

## Wartime Correspondence

In 1944, the 306<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group was stationed in Thurleigh, England. Lieutenant Robert A. Stalker was a bombardier in the 369<sup>th</sup> Squadron. He met an English girl named Muriel, who lived in nearby Bedford. The attraction was immediate and mutual. Robert and Muriel saw each other whenever they could. Five weeks after they met, in October, Robert's plane was shot down over Cologne, Germany. Muriel obtained the address for Robert's mother in East Orange, New Jersey; through an exchange of letters for the next several years, a bond formed between these two women separated by an ocean but connected by their love for one airman. Following are just a few of the letters that Muriel Wild, née Paul, saved from that time.

*Cat Wild*

11 February 2019

CatWildAuthor@gmail.com

**Lt. Robert A. Stalker to Muriel Paul**

Thursday, 21 September 1944

Dear Muriel,

Here's that note I half-promised to write to you. Since I haven't seen you all week, I thought I'd better confirm our date for Saturday night – barring any unforeseen events, I'll see you about 7:30. O.K.??

As you can guess by this stationery, I'm at the Red Cross Club in Bedford. My pilot and I just returned from London. You see, the start of our pass was moved up a day at the last moment, so I had off yesterday & today, instead of Tuesday & Wednesday.

I was going to come out and see you tonight, but decided against it because it is pretty late now (8:35, to be exact) and you wouldn't be expecting me anyway. Instead I think I'll write a letter or two home, get the early truck back to the base, and "hit the sack". Naturally I'm pretty tired after two days in the "big city". I had a good time on my pass, and will give you all the "jen" when I see you (did I use that expression correctly)?

I'm looking forward to seeing you on Saturday. Till then, I'll just say

So Long,

Bob

Friday, 29 September 1944

Dear Muriel,

I know you are expecting this letter on account of the fact that I didn't keep our date last night. Yes, I did fly a mission yesterday, but that's not the half of it! It was the fourth consecutive day that I had to fly (three combat missions and a practice one on Tuesday). A single mission makes a fellow pretty tired, so you can imagine what a "beat up" state I was in last night. We landed late in the afternoon, so by the time I took a shower it was 7 o'clock, at which time I hit the "sack" for a delightful twelve hours of sleep.

Our field didn't put up a mission at all today, otherwise I would probably be up in the "wild blue" again this morning. You see, the replacements are not coming in on schedule lately, so everyone is getting more than his share of flying, especially the new crews.

I'm awfully sorry I couldn't make it last night, not only because it probably inconvenienced you, but because I was looking forward to seeing you, as I always do on all our dates.

Before I forget, I received your letter on Tuesday. I was a little surprised but more that pleased to get it. It got here real quick, considering it was postmarked on Monday PM.

Now, about our next date. I was considering coming in tonight, but think I really should go to bed early again, because I feel sure that only bad weather can save me from a mission tomorrow. I hesitate to set a definite night, because of what happened last night, but I will say that I'll be in at my first opportunity next week. I'll try to make it early so you'll have plenty of time to get ready. Roger?? I hope you have a nice time at home this weekend, Muriel.

