

1945 January 1-7

One Returned

Lieut. Sundet Dies In Action



(La Crosse Tribune, 1945 January 4, page 1)

Even though our calendar is based on natural phenomenon, our construct of years is largely an artificial organizer for our lives. The coming of a new year does not really give us a clean break from the past year because there is always the context, history, and unfinished business of the previous year.

At the year 1945 began, World War II on the Western Front was still dominated by the effects of the [German offensive in the Ardennes](#) that is more popularly known as the "[Battle of the Bulge](#)." This major counteroffensive in mid-December 1944 struck a thinly-defended part of the American lines in the heavily-wooded [Ardennes](#) forest. Its objectives were to drive a wedge between the British forces in the north and the American forces to their south, and an ultimate goal was to capture the key port of [Antwerp, Belgium](#). After early reversals and retreats, American forces held their ground, but the bulge in

their lines remained. They would have to spend most of January 1945 battling to retake ground lost during the battle.

The American army suffered enormous casualties during the Battle of the Bulge. It took several weeks or more for thousands of casualty notifications to reach loved ones in the United States. Such was the case for the Sundet family in La Crosse, Wisconsin.

Lt. Aubrey Sundet of La Crosse was killed in Belgium on December 18, 1944, while serving with a traffic headquarters unit in the [First Army](#).¹ Killed two days into the Ardennes offensive, Lt. Aubrey Sundet was possibly one of those rear-echelon soldiers who suddenly found themselves on the front lines as American units were overwhelmed, surrounded, and cut off during the early days of the Battle of the Bulge.

Aubrey Gerald Sundet's life began on August 13, 1913, in Wisconsin Rapids, Wisconsin.² His parents were Arthur O. Sundet, a native of Chippewa Falls, and Florence Sundet. Arthur Sundet was a freight and passenger agent for the Milwaukee Road in La Crosse from 1937 until he retired in 1955.³

Aubrey Sundet graduated from Lincoln High School in Wisconsin Rapids, Wisconsin, in 1931. In high school, he was involved in the glee club, debate club, and a member of the track and field team for two years. Sundet was also the king of the Junior Prom.⁴



Aubrey G. Sundet

(Lincoln High School, Wisconsin Rapids, Wisconsin, yearbook, 1931)

He went on to earn a Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of Wisconsin in 1936.⁵

Sundet pursued a law degree at the University of Wisconsin for two years before getting a job in the Chicago office of the Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Paul and Pacific railroad.⁶ He worked at Union Station, 576 Jackson Boulevard, in Chicago.⁷

On November 25, 1939, Aubrey Sundet married Marjorie Chare of Madison in the First Methodist Church in Madison. Chare was also a 1936 graduate of the University of Wisconsin. At the time of their

marriage, she was working as a medical technologist for several doctors in Madison. After their marriage, they made their home at 5746 Kenmore Avenue in Chicago.⁸

As with so many marriages during World War II, they were separated by the war. Aubrey Sundet was inducted into the United States Army on November 7, 1942. He completed Officer Candidate School at [Fort Benning, Georgia](#), in May 1943. Sundet then went to [Fort McClellan, Alabama](#).⁹

Sundet was sent overseas one year later, and he landed in France two days after the Normandy Invasion on June 6, 1944. As part of the [First U.S. Army](#), Sundet advanced through France, Belgium, and into Germany by the end of the year. Lt. Sundet was 31 years old when he was killed in action in Belgium. Besides his wife and parents, Sundet was survived by a sister (whose husband was a captain in the army air transport command), and a brother, Corporal Ray Sundet.¹⁰

Ray Sundet was eleven years younger than his older brother. Ray A. Sundet was born on March 4, 1924, in Wisconsin Rapids, Wisconsin.¹¹ Ray attended schools in Wisconsin Rapids until after his freshman year in high school when his family moved to La Crosse.¹² They lived at 403 S. 22nd Street.¹³



Ray Sundet

(*The Booster*, La Crosse Central High School, 1941, page 51)

At La Crosse Central High School, Sundet played football for four years and baseball for two years. He also was on the basketball and track teams his sophomore year. When he was a senior, Sundet was in the chemistry club. In his spare time, Sundet collected stamps, and he had hopes of becoming a mechanical engineer.¹⁴

