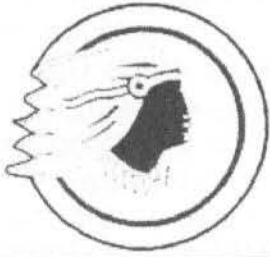


# 345TH BOMBARDMENT GROUP



# STRAFER

AIR APACHES

HQ · 498TH · 499TH · 500TH · 501ST SQUADRONS

Volume 17, Issue 3

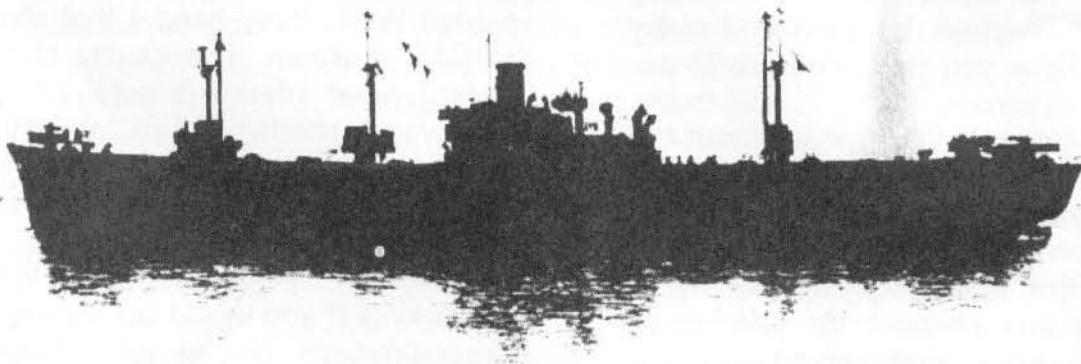
September 1999

1203 CLUBHOUSE ROAD  
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NORMAN OK 73069-5269



Frank Dillard

## *The Thomas Nelson*

Read the feature story by ex-merchant marine seaman Kent Sanborn inside.  
Let us remember the tragic events of November 12, 1945,  
And particularly those 345<sup>th</sup> Bombardment Group members  
Who paid the ultimate price for our freedom on that day.



## PRESIDENTS COMMENTS

### Ken Gastgeb, 345<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group President

It's been a busy summer for the Reunion Committee and Officers of the Reunion Association. Changing the **STRAFER** publisher, responding to internet inquiries, planning future reunions, and many other things.

Col. Bert Rosenbaum called and said his hip is feeling better since his operation, but he is still a little slow getting around. His spirits are high and he certainly has the will to overcome any problem. He said he prays for each and every one of us. God Bless you Bert. You are in our prayers.

Paul Van Valkenburg's WEB page about the 345<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group is attracting attention and letting people know what we did during the War. You can log on to Paul's Web Site at: [vanvalkp/index.htm](http://vanvalkp/index.htm). Many requests have been received through this channel for information about dads and uncles that served with the Group. It has also given rise to many other questions. If anyone remembers flying missions with the 17<sup>th</sup> Tac Recco Squadron, or Group, please let me know. Also, one of our members would like to know who the Group Flight Surgeon was in September 1945.

If you have an e-mail address and would like to communicate with other members of the Group contact our editor, Frank Dillard, at [strafer@midamer.net](mailto:strafer@midamer.net). He will be publishing an e-mail directory sometime in the near future.

Received word from Mark Foreman that his TV documentary about the 345<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group should be completed by the end of this year. Mark attended Reunion XII, at San Antonio last year, and interviewed Joan Leslie and several members for his documentation. He also videotaped the banquet and other events.

Col. Norval Seeley of the Missouri branch of the Confederate Air Force extends an invitation to us to visit their museum at Smartt Field in St. Charles County, near St. Louis, Mo. They have a beautifully restored B25-J, with the "Air Apache" insignia on the vertical stabilizers. A photo is shown in the **SCRAPBOOK** section of this issue. The plane is named "Show Me", and features a lovely lady on the left side of the nose. She was originally painted as a nude, but the Chapter decided to partially clothe "her" due to ~~adverse comments from women spectators at air shows~~. Stan Stokes, noted aviation artist, featured the plane in one of his paintings. It has also been presented in calendar art form. "Red" Garland of the 498<sup>th</sup> Squadron is a member of the Missouri CAF team that completed the restoration. The plane is housed in a converted wooden WWII Navy hanger that also serves as the CAF museum. The quality of the naturally finished wood interior is outstanding. It seems there was a shortage of metal during the time, and the Navy substituted wood. If you pass through St. Louis you should put this museum on your itinerary.

Organizing Reunion XIII is a major undertaking. If you would like to serve on any of the committees please let George Mordecai know. Your help will be appreciated. This is your reunion, so if you have any suggestions that will make our gatherings more enjoyable, or improve our operations, let us know.

