

1945 December 17-23

The T-A-G Trio

Once upon a time, there were three All-American boys who grew up in the same neighborhood in a small Midwestern city. They developed a close friendship that lasted for the rest of their lives. Although this sounds like the beginning of a familiar fairy tale, it is all true, and it happened here.

Robert Grosskopf was the first to come into this world. Robert Charles Grosskopf was born in La Crosse on November 29, 1922.¹ His parents were Arthur and Lulu Grosskopf, and his father managed a restaurant. He had a brother, Donald, who was five years older.²

Less than a month later, Robert Carl Abegglen was born in La Crosse on December 23, 1922.³ His parents were Gottfried and Lenora M. Abegglen, and his paternal grandparents were born in Switzerland. Gottfried Abegglen was a foundry foreman.⁴

The two Bobs became "inseparable pals" in the First Lutheran grade school. They were confirmed together in the same church. Their likes and dislikes were almost the same, and they had the same circle of friends.⁵

They continued to be close friends at La Crosse Central High School, and then they enlarged their circle of friendship to include a young man from rival La Crosse Aquinas High School, George Thiele.⁶

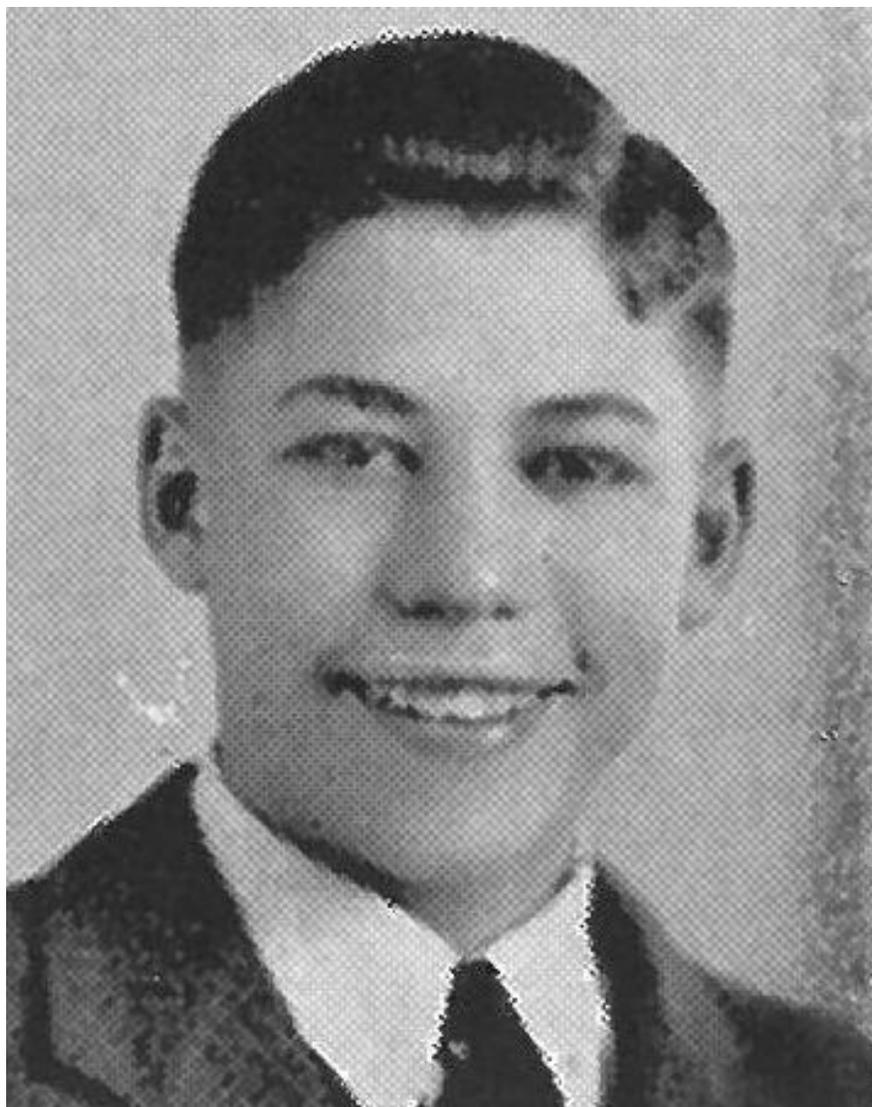
George Joseph Thiele was born in Wabasha, Minnesota, on January 6, 1923.⁷ His parents were George L. and Sadie Thiele, and his paternal grandparents were born in Germany. George L. Thiele was a laundry truck driver. The family had a younger boy named Bernard.⁸ Thiele played offensive end for the Aquinas football team.⁹

