



# AIR APACHES

# STRAFER

Volume 38, Number 1

July 2020

## President's Message

### Mary Roby, 500th

Well, family members and friends of the 345<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group Association, it looks like we will have a reunion this year. Enthusiastic response to the recent survey indicates that many of you would like to visit San Antonio for a 2021 Reunion.

The Historic Menger Hotel that we selected for the 2020 reunion is available for October 15-17, 2021, and they are thrilled that we will be holding our reunion there. They are offering us a very good room rate and reasonable costs for our other needs. Please see the registration form elsewhere in The Strafer for details.



One special purpose of our Texas visit is to dedicate a plaque to the 345<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group at the National Museum of the Pacific War in Fredericksburg. On Saturday, we will travel to the museum by bus and have plenty of time to tour the museum and visit Fredericksburg.

In addition to renewing friendships, we have invited some special guests, Dave Gutierrez and Alfredo Paredes, who collaborated with our member, Sandy Knudsen, to tell the story of the B-25 Cactus Kitten. Sandy's mom's first husband was Andrew Johnson, pilot

of the ill-fated airplane and Mr. Paredes' father was the Flight Engineer. The story was featured at the recent WWII meeting at the WWII Museum in New Orleans.

Dr. James Shaw, author of a new book, "Unsung Heroes," will speak at our dinner about Major Howard Brigham, who served the 345<sup>th</sup> as Operations Officer.

I am excited that so many of you indicated an interest in attending the reunion and I think you will enjoy what we have planned. If you have a question, please write to me at [mroby1916@gmail.com](mailto:mroby1916@gmail.com).

See you in San Antonio!

## Captain Underwood Update

### Jim Briggs, 501st

I wrote in the August 2020 "Strafer" about my father, Capt. James Underwood, and the continuing efforts by the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency (DPAA) to find the site where his B-25, with a crew of six, went down on 9 January 1945 (a month before I was born) while on a mission to support the U.S. invasion of Luzon Island in the Philippines (where Manila is located.) The remains of his plane, along with five incomplete bones, were found in May 1963 on Mindoro Island (south of Luzon), but the US Army team that found the site made no effort to document, or even describe, its exact location. Thus, it could not be found again - in later search efforts in 1963 and 1973 and then in April 2013 - for further, more detailed excavation. (The bones could not be identified, so were cremated in October 1965.)

This is just a brief update, again reflecting the considerable difficulties encountered in trying to locate lost servicemen from World War II and repatriate their remains.

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Last I wrote, I was waiting to hear back from DPAA on possible photos a tourism official on Mindoro Island might have gotten from "a local resident" whom he had reportedly sent "to a crash site with a disposable camera." I was told about this at a DPAA "Family Member Update" conference in Las Vegas in January 2020. At another update conference in February 2021 (via Zoom), I was told that DPAA had lost contact with the tourism official: they had tried calling his cell phone number, and it was no longer in service. That was the extent of their effort. (DPAA's predecessor organization had sent a team to Mindoro Island in April 2013 to search for my father's plane, and the tourism official had provided significant help, though nothing came of it. He had promised to advise the US military if he learned anything new.)

So, in May 2021, I took action myself: just Googled the name of the tourism official, found a reference to his Facebook page, and established contact via Facebook. I posted a note on his Facebook page, and he accepted my "friend" request. I also sent him a separate note via Messenger, with details on my father's case, reminding him of the role he had played in April 2013 and asking for his assistance. The (now-retired) tourism official responded: "Please be assured that I am still very much committed to help you find the wreckage and put things in its proper rest. I regret to inform you, however, that I have lost contact already with the Mangyan I requested to scout the wreckage. It's been years since I last talked to him. Our situation is quite hard due to pandemic with so many restrictions. Nonetheless, I will try to reestablish contact with him hopefully this summer. I will let you know of whatever updates I could possibly get."

DPAA Director Kelly McKeague had written to me on 9 March 2020, noting that DPAA's "goal is to place this case on our Master Investigation List so as to appropriately plan for an organic or partner team to locate and correlate any crash sites in the Mount Halcon area to that of your father's in 2021/2022."

While the evidence found in May 1963 confirmed the location of my father's plane in the Mount Halcon/Mount Bacuran area, incomplete and

inconsistent reporting in the official record makes it impossible to pinpoint a crash location using historical data. The terrain on Mount Halcon, towering over 8,000 feet, is considered about the most difficult in all of the country. DPAA feels the best way forward is a further investigation on Mindoro, with the intent of visiting and analyzing wreckage sites that are known to present-day residents and trying to locate the families of those involved in past search efforts to see if they have any "historical" knowledge.