Take care.

# CHARLESTON HERE WE COME !

OCTOBER 1<sup>st</sup> to the 5<sup>th</sup>, 2000

By George Mordecai, Reunion Committee Chairman

The 345<sup>th</sup> Bombardment Group originated in South Carolina 57 years ago, and now we are returning to the scene of the crime. This should be a much more enjoyable time than the one we had while training for overseas combat duty-- not knowing where we would be sent.

Your Reunion Committee has done a lot of research, and made personal visits to several cities along the east coast to locate the place best suited to make this reunion one of the most memorable ones the 345<sup>th</sup> has ever held. This is quite a goal to accomplish for we have had many great reunions in the past 25 years. The only way the committee can reach this goal is for all of you to make the trip and add your presence, for all to enjoy.

The city of Charleston will provide a marvelous setting for our gathering in the next millenium while we reminisce about the glorious days of the last one.

Charleston is a treasure house of our country's heritage. The beautiful **Magnolia Plantation**, and it's breathtaking floral gardens, unforgettable **Audubon Swamp Garden**, the **Charleston Museum**—the oldest (1773) in North America, Charleston's famous **mansions** (many are National Historical Landmarks),

experience the excitement of sailing on an authentic **Tall-Masted Clipper Ship**, or a leisurely harbor cruise to the site where the Civil War began--- historic **Fort Sumter National Monument**, see **Patriots Point**, the largest Naval & Maritime Museum in the world, featuring WWII's famous "Fighting Lady", the **Yorktown, Charles Towne Landing** (the first permanent English settlement in North America, 1670), and horse drawn carriage rides along Charleston's cobblestone streets, are some of the favorite selections which await your visit to take you back in time!

The Reunion Committee plans to include an opportunity for you to have a pleasant trolley tour of many of these historic sites during your stay. The city is located on the Atlantic Ocean, and a harbor tour of the places that have contributed so much to our American heritage will also be available. The harbor provides the resting-place for the first submarine (**H.L. Hunley**, 1764) to sink a ship in battle.

The Charleston Air Force Base is home to the 437<sup>th</sup> Airlift Wing. They are trained to normally fly their C-17 Globemaster III's at altitudes under 1000'. The planes are not equipped with defensive weapons, and use this technique to avoid detection

by enemy radar. The 345<sup>th</sup> aircrews can relate to this! If there is sufficient interest we may request a tour of the base.

We will be staying at the **Hilton North Hotel**. They have ample accommodations entirely suitable to our needs. The Lobby is spacious and conducive to those who wish to just sit and talk. It will also be our registration area without giving up any other space. There is a lovely bar, complete with a 60-inch TV, and a dance floor where we can have the music of our choice. The hotel main dining room seats 90 people with an overflow room—that seats another 50. The ballroom is designed to accommodate 500 people, or more, without crowding.

There will be three hospitality rooms: One for non-smokers, one for smokers and one for displaying memorabilia. This arrangement will afford us all the opportunity to enjoy ourselves, without infringing on the rights of others.

The Reunion Committee is made up of all of the Group Officers and Assistant VP's. If you have any suggestions please contact one of them and we will see that you are given every consideration.

**SEE YOU IN CHARLESTON  
IN THE YEAR 2000.**



**Lynn Lee (501)**  
2617 Hayter Rd  
Abilene, TX 79603  
915/677-5319

### LEE'S MAILBAG

Many of us have talked about the serious decline in our Group's membership, but Lynn Lee did something about it. If you are reading this, you received a two-part postcard mailing from Lynn back in May of this year.

As a result of Lynn's survey, it was determined that many of our members had passed away, and their loss had not been reported. Note the unusually large number of names listed in the **"IN MEMORY OF"** section of this issue. Our hearts go out to the families of all our departed 345<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group members.

The postcard mailing also revealed that many of our members moved and failed to inform the **STRAFER** editor, or Treasurer, of their new address. Consequently, their cards were returned marked "Address Unknown" by the post office. Lynn has volunteered to try and locate these members. The list of their names is reported under the heading **"LOST SHEEP"**

in this issue. If you have information as to the whereabouts of any of these people, please contact Lynn Lee, Dick Feucht, or your editor.

On a brighter note, many of you wrote Lynn a note, offered short stories, and sent photographs to be published in the **STRAFER**. Some of the items are included in the current issue, and others will appear in the future, as space permits.

Lynn, the officers, and the **STRAFER** editor, sincerely appreciate your efforts, and the member's response. (Ed.)

