

781st BOMB SQUADRON | 465th BOMB GROUP | 15th AIR FORCE



# PANTANELLA NEWS

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# 2021 REUNION ALBUQUERQUE NEW MEXICO



2021 781<sup>ST</sup> BOMB SQUADRON REUNION

**PANTANELLA NEWS**

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 Georgia McKinnon, Greg Soucy

**PANTANELLA NEWS**

781st BOMB SQUADRON (H)  
 Part of the 465th Bomb Gp. 15th AF  
 Italy 1944-1945

Flew 191 Missions over Southern Europe dropping thousands of tons of death and destruction to the enemy. Shot down 25 enemy aircraft. Received two Presidential Unit Citations in Seven Battle Campaigns.

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<http://465th.org>

**President's Message**



Our organization celebrates and memorializes the men and deeds of the 781st Bomb Squadron. As time marches on, it is less a celebration in the sense of a reunion of old comrades, and more of a memorial, as our veterans pass. We still recognize and honor these brave men, and that is cause for celebration among the surviving families.

My father, Kennard Wiggins Sr. (O'Brien crew) passed almost two decades ago. I recently had the opportunity to honor his memory. Here in his home state of Delaware is an organization called the Delaware Aviation Hall of Fame. It has been around for about fifteen years. It recognizes those who have made a significant contribution to aviation in Delaware. It includes notable inventors, pioneers of aeronautics, pilots and war heroes. I wanted to nominate my father for this honor but it seemed pretty intimidating.

My father was one of thousands of returning veterans and seemed to be

typical in that sense for having done his duty. What I now realize is that his service and thousands of others was not typical. It was extraordinary for a nineteen-year-old to strap himself into a ball turret and hang in the slipstream of a bomber 35 times. His crew crash-landed twice. His best friend Carl Gruber was killed. It must have been terrifying for him. It must have been life-changing. All our fathers faced this trial by fire knowing they could be the next to die.

To my surprise, my Dad was inducted into the Delaware Aviation Hall of Fame a couple weeks ago. They recognized what I had seen and acted accordingly. Here is a link to the site: [https://www.dahf.org/2021\\_Wiggins.html](https://www.dahf.org/2021_Wiggins.html).

Chances are, your state has a similar organization. You may want to consider your 781st Squadron member as a nominee. It would be a good way to celebrate their life and to memorialize their accomplishments.

— Kennard Wiggins  
 President

**CONGRATULATIONS**

We would like to congratulate our chaplain, Lance McKinnon upon the completion of his Doctor of Ministry degree. Lance completed his studies at Shiloh University and successfully defended his dissertation in November. He will now be serving as a professor, as well as an administrator, at Grace Communion Seminary. We wish him all the best and congratulate him on this wonderful accomplishment.



**2022 Bomb Group Renunion**

**Date - September 15-18  
 Wichita, Kansas**



**Wichita Marriott**  
 9100 Corporate Hills Drive | Wichita, Kansas 67207

# STEM in the City

STEM is an acronym for the combination of Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics.

We received a letter in 2019 from the Strategic Air and Space asking for our support of a STEM in the City Community Event. We pledged \$5,000.00 to be taken from our Endowment Fund which we have there. They postponed a

year, but it was held in 2021. Here is the thank you letter we received from them and pictures of the event.

— Carole Lee



THANK YOU to everyone who was able to support STEM in the City in one way or another!!! As one of the first, free, large-scale events coming out of the pandemic, we really did not know what to expect! From our data, we have estimated a total of 450 attendees. Although it was a little lower than expected, it was still a successful day that provided access to safe, fun, educational experiences. We could not have done it without you, and we hope you will join us in growing this event next year. Please let me know your thoughts, comments, feedback, advice, and anything else you would like to share for this year's and next year's event.

Thanks again for all your help in preparing, facilitating, and promoting this event! I look forward to receiving your feedback.

Have a great weekend and don't forget to check out the attached pictures!

Samantha Gentry  
Grants Manager  
Strategic Air Command & Aerospace Museum



## MEMBERSHIP DUES:

**All 781st WWII Veterans are Life Members**

All other members are Associate Members for \$10.00 per year renewable each January.

Your label shows the year you last paid. If it is not 2021 or later, you owe dues.

