

# **50<sup>TH</sup> Anniversary Reunion**

## **Fresno, California**

### **Sept. 30 - Oct. 3, 1993**

**Frank and Millie are honored for their leadership of the Association for the past 13 years. Millie looks a little “shaken up”. Hope the wine helped.**

The seventh “present day” reunion of the 461<sup>st</sup> Bomb Group Association (H) was held in Fresno, California September 30<sup>th</sup> through October 3, 1993. The primary mission of this occasion, and the 385 veterans in attendance, was to dedicate a memorial to the 16 airmen who made the supreme sacrifice while in training with the 461<sup>st</sup> at Hammer Field. We also gathered to observe the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 461<sup>st</sup> Bomb Group (H) which was activated on July 1, 1943 and trained at Hammer Field from November 1 through December 31, 1943.

Fresno and the surrounding area, including what was Hammer Field, had changed so much in 50 years that the only thing recognizable was an aircraft hanger which now serves as an Air National Guard facility. Fresno has grown from a population of about 80,000 in 1943 to more than 350,000 today.

#### **Tuesday, September 28, 1993**

President Frank and co-pilot Millie O’Bannon arrived at the Holiday Inn Centre Plaza to prepare for the major units which started landing Wednesday, September 29<sup>th</sup>. Treasurer Gail “Pete” Peterson and his wife Verna were also part of the point group as were Marimac’s Marietta and Phil. Everyone was pleased with the hotel and especially the facilities in the Atrium.

461<sup>st</sup> Bomb Group Association people arrived throughout the day. First mission was to report to the registration table to pick up a reunion packet and 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary T-shirts which displayed a flight of 461<sup>st</sup> Bomb Group B-24’s. The remainder of the day was spent renewing old acquaintances, reminiscing and watching the video tapes of World War II and previous reunions.

Headquarters and Squadron mementos were on display in the reception room. Coffee and a cash bar were available. Many old memories were retold, and they get better each time. The most amusing was that of Art Currier of Presque Isle, Maine and the 765<sup>th</sup> Bomb Squadron. He tried to find the store or shop in Fresno where he bought a dress for his wife. This was mailed to her in Maine, but it didn’t fit so she mailed it back to Art at Hammer Field. In the meantime, he had left Fresno with the squadron for Italy. He finally received the dress in Italy four or five months later. Art mailed the dress back to Mrs. Currier, and surprisingly it fit this time! He said he was careful to keep this information from the other fellows in his tent.

## Thursday, September 30, 1993

Early breakfast was in order for the 3 busloads of 461<sup>st</sup>ers who left at 7:00 a.m. for the 2 ½ hour drive to Yosemite National Park. We went from city freeway through fruit orchards, grazing country to oak covered hills, then up into high country with its twisting roads, tall trees and steep overlooks. We descended onto the valley floor where we joined a tour group on a tractor drawn open-air tram for a picturesque trip through the valley. It was a bit chilly after the 90 degree weather in Fresno but we shared nice green wool blankets. Our guide kept us apprised of all the history and beautiful features of the park. We saw the famous Yosemite Falls and Bridal Veil Falls (both just trickles at this time of year). We also had a picture taking stop at Tunnel View to have the best view of El Capitan, the largest solid piece of granite in the world.

We, who were scheduled to go to the dinner theater that night, had a shortened tour and ate a delicious box lunch at the Lodge with many other tourists from all over the world. Departure time was 1:15 p.m. Our trip back to Fresno was uneventful except for the bus being stopped by the State Patrol and the loud snores from the sleeping 461<sup>st</sup>ers.

That evening a large number of us were pleasantly entertained at the Music Hall dinner theater where we enjoyed a 3-entrée buffet dinner. The program included several numbers by a singing and dancing group. The Junior Company, and the comedy Rumors by Neil Simon which was ably performed by the Good Company Players. Most of the audience that evening were 461<sup>st</sup> people.

Those members that chose not to go to Yosemite National Park had the option of going on a “taste and sample tour”. All About Grapes; that’s just what it was. Leaving the hotel at 8:30 a.m., we traveled through Fresno County until we came to a place called “Simonian Farms”, which dated back to 1901. Antique farm equipment, the largest collection in the San Joaquin Valley, was on display along with memorabilia of yesteryear. Fruits, nuts and vegetables were on sale from the local farms. Having been born and raised on a farm, it brought back many memories to me and a lot of us.