Ray Sundet enlisted in the Army Air Corps aviation cadet program in December 1942 when he was 18 years old.¹⁵ He reported for duty in Chicago in February 1943.¹⁶

At the time of his brother's death, Corporal Ray Sundet was a radioman on a [B-17 bomber](#) stationed in Dyersburg, Tennessee.¹⁷

Just a few months after the death of his brother, Ray Sundet would have his own brush with death when his B-17 bomber was shot down during a bombing raid of Germany. A new German jet fighter, called the [ME-262](#), shot out two of the four engines on Sundet's plane. The B-17 pilot decided to try to make it to Russia instead of returning to England. They crash landed in a farm field near Witkow, Poland. All ten crewmen survived and were rescued by Russian soldiers.¹⁸

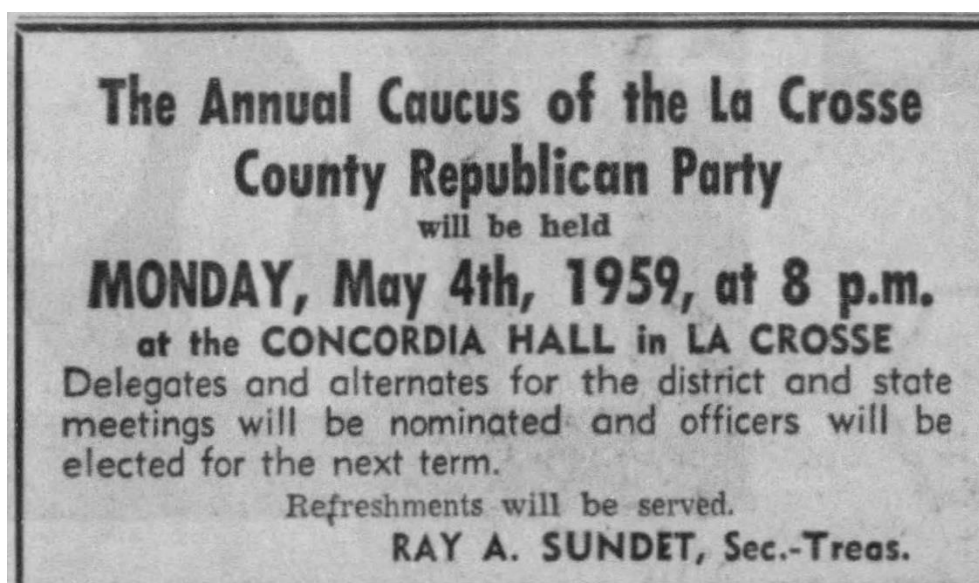
After the war, Ray Sundet enrolled at the University of Iowa in Iowa City. On August 31, 1946, he married Betty Lou Swartz, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. A. O. Swartz, 2317 State Street, La Crosse, at the Christ Episcopal Church. Their first home was in Iowa City where Ray continued his studies.¹⁹ Betty was also a graduate of La Crosse Central High School and La Crosse State University.²⁰

Sundet was using the G.I. Bill to study accounting at the University of Iowa. Betty Sundet worked in a veterans' office.²¹ Their first child, a daughter named Ann Elizabeth Sundet, was born in Iowa City on December 8, 1948.²²

After graduating from the University of Iowa, Sundet enrolled in law school at the University of Wisconsin. He earned his law degree from there in 1950.²³ While he was attending law school, Ray and Betty lived in the "[Badger Village](#)" in Baraboo. One of their neighbors was another World War II veteran, John Bosshard of Bangor. Sundet and Bosshard later were longtime partners in a La Crosse law firm.²⁴

