

→ → → Plane Talk → → →

The Official Newsletter of the Combat Air Museum

December 2005 / January 2006 • Vol. 22, No. 1



The work crew positions the uprights for the billboard sign.

Here's what's been going on at the Combat Air Museum

Our volunteers have been busy

In the last issue of *Plane Talk*, we wrote about the restoration work being performed on some of CAM's aircraft. That work continues, and with this issue we write about some of the other activities taking place at the Museum.

Beattie Dickson and **Don Dawson** have worked alternately on the Museum's 1941 Dodge Ambulance and 1952 Willys Jeep for the past several months. Their end goals for these two vehicles are to complete their restorations and get them in reliable operating condition so we can use them in parades and other Veterans events.

The work Beattie and Don have done includes restoring/repairing existing parts and installing new replacement parts. The Jeep has run a few times over the past several years, but reliability has been an issue. It seemed to take after an old US Coast Guard saying, "You have to go out, you don't have to come back." Hopefully, Don and Beattie's work will rectify that problem.

The work being done on the ambulance picked up where the late **Loyd Ellison** left off. Before his health kept him from coming out to the Museum, Loyd had done extensive work to the frame and body of the ambulance and applied primer and one topcoat

to each. Loyd had started re-wiring the dashboard, too. Don and Beattie have see "What's going on," con't. on page 6

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Museum Hours

Monday - Saturday

9 A.M. - 4:30 P.M.

Last Admission 3:30 P.M.

Sunday Noon - 4:30 P.M.

Last Admission 3:30 P.M.

Plane Talk, the official newsletter

of Combat Air Museum

of Topeka, Kansas,

is published bi-monthly.

Your questions and

comments are welcomed.

Any information for **Plane Talk** should be submitted to CAM office.

New faces on the CAM Board of Directors

Changes to CAM's Board of Directors took place on September 28, 2005. **Ken Hollemon**, CAM's Board Secretary for about the past decade, resigned his position as he and his lovely spouse **Linda** were retiring and moving from Lawrence, Kansas to a new home in Bend, Oregon. Ken, a life member, will remain active with CAM from a distance by maintaining our website. We wish Ken and Linda the best in their retirement and are glad they will be keeping their ties with the Museum. **Stu Entz** takes over the duties as Board Secretary.

Two members were also added to the Board during the September 28 meeting. **Martin Moyer** and **Bob Crapser** accepted appointments to the Board of Directors. Martin and Bob bring a combined 35 years of membership and volunteer work with the Museum. Martin hails from the days when CAM was Yesterday's Air Force, Kansas Wing. Both are active volunteers with the Museum and have an excellent feel for the daily happenings in the hangars, especially because they are often the ones making things happen. ➔

Visitors

During **September**

the Museum had

738 visitors

from **37** states

and

Bermuda

Canada

Czech Republic

Denmark

Germany

Great Britain

Slovak Republic

Taiwan

During **October**

we had

682 visitors

from **36** states

and

Australia

Canada

Denmark

Germany

Great Britain

Japan

New Zealand



Join the Combat Air Museum!

Our first "Winged Foot" 5K Run/Walk



Runners start their stop watches as they start the inaugural Winged Foot 5K Run/Walk.



Cadets from Highland Park High School Air Force Junior ROTC form around Bill Briery as he walks the course.

Gene Howerter and runners at the awards ceremony.





Tad Pritchett holds up a World War I cartridge belt.

Dave Murray and **Tad Pritchett** were our guest speakers at the October Membership Luncheon. Their presentation was generally on American troop involvement in World War I with some specific information researched by Dave on Shawnee County participation in the Great War.

Tad began the presentation with the United States' declaration of war on Germany and its allies in April 1917. The American Expeditionary Force began arriving in France two months later. By March 1918, some 250,000 US soldiers were in France, and this number increased to 2 million troops by war's end in November 1918. Altogether, by November 1918, 4.4 million men were called up for service in the United States.

Before declaring war, the United States had been very isolationist. Europe had been at war since 1914. Eventually, a number of various things slowly built up to cause the US to enter the conflict.

As it became evident that the United States would enter the war, the Germans mounted a massive offensive in 1918 with the plan of taking Paris. If they accomplished the capture of the French capital before the Americans entered the war, the Germans hoped France and England would sue for peace. The Germans got to within 40-45 miles of Paris before their offensive stalled.