### LOST SHEEP

Postcards to the following 345<sup>th</sup> B.G. members were returned by the post office for lack of a forwarding address:

- George Blackwell (501)
- Robert A. Cross (498)
- Michael F. Hochella (?)
- Michael Hochgesang (498)
- Bob Kenney (499)
- Walter C. Kurowski (499)
- Ralph M. Knowles (501)
- Perry V. Lane (498)
- Kenneth L. Lentz (501)
- Leo P. Marchand (498)
- Charles E. Mardis (501)
- Charles P. Martin (498)
- Robert J. McIntyre (?)
- Fred Moore (500)
- Walter R. Naas (498)
- Joseph N. Peregoy, Jr. (500)
- Dale A. Rapp (499)
- Forster A. Stenfield (499)
- Carl A. Strauss (?)

**NOTE:** If you move, please notify Dick Feucht, or your editor, of your new address. This will insure continued delivery of your **STRAFER**.

### ON THE LINE

"Squawks" are problems noted by U.S. Air Force pilots and left for crew chiefs to fix before the next flight. The following are actual pilot's complaints and the replies from maintenance crews:

(P) = Problem, (S) = Solution

(P) Left inside main tire almost needs replacement.

(S) Almost replaced left inside main tire.

(P) Test flight OK, except "Auto Land" extremely rough.

(S) "Auto Land" not installed on this aircraft.

(P) Something loose in cockpit.

(S) Tightened something in cockpit.

(P) Evidence of leak on right main landing gear.

(S) Evidence removed.

(P) Friction locks cause throttle levers to stick.

(S) That's what they are for.

(P) Number three engine missing.

(S) Number three engine found on right wing after brief search.

(P) IFF inoperative.

(S) IFF always inoperative in "OFF" mode.

(P) Target Radar hums.

(S) Reprogrammed Target Radar to include words.

The above contributed by:  
Arthur McGrain, Winston Salem, NC

## SQUADRON REPORTS



### Headquarters

August Ouellett, Asst. Group V.P.

Change is often times a good thing, and is sometimes dictated by the "trial and error" method. Lord knows we have tried the **STRAFER** long enough to see some beneficial changes. It now behooves us to be patient with the new editorial team and "mark time" for the present. If I'm not mistaken, it was voted to make a change at the last reunion, and that vote was unanimous. I feel sure that Frank, and son, Cliff will do their best, so let's give them a chance, and do all we can to support them. If any of you have photos or articles that might be of interest to the members send them in to your Squadron V.P., or directly to the Dillard's.

Personally, I don't have much news to report. Our health problems are pretty much over, and we thank God for that.

I see Ray DeRusha now and then. He's doing good, but like the rest of us getting

old, gray, and fat. Cheer up Ray you're in good company.

I called Fay Bishop, and she is doing much better after her "barrel full" of problems.

Dave Blazer checked the upstate New York area for future reunion possibilities. He sent me some interesting brochures from several different places. I will forward them to George Mordecai, our Reunion Committee Chairman for future reference.

Dave was also looking for some "Air Apache" logos, so I sent him some. Do you remember when we were the "Tree Top Terrors"? I have one of those logos somewhere in my collection of "stuff". If I can find it we will put it in the **STRAFER**.

Speaking of logos, some time ago, Frank Dillard asked me if Headquarters had one. I told him no, and that I didn't know why not. Frank made up the following tentative design and suggested we print it and see what the other members could come up with.



This is printed in black-and-white, but the sample had a gold arrowhead on a blue background. The letters "HQ" and the outer ring were in Air Force blue. The other lettering was done in red on a field of white.

So, now all you artists and illustrators get out your palette and let's see what we can come up with. If there is enough interest we might have tie tacks, logos, or hats made for Reunion XIII!



### 498<sup>th</sup> SQUADRON

Frank Dillard, Asst. Group V.P.

When you read this **LA** Day will have come and gone and summer will be almost over. Since the **STRAFER** is published quarterly many important dates that occur between issues are often overlooked. For example, happy birthday W.W. (Jack Morris (June), and Raymond J. LeTourneau (August).

Back in July I spent a few days in Dayton, Ohio visiting with my ex-radio man Jerry Dean, and his lovely wife Dorothy. One other reason for my trip was to pick up M. Nordstrom's **STRAFER** file. Dick Feucht, our Group Treasurer. Who also has a lovely wife (Pat), graciously volunteered to get them for

Mark and meet me in Dayton for the transfer. This cut down my total driving distance considerably. Dick, Pat and I had a nice visit over lunch before the exchange of the several boxes. Their help is really appreciated.

During my stay at Jesse's, we decided to go out to Wright Patterson Air Force Base. We visited the site of the 345<sup>th</sup> Bombardment Group Memorial, and I am sorry to report that some of the bronze plaques are showing stains and discoloration. We talked with someone in the office to see about having the WP groundskeepers clean it, or allowing Jesse and me to clean it, but ran into a brick wall. It seems that WP personnel do not clean monuments as part of their regular duties, and since the monuments are Air Force property, we civilians are not permitted to do the cleaning. It was on a Sunday, so we were unable to contact anyone with real authority. Since my visit I have discussed this issue with several of our Group Officers and members. Jesse is working to find the name and address of the proper party to contact, but until then we have a "Catch 22" situation. A reprint of a photo of the Monument from the July 1986 **STRAFER** is printed on the **SCRAPBOOK** page of this issue.

