

339th

Fighter Group Association

Station F378 – Fowlmere, England



NEWSLETTER



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Editor: Stephen C. Ananian



Capt. James R. Starnes

How the Holes Got in Swiss Cheese

By S.C. Ananian
Pilot 505th

I have been reminded by some that not everyone had the good fortune to know Jim Starnes the man most of us flew with.

You all know him as the quiet, modest unassuming editor of our Newsletter. He's the fellow behind the registration desk at our reunions. Jim is the one who makes out our nametags and answers all our questions about the events of the day.

We are also aware that he and Chester Malarz were responsible for the forming of the 339thFGA. Because of his modesty, we know little of the man most of us flew with. It would be safe to say that of the sixty plus missions I flew, more than half of them were with Jim Starnes flying in his plane "Tarheel", 6N-X. The "True Story" that follows is an account of one of them.

It was the winter of '44 - '45, the mission was a "Ramrod" (bomber escort), to the Rhur Valley. The weather forecast was bad for most of Germany, but it was expected to open up over the target. We had a layer of clouds at about 10,000 feet. A solid undercast! This meant that we could not see objects on the ground to check our course.

(A word of explanation to you non-flyers. Navigation during WWII was very crude by today's standards, particularly in a fighter plane. The bombers had sextants to shoot the sun and determine where they were. In addition they had navigators galore! One member of every crew was a navigator. The best was assigned as "Lead Navigator". Then there were "Group Navigators", "Squadron Navigators" and "Flight Navigators". On the other hand fighter pilots navigated by dead reckoning. Basically, heading, time and distance).

Our course was simple, straight in across Holland to the target and back out. We did not expect many enemy fighters because of the bad weather over the continent. Enemy fighters were not too good on instrument flying.

Jim Starnes was leading the Group ('Armstrong') and the 339th was leading the "Fighter Task Force".

I don't recall the number of planes that day, but it was probably 600 bombers and about 400 fighters. From the very beginning, things didn't look right. Once in a while, through a hole in the solid layer of clouds below, you could see a bit of terrain. It wasn't the flooded fields of Holland as one would expect, but the rolling countryside of France. In addition, there was a lack of anti-aircraft fire that would have bombarded us when flying over enemy territory. It sure looked like we were over France!

According to my wristwatch, we were very near the target. I looked at the bombers (Big Friends). The bomb bay doors were open! Then as I watched, the lead bombardier dropped a single smoke bomb. The signal that they were starting their bomb run.

I watched as the bomb went down right into those clouds with two ice cream cones protruding through. Ice cream cones? Those were snow-covered mountains, the Swiss Alps! That was Switzerland down there, not the Ruhr Valley! They were about to bomb Switzerland!

I broke radio silence and called 'Armstrong' (Jimmy) and asked him what was going on. "That's the Swiss Alps, we are over Switzerland!"

Jim agreed and said he would call the Bombers. 'Armstrong' switched over to the bomber channel and asked the "Big Friends" what they were doing. I don't remember the exact words but it went something like this.

Big Friends, "We are on our 'Bomb Run'"

Jim said, "No kidding! That sure looks like Switzerland down there!"

Dead silence! Then in a meek voice, "Can you give us a heading to the target?"

Then the great moment!

It was like Babe Ruth stepping up to the plate and pointing up into the stands, indicating where he would hit the next pitch!

'The Mighty Jim Stearns' says, "One moment I'll check with my Navigator".

Now I can just visualize Jim sitting in that cramped little cockpit holding the stick between his knees. His left hand holding the chart and spanning out the distance to the target with his right.

Then Jim's calm voice says, "My navigator says steer due north for 400 miles."

The bombers slowly turn left, close their bomb bay doors and head for the target. Fortunately, when we got to the Ruhr a hole opened in the clouds over the target, just as predicted, and the bombers dropped their bombs visually.

When we got back we discussed what might have happened. I figured it would have taken a 200-mph crosswind to knock us off the course. That was impossible! Hurricane winds are 100 plus mph. You see, we knew nothing of "Jet Streams" in those days. These high altitude winds that blow at lower levels in the winter months.

I shudder to think of the lives that might have been lost or just what the Alps would have looked like after 600 B-17s and B-24s had each 'salvoed' 3,800 pound bomb loads on them.

Would they now be called the Swiss Hills? If the Swiss only knew, they would really have something to Yodel about!

Some of you out there will doubt my story. In those days you would have also questioned that winds aloft could be two hundred miles per hour (the existence of the "Jet Stream") or that the Germans had V2 rockets that traveled at 3,000 mph, but it is true.

So boys and girls, on a cold winter night when you are sitting in front of a fireplace surrounded by your great grandchildren, reading them the story of the "Mighty Babe Ruth" or the fairy tale of "How the leopard got its spots".