Bye Now,

Bob

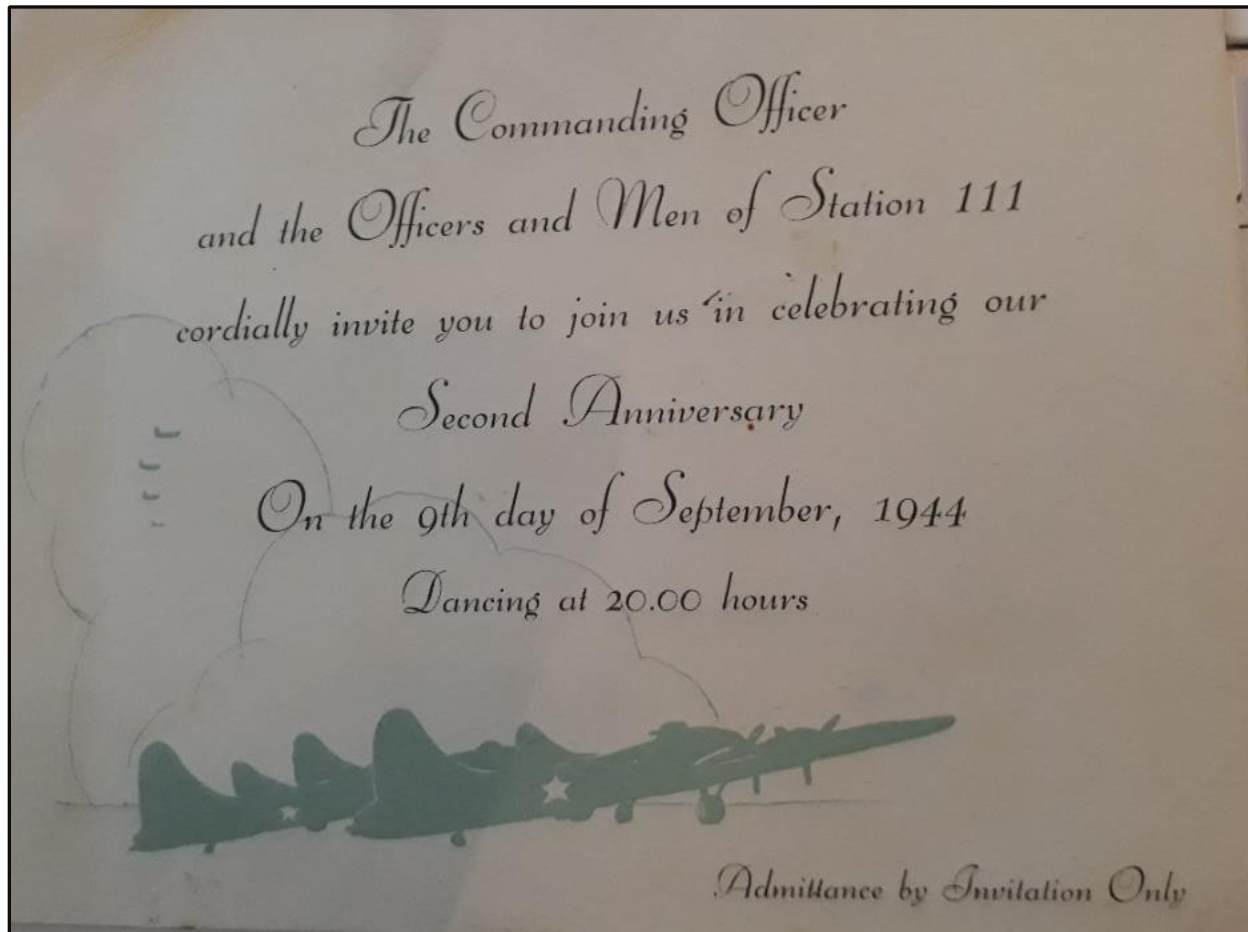


Figure 1 Dance invitation - on the back Robert has written "Thanks for a swell evening"



Figure 2 Robert's letters to Muriel

**Mrs. Josephine E. Stalker to Muriel Paul**

Monday, Apr. 9, 1945

Dear Muriel,

Your very lovely letter reached me safely and I'm so happy that you did write and not take the advice of the officers who told you not to. I rather expected to hear from you because you see Bob told me about you also and that he couldn't see you on his last leave as you were sick with a cold. He wrote that in a letter I received the day after the telegram telling us he was missing.

If only I had some good news to tell you about Bob. It will be six months next Sunday and that is such a long time that we have very little hope left.

Perhaps you have heard from Lt. Carle that six of the crew have been reported prisoners. The pilot and the five enlisted men. Joe Seibert, Bob and a boy named Duncan, the co-pilot who took Frank Carle's place that day are still missing. Do you think Lt. Carle heard from any of the boys while he was still in England? I was in touch with his family about seven weeks ago and they were expecting him

home soon. I asked them to have him phone me when he reached home but haven't heard from him to date. His home is about sixty miles from here.