Roland Lamb, our Group Secretary, came through town last week and we managed to get together for lunch. It was too hot for golf or War stories!

This issue is my first effort

at editing and publishing the **STRAFER** while also serving as the 498<sup>th</sup> Squadron VP, and writing this column. Although I enjoy all of these activities, I think the Squadron should elect a new Vice President at Reunion XIII, in Charleston, SC. It is not too early to be thinking about that.



### 499<sup>th</sup> SQUADRON

Ben F. Miller, Asst.Group V.P.

The 499<sup>th</sup> recently lost another member, a tall pilot from San Angelo, TX. Ralph Stevens stayed in the service till retirement time. He passed away June 9, 1999. We send our deepest sympathy to his family.

Who was the Flight Surgeon of the 499<sup>th</sup> Squadron after Captain Weiner went stateside in September of 1945? Did we have a replacement, or did we double up with another squadron? If you can help out, write to William V. Pennanen, 300 Sykes Creek, Merritt Island, FL 32953. He needs this information.

In a recent issue of the **STRAFER**, Ken Gastgeb mentioned finding a long lost member of the 499<sup>th</sup> Squadron, by the name of John O'Mera. While the Thomas Nelson was burning (November 12, 1945), I spent over an hour on the only working firehose on the aft section of the ship with a new member of our squadron. He was a tall kid, dressed in shorts, large GI shoes and a baseball cap. I once wrote to the **STRAFER** inquiring about him, but never received any response. John, if you are the person in question...welcome back, and please let me hear from you.

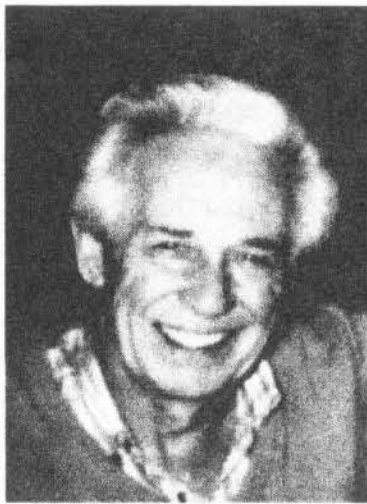
In the December 1998 issue of the **STRAFER**, Ken Gastgeb wrote an article about the "Forty and Eight" train of boxcars presented to the U.S. by France after WWII. Ken asked the question: "Do you know where your boxcar is"? Yes Ken, the Indiana boxcar is at the Veteran's Memorial Center near Fort Wayne. I am pleased to report it is fine repair, and under a permanent roof.

How many of you remember that the 499<sup>th</sup> officer's mess once had two chests full of really ugly dishes?

It seems they were not required to use mess kits. It was the duty of the KP from Communications Section to wash them. Since the Air Force had so much non-com rank, KP duty came around for me every 13 days. Even today, I blame this for my

language when irritated. God forgive me, but I learned to CUSS for 13 straight hours! When we moved across the Hump the dishes vanished from the plane, but to no avail, as the Quartermaster came up with more. We endured this torture until Wendell D. Decker became our CO, and banned this chore as unnecessary work. **THANK YOU MAJOR DECKER.**

Shortly after we arrived in New Guinea, we were billeted at 17 Mile Strip. One Sunday we were given permission to go beyond the strip to visit native villages. Off we went in a command car until we arrived at the first bridge—a smooth log across the river, followed by two more like it. They really bounced when walked upon! No, there were no handrails. The grass-skirted native women were unlike the Hollywood version. They had open sores, were covered with flies, and had lumpy tattoos under the skin. The men didn't smile, and carried weapons with barbed tips. Having seen enough, we didn't linger, but high-tailed it back across the log bridges—glad to have made it.



### 500<sup>th</sup> SQUADRON

Stan Muniz, Asst. Group V.P.

Bill Cavoli informed me that there are over 100 confirmed reservations for our Denver Reunion. Great! See you there!

While going through some photos of my time in the 500<sup>th</sup>, I came across a photo of a crew standing beside "The Grey Mare" from the 501<sup>st</sup> Squadron. The print is shown in the "SCRAPBOOK" section of this issue of the **STRAFER**. The fellow in the white Tee shirt gave this photo to a friend of mine sometime back in the 1960's. My friend gave me the picture, but did not remember the name of the person that he got it from. Does anyone recognize any of the people in the photo? If you are in the picture and would like to have a copy, I will be glad to send you one.

Speaking of pictures, I must send one in to head-up this column before the next issue.