Just think of me. You know what I'll be doing. I'll be telling my great grandchildren of the "Tarheel" who saved the Swiss Alps, or "How the Holes Really got into the Swiss Cheese".

4/1/2000



By James R. Starnes
Permanent Columnist 505th

From the Desk of Jim Starnes

When our new editor asked me to do a column in his newsletters, how could I refuse? Here I am, promoted from editor to columnist. Steve asked me for a few items of historical interest, and I am happy for what I can contribute.

Condolences

Let me get some bad news out of the way first. About six months ago we lost 503rd C.O. and POW Harvey Henderson. His wife had died many years ago. Then in December '99 we lost another POW, original pilot Bill Jones (505). Bill shot down the first German aircraft for the 339th on 9 May 44 and was shot down by a ME -262 on what was to be his final mission to complete his combat tour on 11 Sep 44. He thus became the first member of the 339th to be shot down by a Jet propelled aircraft. Also late in December we lost HQ board member Matthew Hirshout. Beatrice Hirshout wrote that Matt got out of the car to get some cough drops at a drug store. He walked about 15 steps and fell, breaking his leg in four places, then died in the hospital two weeks later. No evidence of heart attack or stroke, very strange. In Mid-February we lost Lewis Peter, 504th operations officer and commander for a short time before Bill Clark arrived in early 1945. Lewis had been plagued by lung problems and on oxygen for several years. He was a great guy and admired by officers and enlisted personnel alike. Finally Jeanne Mankie, wife of 503rd board member James, was diagnosed as terminally ill shortly after our Harrisburg reunion. Jim informed us that after a short illness she passed away. She was a regular attendee to our reunion. Frank and Adrianna Gerard sent a donation in memory of Jeanne Mankie. Frank writes "Adriana and I always looked forward to seeing Jeanne and Jim at our reunions and to spend some time with them as we did in Harrisburg last year. We can only convey to Jim that we will always be with him and may God bless his worthy son". We echo Frank's sentiments, and offer our condolences to all the families. ★

Radio Chatter

The Ananians and Jim & Pepper Woolery visited me early in February, as did Alaskans Jim & Mary Sterling. The Sterlings had made a trip to Germantown, OH, to get Dale Shafer's autograph on a new book about fighter aces. Jim said Dale seems to be OK, which is good news. We have not seen the Shafers at a 339th reunion in many years. Jim Hanson 505th writes at Christmas that he is folding his wings after 60 straight years of continuous flying! That must be some sort of record. After WWII Jim flew with Piedmont Airlines, and taught his children and grandchildren how to fly. He also built his own experimental aircraft. At the top of the newsletter you see his caricature of the boxing mustang. I hear Frank Gerard is recovering from back surgery. We wish him a speedy recovery. My ankle surgery last week was successful, but is bound up in a splint and many feet of bandage. I am getting around on a walker without being able to put any weight on it until the surgeon opens the bandage. That means I am spending much time flat on my back with the left foot elevated as directed.

Some of you recall our diligent and unsuccessful search for 504th commander William H. Julian. Slick Penrose tried several leads to no avail. Dr. Frank Olynyk, probably the leading fighter ace historian in this country, has determined that Bill Julian, an ace with the 78th Fighter Group prior to joining us at Fowlmere, died on 29 Mar 73 at the age of 56. No wonder we were not able to locate him. ★

Book Report

Around Christmas Martin Sheldrick sent me a newly published book "Fowlmere 2000" by a married couple in Fowlmere. I enjoyed reviewing parts of it, spent quite a few hours reading it, and wrote Martin our thanks. Told him I would be turning it over to you next (Steve), to mention in the newsletter as well as read for yourself. It is a local history of Fowlmere going back an incredible number of years and contains an interesting chronology in the back called Fowlmere Time Line. It has some of Martin's photos of the 339th during the war and of our memorial there. I even recognize several people at the memorial dedication, including John Henry, Fred Rutan, Chet Malarz and myself. ★

Major Don Larson



by James R. Starnes

505th

Earlier this year a lady who is writing a book on several of us. She wanted information on 505th C.O. Don Larson, and was glad to reach many who knew him quite well during his service with the 339th.