Please make checks payable to 781st Bomb Squadron. Mail to:

**Carole Lee, Squadron Treasurer, 4700 S. Cliff Ave. #308, Sioux Falls, SD 57103**

# 2021 REUNION MEMORIES



One of the highlights of the 781st Bomb Squadron reunions has always been their speaker series and the 2021 reunion continued that tradition. There were several speakers at this year's reunion and each one of them delivered a compelling talk about their unique experiences and the sacrifices/contributions they were able to make.

Harley Bridger was one of those speakers but what set him apart was the fact that he was a member of the 465th

Bomb Group, 782nd Squadron serving at Pantanella along with the 781st the reunion was celebrating. There are only a handful of these veterans remaining and we were extremely fortunate to hear one of them speak. Harley talked about his military experience from basic training to landing in Italy, as well details of the bombing missions he needed to participate in so he could go home. The conditions they faced on the ground and in the air were rustic at best. They lived in tents and slept on cots covered in hay stuffed canvas bags. The temperature in the plane was frigid. On one of their flights the temperature was 65 degrees below zero!

After returning home, Harley started a family, attended college and became an educator. He and his wife Katy celebrated their 75th anniversary on October 19th of this year.

These remaining veterans are a true treasure and we must continue to find ways to celebrate their legacy. It is reassuring to see families bring their children and grandchildren to these reunions to share in this celebration. I hope this tradition continues with the future members of our families.

If you'd like to learn more about Harley's military experience you can visit: <https://www.wv2online.org/view/harley-bridger>  
— **Liz Wiggins**



It was indeed an honor and privilege to attend the Bomb Group 2021 Annual Reunion in honor of Albert LeBlanc and Ron Soucy. My adventure started with a quick flight from Tampa to Dallas where I met up with Big Ron's son, Rodger. We drove to the

hotel in Albuquerque where we met Greg and the 781st Family. It was great seeing everyone and celebrating the Greatest Generation! The hotel was a great location, and the staff was accommodating in all respects. The highlight for me was seeing the entire Orren Lee Family celebrating his accomplishments and longtime service to all our Veterans and their families.  
Semper Fidelis  
— **Ron Horne**



I want to say thanks for sending me my dad's old flying group information. I save the pictures and have them in a special book.

I am so glad you keep going. Your generation is very special. Many thanks for the WWII vets there. God bless you all.  
— **Michael Fahrer**

The reunion in Albuquerque brought us to the amazing New Mexico Veterans Memorial. In addition to reconnecting with the veterans and their families, we had the opportunity to see a truly breathtaking memorial to our veterans from many of our conflicts.

— **Don Munce**

The 2020 postponed reunion in Albuquerque was held September 9-12 in 2021. The attendance was 212. The 465th had 33 registered but two couples

became ill and were unable to come. Our 781st members Mike and Julie Deslatte were one of them. We missed you Mike and Julie. I had my family there in memory of Orren.

My family in attendance, Roxanne & Roland Richle, Caroline Merriman, Don Munce, Audrey Munce, Jamie Munce and friend Adam, Patti & Joe Wilson, Amanda Flood, Karen & John Myhre, Jay & Jill Munce and Maggi Munce. Other members of the 781st in attendance was Greg & Rodger Soucy, Ron Horne, Bud & Libby Russell and Liz Wiggins.

— **Carole Lee**

# In 1944, a Malfunctioning B-24 Bomber Needed Crazy Mid-Air Surgery

A World War II story for the history books.

Here's What You Need to Know: One air crew had to contend with a dangerous screw-up.

On April 22, 1944, 26 B-24 bombers from the U.S. Army Air Corps' 453rd Bombardment Group took off from Old Buckenham Airfield in England. Their target—a railway marshaling yard in Hamm, Germany.

The pilot of the lead B-24 was Bill Norris, my father and a future Air Force test pilot. Norris, then in his early 20s, was not happy. The group had decided to surprise the Germans by launching the planes in the daytime—a departure from standard procedure.

It was a tactic the bombardment group would not repeat.

The problem was, departing when the sun was up meant returning when the sun was down. "Another example of masterful mission variation planning and execution," Norris joked decades later.

