The sun is setting over the village of Eye as sputtering interrupts the quiet of the English countryside. The four propellers on a B-17 Flying Fortress are coming to life. Prop wash thrashes the grass behind the plane, making it undulate like ocean waves. The bomber has been dubbed the Heavenly Body, and a shapely woman showing a lot of skin has been painted near its nose. On board are a dozen American airmen: the nine-member crew and three passengers.

Joy Houpt, an English woman who is second from the right in the photograph above, sent this letter to Providence about events that started on Sept. 27, 1944. She is shown above and below at a 2002 ceremony dedicating a memorial to World War II fliers.

The Heavenly Body gets clearance to take off. Its four 1,200-horsepower engines roar, and the 30-ton bomber rumbles down the runway. The tail wheel lifts off, followed by the main gear, and the Heavenly
Body climbs into the darkening sky.

It is Sept. 27, 1944.

* * *

Six decades later, in February 2007, an envelope arrives by airmail at Barrett & Company, an investment securities firm at 42 Weybosset St. in Providence.

The envelope is about seven inches by nine and a half inches, of plain brown paper. Red print advises, “Please do not bend,” in English and in German. Handwritten lines announce: “WWII Memories of Crew” and “VERY IMPORTANT.” The latter is underscored twice.

The envelope is addressed to “Mrs. Florence R Barry (Mother).”

The postmark is from England.

Employees at Barrett & Company aren’t sure what to do with the envelope. They’ve never heard of Florence Barry. They ask W. Lincoln Mossop, president of the firm.

When he sees it’s from England, Mossop opens it up. Inside is a handwritten letter on three pages of cream-colored paper, with a dove carrying an olive branch stamped on the corner of the first page.

* * *

The Heavenly Body is not on a combat mission this night. This is a training flight, to practice cross-country navigation after dark. Among the passengers is John C. Barry Jr., a sergeant in an Army Air Corps mobile training unit and the son of Florence Barry. After taking off, the B-17 heads west, toward the interior of England.

John Barry is 25 years old. He stands almost 6 feet tall and, at 160 pounds, is on the skinny side. The girls find him handsome, in a youthful way. He grew up in North Attleboro, graduated from high school in 1936 and went on to college, working as an auto-parts clerk. He plays trombone and oboe in a band. But, on Dec. 9, 1941, two days after the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, Barry put all that aside. He went to Providence and enlisted in the Army Air Corps.

As the Heavenly Body cruises through the night sky over England, his mother, Florence, is at work as a stenographer in Providence, with an office on Weybosset Street. She is the daughter of Danish immigrants and the wife of a jewelry factory worker, John C. Barry Sr.

* * *

The letter that Mossop opens transports him to another time because he has always been fascinated by World War II, especially combat aircraft. He graduated from the U.S. Naval Academy in 1956 and was assigned to a fighter squadron at Quonset Point. He flew four years on active duty, then 19 years in the Reserves. He has visited World War II sites in England and in Normandy, France. If you get him talking about military aviation, be prepared to spend awhile — and learn a lot.

* * *

It is 8:45 p.m., and a bright gibbous moon lights the landscape around Nailstone, England, about 100 miles from Eye.
Outside the village, Ernest Widdowson and two friends are riding bicycles back from a nearby town. They see a B-17 pass overhead. Its lights are on and its engines are running, but it glides lower and lower, as if coming in for a landing, except it is flying full-speed. The plane turns to the left, then its nose points toward the ground.

Closer to the village, 9-year-old Eric Butler is playing outside. He sees the B-17 fly over the village. Its engines are on fire. It misses the church and the village center. It nosedives into a field, and a fireball erupts where the Heavenly Body meets the earth.

In Ellistown, three miles to the north, Sgt. Leonard Rose of the local constabulary reports a “terrific explosion which made the doors and windows of houses nearby rattle terrificly [sic], and then I saw something burst into flame.”

Widdowson and his friends race toward the crash to help the crew. One of them gets within five yards of the plane before heat drives him back. Smaller explosions go off, and bullets on board the burning plane rip through surrounding trees.