Major actions in which US troops participated included the Champagne Campaigns from May 27 – November 11, 1918; the battle of St. Mihiel, September 12 - 16, 1918; and the Meuse-Argonne battles, September 26 – November 11, 1918. For their relatively short time in battle, total US casualties amounted to 48,900 killed in action or died from wounds. Over

Shawnee County troops' participation in World War I was the focus of the October Membership Luncheon

73,600 died from other affects such as disease, accidents, etc. Approximately 230,000 were wounded.

Tad and Dave went over the basic Field Gear carried by ground troops and had several examples of these items. One of them, an example of which Tad showed us, was a grenade vest. As its name implies, this was a vest garment worn by a soldier and had attachment points for carrying a large number of grenades. It was not a popular item with the soldiers.

The majority of Kansas draftees and volunteers served in three US Infantry Divisions. These were the 35th (Santa Fe), a National Guard division made up of Kansas and Missouri National Guard Troops; the 42nd (Rainbow), another National Guard division with National Guard units from 26 states and the District of Columbia; and the 89th (Middle West) Division, a part of the National Army, formed at Camp Funston, Fort Riley, Kansas in August 1917.

Some 2,831 men from Shawnee County were drafted or volunteered for service in World War I.

Dave
~~Tad~~ then talked to us about his research involving World War I veterans from Shawnee County, Kansas. It has been quite a task. Dave referred to a book, *Honor Roll Shawnee County Edition Kansas*, published circa 1920/1921. Through his research he found the names

listed in this book actually contained names of some soldiers from Osage County and other surrounding counties, but it was a beginning point for his research. Dave also researched the Topeka newspaper archives and filled two large binders with copied information. He visited the Victory Memorial in Topeka's Gage Park to compare its names to his findings. And then there were miles of driving Shawnee County roads to find all the community and county cemeteries to check on monuments and gravestones of World War I veterans.

Based on his research thus far, Dave told us some 2,831 men from Shawnee County were drafted or volunteered for service in World War I. One hundred and forty of these men died in service. Forty-nine died in the United States and the remaining 91 died overseas. Almost two-thirds of the 49 deaths in the US were from the Spanish Flu.

Of those who died overseas, 41 were killed in action, 15 more died from battlefield wounds. Twenty-six died from disease, over half from the Spanish Flu, and 9 died in accidents.

Dave also gave a breakdown of where the remains of all but 26 of the 140 Shawnee County men were laid to rest. Forty-three were buried overseas, five in Arlington National Cemetery, 55 in Shawnee County cemeteries, and 11 in other counties'/states' cemeteries.

The fate of the 35th Infantry Division and its part of the Meuse-Argonne offensive during September 1918 were briefly discussed. Within the first week of that offensive, the 35th suffered so many casualties it virtually collapsed and, in fact, was withdrawn from the battle on September 30th. Lack of air support was cited as one reason for the Division being mauled so badly. Eventually, congressional hearings were held to determine why the 35th was so decimated in this offensive.

Dave then showed a series of slides containing selected obituaries, grave markers, and monuments to Shawnee County men lost in the war, and photos of four military cemeteries in France where Shawnee County soldiers are buried. Dave found one marker in the Topeka cemetery to a Fay Sarah Friedberg who served in the War Department, Washington, D.C. She died December 30, 1918 from complications from the Spanish flu and pneumonia. One of the obituaries was for a Marine Corps Private, Walter D. Stanley, who was assigned aboard the USS CYCLOPS, a 552-foot (coal) collier. Sometime after leaving the Barbados on March 4, 1918, the CYCLOPS disappeared without a trace.

The ship and its crew have since become famous as one of the mysteries of the Bermuda Triangle. One slide listed five men from Shawnee County who enlisted in foreign service and entered the War much earlier than the United States. Four served in the Canadian Army and one in the Australian Army. The photos included four military cemeteries in France where the remains of some of the Shawnee County soldiers are interred.

Dave also had a slide of a monument to Philip Louis Billard, erected at Issoudun, France. Billard was serving with the 3rd Aviation Instruction Center there, and was killed in an aircraft accident on July 25, 1918. Topeka's Philip Billard Airport is named in his honor. →

December/January Calendar of Events

December

Monday, December 12

Membership Luncheon

Jean Wanner Education Conference Center

11:30 a.m.

Jack Vaughn is our guest speaker.

He will talk about US Army General

Frederick Funston.