On a different note, I hope all of you living on the East Coast have gotten some relief

from the heat and drought by now. So far, for over a month now, the temperature has ranged between 70 and 85 degrees, and it has been sunny with a nice breeze here in San Jose. We are about 50 miles south of San Francisco. Now, if only we don't have an earthquake.....

### Remember Veteran's Day November 11

That's it for now, God Bless, and everyone stay healthy.



### 501<sup>st</sup> SQUADRON

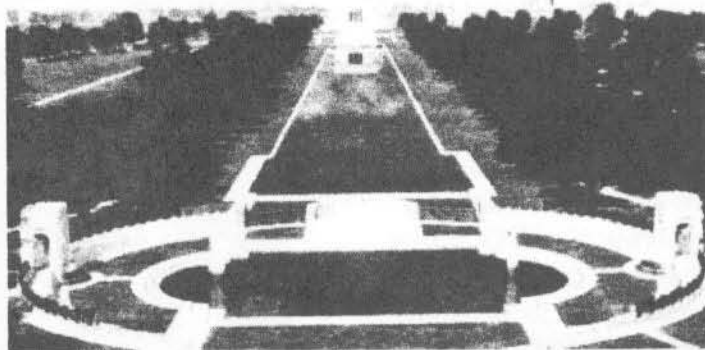
Chet Burns, Asst. Group V/P.

First off, we all would like to congratulate Frank Dillard and wish him lots of luck in his new capacity as editor of the **STRAFER**.

He has volunteered to take on a BIG JOB! I hope we all lend him our united support to make it a great success.

At the time of this publication we will be having our

## NATIONAL MONUMENT TO HONOR WWII VETERANS



Squadron Reunion in San Diego. We have tried to get there many times before. I am looking forward to seeing old friends, hoping for a good turnout, and a great time.

I received a letter and phone call from Elmer Kasten, brother of Ed Kasten. Ed's plane, "The Grey Mare", crashed on Biak after returning from a search mission. Elmer is seeking information from anyone that knew Ed, or flew with him. His address is: Elmer Kasten, RR 1 Box 19K, 918 Linden Ave., Gaylord, MN 55334-9705.

(Editor's note: See Stan Muniz's 500<sup>th</sup> column, and "Scrapbook" page, this issue.)

Another sad note came recently from Howard Dean. He informed me of the passing of Roland "Eck" Eckard. Roland was a member of Bud McGowen's original 501<sup>st</sup> crew, and was 82 years old. Howard attended his funeral at Homer, NY.

Would appreciate any news, notes, pictures or other information for the next issue of the **STRAFER**. In the meantime, have a happy thanksgiving, and I'll **See You in San Diego!**

### Some Significant 4<sup>th</sup> Quarter Anniversaries

**9/2/45** Japs sign formal documents officially ending WWII aboard USS Missouri.

**11/13/43** 57 B-24s & 62 B-25s made heaviest raid of WWII on New Guinea.

A national drive is underway to raise \$100 million to finance a memorial as a tribute to the millions of Americans who served in the military and at home during World War II.

Planned to be built on the National Mall in Washington, D.C., between the Lincoln Memorial and the Washington Monument, it will be the first national memorial for veterans of the war and civilians on the home front.

The memorial will be funded almost entirely by private donations. Of the \$100 million needed, about \$45 million has been raised to date.

Leading the fund-raising effort are the national campaign chairman, former Sen. Bob Dole, and co-chairman Frederick W. Smith, chairman and president of the FDX Corp. Among the groups supporting the memorial are the American Legion, Disabled American Veterans, Daughters of the American Revolution, Tuskegee Airmen and AARP.

This past spring the memorial campaign included efforts to widen public awareness about the fund-raising drive. Among those participating was actor Tom Hanks, who starred in the recent WWII movie, "Saving Private Ryan."

The design concept for the memorial, developed by architect Friedrich St. Florian, features two arches that mark the north and south entrances to the Memorial Plaza. President Clinton dedicated the memorial site in 1995. Groundbreaking is projected for Veterans Day 2000.

The memorial will include a registry of names of Americans who served in the armed forces and civilians who helped on the home front.

Information about the memorial, including how to donate, can be obtained by visiting the Web site at [www.wwiimemorial.com](http://www.wwiimemorial.com), calling (800) 639-4992, or writing to: World War II Memorial Campaign, Courthouse Plaza II, Suite 501, 2300 Clarendon Blvd., Arlington, VA 22201.