The three boys lived in close proximity to each other: Abegglen at 1245 S. 11th Street, Grosskopf at 1307 S. 10th Street, and Thiele at 1420 S. 10th Street.¹⁰ Alberta Gund, who lived in the same neighborhood, remembers them as a group of pals and "river rats" who hung out at Green Island.¹¹

Being close to the Mississippi River may have instilled a little bit of the spirit of Huck Finn in them. The three pooled their money and bought a secondhand canoe. They scraped it clean and repainted it. When it came time to christen it, they chose the name T-A-G---the first letters of each of their last names---and stenciled that near the prow. Unlike Huck Finn, however, most of the T-A-G canoe trips were north, rather than south on the river, to Trempealeau, where the boys enjoyed camping.¹²

Since the three had been born within two months of one another, they were all the same age and graduated from high school at the same time. Abegglen and Grosskopf were part of the La Crosse Central Class of 1940, and Thiele was in the Aquinas High School Class of 1940.¹³

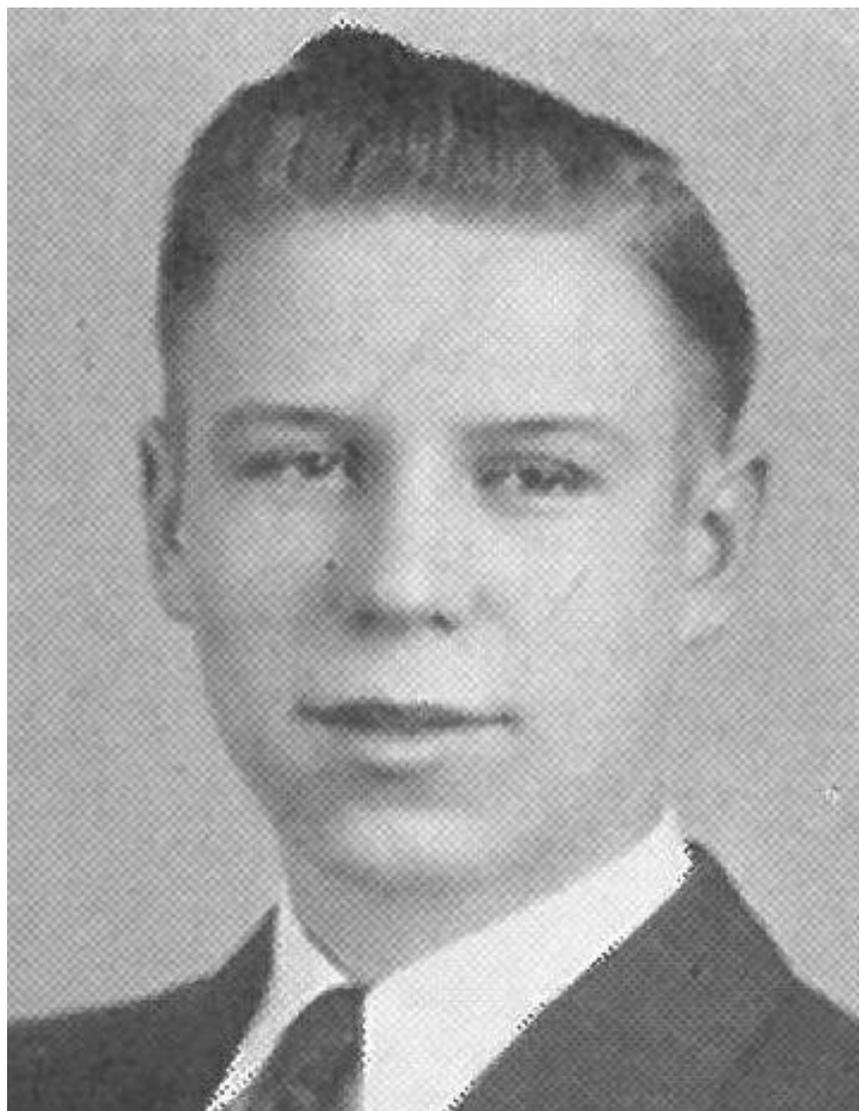
The three had their own version of a graduation party with a canoe/camping trip to [Perrot State Park](#) at Trempealeau.¹⁴