Sunday, December 25

Christmas Sunday

The Museum is Closed

January

Sunday, January 1

New Year's Day

The Museum is Closed

There is no Membership

Luncheon in January.

The next luncheon is

Monday,

February 13.

→ → →

"What's going on," con't. from page 1

picked up from that point and have also worked on the cooling and exhaust systems, tail lamps, head lamps, battery compartment, steering, and other areas.

In August, member **Carl Caldwell** gave us a welcome gift as part of a donation he made to the Museum. This was a three-part article on the WC Series Ambulance Family by Richard Pelouze and Lt. Bryce Sunderlin. The article gives detailed information on the serial numbers, makes, and models of the WC series ambulances and also has several pages of detailed markings for the ambulances based on year and/or theater of service. As the restoration nears completion, these will be especially useful. Photographs in the article have helped confirm the existence and location of accessories on the Ambulance. **Jim Braun** has also assisted Don and Beattie with detail work and possible sources for parts.

If you are in Hangar 604 before the cold weather sets in, and you hear some banging going on, just look for a pair of feet sticking out from underneath the Willys or Dodge, and it will be Beattie or Don.

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Gene Howerter did some cosmetic work on one of our exhibits outdoors of Hangar 602. The paint work on the Honest John missile was badly faded for both the overall paint coat and the white stenciling. Using our large crew stand, Gene gave the missile a good scrubbing and then repainted the olive drab surfaces of this former Cold War weapon. The next step will be re-application of the white US ARMY markings to the missile.

At print time, **Stu Entz** is applying paint to walkways along the interior walls of Hangar 604. Stu marked off seven feet wide walkways, then cleaned the floor area inside the walkways, followed by acid cleaning/etching

the concrete, then applying a sealer and topcoat of gray paint. His current work is along the north and west corner of the hangar and runs a bit over 81 feet in length.

Tom Witty is currently revamping the second of two of the WASPs (Women Airforce Service Pilots) exhibits. He earlier completed the first WASP exhibit that held a mannequin dressed in a WASP uniform donated to CAM by the late **Penny Hallady Moore** some years ago.

About a year or so ago, **Gene Howerter** acquired a female mannequin that was in physically better condition than the one in the first WASP exhibit. With some modifications, Tom prepared the new mannequin for the exhibit, and while the case was empty he, **Martin Moyer**, and **Amos Page** rebuilt part of the case's interior to better exhibit other materials and photos.

Jane Weinmann helped Tom with fitting the uniform to the mannequin. Tom found the mannequin's arms gave an overall effect of a model's pose, rather than a military pose. He removed the original arms and made others that gave a more military appearance.

Once the dressed mannequin was in the case, Jane and **Marlene Urban** were giving it a look over and decided that mannequin lacked – for lack of a better description – certain curves. They told Tom they would correct this and went about doing just that. As they worked, they discussed how big the curves should be. At this point, Tom felt silence would probably be the better part of valor (and perhaps self-preservation) and found something else to work on. The exhibit looks great.

The case Tom is now working on had a number of photos taken by **Penny Moore** of WASPs in training, some aviator clothing artifacts, and model airplanes. With Martin's and Amos' help, the interior of the second case was also modified to give a better sight presentation for photos and other written materials. Tom went through our models in storage and selected several new examples to place in the case. Since the original exhibit was put together, we have acquired artifacts similar to those originally on display that are in better condition, and Tom is adding these to the exhibit.

Marlene, Jane, and **Mary Naylor** put together an exhibit case that has a "Home Front" theme with a mix of memorabilia and souvenir artifacts that perhaps a father and mother, sister, wife or sweetheart might have received from a loved one in service. The artifacts include military installation pillow slipcovers, charms, pins and

jewelry, photos, aircraft puzzles, sheet music, and memorabilia made from ammunition. When the curator gave these ladies a key for the case lock, it came back labeled "Girlie Case." Joking aside, this exhibit presents a number of things folks on the Home Front received and cherished from their family members in uniform.

We have also seen several changes in our Gift Shop this year, and these deal with some of the most important assets we have – our Gift Shop Operators. Without these folks, the public would not see everything else done around the Museum. Our Gift Shop operators are the first live introduction to the Museum. They are our Greeters and Goodwill Ambassadors at the front counter 361 days a year. And it is not likely that we can ever have too many Gift Shop Operators. This is a critical volunteer position area for the Museum, and one where we need to see some growth.