* * *

The letter in Mossop’s hands, addressed to Florence Barry, begins:

“Dear Friend,

“I feel so much that I know you all. And it was really a miracle how I have finally got all the ‘crews’ names of the B17 the ‘Heavenly body.’ Sadly lost right here in my village. Sept. 27th 1944.”

* * *

Sept. 27, 1944, is not a good day for the U.S. Army’s Eighth Air Force. That morning, a group of 35 bombers, B-24 Liberators, gets lost in overcast skies above Nazi Germany. The group is beset by more than 100 German fighter planes. Twenty-five of the Liberators drop from the sky over the heart of Germany. Five more crash trying to reach their base in England. One makes an emergency landing at a backup airfield. Only 4 of the 35 make it home.

Against the backdrop of those enormous losses, the Heavenly Body’s fate will draw little attention and will be quickly forgotten. By all but a few.

That same night, an Englishwoman named Joy Marshal is living in London, where doodlebugs — German V-1 rockets — rain random destruction upon the city. Joy is from the same village where the Heavenly Body crashes. She is 25, just like John Barry, and is training to be a hotel manager. “For after the war,” she relates decades later. “If we survived it.”

Joy’s husband, Cyril, is in an Asian jungle with a British infantry regiment, and she has fallen in love with an American flier. She finds American men more emotional, more passionate, more exciting than their stoic British counterparts. She knows the relationship is forbidden, but she can’t help herself.

* * *

The letter mailed to Mossop’s office talks of trying to gather the relatives of the downed fliers for a
memorial service in 2002. The writer bemoans failing to make it happen. “I got a coach to bring you from Heathrow. I got you accommodation in a hotel. ... But that is where I lost. I could not track anyone at all.”

The writer is still upbeat. “But miracles do happen. You had better believe it.”

* * *

The mothers of the 12 men aboard the Heavenly Body write to each other. Willa Griswould is the mother of aerial engineer Roy E. Griswould, of Colorado. She becomes the hub. All letters go to her. She collects pictures of the fliers.

As time goes on, the mothers fall out of touch. They grow old. Willa Griswould dies.

Florence Barry continues working as a stenographer out of her office at 42 Weybosset St., Room 19. When she is 70, in the early 1960s, she retires and moves to Casper, Wyo. She dies in May 1963.

* * *

After holding onto Florence Barry’s letter for several weeks, Mossop decides to do something. He sends it to The Providence Journal, thinking it will make a good story. The paper finds the Barrys in a wealth of public records: city directories from the 1930s, ’40s, ’50s and ’60s. The federal census from 1920 and 1930. World War II enlistment papers.

But they are all historical records. Nothing current can be found.

The U.S. Social Security Administration’s death master file shows two Florence Barrys who received Social Security numbers in Rhode Island: one who died in 1996 in Rhode Island and one who died in 1963 in Wyoming. A Journal obituary rules out the woman who died in Rhode Island. For the Wyoming woman, the Social Security records do not have a city or a specific date of death, making it virtually impossible to track her.

Birth records in North Attleboro reveal that John Barry had a younger brother: Richard W. Barry, born Feb. 15, 1921.

The Social Security Administration lists a Richard W. Barry, who was born Feb. 15, 1921, and who received his Social Security number in Massachusetts. He died in 1999 — in Casper, Wyo. His obituary in the Casper Star-Tribune confirms that he was Florence’s son and John’s brother. It says Richard had also been in the Army Air Corps during World War II, serving in India, Burma and China. His survivors include two daughters, Susan, in Nebraska, and Evelyn, in Pittsburgh. John Barry had nieces. Florence Barry had granddaughters — her nearest living relatives.

* * *

Floyd Griswould is 8 when his 20-year-old brother Roy’s plane crashes into the English countryside. He is 70 when he sets out from Colorado to find the place where his brother died. He pores through the letters his mother left when she died, looking for clues to guide him to the spot. He comes across the name of a town: Market Bosworth.

