

303rd Bomb Group

"HELL'S ANGELS" NEWSLETTER

VOLUME II NUMBER I

NOVEMBER 1977

MESSAGE FROM OUR PRESIDENT

A few months ago we gathered at the Four Seasons Motel in Colorado Springs to share memories, experiences, and I feel our deep respect and concern for one another. For three wonderful days we relived the bloody days in German skies, and you could continually feel the emotions, enthusiasm, loyalty, and respect for one another. As I sit here at my desk I can still see Joe and Elmer keeping things moving, John Barker always ready to lend a helping hand, Father Skoner everywhere injecting his warm influence, and a few of the "tigers" (Don, Bill, Jim, Van, Harry, Dick, Owen, Bob, Carl) making plans for '79 and '81. It was loud and clear that the 303rd will be flying for many more years, and keep tuned-in for info on Dayton in '79 and San Diego in '81. Dick Webster will lead the Group over Dayton and two years later Don Harrison finally makes the leadship (this San Diego lobster in the closest thing to Avis that I have ever met--he really tries harder.)

We all appreciate the efforts of Harry Jenkins and Jim Ferris in making this publication a reality and we look forward to a few more issues before the max effort at Dayton. I know Harry would appreciate hearing from you regarding any notices, pictures, or articles that you would like published. My best wishes to all.

Charles J. McClain

HONORED GUEST

We were honored in having as our guest General T. R. Milton, USAF (RET). General Milton was a USMA graduate and led the Schweinfurt mission of October 1943. Immediately prior to his retirement as a four-star general in 1974, General Milton was U. S. Representative to NATO's Military Committee. Previously, he served as Commander, Thirteenth Air Force, Chief of Staff of TAC, and as Comptroller of the Air Force. General Milton now lives in Colorado Springs.

The following letters were received by the 303rd Bomb Group. We appreciate the interest shown by these two esteemed gentlemen.

GOVERNOR OF COLORADO

Greetings:

I would like to extend my personal greetings to the members of the 303rd Bomb Group Association on the occasion of your second reunion.

The people of Colorado recognize and deeply appreciate the services you rendered to our State and to our Nation when the times demanded sacrifices of us all. Your dedication to the principles of freedom and democracy and your personal commitment to those ideals

in time of need will be an inspiration for years to come.

We invite you to share with us the beauty and history of our State. Best wishes for an enjoyable and memorable reunion.

Sincerely,
Richard D. Lamm

WALTER CRONKITE

Dear Mrs. Fessler:

Indeed I did fly missions with the 303rd Bomb Group out of Molesworth, the most notable of which was the raid on Wilhelmshaven, Germany on, I believe, February 17, 1943.

As I recall there were just four groups in England at the time and all participated in that raid. I think they were the 303rd, 305th, 306th, and 92nd. We had escort only out over the North Sea and from the Dutch Frisian Islands on to the target and back out again--for almost three hours--we were "escorted" by Fockewulf 190's and Messerschmidt 109's and, in the most unpopular phrase of the day, the flack was so thick we could walk on it.

I'm sorry I missed the Colorado Springs reunion. It must have been a ball.

Sincerely yours,
Walter Cronkite

COLORADO SPRINGS REUNION
ENJOYED BY ALL

Approximately four hundred members, wives and friends of the 303rd Bomb Group came to Colorado Springs for a great third reunion,

which was held from Thursday, August 25th through Sunday, August 28th.

Thursday was registration and "renewing acquaintances" night, which also included a delicious prime rib dinner at Peterson Air Force Base.

Friday afternoon we all boarded chartered buses for a sightseeing tour to Pikes Peak. It was a nice day and the panoramic view from fourteen thousand feet was superb. I'm sure we all agree that we were glad to leave the driving to someone else going up that winding road.

Saturday morning we again boarded our chartered buses for a trip to the Air Force Academy and a guided tour through the Chapel. I think the exquisite beauty and dignity of its architecture impressed and inspired all of us. Later we had a good lunch at the Officer's Club.

The Saturday evening banquet was the highlight of our reunion. The guest speakers were General Milton, Mrs. Hamilton and Mrs. Moore. It was a pleasure to have these fine people as speakers for such a memorable occasion.

In general, it was an evening resplendent with memories for most of us, and we hope to see all of you again at Dayton, Ohio in 1979.

MINI-REUNION

We are trying to arrange for a mini-reunion in Washington, D.C., October 19th through the 22nd, 1978. This would be in conjunction with the 8th Air Force Historical Society's convention. Mr. Keith Ferris (the artist who

painted the B-17 mural for the Smithsonian Institute) would like to present his slides and explain how he put the mural together. If you are interested, please contact Mrs. Jean Fessler, 3911 N.W. 173rd Terrace, Opa-Loca, Florida 33055.

HONORARY MEMBER

It has been suggested (and we heartily concur) that we make Mr. Walter Cronkite, (noted commentator), an honorary member of the 303rd Bomb Group. If there are any dissenters, please let us hear--otherwise the committee will proceed with the suggestion.