So Bob told you all about us, about the silly notions his kid brother gets. They are so different, these two, Bob so sensible and serious and Don just the opposite. He was eighteen in March and enlisted in the Navy. I hope it was the wise thing to do. The boys reaching eighteen now have no choice, all the long training programs are closed and if they wait to be drafted they are put right in the infantry and we didn't want that. He hasn't been called yet and we are hoping he won't be for some weeks until he graduates from high school.

Do you think Bob ever felt that he may never come home? Did he ever talk it over with you? If he did feel that way he never let us know, his letters were so cheerful, so full of courage, he didn't want us to worry. But we did, every time we'd hear the radio "hundreds of bombers over Germany" and "50 of our planes failed to return" we'd be almost frantic but we prayed so hard for him and somehow we felt that he would get back safely. Please God he may still be alive, we won't give up until final word is received.

I'm glad he knew you, Muriel and truly grateful to you for the time you gave to him in the few short weeks you knew him. Won't you write to me soon again?

Sincerely,

Josephine E. Stalker

Sunday, Aug. 12, 1945

Dear Muriel,

So much has happened since I last wrote you that I hardly know where to start. I kept putting off writing to you in the hopes that I would have good news for you but all the reports that we had about Bob turned out to be false.

On June 30<sup>th</sup> we had another telegram from the War Dept. confirming Bob's death on Oct. 15<sup>th</sup>. I still can't believe it, and as I sit here today listening to the radio and waiting for word that Japan has accepted our terms and surrendered, my only reaction is a feeling of extreme depression and sadness. Not because the war is ended, we all thank God for that, but we will now have to accept the fact that Bob is gone and that is not easy.

I will try to tell you a little of what took place since my last letter. Some time in April Lt. Carle called on me with his bride. They were married the day before and were on their way to Mississippi where he is an instructor. He told me a very encouraging story about a friend of his, a gunner who had seen our Bob in the plane after it was hit and this boy felt certain that they were all safe. We have since learned that it was another plane and not Bob's that he had seen.

Then on May 28<sup>th</sup> Lt. Carle's father called me on the telephone to say they had received a letter from a friend of Frank's who had just been liberated in Germany, and he wrote that he had met all the