This year we have welcomed some new faces to the Gift Shop and have also said good-bye to a few others. New volunteers we are glad to have working in the shop include **Vic Van Camp**, **Ted Marvin** and the return of **Mary** and **Jim Braun**. Mary works the shop and Jim works all around the Museum. Most recently, **Jean Trupp** and **Margaret Carlson** have started training as Gift Shop Operators.

Our current core of regulars has been with us ranging from a few years to more than 25 years. They include **Mary Naylor**, **Wayne Dodson** (Gift Shop Manager as well as Operator), **Richard Long**, **Bill Ballentine**, **Ray Miller**, **Dan Pulliam**, and **Marlene Urban**. While Marlene works the shop, **Chuck Urban** is out weed whacking the Museum grounds and doing other buildings and grounds maintenance.

Reluctantly, we said good-bye to three familiar Gift Shop faces with **Bill Mohney** and **Jean** and **Bernie Wanner** "really" retiring. Apparently, they looked "retirement" up in Webster's dictionary and found out "Volunteering at the Combat Air Museum" was not really a definition after all. Bill, Jean and Bernie represent 58 years of volunteer service at CAM, and Bill is a charter member of the Museum, so their "real" retirements are well deserved. Fortunately, we still plan to see them at various Museum functions.

In support of the Gift Shop, **Joe Higgins** has been diligently working at his bench in the 604 workshop,



A view showing the attached pole and windsock for the billboard sign.

making the walnut bases for the .50 caliber machine gun shells and hand grenades sold in 602. Those items are popular with visitors, so Joe always has bases to work on. His wood comes from old gun stocks that were rough cut but never finished. Joe runs the wood through a planer, then cuts the base to size, and sands and finishes the wood to create the attractive bases. He has also built and finished a couple of flag cases that we will place in the Gift Shop as sell items.

The unseasonably warm fall weather brought out a larger than usual number of tours to the Museum for this time of year. **Jack Vaughn**, **Bob Kelly**, **Ralph Knehans**, and **Dave Houser** have all been busy guiding folks of all ages through our two hangars.

Off the Museum grounds, **Mark Hasvold** continues restoration work in his shop on the Ryan Firebee target drone. Mark is currently repairing and replacing damaged skin on the bottom of the drone. When he completes the restoration, which includes painting the drone, it will be a real beacon in its bright red-orange paint against the white

see "What's going on," con't. on page 8

"What's going on," con't. from page 7

back drop of Hangar 602.

Also off site, volunteers have erected the framework for a billboard sign along US Highway 75 south of Topeka. **Stu Entz** owns some property along US 75 between south Topeka and the 77th street exit to Forbes Field and has allowed us to erect a billboard sign for the Museum on this property. On November 9, **Martin Moyer, Dale Allen, Stu Entz, Bob Crapser, Gene Howerter, Dick Trupp, and Danny San Romani** gathered at the site, dug postholes and set up the framework. The framework was designed and built in

Hangar 604 by volunteers, then taken to the site for assembly. It includes a pole with a windsock on one upright. While finishing the concrete work, the crew had a real scare when Martin passed out while sitting on the tailgate of his truck. Bob immediately called 911 and Stu, Dale and Bob tended to Martin until the ambulance arrived. As the emergency medical technicians arrived, Martin came around and was able to talk with them and answer their questions. Once in the hospital, it was determined that he was suffering from severe anemia. As this is being written, Martin has a series of tests to undergo to determine the cause of the anemia. We wish him a speedy recovery. →

The Battle for Leyte Gulf

An eyewitness account of KITKUN BAY's part in the Battle of Leyte Gulf off Samar Island, Philippines on October 25, 1944

Two years ago, **Mr. Charles Ferguson** of Topeka brought to the Museum a scrapbook from his World War II Navy days. Included in the scrapbook were a number of photos and papers regarding a **Dr. Herman Ellsworth Schuman** who, after World War II, practiced dentistry in El Dorado and later, Parsons, Kansas. Mr. Ferguson and Dr. Schuman served together on the USS KITKUN BAY (CVE 71), an escort aircraft carrier, sometimes also called a "jeep" carrier. Mr. Ferguson was a Storekeeper and 20 mm gunner, and Dr. Schuman was in the Medical Department.

