

Merle S. Eaton Biography

Pre-WSC Experience

Merle Stimmel Eaton was born on August 11, 1921 in Waitsburg, Washington to Clarence and Charlotte May Stimmel Eaton.¹ He was the second of three children; he had an older sister, Ursula, and a younger sister, Clara.² His father was a farmer. Waitsburg, which lies in the Touchet Valley near the eastern border of Walla Walla County in southeast Washington, formed around a gristmill built by Sylvester Wait around 1865.³ As technologies advanced for farming wheat and for milling and transporting flour in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, both the town and mill grew but not dramatically so. Today, the population remains around 1,200 residents.⁴ Wheat farming remained the core economic industry during the early twentieth century, and families like Eaton's made up the town's population.

Eaton graduated from Waitsburg High School in 1940.

WSC Experience

Before attending Washington State College, Eaton worked as a tractor driver.⁵ He attended Washington State College during the 1940-1941 academic year and was a Mechanical

¹ C. James Quann, *WSU Military Veterans: Heroes and Legends* (Spokane, Washington: Tornado Creek Publications, 2005), 178; "Merle Stimmel Eaton," *Ancestry.com*; https://www.ancestry.com/family-tree/person/tree/2597466/person/-1831733663/facts?_phsrc=ixh840&_phstart=successSource (Accessed on August 9, 2019).

² "1930 United States Federal Census for Merle S Eaton," *Ancestry.com*, https://www.ancestry.com/interactive/6224/4547541_00634/112865096?backurl=https://www.ancestry.com/family-tree/person/tree/2597466/person/-1831733663/facts/citation/3072674746/edit/record (Accessed August 9, 2019).

³ Michael J. Paulus, Jr., "Waitsburg – Thumbnail History," *HistoryLink.org*, <https://www.historylink.org/File/9862> (Accessed August 9, 2019).

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ "1940 United States Federal Census for Merle S Eaton," *Ancestry.com*, <https://www.ancestry.com/interactive/2442/m-t0627-04367-00949/65039851?backurl=https://www.ancestry.com/family-tree/person/tree/2597466/person/-1831733663/facts/citation/6968134719/edit/record> (Accessed August 9, 2019).

Engineering major.⁶ He was a member of the Associated Engineers club.⁷ Eaton registered for the draft on February 16, 1942, at which time he noted that he was working for Boeing as an operator of a blueprint machine.⁸ He was later employed by Leonard and Slate, general contractors.⁹ Eaton married Marilyn Kendrick in Stockton, California on December 5, 1944.¹⁰ He was a member of the Presbyterian church of Waitsburg, the Masonic lodge of Waitsburg, and served as a member of the Maripan Masonic club in the Pacific.¹¹

Wartime Service and Death

Eaton enlisted as an Aviation Cadet in the United States Army Air Corps Reserves in Santa Ana, California on March 12, 1943.¹² He trained at Thunderbird Field in Phoenix, Arizona; Merced Army Air Field in Merced, California; and Stockton Field in Stockton, California.¹³ Eaton began B-17 training at Rosell, New Mexico and was assigned to a B-29 group at Clovis, New Mexico in February 1944. He received his commission as a Second Lieutenant, and was

⁶ Quann, *WSU Military Veterans*, 178.

⁷ *Chinook*, 1941, pg. 272, WSU 46, WSU Publications – Chinooks at Washington State University Libraries’ Manuscripts, Archives, and Special Collections (MASC) <http://libraries.wsu.edu/masc>.

⁸ “Merle Stimmel Eaton in the U.S. WWII Draft Cards Young Men, 1940-1947,” *Ancestry.com*, <https://search.ancestry.com/cgi-bin/sse.dll?indiv=1&dbid=2238&h=36853119&ssrc=pt&tid=2597466&pid=-1831733663&usePUB=true> (Accessed August 9, 2019).

⁹ “No Hope Held For M.Eaton,” newspaper clipping, Box 1, Folder 6, Washington State University Libraries’ Manuscripts, Archives, and Special Collections (MASC) <http://libraries.wsu.edu/masc>.

¹⁰ Letter from Charlotte Eaton to T.S. Meade, February 26, 1929, which includes handwritten service record, Box 1, Folder 6, Washington State University Libraries’ Manuscripts, Archives, and Special Collections (MASC) <http://libraries.wsu.edu/masc>.

¹¹ “No Hope Held For M.Eaton,” newspaper clipping, Box 1, Folder 6, Washington State University Libraries’ Manuscripts, Archives, and Special Collections (MASC) <http://libraries.wsu.edu/masc>.