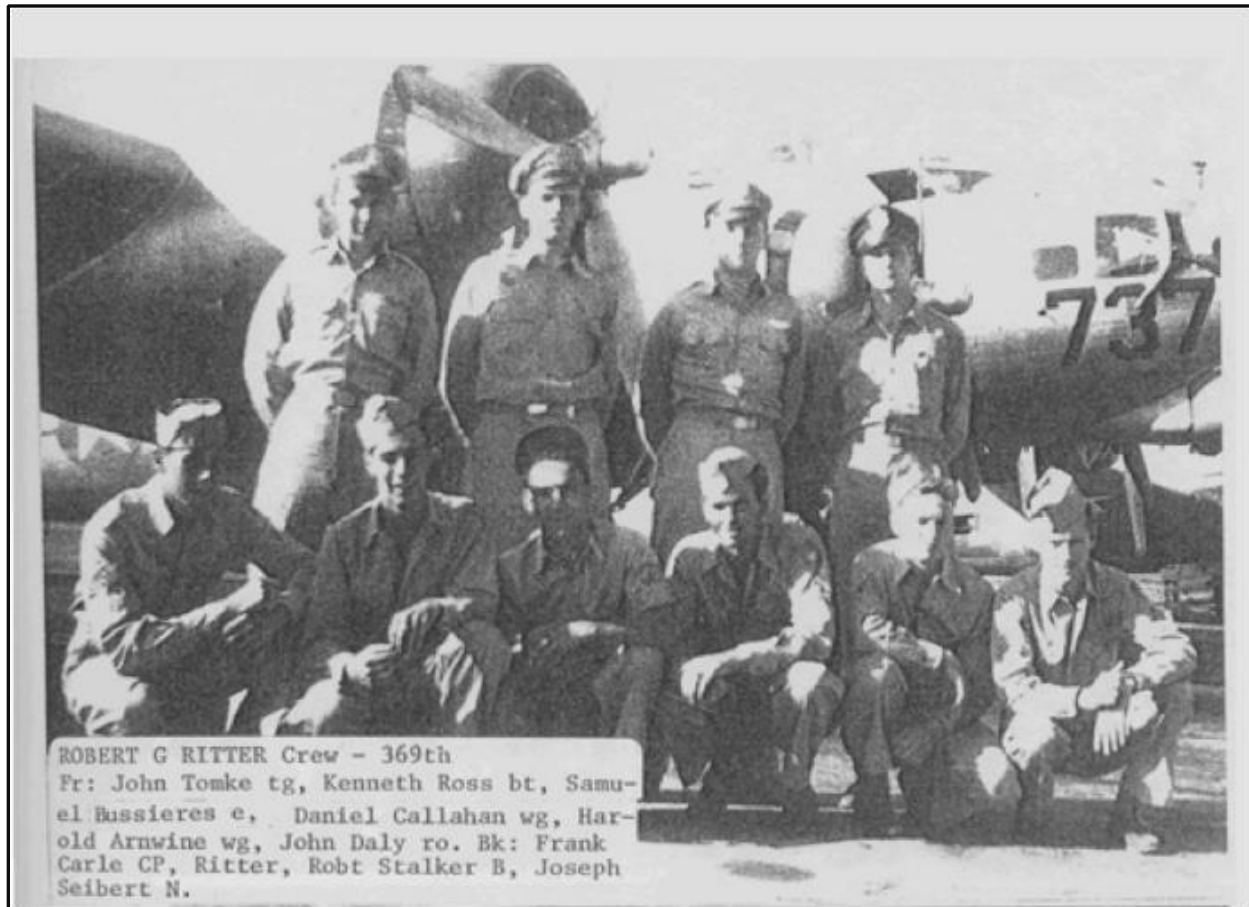


Figure 3 Squadron 369, Robert Ritter crew (Lt. Robert Stalker is standing, 2<sup>nd</sup> from the right)

boys of the crew and they were all safe except the co-pilot. You can imagine how we felt, almost as if we had heard from Bob himself. From day to day we waited for word from the Government but weeks passed and our hopes were shattered again.

In desperation I wrote to Mrs. Ritter asking if she would have her husband call me on the telephone as soon as he arrived home, as I knew then we would have the true story. He called me one afternoon, I believe it was around June 10<sup>th</sup>, and told me the sad story.

The plane received a direct hit, the nose and two motors were shot off and I believe Bob and Joe Seibert were shot right out of the plane. After Lt. Ritter bailed out and was captured he said the Germans brought him to a spot where two bodies were and asked him to identify them. He identified Lt. Seibert by his tags but the other body had no tags and he was unable to say whether it was Bob or the co-pilot. However, they showed him a wallet containing the co-pilot's picture and when asked to identify him he gave no answer and the Germans said it didn't matter as he was dead anyway. What he cannot swear to is whether the second body was Bob or the co-pilot, he said he didn't see a third body but he later wrote my husband that he was pretty sure it was Bob's because it was close to Lt. Seibert's body. He reported this story to the War Dept. and we believe the official telegram we received was based on this report.

Lt. Ritter is to report to Atlantic City Aug. 13<sup>th</sup> which is tomorrow and he has promised to call on us. We hope by seeing him we can get a better idea of what did happen. Not that it can help matters any and in a way I rather dread meeting him as I know how awful I will feel.

Just think, Bob has been dead almost ten months, as time goes on we miss him more and more. Sometimes I wonder how we can get along without him. Don was called into the Navy in April and we have been very lonesome and heartsick all these months.

We received your picture and think it is very lovely and I am so happy to have it. I am having some made of Bob and will send you one when I receive them. Please let me hear from you soon again.