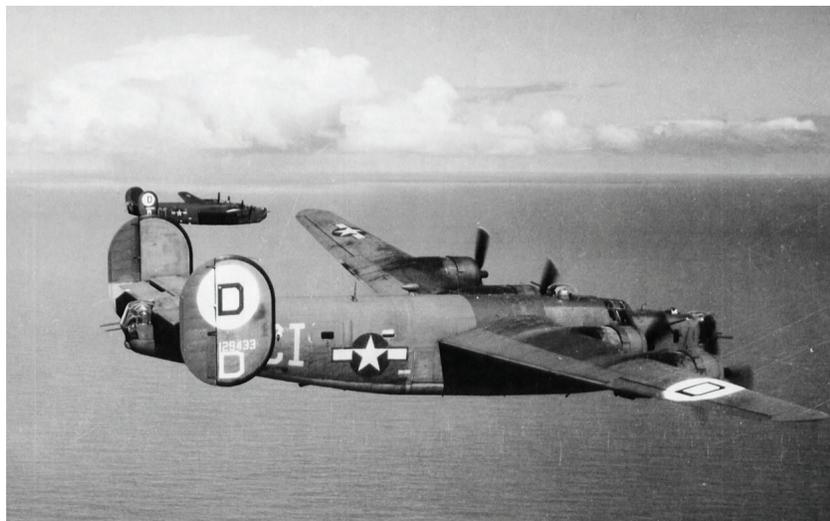
"The penetration into Germany and bombing were nearly normal," Norris explained. The 453rd Bombardment Group's official history seconds Norris' account. "Bombing results were excellent," the history notes.

The problem occurred on the flight back to England. "The return was a real nightmare," Norris said.

"German night-fighters followed us home until we were told to turn on navigation lights for penetration separation and recovery," Norris said. "In just a couple

minutes, the black night was well-illuminated by flaming B-24s in the sky over southeast England."

"I directed the squadron to shut off their lights and pick any airfield they could find. I found Old Buck and approached to land. A Ju-88 was firing at us on final approach and the gunners were returning fire 'til



we touched down. We sustained several 20-millimeter [cannon] hits in the wings and tail, but no one was injured."

"Many aircraft had encounters with intruders," the official history comments unironically.

"Needless to say," Norris quipped, "we did not do that again."

On a separate mission that same spring, Norris and his crew had to contend with an equally dangerous screw-up—one that required some mid-flight engineering on a malfunctioning plane.

"We were alerted for a mission and the usual procedure was for the crew to pre-flight the B-24 and munitions-load prior to mission preparation and briefing," Norris recalled. "As squadron lead, our navigator

and bombardier prepared the route and target folders while I worked with operations on the departure, formation and in-flight procedures."

Our group of 26 B-24s—each loaded with four 2,000-pound bombs—was to join hundreds of other bombers and fighters from the 8th Air Force on the mission. Our

aircraft's load included a couple of 100-pound smoke bombs because, as lead, our formation dropped on our release and the smoke bombs acted as a marker.

All was well until our crew chief found an engine problem that couldn't be fixed in time for take-off. Therefore, we had to use a backup aircraft. Time was moving rapidly toward mission take-off time and we had a new bird to pre-flight. We immediately encountered a problem in

that the spare's bomb load wasn't correct and had to be downloaded and replaced in the dark and rain well before sunrise.

Adding even more to the degree of difficulty was the fact that the spare B-24 had several major differences from our H-model, including the cockpit layout, flight controls, defensive weaponry and the bomb sight. But there was one particular difference between it and our normal aircraft that was about to bite us in the keester. The two birds had different locations for the pitot-static system which provide the pilots with airspeed, altitude and rate of climb/descent.

The download/upload of bombs took darn near every bit of the time remaining and we were pressed to man-up, crank up the four engines and get to the runway to lead the takeoff sequence.

As usual, the weather was lousy. A ragged 600 foot ceiling, moderate rain and solid clouds from 1,800 to 20,000 feet. We had specified climb corridors and routes since there were several nearby bomber and fighter groups executing similar departures.

The plan was for each of the 25 B-24s following us from Old Buck to penetrate the clouds individually and—once on top—rendezvous with us via the Buncher 6 radio beacon. We would then join with other groups to form the Division as we departed the English coast for Germany.

By that time it would be daylight and we knew German flak would begin right away—prior to crossing the coast inland—from flak barges and would continue in varying intensity and accuracy until we re-crossed the Channel on the way home.

For example, one battery at Abbeville always scored hits, while others could not seem to hit anything. When not in the midst of flak, we'd be under attack by Luftwaffe fighters. The boys out of Abbeville earned a reputation for being especially deadly.