Logistical challenges that must be overcome to launch an investigation include the remoteness of the area (an estimated multi-day hike if searched by foot) and medical evacuation protocols. In addition, Mount Halcon is in the ancestral lands of the indigenous Mangyan population. As the U.S. team found in April 2013, access to this area has required coordination with the Philippines government, as well as with the Mangyan indigenous governing bodies.

The DPAA Director wrote to me on 10 November 2020: "We monitor conditions weekly and look for any opportunities to field both DPAA and partner teams. Of note, we have initiated a pilot project in partnership with the University of Illinois-Chicago, whose history, anthropology, and engineering departments will add capabilities and augment our investigation and recovery efforts in the Philippines through comprehensive case progression. We are planning to add your dad's case to the University's list of field investigations once they resume operations" halted by COVID-19 restrictions.

The DPAA lead historian for the Philippines estimates that it may take up to 2-3 years for any undertaking - whether by a partner like the University of Illinois-Chicago or DPAA inhouse - to potentially find my father's crash site, given the difficulties involved.

I have also been in regular contact with Colin Colbourn, lead historian for Project Recover (also engaged in trying to locate missing servicemen), since meeting him at our reunion in San Diego in September 2017. Project Recover announced recently that they had "entered into an agreement with DPAA to begin recovery missions in 2021." Not directly related to my father's case at this point - Project Recover has not been

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involved in the Philippines in recent years - but a possible option in the future.

All in all, not too much actual "progress," though COVID restrictions have had an impact. But my father's case clearly has DPAA's attention. That makes all the effort I've put into this over the past 20 years well worthwhile. I've recently gone through the 500-600 pages of documents available on my father's case, and completely rewritten his "case summary" and submitted it to DPAA to be used as their "official" version - to ensure that it details all of the complexities of the written record as completely as possible for anyone involved in the search in future. Hope springs eternal.

### ***Mailing List Clean-Up***

Our mailing list has been hovering near 500 names for several years and recently has dropped well under 500. This impacts our ability to use the special postage rate for non-profit organizations.

Consequently, if you do not wish to continue to receive the Strafer or may know of someone who has passed on, please let us know. You can mail us the address page from this Strafer or email me at [mroby1916@gmail.com](mailto:mroby1916@gmail.com). We don't want to remove anyone who would like to continue to receive The Strafer (family members of deceased veterans, for example.)

Thank you!

### **Honoring the Missing Crew of the Cactus Kitten Dave Gutierrez**

I stumbled across a newspaper article from May of 1945. Once I started down the path of further researching the story of a Sgt. Alfredo Paredes, U.S. Army Air Corps, I could not imagine I would be speaking to family members and descendants or staring at photos of the crew of a B-25 Bomber that was lost over the South Pacific in WWII. Sgt. Paredes was the catalyst



### **Honoring Those Who Have Passed**

*We extend our heartfelt sympathy to these 345<sup>th</sup> friends we have lost recently.*

Lincoln "Linck" Grush on December 13, 2019, Farmington, ME. *Mr. Grush, his wife Gloria & family attended the 2018 Greenville reunion.*

Marvin "Murph" Leventon on January 28, 2020, Baltimore, MD. *Mr. Leventon, his wife Vivian & family attended the 2018 Greenville reunion.*

Floyd Fox on February 29, 2020, Muskegon, MI. *We were honored to have Mr. Fox with us at our last reunion in Ypsilanti, MI in September 2019.*

Irving Horwitz on September 5, 2020, in Burlington, NJ. *Mr. Horwitz was the subject of a story by Kelly McNichols in the August 2020 edition of The Strafer.*

George Cooper on December 14, 2020, in Tonganoxie, KS. *Mr. Cooper was the subject of Jay Stout's book, "Jayhawk." There is a lovely afterword by Mr. Cooper written shortly before his death at age 100.*

Harlan Hatfield on January 3, 2021, in Fair Oaks, CA. *Mr. Hatfield supported the 500<sup>th</sup> Bomb Squadron and maintained their website until his death.*

for what became a journey to honor five heroic men and their family's sacrifice.

Alfredo Paredes was born January 28, 1921, in Del Rio Texas. Alfredo graduated from San Felipe High School in May of 1941 and in mid-July had enlisted in the US Army Air Corps. He had applied and was accepted to Flight Engineer/Gunner school, so he headed out to Georgia for the training. Once he graduated as a flight engineer, Alfredo was sent to South Carolina.

