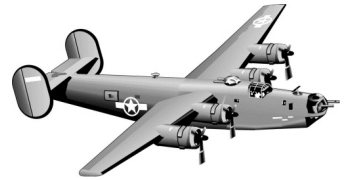




# Flightline



Newsletter of the 780th Bomb Squadron of WWII

December 2011

## Last 780th Reunion First for Kakaska

*Editor's Note: The 780<sup>th</sup> Bombardment Squadron met for potentially the last time in September 2011. It was the 40<sup>th</sup> reunion for the squadron. Also significant was that this was the first reunion for one of the veterans attending - navigator George Kakaska. We are fortunate to have not one but two reports from the reunion, the first written by Kim McLaughlin, daughter of co-pilot Gayle McLaughlin, and the second by 780<sup>th</sup> newcomer Joshua Hummel, grandson of Robert Davenport. They will tell the rest of the story.*

by Kim Mc Laughlin

The 40th reunion for the 780<sup>th</sup> WWII Bombardment Squadron began in Abilene, Texas, on September 15<sup>th</sup> with the arrival of Pat Logan, Shirley Gary, Dr. George Kakaska, Gwen Kakaska Reynolds, and Louis and Alice Lindeman at the Hilton Garden Inn in the afternoon. The veterans and their families immediately met with a reporter and photographer from the *Abilene Reporter News*. After the interviews we headed out to Perini's Steak house for some great steaks and beverages.

Friday afternoon we added another person to our crew, Joshua Hummel, grandson of nose gunner Robert T. Davenport. Joshua traveled all the way from Burbank, California, to attend this reunion. We headed out to Dyess AFB (<http://www.dyess>.

[af.mil/](http://af.mil/)) for a tour of the six-acre base. We ended at the museum where we viewed a video about the B-1 plane.

In the evening we met at the Hilton Garden Inn Longhorn C room. Five Wylie High School seniors sang the national anthem a cappella. An

an Honor Guard folded and presented flags that have flown over Afghanistan and Dyess AFB to our veterans. It was very moving. Included with the flags were certificates describing the planes flying the flags. It was a very touching ceremony. The Honor Guard stayed and ate their evening meal with us.

After a wonderful and fill-

ing meal of sausage and chicken we recognized Frank Love, who passed away since the last reunion. Frank's son, Roger, called and



Louis Lindeman and George Kakaska received Never Forget coins from the Dyess Air Force Base honor guard. From Dyess are, from left, Airman 1st Class Matthew Johnson, Senior Airman Jeimain D. Williams, Master Sgt. Mike Larson, and Airman 1st Class William McLendon.

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wanted to let us know he was in Oklahoma and he was glad about us having the reunion. We also read e-mails from Ashby Nelson and Tanya Beitz, daughter of Ardnel Steele. Then we watched two videos about the Not Forgotten coins before the Dyess military personnel presented the Not Forgotten coins to the veterans and their families. If you want to see the videos they are at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0div3g2U1E0> and <http://www.lsffoundation.com/>

The man at the front desk of the Hilton Garden Inn said his father was a WWII veteran. We invited him to attend the ceremony, which he did with his wife. The Honor Guard was not able to give our guest a flag as they had already been prepared for presentation to Dr. Kakaska and Louis Lindeman, however, he received a Not Forgotten coin.

The Lindemans' brother-in-law, who had attended a couple of reunions with them, died the day before the reunion. The Lindemans had to head back to Kansas a day early but we were able to have the main presentations to the veterans done on Friday. This was a crammed packed day, however, everyone was very appreciative.

## ***Reunion Leaves Lasting Impression on Grandson***

*by Joshua Hummel*

I arrived on a late-night flight from Los Angeles, hopped in my rental car, and drove to Abilene. My emotions were very high and filled with excitement. I remember thinking during the four-hour car drive from Dallas, "Wow, this is it. I am able to meet the men who served along side my grandfather, S/Sgt Robert F. Davenport." I felt like I was running a race, and meeting them was the emotional finish line that was over ten years in the making. With my wife, family and friends behind me, I pushed aside the nervous feelings and replaced them with overwhelming happiness of being

so close to such a monumental event.

