



# Hardlife Herald

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## FRONT COVER

Sketch of the *Blue Champagne's* last mission drawn by M. Drue Gillis while a POW in Stalag XVII-B

## EDITORIAL

I regret that this issue of the Hardlife Herald is somewhat late. Please accept my apologies. It is with deep sorrow that I wish to submit my resignation as the Editor of the 385th Bomb Group Association's newsletter owing to medical problems of my wife and me. I hope that the Association can select someone to continue to edit our newsletter, so that, we as Association members, can remain in touch with each other, if not by personal contact, but at least by receiving and reading the newsletter with the tales of their, and other HH members', days at Great Ashfield. I will remain as editor until a new person accepts the job. I will assist the new editor the best that I am able to. I might add that for anyone considering the position, the salary is outstanding—far, far out!

In this issue there are several articles about Berlin. It was a target area that we all hated to see when the curtain was pulled back at the mission briefings. When all saw the string from Great Ashfield to Berlin and return, there was always a loud moan from those assembled crewmen, and with good reason. All knew it would be a rough mission to Hitler's home. But I hope that you will find these stories interesting.

The front cover of this issue is a partial reproduction of the cover of an old issue of the Newsletter of the 385TH Bombardment Group Memorial Association, edited by Ed Stern, Tom Newton, and others. Upon reading some of these old Hardlife Herald issues, I felt very nostalgic and decided to reproduce a copy of their cover. Notice that the name of the Association has been changed by eliminating the word Memorial.

You will find in this issue the Registration Forms for the 8th Air Force Historical Society Annual, October 11–16, 2011 Reunion and the Sheraton Westport Hotel Lakeside Chalet in St. Louis, MO. I hope that I will see you there.



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# THE “BLUE CHAMPAGNE” MYSTERY SOLVED

In the December 2010 issue of the *Hardlife Herald* there was an article about two planes named “*Blue Champagne*” and the mystery of ‘how and when’ the names originated. In order to set the record straight on this ‘mystery, the following letter was received by Chuck Smith from Craig Gillis, the son of Drue Gillis, the ball-turret gunner on “*Blue Champagne*.”

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Dear Chuck,

Thank you for your letter concerning “the mystery of two “*Blue Champagnes*.”” It will be my pleasure to try and set the record straight on this “mystery.”

First, some background on my dad, M. Drue Gillis. Like other men of the time, he grew up poor on a farm in Maryland’s rural eastern shore. He had what I call “God’s gift to draw.” He left home in 1938 to come to Washington, DC to study commercial art and along with commercial art, he got into the design of window displays and exhibits. After WWII, he started his own company and later another exhibit’s business, becoming highly successful and providing a good life for his wife and two sons. I had the honor and pleasure of working with him in the family business for many years until he retired in 1990 and the business was closed. I learned a lot about business, design, construction, graphics, and photography, many things I never learned in college. Many people say I’m a carbon copy of my dad in looks and disposition. Unfortunately, I did not inherit his talent in art skills and can’t draw for crap!

I probably know more about the history of the “*Blue Champagne*” and her crew than anyone alive now. From the time I was old enough to comprehend my dad’s war experiences and those of his fellow crew mates during visits and reunions,

I listened with rapt attention. Many of dad’s combat experiences I later experienced myself when I flew in Vietnam.

So here is the true story of the two “*Blue Champagnes*.”



**Color pigment paint was almost impossible to acquire in England in 1943, but by barter and doing artwork for others, dad got the required paint. He painted the nose art on both sides of the nose.**

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The B-17 my dad and crew trained on in the states and flew to England with a ferry pilot was not the one that they flew in combat. Upon arrival in England at the 548th Squadron, 385th Bomb Group, the aircraft was taken from them for reasons unknown. They were given another B-17 which was "tired" and this would become the first "*Blue Champagne*." (Note: 385th BGA records indicate this "*Blue Champagne*" could be A/C #42-3547.)

One night the enlisted crew was sitting around the barracks trying to think of a name for their aircraft. Many names were offered and rejected. Dad put forth the name "*Blue Champagne*" after the popular

the other officers.

Color pigment paint was almost impossible to acquire in England in 1943, but by barter and doing art-work for others, dad got the required paint. He painted the nose art on both sides of the nose. After a couple of missions, their aircraft started to have grievous supercharger problems and was replaced with Aircraft #42-37977. Dad had to again paint the nose art on #42-37977 and this is the aircraft they did their remaining missions on until being shot down on April 11, 1944.

Exactly what happened to the first "*Blue Champagne*" I don't know. However, I do know that it made my dad's blood boil when he received

called these folks" REMFs."

The only photo of the second "*Blue Champagne*" is the one enclosed which was taken shortly before they were shot down. The aircraft met its final end crashing into the woods near Stettin, Germany, which is now part of Poland. Hanging in his parachute, dad watched her crash. There was no post-crash fire because flak damage had torn the gas tanks open and no gas was the reason they went down.

Dad hit the ground hard, breaking his leg, and he was captured along with the rest of the crew. Eventually, the enlisted crew was sent to Stalag XVII-B near Kriens, Austria, where they would spend 13 months as POWs. On an exchange program to Austria in 1964, I had the opportunity to visit the old POW camp site. It was a very sobering moment.

That's the true story of the two "*Blue Champagnes*" as I know it and my dad did the art work and flew on both aircraft.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to set this matter straight. Any other information I may be of assistance on, please let me know.

—S. Craig Gillis

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song of the time. Reaction to this name was mediocre at best. Then my dad said, "How about that name, if I paint a semi-nude woman reclining in a cocktail glass with bubbles along with the name?" That sold the crew, the aircraft commander and

his 385th newsletter and saw the photos of the original "*Blue Champagne*" with what he called "ground grippers" (real echelon personnel) posing with the aircraft around the nose. I kind of like the term "ground grippers" because in Vietnam, we

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A hotdog at the ball game beats roast beef at the Ritz

— Humphrey Bogart

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# CURRY'S COURAGE

## The Story of S/Sgt Melvin H. Curry

### By Ian McLachlan

In December 2010, Ian and Sue McLachlan met Wayne and Caroline Speers, granddaughter of Melvin H. Curry, and guided them around Great Ashfield, and pointed out the memorials of the 385th Bomb Group achievements. Caroline's grandfather, Melvin H. Curry, served with the 550th Squadron and she had the opportunity to follow some of his flight path into 385th BG history. We were ably supported by Roy Barker and Robert Dyball showing us their land on which the airbase was situated as well as the few dilapidated buildings still remaining. One could imagine hearing the voices of the young airmen grumbling as they arouse from their sacks to face another nerve-wracking tryst with fate. One could only imagine their thoughts still haunt the buildings. Ducking into an air-raid shelter, we wondered if Melvin went down those steps when on May 23, 1944 a German raider bombed Great Ashfield and burned out the B-17, "*Powerful Katrina*", the only loss of an 8th Air Force B-17 in this manner.

The records show that Sgt. Melvin H. Curry arrived at Great Ashfield on April 26, 1944, and flew his first mission (M-105) to Laon on May 9, 1944. May was a busy month for the 385th BG, and the 8th Air Force, bombing both strategic and tactical targets in preparation of the forthcoming invasion of Europe. By

June 2nd, Melvin had flown seven missions with 2nd Lt. Roger Schock, and on that day they were flying A/C 42-39918, "*Stormy Angel*", a veteran of over thirty missions.

Flying with the 551st Squadron, the crew consisted of 2nd Lt Roger L. Schock-P; F/O Richard F. Ahlheim-CP; 2nd Lt Emerson E. Branson-N; F/O John E. Brenish-B; S/ Sgt Ray A. Flora-RO; S/Sgt Melvin H. Cury-BTG; S/Sgt William A. Wesley-TTG; Sgt John M. Connolly-RWG; S/Sgt Bernard B. Soloman-TG; and Ralph M. Valvano LWG. This was the second mission that for the 385th BG and their plane was one of 13 leaving Great Ashfield to join a force of over 300 planes. The mission, code name "Cover", was to convince the enemy that an invasion was planned for the Pas De Calais area.

At their objective, the 385th planes were bracketed by heavy flak, and the *Stormy Angel* was hit by the flak in the vicinity of Meulan-les-Mureaux, France. The #3 engine was on fire and the ship began to lose altitude. Ten chutes were seen to be coming out of the plane before it dived into the ground and exploded. All chutes cleared the plane and opened. The Missing Aircrew Combat Report (MACR) showed that all crew members, except Sgt Curry, were eventually returned to duty. For Sgt Curry there was simply a question mark.