**TREASURER'S REPORT**

**Dick Feucht, Group Treasurer**

Through 3/31/99

**Funds on Deposit:**

**(1)Checking Account:**

National City Bank, Hill Rd.,  
Pickerington, OH  
Balance \$12,273.57  
Receipts 2,190.00  
Disbursements 1,138.18  
**Total Checking \$13,325.39**

**(2)Certificates of Deposit:**

Fifth Third Bank of Columbus,  
PO Box 182026, Columbus,  
OH 43218  
**Total in CDs \$18,088.88**

**Grand Total \$31,414.27**

**Note:** Check the date on your mailing label to see if you are current with 1999 dues. Still just \$15 (Treas.).

**REUNION XIII  
OCTOBER 1-5, 2000  
Reunion Chairman:  
George Mordecai  
14 Fredrick St.  
North Branford, CT  
06471-1807  
(203) 488-8177**

**ASSOCIATION OFFICERS**

President- Ken Gastgeb  
2143 Melrose Ct. #221  
Norman, OK 73069-5269  
405/364-1350  
Vice President – George Mordecai  
14 Fredrick St  
North Branford, CT 06471-1807  
203/488-8177  
Secretary – Roland Lamb  
3100 Black Walnut Dr.  
Flower Mound, TX 75028  
972/355-22373  
Treasurer – Dick Feucht  
12500 Tollgate RD.  
Pickerington, OH 43147-9161  
614/837-7062  
Strafer Publisher – Frank Dillard  
1203 Clubhouse Rd.  
Marion, IL 62959  
619/995-2225  
e-mail: [strafer@midamer.net](mailto:strafer@midamer.net)

**ASSISTANT GROUP VPs**

HQ- August Ouellette  
86 Central Street  
Hudson, NH 03051-4600  
603/598-6559  
498<sup>th</sup> -Frank Dillard  
1203 Clubhouse Road  
Marion, IL 62959  
618/995-2225  
499<sup>th</sup> - Ben Miller  
9450 N 550 W  
Decatur, IN 46733-9428  
219/547-4460  
500<sup>th</sup> - Stan Muniz  
5378 Borneo Circle  
San Jose, CA 95123  
408/227-3240  
501<sup>st</sup> - Chet Burns  
2693 Rock Port Ln  
Tom's River, NY 08755-2544  
908/886-0529

**IN MEMORY OF**

<b>Pat Aloia</b>	<b>498</b>	<b>11/25/97</b>	<b>Washington, PA</b>
<b>Arthur Anderson</b>	<b>501</b>	<b>6/11/98</b>	<b>Mound, MN</b>
<b>Lawrence Avant</b>	<b>501</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>Birmingham, AL</b>
<b>Calvin M. Bowen</b>	<b>498</b>	<b>3/94</b>	<b>Kensington, MD</b>
<b>Glen W. Cowell</b>	<b>501</b>	<b>7/2/98</b>	<b>Harlem, MT</b>
<b>Bill Crutchfield</b>	<b>?</b>	<b>4/5/99</b>	<b>Panama City, FL</b>
<b>Bob DeVinney</b>	<b>498</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>Rushville, NY</b>
<b>James M. Dunn</b>	<b>500</b>	<b>7/14/99</b>	<b>Dallas, TX</b>
<b>Roland Eckards</b>	<b>501</b>	<b>7/16/99</b>	<b>Homør, NY</b>
<b>Fred Ellard</b>	<b>500</b>	<b>7/12/99</b>	<b>Beaumont, TX</b>
<b>Philip Gath</b>	<b>499</b>	<b>2/26/99</b>	<b>Sumter, SC</b>
<b>Conrad Greenquist</b>	<b>501</b>	<b>5/16/99</b>	<b>Evansville, MN</b>
<b>Robert D. Ice</b>	<b>501</b>	<b>7/6/97</b>	<b>Louisville, KY</b>
<b>John W. Knerr</b>	<b>499</b>	<b>1/25/99</b>	<b>Hutchinson, KS</b>
<b>Mark T. Lemay</b>	<b>499</b>	<b>6/2/99</b>	<b>Manchester, NH</b>
<b>Joseph Liparela</b>	<b>501</b>	<b>4/10/98</b>	<b>Wilkes Barre, PA</b>
<b>Billy Matthews</b>	<b>498</b>	<b>1/23/99</b>	<b>Montgomery, AL</b>
<b>John McCarn</b>	<b>498</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>Rowland, NC</b>
<b>Fredrick Meisner</b>	<b>501</b>	<b>3/25/99</b>	<b>Newark Valley, NY</b>
<b>Marjorie Miller (Wife of Bill Miller)</b>	<b>501</b>	<b>5/4/99</b>	<b>Miami, FL</b>
<b>Raymond Nass</b>	<b>498</b>	<b>12/20/98</b>	<b>Springfield, IL</b>
<b>Frank Pohlman</b>	<b>500</b>	<b>11/98</b>	<b>Punta Gorda, FL</b>
<b>Rose Mary Seguin (Wife of Donald Seguin)</b>	<b>498</b>	<b>3/31/99</b>	<b>Lindstrom, MN</b>
<b>Robert Schieben</b>	<b>500</b>	<b>2/5/99</b>	<b>Lansing, IL</b>
<b>Lloyd Sindeldecker</b>	<b>498</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>Coolville, OH</b>
<b>Ralph Stevens</b>	<b>498</b>	<b>6/9/99</b>	<b>San Angelo, TX</b>
<b>Leonard Straka</b>	<b>499</b>	<b>8/21/98</b>	<b>Houston, TX</b>

## KENT SANBORN'S STORY

Recollections of an ex-seaman, Kent Sanborn, of what happened on the Thomas Nelson on November 12, 1944. His story was sent to Paul Van Valkenburg and Paul forwarded it to me.  
Ken Gastgeb.