Also in the scrapbook was a copy of a written eyewitness account of KITKUN BAY's part in the Battle of Leyte Gulf off Samar Island, Philippines on October 25, 1944. **LT(jg) Charles F. Spalding** wrote the account. Spalding also co-authored a 1943 novel *Love At First Flight* and was a close friend to "Jack" Kennedy and other members of the Kennedy family.

Mr. Ferguson loaned his scrapbook to curator **Danny San Romani** long enough for San Romani to copy its contents. With this issue of *Plane Talk*, we start Spalding's account of The Battle for Leyte Gulf. Vol-

umes have been written on this naval battle, and some background information is necessary before we start LT(jg) Spalding's account..

On October 24, 1944, US Army General Douglas MacArthur waded ashore on the eastern beaches of Leyte Island, Philippines, fulfilling a promise to the Filipino nation made in 1942 that he would return. Four days earlier, troops of Lieutenant General Walter Krueger's Sixth Army had landed on Leyte's beaches. Admiral William "Bull" Halsey's Sixth Fleet supported the landings by providing security in the Leyte Gulf with 16 fast carriers, six new battleships, and 81 cruisers and destroyers. Vice Admiral Thomas Kincaid and the Seventh Fleet with its smaller escort carriers and old battleships provided direct support to troops on the beachhead. Lieutenant General George Kenney's Fifth Air Force provided additional aerial support from five Pacific Island bases.

All these forces arrived essentially unopposed, and the landings initially encountered light resistance. But this did not mean the Japanese were abandoning Leyte to the invading forces. In fact, the invasion put into effect a pre-

planned Japanese defensive response named Sho-1 in which they hoped to decoy the major US Navy fleet units away from Leyte so they could attack and destroy the ships supporting the landing and defeat the forces ashore.

The Sho-1 plan consisted of three naval forces, the Northern, Center, and Southern. The Northern Force was the decoy, set up to draw Halsey's fast carriers to an area well northeast of the Philippine Islands. The Center and Southern Forces approached the Philippine Archipelago from the west and steamed eastward through the Sibuyan and Mindanao Seas to eventually come out on the eastern side of Leyte through the Surigao and San Bernardino Straits.

The Battle of Leyte Gulf occurred October 23-25, 1944. USS KITKUN BAY and its small task unit took part in a running gun battle with Vice Admiral Takeo Kurita's Center Force on the morning of October 25, off Samar Island.

KITKUN BAY was one of six escort aircraft carriers (CVE) in Task Unit 77.4.3, part of Kincaid's Seventh Fleet. The Unit's call sign was Taffy 3. Escort ships for Taffy 3 included three destroyers (DD) and four destroyer escorts (DE). The largest guns of the 13 ships of Taffy 3 were 5-inch gun mounts. Each carrier had one, the DDs had five apiece, and the DEs had two apiece, for a total of 29. The DDs each carried 10 torpedo tubes, the DEs each carried 3 for a total of 42. The six carriers each carried Wildcat fighters and Avenger torpedo bombers. On the day of their battle with Kurita's Center Force, a combined total of 52 Wildcats and 43 Avengers were launched, often sporadically and hastily. A distinct disadvantage for the fighters and torpedo bombers was that they were armed for attacking ground targets—men, material, armor, and vehicles. They and their carriers did not carry the ordnance necessary to penetrate armor plated battleships and cruisers. It was somewhat like hitting a charging rhinoceros with a fly swatter.

Escort carriers were comparatively small ships. They were built on oil tanker hulls and had a length of 512 feet. They displaced 7,800 tons, smaller than most cruisers, and had a top speed of 19 knots (21-22 mph). Besides their main defensive armament of one 5-inch gun, they carried an array of 40 mm, 20 mm, and 50 caliber anti-aircraft guns. Escort carriers were designated CVE. Their crews said this stood for "Combustible, Vulnerable, and Expendable."

Kurita's Center Force, Taffy 3's opponent on the

morning of October 25, consisted of four battleships, eight heavy and light cruisers, and 11 destroyers. The four battleships by themselves had 81 guns larger than the largest guns of Taffy 3. The cruisers and destroyers added another 160 guns as big or bigger than the American ships'. Kurita's force also had over 150 torpedo tubes to the Americans' 42. The slowest ship in the Center Force could make good 26 knots (29-30 mph). In short, the Japanese had by far the superior force.

