

1945 October 29-November 4

## War Widow



—AAF Training Command Photo

**Mrs. Pauline M. Benson, 696 Cass, La Crosse, next-of-kin of the late 1st Lieut. P. G. Benson, is shown as she received the air medal and one silver oak leaf cluster won by her late husband in combat in Europe. The medal, presented at Truax Field in a formal ceremony, is presented Mrs. Benson by Brig. Gen. Vincent J. Meloy, commanding general of the installation.**

*(La Crosse Tribune, 1945 October 31, page 5)*

The photo above was a scene played out all too often during World War II--a young widow (in other cases the parents) of a deceased serviceman being presented with medals. The medals were just tokens of appreciation for a life given in the service of the country. Of course, nothing could replace the life that was lost.

Although Lt. Paul Benson never lived in La Crosse County, his wife and parents did.

Paul G. Benson was born on September 11, 1920, at Prescott, Wisconsin.<sup>1</sup> His parents were Dr. Arthur G. Benson, who was a native of Cannon Falls, Minnesota, and Luthera Benson.<sup>2</sup> He graduated from Rice Lake High School. About that time, his family moved to Mount Sterling, Wisconsin, in 1938.<sup>3</sup>

Paul Benson enrolled in the pre-med program at the University of Wisconsin.<sup>4</sup>

In the spring of 1942, he enlisted in the Army Air Corps. Following the school term, Benson worked in Madison during the summer before leaving on August 26 to report to air cadet training camp at Chicago.<sup>5</sup> His training was at [Gardner Field](#) in California; Stockton, California; and Santa Ana, California.<sup>6</sup>



Lt. Paul G. Benson, date unknown  
(Ancestry.com)

During his stateside training, twenty-two-year-old Benson married Pauline Drake, 19, of Viola, Wisconsin, at Bakersfield, California, on February 27, 1943.<sup>7</sup> Her father, Paul Drake, was a painter and wallpaper hanger.<sup>8</sup>



Pauline M. Drake, age 19, at her home near Viola, Wisconsin

(Ancestry.com)

Pauline became pregnant and returned to Mount Sterling, possibly to live with her husband's parents. One year later, on February 29, 1944, Pauline gave birth at St. Ann's Hospital in La Crosse to a son, Paul Arthur Benson.<sup>9</sup>

Lt. Paul Benson never saw his son. Lt. Benson left the United States in February 1944 and was shipped to Northern Ireland. From there, he was transferred to England on April 1, 1944. Benson was the pilot of an [A-20 Havoc](#), and he named his plane after his son.<sup>10</sup>



### [A-20 Havoc](#)

[\(Lewis Air Legends\)](#)

#### [Douglas A-20 Havoc/Boston light bomber](#)

Wingspan: 61 feet, 4 inches

Length: 47 feet, 7 inches

Crew: 3

Speed: 340 miles per hour<sup>11</sup>

The [Douglas A-20](#) entered the Army Air Force inventory in April 1940. It was the first American combat plane to have tricycle landing gear. The A-20G model had six machine guns in the nose, two in a top turret, and one in its belly. It carried 2,600 pounds of bombs internally and could mount an additional 1,400 pounds of bombs under its wings. The plane had a range of 675 miles that could be increased to 1,100 miles with added drop fuel tanks.<sup>12</sup>

On July 4, 1942, American airmen flying six A-20s borrowed from the British Royal Air Force became the first Americans to enter combat in Europe. In their attack on German airfields in Holland, two of the planes were shot down. When the war was over in Europe, A-20 Havocs had flown "39,500 sorties, dropped 57 million pounds of bombs, shot down twelve enemy aircraft, and lost 275 planes." During the war, 7,385 Havocs and Bostons had been built and flown by five countries.<sup>13</sup>

In those early months of 1944, the Army Air Force was concentrating on destroying and disrupting German installations, transportation, and communications in preparation for the D-Day invasion of Normandy, France, in early June 1944.