Robert Grosskopf

GROSSKOPF, ROBERT *B-Manual Arts*
 "Bob," a future advertising manager, can't tolerate people who continually crunch popcorn at the movies. He makes much of Mickey Mouse in the movies, Major Bowes on the air, health as a subject, and swimming as a sport.

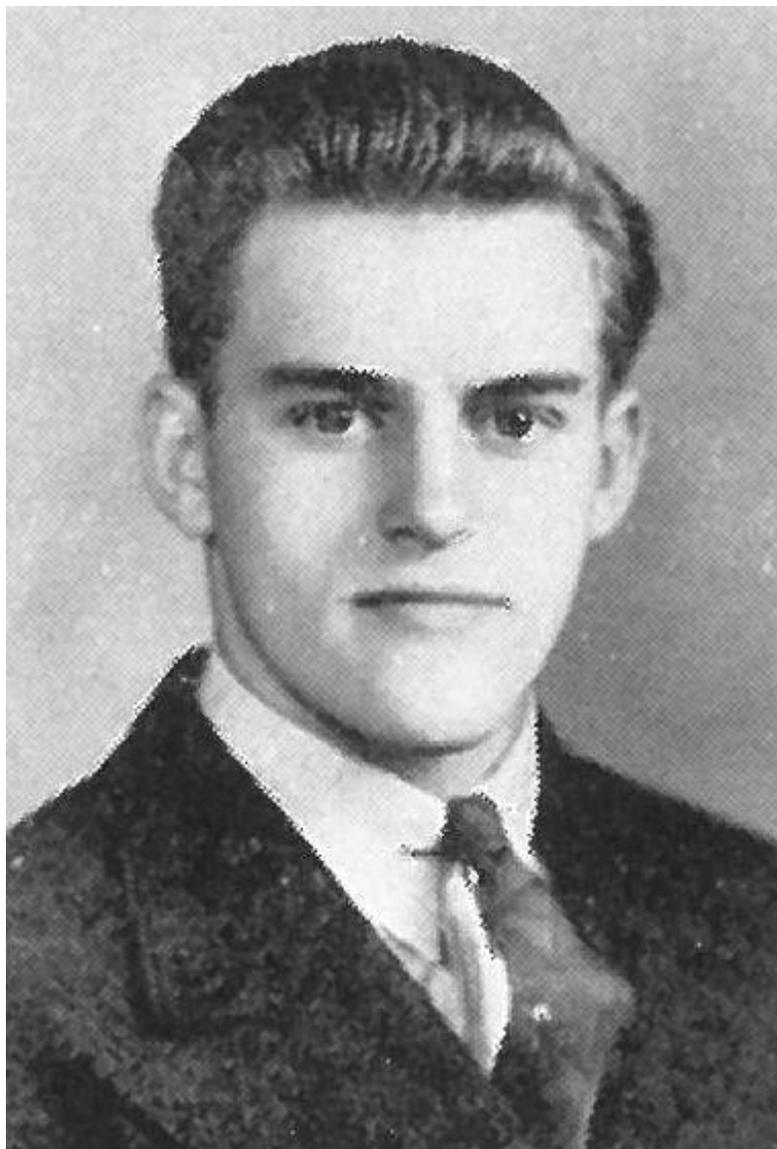
(Booster, La Crosse Central High School yearbook, 1940, page 35)¹⁵



Robert Abegglen

ABEGGLEN, ROBERT.....*B-Manual Arts*
 "Bob" objects to bragging but not to a big dish of ice cream after a swim. Errol Flynn, making airplane models, Jack Benny, Zane Grey, machine shop, woodworking, and "Life," vie for his affections. He has hopes of becoming an aviator.

(*Booster*, La Crosse Central High School yearbook, 1940, page 32)



George Thiele

THIELE, GEORGE *Holy Trinity*
a football hero . . . interested in
all kinds of sports . . . plays the
violin with great ability . . . Dr.
Barker impressed him . . . home-
room secretary of 315.

