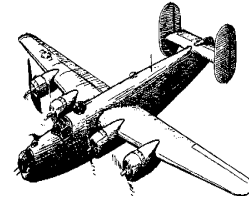


Plane Talk



The Eighth Air Force Historical Society
Virginia Chapter Newsletter

<http://www.8thaf-virginia.org>

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APRIL 2010



Greetings From Your President:

We have recently lost two long time and highly dedicated members. Both Bob Noziglia and Ordway Gates have passed to that great wild blue yonder in the sky.

I keep the “official” data base of the Chapter. It includes name, year paid, address, phone number and, in almost all cases, the war time outfit of the veteran and, if known, the relationship of relatives and friends on the rolls. My data base contains 106 names.

Many members automatically pay their dues each year. This is good because it saves the cost of postage and envelopes as well as the time to get a notice out. Some of you have or will be receiving a mailed notice. There is also a dues renewal form on the back page of this newsletter.

Jimmy Harvell has arranged our next three luncheon meetings at the Stonehenge Country Club. We will be meeting on April 9th, August 20th and December 10th. There will be an activity which will be of interest in addition to the general meeting and luncheon. There is more information about the coming meeting on the back page of this newsletter.

Those of you who receive the *8th AF News* may have noticed that our Editor, Rob Gates, had a great article on page 16 of the December issue. It dealt with the development of the Norden Bomb Sight. By the way, a great interview of Ordway Gates in on our web site. It deals with his bail out and evasion of capture.

We’ve had a vacancy on our Board for some time. As President, I asked Ken Rowe to serve as the fourth Director until (and hopefully after) the next election. He agreed and we can all look forward to meaningful contributions from Ken.

Lew Burke

WE NEED YOUR STORIES AND PICTURES! WE WANT TO KEEP *PLANE TALK* INTERESTING AND NEED YOUR HELP. PLEASE SEND YOUR STORIES AND PICTURES TO THE EDITORS.

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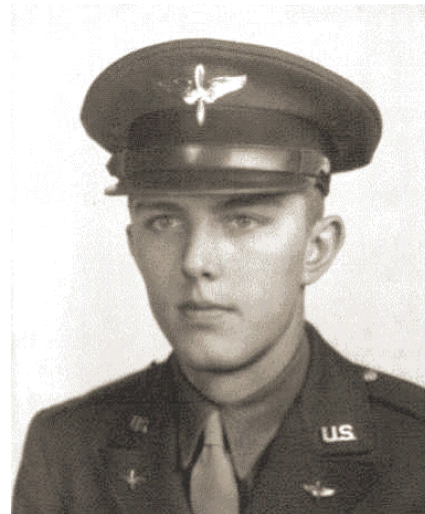
FOLDED WINGS

Ordway B. Gates, 89, of Williamsburg, VA, passed away on 12 January 2011. He was a B-17 bombardier in the 8th AF assigned to the 95th Bomb Group stationed at Horham, England. A native of Chesterfield County, Virginia, he entered the College of William and Mary in 1939 but interrupted his education to serve in World War II. Shot down in 1944, he was aided by the underground in Luxembourg and evaded capture by being hidden in homes for several months until advancing Allied forces reached the town in which he was sheltered.

After the war, he completed his degree at William and Mary and began work in Hampton at the Langley laboratory of the National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics, the precursor of NASA. His career took him to the Glenn L. Martin Co. in Baltimore, General Electric Space Division in Philadelphia, Martin-Marietta in Baltimore, and Lockheed-Martin in Lompoc, Calif. and Washington D.C. During those years he added graduate work in engineering at the University of Virginia, Johns Hopkins University and Drexel University. He was an accomplished aerospace engineer and manager and his work included many space-related projects, including the Nimbus satellite program and the Space Shuttle, as well as undersea monitoring technology and air traffic control.

He was a member of the Virginia Chapter of the 8th Air Force Historical Society and served on the Board of Directors and Editor of *Plane Talk*.

He is survived by his wife, Dawn, eight children, 18 grandchildren, and six great-grandchildren. He was preceded in death by his first wife, Nancy Cogbill Gates.



Reprinted with permission from the Newport News Daily Press (20 March 2011)

For Hampton vet, flying in a B17 bomber with radar in WWII was high-tech



Abe Firestone, a member of the 34th bomb group of the 8th Air Force during World War II, participated in one of the largest bombing runs of the war in a raid over Berlin. Firestone is seen above at his home in Hampton on Feb. 25 posing with a photo taken in 1945. (Sangjib Min, Daily Press / March 19, 2011)

By
Hugh
Lessig

HAMP

TON – Abe Firestone never flew in an airplane before the start of World War II, but he longed for it in the worst way.