**"The Jap fleet is fourteen
miles astern!"
"Sure," I say, "Sure it is."**

Lookouts on the ships of Taffy 3 were absolutely stunned and surprised to see the silhouettes of Japanese battleships and cruisers steaming over the horizon on the morning of October 25. An Avenger pilot had first reported their presence, and this was passed to an unbelieving Rear Admiral Clifton Sprague, commanding Taffy 3. Unknown to him, Halsey had taken the bait set by the Japanese Northern Force and steamed off to the northeast to find and engage this force. Halsey left the San Bernardino Strait unguarded, and Kurita's Center Force steamed through the strait during the night. Thus Taffy 3's part in the Battle of Leyte Gulf began. Here follows LT(jg) Charles F. Spalding's account (printed as written).

"The Jap fleet is fourteen miles astern!"
"Sure," I say, "Sure it is."

Angrily, the flight deck officer, LaRue, a small aggressive man who looks like a belligerent rooster with his yellow cap tied on his head, grabs my arm and points toward the last CVE in the formation. It is the Gambier Bay steaming along undisturbed against a background of gray, quarrelsome, early morning clouds that squat low on the early sullen sea. Gusty winds drive a dawn rain across the deck but nothing seems out of the ordinary. At 0700 on the 25th of October, 1944, the six escort carriers, three destroyers, and four destroyer escorts that make up Task Force 77.4.3, not exactly a gathering of naval might, apparently are about to commence another day of support air operations. It is a dull,

monotonous, unadventurous mission, but one for which CVE's are particularly fitted with their limited speed, flimsy construction and negligible armament. It requires that our planes bomb and strafe in support of troops that have landed ashore on Leyte Island. Naval might is not needed here, the job can be done by jeep carriers, destroyers, and destroyer escorts operating in guarded waters.

But even as I look, two geysers of spray rise up fantastically in tall lazy columns behind the Gambier Bay. Marker shells dye the water red. And then a phosphorus shell bursts short above the ship releasing glittering streamers.

I turn quickly back to LaRue, but he is under the bridge getting orders to launch from Lt. Comdr. Sweet, the air officer. Captain Whitney's bulk, peaked by a green baseball cap, looms up behind the air officer. The bridge teems with activity. Startled members of the staff peer thru glasses into the murky gray astern. The Admiral, holding binoculars in his left hand, his canvas flight jacket with the leather name plate, Oftsie, R.A., open below his neck, goes to the Captain.

"Captain, that's a Jap fleet behind us. What are you doing about it?"

"Admiral Sprague has ordered the Task Force to increase speed one knot."

"One knot!! Give her all she'll take!"

All she'll take amounts to nineteen knots. In of [sic] the C.I.C. [Combat Information Center] room, a telltale red line on the plotting screen shows the Japanese warships closing at thirty. Enlisted men and officers work feverishly oversquawk boxes, charts, radar instruments, radio and phones. Foul weather doubles the static, excitement multiplies the conversations. Loud hectic talk, instructions, pleas, cries, shouted criticisms, Japanese, frantic questions all issue into the semi-lit room collide and jell into endless garbling. One of the officers stands aside watching an enlisted man plot with red chalk on the large, circular, luminous screen the course of the Japanese behind us.

"How could they get so close and not be detected?" I ask.

"The radar isn't as effective in bad weather," he answers.

"But fourteen miles! It must be part of a strategic plan."

He shrugs again.

"What about the other carriers? Listen, we're not

out here alone, are we?"

He shrugs.

My voice has risen too high. Someone looks at me. Embarrassed I start to leave. At the door I ask a talker what the Jap strength is.

"Four battleships, six cruisers, and a flock of destroyers," he says quickly and then relays an official message.

Back on deck the fighter planes are already off, the last in a climbing curving arc to the right. A plane director aids the first torpedo plane onto the catapult, walking slowly backwards and motioning with his hands. Immediately behind crawls another plane waiting its turn. The catapult officer, Lt(jg) Wertheimer, points down the deck and the first plane is flung aloft. The others inch clumsily nearer the catapult.

My eye follows the torpedo plane over the water and falls upon the small escort vessels steaming along both sides of our force. They are laying a smoke screen. It shows cleanly white against the sea's ashen shade. Two destroyer escorts and a destroyer are doing the same thing astern. Heavy black smoke issues from our own stacks. And then again a six gun salvo raises fingers of foam on both sides of the Gambier Bay. They can come no closer without hitting. More shells strike around the carrier. It seems to be sailing between spouts of water.