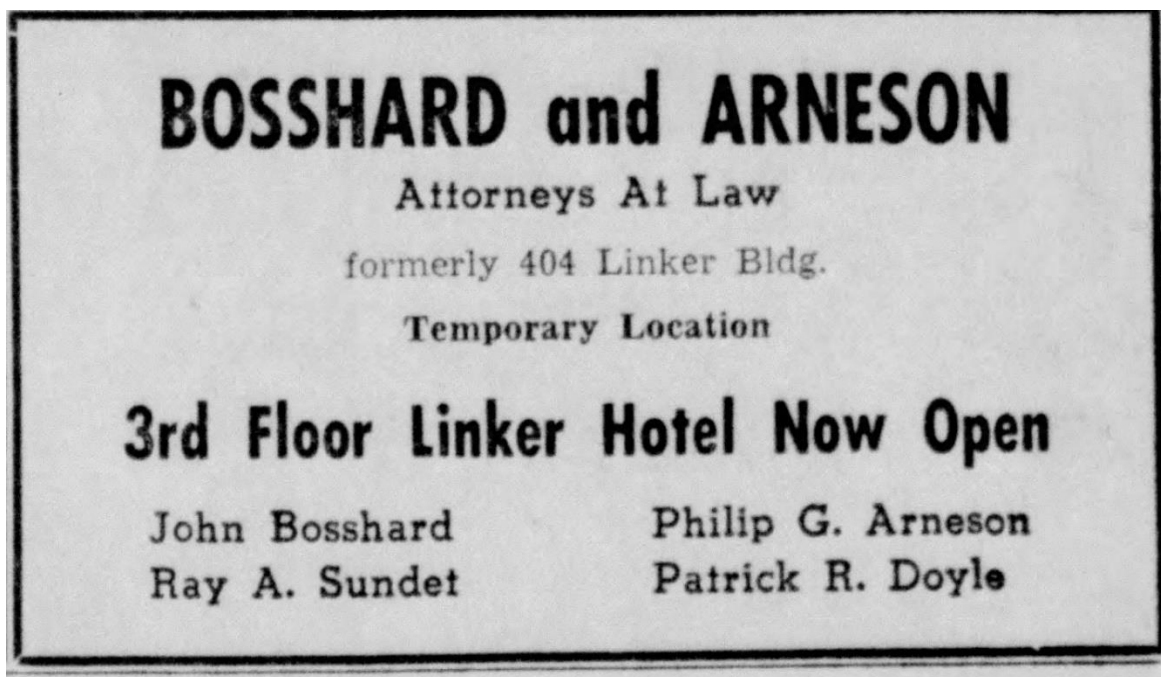
Ray and Betty Sundet returned to La Crosse where Ray practiced law for about 58 years. He was the city attorney for Onalaska, and he was La Crosse County's first corporation council.²⁵ When John Bosshard was La Crosse County district attorney in the early 1950s, Sundet was an assistant district attorney.²⁶ In 1959, another district attorney appointed Sundet as assistant district attorney to do legal work for the La Crosse County Department of Public Welfare.²⁷

Sundet was active in Republican Party politics, and he was an officer for the La Crosse County Republican Party.



(*La Crosse Tribune*, 1959 April 29, page 3.

Ray Sundet was also part of the civic life of La Crosse. In the early 1950s, he was the assistant chairman for the [March of Dimes](#) campaign.²⁸ Later in the 1950s, Sundet was co-chairman of [Brotherhood Week](#) for La Crosse County.²⁹ By the early 1960s, he was the district chairman of this observance.³⁰ He was also a member of the Mary E. Sawyer Auditorium board.³¹ Sundet was a member of the Kiwanis Club too.³²



(*La Crosse Tribune*, 1961 October 9, page 9)

Sundet had other interests. He was part owner of a machine shop with his friend, Dave Baptie. He also dabbled in real estate development and tree farming.³³