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In Greenville South Carolina, Alfredo was assigned to a crew that included 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt. Pilot Andrew J. Johnson of Cadillac Michigan, 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt. Co-Pilot Paul E. Langdon of Cincinnati Ohio, Lt. Frank M. Worley of Asheville North Carolina was the Navigator/Bombardier, the Radio Gunner was Corporal Armas A. Tuuri of Michigan, and the Tail-Gunner was Private James Robert "Red" Sams from Jacksonville Florida. The new crew trained together in a B-25 Mitchell Bomber and became good friends.

2<sup>nd</sup> Lt. Andrew Johnson graduated from Cadillac High School in 1941 and had married his high school classmate Margaret Sulpher in March of 1942. As Johnson moved around the country attending flight schools, Margaret followed along as much as she could to be near her newlywed husband.

2<sup>nd</sup> Lt. Paul E. Langdon had graduated from Cincinnati's Hartwell High School in 1942. His brother Walter was serving at Hickman Field in Hawaii on December 7, 1941 and survived the attack on Pearl Harbor. Lt. Frank McCame Worley had graduated from Lee H. Edwards High School in 1939. Worley was working as a chemist when WWII broke out and by 1943 was in Tennessee as an air cadet for the U.S. Army Air Corps.

When the group completed their training in Greenville South Carolina as a crew, they received orders to pick up their B-25 aircraft in Georgia. The crew spent time in Sacramento California before making it out to the Pacific where they would be assigned to the 5<sup>th</sup> Air Force, 345<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group, 501<sup>st</sup> Bomb Squadron. The Air Apaches of the 345<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group had already made a name for themselves in the Pacific. The 345<sup>th</sup> BG was the first full air combat group to be assigned to the Pacific arriving in 1943. The bombing group was made up of four squadrons: the 498<sup>th</sup> BS, the 499<sup>th</sup> BS, the 500<sup>th</sup> BS and the 501<sup>st</sup> Bomb Squadron that was nicknamed the Black Panthers. Shortly after arriving in the Pacific, the Air Apaches had changed their B-25 bombers into a strafing role. They had added additional 50 Cal guns on the nose of the aircraft to total eight 50 Cal guns. They found that the B-25 was more effective in a strafing role against enemy ships and ground attacks than the traditional bomber role.

The 501<sup>st</sup> BS had moved their base of operations to San Marcelino Airfield in the Philippines, located in central Luzon in the Zambales Province. Their missions from San Marcelino in April of 1945 targeted Japanese shipping, airfields, factories and looking to disrupt all Japanese transportation. When new personnel arrived at the 501<sup>st</sup> BS they partnered up with veterans before turning them loose on their own. When Lt. Johnson's crew arrived, they were separated to train with veterans, with each trying to complete their five to eight missions with veterans.

The mission reports of the 501<sup>st</sup> BS indicate that Lt. Andrew Johnson's first mission was on April 8 1945. The target for this mission was a Japanese convoy of seven to eight ships that had been spotted near the China coast. Unable to locate the convoy of enemy ships at the first and secondary target area, the eight B-25s of the 501<sup>st</sup> BS attacked their last resort target, Chomosui Airdrome in the Pescadores Islands.

On April 15 Lt. Johnson was scheduled another mission and was assigned a B-25 with serial number 43-36041, it was nicknamed the Cactus Kitten. The B-25 had arrived in the 501<sup>st</sup> BS on October 16 1944. Crew Chief Tech Sergeant Dave William Haines was from Wyoming, and TSgt. Haines had one of his men, Sgt. George Blackwell paint a sexy cowgirl on the starboard nose.

On April 27<sup>th</sup>, Lt. Johnson and some of the other officers were summoned to the operations tent. At the front of the operations tent was the Commanding Officer of the 345<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group, Colonel Chester Coltharp who stated, "Gentlemen, you have been selected to fly the most important strike in the history of the 345<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group. Our target is Saigon Harbor on the coast of Indochina (Vietnam) where the enemy has a large concentration of shipping." Also assigned on the mission was Lt. Ralph E. "Peppy" Blount from Big Springs Texas. Lt. Blount had become one of the youngest B-25 pilots in the Pacific at the age of 19.