As we continued on our way through the valley, the vineyards were being harvested for raisins. Periodically the bus would slow down for a better look at how the process for sun-drying raisins is done. They are dried on brown paper which is laid on the ground that has been tilted to face the sun. They are turned over during the process, then folded in a paper to continue to dry and then picked up for harvest. One stop at the Sun-Maid raisin plant gave us more details during the showing of a film. We also saw how raisins are packaged for market. We tasted raisins and candy in the gift shop. By the way, the grapes grown for raisins are called “Thompson Seedless”.

Lunch time found us at Wolf Lakes Park, a private family owned park. We had an excellent lunch prepared by the staff. Homemade cookies too. We were given a tour of the grounds including a lecture on almond trees.

Our last stop was at the Bianchi Winery. We were given a talk on the process of wine making. We were informed about the variety of grapes that are used to make the different wines. We learned about harvesting methods, what a wine master is (he’s not the guy who can drink the most wine), and procedures for fermentation and bottling. On departing, each of us received a small bottle of Bianchi—California “Chardonnay”.

By 4:30 we returned to our hotel, more knowledgeable than when we left; a most enjoyable day.

### **Friday, October 1, 1993**

Over 150 reunion visitors traveled in 4 busses to the Castle Air Force Museum which is located next to Castle Air Force Base. Our guide explained that the museum was opened in 1980 and had grown to about 40 aircraft including a B-24. This ship had never been in combat but was converted for cargo purposes and flown in South America for several years before being brought to Castle. It carried a "Shady Lady" nose art logo similar to that of one of the 461st bombers.

The Castle Museum display also included an SR-71 Reconnaissance Plane. This was the very famous "Secret Weapon" that was retired from service several years ago. Other planes were a "Haunted B-29" which security personnel report seeing lights in it occasionally although it has no electrical system. There also was a modified version of a B-52 which was capable of carrying a 70,000 pound bomb load. The display included an F-111 model which was very effective in Desert Storm with no losses and a high number of kills. A KC-135 tanker was there. They are still being used by the Air National Guard and other Air Force units.

We saw a British Vulcan high altitude (100,000 feet at Mach 3) bomber in the exhibit. Also a B-36 was being reassembled and restored. This plane was used to carry R-34 Reconnaissance planes (called parasites) to target areas.

The Castle Museum display was very well designed, and the climate (temperature and humidity) is very favorable for the preservation of these planes. There is a minimum amount of deterioration even though they are stored outside.

The only snafus of the tour were the location of the luncheon site and the lack of air conditioning in Bus #204 on the return trip.

Late in the afternoon the annual business meeting was called to order by President Frank O'Bannon. Various facets of the groups activities were discussed. Frank praised Ed Chan and Jim Hardee for their work in locating former 461st personnel. Less than 900 of the 5,000 plus troops have not been found. Ed and Jim are searching all the telephone directories which are available on computer disks.

The chairman of the nominating committee presented the names of the current officers for re-election. President Frank O'Bannon, Vice-President Ed Chan and Secretary/Treasurer Gail Peterson were unanimously re-elected.

The individual squadrons held a short meeting to elect new alternate directors. The current alternate directors automatically assume directorships for the next two years. Three retiring directors Ted Ahlberg, Denothy Perkins and Bill Wilkins received plaques for their service from President O'Bannon.

### **Saturday, October 2, 1993**

A memorial dedication ceremony was held at the Fresno Metropolitan Museum by the 4th and 5<sup>th</sup> grade classes of the Big Creek School. Big Creek is a small town about 70 miles up in the mountains from Fresno. About ninety percent of the population work for either

Southern California Edison (SCE) or the Big Creek school system. Huntington Lake is a ten minute drive from the Big Creek School. It was here that the B-24 "Exterminator" crashed on December 6, 1943 and remained undiscovered until the mid 1950's when SCE lowered the water level in the lake to work on the dam (see the article on page 1 of the June 1992 issue of the "Liber Raider" for more information on the crash. Again in 1990 the level of the lake was lowered exposing the B-24. A newspaper article regarding the plane crash was brought to school by one of the students and read to the class by Bob Crider, the 4th grade teacher.