Griswould and his wife, Phyllis, are in the library at Market Bosworth in September 2006. The librarian thinks the crash of the Heavenly Body is recounted in a book the library holds. While she looks for it, an older gentleman happens by.
“Sir,” Phyllis asks, “how long have you lived in this area?”

“Only 71 years.”

“Do you remember a plane crashing in this area in 1944?”

“Like it was yesterday.”

The older gentleman is Eric Butler, the 9-year-old boy who witnessed the Heavenly Body come crashing to earth. He offers to take the Griswolds to the site, four miles north of Market Bosworth.

* * *

By 2007, Evelyn Barry no longer lives in Pittsburgh, where she earned a master’s and a doctorate at Carnegie Mellon University. But, as an academic, she is easily traced to Texas A&M University, where she teaches computers in the business school. Her sister, now Susan Griffiths, is still in Nebraska, where she teaches music.

When they were growing up, their father talked little of their Uncle Jack, who died before they were born. “Dad used to tell a few childhood stories,” says Griffiths, “but they were few and far between.” Most of what they know about their uncle they learned after their father died, when they were going through photographs, letters and other papers. “He looked like a cute, young Mel Gibson.”

* * *

Joy Marshal carries on with her American flier, Ralph Houpt, until the war in Europe ends in 1945 and he heads home to Kansas. Her husband returns from Asia the next year. They remain married until his death in 1987. A friend urges her to place an ad in the newspaper in Wichita, Kan., seeking information on Houpt.

Houpt no longer lives in Kansas. After the war, he marries a woman from Newfoundland, and they move to Canada. But Houpt’s niece sees the ad and writes to Joy. Joy writes back, asking the niece to forward a letter to Houpt.

In 1989, after Houpt’s wife dies, he writes to Joy. She joins him in Newfoundland, where they marry in 1990, 45 years after they first met.

Five years later, he suffers a stroke, and Joy takes him back to England, where he dies in 1998.

That same year, Mark English, of Nailstone, discovers one of the Heavenly Body’s engines buried in a creek. He wants to establish a memorial to the crew and enlists the help of Joy Houpt, who has long been active in local politics. She uses her connections to arrange for local companies to donate a plaque and stone for the memorial, to organize a dedication ceremony with an American honor guard from a nearby base, and to try to find the families. She feels an affinity for the American servicemen. “They deserved the best, and we owe it to them,” she says. “If the Americans had not come and helped us when they did, we should have stuck our hands up and said, ‘Heil, Hitler.’ ” The memorial is dedicated in 2002.

Four years later, Joy learns of Floyd Griswould’s visit to Nailstone. They write each other. He gives her the addresses his mother had collected of the other mothers of the crew. The addresses may be 60 years out-of-date.

In 2007, Joy, now 87, sits down and writes to Florence Barry and the other mothers.
“I have to pray some of the relatives are still around. It is such a long time ago. So I’m trying to help to put your mind at rest,” she writes. “I’m trying to contact any members of the family who may be alive. I want you to know what I did for your sons.”

She sends the letter to 42 Weybosset St. in Providence, now Lincoln Mossop’s office.

*  *  *

The Army never determines what caused the crash that killed John Barry and his crewmates.

John Barry had never married and, according to Army records, has no dependents.

But that does not mean he and his sacrifice have been forgotten.

Tomorrow, on Memorial Day, Joy Houpt plans to place American flags on the monument in the churchyard in Nailstone.

Sources for this story included: interviews with W. Lincoln Mossop, Floyd Griswould, Evelyn Barry, Susan Griffiths and Joy Houpt; the War Department documentary The Memphis Belle; archives of the Leicester Mercury and The Providence Journal; the Air Force Historical Research Agency; the National Archives and Records Administration; the Social Security Administration; North Attleboro Town Clerk; the Casper Star-Tribune, and World War I and World War II draft records, World War II enlistment records, census records, Social Security records and city directories available on Ancestry.com.

pparker@projo.com