"I was a member of the crew of Thomas Nelson from February 17, 1944 to January 29, 1945. We sailed out of San Francisco with a mixed cargo of supplies for the army units then fighting in New Guinea. Our first stop was in Milne Bay. The next several months were spent ferrying supplies and equipment along the coast all the way from Port Moresby to Biak, and nearly every place in-between.

In October of that year we loaded some of the 345th Bomb Group personnel and equipment at Biak, and proceeded to Hollandia, New Guinea. There we joined a large convoy that was scheduled to be part of the Philippine Island invasion force. That trip into Leyte Gulf turned out to be the last shuttle for the Nelson that year, due to damage sustained in a Kamikaze attack while at anchor near Dulag.

My recollection is that the small harbor at Hollandia was pretty well filled with ships. Some of them were Navy fighting vessels, but most were merchant ships like ours. I remember the night before our departure as being very dark. We watched

masthead lights on the warships flash rapidly for a couple of hours as signalmen talked with each other in a steady stream of coded messages. Sometime after midnight I stood on our flying bridge with the second mate and watched as the Navy pulled out, ghosting past us almost without a sound. I remember wondering how it was possible to go through all the commotion of hoisting anchors on several large ships and stowing them away in nearly total silence. By dawn they were gone.

The trip to Leyte was slow. All trips on Liberty ships were slow. For the Thomas Nelson, ten knots was a pretty normal speed when she was traveling alone. Convoys were usually a bit slower. Without knowing, I imagine the same is true of formation flying where maintaining position and maneuvering requirements limit the flexibility a pilot has when he's alone. I don't remember how many days it took us to get there, but the trip was uneventful. Some might even characterize it as boring, with pleasant weather, bright skies, a gentle rolling motion and time spent lolling against the rail watching the flying fish do their thing.

When we arrived in Leyte Gulf on October 29, 1945, some of the convoy anchored off the town of Dulag. I don't remember whether all did or not, but we did, and so did SS Morrison R. Waite, on which some other 345th people had made the trip. For reasons I

don't know about, the Air Force wasn't ready to accommodate the 345th on shore immediately. One story I remember hearing was that the airstrip wasn't ready to accept their airplanes. Maybe someone else can shed more light on that. For whatever reason, they stayed on the two ships. During that time we knew there were air raids around because we could see and hear the anti-aircraft artillery, but nothing seemed particularly threatening to me. The targets seemed to be on the beach and a little north of our location, closer to Tacloban. In those days, I was barely eighteen years old and had the Alfred E. Newman philosophy, "What? Me Worry?" I was too ignorant to be frightened. All of that changed abruptly at lunchtime on November 12, 1944.

I was standing in the starboard companionway of the main deckhouse, just inside the doorway onto the main deck, when a fierce explosion knocked me to my knees. One of the ship's cooks was there with me, and both of us needed a minute or so to recover from our initial shock. When we went outside to see what had happened, we looked first toward the foredeck, which was closest to where we stood. We couldn't see anything there that would account for the explosion so we ran aft along the outside companionway. As soon as we cleared the end of the deckhouse we stood at the

head of the temporary ladder into the number four hole where many of the 345th people were quartered. From there we could see a major fire in the aft end of the ship. I recall that most of the fire was on the port side and a little aft of the mast between the fourth and fifth holes. I also recall the feeling of alarm that struck me when I realized I couldn't see the after deck house where our Navy gun crew people were quartered, and where there were magazines full of ammunition for a four-inch surface gun and two twenty-millimeter machine guns. There was absolute pandemonium for a few minutes, but at the time it seemed like hours.

When I finally "got my wits about me" I went to a nearby fire hose location. There were a couple of people already there trying to get the hose off the rack, which had been damaged, so I went up the ladder to the boat deck to get another hose. With help from someone nearby I pulled the hose out, but when the valve was opened we discovered that shrapnel had destroyed the hydrant. It was quickly decided that any hoses that were going to be useful all had to be turned on from hydrants forward of the deckhouse. Several people got that done after what seemed like an eternity. I have no good estimate of the time it took to get water on the fire. It was probably not more than ten minutes or so, but that ten minutes seemed like forever. After the fire had

been knocked down I went aft to my battle station and spent the rest of the day unloading magazines and throwing overheated four-inch ammunition overboard.