Growing up in Brooklyn, he devoured pulp magazines with stories of adventurous pilots. Then came Hollywood icon Jimmy Stewart - the first movie star to enter war service - who appeared in a recruiting film for young fliers. That sealed it.

"I said, 'Wow, that's great,'" Firestone recalled.

In 1943, he left his job at the Brooklyn Navy Yard and entered the military. After training as a navigator, he was offered the chance to do something that sounded a bit more mysterious.

"It was so secret, they sent the FBI around to my old neighborhood (in Brooklyn) and asked my neighbors if I was OK, so to speak," recalled Firestone, now 88. "It scared the heck out of my parents."

The hush-hush program?

Radar.

It doesn't seem so high-tech today, with U.S. armed forces employing everything from predator

drones to stealth aircraft to find and evade the enemy.

But in the 1940s, radar as a tool for bombing runs stood on the cutting edge of the Allied war effort. The idea of using electromagnetic waves to determine the altitude, direction, range or speed of objects, both fixed and moving, wasn't something out of a pulp magazine. It was very real.

Radar operators were known as Mickey Men because the early equipment had circular antenna that resembled Mickey Mouse ears.

They played a key role in daylight bombing runs when skies were overcast and bombardiers could not see their targets. That was often the case during the bad winter of 1944 into 1945, Firestone recalled.



A 1945 photo shows the crew of the B-17 Knockout Dropper, including Abe Firestone of Hampton at top left. As a navigator/bombardier in the lead plane, it was Firestone's job to serve as a marker for other planes and bomb drops.

Radar operators fed data to the bombardiers - distance to target and other information - that was fed into the Norden bombsight, another high-tech, super-secret piece of equipment. The bombsight contained an analog computer that crunched the numbers and dropped the bombs.

In a formation, only the lead bomber was equipped with radar. Firestone said he never felt any additional pressure by constantly running at the front of the formation.

"You never thought about it," he said. "You did your job as

best you could."

Firestone flew in a B-17 Flying Fortress, the workhorse bomber of the U.S. fleet. As a first lieutenant serving in the 34th Bomb Group of the 8th Air force, he ended up flying 24 combat missions through 1944 and 1945.

And he survived a few close calls.

After a mission over Bremen, his aircraft returned with 150 holes. In another instance, a direct hit from a German anti-aircraft gun went through the wing, between two engines.

He also witnessed the frightening introduction of German jet fighters, which entered the war too late to make a real difference.

On another mission, his heated suit caught fire.

"Well, that was funny in retrospect," he said.

The highlight of his adventures in the sky came almost 66 years ago to the day, when more than 1,000 bombers rumbled over Berlin in what press accounts have described as one of the largest bombing runs of the war.

It happened on March 18, 1945.

"We didn't realize it until after we had taken off and returned how big of a mission it really was," he said.

He does remember the fear of not knowing what each mission would bring.

"You always wondered when you went out, is this going to be my last mission," he said. "It was a little scary, but when you're young and foolish I guess . . . no, it *was* scary."

Item Of Interest

There is an organization of WW-II Veterans called the "Pilot Classes Of WWII." They have been in existence for several years and have a reunion somewhere in the U.S. each year. This year they will be in Charleston, SC in September. They publish a newsletter five or six times a year. It is titled "The Poopsheet." I joined about five years ago when I first heard of it. I did attend one Farewell Banquet night when it was in Falls Church, Virginia. I met some great guys and have belonged ever since.

Should any of you other pilots like to become a member, the Secretary/Editor is Stan Yost. His address is 13671 Ovenbird Drive, Fort Myers, FL 33908-5816. His telephone number is 239-466-1473. If you join and receive "The Poopsheet" I think you will feel it is \$15.00 well spent.

Lew Burke



"Twelve O'Clock High"

Not only is "Twelve O'Clock High" regarded as one of the best movies of all time and widely used in both military and civilian

leadership training, it is generally considered the most realistic representation of air combat in World War II.

The screenplay for the movie was written by Beirne Lay, Jr. and Sy Bartlett, both 8th Air Force veterans, as was the book that was basis for the movie. Lay, who served in the Air Corps for several years in the 1930s and was a qualified aviator, was one of the original six officers who accompanied Brig. Gen. Ira Eaker to England to establish the advanced element of the Eighth Air Force. He flew a number of combat missions and rose to command the 487th Bomb Group. He was shot down over France and with the help of the underground made his way back to England. Bartlett was an aide to Maj. Gen. Carl Spaatz. He served as an intelligence officer in both Europe and the Pacific.