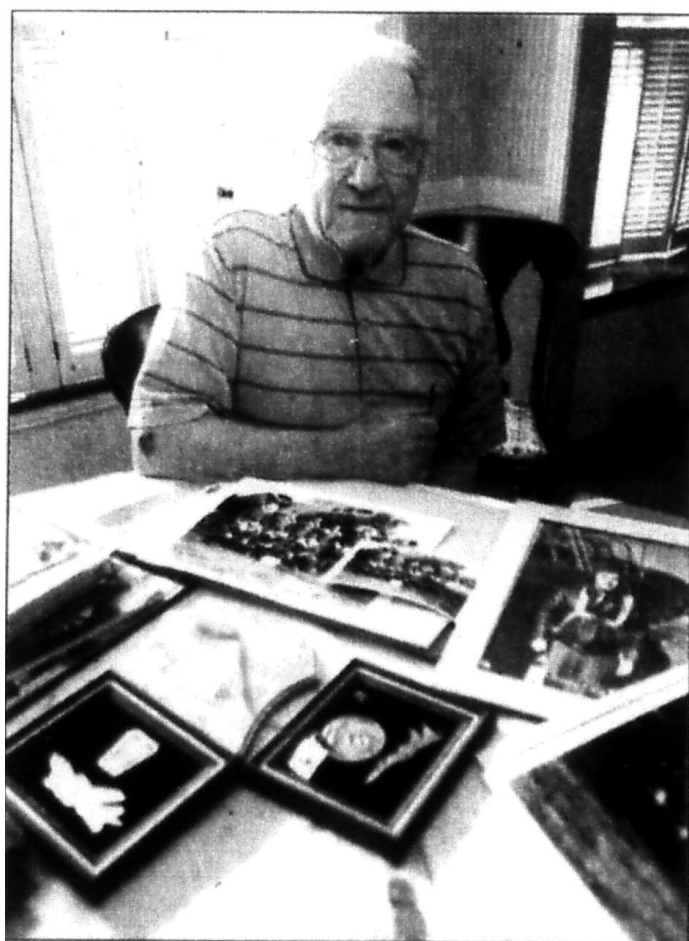


(*La Crosse Tribune*, 1962 October 3, page 29)

His leisure pursuits involved golf, sailing, traveling, and continuing education. Ray and Betty Sundet traveled to many places in the United States and Europe. Along with some sailing buddies, he made sailing trips to the Virgin Islands. Sundet and some retired friends took history classes at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse. According to his family, "They spent a great deal of time correcting the instructors and 'rewriting' history."³⁴

Betty Sundet was also active in the La Crosse community. She was on the Board of Directors of the YWCA, and a member of the La Crosse County Historical Society, Coulee Country Chapter of the Embroiderers' Guild, Oktoberfest Embroiderers, P.E.O. BX Chapter, and Presbyterian Deaconesses. Betty was 66 years old when she died on February 7, 1990, of cancer complications.³⁵

In 2008, Ray Sundet and his children and grandchildren visited the Polish village where his plane went down. Sundet, 84 years old at the time, signed autographs at the museum in Witkow where some pieces from his World War II airplane were displayed.³⁶ He was the last surviving member of his crew from the plane that crashed there 63 years prior when Sundet was a 21-year-old radio operator.³⁷



Ray Sundet shows some photos and awards from his service as a World War II radio man on a B-17.

DICK RINIKER
LA CROSSE
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(*La Crosse Tribune*, 2008 July 14, page A1)

Ray Sundet lived to be 90 years old. He died on December 26, 2014, in La Crosse. He was survived by two daughters and a son, as well as four grandchildren. After funeral services on December 31, Ray Sundet was buried in Oak Grove Cemetery in La Crosse.³⁸

While Ray Sundet had a chance to return to Europe to the scene of one of his World War II experiences, Aubrey Sundet made a return in a different direction. After being killed in the Battle of the Bulge in December 1944, his body was interred in an American military cemetery. In late 1947, Sundet's body was one of over 6,000 American servicemen whose bodies were disinterred and returned to the United States for reburial.³⁹ His final resting place is the Forest Hill Cemetery in Wisconsin Rapids, Wisconsin.⁴⁰



(Find a Grave)

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Revised: 2021 February 19

Sources & Notes:

¹ "Lieut. Sundet Dies in Action," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1945 January 4, page 1.

² The National Archives in St. Louis, Missouri; *Draft Registration Cards for Illinois, 10/16/1940-03/31/1947*; Record Group: *Records of the Selective Service System*, 147; Box: 1768; image, *Ancestry.com* (<http://www.ancestry.com>: accessed 2021 February 15).

³ "A. O. Sundet, Ex-Agent For Railroad, Dies," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1960 August 24, page 21.