Earlier I spoke with the kind-hearted and amazing Kim McLaughlin, and she told me what time we were meeting. After arriving I slowly walked in to the lobby of the hotel not knowing what to expect or whom really I was able to meet. There, sitting in the lobby, was a tall man with a nice smile, talking to his loving wife (I later learned these were the Lindemans). I introduced myself and refrained from asking them a million questions about what the war was like, etc. I enjoyed looking at their photo albums and the 780<sup>th</sup> *Memoirs*, a copy of which my wife had found at an auction.

After several minutes of getting to know one another Kim, the Lindemans and I look up to see a shorter man walking with such pride and



*Joshua Hummel and George Kakaska*

humbleness towards us. He had a large smile on his face. I immediately knew he was navigator George Kakaska - the man who served with my nose gunner grandfather, and the only member of Richard Tennant's crew I have been able to find. Immediately my eyes welled up and I choked back tears. This was such an emotional moment. George Kakaska and his daughter, Gwen, politely introduced themselves and with true Southern hospitality they gave me a hug.

I am so completely honored and blessed to have met all the veterans and family members who were able to attend. From the car ride with Pat Logan to touring the 7<sup>th</sup> Armored Division museum with the Kakaskas and Kim and her sister, the entire weekend was put together so





*Attending the reunion, front row from left: Lisa McLaughlin Kidd, Kim McLaughlin, George Kakaska and Shirley Gary. Back row from left: Joshua Hummel, Pat Logan, Gwen Kakaska Reynolds and Tom Philpot. Philpot is a friend of Kim's who came to the reunion to interview Kakaska.*

nicely. There was a tour of Dyess AFB, an honor guard during dinner, a local choir singing the national anthem, and each veteran receiving a Not Forgotten coin with American flag.

The most important part of the week for me was the after dinner conversation and drinks in the banquet room, where I listened to serious stories from George and Louis about their days at Pantanella, the missions they went on, and how lucky they were to come back alive and in the shape they did.

But not everything was serious with all of these what I call family members. Louis, Pat, and Shirley Gary talked about past reunions and their great attendance, and the events that

### Interest in 2012 Reunion

Joshua Hummel would like to know if there is any interest in holding another 780<sup>th</sup> reunion in 2012. He suggests meeting in either the Midwest or Burbank, CA area.

Would you and or your family be interested in getting together for some low-key fun, sharing stories, and continuing the 780<sup>th</sup> tradition? If so, contact Joshua at (323) 652-2858 or summersun83@gmail.com.

took place at them, most of which was comical.

The trip was a trip of emotions in the most positive way. My heart goes out to all who attended and wanted to attend. This weekend will be kept in my heart right next to the memories of my grandfather, for these people knew him, flew with him, and faced death with him. With all my heart and soul I thank the members of the 780<sup>th</sup> who were able or wanted to attend, Kim and her sister, Lisa, for putting on such a great weekend; George Kakaska and daughter, Gwen Kakaska Reynolds, for making the fateful first reunion trip and sharing such great stories and time; the Lindemans and Pat and Shirley, for making such a long drive and being so warm and polite and sharing so many stories; and to my family for all their unyielding support and encouragement. I pray there are more reunions in the future.

### The Never Forgotten Coins

Louis and George were presented Never Forgotten coins free of charge by the LSF Foundation. Since the 780<sup>th</sup> Bombardment Squadron Association is disbanded and had no funds for the reunion or a donation, Kim would appreciate individual donations to LSF to show our appreciation for honoring our 780<sup>th</sup> veterans. For more information on making a contribution:

The LSF Foundation  
Supporting our Troops and Veterans  
P.O. Box 4221  
Abilene, TX 79608  
web: [www.lsffoundation.com](http://www.lsffoundation.com)  
email: [lsffoundation@gmail.com](mailto:lsffoundation@gmail.com)

An article about the coins is at:  
<http://www.reporternews.com/news/2009/dec/21/not-forgotten-coins/>  
Links to a video about the coins are in Kim's article.