The students eagerly asked questions and were anxious to learn about the fate of the crew. In February, 1991, under the tutelage of Mr. Crider, the 4th grade class took on the project of researching the crash and the 16 airmen that lost their lives in 1943. They worked in pairs and each pair was assigned a crew member to research. This turned into a two year project, laden with disappointments, unanswered letters and rejected requests. In spite of this, every student persevered. They knew where they were going but had no idea how to get there. They contacted the State Department and the War Department only to be met with government bureaucracy. No information would be released. They wrote to every source available to them. The first break came with a reply from a member of the 461st Bomb Group. Then another, and another. Finally, after many months of disappointments, the project was truly underway. After installing a plaque at Huntington Lake and writing a booklet on the life and death of the 16 men of the 461<sup>st</sup> Bomb Group who died while in training at Hammer Field, Fresno, California, the project was completed. The 4<sup>th</sup> grade class of 1991, aided by the 4th grade class of 1992, culminated the project by jointly holding a memorial dedication ceremony. They unveiled an oil painting of the B-24 "Exterminator" which will hang in the Fresno Metropolitan Museum honoring the 16 airmen who gave their lives.

The reunion banquet and dance were held in the hotel ballroom. Honored guests included the students of the Big Creek School, their parents and families and Bob Crider. The invocation was given by Chaplain, Major Leslie R. Hyder. The highlight of the evening was the surprise presentation of an engraved silver wine cooler to Frank and Millie O'Bannon for their many years of work and devoted service in organizing and overseeing the operation of the 461st Bomb Group Association. The presentation was made by George Dickie with the assistance of Ed Chan and Pete Peterson. John and Lee Trommershauser of the 764th Squadron were responsible for obtaining the gift but could not attend the reunion. During intermission the Big Creek students and everyone else enjoyed George Dickie's rendition of "Rindercella".

The oldest veteran in attendance was 81 year old Art Currier of Presque Isle, Maine. Art also won an award for having come the longest distance to attend the reunion.

### **Sunday, October 3, 1993**

The memorial service to honor those killed in active service and those deceased in the later years was conducted by the Chaplain, Major Leslie R. Hyder. This is always the most solemn and cherished time during each reunion.

Following the service, a breakfast buffet was enjoyed by everyone before saying their final goodbyes to fellow crew members, comrades, spouses, and friends.

Four couples who were staying until the next day rented a van and journeyed about 70 miles to Huntington Lake near the Big Creek School and where the B-24 bomber, lost December 6, 1943, went down. We stopped at a nearby service station to ask directions and were cordially greeted by the operator. He brought out the life-raft compartment door or hatch which was found about 35 feet from the rest of the plane. This and a small window frame were the only parts of the bomber that were removed from the lake. Those making this Sunday trip were Marjorie and Wally Robinson, George and Barbara Dickie, Gail and Verna Peterson and Bill and Muriel Wilkins.

Editor's note:

Many thanks to Bill and Muriel Wilkins, Jim Van Nostrand, Elaine Shevin, Alvina Bella, and other members of the 765<sup>th</sup> Bomb Squadron for preparing this reunion summary for the "Liberader".

### **Reunion Aftermath**

Thank you one and all!!!! The highlight of the Fresno Reunion for Millie and I was the presentation of a wine cooler from the Group. I always felt that I had ESP regarding the goings on within the outfit—wrong again!!! I do know that George Dickie and John Trommershauser had a great deal to do with the gift but George seems to have suffered an almost total memory loss about the background of this project. Anyway, to all the members, please accept our thanks for an item that will always provide us with fond and pleasant memories of the 461<sup>st</sup> Bombardment Group.

Frank and Millie

Editor's note: I heard through the grapevine that Frank had mentioned that they had no idea how much the Group appreciated their efforts and they were very touched and moved by their recognition. Wow, Frank! You really lost your ESP. If it weren't for you and your sidekick, we would not exist. The recognition is long overdue! Enjoy.