Sincerely

Josephine E. Stalker



Figure 4 Lt. Robert A. Stalker

Tuesday, Aug. 28, 1945

Dear Muriel,

I finally got Bob's pictures and am enclosing one. I hope you like it.

You may be interested to know that Lt. Ritter called on us last week. He had just come from Port Din where he received his discharge. There are the things that hurt so much when I think that Bob, too, might have been out if he had been lucky enough to survive that mission.

The past few weeks have been very hard for us and now so many of the boys around here are coming home already. Something has gone out of me and I shall never be the same again. I have tried to be interested in things but it all seems so futile.

Just what was your opinion of Lt. Ritter? It seemed very strange to me when he was here he never once said he was sorry about Bob. In fact only one of the crew has written to extend his sympathy. For them the war is over but for us it will never be over. Do I sound bitter? Write soon.

Sincerely

Josephine E. Stalker

Thursday, Oct. 25, 1945

Dear Muriel,

I have been wanting to write to you for several weeks and today when your second letter arrived I felt so ashamed that I decided I must write immediately.

I do enjoy hearing from you so much and when I received your long letter of September 15<sup>th</sup> I couldn't help but feel that you must be a very sensible young girl, you say you only knew Bob five weeks yet you seem to have understood him so well.

Several weeks ago we received Bob's clothes and other effects from overseas. They came in a very large carton and I was alone in the house one afternoon when they arrived. The first thing I took out was a shoe, it had some soil on the sole just as if he had only worn it the day before. I can't tell you how my heart ached at the sight of that shoe and yet it made me feel very close to Bob just to handle his clothes.

I waited until my husband came home and that evening we unpacked the case. You would wonder how the government could ever keep those things straight. I'm sure there wasn't a thing that didn't come back. When we had finished we just felt that this surely was the end. Even tho my heart ached so, all his things had to be sorted and put away. I shall always keep his uniform, and his underwear and pajamas were all put away in his chest after I had washed and ironed them. I have kept his room just the same as the day he went away and now it is like a sanctuary to me. My friends think I should put his clothes away where I won't see them but I don't feel that way. I like to go into his room and see his things and that way I feel that he is still very close to us.

Now I do hope I haven't upset you by telling you all this but somehow I feel I can tell you these things because of the way you felt about Bob. I don't talk about him much even to my best friends because I realize while they have all been very sympathetic and understanding they don't want you to talk about these things forever. People soon forget and they gush about boys who are coming home until I feel sometimes I could scream.

Many homes are displaying flags and "Welcome Home" signs and every time I see one I feel so badly and yet I would probably do the same thing myself for Bob's homecoming.

Donald is at college in Nashville, Tenn. He is still in the Navy but in the N.R.O.T.C. which is a college training program and a wonderful opportunity for him. When he finishes he will have a B.S. degree, that is if his marks are good. Of course I would rather have him at home or in a college nearer to our home but still he will get more time off than if he was still in the regular Navy. He is in with the civilian students and will get the vacations same as they do.

He was home about a month ago before starting college and when I showed him your picture he said "She's cute, isn't she?" He's so different from Bob, yet there's not a thing wrong with him. Bob was so sensible and dependable and Don is just care-free, never sticks to a job very long (the ones he's had during vacation) and likes changes even with girls. He gets a terrible crush for a while and then he turns to someone else. He's still young and he'll get over that as he grows older, I wouldn't want him any different.

Sorry I've run out of paper and will have to finish on this scrap.



Conditions here are about the same as in England, I presume. Strikes all over the country, you would think they'd be so glad the war is over but the world is full of selfish people whom the war probably hasn't even effected [sic].

I am sending some receipts we received with Bob's effects. We are most interested in the one for his trench coat and wondered if you would be so kind as to inquire if they still have it and what the charges are. We would send you the money so you could send the coat to us.

Now I must close as I am running out of scrap too.

Sincerely

Josephine E. Stalker

January 15, 1946

Dear Muriel,

This is going to be quite a lengthy letter as I have two of yours to answer, so I hope you won't mind if I type it as it will go much quicker and I can get so much more on a page than by handwriting.