I have never forgotten my first meeting with my new C.O., then-Captain Donald Arthur Larson. It was late in January of 1944 when a number of us replacement pilots arrived at Rice Field, CA, to fill up the authorized strength of the 339th prior to deployment overseas. Lt. Frank Luce, the 505th adjutant, assigned Lt. Andy Sirochman and I to a couple of bunks in an officer area tent. The tent had a lumber floor and only two bunks, one of which already had sheets and blanket. Andy and I moved that mattress and its sheets to the next tent over (which had a dirt floor) and I set up my belongings on the replacement mattress. We were sound asleep in the middle of the night when someone put a flashlight in my face and asked about the sheets and blanket, and I said we moved them to the next tent. That was the end of the matter until we met the commander the next morning when they welcomed the newly assigned pilots. Then Captain Larson said, "There are two new pilots who were moved into my tent. When this meeting is over, I want them to get their stuff out of there immediately." Andy and I moved to the tent with the dirt floor for the rest of our stay at Rice Field. Larson had been on a flight to Yakima and brought back apples in the ammo bays of his P-39.

Much has been written in our newsletters about Major Don Larson, including Larry Powell's article on our 100th mission when Don was killed in action. The lady from Yakima provided some interesting facts on his early life. His father died when Don was about seven and his twin brother Ronald was killed in a bicycle accident when they were 13. Their wealthy uncle, who had no children, left each of his nieces and nephews \$10,000, except that Don was to get an additional \$10,000 when he turned 30.

He used much of his inheritance to get a college education prior to becoming an aviation cadet in April '41, during his service, he took many 16-mm movies of his stay at Pinellas Field, Florida, California and Fowlmere, England. We have many videos of these through Bill Jaskelainen, and they include a number of shots of his sweetheart, Mary Scott of St. Petersburg, Florida. He named his P-51 "Mary Queen of Scotts" after her and not the famous queen of the Scots. Major Larson was Killed In Action on 4 Aug 44 at age 29 and thus never received the other \$10,000 of his inheritance. ★

Roster Changes

Change O.P. Farmer to 112 Fourth Ave., Shalimar, FL 32579

Change Mrs. William A. Jones to 13 Bonnell Lane, Orleans, MA 02653

Change G. Tom Rich 8346 Chisholm Plantation Rd., Edisto Beach, SC 29438

Change Alfonse Rivera to 11892 Persuasion Drive, San Antonio, TX 78216

Change John Withers to Route 2 Box 1100, McGaheysville, VA 22840

Delete Lybi Hauss, Delete Joseph Mudd ★



Reforming the “Group”

How the 339th Fighter Group Association was formed

By Chet Malarz
505th

Chester Malarz

In September 1978, the 8th Air Force Historical Society was holding their annual reunion at Washington, DC. My wife, Mary and I decided to attend. At that time, the only member of the 339th that I was in contact with, was Joe Thury (505th C.O.) in Tampa, Florida. At the reunion the attendance registry showed two other members from our group, Ed Epp and Bob Burns. The truth is I didn't recognize either one of them. Ed Epp operated our radio homing station “Gaspump”, and Bob Burns was a 505th pilot. Bob went down over enemy territory in that mid-air collision with Major Don Larson, our Squadron C.O. That, incidentally, was also my first combat mission.

There were approximately 2,500 people in attendance that day. Compared to the other groups, we did not put up a good showing. At that point we agreed that the 339th could do much better. We decided to try to locate our former comrades so that we could meet once again.

Since I had been in touch with Joe Thury, I approached him to get his feeling on the matter. He was most enthusiastic and very supportive, and contributed generously towards the cause. Through him we contacted Dr. Fred Scroggin 505th and Jim Starnes 505th.

From thereon the effort snowballed, gaining speed and getting bigger. Those we were able to contact, supported our plans and helped. We used many ways, too numerous to mention, to locate our WWII buddies.

One dares not mention all those who helped lest we leave someone out, but Jim Starnes certainly was key to the success of the operation. He must be given credit for carrying the heaviest part of the load. Without him and the wonderful newsletter he published, our association would not resemble what we have enjoyed in the past and today.

Our first reunion was in 1980. It was held with the members of the 8th AFHS. Our initial numbers were small, but big enough to encourage us. As a result, when meeting in conjunction with the 8th AFHS, our attendance figures placed us 2nd and 3rd, outnumbered by only the bomber groups. We were all proud of that. The 339th was starting to be recognized.

To credit each and all those who have contributed supportively to the success of our association is an impossible task. Thanks to our leadership and each of you, our efforts have been rewarded. Tom Brokaw points out in his book, that the WWII generation is the greatest. Modesty prevents me from agreeing, but I know you in the 339th are. 

President's Message

Happy New Year

Charles J. Steffen

President 339th FGA

Greetings and belated best wishes for a satisfying, rewarding and healthy year.

I am grateful for having been selected to be your President for the next two years, the last year of the 20th Century and the first year of the 21st Century. When Pat and I started attending our reunions about 16 years ago, Denver being the first, I certainly did not expect that one-day I would rise to this position in a great group of illustrious airmen and supporting ground crews of WWII. Truly, I am very honored and I pledge to you that I will give the position my very best effort.