Commander Richard Fowler, the squadron's skipper, is on the catapult now. The tip of his tongue shows between his teeth. It gives him an impish look. Stiff anxiety is pressed on other faces, but Fowler's face is almost bright. This is his profession. The helpless position he regards as the chance of a lifetime. Some men are made great in moments like this. Turner's tough bearded face is twisted, Garrison's fat rubbery face looks ugly behind his goggles. Issitt's dark face freezes evenly. Globoker is open mouthed, but the Skipper's humorous face is almost bright.

After he is launched, Lt. David appears out of Operations. We stand together in the catwalk.

"They're firing on the White Plains," he shouts.

Water rises beside the carrier off our port quarter.

"They've four battleships, six cruisers, and fifteen destroyers back there," he adds.

I nod.

"Are we getting any help?"

"We sent a message, but everybody's busy. They're attacking down south and at the beach."

"There must be somebody. How about Army planes?"

He shakes his head. Tacloban Field isn't ready.

For the first time I fully realize our position. A Jap task force coming down from the north has accidentally run into us off the coast of Samar. We are all that lies between them and their objective, the defenseless transports at anchor in Leyte Gulf. Six CVE's, three destroyers, and four destroyer escorts are pitted against four battleships, six cruisers, and an estimated sixteen destroyers. Fear fills me and curls in my stomach like fog around a street lamp. We have nothing to fight back with but one five inch gun. And our planes.

"Our planes have been sent to attack the enemy," it is announced over the public address.

On the plotting board in C.I.C. it is evident that the Japanese are pressing closer and closer. They have moved up on both sides and lie about us like a horseshoe. From the catwalk you can plainly see orange streaks from their guns, wait an endless thirty seconds and then observe the shell splashes. Their cruisers stand less than six miles off our port and starboard side. Battleships and the rest of the unit are drawing up astern.

I pass Lt. Harry at his twenty millimeter gun forward on the port side. His babyish face looks ridiculous beneath the steel helmet.

"I can't believe it," he mutters desperately. "It is incredible! How did it happen? We can't even shoot back!"

The anguish of utter helplessness gives the crew a craven look. They stand impotently at the rail watching shells splash about the White Plains and the Gambier Bay.

"Lookit there! She's hit!" several shout at once.

The Gambier Bay swings violently to port, smokes badly and begins to drop back. She doesn't explode. I think of the Liscombe Bay [torpedoed, exploded, and sank November 1943]. I watch her [Gambier Bay] fall back. Shells drop on her with doubled fury now. Soon she will be a sitting target for their battleships, cruisers, and destroyers.

"I hope Mac gets off," murmurs a crewman.

Everybody has friends on the Gambier Bay. I want to run away. I duck into the light lock [sic] and run aimlessly down the passageway. In the flag office I find Lt. Snyder at his desk. His thick frame is slumped in a chair, and fear has drawn his features.

"What do you think?" I ask stupidly.

He spreads his thick hands helplessly.

"This is it," he says.

"Yeah, this is it," echo two pale yeomen, nodding together agreeably. They are packing secret papers that they have been ordered to destroy.

I leave this cheerless scene and go needlessly to the head. Two hundred and fifty pounds of Lt. McCabe are balanced on the toilet in what must be one of the most studied casual gestures ever assumed. Spread out before him is the sports edition of the Philadelphia Inquirer. This is October 25th. I calculate quickly that the paper is four months and thirteen days old.

"What do you think?" I ask again absurdly taking a seat beside him.

He turns his high head slightly like an interested St. Bernard and talks grandly as if he were the allied spokesman.

"I have every confidence that we shall emerge safely from this."

Continued in the next issue of Plane Talk

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www.combatairmuseum.org

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2006 Events Calendar

*Event dates subject to
change*

March

20-23 Aviation Education
Class

April

29 Celebrity Pancake Feed

June

5-8 Aviation Education
Class

July

10-13 Aviation Education
Class

August

7-10 Aviation Education
Class

September

Winged Foot 5K Run/Walk

→ → →

Plan to attend the December 12th Membership Luncheon

Our speaker for the De-
cember 12 Membership Lun-
cheon will be member **Jack
Vaughn**.

Jack will speak to us about
the life and times of US Army
General Frederick N. Funston,
whose boyhood home was Iola,
Kansas. →

In Memoriam

Egideo Perry "Bud"
San Romani
November 2, 1918 -
October 28, 2005
#3510

Wishing You the Best
of the
Holiday Season
and a Happy
2006



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