(La Crosse Aquinas High School yearbook, 1940, page 24)

After high school graduation, all three of them entered the workforce. Grosskopf worked for Western Union at 231 Main Street in La Crosse.¹⁶ He was a messenger boy.¹⁷ Abegglen worked for the *La Crosse Tribune*.¹⁸ His job there was in the mailing room.¹⁹ Later he worked for the Swift Company.²⁰ Thiele worked at Gen's Flower Shop at 1109 Market Street in La Crosse.²¹

The three continued to hang out together in their free time. There were more canoe/camping trips to Trempealeau with T-A-G.²² Bob Grosskopf took Ruth Beranek to the Aquinas High School prom in May 1942, and Bob Abegglen's date was Lorraine Beranek.²³

Something else came along that caught their interest in the early 1940s. Abegglen expressed an interest in aviation in high school, and the La Crosse Elks Club provided the opportunity. With war already raging in Europe and Asia, the national Elks organization created "Keep 'Em Flying" schools for young men between the ages of 20 and 27 who were not in college. This was a path to qualify for the Army Air Corps aviation cadet program without the normal requirement of two years of college. The 12-weeks of classroom instruction prepared candidates for the Army aviation entrance exam. At the organizational meeting in La Crosse in September 1941, the La Crosse school district, as well as those in Sparta and Viroqua, offered use of their facilities. Mayor J. J. Verchota and John Coleman, director of the Vocational and Adult school, also pledged their support. By completing the Elks program, young men were then eligible to take the aviation cadet entrance examination given four times a year at [Chanute Field, Illinois](#).²⁴ The first seventeen men to complete the school left in March 1942 to take the qualifying test.²⁵



At least four of these men would later die in the war.²⁶

(*La Crosse Tribune*, 1942 March 26, page 13)

The first "La Crosse Elks Squadron" did not include Abegglen, Grosskopf, or Thiele. Bob Grosskopf went through the program later,²⁷ as did Bob Abegglen. This was one activity that George Thiele was not able to experience with his friends because he had an eye condition that disqualified him from flying.²⁸ Grosskopf and Abegglen finished the course and passed the entrance examination for the Army aviation cadet program.

The T-A-G canoe was stored in the attic at Abegglen's home when the three friends left to serve their country in the early months of 1943.²⁹

Grosskopf and Thiele filled out their draft cards on the same day, June 30, 1942, in the same room of the same building.³⁰

Abegglen was one of nineteen young men honored at the end of August 1942, for having enlisted in the Army or Navy reserve, before the La Crosse Blackhawks baseball game with Wisconsin Rapids at Copeland Park. The American Legion entertained them before and after the baseball game.³¹

Grosskopf was the first to actually report for duty. He was with a group of La Crosse aviation cadets who reported to Chicago on January 5, 1943, for induction.³²



—Tribune Photo
La Crosse's Latest Addition to the U. S. army air corps is, left to right, back row, Warren J. Bosshard, Allen Embury, John W. Hall, Gerald M. Johnson, Alfred J. Herlitzka and Robert C. Grosskopf; front row, Gerald G. Moriarity, Lyle A. Cooper, Her-

bert B. Olson, William C. Mayo, Lloyd A. Gilbertson and Curt H. Kohnert. With the exception of Bosshard, who reports at Kelly Field, San Antonio, Tex., Jan. 10, the cadets will report in Chicago tomorrow afternoon, and then at an air force classification center at Nashville, Tenn., Wednesday.

Robert Grosskopf is in the top row, far right.

