Marion Bunnell, Sam Casella, Sr., Leonard Cooper, William Duchell, George Dutcher, Ray Dutcher, Donald Gage, Edward Herendeen, Robert Herendeen, William Higley, Gene Hilton, Joe Hurley, George Kay, Sr. Ken Montanye, Glenn Munger, Glenn Olmstead, Ralph Pestle, Lyndon Quayle, Harold Rogers, Don Ross, Lawrence Sands, Robert Simmons, Robert Spittal, Bernard VanTroost, Abe Yarger, Don Yarger, Paul Yarger.

Two comrades, who were so closely linked throughout their whole lives, by unbelievable happenstance, only one was fortunate enough to come home to grow old and raise a family.

Resources: "The Anatomy of a Rabbit" by Roy G. Benson;
Interview with Lynn Benson Avery (Roy's daughter)
and interviews with Christine Pierce Dailey and Helen Pierce Gerlock (Lenny's sisters)

Ray Henry
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