Figure 5 Bob's A-2 jacket he traded shortly before his last mission

Please forgive any mistakes as I am a little out of practice, this happens to me [sic] my husband's office typewriter.

First I want to thank you for the lovely hanky you sent me, the lace on it is beautiful. I do so love such pretty ones to wear in the pocket of a sport dress, it was very sweet of you to send it to me.

I am so sorry you went to all that trouble about those laundry tickets. I shouldn't have sent them to you, I'm afraid you wore yourself out trying to check up on them. No doubt Lt. Carle did pick up the coat but I wouldn't think of writing him about it now. To tell you the truth I don't know what I would do with it if I did have it. I just thought if it was still in the Bedford Dye works unclaimed we might get it. As for the underwear I'm glad to hear they gave those things to charity. We have had several drives for clothing to be sent to Europe and I have given a lot of Bob's clothing in these collections.

The Christmas holidays passed very quickly it seemed but somehow I was glad when they were over. Don was home for two weeks and left to go back on New Year's Day. He is very anxious to get out of the service and come home for good. As far as we know now the program he is in will close in June but he may not get out of the service as he enlisted for two years. However, he will have his first year of college finished and then if he has to stay in the Navy a few more months he can go on with his education after he is discharged.

We had a family dinner at our home on Christmas day. We usually spend Christmas at my mother's but she is not very well right now so I decided to have my sisters and their families here. I was very busy preparing things for days before the holiday and while it was a lot of work and I was quite exhausted when it was all over I really think it was the best thing for me as I didn't have so much time to think. Of course, Christmas will never be the same for me again without Bob. He loved the family dinners and parties we used to have and sometimes I feel that I shouldn't do things as we did before but my sister tells me that Bob would want us to go on just the same and we should look on these family gatherings as a memorial to him.

I'm glad to hear you had such a lovely time being home for Christmas. And those cakes and buns you wrote about just make my mouth water, you must be very artistic or should I say domesticated dressing them up so prettily with holly and berries. Those are the kind of things Bob loved, fancy cakes with rich icings. I never bake a cake or a pie these days that I don't think how much I would give if he were only here to enjoy it. Fifteen months today, and I still feel that some day he will walk in the door.

Now that you write that you haven't been feeling so well I am more sorry than ever that I bothered you with those old tickets, you shouldn't have been asked to do all that investigating as it was all so unnecessary. Please take good care of yourself and do get as much rest as you possibly can.

The clippings you sent were very interesting. Bob's great-grandparents were born in Scotland and it could be that this Captain mentioned may be from the same "clan". I should like very much to come to England some day and visit St. Paul's Cathedral after the chapel is erected. If it only didn't seem so far away. Sometimes I feel if I could only go to Germany I would go around for days and look for Bob's grave. We have been told that the Germans did bury some of our dead and that they will be removed from Germany to American cemeteries in France and England but that will probably take a long time.

I meant this letter to be cheerful and now I'm afraid I've done just the opposite.

I hoped you would receive the compact by Christmas but guess I was too late getting it off to you. However, I'm glad it arrived safely and that you liked it. Write soon again, your letters are most interesting and don't ever think I am bored, I like hearing about your family.

Sincerely,

Josephine E. Stalker

Sunday, Apr. 7, 1946

Dear Muriel,

First of all I want to tell you how much I appreciate your letters, they really do something for me and you are ever so thoughtful in trying to obtain some information about Bob to send me. For instance, having your girl friend try to find out something when she arrives in Germany. Most girls just wouldn't be bothered they'd say the boy is gone and that would just be the end.

It seems a coincidence that this friend should be going to Germany just about this time because only last week we received a letter from the government telling us that some captured German records revealed that Bob had been buried in the Cemetery of Geyen in the vicinity of Cologne. I hope you can get in touch with your friend and tell her this and it would be such a help if she could get there and tell us something of Bob's grave. Of course if it is at all possible we would like to have him removed from there when the government gets to those things. I believe I read in the paper some time ago that all our boys who were buried in Germany would be moved to American cemeteries either in France or England. In fact I think I would like to have him brought home, I know some people did that after the last war. Some folks advise against it but I think I would like him buried in a family plat where we will all be together some day. However, we have time to decide about that later on.

