

EDSELL NEIL POE

STAFF SERGEANT U.S. ARMY AIR CORPS

WORLD WAR II 1923 - 1944

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Edsell Poe's 1941 senior class portrait, Grafton High School. *Ancestry*

Edsell Neil Poe was born the second of three children on March 26, 1923, to Virgil Ona Poe and Oattie Lena Campbell Poe in Grafton, West Virginia. According to U.S. Census records, Oattie was born in West Virginia but lived in Omaha, Nebraska, for a time. After returning to West Virginia she married Virgil, himself a native West Virginian, in 1919. Their first child was Roy Ona Poe, who died at the age of 15 in 1936 when Edsell was only 13 years old. This left Edsell and his younger brother Norman Lee Poe, born in 1924, as the only children. The Poe children grew up at 436 Barrett Street, which is within walking distance from Main Street, Grafton. The family lived with Virgil's mother, Elizabeth Poe, until her death in 1933 at which time Virgil inherited his mother's property.

In those days, Grafton had a population of about 8,500 people. It was a major railroad town, making employment at the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad (B&O) a gainful and popular option for young men following high school. Grafton was also an early tourist town, as it was the birthplace of Mother's Day and featured the famous shrine to Anna Jarvis, the holiday's creator. However, just like most towns in America, it suffered economic strife after the stock market crash of 1929.

By this time, Edsell was six years old. According to the 1930 census, his father Virgil was a steam carpenter for the B&O. As the Great Depression staggered some West Virginia counties with 80 percent unemployment, the Poes seemed to have enjoyed relative stability—assisted in no small part by inheriting the house in which they lived. By 1940, Virgil had switched jobs to that of deputy sheriff for Taylor County, while Oattie was a housewife. Edsell graduated from Grafton High School in 1941 with 65 classmates. He managed to briefly obtain construction work for the B&O before enlisting in the U.S. Army Air Corps on December 15, 1942. His younger brother Norman was not far behind with his own Army enlistment (and would later serve in Korea, as well).

Following basic Army Air Corps training, Edsell was funneled into a role as a B-17 Flying Fortress radio operator. This training gave Poe and his fellow operators intricate knowledge of the radio systems aboard their iconic aircraft (destined to become the most recognizable American bomber of the war). A

total of 720 training hours—spread across five to six months—was required to graduate from radio school, which covered communication procedures, Morse code, basic electronics, transmitters, receivers, aircraft equipment installation, and even first aid.

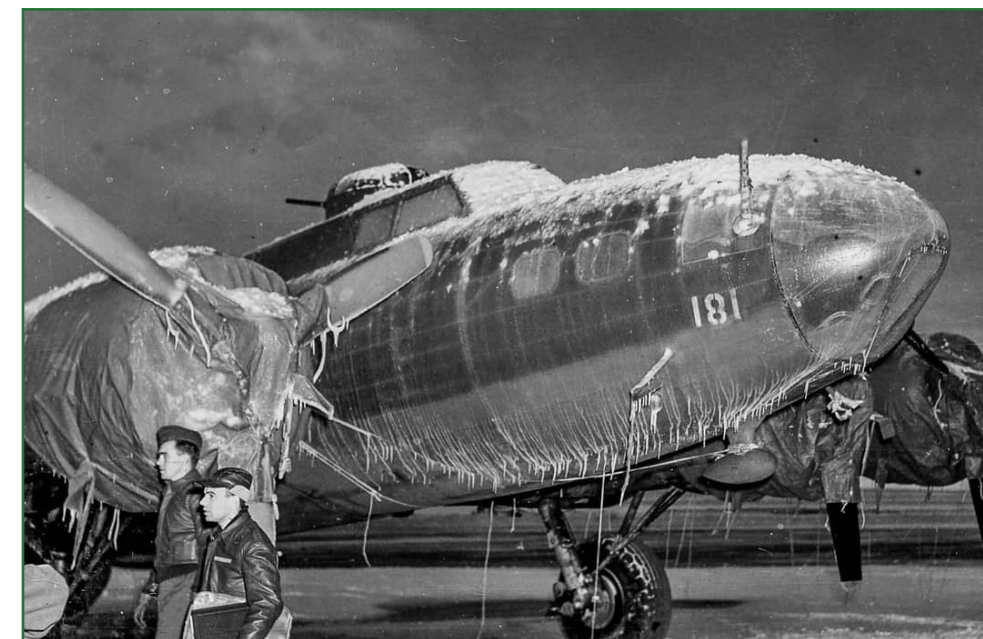
From radio training school, Poe moved on to gunnery school. Radio operators needed to man the defensive machine guns of their B-17s, as well. The five-week gunnery course started with equipment familiarization, as trainees learned to field strip and reassemble a .50-caliber machine gun blindfolded. Troubleshooting the various malfunctions the gun could experience while in service was required, too. Edsell practiced shooting at skeet targets, and for final qualification had to score 20 hits out of a possible 100 rounds on a target plane.