Also scheduled for the mission to Saigon was Lt. Paul Langdon who would be Lt. Johnson's Co-Pilot. Navigator Bombardier Frank Worley was on leave in Manila so another navigator would be assigned to the crew. Sgt. Alfredo Paredes of Del Rio was not scheduled on this mission. When Alfredo found out that Andrew was

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piloting on this mission, he volunteered as Lt. Johnson's flight engineer. Of the six original crew members that trained together in South Carolina, Lt. Johnson would have two familiar faces with him, Lt. Langdon and Sgt Paredes. Aubrey Lionel Stowell Jr. of Indianapolis Indiana was assigned as the Navigator on Lt. Johnson's crew to replace Lt. Worley. The fifth and final person assigned to Lt. Johnson's crew was radio man Corporal Lester F. Williams of Burkesville Kentucky.

Lt. Johnson's crew would be flying the Cactus Kitten on their mission to Saigon Bay. The crews would fly to Palawan Island the afternoon of the 27<sup>th</sup> and strike Saigon Bay targets the next morning from Palawan. Col. Coltharp was to lead eight B-25s from the 501<sup>st</sup> BS and the 499<sup>th</sup> BS was to be adding five more B-25s bringing the total to fourteen aircraft on the mission. Col Coltharp also informed the crews that ten minutes prior to their attack, a squadron of B-24s was to bomb the area. In addition, they were to expect twenty-four P-38 fighters to provide air support and help strafe the targets.

On the early morning of April 28<sup>th</sup> fourteen B-25s took off from Palawan Island at 0635. Lt. Johnson in the Cactus Kitten was flying as Col Coltharp's wingman. Flying their own crews from the 501<sup>st</sup> was also Lt. Peppy Blount, 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt. Milton E Esty and 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt Vernon M. Townley Jr.

As the B-25's approached land, two of the pilots from the 499<sup>th</sup> BS turned back due to low fuel, leaving a dozen B-25's left to complete the mission.

The B-24 Bombers that were scheduled to bomb the area to soften up enemy guns at Saigon Harbor never made it. The P-38s that were supposed to escort the Air Apaches on their target run radioed in and told Col Coltharp that they were running low on fuel and returning to their base.

At 1115 the B-25s roared over Saigon at 200 feet. Lt. Peppy Blount would later write, "Arriving over the city flak, small, medium, heavy from every direction and location, was so intense you could walk on it!" Col. Coltharp with Lt Johnson on his wing would fly the first attack on Japanese freighters docked on the Saigon River. A two-hundred-ton freighter was sitting on the

north bank of the river, Col Coltharp attacked the freighter and released two bombs that destroyed the freighter. Two freighters were docked on the south bank of the river, Col Coltharp scored a direct hit on one sinking the ship. Lt. Andrew Johnson had been strafing everything in his path and as he followed Col Coltharp to the south bank of the river, he dropped three bombs on a twenty-three-hundred-ton freighter. The third bomb had bounced up onto the deck. The freighter must have been loaded with ammunition and or other explosives because it exploded violently and quickly disappeared as if it had never existed.

As Lt. Johnson pulled the Cactus Kitten passed the once freighter that had been sitting on the south bank of the river, heavy flak continued to explode around him. A massive flak burst hit his right engine and immediately caught on fire. The fire quickly spread and was now burning the fuselage of the aircraft. Lt. Johnson was somehow able to climb the burning B-25 to about one thousand feet. The burning aircraft alerted every gun and enemy fighter in the area to it. A Japanese Zero appeared behind the Cactus Kitten and fired three long bursts at it before pulling away. Lt Peppy Blount saw Lt. Johnson in trouble and losing altitude quickly and radioed over and screaming for Johnson and his crew to bail out. As the Cactus Kitten was going down Lt. Blount pulled as close as he could to aircraft. At about two hundred feet from the ground, he could see one crewman bailed out, but his parachute never opened being too close to the ground. The Cactus Kitten exploded before it even hit the ground an estimated 17 miles southwest of Saigon. Col. Coltharp made a pass over the crash site and quickly knew that no one could have survived that crash.

Two other B-25s that were piloted by 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt. Milton E Esty and 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt Vernon M. Townley Jr. were also lost on the mission over Saigon Bay, each aircraft carrying five men.

Alfredo Paredes' parents wrote a letter to the parents of Lt. Andrew Johnson to check on Andrew and if they had heard any news. Margaret Sulpher Johnson was looking for answers, she had learned that Paul Langdon had also been killed alongside her Andy. She had met Frank Worley while the crew was training together in South Carolina and wrote to Frank. The US Army had a

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rule about notifying any family members of any death until forty-five days had passed.

In this letter to Margaret, Frank also explained that Sgt. Alfredo Paredes was not originally scheduled on the mission to Saigon but that he had volunteered because Andy was piloting. She received many letters of condolences including a personally signed letter from Douglas MacArthur.