¹² “Merle S Eaton in the U.S., World War II Army Enlistment Records, 1938-1946,” *Ancestry.com*, https://search.ancestry.com/cgi-bin/sse.dll?dbid=8939&h=4765285&indiv=try&o_vc=Record:OtherRecord&rhSource=2238 (Accessed August 9, 2019).

¹³ Letter from Charlotte Eaton to T.S. Meade, February 26, 1929, which includes handwritten service record, Box 1, Folder 6, Washington State University Libraries’ Manuscripts, Archives, and Special Collections (MASC) <http://libraries.wsu.edu/masc>.

sent overseas on December 5, 1944 to Saipan with the 500th Bombardment Group of the 73rd Bomb Wing.¹⁴

The 500th was one of the first B-26 groups to operate from Saipan and participated in the bombing campaign from its first mission on November 11, 1944 until the end of World War II.¹⁵ It was formed in November 1943 as part of the 73rd Bombardment Wing; along with the 499th, the 500th began to officially take up residence on September 18, 1944 at Isley Field on Saipan.¹⁶ Their first combat mission took place on November 11, 1944 with a raid on the Dublon submarine pens on Truk.¹⁷ The wing began carrying out high level daylight raids against Japanese aircraft factories, including against Tokyo, but these turned out to be ineffective. Command decided to shift to low-level night incendiary bombing raids, which proved to be much more successful.¹⁸

On the night of April 3 – 4, 1945, the 73rd Bomb Wing deployed an experimental night bombing attack on the Tachikawa Aircraft Plant near Tokyo; a secondary target was the city of Kawasaki. The 500th Bomb Group enlisted thirty-one aircraft for this mission.¹⁹ Lieutenant Eaton had successfully completed twelve missions and this was to be his thirteenth, with him serving as co-pilot on the mission.²⁰ Twenty-seven “aircraft made it all the way home to Saipan and landed between 1046 and 1215. Two aircraft, unidentified, ran short of gas and had to stop on Iwo Jima

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ “500th Bombardment Group (USAAF),” *historyofwar.org*, http://www.historyofwar.org/air/units/USAAF/500th_Bombardment_Group.html (Accessed August 9, 2019).

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ *500thbombgroupb29.org*, <http://www.500thbombgroupb29.org/journal%20-%20victory.pdf> (Accessed August 9, 2019).

²⁰ Letter from Charlotte Eaton to T.S. Meade, February 26, 1929, which includes handwritten service record, Box 1, Folder 6, Washington State University Libraries’ Manuscripts, Archives, and Special Collections (MASC) <http://libraries.wsu.edu/masc>.

to refuel. These planes got back to Saipan late, landing at 1610 and 1938 respectively. One plane never came back.”²¹ There was no distress signal sent or other message that might have given a clue as to the bomber’s fate; no ground crash site was ever discovered, so it is considered a probability that Eaton’s crew went down in the ocean or potentially in Tokyo Bay.²²

Eaton was initially declared missing but on April 5, 1946 he was declared presumed dead.²³

Postwar Legacy

Eaton is memorialized at Tablets of the Missing, Honolulu Memorial (Punchbowl) in Honolulu, Hawaii.²⁴ He was the recipient of the Air Medal; received a unit citation with cluster, and posthumously received a bronze star for participation in the Eastern Mandate Campaign in the Asiatic Pacific theatre, and the Pacific theatre ribbon with three battle stars (Marianas, Japanese homeland, and Pacific area).²⁵

²¹ *500thbombgroupb29.org*, <http://www.500thbombgroupb29.org/journal%20-%20victory.pdf> (Accessed August 9, 2019).

²² *Ibid.*

²³ “Merle S Eaton in the U.S. WWII Military Personnel Missing in Action or Lost At Sea, 1941-1946,” *Ancestry.com*, <https://search.ancestry.com/cgi-bin/sse.dll?indiv=1&dbid=1199&h=9756&ssrc=pt&tid=2597466&pid=-1831733663&usePUB=true> (Accessed August 8, 2019).

²⁴ “Merle S Eaton,” *Honorstates.org*, <https://www.honorstates.org/index.php?id=123039> (Accessed June 12, 2019).

²⁵ “No Hope Held For M.Eaton,” newspaper clipping, Box 1, Folder 6, Washington State University Libraries’ Manuscripts, Archives, and Special Collections (MASC) <http://libraries.wsu.edu/masc>.