The story and many of the characters are loosely based on several actual incidents and individuals. The movie's "hard luck group," the fictional 918th Bomb Group, stationed at Archbury, was based on the 306th Bomb Group at Thurleigh. Many of the incidents that led to the relief of Col. Keith Davenport by Brig. Gen. Frank Savage in the movie were based on events viewed by Lay and Bartlett. In November 1942, Eaker (accompanied by Bartlett), visited Thurleigh and found that there was no MP on the gate and that they were able to enter the base unchallenged. When he saw that was a reflection of lax conditions elsewhere on the base, Eaker knew that the group commander, Col. Charles B. "Chip" Overacker, would have to be relieved. In the following six weeks, the 306th's record, as measured by bombs on target, became the worst in the 8th Air Force. Eaker, accompanied by Col. Frank Armstrong and Beirne Lay, returned to Thurleigh. Conditions on the base were largely unchanged and Eaker replaced Overacker with Armstrong on the spot. This is mirrored by a scene in the movie. Clearly, Maj. Gen. Pritchard is based on Ira Eaker, Frank Savage is Armstrong, and Keith Davenport is Overacker.

Other characters in the movie are also based on actual people. Maj. Joe Cobb, who became Air Exec, is based on Paul Tibbetts. Tibbetts, who was in the 97th BG with Frank Armstrong, is better known as the pilot of the *Enola Gay*. Lt. Jesse Bishop's Medal of Honor mission is based on the actions of Flight Officer John Morgan. In fact, the description of Bishop's actions is taken almost verbatim from Morgan's Medal of Honor citation. Sergeant McIllhenny, Savage's clerk and driver who kept losing (and regaining) his stripes, was based on Sgt. Donald Bevan, a driver in the 306th when Armstrong was there. Although Bevan got some notoriety as a "stowaway gunner" in 1943, he was a qualified aerial gunner and flew 17 missions.

The targets for the "big mission" aren't named in the movie but the novel says that the targets are the ball bearing plants in "Hambrueken" (actually Schweinfurt) and the Messerschmidt plant in "Bonhofen" (Regensburg). The movie's "big mission" was actually a composite of the first B-17 mission into Germany (on 27 January 1943) and the double mission against Schweinfurt and Regensburg on 17 August 1943. Lay and Bartlett took liberties with the chronology. Armstrong commanded the 306th for six weeks starting in January 1943. He led in the 27 January mission into Germany but he was not there for the 17 August mission. Bartlett flew with Armstrong on the mission to Germany. Lay was co-pilot of the *Picadilly Lily* on the Schweinfurt-Regensburg missions. You may remember that Frank Savage flew a B-17 with the same name in the movie.

There were some differences as well. The biggest difference is that Frank Armstrong did not have a breakdown. In fact, he finished his tour in England, returned to the United States to transition to B-29s, and later commanded a B-29 wing in the Pacific. He retired from the Air

Force as a lieutenant general in 1962. It is said that the breakdown happened to another commander after four rough missions. Col. Overacker was assigned to the Proving Ground Command in Florida and, unlike Keith Davenport, had no further role in the story. He retired from the Air Force as colonel in 1956.

The basic story was recycled twice. The television series *Twelve O'Clock High* ran from 1964 to 1967. It was also the basis for the 1963 movie *A Gathering of Eagles* that starred Rock Hudson. In that movie, Col. Jim Caldwell (Rock Hudson) relieves a Strategic Air Command wing commander after the wing fails an operational readiness inspection.

Did You Know ...

... that there is a large aviation museum in Virginia Beach? It is located at the Virginia Beach Airport and is home to one of the largest private collections of World War II and Korean War era fighters, bombers, trainers and seaplanes. Many aircraft have been fully restored to their World War II condition and are available for flight demonstration, static display, or movie production or commercials.

If you want to find out more, there website is: <http://www.militaryaviationmuseum.org/>.

<p>Send or e-mail your memories and stories from your time in the service to Rob Gates, Editor of <i>Plane Talk</i>.</p>

ANNOUNCEMENT

We are having a general membership meeting and luncheon on April 9th at Stonehenge Golf and Country Club in Chesterfield. The meeting will start at 11:30 with lunch at 12:30.

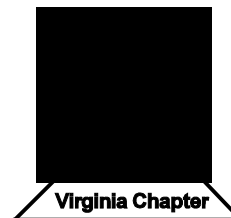
This is the first of three meetings scheduled for 2011. We get to see and talk to fellow vets and their wives, children, friends and neighbors. In addition, there will be some planned activities as well as an opportunity to share some memories. As always, Stonehenge Golf and Country Club will serve a great lunch.

The Chapter will pay for lunch.

James Harvell needs to give the club an approximate head count a couple of days in advance so that they can plan. Please give James a call at (804) 744-1764 if you plan to attend. He can also give you directions if you're not sure how to get to Stonehenge Country Club.



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