As we moved around the deck, we could see a lot of people who had been killed or very seriously wounded. We could also see people in the water alongside the ship. Some may have been blown overboard. Others may have jumped to escape the fire. Sometime during the early afternoon we began to see small boats coming out from the beach in an effort to help. In Tom Brokaw's book, "The Greatest Generation", he tells about one of those people, John Assenzio, who was awarded the Bronze Star for his life saving efforts.

When I looked around at the rest of the ships and realized Waite had been hit. When I did, it seemed to me that they might have had more damage to their ship than we did. The airplane that hit us appeared to have struck the rigging near the masthead aft of the deckhouse. Most of the airplane went into the water. On the Waite it appeared the airplane had hit the side of the ship below the rail and just aft of the starboard anchor hawspipe, opening a large triangular hole through the hull and into the number one hold. However, we were anchored some distance apart so that impression may not be accurate. In any event, both ships had sustained damage and the human loss was

indescribable. I had never seen mayhem like that. It was unnerving and ugly. The memory still brings tears to my eyes and I know it will be with me for the rest of my life.

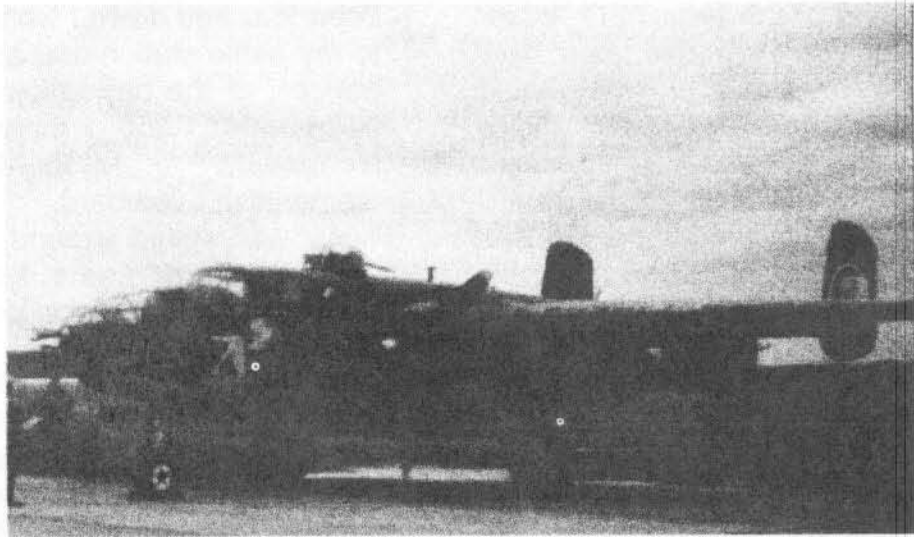
I never heard how many 345th people on our ship were lost that day. Of our crew, two of the fourteen man Navy gun crew were killed and two were taken ashore wounded. I never saw them again. None of the thirty-five merchant seamen were killed, and only two had relatively minor wounds. After the troops had finally been put ashore we unloaded most of the equipment and supplies. In our lower holds we had bombs, which weren't high on the Port Commander's want list. So, we sat there for a few more days. Eventually we moved the ship closer to Tacloban where we awaited again for someone to want those bombs. It was probably about a week after we dropped anchor at Tacloban that we joined a southbound convoy.

It seems to me that Mother Nature has a wonderful way of softening the effect of catastrophic events for us. I'm glad, it would be hard to go on sometimes if that didn't happen. I'll never forget that day in Leyte Gulf. But, more importantly I'll always remember the time I had with 345th after we left New Guinea and before we met with disaster. I met some fine people and have felt a strong affinity with them ever since."

# SCRAPBOOK

## “SHOW ME”

The Missouri Branch of the CAF owns this B25-J. Although it does not have the strafe nose it sports the “Air Apache” emblem on the vertical stabilizers. The plane was recently repainted in the Boeing’s new facility in St. Louis. The plane is regularly flown and displayed at airshows around the country.



This photograph of the 345<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group Memorial at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, with Ed Bina and Jeff Blackmon was featured in the July 1986 *STRAFER*.

The bronze plaques (not shown in this view) are unevenly tarnished, and are showing signs of weathering. Jesse Dean (498<sup>th</sup>) resides in Dayton, and is looking into having it restored to original condition.



The “GAY (?) MARE”, from the 501<sup>st</sup> Squadron is pictured here with an unidentified crew.

Stan Muniz (500<sup>th</sup>) sent this in. Do you recognize anyone? If so, let Stan Know, and he will send you the original black and white (5x7) print.

(Editor’s note: Is the plane’s name “The **GAY MARE**”, or “The **GRAY MARE**”?)