The following is a reprint of an article which appeared in the Denver, Colorado, Rocky Mountain News on August 29, 1977. It was sent to us by Mr. John C. Barker and we thought our members would enjoy reading it.

303RD RELIVES BLOODY
DAYS IN GERMAN SKIES

In the motel lobby, Joe Vieira is crouched behind an imaginary machine gun in the imaginary gunner's seat of an imaginary B-17 and he is spraying imaginary bullets at an imaginary German fighter plan attacking from about 1 o'clock high.

The Nazi goes down in imaginary flames, and Vieira goes on remembering what was stark, bloody reality 34 years ago.

"The German fighters were coming at us six abreast and six deep. Our plane had one wounded man, one or two engines down, plenty of holes, plenty of fire, low on ammu-

munition, but we were able to make it back to England. That was a day we called Bloody Thursday."

The men congregated around Vieira in the motel lobby were delighted with the recollection. Former members of the renowned 303rd Bomb Group, they had journeyed from faraway parts of the country to meet last week in Colorado Springs and remember the bad and good things about World War II.

It was all coming back to Vieira.

"I flew my first mission on my mother's birthday - Sep. 16, 1943. When I first went over there we had fighter escort all the way. The (English) Spitfires would take us out to the Channel, and then the Germans would escort us all the way in and all the way out and we were spitting at each other all the way."

Vieira, who is now 60 and lives in Florida, kept his audience captivated in the unfriendly skies over Germany with episodes in which he was hit in the neck with shrapnel, passed out in flight from lack of oxygen and returned from a conversation with the pilot to find his gunner's seat blown away by flack.

He concluded: "I flew 58 missions, which is more than two full tours. I came home in between and spent a few days with my old lady. When she heard I was going back, she didn't say 20 words to me."

In a week full of war stories (the American Legion and Veterans of Foreign Wars were holding national conventions elsewhere), the 303rd's reunion organizer, Charles McClain, told why the bomb group became famous.

"We flew out of England from

January 1942 to September 1945," McClain said. "We flew more combat missions than any other group, and we were the first to complete 300 missions. We had two Congressional Medal of Honor winners.

"It's a cross-section of America that's here," he said of the four-day reunion that concluded Sunday. "We have people from the gas station attendant all the way to millionaires. They are men dedicated to preserving rights."

The 175 men attending the 303rd's second reunion also seemed dedicated to preserving old friendships.

There was all manner of loud greeting, back slapping, drink buying, playful rank pulling and war story telling.

Most of the men didn't need much prompting to give detailed accounts of their numerous nine-hour bombing raids over France and Germany.

But McClain, whose story was among the most fascinating of all those told, was reluctant to talk. After a certain amount of coaxing, he said:

"Our plane was shot down on Feb. 28, 1944, over occupied France. I was flying bombardier and we had a direct hit on the left wing. I was shot right out but I was able to get a chute open. I was captured as I hit the ground."

McClain escaped several days later (he declined to give details of the escape) and spent the next 90 days evading the Germans.

"At the beginning I was on my own for three or four days, but then I

was fortunate in meeting someone in France who contacted the underground for me."

McClain, who retired with the rank of colonel, began traveling as secretly as possible through the French back country toward Spain.

"I walked for five days through the Pyrennes. It was a son-of-a-bitch, and we weren't equipped for mountain climbing."

But he didn't always keep what one would think of as a safe distance between himself and his enemies.

"One night in a railroad station it was cold, and I squeezed in between four Germans to stay warm... Yes, I was wearing civilian clothes."

Another night McClain found refuge in a house only to learn that the house next door was occupied by German soldiers.

Moving cautiously, lying low when necessary, he finally reached Madrid. From there he was returned to his unit in England.

Others at the reunion told of being accompanied on combat missions by newsman Walter Cronkite and actor Clark Gable.

Reunion organizers placed a newspaper advertisement inviting German fighter pilots to attend the get-together but, according to Vieira, "We didn't get any rumbles from them."

If there was a favorite topic of discussion among the veterans, it seemed to be the B-17 bomber in which they did their dangerous work.

Ground crewman Elmer Fessler's voice was full of respect: "The B-17 was strong, a very tough old airplane that took a lot of beating. She would fly when nothing else would fly. They've had the whole nose shot out and still made it back."

Fessler, who works as an electrician for Eastern Airlines, attended the reunion's registration session in ground crewman's coveralls. He said that in the early days of the 303rd Bomb Group's involvement in the war, he and other ground crewmen were kept busy around the clock patching up battered B-17s.

"Most of the Germans' first-string pilots were still with us then and they were good, no doubt about it.

"But it was in February 1944 that we broke the back of the German Luftwaffe (air force)," Fessler said. "We started hitting everything that moved."

The reunion featured visits to the Air Force Academy and Pikes Peak, several meetings, cocktail parties and a banquet.

But it was mainly a time for remembering.

"You got busted on the 26th, wasn't it?" one of the men was saying to his companion as they prepared to drink yet another toast to the end of World War II.

"No sir," the companion replied, "It was the 29th. I flew my last mission before I got busted."

ELECTIONS

The following persons were elected

as officers and directors for the year 1977 through 1979.

