



Flightline



Newsletter of the 780th Bombardment Squadron of WWII

September 2018

Flightline Flashback



This month the 15th Air Force Bomb Group Joint Reunion is taking place in Dayton. In honor of the occasion we continue the series *Flightline Flashback* with this photograph from the May 1968 issue of *780th News* (issue #3) of 780th Squadron members who attended a squadron meeting (not reunion) in Los Angeles in November 1967. Do you recognize these guys before I tell you who they are? Take a look first, then read on. Top row, from left: Fristoe Wallace, Gene Koscinski, Earl Francis and Bud Line. Middle row: Lee Englehorn, Rolland Cohen, Ralph DeSantis, Howard Williams, Al Ettlin and Max Freed. Bottom row: Bernie Bezinover, Sal Rodriguez, Charlie Davis, Orlo Wilcox, Jim Hanselman and Bob Bleier. Davis passed away two months later. Here's what Gene had to say about the meeting: "Mr. Wallace, our generous host, went to extremes to render us a truly "posh evening." The entire evening bubbled over with fine food, drinks and lots of other goodies, but most of all we enjoyed an evening of warm, interesting conversations where we once again cemented our relationship together. I tell you we have a wonderful and friendly group. They say there is nothing that creates camaraderie as that which comes from men who have been together in some war. Here was living proof of it." I think you all would agree with me that this camaraderie continued through all subsequent 780th reunions, and into *The Flightline*.

Your News & Letters

Dear Kathy,

Always good to hear from you. Your recent Flightline from 1944 (Welcome to '780th Town', March 2018) was new to me, since I did not join the group until 1983. Seems like ages ago, but I still remember the good reunions we had together. Just a note to let you know I have joined the aged group at an extended care home in Tavares, Florida. I am the second youngest in here, and can still hear and walk with a walker or cane. But I

experienced my second stroke in January of this year, and my daughter felt it was good for me to retire close to her here. I can still take care of all my personal needs, but who knows what is ahead for any of us.

Blessings from sunny Florida, Vera Bagley

Editor's note: Thanks for your "sunny" note, Vera. Continue to look out for yourself and stay in touch!



Kathy.

Received my mother's copy of Flightline in the mail today. Unfortunately I have to report that she has passed away. I know that she and my father greatly enjoyed your publication. B-24's were very much a part of them both. Best wishes for the continued success and camaraderie of the group.

Vernon Bettencourt

Editor's note: Thank you. Her obituary appears on page 3.

Last flight of 'Cookie' Kuchenbecker

George Kuchenbecker, 780th tailgunner and last member of the Joe Theena crew, passed away in February at age 92. George was one of the first 780th members I met, in Dayton in 1998. We had two interests in common: the B-24 and the tailgunner position. George was more than thrilled to educate me about both since my grandfather was a tailgunner. My grandfather's name was George, too. George K. made sure I knew about the B-24. It was his passion, and there was no better send-off from this life to the next for George than one last ride on the Collings B-24, *Witchcraft*. This is the letter George's son, Dave, wrote to the Collings family, Foundation staff, and *Witchcraft* crew, for arranging this special last flight:

On June 23, we had a wonderful memorial to my father "Cookie." This couldn't have been any nicer, more respectful or more generous memorial. From the moment I arrived at Boeing field, the entire Collings crew could not have been more gracious. It seemed like every five minutes somebody asked me if there was

anything else they could do for Dad and his family. There were so many great suggestions from Ty, Eric, Amy and all the Seattle crew on ways to honor Dad and his memory. We set up a table under Dad's "Office," as he called it, and had a bunch of pictures of his life both in the service and out. We had his portrait on display along with his original A-2, flight suit, O-2 mask and flight helmet. As the time approached to take off, Eric suggested that we put his portrait in the tail turret facing forward so we could take a picture of him on his last flight, in his office. Four generations of Kuchenbeckers were there to celebrate Dad's life and then join him on his last flight. The flight was beautiful as the cloud cover lifted, revealing a bluebird day in Seattle. The flight out over Puget Sound was so memorable as I scattered Dad's ashes as he had wished. Thank you to all at the Collings Organization.

But I think there was one more send-off. One month later, *Witchcraft* arrived at my airport in

TAPS



Eunice "Eunie" Edrige Bettencourt, 92, widow of 780th pilot Vernon Bettencourt, passed away May 11, 2017, in Winchester, Virginia. She was born July 4, 1924, at the Rotta Winery in Templeton, California to Gerolamo and Annetta Rotta, and married Vernon on February 10, 1946. She lived in California until 2008 when she moved to Virginia. Eunice enjoyed World War II aviation history and was a member of the Santa Maria Museum of Flight. She also enjoyed traveling with her husband. Survivors include her son, Vernon Bettencourt Jr. (Mary Ann); daughter, Barbara (Jim) McGhan; five grandchildren and four great-grandchildren.

Springfield, Illinois. I had hosted the Collings Foundation in 1999, and the planes came back one other time since then. Now they arrived this year, just one month after George's last flight. I can't help but think it was more than just coincidence. Thank you for stopping by, George, and thanks for enriching my life through the B-24.



Left: Clan Kuchenbecker, in front of George's beloved plane/turret/office. Above: George's portrait, ready for one last flight. Below: Me and my family saying our goodbye and thanks to George.



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This summer I got an email from Peter Gluklick, son of Ed Gluklick, asking about the documentary Ed appeared in. *On the Wing*, produced by our very own Brad Branch, son of Bart Branch, features many men from the 780th and the story of the air battle over Ehrwald, Austria in 1944 that resulted in the loss of more than 30 men, including some of Lee Englehorn's crew (he's pictured on the front of this newsletter). I put Peter in touch with Brad and Brad responded: "I am in Austria now. I have visited several of the crash sites from the August 3 1944 battle mentioned in the film. I went up alone to the Brendlkar and had a little service for the guys. Notice the lit candle. Despite a good breeze and about 7,000 feet altitude it burned for a long time." Above are two photos Brad emailed from Austria of the memorial to those lost crews. Isn't technology great?