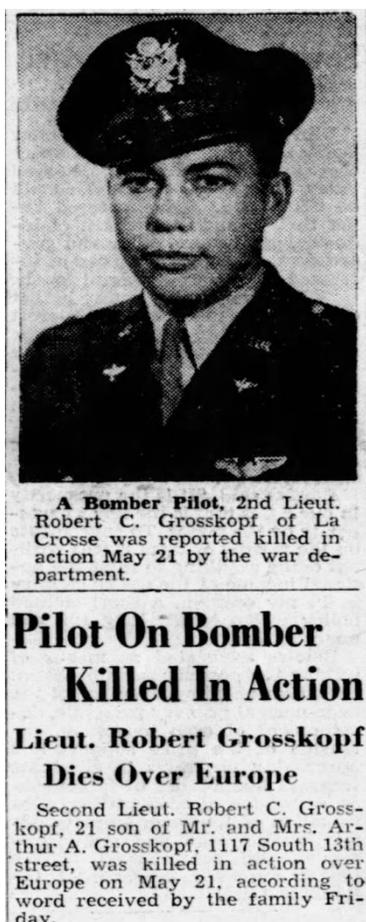
(*La Crosse Tribune*, 1943 January 4, page 2)

Robert Abegglen was called up by the Army Air Force on February 14, 1943. His initial training was at Uvalde, Texas.³³

George Thiele was inducted into the Army on February 18, 1943. His group of draftees took the Milwaukee Road train to Camp Grant at Rockford, Illinois, for processing.³⁴

Later that year, Robert Grosskopf graduated from pilot training at [Moody Field](#) in Georgia. Along with his silver pilot's wings, he was commissioned as a 2nd Lieutenant in the Army Air Force.³⁵ Grosskopf had additional training at Nashville, Tennessee; Montgomery, Alabama; Shreveport, Louisiana; and [Turner Field](#), Georgia. He returned to La Crosse on leave in November 1943, and after that, he was stationed at Barksdale, Louisiana. Grosskopf shipped overseas to England in March 1944 to the [8th Air Force](#).³⁶ He was assigned to the [322nd Bomber Group, 451st Bomber Squadron \(Medium\)](#) to fly a [B-26 Marauder bomber](#).³⁷

Grosskopf arrived during the massive air assaults against France to soften up German defenses before the D-Day Normandy landings on June 6, 1944. On May 21, 1944, Grosskopf flew his bomber in what was called the greatest mass attack of the war as 6,000 American and British bombers and fighters pounded a 150-mile-wide swath of France and Belgium. These aircraft dropped at least 8,000 tons of bombs on rail junctions, airfields, and other installations in a continuous air raid that lasted for 24 hours. Almost 1,250 American heavy bombers and fighters took part in this mission. American losses were two heavy bombers, three medium bombers, two light bombers, five fighters, and one fighter-bomber.³⁸ One of those three medium bombers lost was Grosskopf's.



(La Crosse Tribune, 1944 June 2, page 1)

The twenty-one-year-old had been in combat for just over two months. Lt. Robert Grosskopf was buried under a white marble cross at the [U.S. Military Cemetery at Cambridge, England](#).³⁹ Since he has a grave in Cambridge, that might mean his plane crashed on its way back from this mission, or it crash-landed at its airfield. Or his plane crashed with the certainty of no survivors, and a cross was erected for him without a body to put in the grave. We do not know the details. He was survived by his parents and one brother.⁴⁰

The first of the trio was gone.

Army Private George Thiele trained at [Camp McCain, Mississippi](#).⁴¹ He became a member of Company E, [345th Infantry Regiment](#), at [Fort Jackson, South Carolina](#), in February 1944.⁴² Thiele was home on leave in early February and returned to Fort Jackson by February 18.⁴³



(La Crosse Tribune, 1948 December 11, page 1)

S.Sgt. Thiele shipped overseas in October 1944.⁴⁴ His [87th Infantry Division](#) arrived in Scotland on October 22, 1944. They spent the rest of October and all of November training in England. The division landed in France, December 1-3, and went into combat at [Metz](#) on December 10. The 87th then captured Rimling, Obergailbach, and Guiderkirch. It was advancing into Germany when the Germans launched the Ardennes Offensive, better known as the Battle of the Bulge, on December 16, 1945.⁴⁵

In January 1945, Thiele's parents were informed that he had been missing in action since December 18, 1944.⁴⁶ The news they may have suspected and dreaded was confirmed in early April.

3 Servicemen Die In Action



THIELE

HANEY

Three La Crosse men in the army and navy have been reported killed in action by the war and navy departments in telegrams and letters to their parents.

They are Lieut. Francis Albert Riley, assigned to the USS Albacore, submarine reported overdue and presumed to have been lost in action in the Pacific; S. Sgt. George J. Thiele, with the 87th Division of the 3rd army in Europe; and Clyde J. Haney, with the 17th Airborne Division in the European theater.