⁴ Lincoln High School yearbook (Wisconsin Rapids, Wisconsin: Lincoln High School, 1931), 44, image, *Ancestry.com* (<https://www.ancestry.com> : accessed 2021 February 15).

⁵ "Four Local Students Get Degrees at 'U,'" *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1938 March 14, page 7. See also: "24 Local Students Graduate At U.W.," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1938 June 21, page 5. Both of these articles state that Sundet was awarded a Bachelor of Arts degree. The newspaper article about his marriage (*La Crosse Tribune*, 1939 November 27, page 4), however, states that he graduated from the University of Wisconsin in 1936 and then attended the University of Wisconsin law school for two years. The latter timeline seems more probable with his high school graduation in 1931, college graduation in 1936, followed by two years of law school, and marriage in late 1939.

⁶ "Aubrey G. Sundet And Madison Bride To Live In Chicago," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1939 November 27, page 4.

⁷ *Draft Registration Cards for Illinois, 10/16/1940-03/31/1947*.

⁸ *La Crosse Tribune*, 1939 November 27.

⁹ "Our Men in Service," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1943 May 30, page 13.

¹⁰ *La Crosse Tribune*, 1945 January 4. The author has not been able to find a lead on Marjorie Sundet to find out anything about her life after her husband was killed.

¹¹ "Ray A. Sundet," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 2014 December 28, page C-6.

¹² *Booster* [La Crosse Central High School yearbook] (La Crosse, Wisconsin: Central High School, 1941), 51.

¹³ *La Crosse Tribune*, 1945 January 4.

¹⁴ *Booster*, 1941.

¹⁵ "29 More Youths Enlisted In Army Air Corps By Traveling Examiners," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1942 December 7, page 10.

¹⁶ "33 Area Youths Leave This Week For Air Service," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1943 February 20, page 3.

¹⁷ *La Crosse Tribune*, 1945 January 4.

¹⁸ Steve Cahalan, "Local veteran returns to site of 1945 B-17 bomber crash in Poland," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 2008 July 14, page A1.

¹⁹ "Betty Swartz, Ray A. Sundet Living In Iowa," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1946 September 6, page 8.

²⁰ "Betty S. Sundet," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1990 February 9, page B-4.

²¹ "Campus Courier," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1947 February 23, page 10.

²² "New Citizens," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1948 December 12, page 12.

²³ "12 From City Reap 'U' Degrees As Result Of Summer Pursuits," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1950 October 25, page 11.

²⁴ *La Crosse Tribune*, 2014 December 28.

²⁵ *La Crosse Tribune*, 2014 December 28.

²⁶ "Bosshard Runs For Re-Election To County Post," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1952 July 13, page 26.

²⁷ "Sundet Is Appointed Asst. Dist. Atty.," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1959 July 1, page 24.

²⁸ "Campaign For Infantile Fund Planned Here," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1951 December 30, page 30. Sundet's law partner, John Bosshard, was the chairman.

²⁹ "Co-Leaders Of Brotherhood Week Named," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1957 February 15, page 7.

³⁰ "Sundet Heads Brotherhood Observance," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1962 October 3, page 29.

³¹ "Subscription Series Studied For Auditorium," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1959 April 26, page 12.

³² "Local Kiwanians Attend Convention," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1963 July 5, page 7.

³³ *La Crosse Tribune*, 2014 December 28.

³⁴ *La Crosse Tribune*, 2014 December 28. The university had a program that allowed community members to "audit" classes; attending lectures but not being required to complete assignments or tests.

³⁵ *La Crosse Tribune*, 1990 February 9.

³⁶ *La Crosse Tribune*, 2008 July 14.

³⁷ *La Crosse Tribune*, 2014 December 28.

³⁸ *La Crosse Tribune*, 2014 December 28.

³⁹ "14 Coulee Region Servicemen Being Returned From Europe," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1947 October 26, page 1.

⁴⁰ "Lt Aubrey Gerald Sundet," *Findagrave.com*, accessed 2021 February 16,
<https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/103078712/aubrey-gerald-sundet>.