Several days later, the Group Chaplain, Captain (Father) James Kincannon, wrote to Melvin's father: "Dear Mr. Curry, In times such as this, I hardly know just what to say because I only know in part your distress and anxiety. But I do feel that you can find courage, comfort, and hope as the Psalmist found when he said '*I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills from which cometh my help. My help cometh from the Lord which made the heavens and the earth. The Lord shall preserve thy going out and thy coming in from this time forth and for evermore.*' Since your son, S/Sgt Melvin H. Curry, 37384305, has been reported as missing in action, we have been anxiously waiting for some report. Melvin was a fine man, a good soldier, and a man of good character. I have great confidence in our men because they know what to do in an emergency such as this, and in faith, hope and prayer, we anxiously wait for good news.

Melvin's Commanding Officer, Col Elliot Vandevanter, Jr., the Commanding General, Eighth Air Force, and the men of this station extend to you our deepest sympathy. It is our hope that God will be with you in your time of distress and that He will give you comfort and strength. We are very much interested in your son and his welfare, and our prayers join with yours for his safety."



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Tumbling from 20,000 feet, Melvin was descending into enemy occupied territory, but not eyes observing him were hostile. Made-moiselle Marthe Ferret, resistance group "Goelette" had seen several parachutes leave the plane and hoped that some might drop into her resistance movement.

Melvin had little control over his landing place, however he observed and fell near farm buildings and a pond. Upon landing, he collapsed and bundled his chute, and stuffed it into the mud surrounding the pond,

### **A storm of machine gun bullets lashed the undergrowth and water. Melvin almost considered surrender, but he held his nerve and remained hidden.**

not a moment too soon. He heard and recognized the guttural voices and he sunk into the water amidst the weeds. Some moments later, a storm of machine gun bullets lashed the undergrowth and water. Melvin almost considered surrender, but he held his nerve and remained hidden. Evidently uncertain, the Germans moved away. But Melvin remained still. Later the enemy returned and again lashed the undergrowth with machine pistols, but again Melvin remained still. After waiting many minutes, he eased himself from the pond and edged to an outhouse and slipped inside for shelter from the night chill.

Melvin kept himself hidden all of the next day, and the next. Toward

evening, hungry and thirsty, he crept outside and saw a civilian farm worker. He whistled softly but there was no response, and he returned to the shed. After some time, he heard a low whistle. Then again – a low whistle. Cautiously, he emerged from the shed. The farmer again softly whistled and gestured to be followed. He was now in the brave hands of the Hardouing family with warm food and dry clothes.

Later, Melvin was taken to a barn and hidden among bales of straw. He slept comfortably that night and the

next morning the Hardouing son brought food for the newest member of their flock of sheep. A few days later, an elderly school teacher who spoke English and German told Melvin the invasion was underway. Due to this event, the moving of evaders was more difficult and Melvin spent ten more days hidden in the barn. Both Melvin and the Hardouings were concerned about falling into the hands of the SS. Melvin would likely become a POW, but to the family, it meant death to the men and a concentration camp for the women. Finally, the "Goelette" unit deemed it safe to move him through their network. As he left, Mrs Hardouings gave him a necklace bearing a tiny religious medallion – representing their prayers for his safe-

keeping. "Goelette" had prepared a false identification card and Melvin became Louis Paulo, an inconspicuous worker.

On June 11, Mlle Marthe Ferret, a member of "Goelette", met Melvin and reassured both he and the Hardouings that movement plans were in hand. On the 13th, she returned by bicycle with two Frenchmen, Adrien Bories and Alphonse Pasco, also members of "Goelette", and provided Melvin with a spare cycle. Appearing as youngsters out cycling, they were guided by Marthe westward to St. Julien de la Liegue et la Boissaye. Progress was slow, and knowing Melvin needed energy, Marthe gave him a little precious sugar to sustain him the remaining distance into the hands of another resistance group, the Marquis de Penette near the town of Carcouet. The Lemarie family were now his guardians, but now he had an American companion, Lt. Drake, a Mustang pilot shot down on 9 June. Two days later they were escorted by Adrian and Alphonse toward the Allied lines to Rene and Genevieve Tassel near Evreux. In town they stayed with Mr. Gaetan Moutier and then to the farm of the Fiora family near Gilsolles. On the 22nd the German entered the village and Melvin and Drake were moved to another farm more secure. (Tragically, a few weeks later, four Mustangs strafed Mr. Fiora and his son's wheat truck. Both were badly wounded and the father died two days later). From the Fiora farm they were under the protection of Mr. Gilbert and wife, Mar-

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celle who were also protecting four resistance fighters from Conches Now in the Marquis de Feriere – Clocher resistance unit, it was considered too much of a risk to travel further, so all waited for the advancing Allies.

On August 23rd, the 82nd Armored Reconnaissance Battalion, US Army, suddenly found themselves with two American aviators as their guests. Escorting to the rear, the party fell under heavy attack to enemy artillery with deadly shards of shrapnel across the area, both airmen were hit. Now delayed by by time in a Field Hospital, both were treated for non serious wounds and both were evacuated to safety.

Melvin did not consider himself courageous, but he acknowledged the French Resistance who bravely risked their own lives to deliver him to safety. He did not fly any additional combat missions since if shot down again and captured, his knowledge of the resistance movement personnel might jeopardize their lives.

All men of the *Stormy Angel* returned home and moved on. Melvin treasured the necklace received from Mrs. Hardouing. In 1985 Melvin passed away and the necklace was passed on to his granddaughter, Caroline. Research by her husband unlocked some of this story resulting in their trip to Great Ash-

field. Wayne's investigations were confirmed by Frenchman Rene Psarolis. *Stormy Angel* exploded in the private forest of La Londe near the village of Moulineux. It is possible that pieces of the plane may be still scattered among the trees. One thing Rene does know is the warm welcome the Speers would receive from the descendents of those heroic French resistance families. Both Rene and this author would welcome the adventure of finding the pond in which Melvin hid, keeping his cool amidst bursts of machinegun fire. This took courage – Melvin Curry's courage.

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## **U.S.S. BARB: THE SUB THAT SANK A TRAIN**

In 1973, an Italian submarine named *Enrique Tazzoli* was sold for a paltry \$100,000 as scrap metal. This submarine, given to the Italian Navy in 1953, was originally the *U.S.S. Barb*, an incredible veteran of WWII service with a heritage that never should have passed so unnoticed, went into the graveyards of the metal recyclers.

The *U.S.S. Barb* was a pioneer, paving the way for the first submarine launched missiles and flying a battle flag unlike that of any other ship. In addition to the Medal of Honor ribbon at the top of the flag identifying the heroism of its captain, Commander Eugene "Lucky"

Fluckey, the bottom of the flag bore the image of a Japanese locomotive. The *U.S.S. Barb* was the submarine that "SANK A TRAIN."

### **JULY 18, 1945 (Patience Bay, Off the coast of Karafuto, Japan):**

It was after 4am and Cmdr. Fluckey was peering at the map before him. It was the 12th war patrol of the *Barb*, the 5th under Cmdr. Fluckey. Normally relieved after four patrols, he struck a deal with the Admiral to make one more patrol with the men of the *Barb*. No one suspected that he had made this deal prior to his fourth and that Cmdr. Fluckey's success would be so great that he

would be awarded the Medal of Honor.

Cmdr. Fluckey smiled as he remembered that patrol. "Lucky" Fluckey they called him. On January 8th the *Barb* had emerged victorious from a running two-hour night battle after sinking a large enemy ammunition ship. Two weeks later in Mamkwan Harbor he found more than 30 enemy ships. In only 30 feet of water his crew had unleashed the sub's forward torpedoes, then turned and fired four from the stern. Pushing the *Barb* to full speed, he made a daring withdrawal to the open seas, after recording eight hits on six enemy ships.

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What could possibly be left to accomplish for the Commander who had received the Medal of Honor? He looked again at the map showing the rail line that ran along the enemy coast line as his crew buzzed excitedly about bagging a train!!

The rail line itself wouldn't be a problem. A shore patrol could go ashore under cover of darkness to plant one of the sub's 55-pound scuttling charges. But this morning "Lucky" Fluckey and his officers were puzzling over how they could blow not only the rails, but also one of the trains that shuttled supplies to equip the Japanese war machine. But no matter how crazy the idea sounded, the *Barb's* skipper would not risk the lives of his men. Thus the problem... how to detonate the charge at the moment the train passed, without endangering the life of the shore party.

If you don't look for solutions, you'll never find them. But, sometimes they arrive in the most unusual fashion. Cruising beneath the surface to evade the enemy planes circling overhead, the monotony was broken with a new idea: instead of having a crewman on shore to trigger the explosions to blow both the rails and a passing train, why not let the train BLOW ITSELF up? Billy Hatfield was explaining how he, as a kid, cracked nuts on a railroad track by placing the nuts between two ties so the sagging of the rail under the weight of the train would break them open. "Just like cracking nuts," he explained. "To complete the circuit (detonating the 55-pound

charge) we hook in a micro switch between two ties. We don't set it off, the TRAIN does."