(*La Crosse Tribune*, 1945 April 7, page 1)

Thiele had been in combat for just eight days when he was killed. Thiele, 21 years old, was survived by his parents and one brother.

Thiele was buried in a military cemetery in Europe. In November 1948, he was one of 20 World War II dead from this area whose bodies were returned to the United States for reburial.⁴⁷ The Blaschke Funeral Home handled the arrangements for a funeral at Holy Trinity Catholic Church on December 13, 1948. Burial was in the Catholic Cemetery.⁴⁸

The trio was now down to just one.

Aviation Cadet Robert Abegglen started advanced aviation training in San Antonio, Texas, at the end of May 1943.⁴⁹ He received his pilot's wings and commission as a second lieutenant at San Antonio.⁵⁰ By September 1943, he had transferred to bombardier school at Big Springs, Texas.⁵¹ Abegglen was a bombardier instructor at Big Springs for a year. Next, he was stationed at Columbia, South Carolina. After a leave home during Easter (April 1, 1945), Abegglen was transferred to Lake Charles, Louisiana.⁵²

Less than two months later, the last of the T-A-G trio was gone.

Crash Fatal to Three
 By United Press
LAKE CHARLES, La., May 24
 —Three airmen were killed and a fourth critically injured when a light bomber from the Lake Charles Army Airfield crashed 20 miles south of here.

(*The Knoxville News Sentinel*, Knoxville, Tennessee, 1945 May 24, page 2)

Abegglen Dies In Plane Crash

**Mandel Is Reported
Freed In Germany**



ABEGGLEN

MANDEL

Second Lieut. Robert C. Abegglen, 22, died of injuries received in an aircraft accident at Lake Charles, La., Wednesday, according to word sent his parents, Mr. and Mrs. Gottfried Abegglen, 1249 South 11th street, by air force headquarters at Lake Charles.

No details were given but Lieut. Abegglen's body is expected Saturday morning. Funeral arrangements are incomplete.

(*La Crosse Tribune*, 1945 May 24, page 1)

Funeral services were on May 28, 1945, at the Hellwig-Morris Funeral Home and the First Lutheran Church. Burial was in Oak Grove Cemetery. The Roy L. Vingers Post 52 of the American Legion conducted the military rites. Robert Abegglen, 22, was survived by his parents, two brothers, and three sisters.⁵³

Military service and death in World War II had separated the inseparable friends.

Alberta Gund of La Crosse remembers Thiele, Abegglen, and Grosskopf as "wonderful" and "exceptional" young men.⁵⁴

If this story were made into a movie, a fitting final frame would be a shot of the T-A-G canoe sitting forlornly in an attic waiting for its owners to return from the war.

Sacrificing young lives was the price exacted in winning the war. There is only one consolation---as high as that price was, losing would have been even more costly.

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Revised: 2021 January 5

Sources & Notes:

¹ The National Archives in St. Louis, Missouri; *Draft Registration Cards for Wisconsin, 10/16/1940-03/31/1947*; Record Group: *Records of the Selective Service System, 147*; Box: 244; image, *Ancestry.com* (<http://www.ancestry.com>: accessed 2020 December 22).

² 1930 U.S. census, La Crosse County, Wisconsin, population schedule, La Crosse, p. 6A, dwelling 109, family 134, Arthur and Lulu Grosskopf; image, *Ancestry.com* (<http://www.ancestry.com> : accessed 2020 December 22); citing NARA microfilm publication T626, roll 2667. Alberta Gund of La Crosse, who lived in the neighborhood, says Grosskopf owned a tavern at 8th and Farnam streets. (Alberta Gund, telephone conversation with the author, 2020 February 12).

³ The National Archives in St. Louis, Missouri; *Draft Registration Cards for Wisconsin, 10/16/1940-03/31/1947*; Record Group: *Records of the Selective Service System, 147*; Box: 1; image, *Ancestry.com* (<http://www.ancestry.com>: accessed 2020 December 22).