OFFICERS

President:

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Secretary:

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Treasurer:

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Publicity Chairman:

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Reunion Chairman:

Webster, Richard E. (1st Lt)
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Member:

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(313) 232-1800

The following letter was received from Mrs. Susan Hamilton who was a guest speaker at our Colorado Springs reunion. It is a pleasure to share her interesting letter with you.

SUSAN HAMILTON

Dear Mr. Jenkins:

Regards to the nice letter I received from Sgt Ferris last week of the reunion, which I think was

enjoyed by everyone so much. I hope we can all meet again the same way in 1979.

The one thing I really enjoyed was the bus ride to the Officer's Club, and the sing-song there and back. It reminded me of the days at home when the Yanks (as everyone called them) would send a bus to town to pick up the girls for a dance on base at Molesworth. Everyone would sing wartime songs going home, those that were able, that is, as after all the "goodies" we used to get, everyone was so full they would sleep most of the way home.

My father would wait every night for his regular G.I.'s to come to our pub and drink a beer with him and bring him a cigar and sit and shoot the wartime breeze with him. Sad to say, he passed away before it was all over, but his friends all attended his funeral with us. They were such a great group of boys at Molesworth. Everyone took them into their homes like their own sons. We would watch them go on their missions every day and wait on their return that evening, and if they weren't on the liberty run that night to our pub "THE FOX", one village pub would call the other to see if they were there. If not, we would wait news of them, often ending up with a card three months later from Stalag Luft #3, and some were never heard from again.

After meeting so many of the 303rd Bomb Group and their nice friendly wives, it seemed like I remembered everyone I used to see in his flying helmet - only a few years older now. It made me so homesick the night of the banquet, I almost cried, as it was like a dream had come true for me to be here and

meet so many wonderful people who helped us pull through that war, and to get to talk to their wives about it all.

I remember one cold day in January, I was on the tractor and a very thoughtful guy got out of a jeep, took off his big fur coat and gave it to me. He said, "Susie, I know you are cold and I want you to have my coat." I enjoyed it so much, but it wasn't long and here came the Provost Marshal and took it away from me. (Guess he thought I had stolen it.) But a group of the boys got together and talked to him and got it back for me, and I wore it all through the war. I was so pleased to have it back! When the planes would run off the runway, we used to fill in the hole it made, and one day one came in with a flat tire and stopped only a few feet from us on the grass, and it really sank into the ground. Apart from scaring us half to death, it made us work for a day or two.

I haven't been back to Molesworth in ten years now so it was nice to meet a couple at the reunion who were on a visit there last year and to get caught up with all the news over there.

I managed to get my name on the great "Hell's Angels" plane before it left Molesworth. It was a sad day for everyone when the G.I.'s left, but a great day for them to be able to return to their homeland again, and to know what a great job they had done in helping us through the war.

We heard from boys for years after they left (at Christmas), and all had settled down now with a family of their own.

I married an Air Policeman from

Molesworth who brought me to the States, so have made my home here now. I have worked for J.C. Penney almost ten years. I hope to visit my people in England next year and go back to Molesworth once more.

I missed the pubs so bad and the fire places when I came here, but most of all the warm beer in the winter, so, I have to heat it in a pan now.

So many things have happened since those days have passed, I feel I could write a book about it all, but must end this off now and say thanks for the wonderful time we had in Colorado Springs. I do hope everyone who came will get to know how much we enjoyed it all. My regards.

Sincerely,
Susan Hamilton

IN MEMORIUM

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Middletown, RI 02840

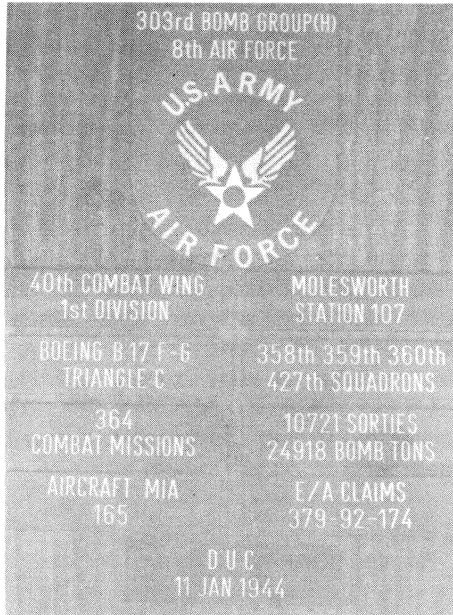
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Annandale, VA

Smoleroff, Theodore L.
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Maitland, FL 32751

WALL PLAQUE

Below is a picture of the wall plaque presented as a door prize at the final banquet in Colorado Springs. Those who would like to buy a plaque should contact Joe Vieira for details.

THANKS
AND APPRECIATION

We wish to express our sincere thanks and appreciation to Mr. and Mrs. Fessler and Mr. and Mrs. Joe Vieira for their time and effort in seeing to it that our reunion ran as smoothly as possible. They spent many hours "behind the scenes" and took care of registrations and assisting people in finding their rooms, etc. Thanks to all of you for a job well done!

Harry F. Jenkins
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