My goal is to have a most memorable reunion, our twenty-first, in San Antonio, the hometown of our WWII commander, General John Henry, and to have as many of our members and their wives in attendance as possible. Our management team is working to this end. This is particularly so with our Reunion Coordinator, Larry Powell. We are fortunate to have a person of his stature and experience leading the way. Already, he has met our criteria with respect to a suitable and attractive location at a reasonable cost. We must tell you we are disappointed with the return flow of Reunion/Britain Survey forms contained in the December Newsletter. It is not an easy job for our management team to select reunion sites and make necessary arrangements to satisfy a cross-section of our membership, so if intelligent decisions are to be made, we must have input from all of you. This is particularly true with respect to those members and wives who have faithfully attended reunions over the past twenty years. We are striving to make reunions attractive to all, as this is what the organization is about.

For those of you who have not responded and have a real concern about the future of our organization and the reunions. I respectfully suggest you dig out the form from the December Newsletter, **NOW** while the matter is fresh in your mind, and send it in. If the form has been misplaced, then just drop me a note, stating your preference for future reunion sites and your interest in a trip to Britain. Again, we want to hear from everybody who has a keen interest in returning to Britain in the Spring of 2001, even though the tour might not be billed a reunion.

If sufficient interest is shown through the survey, Then Chet Malarz, who has lead us back to Britain twice before, will make the appropriate arrangements.

For now, THINK SAN ANTONIO IN OCTOBER and the renewal of old and dear friendships. 

339th FIGHTER GROUP ASSOCIATION

TREASURER'S REPORT

William R. Guyton
1272 Lakeside Woods Drive
Venice, FL 34292
March 2000

General Fund Revenues

Balance on hand January 1, 1999		\$17,985	
Interest on C.D.	\$678		
Sale of shirt	\$ 20		
Returned Prepayment on 1999 reunion	\$500		
Total General Fund Receipts		<u>\$ 1,198</u>	
Total General Fund Revenues		\$19,183	continued next page

Treasurer's Report continued from page 6

Expenses

Corporate Filing Fee	\$ 61	
Newsletter	\$1,779	
Wreath, Columbia, MO	\$ 80	
1999 Reunion Loss	\$ 976	
2000 Reunion prepayment	\$ 494	
Total 1999 Expenses		<u>\$ 3,390</u>
General Fund Balance December 31, 1999		\$15,793

Memorial Fund

Memorial Fund Balance January 1, 1999	None
Receipts during 1999	None
Expenses	None
Memorial Fund Balance December 31, 1999	None



Editor's Corner

Stephen C. Ananian

Editor 505

This issue is dedicated to a great "Fighter Pilot", a great guy, Jim Starnes. After twenty years of editing our newsletter Jim Starnes has been promoted to permanent columnist. You notice I have changed the format a little. I did not want to confuse the issues that follow with the previous ones. I learned a long time ago that one does not try to imitate a work of art.

Larry Powell our Reunion director, wrote that he had gone to San Antonio to finalized our next reunion. He says, "John Henry is a great chauffeur and Maxine mixes a fantastic drink!" Larry has made arrangements at the Four Points Sheraton Hotel (on the River Walk) October 18th through the 22nd. The rates are \$89 a night. This rate applies for two nights before as well as two nights after. The reservation number is 1-(800) 288-3927.

There is no RV parking. Car parking is an extra (\$5 a day)! Continental Airlines is our host Airline and will give a discount to members of the 339th. Thank you Larry!

Our unit directors are working on the unit dinners as we go to press. As you heard, Jim Mankie our 503rd Unit director lost his lovely wife, Jeanne. Sal Carollo, former 503rd Director was asked to help out. He and Ila Dearey (who lives in San Antonio) volunteered to assist. Our thanks to you all.

Next Issue we will have all the forms and data for our San Antonio Reunion 2000!

Jay Marts has been keeping us in touch with what some 8th Air Force units are doing. With the advance of time, some are folding up their tents and turning everything over to the Heritage Museum. From the response I got, a lot of our members wish to continue meeting till the very end!

Just before Christmas, Isabel & I had lunch with Mary & Chet Malarz. Inevitably the conversation drifted around to the 339th FGA. I asked Chet if he would write and tell us how it all started. You will find his account on page 4.

I received an e-mail from a person in France researching a raid 17 Aug '44. A B-17 was supposed to have dropped a "Batty TV" bomb. The 339th escorted the B-17s that day. Any info?

For those of you on the Internet, monitor our web site for reunion information at Tim Ferrell's www.ourworld.cs.com/the339thftrgrp/ as well as

Peter Randall's site in England <http://www.pyker.dircon.co.uk/339thfg.htm> and

Jim Sterling's web site in Alaska <http://www.ourworld.cs.com/the339thftrgrp/>

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