The solution found, there was no shortage of volunteers; all that was needed was the proper weather, a cloud cover to darken the moon for the mission ashore. "Lucky" Fluckey established his own criteria for the volunteers:

- No married men would be included in the party, except for Hatfield,
- The party would include members from each department,
- The party would be split between regular Navy and Navy Reserve sailors,
- Half of the men had to have been Boy Scouts, experienced in how to handle medical emergencies.
- "Lucky" Fluckey would lead the saboteurs himself.

When the names of the 8 selected sailors was announced, it was greeted with a mixture of excitement and disappointment. Among the disappointed was Cmdr. Fluckey who surrendered his opportunity at the insistence of his officers that "as commander he belonged with the *Barb*," coupled with a threat from one that "I swear I'll send a message to ComSubPac if you attempt this (joining the shore party himself)." Even a Japanese POW being held on the *Barb* wanted to go, promising not to try to escape.

In the meantime, there was to be no more harassment of Japanese shipping or shore operations by the *Barb* until the train mission was accomplished. The crew would "lay

low", preparing their equipment, train, and wait for the weather.

**JULY 22, 1945 (Patience Bay, Off the coast of Karafuto, Japan):** Patience Bay was wearing thin the patience of Cmdr. Fluckey and his innovative crew. Everything was ready. In the four days the saboteurs had anxiously watched the skies for cloud cover, the inventive crew of the *Barb* had built their micro switch. When the need was proposed for a pick and shovel to bury the explosive charge and batteries, the *Barb's* engineers had cut up steel plates in the lower flats of an engine room, then bent and welded them to create the needed tools. The only things beyond their control were the weather....and time. Only five days remained in the *Barb's* patrol.

Anxiously watching the skies, Cmdr. Fluckey noticed plumes of cirrus clouds, then white stratus clouds capping the mountain peaks ashore. A cloud cover was building to hide the three-quarters moon. This would be the night.

**MIDNIGHT, July 23, 1945:** The *Barb* had crept within 950 yards of the shoreline. If it was somehow seen from shore it would probably be mistaken for a schooner or Japanese patrol boat. No one would suspect an American submarine so close to shore or in such shallow waters. Slowly the small boats were lowered to the water and the eight saboteurs began paddling toward the enemy beach. Twenty-five minutes later they pulled the



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boats ashore and walked on the surface of the Japanese homeland.

Stumbling through noisy waist-high grasses, crossing a highway and then into a 4-foot drainage ditch, the saboteurs made their way to the railroad tracks. Three men were posted as guards, and Markuson was assigned to examine a nearby water tower. The *Barb's* auxiliary man climbed the ladder, then stopped in shock as he realized it was an enemy lookout tower...an OCCUPIED tower. Fortunately the Japanese sentry was peacefully sleeping and Markuson was able to quietly withdraw and warn the raiding party.

The news from Markuson caused the men digging the placement for the explosive charge to continue their work more slowly and quietly. Twenty minutes later the holes had been dug and the explosives and batteries hidden beneath fresh soil.

During the planning for the mission the saboteurs had been told that, with the explosives in place, all would retreat a safe distance while Hatfield made the final connection. If the sailor who had once cracked walnuts on the railroad tracks slipped during this final dangerous procedure, his would be the only life lost. On this night it was the only order the saboteurs refused to obey, all of them peering anxiously over Hatfield's shoulder to make sure he did it right. The men had come too far to be disappointed by a switch failure.

#### **1:32 A.M.**

Watching from the deck of the *Barb*, Cmdr. Fluckey allowed himself a sigh of relief as he noticed the flashlight signal from the beach announcing the departure of the shore party. He had skillfully, and daringly, guided the *Barb* within 600 yards of the enemy beach. There was less than 5 feet of water beneath the sub's keel, but Fluckey wanted to be close in case trouble arose and a daring rescue of his saboteurs became necessary.

#### **1:45 A.M.**

The two boats carrying his saboteurs were only halfway back to the *Barb* when the sub's machine gunner yelled, "Captain! Another train coming up the tracks!" The Commander grabbed a megaphone and yelled through the night, "Paddle like the devil!", knowing full well that they wouldn't reach the *Barb* before the train hit the micro switch.

#### **1:47 A.M.**

The darkness was shattered by a brilliant light and the roar of the explosion. The boilers of the locomotive blew, shattered pieces of the engine blowing 200 feet into the air. Behind it the cars began to accordion into each other, bursting into flame and adding to the magnificent fireworks display. Five minutes later the saboteurs were lifted to the deck by their exuberant comrades as the *Barb* turned to slip back to safer waters. Moving at only two knots, it would be a while before the *Barb* was into waters deep enough to allow it to

submerge. It was a moment to savor, the culmination of teamwork, ingenuity and daring by the Commander and all his crew. "Lucky" Fluckey's voice came over the intercom, "All hands below deck not absolutely needed to maneuver the ship have permission to come topside." He didn't have to repeat the invitation. Hatches sprang open as the proud sailors of the *Barb* gathered on her decks to proudly watch the distant fireworks display. The *Barb* had "sunk" a Japanese TRAIN.

On August 2, 1945 the *Barb* arrived at Midway, her twelfth war patrol concluded. Meanwhile, United States military commanders had pondered the prospect of an armed assault on the Japanese homeland. Military tacticians estimated such an invasion would cost more than a million American casualties. Instead of such a costly armed offensive to end the war, on August 6th, the B-29 bomber "*Enola Gay*" dropped a single atomic bomb on the city of Hiroshima, Japan. Second such bomb unleashed 4 days later on Nagasaki, Japan cause Japan to agree to surrender terms on August 15th. On September 2, 1945 in Tokyo Harbor the document ending the war in the Pacific was signed.

The story of the saboteurs of the U.S.S. *Barb* is one of those unique little known stories of World War II. It becomes increasingly important when one realizes that eight sailors who blew up a train near Kashiho, Japan conducted the ONLY GROUND COMBAT OPERATION on the Japanese "homeland."

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# ARMY AIR FORCE WWII STATISTICS

## From the AAF Statistical Digest

In less than four years (December 1941-August 1945) the US Army Air Forces (USAAF) lost 14,903 pilots, aircrew and assorted personnel plus 13,873 airplanes inside the continental United States. They were the result of 52,651 accidents in 45 months. They average 1,170 aircraft accidents per month - nearly 40 per day.

Almost 1,000 army airplanes were lost en route from the US to foreign regions. However, 43,581 aircraft were lost overseas with 20,633 attributed to non-combat causes and 22,948 on combat mis-

tresses loss was 26 planes, 5.6% of the 464 planes dispatched from the Marianas.

By the end of the war, over 40,000 airmen were killed in combat theatres and another 18,000 wounded. Some 12,000 missing men were declared dead, including a number "liberated" by Soviets but never returned. More than 41,000 were captured, half of the 5,400 held by the Japanese died in captivity, compared with one-tenth in German hands. Total combat casualties are considered to be 121,867.

enough not only for US Army, Navy and Marine Corps, but for allies as diverse as Britain, China, and Russia. In fact from 1943 onward, American produced more planes than Britain and Russia combined, and more than Germany and Japan together from 1941-1945.

However, our enemies took massive losses. Through much of 1944, the Luftwaffe sustained about 25% of their aircrews and 40 aircraft per month. And in late 1944 into 1945, nearly half of the pilots in Japanese squadrons had flown less than 200 hours. The disparity of two years before had been completely change by the allies.

In 1942, the United States sent many airmen to war with a minimum of training, some fighter pilots with less than one hour in their assigned aircraft. In 1943, one Fighter Group trained on P-39s but on arriving in England was assigned Mustangs prior to their first mission. An experienced P-51 pilot had about 30 hours in a P-31. Many had less than five hours, and some had only one hour.

Many combat units transitioned in combat. The attitude was, "They all have a stick and a throttle. Go fly 'em." The 4th Fighter Group converted from P-47s to P-51s in February 1944, with no time for a stand down to transition. Col. Donald Blakeslee, the Group com-

**By the end of the war, over 40,000 airmen were killed in combat theatres and another 18,000 wounded. Some 12,000 missing men were declared dead, including a number "liberated" by Soviets but never returned.**

sions with 18,418 lost against the Western Axis. In a single 376 plane raid in August 1943, 60 B-17s were shot down, a 16% loss rate. In 1942-43 it was statistical impossible for bomber crews to complete a 25-mission tour in Europe.

Pacific theatre losses were less (4,530 in combat) owing to smaller forces committed. Against Tokyo on May 25, 1945, the B-29 Superfor-

USAAF manpower made up the deficit caused by the AAF casualties. The AAF's peak strength reached in 1944 with 2,372,000 personnel, nearly twice the previous year's strength.