## *Saluted by Four Star Generals*

# **'Cookie' Receives Lifetime Achievement Award by AFA on Behalf of 15 AF Flyers**

*by George Kuchenbecker*

In July I was asked by the Air Force Association to speak at their annual conference and trade show and to be awarded their "Lifetime Achievement Award" in recognition of my WWII service as a bomber crew member in the 15<sup>th</sup> Air Force. The conference was held September 19-21, in Washington, D.C., at the Gaylord National Resort and Convention Center.

The invitation included Gloria with all our travel and hotel expenses paid by the AFA. That was a great benefit as the room rate at the Gaylord is \$299 a night. Most of our meals were also covered by the AFA. All we had to pay for was incidental food and some keepsakes for us and the gifts we bought for the grandkids.

We left Seattle early on September 18<sup>th</sup> and spent our first night in the Gaylord. Monday the 19<sup>th</sup> the rush of activities started with getting our name tags from the AFA suite and meeting all the AFA people we had worked with to get to the event. Then the endless parade of new faces. Not possible to remember faces and names.

This year the AFA was giving its Lifetime Achievement Award to the heavy bombardment crews of WWII, "recognizing a lifetime of work in the advancement of aerospace," according to their letter to me. Four WWII Army Air Corps veterans were invited - one from each major theater of combat. A pilot from the 8<sup>th</sup> Air Force in England represented Northern Europe, me from the 15<sup>th</sup> AF in Italy for Southern Europe, a 13<sup>th</sup> AF B-29 pilot who flew out of Tinian in the Pacific bombing Japan and island bases on the road to Tokyo, and finally a B-24 ball turret gunner who flew in the CBI, flying missions in Burma and Southeast Asia.

Our first scheduled event Tuesday was a forum with the four of us speaking to the entire group in attendance. A large number of those we spoke to were U.S. Air Force personnel, all



*George "Cookie" Kuchenbecker, second from left, pictured with the AFA Lifetime Achievement Award. Cookie and the other three men pictured represented the four main theaters of combat: Northern Europe, Southern Europe, the Pacific, and Far East.*

in their dress blues. There were more four-star generals than I had ever seen before, and all wanting to shake our hands. Some of the females were in their formal uniforms with long blue skirts. Quite a sight. The forum lasted about an hour and a half and then it was dinner time. We dined at McCormick & Schmick's, right on the banks of the Potomac River. Our host was Doug Birkey, the AFA man who set up the whole event, and some of the AFA people that worked with him. Bunch of really great people.

Wednesday started with a stop at the Jos. A. Bank store to pick up our rental tuxes which the AFA paid for. We spent most of the day exploring the Gaylord and some of the D.C. sights. Then the big event - a huge banquet for about 1400 guests. Formal attire for all. Great food and very well served. Then the awards presentation with lots of Air Force brass, many high-level executives from Air Force suppliers including Boeing and Air Bus, plus many smaller companies that supply most of the nuts and bolts that make the Air Force run.

After dinner was the awards. After many speeches and recognitions of dignitaries it was time to present the Lifetime Achievement Awards. There were five to be presented. My group was next to last and the four of us took our place on the stage. The perpetual trophy for the award is a large crystal ball engraved with the AFA logo and several turns of silver cord around it. Our names will be placed on its pedestal. Unfortunately, there were no small replicas for the recipients.

Then the party began. In that huge ballroom many came up to shake our hands and say thanks for what we had done so long ago. There were five four-star generals in the group and each sought us out individually, came to attention in front of us, popped a brisk salute and shook our hand. They spent a few minutes asking the what and where questions about our service, thanked us for our service and made way for the next person to speak to us. It's hard to imagine a lowly staff sergeant being saluted by a four-star general!

