

The cross will
be painted;
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NOW ... AND THEN
Enjoying a light moment (above) during their first get-together in 35 years were six former members of a B-24 bomber crew: (from left) George Boyas, Charles Smith, John Billings, Richard Gottlieb, Jim O'Flarity and Warren Eldridge. Back in 1944, several crew members posed on a South Carolina beach (right). Shown are (front row, from left) Gottlieb, a ball turret gunner named Searborne and Eldridge (back row) Billings, co-pilot Roland Nix (now deceased) and Smith.



Ex-bomber crew meets here for 51st mission

By DENNIS GAUB
News Editor

Six of seven members of a World War II B-24 bomber crew conducted their 51st mission in Frankenmuth earlier this month.

The crew didn't, however, flatten the city. Instead, they got together at the home of Richard and Lenore Gottlieb, 655 Eastgate, and remembered the time 35 years ago when they helped win the war over Europe.

THE CREW got credit for 12 heavy bombardment missions. They also helped win the ground war in Europe because they participated in 38 more, especially dangerous missions for the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), predecessor of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). They dropped supplies to partisans fighting the Nazis in Italy and on at least one occasion airtight partisans themselves behind enemy lines.

Boyas was bombardier-navigator on that B-24, attached to the 825th

Squadron, 484th Group, 49th Wing of the 15th Air Force. He's now an engineer with General Motors.

John Billings, of Englewood, Va., was the pilot. Naturally, he's been a commercial airline pilot with Eastern Airlines for 31 years.

The radio operator was George Boyas, of Fair Lawn, N.J., now a public works assistant foreman.

The navigator, Charles Smith of Minneapolis, is a chemist nowadays.

GUNNER-DISPATCHER Jim O'Flarity, now residing in Palm Beach, Fla., where he's a trial lawyer. He flew 15 missions in North Africa before being assigned to the crew. Warren Eldridge is a different type of engineer these days. Then the plane's flight engineer, the Albany, N.Y., man is now a civil engineer for the New York State Thruway system.

Co-pilot Roland Nix is deceased.

Five of the six surviving crew members — O'Flarity was added later — trained together, starting in May 1944, at the Charleston, S.C.,

Army Air Force Base. (An Independent Air Force didn't come into existence until after WWII.)

To determine whether a pilot assigned to the crew was suitable, the crew used a sink-or-swim test — in reverse.

A PILOT would be carried out into the nearby Atlantic Ocean and tossed into shallow water. "If they sunk, we kept them," Smith recalled, to laughter all around. "If they floated, we threw them away."

The original pilot had a football injury and was caught in the undertow, breaking his leg, crew members recalled. But Billings apparently passed the test; and later, when dangerous missions were being planned, he displayed a can-do-despite-the-odds attitude, according to his compatriots.

"On some of those missions, he'd (Billings) say it's stupid to go ... let's go," Smith remembered.

Before joining the fray, the crew

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went to Mitchell Field on Long Island to pick up what Billings jokingly called "a Ford almost-built, B-24" because of the plane's variety of mechanical problems.

ENROUTE to Europe, the crew stopped at Newfoundland's Gander Field for what Gottlieb remembers as "the best ice cream and fried eggs. They were the only things you could stomach."

The crew arrived at Cerignola, Italy, in late August 1944, when the front was on the Po River about 300 miles away. They joined the newly-formed 484th group.

"We got there in time to be in on the first bombing mission the 825th (Squadron)," Billings recalled. And that was a memorable experience.

Only two of the squadron's seven planes had bomb sights, so bombardiers on other planes relied on the sight-equipped aircraft to know when to drop bombs. When bombs started falling from the lead aircraft, others would join.

Enemy fire brought down four planes in the squadron, including the ones with sights. So, "we dropped our bombs by guesswork," Billings said.

"OF THAT squadron flying that day, two (planes) got back," he added. "The other pilot broke radio silence to say I'd (Billings) better take the lead because this was only his second mission."

"Guess what?" Billings says now of that time when he, a novice pilot, and another pilot with little more experience guided each other over enemy territory back to the base.

And there was the time when the crew participated in the bombing of an oil refinery in Poland. The target was at the far reaches of the B-24's operating range as Smith put it, "We were so far from home, if the wind shifted, you couldn't get back."

Flak over the refinery was so heavy, crew members recalled flying through a "black sky." "Guys said you could walk on the flak," Billings said.

ANOTHER time, quick action by Boyas may have saved the crew's lives. With a German fighter clogging the American bomber, crew members discovered their guns weren't working. The B-24 was flying at 28,000-32,000 feet, and oil in the gun mechanisms had congealed.

Billings gave the order to "at least aim the guns" at the fighter. "Maybe, it'll scare him away." To lighten the tension, Billings also said, "If there are any storms around, get ready to throw them."

Boyas, meanwhile, had gone to the rear of the plane to use its primitive sanitary facilities. Seeing the fighter fly by, he opened the tail gun, got it working and fired off a burst that deterred the fighter.

"He saved our butt," Billings said of Boyas. And Gottlieb spoke for the group: "Nice shooting, George."

CHECKING out a new first pilot on another occasion gave Billings some anxious moments. He went along as a co-pilot on a plane equipped with anti-troop bombs, described by Billings as "an aerodynamic hand grenade, three feet long where the stick was the detonator."

The bombs were so sensitive that the end would set them off. One pound anywhere else would set them off," Billings said.

Approaching the mission's target, the bombardier of Billings' plane pulled the "pins" on about half the bombs, in accordance with normal procedure.

Then, said Billings, "The Germans got word we were coming. The commander said, 'Bring 'em back.'"

With masterful understatement, Billings says of that perilous order, "This wasn't something that made me very happy."

SMITH interjected, "You scared easily, John." Billings replied, "and that scared me. He (the first pilot) landed successfully but it didn't help my nerves a bit."

Perhaps the most dangerous missions the crew flew were with the OSS, dropping supplies, food, guns, and food to the Italian and French underground. The missions were normally flown at night, unaccompanied by fighters, and crew members faced the prospect of Gestapo torture had they been captured.

One of their OSS missions may have been among the most important of the war. "We flew in the crew that hung up Mussolini and his girl friend," Smith speculated.

"Nobody ever told me about this," a surprised Boyas said.

"**YOU** FIGURE this out afterwards," Smith responded. "All I know was they were awfully protective of our plane that night."

Those OSS missions are the subject of several books. Billings is mentioned in one of them, "Piercing the Reich" by Joseph E. Percio.

And, during one weekend in May 1980, memories came flooding back for the former crew members.

Billings may have summarized their sentiments best. "That's what we ought to call this — the 51st mission," he said.