We took the runway with the deputy-lead on the right wing. I applied power and

we rolled slowly down the runway, heavy with full fuel and the bomb load. I eased the B-24 off the ground and called for the gear retraction. Checking the instruments, I found—with some trepidation—that we had no airspeed, erratic rate of climb and questionable altitude. There was no choice but to proceed and soon we were mired in thick cloud and rain.

Fortunately, the aircraft was flying well and we were climbing at a positive—if unknown—rate. Without the gauges we rely upon in zero visibility, I had no choice but to fly the aircraft by attitude, power and the seat of my pants. We needed to unscrew this ASAP, so I called for Chris, our flight engineer, to make his way up to the cockpit and explained the situation.

Given that our pitot-static system was totally defunct, we ran through the possibilities and quickly diagnosed the problem. In our hasty departure, the protective covers had to have been left on the tubes shutting off both the ram and static air sources needed by our gauges.

Problem was—even though we understood what went wrong—we still had to solve it because we needed both airspeed and altitude for bombing, to say nothing about normal flying and recovery, assuming we got home in one piece.

Running out of the proverbial airspeed, altitude and ideas, our solution was a bit drastic, but none other came to mind. As I kept us climbing wings level, Chris got his tool box, went up to the bombardier's compartment and chiseled out a sizable hole in the side of the fuselage just ahead of where he knew the left-hand pitot tube to be.

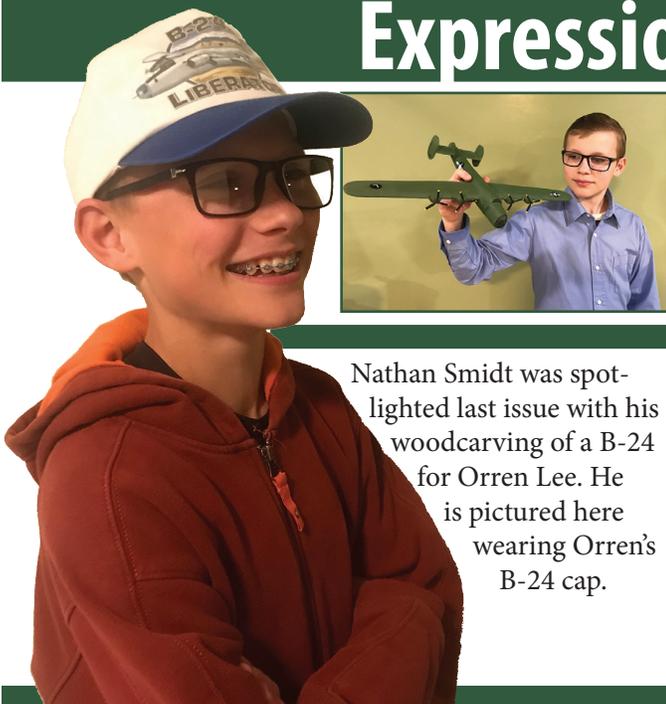
He then reached out and pulled the cover off the pitot tube and—like magic—we had airspeed, altitude and rate of climb for the rest of the mission.

The hole was easily explained as battle damage since we had collected multiple holes from heavy flak and German fighters. But, to my knowledge, this specific bit of mission information never made it into the debriefing folder.

An unintentional oversight, I'm sure.

*This article was shared by Ken Wiggins which he found on The National Interest webpage. The link for the article is: <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/reboot/1944-malfunctioning-b-24-bomber-needed-crazy-mid-air-surgery-194685>*

## Expressions of Honor



Nathan Smidt was spotlighted last issue with his woodcarving of a B-24 for Orren Lee. He is pictured here wearing Orren's B-24 cap.

After I (Carole Lee) sent a thank you to Lance for putting the June Newsletter together for us I received his reply.....

*And you are very welcome! It has been such an honor for me to serve this wonderful group of veterans and their families who have given so much in service to our country. I know the newsletter cannot continue forever as everything eventually serves its purpose in its time. But I will keep every issue as a precious memory of the opportunity my family has had in getting to know you and Orren and the other veterans over our time together. I was able to build the newsletter over the Memorial weekend which I thought to be an appropriate way to honor our veterans even in this small way. So, thank you for the opportunity and privilege. It has been a blessing!*

Lance McKinnon

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# PANTANELLA NEWS