Upon completion of gunnery school, Edsell was promoted to staff sergeant—an indicator of the technical knowledge that accompanied his radio operator rating—and awarded the Combat Crew Badge. From there, Edsell began Crew Transition Training and was assigned to the 32nd Bomb Squadron of the 301st Bombardment Group as a radio operator. At last, he was to join the Flying Fortresses over Europe.

At some point before departing the United States, Edsell struck up a courtship with Lenora A. Ridenour of Fairmont, West Virginia, which was only ten miles from Grafton. They married on December 2, 1943, and a baby was born to them exactly nine months later. Sadly, Edsell Jean Poe (later Ratliff), born September 2, 1944, would never meet her father.

The B-17 Flying Fortresses, or "Forts," of the U.S. Army Air Corps were in the process of ushering in an unprecedented scale of bombing during World War II, with tens of thousands of bombs mass-produced and employed on every fighting front. Early-war American military planners felt that the B-17's 13 heavy machine guns, coupled with mutually supporting "box formations," would keep German fighters at bay. To increase the precision of large-scale strategic bombing, the B-17s were sent out on unescorted daylight raids until later in the war—after enemy flak and aircraft proved far deadlier than anticipated to bomber crews like Poe's.

Those crews were composed of ten men per Fort: pilot, copilot, navigator, bombardier, radio operator, and five gunners. Edsell's duties as radio operator included relaying his plane's position to the formation every 30 minutes, assisting the navigator in taking positional fixes, keeping the bomber's multiple radio sets properly tuned and in good operating order, and maintaining the Fort's flight log. Poe's target training was not wasted, however. The radio operator had his own machine gun if the fighting grew desperate.



Poe's B-17 Flying Fortress #42-3144 in the United States before shipment overseas. Probably photographed in Montana where the plane was receiving equipment upgrades. *American Air Museum in Britain*

Edsell and his squadron flew a variety of missions in 1944. They usually struck strategic targets—oil distribution centers, factories, airfields, or enemy communication sites throughout Axis-occupied southern and central Europe. Poe was stationed in Lucera, Italy, a flat, agricultural area recently liberated from Axis control, where the 301st Bombardment Group moved in December 1943. Many of the Allied airbases around Lucera had been German airstrips, now upgraded and substantially expanded for use by the American 15th Air Force. Signs of the airfields remain to this day.

Edsell and his crewmates of "#144" (part of the plane's serial number) took to the air for their final mission on the morning of April 2, 1944. Some 500 Flying Fortresses and B-24 Liberators from multiple bombardment groups, with fighter escorts, proceeded north across the broad waters of the Adriatic Sea on a clear, cool day bound for a bombing run on a German ball bearing plant and other strategic targets in Steyr, Austria. Unfortunately, something was wrong with #144 from the beginning. The Fort repeatedly fell behind the rest of the formation, and another B-17 crew member observed smoke coming from one of its engines. Why Poe's pilot, 1st Lieutenant Calvin Miller, did not choose to turn back as soon as engine trouble was apparent is not known. Aircraft malfunctions were frequent occurrences, and a potentially crippling engine problem would have been sufficient justification to abort.

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Austrian authorities and German military personnel eventually accounted for the remains of all ten crew members, but only four could be identified. Among the latter was Edsell Poe, whose dog tag was recovered intact. The men were buried in a parish churchyard in Weyer, a small mountain municipality that includes Kleinreifling, Weyer, and another village. The parish church apparently still stands to this day.

