

Richard Brooks; WWII pilot, POW became telecom specialist

June 14, 2011|By Arthur Hirsch, Globe Correspondent

Richard Walker Brooks lived 91 years, married, raised two daughters, and pursued a career in telecommunications, but he once said the course of his life seemed set in the sky over Germany in autumn 1943, as he copiloted a B-17 on a bombing run that flew into enemy fire.

His plane, nicknamed “Sexy Suzy, Mother of Ten,” collided with another and went down as Mr. Brooks parachuted to the ground. The man from Watertown and West Roxbury, who had just turned 24, was soon surrounded by German civilians and taken to a farmhouse, eventually landing in a prisoner of war camp southeast of Berlin.

At Stalag Luft III — dramatized in the movies “The Great Escape” and “The Wooden Horse” — Mr. Brooks waited out World War II. Studying with a number of scholarly men among the prisoners, from books sent by the American Red Cross, he discovered a love of learning that sustained him through Boston University and as long as he could read.

“My dad told me just months ago, after a POW meeting held in Bedford to honor him and the other veterans, that in an odd way he felt the war had given him so much of what he knew and loved in life,” Kelly Brooks said of her father, who died at the Bedford VA Medical Center on May 30 of infection and malnutrition. “In many ways, his life was shaped by being a POW. Before that, he never wanted to go to college.”

Mr. Brooks, who left military service as a first lieutenant, studied business administration at BU on the GI Bill, graduating with honors as a member of the Beta Gamma Sigma Society. He then followed his father into the telephone business.

Mr. Brooks went to work for New England Telephone Co., his

daughter said, and later for American Telephone & Telegraph, then for Lucent Technologies, from which he retired in 1983. With his wife, Virginia, and two children, he moved from New England to the New York area, to Colorado, and back to New England during Mr. Brooks's career. He worked in several positions, including engineering and later in education and training.

A tall, slim man with blue eyes and light hair, Mr. Brooks moved through life quietly, relishing his family and his 5-handicap golf game, happy to let his wife take the spotlight. She spurred him on to workplace promotions, and together they vacationed in Hawaii and later retired to the mountains of North Carolina.

"His was a soft-spoken, gentle way that did not require fanfare," his daughter said in the eulogy she delivered for a gathering of about 50 mourners on June 4 at St. Anne Catholic Church in Littleton. "In fact, as I was preparing some of these thoughts today and shared them with him a few months back, his comment was, 'I would not make it too long, honey. People don't come to funerals to be lectured. They just want the highlights.'"

Kelly Brooks, of Boston, said her father's great gift was an ability to accept life on its terms, come what may, whether that was "in the POW camp or at the side of a road with a flat tire. He had this amazing ability to shift his expectations in tough times."

That power would serve him well during and after the war, through the death in 1993 of his wife of 35 years, who succumbed to a heart condition at 72. Less than two years later, his oldest daughter, Tracy Brooks, died of colon cancer at age 35.

"I think my sister was more traumatic, because it was so soon after my mother died," said Kelly Brooks. "He said, 'Honey, we have to be strong.'"

Jack Davidson of Brattleboro, Mr. Brooks's nephew by marriage, described him as "a very honorable person ... steady, nice, very decent."

Mr. Brooks grew up in a family of four brothers and a sister in Watertown, graduating from Watertown High School in 1937. In his senior year, the family moved to West Roxbury, and he took the streetcar to school.

He wasn't yet sure about college, so he took night courses at BU while working during the day. He registered for the draft the day after he turned 21, on Oct. 6, 1940. Before he was called to service, he enlisted in the Army Air Corps in March 1942, training in Nashville, Birmingham, Ala., and Greenville, Miss. In the summer of 1943, he flew to his base in England.

His 10th bombing mission, to a target in Münster, Germany, turned out to be his last. In a pocket of his flight coveralls, he carried an image of Our Lady of Perpetual Help that his mother had given him. In a room at the farmhouse where he was held by the German civilians, there again in a framed picture on the wall was Our Lady of Perpetual Help, as if she were watching still. He was one of four airmen in the crew of 10 to survive.

Back home, he talked little about the experience, but during the 15 months he spent at the Bedford VA he seemed to drift back to that last mission. He experienced fits of anxiety at night and seemed to think he was on the plane, clutching the nurse call button as if it were a control stick on the B-17. In conversations with a psychiatrist, he referred to his bed as "his plane," his daughter said.

In the last days, he had stopped eating, but he held on. His family became convinced that he intended to stay for Memorial Day. He did, if only for a few minutes.

"It was such a miraculous event that he held on until midnight," Ms. Brooks said. "We felt there was a connection between the day in October 1943 when he was shot down. This was a kind of tribute."

In addition to his daughter, Mr. Brooks leaves a sister-in-law, 13 nieces and nephews, and 21 grandnieces and nephews. Services

have been held. A military burial at which taps was played was held at Westlawn Cemetery, Littleton.