Aircraft losses were huge, but so was aircraft production. From 1941 through 1945, American industry delivered more than 276,000 military aircraft. That number was

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mander, said, "You can learn to fly '51s on the way to the target."

In WWII flying safety took a back seat to combat. The AAF's worst accident rate was recorded for the A-36 invader version of the P-51 with a rate of 274 accidents per 100,000 flying hours. Next worst rates were the P-39 at 245 per, the P-40 with 188 per, and the P-36 with 139 per 100,000 flying hours. All were powered by Allison engines.

Bomber accidents were fewer but more expensive. The B-17 and B-24 averaged about 30 and 35 accidents per 100,000 flying hours, respectively. The B-29 accident rate was worst with 40 mishaps per 100,000 flying hours. It was too urgently need to stand down for mere safety reasons. The original cadre of the 58th Bomb Wing was to have 400 hours of multi-engine time, but there were not enough pilots with only about 10% with overseas experience.

The B-29 maintenance personnel were also inexperienced. A little more than half of them had previous experience with the R3350 complicated and troublesome power-plant.

All these rates are horrific when compared with the 1980 to 2000 Air

Force's major mishap rate of less than two per 100,000 flying hours.

Yet with all these mishaps and lack of experience the United States Army, Navy and Marine Air Forces were a major part of the victory in all theatres of WWII, mainly

craft of all types. Today the US Air Force employs 327,000 personnel (plus 170,000 civilians) with 5,500+ manned and about 200 unmanned aircraft, about 12% of the manpower and 7% of the aircraft of the WWII AAF peak.

**With all these mishaps and lack of experience the United States Army, Navy and Marine Air Forces were a major part of the victory in all theatres of WWII, mainly due to the excellent training of their ground and air personnel.**

due to the excellent training of their ground and air personnel.

The greatest unsung success story of the AAF training was the training of Navigators. Some 50,000 AAF navigators graduated during the war. Many who had never flew out of sight of land before leaving the United States for a war zone found their way across oceans and continents without getting lost or running out of fuel. Such is a credit to the AAF's educational standards.

At its peak in mid-1944, the Army Air Forces had over 2.3 million people and nearly 80,000 air-

#### **In Summation:**

Whether there will ever be another air war like that experienced in 1940-1945 is doubtful, as the fighters and bombers of yesterday's battles has given way to helicopters and remotely-controller drones of today's battles. But within living memory, men left this earth in 1,000-plane formations and fought major battles five miles high, leaving a legacy that will remain timeless.

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The most terrifying words in the English language are:

"I'm from the government and I'm here to help."

—Ronald Reagan, 1986



# GROUP MISSION NO. 285, 7 APRIL 1945

by Bill Varnedoe

Group Mission No. 285, April 7, 1945 was to an ordinance warehouse at Gustrow. Although we hit the target visually, there was an absence of flak. However, three ME-109s attacked the formation head on. Then a single ME-109 came straight at our formation from the rear. Our tail gunner, Herman L. Lancaster, and Charles Stewart, the tail gunner on the Burich plane, which was flying in the low diamond as the tail-end Charlie position, both opened fire at the attacking enemy plane. However, the ME-109 continued its approach to the formation without firing at our planes, but continued to approach the formation and rammed the Burich plane behind the No. 2 engine. After completion of the mission, we speculated that one of the tail gunners (Stewart and/or Lancaster) must have killed the pilot causing his plane to ram the Burich aircraft. Whatever our thoughts were about the German military, we didn't think they were suicidal. Both Burich's B-17 and the ME-109 went down. Our tail gunner, Sgt Lancaster, received one-half credit for the German kill. However, he almost had to pay for some warped gun barrels, as a rigid SOP mandated only short bursts of gunfire. Since the German pilot did not break-off his attack, Lt. George Crow, our pilot,

interceded for Lancaster, and his action was deemed justifiable.

I received additional information about this incident from a POW American GI, William P. Marciano of Hazelton, PA, who witnessed the ramming. He saw a gunner's bubble break off the plane and fall clear of the fire. In a moment he saw a parachute jerk a man out of the bubble, then disappear over the horizon. Later that day, six POWs were picked to bury an American airman. One of the POWs was given permission to pray over the body and managed to remove the dead man's belt. On the underside of the belt was marked "S-3906." Mr. Marciano, not in the burial party, asked to keep the belt so that he might be able to find the dead airman's family after the war. Searching government records he was able to discover the rammed aircraft crew's identities. He found that the belt marked with "S-3906" belonged to Charles J. Stewart of Minooka, Pennsylvania. In June 1949, Charles J. Stewart's body was returned home to be buried in St. Joseph's Cemetery in Minooka.

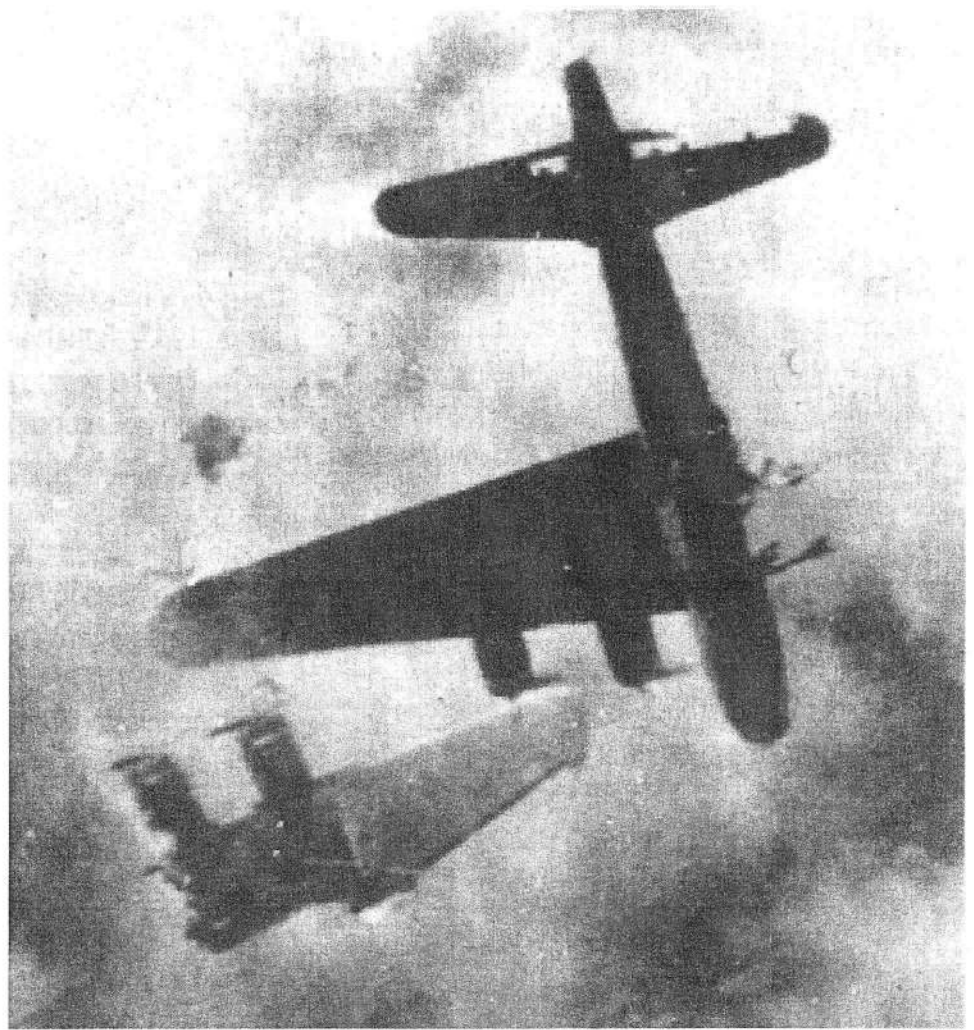
In 2004, I learned that the ramming was indeed deliberate. A German ME-109 pilot, named Walter Otto, told in his book about his ramming of a B-17 on that day. He wrote:

"On completion of my training as a pilot, I was posted to a Special Command at Hirshing near Linz where I was instructed on the four-engined Flying Fortress. We were told that we were to be flown to Italy in a JU-52, with the aim of capturing the Allied heavy bombers whilst their engines were being warmed up at the break of dawn and ferry them back to Germany. Fortunately nothing came of the whole thing. In Autumn of 1944, several combat units were disbanded due to lack of aircraft fuel. I was given the choice of being sent to the Eastern Front, or to become a ramming fighter. I chose the latter and received further instruction on the ME-109. I finally became operational for the Ramkommando Elbe Operation on 7 April 1945, operating from Prague Gbel airfield. Our ME-109s were fitted with an additional belly fuel tank and with an armoured frontal windshield, but without any guns or camouflage. With the belly tanks we had about three and a half hours flying endurance. If I remember correctly, we were informed that 200 aircraft were to take part in the ramming mission, but I don't know if all the machines did in fact start on the mission. At 0900 hours, we were scrambled in the direction of Brockon, and climbed to a height at 10,000 meters. During the flight,

I heard the Deutschland Song and the Horst-Wessel Song in my headphones, and we were also told to "save your Fatherland, think of the women and children." At last at 11 o'clock, we were told to go ahead with the ramming mission.