⁴ 1930 U.S. census, La Crosse County, Wisconsin, population schedule, La Crosse, p. 4B, dwelling 76, family 96, Gottfried and Lenora M. Abegglen; image, *Ancestry.com* (<http://www.ancestry.com> : accessed 2020 December 22); citing NARA microfilm publication T626, roll 2667. At the time of his death in 1945, Abegglen was survived by two brothers and three sisters. ("Obituary-Lieut. Robert Abegglen," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1945 May 26, page 6.)

⁵ "Three Youths Jointly Owning Boat Pay Supreme Sacrifice," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1945 June 3, page 3.

⁶ *La Crosse Tribune*, 1945 June 3.

⁷ The National Archives in St. Louis, Missouri; *Draft Registration Cards for Wisconsin, 10/16/1940-03/31/1947*; Record Group: *Records of the Selective Service System, 147*; Box: 727; image, *Ancestry.com* (<http://www.ancestry.com>: accessed 2020 December 22).

⁸ 1930 U.S. census, La Crosse County, Wisconsin, population schedule, La Crosse, p. 10A, dwelling 176, family 226, George L. and Sadie Thiele; image, *Ancestry.com* (<http://www.ancestry.com> : accessed 2020 December 22); citing NARA microfilm publication T626, roll 2667.

⁹ "Fifteen Gridders Complete Carrers (sic) For Blue, Gold," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1939 November 6, page 7.

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- ¹⁰ "Maple Grove Entertained By Tomah Club," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1940 July 18, page 4. This column of local snippets includes mention of the three camping at Perrot park.
- ¹¹ Alberta Gund, La Crosse, Wisconsin, telephone conversation with the author, 2020 February 12. Mrs. Gund first told the author the story of these three young men.
- ¹² *La Crosse Tribune*, 1945 June 3.
- ¹³ "Three Local High Schools Hold Baccalaureate Services Sunday," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1940 June 2, page 2.
- ¹⁴ *La Crosse Tribune*, 1940 July 18.
- ¹⁵ [Major Bowes](#) was a radio personality in the 1930s.
- ¹⁶ *Draft Registration Cards for Wisconsin*.
- ¹⁷ "Four Air Corps Cadets, Two Glider Pilot Trainees Pass Tests Of Army," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1942 June 19, page 9.
- ¹⁸ *Draft Registration Cards for Wisconsin*.
- ¹⁹ "Abegglen Dies In Plane Crash," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1945 May 24, page 1.
- ²⁰ "Obituary-Lieut. Robert Abegglen," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1945 May 26, page 6.
- ²¹ *Draft Registration Cards for Wisconsin*.
- ²² "Takes Work In Norfolk Navy Yards," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1941 July 31, page 8. A local news item notes that Grosskopf and Thiele are camping at Trempealeau.
- ²³ "71 Couples Attend Aquinas Junior Prom," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1942 May 18, page 4. Ruth and Lorraine Beranek were not sisters, but the author has been unable to determine their relationship. There were a lot of Beranek family members in La Crosse.
- ²⁴ "La Crosse Elks Sponsor Flying Cadet Training," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1941 September 5, page 1.
- ²⁵ "Pair Carries Farewell A Bit Too Far; Has To Walk Mile," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1942 March 26, page 13.
- ²⁶ This first group of Elks flying school graduates included Robert K. Allen of La Crosse, who went on to become a P-51 Mustang fighter pilot in England. He attained the rank of captain and was a flight leader, and he shot down several German aircraft. He earned the Distinguished Flying Cross and the Air Medal. ("Mustang Pilot Now Captain," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1945 April 15, page 3.) Carl P. Bock of La Crosse was killed in March 1943 when his fighter plane crashed into Long Island Sound near New London, Connecticut. ("Lieut. Carl Bock Victim Of Crash," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1943 March 6, page 1.) Lt. James Opitz gained notoriety, and perhaps a reprimand, for flying his B-17 bomber low over La Crosse and dropping a message for his mother, who lived at 1433 N. Park Avenue. The weighted message landed within five blocks of her house, and the woman who found it at 1039 Tyler Street called Mrs. Opitz. Mrs. Opitz was able to run outside and wave at her son's plane as it did a second flyby. Opitz was stationed at Mitchell Field, South Dakota, at the time. ("It Was A Great Day For The Opitzes," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1943 July 24, page 8.) Alberta Gund of La Crosse says she was babysitting one of her siblings that day when she heard "a terrible roar" as the B-17 bomber flew, according to her, at almost treetop level. The note dropped from the plane landed near the bicycle shop at 12th and Tyler streets. (Alberta Gund, telephone conversation with the author, 2020 November 16.) Lt. James R. Opitz was killed over Germany on December 20, 1943. 1st Lt. Louis C. Haberman, who was also in the first Elks squadron, was killed in May 1943. ("Two Aviators Reported Dead," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1944 June 26, page 1.) The bomber that Opitz piloted was shot down on its 10th mission which was over Bremen, Germany. Opitz and the tail gunner were killed, and the rest of the crew was taken prisoner. Opitz, who graduated from La Crosse Aquinas High School in 1938, was buried in the American cemetery at Margraten, Holland. In 1949, his body was returned to La Crosse for funeral services at the Holy Trinity Catholic Church and reburial in the Catholic Cemetery. ("Set Rites For Army Aviator," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1949 April 17, page 1.) Ironically, one of the promoters of the Elks club Flying Cadets program was also killed during the war. In November 1943, Raymond C. Dwyer, 48, La Crosse County Coroner and coordinator of the La Crosse civilian defense council, died in a two-vehicle traffic accident near Madison, Wisconsin. ("Raymond C. Dwyer Is Killed In Auto Crash Near Madison," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1943 November 11, page 1.)
- ²⁷ "Pilot On Bomber Killed In Action," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1944 June 2, page 1.