Margaret became a widow and years later would remarry. She had three daughters that grew up knowing that their mother had once been married to Andrew Johnson that had been tragically killed in WWII.

Co-Pilot Paul Langdon's brother had been killed in 1944 when his plane went down in New Guinea. Now his mother received yet another devastating telegram notifying her that her only surviving son had also been killed. Aubrey Stowell Jr was married and left behind a young son named Dave he had never met. Lester Williams was one of five children born to Luther and Sallie Williams of Burkesville Kentucky. Both of Lester's older brothers also served during WWII, brother Carl served in the Army Air Corps and brother Lewis was serving in the Navy.

## What We're Reading

**A Lad from Lamont: Faith Journey of a Country Boy** by James Hutcherson (499<sup>th</sup>)

**Jayhawk: Love, Loss, Liberation and Terror Over the Pacific** by Jay Stout, with George L Cooper (499<sup>th</sup>)

**Letters Across the Pacific: A Love Story in the Time of War** by April Martin Beltz (499<sup>th</sup>)

**The Women with Silver Wings: The Inspiring Story of the Women Air Force Service Pilots of WWII** by Katherine Sharp Landdeck

**Unsung Heroes: Major Montgomery H Throop of the "Mighty Eighth" and Major Howard H Brigham of the "Air Apaches"** by James A Shaw, MD. (HQ)

The Paredes family never forgot Alfredo who was killed in action in defense of his country. Younger brother Ernesto had two sons, one which he named after his heroic brother Alfredo. The entire Paredes family continues to honor Alfredo's sacrifice. None of the five



Georgia 1944 Front LtR: Armas A. Tuuri, Sgt. Alfredo P. Paredes, James R. Sams. Back LtR: 2nd Lt. Paul E. Langdon, 2nd Lt. Andrew J. Johnson, Lt. Frank M. Worley

bodies aboard the Cactus Kitten were ever recovered. Missing Tablets Memorial at the American Cemetery in Manila, five out of over thirty-six thousand names of American servicemen that are listed as missing in the Pacific during WWII.

The 345<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group became one of the most decorated units in the US Army Air Corps during WWII. For its raid on Saigon in April of 1945 the 501<sup>st</sup> BS was awarded the Distinguished Unit Citation for the second time in WWII. The first DUC came in 1943 for its raid on the Japanese stronghold at Rabaul.

In October 1945, the Paredes family in Del Rio was notified that Sgt. Alfredo Paredes was to be awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross posthumously for his role on the airstrike over Saigon.

*Dave Gutierrez is the author of the book Patriots from the Barrio, the story of Company E 141<sup>st</sup> Infantry: the only all Mexican American Army unit in WWII.*

**Note to our Members and Friends.** Thank you for your membership in the 345<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group Association, which is a 501(c)(3) non-profit educational and historical organization to which your contribution may be tax deductible on your federal return. Memberships and contributions help us achieve our goals to remember and share the accomplishments of the 345<sup>th</sup>.

**345<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group Association**  
**Membership Form**

Name(s) \_\_\_\_\_ Squadron \_\_\_\_\_

Mailing Address \_\_\_\_\_ Please check if new

City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_

Phone \_\_\_\_\_ Home \_\_\_\_\_ Cell \_\_\_\_\_ Other \_\_\_\_\_

Email Address \_\_\_\_\_

I am a:

345<sup>th</sup> Vet or Widow  345<sup>th</sup> Family Member  Vet from another group  Other

**Please tell us about yourself and your interest in the Association. We are especially interested in hearing from grandchildren and great-grandchildren of veterans. If you are a family member, please tell us who your veteran is and about your relationship to him. We urge you to share any information you may have with the Association, by scanning and sending to the Association on a flash drive or DVD.**

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**Please check here  if you have documents and other items you would like to share with us.**  
(We will be happy to scan and return your items or you may scan and send them on a flash drive.)

**Please check here  if you would like to be contacted by the Association about getting involved.**  
(What would you like to do?)

Please make your check payable to  
345<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group Association  
and send it with this application  
page to:

**Clint Roby, Treasurer**  
**345<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group Association**  
**PO Box 8755**  
**Roanoke, VA 24014**

*Have you paid your 2021 dues?*

*Only \$15 for veterans and their spouses/widows.  
Other individual memberships are \$35 per year.*

Your support enables us to publish The Strafer, maintain our web presence, install, and maintain our 345<sup>th</sup> monuments, and hold our Annual Reunions. Additional contributions beyond membership are much appreciated!

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