The four-engined Fortresses came in from Belgium and were on a heading probably for a bombing attack on Stendal. I successfully rammed one bomber and was fortunate to bail out, coming down back to earth by parachute at Stadthagen, near Steinhuder Lake. From there I traveled by train, through, Leipzig, Chemnitz to my home town, where I stayed for two days between 9 and 11 April before going back to Prague. On arrival, I found out that there were only a few of my comrades left there. From Prague we transferred to Pocking and from there we were to a small satellite airfield at Klagenfurt, which was situated near the railway yards for goods trains. A handful of BU-181s were stationed at this field, and I received orders to take off and try to blow up the bridge over the Danube at Pressburg. I took off on 5 May at 2100 hours in my BU-181 and headed fro Pressburg. It was my luck to receive hits from ground fire forcing me to crash-land on the Feld Mountain, which precluded me from having to blow up the bridge. Early the next morning, I traveled back to Bruckon the Mur by train, where I was taken prisoner. I was taken to a POW camp at Ulm, from which I was released 14 days later."

We now thought that the para-



**Burich, after the collision.**

chute seen on the ground was the German pilot, and that Burich's tail gunner fell without his parachute, as he wouldn't have had time to hook it on to his harness. Still later, in 2007, I received an e-mail from a German who said that Lake Steinhuder was too far from our mission to have been Fw Otto. It must have been another Rammkommando pilot. This communication exemplifies the intent and truth of the ramming incident. Therefore, the parachute seen by us could have been Burich's tail gunner's chute.

On the way back from Mission

385, George Lentz's oxygen system failed and Lt. Crow sent him down into the nose with me, thinking there was an extra oxygen outlet there, but there was none. However, we were letting down to a lower altitude and Lentz was OK. We were glad to let down as our windows were frosting over and we had trouble flying in formation with the poor visibility. The lower altitude melted the frost away.

# BERLIN

**November 23, 1943:** The first briefing for the bombing of Berlin was planned, but the mission was scrubbed.

**March 4, 1944:** Mission to Berlin again scrubbed, but 30 B-17s of the 3rd BD made it to the target.

**March 6, 1944:** Berlin felt the full brunt of the 8th Air Force. Primary targets were the industrial areas in the Berlin Suburbs. German radar units picked up the large number of aircraft over East Anglia and the Luftwaffe had time to concentrate its aircraft to defend Berlin. A large number of bombers failed to return after 1,648 tons of bombs were dropped on the targets. Over 800 fighters (P-38s, P-47s, and P-51s) flew escort for the B-17s and B-24s. Unescorted bomb groups in the middle of the 3rd BD stream bore the brunt of the German fighters with the 95th BG losing 8 planes, and the 100th BG losing 15 planes, with one 100th BG Squadron, the 350th BS, losing 10 planes.

**March 8, 1944:** The Berlin suburbs were again the target of the 539 B-17s and B-24s with 1,059 tons of bombs dropped, mostly on the Erkener ball bearing plant which received 75 direct hits. Again over 800 fighters escorted the bombers.

**February 3, 1945:** The next-to-last 8th Air Force mission to Berlin was the largest bombing mission against a single target.

**1940 to 1945:** Allied Air Forces flew 314 missions to Berlin, the Capital of Germany, its largest city, and the heart of Germany. Berlin housed the Hqs. of the Third Reich and the German armed forces, and was a vital transportation center. It also housed many aircraft assembly and military vehicle factories. It was well protected by searchlights, anti-aircraft batteries and airfields with thousands of German air force fighters surrounding the area.

Some dates and information taken from WWII 8th Air Force veteran Craig Harris' "A Time-line History of the Mighty Eighth".

# MISSION TO BERLIN

A book "*MISSION TO BERLIN*" is a general-interest book, Stephan Ambrose-style, World War II history, that focuses on the B-17 Flying Fortress crews who attacked Berlin on February 3, 1945, in the largest mission ever flown against a single target. The book also includes a new look at the entire bombing campaign in Europe.

The young men who flew and maintained the B-17s are at the center of the story but "*MISSION TO BERLIN*" also has lengthy passages about Americans who flew and maintained the B-24 Liberator, P-47 Thunderbolt and P-51 Mustang. There is a huge segment about the P-47 Thunderbolt in this book.

"*MISSION TO BERLIN*" takes the reader on a World War II bombing mission from the airfields of the English countryside to Berlin and back. Largely in the veteran's own words, it covers the aircrews, ground crews and escort fighters that protected the bombers on their mission to the Capital of the Third Reich.

The book is dedicated to pilot Marvin D. Lord, co-pilot Robert Des Lauriers, toggler Ray Frette, and tail gunner Frank Chrastka. You'll encounter air aces like Brooks Liles and Grant Turlry, and bomber pilots like Mike Barta and Manny Klette. The book should be of interest to the warbird community and to veterans and reunion groups. A veteran of one of the bomb groups looked at the pre-publication copy said, "I learned something new from it."

If you would like to get a first-edition signed copy directly from the author, Robert J. Dorr, send him a check for \$35.00 to cover the book, signature, packaging and shipping. It is very important that any communication to him must include (1) for whom to sign the book, and (2) the address to where it will be sent. Any questions, PICK UP THE PHONE and call (703) 264-8950.

Send a request for "*MISSION TO BERLIN*" – *The American Airmen Who Took the War to the Heart of Hitler's Reich* to:

Robert J. Dorr  
3411 Valewood Drive  
Oakton, VA 22124  
robert.f.dorr@cox.net  
(703) 264-8950



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# 8TH AIR FORCE HISTORICAL SOCIETY ANNUAL REUNION, OCTOBER 11-16, 2011 REUNION

SHERATON WESTPORT LAKESIDE CHALET – ST. LOUIS, MO

## Tuesday, October 11

2:00pm - 6:00pm Early Bird Registration open

## Wednesday, October 12

8:00am - 10:00am Reunion Registration open  
9:00am Memorabilia / Gathering Room open for duration of reunion  
PX opens for duration of reunion  
9:00am - 2:30pm CITY TOUR  
1:00pm - 8AFHS Board Meeting  
2:00pm - 6:00pm Reunion Registration open

## Thursday, October 13

7:00am - 8:30am Continental Breakfast  
8:30am - 10:00am Unit Advisory and Chapter & Unit Dev. Meeting  
9:00am - 10:00am Reunion Registration open  
10:30am - 3:30pm KIMMSWICK HISTORIC TOUR  
3:00pm - 6:00pm Reunion Registration open  
5:30pm - 6:30pm Cash Bar Reception  
6:30pm - 9:00pm Dinner buffet

## Friday, October 14

7:00am - 8:30am Full Breakfast  
9:00am - 10:00am Reunion Registration open  
9:00am - 10:30am Individual Group Meetings  
10:45am - 2:00pm LUNCH CRUISE  
2:30pm - 4:00pm Next Generation Meeting  
3:00pm - 6:00pm Reunion Registration open  
5:30pm - 6:30pm 8AFHS Cash Bar Reception  
6:30pm - 9:00pm Rendezvous Dinners and 'Hangar Flying'

## Saturday, October 15

7:00am - 8:30am Full Breakfast Buffet  
9:00am - 10:30am General Membership Meeting  
11:30am - 4:00pm ST. CHARLES HISTORIC TOUR  
12:00pm - 5:00pm 8AFHS Board Meeting  
5:00pm - 5:30pm Reunion Registration open  
5:30pm - 6:30pm 8AFHS Cash Bar Reception  
6:30pm - 8AFHS Gala Banquet

## Sunday, October 16

7:00am - 8:30am Continental Breakfast

*Air Force related presentations may be added to the program as plans continue to be made.*

Driver and guide gratuities are not included in the tour prices.  
Please be at the bus boarding area at least five minutes prior to the scheduled time.  
All tours must have a minimum of thirty people, unless otherwise stated.