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- ²⁸ *La Crosse Tribune*, 1945 June 3.
- ²⁹ *La Crosse Tribune*, 1945 June 3.
- ³⁰ *Draft Registration Cards for Wisconsin*.
- ³¹ "Honor 19 Local Enlisted Youths At Event Here," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1942 September 1, page 9.
- ³² "La Crosse's Latest Addition," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1943 January 4, page 2.
- ³³ *La Crosse Tribune*, 1945 May 24.
- ³⁴ "Selective Service Boards To Send More Youths To U.S. Army Camps," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1943 February 14, page 11.
- ³⁵ "Our Men In Service," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1943 November 9, page 7.
- ³⁶ *La Crosse Tribune*, 1944 June 2.
- ³⁷ "Robert C. Grosskopf," *American Battle Monuments Commission*, accessed 2020 December 23, <https://www.abmc.gov/decedent-search/grosskopf%3Drobert>.
- ³⁸ "6,000 Allied Warplanes Blast Coastal Defenses," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1944 May 21, page 1.
- ³⁹ "Coles Return From Visit In Ireland," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1956 August 5, page 9. Mrs. Eugene Cole and her son, Richard, visited her homeland of Ireland in the summer of 1956. She brought back a photograph of Robert Grosskopf's grave to his parents, Mr. and Mrs. Arthur Grosskopf of 2011 Farnam Street, La Crosse.
- ⁴⁰ *La Crosse Tribune*, 1944 June 2.
- ⁴¹ "2 Local Men Are Missing," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1945 January 20, page 1.
- ⁴² "Our Men In Service," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1944 February 7, page 10.
- ⁴³ "Red Cross Donation," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1944 February 18, page 5.
- ⁴⁴ *La Crosse Tribune*, 1945 January 20.
- ⁴⁵ "87th Infantry Division-Golden Acorn," *US Army Divisions*, accessed 2020 December 23, <https://www.armydivs.com/87th-infantry-division>.
- ⁴⁶ *La Crosse Tribune*, 1945 January 20.
- ⁴⁷ "Return 20 La Crosse Region War Casualties For Reburial," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1948 November 19, page 3.
- ⁴⁸ "Schedule GI Rebuil (sic) Rites," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1948 December 11, page 1.
- ⁴⁹ "Our Men In Service," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1943 May 30, page 13. Harold Rau of 1216 Pine Street, La Crosse, was in the same training program in San Antonio at the same time.
- ⁵⁰ *La Crosse Tribune*, 1945 May 24.
- ⁵¹ "Our Men in Service," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1943 September 9, page 9.
- ⁵² *La Crosse Tribune*, 1945 May 24.
- ⁵³ *La Crosse Tribune*, 1945 May 26.
- ⁵⁴ Alberta Gund.