In a letter home, Benson wrote that he was flying two or three missions every day. He already had completed 20 missions by the end of April. On one of his missions, German anti-aircraft fire had exploded so close to the belly of his plane that it bounced upward. The two gunners, thinking the plane was out of control, parachuted out over France and were captured by the Germans. Benson flew the plane back to England without his crew.<sup>14</sup>

Lt. Benson's last letter home was dated June 21, 1944.<sup>15</sup> On the next day, 23-year-old Paul Benson "was killed over England." No other details were given in the newspaper article. He was survived by his wife of just over one year and a son who he had never seen, his parents of Mount Sterling, brother James in the navy V-12 program at the University of Wisconsin, sister Janice of Washington, and his grandfather in Cannon Falls, Minnesota.<sup>16</sup>

By the time of the medal presentation in October 1945, Pauline and her toddler son, Paul, lived with Dr. Arthur and Luthera Benson, her late husband's parents, at 626 Cass Street in La Crosse.<sup>17</sup> Dr. Benson's medical practice was in Room 310 of the Rivoli Building.<sup>18</sup> Paul Benson's parents lived at 626 Cass Street until 1954. At the time of Dr. Arthur Benson's death in August 1954, his home address was 302 S. 7th Street.<sup>19</sup>

Meanwhile, Pauline Benson and her son had left La Crosse and moved on with their lives. She found love with another man, and married George Leviton on June 14, 1948, in Cook County, Illinois.<sup>20</sup>

After living in Chicago, they moved to Los Angeles. George and Pauline had a child. They were living in Las Vegas when George Leviton died at the age of 70 in 1988. Pauline lived to be 86 years old, and she died in Las Vegas on October 19, 2009.<sup>21</sup>

It had been 65 years since she became a war widow--just one of many thousands of women who endured the same shock and pain during those awful years.

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#### Sources & Notes:

<sup>1</sup> "Pilot Killed Over England," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1944 July 13, page 18.

<sup>2</sup> Dr. Arthur G. Benson," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1954 August 17, page 9.

<sup>3</sup> *La Crosse Tribune*, 1944 July 13.

<sup>4</sup> *La Crosse Tribune*, 1944 July 13.

<sup>5</sup> "Soldiers from Nearby Towns," *The Capital Times*, Madison, Wisconsin, 1942 August 21, page 6.

<sup>6</sup> *La Crosse Tribune*, 1944 July 13.

<sup>7</sup> *La Crosse Tribune*, 1944 July 13.

<sup>8</sup> "Paul Drake," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1952 May 1, page 14.

<sup>9</sup> "New Citizens," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1944 March 1, page 4.

<sup>10</sup> *La Crosse Tribune*, 1944 July 13.

<sup>11</sup> Andrew W. Waters, *The U.S. Air Force Airplanes, 1907-1983* (New York: Hippocrene Books, 1983), 13.

<sup>12</sup> Waters, 67.

<sup>13</sup> Waters, 67-68.

<sup>14</sup> "Lieut. Benson Dies In Action," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1944 July 6, page 1.

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<sup>15</sup> *La Crosse Tribune*, 1944 July 6.

<sup>16</sup> *La Crosse Tribune*, 1944 July 13. Also: "Lieut. Benson Is Killed in Action," *The Capital Times*, Madison, Wisconsin, 1944 July 24, page 4.

<sup>17</sup> "Mrs. Pauline M. Benson," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1945 October 31, page 5. Also: *Wright's La Crosse (Wisconsin) City Directory 1945* (Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Wright Directory Co., 1945), 673. The *La Crosse Tribune* article has the wrong house number, and there was no 696 on Cass Street in 1945.

<sup>18</sup> *Wright's La Crosse (Wisconsin) City Directory 1948* (Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Wright Directory Co., 1948), 37.

<sup>19</sup> "Dr. Arthur G. Benson," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1954 August 17, page 9. His son, James, was also a doctor. The last time Luther Benson is listed in a La Crosse city directory is 1958.

<sup>20</sup> "Cook County, Illinois Marriage Index, 1930-1960," *Ancestry.com* (<http://ancestry.com> : accessed 2020 November 8), transcription, "Cook County Clerk Genealogy Records (Marriages)," File Number 2034393, crediting Cook County Clerk's Office, Chicago.

<sup>21</sup> "Benson-Drake Family History; Pauline M. Drake 1923-2009 LifeStory," *Ancestry.com*, accessed 2020 October 8, <https://www.ancestrylibrary.com/family-tree/person/tree/39283013/person/19348076748/story>.