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**8<sup>th</sup> AIR FORCE HISTORICAL SOCIETY ANNUAL REUNION  
SHERATON WESTPORT – LAKESIDE CHALET – ST. LOUIS, MO  
OCTOBER 11 – 16, 2011**

**REGISTRATION INSTRUCTIONS**

See choices below and complete the Registration Form noting your event choices and personal information. By "WWII GROUP," we're asking for the group or unit in which you served (specific Bomb Group, Fighter Group, PRG, HQ, etc.). We use this information for tallying totals for each group, nametags, and seating arrangements. If you prefer to sit with a different group, please give us that information too. Remit by mail with check or money order payable to Armed Forces Reunions by September 9, 2011. You may also register and pay with credit card online at [www.afr-reg.com/8afhs](http://www.afr-reg.com/8afhs). A \$6 convenience fee will be added to online credit card reservations. Forms received after September 9 will be accepted on a space available basis only. Hotel reservations should also be made by September 9, 2011.

**ARMED FORCES REUNIONS, INC. CANCELLATION POLICY**

For attendees canceling reunion activities prior to the cut-off date, Armed Forces Reunions, Inc. (AFR) shall process a full refund less a \$5 per person processing fee. Attendees canceling reunion activities after the cut-off date will be refunded to the fullest extent that AFR's vendor commitments and guarantees will allow, less a \$5 processing fee. Cancellations will only be taken Monday through Friday from 9:00am until 5:00pm Eastern Time, excluding holidays. Please call (757) 625-6401 to cancel reunion activities and obtain a cancellation code. Refunds processed 4-6 weeks after reunion. Canceling your hotel reservation doesn't cancel your reunion activities.

**MEALS / EVENTS CHOICES**

**CHOICE #1 TOTAL PACKAGE \$189**

Package includes 7 hotel food functions starting with breakfast on Thursday. Tours are separate.

**CHOICE # 2 PARTIAL PACKAGE \$134**

Package includes 5 hotel food functions starting with breakfast on Friday. Tours are separate.

Breakfast menus: The continental breakfasts on Thursday and Sunday include juice, breakfast breads, cereal, yogurt, fruit, coffee, and tea. The breakfast buffets on Friday and Saturday includes juice, fruit, assorted breakfast breads, eggs, bacon, sausage, potatoes, coffee, and tea.

**CHOICE #3 INDIVIDUAL EVENTS**

Friday Rendezvous Dinner at \$39 and Saturday Banquet at \$44 can be purchased separately, but are included in both packages above.

**TOUR OPTIONS**

Tours and trips are described on the Reunion Highlights Pages. Prices are listed on the registration form. Driver and Guide gratuities are not included in the tour prices.

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## **REUNION HIGHLIGHTS**

### **ST. LOUIS CITY TOUR**

Wednesday, October 12

Enjoy a guided tour of St. Louis. Drive through Forest Park, home of the 1904 World's fair and stop at the Cathedral Basilica to see one of the largest collections of mosaic art. Pass by St. Louis University, Fabulous Fox Theatre, and St. Francis Xavier College Cathedral. You'll stop at Soldier's Memorial, a tribute to the men and women who lost their lives in this country's wars. From there, you'll head to Kiener Plaza, in the very heart of downtown St. Louis with a fabulous view of the Old Court House and the Gateway Arch. Enjoy lunch on your own at one of many eateries. Following lunch, continue past the waterfront and the Gateway Arch, the tallest national monument in the United States. Take in Laclede's Landing, a revitalized 19th century warehouse district with cobblestone streets and cast-iron street lamps as well as the diverse historic community of Soulard. It is one of the oldest neighborhoods in the city with homes dating from the mid to late 1800s. Note: The Cathedral Basilica Tour will not be available in the event of a wedding or other church event.

**9:00am board bus, 2:30pm back at hotel**

**\$39/Person includes bus, guide, and admission. Lunch on your own.**

### **KIMMSWICK HISTORIC TOUR**

Thursday, October 13

Near St. Louis, yet far away from the hustle and bustle of the big city, is the delightful village of Kimmswick. This small town located near the Mississippi River offers a chance to step back into the less hurried days of the 1800s. Enjoy lunch at the popular Blue Owl. The restaurant prepares home-cooked meals and fabulous desserts served on Old English china in a charming atmosphere. You'll be able to select an entrée from six choices along with a yummy dessert. Following lunch you'll head to the home of Mabel-Ruth and her husband, the late Frederick Straub Anheuser. Enjoy the views of the 23-acre grounds from their river-front estate. See a collection of Brewery artifacts and Anheuser family heirlooms including Mrs. Anheuser's Westward Ho Crystal collection and two 1904 hand-carved World's Fair beds. Time will be allowed to browse through the many shops downtown, as well.

**10:30am board bus, 3:30pm back at hotel**

**\$60/Person includes bus, guide, lunch, and admission.**

### **PADDLEWHEELER CRUISE**

Friday, October 14

Enjoy a one-hour cruise with a box lunch on Gateway Riverboats' Becky Thatcher or Tom Sawyer paddlewheelers, reminisce of a time past when the river was the highway to the next port city. Your Captain will narrate and take you back to recapture the vibrant life on the river during the peak of the steamboat era.

**10:45am board bus, 2:00pm back at hotel**

**\$48/Person includes bus, escort, cruise, and box lunch.**

### **RENDEZVOUS DINNERS**

Friday, October 14

Units (BGs, FGs, etc.) with approximately fifty or more people in attendance will have a private room. Smaller groups will be combined with others. Think of this as your "reunion within the reunion." Dinner features Chicken Capri.

**5:30pm Cash Bar Reception, 6:30pm Dinner.**

**Cost is included in both meal packages or \$39 separately.**

### **ST. CHARLES HISTORIC TOUR**

Saturday, October 15

Go back in time in the beautiful town of St. Charles. Walk around the nine-block National Register Historic District, complete with brick streets, gaslights, and charming restored buildings. Browse through one-of-a-kind antique, craft, gift shops, and a variety of quaint restaurants. Consider a tour of the Old Capitol building, dating back to 1821 (small admission fee). Enjoy lunch on your own in one of the many restaurants nearby.

**11:30am board bus, 4:00pm back at hotel**

**\$33/Person includes bus and guide. Lunch on your own.**

### **8<sup>th</sup> AIR FORCE HISTORICAL SOCIETY ANNUAL BANQUET**

Saturday, October 15

Assemble in the ballroom for the Posting of the Colors and Memorial Service. Dinner will be a choice of Cajun Tilapia or Beef Tenderloin and the usual accompaniments. After dinner, we'll proceed with the festivities.

**5:30pm Cash Bar Reception, 6:30pm Banquet.**

**Cost is included in both meal packages or \$44 separately.**



**SHERATON WESTPORT HOTEL LAKESIDE CHALET – ST LOUIS, MO**

**888-627-7066**

**314-434-5010**

**(Please reference the 8<sup>th</sup> Air Force Historical Society Reunion to obtain the special reunion room rate)**

The Sheraton Westport Hotel Lakeside Chalet is conveniently located at 191 Westport Plaza, St Louis, MO 63146, approximately 25 minutes from downtown. The hotel is an all pedestrian village with many different restaurants, night clubs, comedy club, and a live playhouse. The hotel is approximately nine miles from the Lambert-St. Louis International Airport. If you are driving, call the hotel directly for accurate driving instructions. Each room features a coffee/tea maker, iron/ironing board, hairdryer, and high speed internet access (for a fee). The Sheraton Westport Hotel is a non-smoking hotel. The hotel also offers an indoor heated pool, fitness facility and golf courses nearby. Seven handicapped-accessible rooms are subject to availability. Please request these special accommodations when making your hotel reservations. Suites are extremely limited at this hotel, so meeting space will also be used for hospitality rooms. Rental for hospitality rooms will be \$100 per day. Please contact Donna Lee at [DonnaLee@afri.com](mailto:DonnaLee@afri.com) to make arrangements.

The hotel provides complimentary parking for its guests. Check-in time is 3:00pm; check-out time is 12:00pm. **Lucerne Restaurant** offers a traditional American cuisine for breakfast, lunch or dinner. **Lucerne Lounge** is a relaxing place to meet with friends for drinks. Room service is also available.

The Sheraton Westport offers complimentary airport shuttle service to and from the Lambert-St. Louis International Airport. The shuttle runs every ½ hour, from 6:30 am-11:00 pm. The van arrives at the airport on the ½ hour, but there is also a courtesy phone located at the baggage claim area of the airport if needed. Space is limited on complimentary services, so you may want to make other arrangements.

The hotel offers complimentary parking for RVs. Should you need full hook-ups contact the St Louis RV Park at either 800-878-3330 or directly at 314-241-3330. They are located at 900 North Jefferson Ave, St Louis, MO 63106, about 20 miles from the hotel. Make your reservations as soon as possible due to limited space and availability.

Should you need to rent a wheelchair for the reunion, ScootAround rents both manual and power wheelchairs by the day and week. Please call their toll free number at (888) 441-7575 for details.