Several weeks ago I had a letter from one of the gunners on Bob's plane, Kenneth Ross, did you know him? This is the first I have heard from him since he returned to this country last summer and he wrote that he would like to come see me some Sunday. My husband didn't think I should have him as it would only upset me but I thought perhaps he had something he wanted to tell me so I invited him out last Sunday. He came and brought his girl friend with him, he is only twenty and is a very nice boy but he had nothing more to tell us then [sic] we already knew. It only seemed to open the wounds and also to leave some doubts in our minds as to whether the pilot was all that he should have been. This boy claims he was the last to leave the plane and the fact that Lt. Ritter didn't seem to know that the front of the plane was shot off may indicate that he lost his head. Of one thing I am pretty sure, that is that he couldn't have helped Bob as this boy said he heard an explosion in the front of the plane and I feel pretty sure that this being the case Bob must have been killed instantly.

He also told us that Bob wore a name plate on his flying jacket and he thinks that if Lt. Ritter wanted to he could have identified him. Perhaps he did but didn't want to tell us. You never know how these boys feel I guess in most cases they just don't know what to tell the parents. Another thing he told us was that Mrs. Ritter had written his mother that he had received the D.F.C. and we were wondering what he received it for. It seems to me the co-pilot who gave his life would be more worthy of that since I heard that the engineer in the plane a boy named Bussieres passed out and the co-pilot threw him out of the plane saving his life and then being killed himself.

I don't happen to know the boy you mentioned from East Orange, friend of the new girl in your office, but I know very well the street where he lives, it is not far from us at all.

I can't say that Van Johnson reminds me of Bob that is for looks, features, etc. but in general appearances I guess he does since ever [sic] picture I have seen him in of late he is a flyer. I didn't care to see "30 Seconds over Tokyo" but I did cry thru several other pictures he appeared in. One was "Thrill of a Romance" a beautiful picture in Technicolor and I can't think of the name of the other, Lana Turner played with him. In both these pictures he reminded me so much of Bob, in fact everything I see or do these days Bob is always in my thoughts. These beautiful spring days are filled with memories of him.

We hope to be able to take a trip down south next week to visit Don for the Easter holiday, he only has three days off and would be unable to get home and back in that time as it is about 900 miles from here. I hope my husband can take the time from his business to go as I am very anxious to see Don. I think the trip would do us both some good as neither of us have been feeling too well lately.

Please extend my very best wishes to your parents on their Silver Wedding Anniversary. It was so nice for them that they were able to have you all with them to celebrate. We will be married twenty-three years on April 18<sup>th</sup>.

The next time you write let me know what size hose you wear and perhaps I will be able to send you a pair of nylons. I don't suppose you can get them over there, can you? I have six pairs, I stood in line twice and got a pair each time and the other four were sent to me from stores where I have charge accounts. There have been some terribly long lines for them but I didn't go for those things, I have never been a hoarder during the war and am not going to start now. I feel wealthy with six pairs of hose they will last a long time they tell me some folks have as many as thirty pairs.

I know you won't be able to compliment me on this typewritten letter, it's just awful the mistakes and the spacing and everything. This is my nephew's typewriter, it's different than any I have used before and another thing this is not the proper paper to use for a typewritten letter so please overlook and excuse it's [sic] terrible appearance.

I hope you are feeling much better now that the winter is over, has the heart condition you mentioned in your previous letter cleared up, I hope so. Please write soon again.