The remains of Poe and his crew were eventually repatriated to the United States through the “Return of the Dead” program. The program was an effort by the United States government to find the bodies of deceased soldiers after families pleaded for more support in returning their bodies home. The program lasted from 1946 to 1951. Edsell Poe was brought home and interred on July 21, 1949, a full five years after his death.

Edsell posthumously received a Good Conduct Medal, a Purple Heart, and the Europe-Africa-Middle East Medal. His marker in Grafton National Cemetery is just over a mile from the house in which he was raised. Lenora remarried Charles L. Clark from her hometown of Fairmont. Poe’s namesake Edsell Jean lived a long life in Fairmont. She passed away in 2015 at the age of 70 with many children and grandchildren to carry on the memory of their brave ancestor.

Ninety minutes from their target, German fighters pounced on the raiding Americans. Poe’s crew fought off several passes made on their struggling plane, probably taking hits that only made their situation worse. It is not known whether Poe’s bombardier, 2nd Lieutenant Raymond Reese, dropped #144’s bombs over Steyr, or possibly even earlier, but under the circumstances the crew was probably eager to lighten their plane. If so, it was too late to make the crucial difference. More German fighters swooped in during the bombing run. Enemy air resistance to the massive bomber strike was significant—American escorts and bomber gun crews claimed to have downed 100 enemy fighters, indicating hundreds more may have been in the air that day.

As the bombing run completed, as many as ten ME-109 fighter planes converged on #144, riddling the Fort with bullets. Lt. H. D. Evans, watching in horror from another bomber, saw Poe’s plane “nose up and then go into [a] tight spin with pieces breaking from [the] left wing.” It plummeted to 15,000 feet, where either pilot Reese or copilot Joshua Adams “tried to straighten the plane out of its dive,” wrote a second observer from another bomber, tail gunner Staff Sergeant John Mulally. “When the ship snapped back to an almost level position,” he continued, “it broke in two.”

Mulally saw several men fall out of the shattered aircraft, but no parachutes opened. He doubted that any of the crew survived. Those that witnessed #144’s demise dutifully reported its position with little hope for Poe and his fellow crew members as the wreckage crashed to the ground near the Austrian hamlet of Kleinreifling, about 70 kilometers southeast of their target at Steyr.



FAR LEFT: 15th Air Force Flying Fortresses bomb Steyr, Austria, in a raid similar to the one that claimed Edsell Poe’s life. NARA

CENTER: 15th bomber crew displaying their B-17’s extremely damaged tail. NARA

BELOW: Edsell Poe’s dogtag, recovered from the bomber wreck by Austrian authorities and turned over to the German military. The German report and some of Poe’s crew’s dogtags were recovered later by the Allies. NARA



SOURCES FULL BIBLIOGRAPHY TO BE INCLUDED IN FINAL VERSION

SOURCES

ABOUT THE PROJECT

Full bibliographies will be included in the final draft of each biography, available later in the summer of 2024.

The West Virginia National Cemeteries Project is a program of the West Virginia Humanities Council, funded in part by the Veterans Legacy Grant Program of the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs and initiated in 2021. All biographies produced as part of this program are composed by West Virginia high school students, who conduct original research on veterans interred at the Grafton National Cemetery or the West Virginia National Cemetery, both of which are located in Grafton, Taylor County, West Virginia.

As home to one of the nation's first National Cemeteries—founded shortly after the Civil War—the community of Grafton has longstanding traditions of honoring America's veterans, including the longest continuously celebrated Memorial Day parade in the United States. The Grafton National Cemetery, located in the heart of the city and founded in 1867, is typically the endpoint of each year's parade. Since the Grafton National Cemetery began to run short of space during the 1960s, the West Virginia National Cemetery was dedicated in 1987, just a few miles outside of Grafton.

The West Virginia Humanities Council is proud to thank the following organizations for their participation in the West Virginia National Cemeteries Project: West Virginia Archives and History, the West Virginia University history department, Taylor County Historical and Genealogical Society, Taylor County Public Library, Grafton High School, and University High School.

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