**Vendors, Schedules, and Information are subject to change.**

-----CUT HERE AND MAIL TO THE HOTEL-----

**8<sup>th</sup> AIR FORCE HISTORICAL SOCIETY REUNION - HOTEL RESERVATION FORM**  
**REUNION DATES: OCTOBER 11-OCTOBER 16, 2011**

NAME \_\_\_\_\_ SHARING ROOM W/ \_\_\_\_\_

ADDRESS \_\_\_\_\_ ZIP \_\_\_\_\_

TEL. NUMBER ( \_\_\_\_\_ ) \_\_\_\_\_ STARWOOD PREFERRED GUEST # \_\_\_\_\_

ARRIVAL DATE \_\_\_\_\_ APPROX. TIME \_\_\_\_\_ DEP. DATE \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ # OF ROOMS NEEDED \_\_\_\_\_ # OF PEOPLE IN ROOM \_\_\_\_\_ HANDICAP ACCESS  
\_\_\_\_\_ KING BED \_\_\_\_\_ 2 DOUBLE BEDS

In the event room type requested is not available, nearest room type will be assigned.

**RATE:** \$104 + tax (currently 15.175%)

**CUT OFF DATE:** 09/9/11. Late reservations will be processed based on space availability at a higher rate.

**CANCELLATION POLICY:** Deposit is refundable if reservation is canceled by 6:00 pm on date of arrival. Adjustments to departure date after check-in, resulting in a shortened length of stay, will result in a 50% of one night's room and tax early-departure fee unless departure is due to illness or family emergency.

All reservations must be guaranteed by credit card or first night's deposit, enclosed.

\_\_\_\_\_ AMEX \_\_\_\_\_ DINERS \_\_\_\_\_ VISA \_\_\_\_\_ MASTER CARD \_\_\_\_\_ DISCOVER

CREDIT CARD NUMBER \_\_\_\_\_ EXP. DATE \_\_\_\_\_

SIGNATURE (regardless of payment method) \_\_\_\_\_

**MAIL TO: SHERATON WESTPORT HOTEL \* 191 WESTPORT PLAZA \* ST LOUIS, MO 63146 \***

**FAX TO: 314-434-0140 ATTN: RESERVATIONS or**

**visit the online reservation website <http://www.starwoodmeeting.com/Book/8thairforce>**

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## LETTERS/E-MAILS

Following are edited versions of e-mails between Donna Antel (ravensredrum@yahoo.com), Ian McLachlan (ianm385bg@btopenworld.co), David Schilling (drvid@comcast.net), and Doug Ljinger (rdiforconco@msn.com) re: B-17 #42-31181

March 14, 2011 – Donna Antel to Ian McLachlan:

I have been researching my father's WWII experiences and at the suggestion of Bill Varnedoe, suggested that you may be able to help me with some information about my father, Bernie Mistrater, the Bombardier on a B-17 that went down on January 30, 1944 after a bombing mission to Brunswick, Germany. I have been sharing information about the crew's time together with the son of the Pilot (Lojinger) and the grandson of the Co-Pilot (Campbell), and would appreciate further information on the mission from you based on the data in the 385th BGA archives. There is a question regarding information that may be in the archives, upon which Bill relied when the Lojinger plane was listed as one of the 12 known 385th BG mid-air collision incidents.

The Pilot, Co-Pilot and Bombardier all reported that their plane was hit by flak as they entered clouds, taking out engines 3 and 4, and cutting the fuel supply to a third engine; and they were able to turn and head west, but were losing speed and altitude. The entire crew was able to bail out, with the Pilot the last man, and all were captured near Frotheim (near Luebbecke), Germany, per MACR 2266.

I would appreciate any information that may clear up the discrepancies between the anecdotal reports of the 3 officers, and the archival reports of a mid-air collision.

Thanks for any information you may have. You were a natural choice as the 385th BG Historian passed on by Bill. We owe both of you a debt of gratitude for keeping up the sacred memories of the 385th BG for us.

Donna

March 15, 2011 -- Ian to Donna: cc: Frank McCawley (fxmccawley@aol.com)

Hi Donna,

I checked the files for Mission 37 (30 January 1944 – Brunswick) but it only contains the loading list and nothing about a mid-air collision. Per the microfilm, the Group put up both an "A" and "B" group and neither group mentions a collision.

The "A" Group (A/C 42-31181 was in that group) bombed through clouds using PFF. No enemy aircraft attacked, and the flak was "meager and inaccurate" at landfall, "meager and fairly accurate" at the IP, and "moderate to intense" over the target but inaccurate for this Group. (However, it was accurate for your father's plane and crew.) Two crews reported seeing three merchant ships in the Zuider Zee, and some crews reported rail cars in a large marshaling yard. Fighter support was excellent.

The "B" Group flew as the Lead Group in the 4th "A" Combat Wing which led the 3rd Air Division. Reported by a plane in this group was the sighting of a B-17 at 5217N-0230E on a heading of 270 at 1423.

*Continued on next page....*

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## LETTERS/E-MAILS

Continued from previous page....

I do not have a full copy of the MACR, and would be grateful if you would send me a complete copy. I only have the first two pages stating the crew list, and noting that A/C 42-31181 was seen bombing the target and immediately after the target it was seen entering a cloud bank with all engines operating. No chutes were seen leaving this aircraft. After the bombing, bad weather at the target broke the wing formation, and re-assembly into a Wing formation was impossible. Again, I would like a copy of the MACR as it may include crew questionnaires which my copy does not have. I would also welcome any photographs of your father and his crew – or anything 385th.

I hope this info may be helpful to you. Thank you for your kind words, and as a Brit born after WWII, I am borrowing the words of Gen. Ira Eaker upon arriving in the UK, *"We won't do much talking until we've done more fighting. And after we've gone, we hope you'll be glad we came."* I hope that I can do something to perpetuate that appreciation. I run a series of lectures called "The Friendly Invasion" about the USAAF in East Anglia 1942-45 that covers not only the military stuff but the social and cultural impact.

Ian

March 16, 2011 – Dave Schilling to Ian, cc: Doug Lojinger; Donna

Ian,

I have several photos and the "War Story" of my grandfather, and I can send copies to you. I also have his personal diary of the time he left the US until the day before his last mission when their plane went down. My grandmother found it after he died. It was very private, but I am slowly reading it noting Donna and Doug's fathers. Let me know if you want me to watch for anything specific.

Last July my partner, who is English, and I visited Great Ashfield while she was visiting her family in the UK. At the old base we saw the remains of the runways, and visited some of the old buildings. It was amazing. We also visited the church and saw the 385th BG memorial. Previously I had corresponded with a local man, David Bradley, and he met us at the church, let us in, and told us all he knew about the unit and base. His grandfather had worked at the base during the war. Do you know (David) him? He took time from his day to meet some strangers from the US to show us the church and tell us his stories. A great man!

Dave Schilling

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I watch a lot of baseball on radio.

— Gerald Ford



## LETTERS/E-MAILS

March 21, 2011 – Ian to Dave, Donna and Doug

I've reading all the e-mails, and following them as best I can. Yes, Dave – I'd appreciate copies of photographs and your grandfather's war stories. His personal journal sounds excellent and I would welcome any extracts from it that you feel would help 385th BG history. You may consider extracts for publication in the *Hardlife Herald*, the 385th BGA newsletter. I send copies of the e-mails to the Editor for possible inclusion in the newsletter.

I see that you have been bitten by the research bug. I got involved (bitten) in the 385th when, as a boy of 17, I found wreckage of a 385th BG Flying Fortress near my home. That was way back in 1964. My contacts with the 385th BG veterans has been rewarding, and now it's great to have contacts with 2nd and 3rd generations like yourselves. I recently retired and now help the group as their historian. I have written seven books and most have some aspect to the 385th BG inside them. I also give talks on the story of the 385th BG. I am sending you a copy of the e-mail I sent to Donna.

Donna – I checked the files for Mission 57 (January 30, 1944 – Brunswick) provided by Bill but it only has the loading list which doesn't help the collision story. The microfilm notes that the Group put up both "A" and "B" Groups, but has no mention of a collision. Had such a thing occurred, I'm sure it would have been mentioned.

Ian

March 25, 2011 – Dave to Ian cc: Lojinger; Antel; McCawley

Thanks very much Ian. Please feel free to use any info I pass to you with the story of my grandfather and his crew. Their sacrifice can't be forgotten.

I can't tell how amazed and emotional it was to stand on the old Great Ashfield runway and look into the sky of England, the same sky my grandfather flew into many times, and for his last time on January 30, 1944. Standing on the runway, my son and I felt close to him. This was a place I heard of all my life, but never real until then. We walked into one old abandon hut, and I saw the squadron's numbers painted on the wall, and his, the 549th BS. Still there after 70 years! It felt like I was seeing his name on that wall.

