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Batlo's Bangers

An Interview with veteran Bob Andraski

By Elysia Laws

In the summer of 2012, I stepped through the threshold of a small apartment, and was greeted by a white-haired man with gem-like blue eyes and long hands. His face split into a smile and laughter peeled out of him within our first few minutes of conversation. Beautifully detailed sketches of military aircraft graced the walls, accompanied by a classic wedding photograph and more modern pictures of a few children, whom I presumed to be Mr. Andraski's great-grandchildren. The smell of coffee lingered in the air, and I settled on a couch, eager to begin learning about Bob Andraski, a World War II veteran. I was surprised to learn he lived right along my daily route to work, and was grateful for the opportunity to speak not only with a World War II fighter pilot, but also a local resident of the town I love, Cave Creek. After introductions, I smiled at Bob (as he requested I call him) and asked him to tell me his story.

Born into an American-Polish family, with a sweet and worrying mother, Bob Andraski had a good life. His father was a veteran of World War I, a sergeant in the cavalry riding horses. His father was also an active VFW member, and his friends helped get Bob into the Air Force when the time came. Bob graduated high school a few months after the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. "The Japanese picked on us, so I was ready to go pick on them," he joked. Bob was ready, at 18 years old, to enlist in the Air Force and fight for his country. His father, though, insisted that he wait until necessity hit. "They'll come for you when they need you," he mused wisely.

His basic training took place at Fort Hood, Texas. His primary training took place in Bakersfield, California, at Hancock College. He had his choice, once in the Air Force, to become a navigator, a pilot, or a bombardier. He chose to become a fighter pilot, and was picked to fly P-38s. With a double engine and 120mm guns, P-38s were some of the toughest aircraft of the day. He was sent to "where they made all the planes" in Efreta, Washington. He completed his training there, learning all the ins and outs of the P-38. There were thirty-eight young men in his squadron, all flying P-38s, and all rarin' to go.

They flew their own planes from Miami, to Bermuda, and across the Atlantic to Cairo. "I never saw so damn much water!" Andraski laughs now. When asked how it felt to be the pilot of such a tiring, dangerous trip, Andraski sighs and his eyes widen. "It's scary, all right. It sure is scary. You got to know that the only thing below you is water."

While based in North Africa, Bob, now christened "Batlo," was assigned to fly missions, sometimes as far as northern Italy. Usually his mission consisted of chasing enemy fighter jets and helping shoot down aircraft carriers belonging to the Germans or Italians. Bob was scheduled to

help with the Ploesti oil raids on the Germans in Romania, but his mission was changed at the last-minute. “Those raids really did hurt the Krauts [Germans], though!”

All in all, Bob flew fifty missions while based in North Africa. Some were successful, while some were disappointing. His plane, lovingly referred to as *Batlo 2*, “took a lot of shots.” Batlo’s crew chief, Securt, always said, “Damn it, you’ve been screwing with metal termites again, Batlo!” Bob remembers Securt, his chief and friend, very well. He would say, “Securt, get me a coffee,” and Securt would get Bob the requested coffee, along with a pair of gloves, to protect his hands from the scalding metal of the mugs. “He’d make sure that plane flew, no matter what.” If Bob had to fly two days consecutively, Securt would smile and say, “Don’t worry about it, Batlo.” One pressing night, Securt changed an entire 64 plugs so that Batlo could fly safely the next morning. That morning, Securt gave Bob a smile that was stained with oil. When asked, he chuckled and explained that holding the greasy flashlight in his mouth must have stained his face. Securt did survive the war, but was tragically killed by a drunk driver a few years after returning home. “It’s a shame,” Andraski shakes his head sadly, remembering his good old friend.

“Batlo’s Bangers would beat the hell out of any target!” Andraski recalls excitedly. Some flights, it seems, weren’t all business though. “We had... many a boozy day.” Bob made one flight up to Cairo to pick up some “mission whiskey...which is just rotgut, if you know what I mean...” He was sent up with his tanks nearly emptied, and was given the booze “packaged more carefully than any fine pottery!” He was escorted by other P-38s, making sure that the booze made it safely to the base. “Yes, we did have many a boozy day. Many days to laugh at, and many days to cry at. Whenever we lost a man...we’d come together and have a toast for him, and we’d say, ‘Franklin D, take me home and make a Hollywood hero out of me!’”

Batlo and his squadron were transferred to South Asia to fly as escorts for carriers over the Hump. An infamous, treacherous region over the Himalayan mountains, it was a daunting challenge. His first flight over the Hump, a monsoon hit. The clouds were high and torrential, and Batlo had to fly high over them to stay safe. He admits now that he was ill-prepared for the bad weather, and hadn’t put enough gas in his engine to combat it. With the hard winds blowing against him, Batlo quickly ran out of gas. He had no choice but to abandon the aircraft. “Most guys [during the war] didn’t even know how to [work a parachute]! We weren’t really trained for it.” When he jumped, his chute got tangled in a tree, and on the way down, he knocked a little monkey out of the branches with him. “She was shocked!” he exclaimed. So was Batlo.