### **Late *Flightline***

My apologies for the December *Flightline* being so late. Our computer crashed just before Thanksgiving. It took a week to replace, then Christmas took over and, finally, my kids took over! The *Flightline* will be on time in March. Send your stories to [johnkath5@comcast.net](mailto:johnkath5@comcast.net).

## **Stalag Luft III Reunion**

Some 780<sup>th</sup> veterans were imprisoned in Stalag Luft III. Here is some information on the upcoming SLIII reunion:

Stalag Luft III Reunion  
April 17-21, 2012  
Ramada Plaza Hotel  
Dayton, Ohio

Events include a tour of the Wright-Patterson Air Force Museum and other sites, and meeting the five remaining Doolittle Raiders (one of whom was a Stalag Luft III survivor).

A special presentation will be given by the curators of the Stalag Luft III Museum in Zagan, Poland, including a history of the camp and updates on the recent excavations of tunnels Harry and George. They will show a new documentary made at the camp and bring some camp artifacts.

Several panel discussions by experts and former prisoners will cover topics such as the covert activities of captured medical personnel in the ETO; the 2009 "Kriegie Kids" reenactment of the 52-mile Forced March of 1945 to Spremberg; the story of highly-decorated Stalag Luft III POW Ewart T. Sconiers, the only man left behind buried in Poland and the attempts of the Defense POW/MIA Personnel Office and an international group of researchers to bring him home after 67 years; a discussion with Tuskegee Airman Alexander Jefferson and WWII Historian Arnold Wright, who transcribed *Behind the Wire* about the secret ledgers smuggled out of Stalag Luft III and taken on the Forced March; and a question and answer session with Hanns Claudius Scharff, the son of the late Dulag Luft's Master Interrogator, Hanns Scharff, who interrogated fighter pilots at Dulag Luft, and former U.S. Ambassador to Luxembourg, the Honorable John E. Dolibois, who interrogated the top Nazis leading up to the Nuremberg War Crimes trials. Several award-winning documentaries also will be shown.

A hospitality room will have Stalag Luft II memorabilia and artifacts on display plus books and DVDs for sale. The Ramada will provide transportation to anyone wishing to go anywhere within a ten-mile radius.

For more information about the reunion and to obtain a registration form contact reunion organizer Marilyn Walton, 1275 Fareham Drive, New Albany, OH 43054, (614) 855-4161, [waltonk9@gmail.com](mailto:waltonk9@gmail.com).



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## *Flightline*

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# Where It All Began: McCook Army Air Base c. 1943



McCook Army Air Base, activated April 1, 1943, was one of eleven Army Air Force training bases in Nebraska during World War II. The base was under the command of 2<sup>nd</sup> Air Force Headquarters, Colorado Springs, Colorado, and provided final training of heavy bomber crews for the B-17 Flying Fortress, B-24 Liberator, and B-29 Super Fortress. Some 15,000 servicemen and 500 civilians were stationed here. Among the bomb groups trained at McCook were elements of the 8<sup>th</sup>, 15<sup>th</sup>, and 20<sup>th</sup> Air Forces.



The 2,100-acre base included three 150 by 7,500-foot concrete runways, five hangars, and barracks for 5,000 men. It operated with three divisions: Base Services (hospital, chapel, theater, band, gymnasium, fire station, post office, photo lab, library, and military police); Maintenance and Supply (air service groups, post engineers, machine shop, warehouses); and Training (celestial navigation, gunnery and bombing, communications, radar, and aircraft maintenance). The base closed December 31, 1945. Credit: Nebraska State Historical Society

*Top: B-24 Liberators on the ramp at McCook. Bottom: An aerial view looking east along the McCook flightline. (photos courtesy Floyd Mellon, at [http://airfields-freeman.com/NE/Airfields\\_NE\\_W.htm](http://airfields-freeman.com/NE/Airfields_NE_W.htm))*