I have unfinished business at Great Ashfield so I'll return and take more time to look around and talk to the locals who may have been around at that time. I felt as if part of my grandfather was left at Great Ashfield when he took off on that last mission.

Ian, I'd love to meet you at the field sometime. I get to the UK often as my partner is English and we visit her family frequently.

Dave Schilling

# Taps



**Jack T. Gesser** – Clearwater, FL died March 12, 2011 at age of 90. Originally from Bellvue, KY, he helped his father, Anthony Gesser, build the Tacoma Park Swimming Pool, which Jack managed

for many years. Jack also helped manage a roller rink, where he met his wife, Doris Ann Lindsey. Jack and Doris were married for 48 years until she passed away in 1989.

Jack flew 25 missions with 385th BG, 549th BS as the tail gunner of the "Ohio Air Force." The "Ohio Air Force" holds the all time record for combat victories by a single aircraft on a single mission, destroying 12 enemy aircraft while flying on a mission to Munster. Jack was personally credited with three of them. Jack was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross and the Air Medal with three Oak Leaf Clusters.

Jack was a Freemason and the longest Standing High Priest of the York Rite Temple. He was also active at Trinity Lutheran and Prince of Peace Lutheran Churches. He was a loving husband and father. He is survived by his son, Michael, daughters, Connie Philips, Karen Renee, Melissa Paige, and three grand children and one great grandchild. Jack was buried with military honors at the Floral Hill Memorial Park Cemetery Masonic Garden. Charitable donations can be made in his honor to the *Hardlife Herald*, 385th BGA, Chuck Smith, Treasurer.

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**Thomas A. Heydon** –Montgomery, AL died March 9, 2011 at the age of 94. He was married to Helen Heydon for 64 years. Thomas was buried with a full military graveside service at the Woodlawn Cemetery in Sioux Falls, South Dakota.

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**Gerald W. Donnelly** – Miami, FL died March 11, 2011 at the age 86. Gerry was married to his wife, Ginny, for 57 years. S/Sgt Gerry, a member of the 385th BG, was a proud son of Ireland and a devout Catholic, and his legacy is a life filled with love, honor, compassion, loyalty and faith. He was buried with a mass at St. Timothy's Catholic Church. His life was celebrated at the Miami Elks Lodge on March 19th with an Irish Wake. It was requested that those at the Wake wear green.

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**Forbes Leroy Tenbrook** – Wayland, NY died February 9, 2011 at the age of 89. Forbes served three years in the Army Air Force

including two years with the 385th Bomb Group, 548 Bomb Squadron in charge of the Squadron Engineering Department. Forbes married Evelyn Jacob in May 1943; she predeceased him in March 2009.

Forbes was the owner and operator of the Rodgers & Tenbrook Lumber Yard in Wayland for more than 40 years. He was a member of the American Legion Post #402 and the 385th Bomb Group Association. He was an active member of the Wayland Fire Department, serving as the Asst. Fire Chief, and also

## Taps

serving as the Fire Chief from 1948 to 1952. In 1980 he was awarded the Steuben County Fireman's Association Special Recognition Award, and in 1981, he was named Fireman of the Year. He participated in the Meals on Wheel Noyes Hospital program; and in 1997 he received the Good Scout Award from the Boy Scouts of America.

Forbes is survived by his daughter, Ann Owens, three grandchildren, six great grandchildren, and his sister, Lois of Wayland.

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**Truman J. Smith** – Ponca City, OK died February 1, 2011 at the age of 86. After graduation from high school, he joined the Army Air Corps and received his Pilot wings in October 1943, and was assigned as a B-17 bomber pilot. Assigned to the 385th Bomb Group, Truman flew 35 missions over Europe as the pilot of "Barbara B", "Pride of the Yankees", and other B-17s. He received the Distinguished Flying Cross, the Air Medal with a Silver Cluster, and several Campaign Stars.

Finishing his European tour, Truman was assigned to Langley Field in Virginia. After active duty, he flew PBY Flying Boats in South America as a commercial pilot for the US Government Reconstruction Finance Corporation, for the development of the rubber industry.

In 1948 he graduated from the Pasadena Playhouse, California School of Theater Arts and became director of KTTV Los Angeles-CBS Hollywood. In 1952 Truman was called back into the Air Force to develop TV during the Korean War, and in 1953 he was sent to Germany to command a Televi-

sion support squadron for Europe. While in Germany, he met and married his wife, Margot They, in August 1958 in Wiesbaden.

Truman's passion was filmmaking and writing, and in 1969 he won two Silver medals at the Cannes Film Festival; and the Lt. Governor of Oklahoma appointed him to the Oklahoma Film Advisory Commission. He directed a full length movie "Red, White and Black" filmed in the Ponca City area. In 1966 Truman had his book, "The Wrong Stuff", *the Adventures and Mis-Adventures of an 8th Air Force Aviator* published. His book has been used in the history classes at the United States Air Force Academy. In March 2010 he was awarded The Wright Brothers "Master Pilot" Award by the Dept. of Transportation.

He is survived by his wife of 54 years, Margot, one daughter Simone Strah, one son, Rex, and three granddaughters and two grandsons.

Military Honors were provided by The United States Air Force.

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**Theodore Church** – Connersville, IN died June 23, 2009. Ted was a S/Sgt and an airborne radio operator of the 551st Bomb Squadron. His plane was shot down in August 1944, and he became a Prisoner of War until Allied Forces freed the POW camp in 1944.

—Submitted by Jackie Church, daughter-in-law



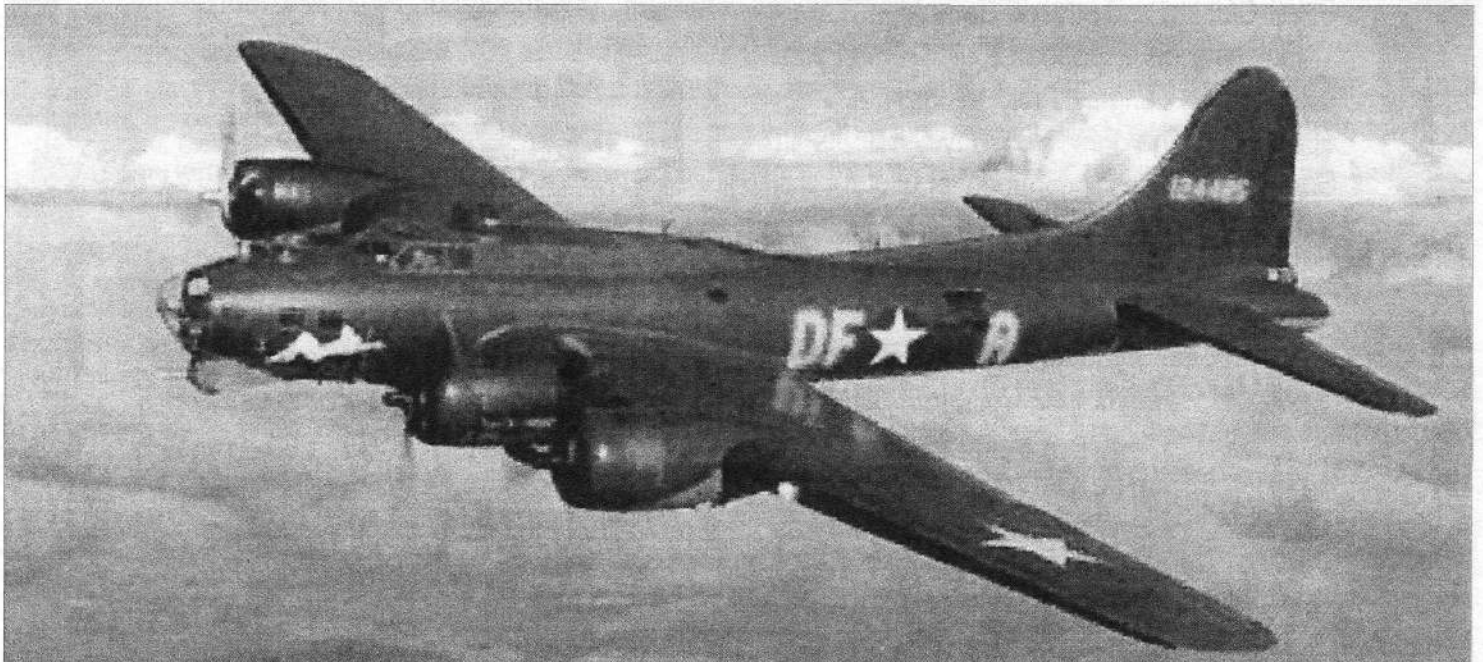
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