Alone in the intimidating South Asian jungle, Andraski befriended the monkey immediately. He christened her Amber, and fashioned a little harness from the remains of his parachute. It soon became evident, though, that Amber didn’t need a harness to stay attached to Batlo. When he knocked her out of that tree, she clamped onto his company as much as he did hers. She would climb up his head, on his back, and sit on his shoulder. She kept Andraski alive in the dangerous and unpredictable jungle. From howling when snakes came near, to picking fruit that was safe for him to eat, Amber kept Batlo as comfortable as he could. “She showed me how to get water out of a bamboo shoot. If you chew through all the fiber, you can get to the water that’s in there.” After roughly ten days of surviving in the jungle, with Amber on his shoulder, Batlo was alerted by the monkey, who heard footsteps approaching. “But I couldn’t hear them; they were too quiet. You know who’s that damn quiet? The Gurkha Guard.”

The Gurkhas were deadly native soldiers, employed by the British army during colonization. Field Marshall Sam Manekshaw, previous chief of the Indian Army said, “If a man says he is not afraid of dying, he is either lying, or he is a Gurkha.” Famous for the curved knife known as the *kukeri* (often known simply as the Gurkha blade), the Gurkha soldiers were silent, fast, and cold-blooded when necessary. However, coming up on Batlo, they were warm and friendly, especially

once he confirmed his identity. They were amused by Amber, but insisted that Bob keep her quiet on the four-day journey along the river back to base.

Once safely back, Bob was eager to show off his monkey. “She was really something else,” he remembers. Most of his squad liked Amber, but one fellow had a pet cat. “That cat would not shut up—just *mron, mron!*” he explains. Amber would push her head to the floor and cover her ears, fed up with the irritating caterwauling. One day, she scampered up to the cat, snuck up behind him, and pulled his tail! “I [also] had to hide my toothpaste,” Bob said. Amber loved the taste of toothpaste, but “she didn’t like shaving cream very much!”

The relationship between Bob and his wild pet, Amber, was a bond between man and animal that is both rare and inspiring. The relationship between dog and man has oft been heralded as a deep and instinctual bond, but the relationship between wilderness and civilization is far more awe-deserving. Despite the boundaries that man has willfully drawn between himself and nature, the mutually protective friendship between a lost Air Force pilot and a wild primate encourages me to think that there is a deeper relationship inherent between man and animal. The story of man and animal becoming friends may help remind us that we are not so different—in fact, we are animals as they are, and we may learn from them as they may from us.

Today, Bob smiles wistfully when he speaks of Amber. His eyes dance, mimicking his excited gesticulations. He shows us how the little primate used to climb up on his head, scouting for him, and how she would rest about his neck. “Do you know who invented the trampoline?” Mr. Andraski questioned me. “Amber did it! I don’t care who else did it, she was the first.” He explains how Amber used to jump on the mosquito netting above the men’s beds, twirling and bouncing like a child on a trampoline. To this day, Mr. Andraski says that Amber was one of his best friends, and he could never forget her.

Time passes, though, and America was fighting a war. When it became necessary to leave Burma and travel elsewhere, Batlo was very saddened. He heard reports around the area that people living in the jungles had seen Amber return to the base, looking for Batlo, her human friend. The squadron moved along to China, where the men would toss candy to the children in the streets. Soon after, it was time to head home.

Once flown to America, the men were taken home by train. “And we stopped at every little town you can imagine.” Bob said it was both exciting and a little sad to come home. There was the anxiety of being called back looming above the men’s heads. It was relieving to be home, but anxious trepidation was imminent. Above the emotional roiling, though, Bob was simply glad to be home, in Milwaukee, with his wife.

Karen Andraski was Bob’s faithful companion for many years. She was not Polish, and though that angered his grandparents, it was a mark of the change of times. Youth have always pushed the boundaries, and this was one of Batlo’s small rebellions. Karen and Bob were young, and they were very in love. A classic couple of the day, she was beautiful, and he was strong and handsome. Back when Bob was in high school, big band music was heavily popular. Bob had his own ten-piece jazz band, and they played all over Milwaukee. They were so respected that police escorts would follow them to their performance venues. Bob eventually decided to break up the band, but as soon as he did, he received a call from the VFW manager, who demanded that Bob get him a four-piece to play at a reunion.

It was that evening, as Bob and his four-piece band serenaded the ballroom, that Bob first laid eyes on Karen. “That’s for me!” he recalls now, pointing excitedly. Karen and Bob were married after he joined the Air Force, but it was not until he returned home by train that Karen and Bob began the next part of their life together.

Nearly 80 years later, Mr. Andraski is a humble, kind, and inquisitive man. His wise and bright sense of humor draws one to him as a child is drawn to ask questions. The twinkling blue

eyes that rest above his wide grin bring a feeling of gentle curiosity, and strong hope. It is impossible not to feel the tremors of curiosity moving within one's mind when one encounters a man who clearly *holds* both an echelon of experience and the vast amount of kindness and interest necessary to *share* his experience.

Bob now resides in his home in Cave Creek with his good friend Curtis Riggs. His memories are a testament to a generation that has handed the reigns to their children, and soon, their grandchildren. When asked if he was concerned for his country, Bob replied thoughtfully. Recounting his recent visit to Washington, D.C. as a guest of Honor Flight, he recalled visiting the Naval Academy. "Those young men and women were so bright. And to see them made me feel good about my country. No, I'm not worried about America. Just look at some of those bright kids who will inherit it."

***Elysia Laws** became involved with Veterans Heritage Project in Barbara Hatch's World History class. When her family moved, she transferred to Higley High School, working part-time at Agritopia. She has since graduated.*

***Bob Andraski** was shot down over The Hump while delivering supplies to China during World War II. A monkey named Amber showed him how to survive the jungle until he was rescued. Bob lives in Cave Creek.*