Fondly,

Josephine Stalker



Figure 6 Mrs. Josephine Stalker, 1948

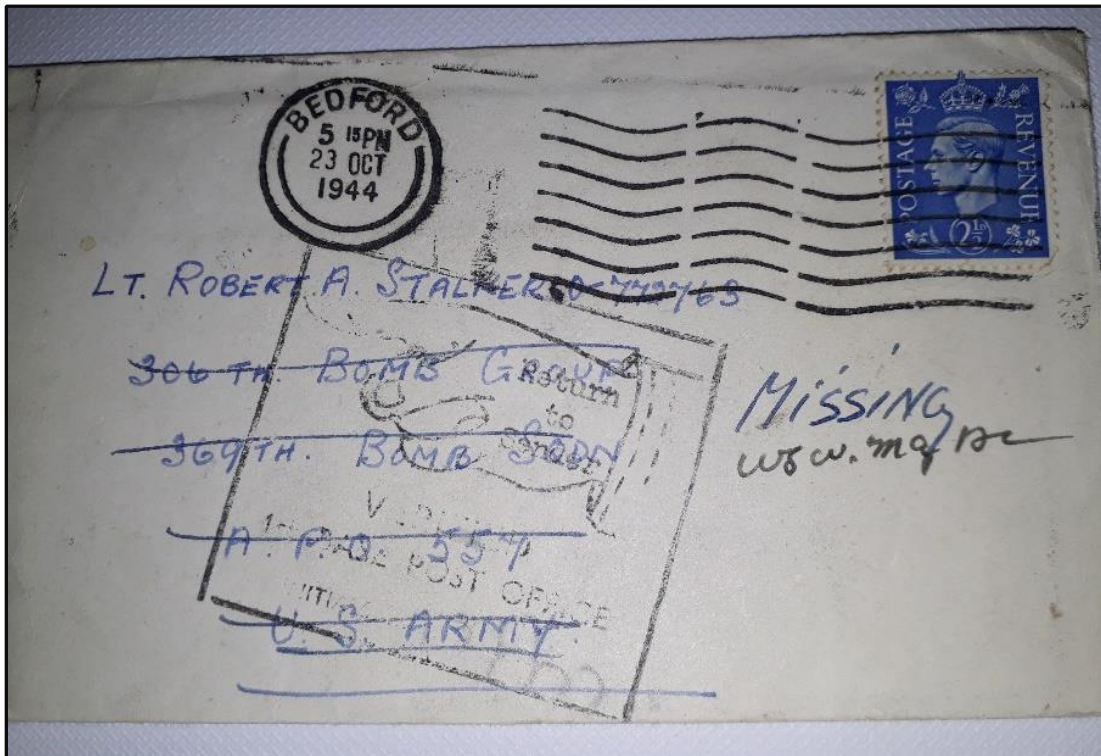


Figure 7 Muriel's letter to Robert, postmarked 23 October 1944. It has never been opened.

Robert Allan Stalker

d. 15 Oct. 1944

buried Plot D, Row 2, Grave 13; Ardennes American Cemetery – Neupré, Belgium  
received the Purple Heart and the Air Medal with Oak Leaf Cluster

Muriel Hope Wild, née Paul

b. 29 Dec. 1922

Josephine E. Stalker

b. 1899, d. Mar. 1979

buried Gate of Heaven cemetery, East Hanover, NJ

**For more info:**

▪ I gratefully acknowledge the help of the 306<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group Historical Association. Please consider making a donation so their volunteers can continue their valuable work keeping the memories of military personnel alive.:

<http://www.306bg.us/>

▪ This is the cemetery where Robert is buried:

<https://www.abmc.gov/node/551210>

▪ American Air Museum in Britain:

<http://www.americanairmuseum.com/person/186300>

▪ Combat Diary of the 369<sup>th</sup> Squadron:

<http://306bg.us/archives/369combatdiary-text.pdf>

▪ Thread on The Fedora Lounge about Robert's A-2 jacket\*:

<https://www.thefedoralounge.com/threads/original-painted-a2.36618/>

*\*I tried contacting the owner of the jacket, but he never wrote back to me.*

▪ Russell A. Strong's First Over Germany (1982, revised 1990) is a detailed account of the 306<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group and it mentions Bob. I'd love to have a copy of this book.

