

# 306th Echoes

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## The 306th Bomb Group Association Marches On....

By Vernon L. Williams  
Abilene Christian University

This is my first issue as editor of *Echoes* and I hope it meets the high standards set for many years by my predecessor, Russell Strong.

What a contribution he has made to the 306th Bomb Group Association! The significance of his work goes well beyond his service to the Association. Over thirty years of *Echoes* comprise a stunning archive of history preserved for generations of Americans who will draw upon the stories, photographs, and documents contained in the issues over the years.

A number of years ago I made the statement that Russell's book on the 306th is one of the best unit histories to come out of World War II. As a practicing military historian, I understand better than most that quality histories at the unit level are hard to come by and many are not reliable sources or well done. *First Over Germany: A History of the 306th Bombardment Group* is first rate and each veteran and his family should be proud that Russell's work represents sound scholarship and has taken its place as one of the seminal histories of the air war.

I speak to these crowning achievements by Russell (there are many others) not to build a monument to him but to alert each of you of the foundation of historical preservation that he has built during the time he has been at the controls of the 306th. Elsewhere in this issue you will learn of the digital project just starting this year that will build a vast 306th research site on the world wide web. This would not be possible had it not been for Russell and his diligent work in collecting historical materials and giving

them tender loving care. The continuing legacy of the 306th Bomb Group is largely possible because of Russell Strong's work for the Association.

In addition to editing *Echoes*, I will be directing an effort here in Abilene to digitize all 306th documents and records collected over the years. These digital records will then be placed on the web where anyone in the world can research and work on the history of the 306th Bomb Group. As each group of records is digitized and uploaded to the web, the original documents will be transferred to the 8th Air Force Museum in Savannah. This procedure has been established by the Board of Directors, 306th Bomb Group Association, and we will be diligent in following their directions to the letter. The primary consideration in the digital process will be the care and preservation of the original records. During their time with us, the records will be under lock and key and will be handled under strict archival policies established for this project.

The 306th website address will become operational on 15 December 2007.

[www.306bg.org](http://www.306bg.org)

At first the home page will have a minimum of materials available. Check the website frequently for new materials as they are digitized and uploaded. Please be patient as thousands of pages of materials are digitized. It will be a monumental task, one that will be done by all-volunteer labor. Student interns will be doing most of the work on the



Photograph courtesy East Anglia Air War Archives

## The Dayton, Ohio 2007 Reunion

WOW! The only apt description of the sensational Reunion we just had in Ohio. Everything went off as planned, the weather was perfect and our President, Robert Rockwell, did an incredible job. We had 167 people registered, which was the best attended Reunion in recent history, and wonderful things have come about though this Reunion.

Elsewhere in this issue, you will read about our new Officers and Directors. The most heartening fact about the new Board is that one-third of them are second-generation. Does this not portend a future for us to be remembered? With our future and growth in mind, the Board approved a ten-year agreement with Dr. Vernon L. Williams and the East Anglia Air War Project based in the History Department of Abilene Christian University (ACU) in Abilene, Texas to provide support and maintain our records in digital form.

Part of the support provided by the team of ACU fellowship students under the supervision of Dr. Vernon L. Williams, will include the creation and updating of a 306th website, which will serve as a source for information and as a communication center for our members and the world. They will also take over the publication of *Echoes*, which will be available in hardcopy and on the website. The future of our Group, indeed, looks rosy.

The enthusiasm and comradeship which was in evidence everywhere at this Reunion was so wonderful and palpable in the air, that one could almost reach out and grab a handful of it. Those that did not attend really missed out. Hopefully at next year's Reunion in Little Rock, Arkansas, we will have even a larger attendance.

See you there!  
Dr. Herman H. Kaye

306th project. See page 4 for more information on the 306th internships and who has been selected this year for each internship. It is an exciting program that will benefit many students over the years while preserving the history of the 306th Bomb Group.

So the 306th Bomb Group Association continues on with a little help from its friends. I invite every 306th veteran and their families to contribute stories, photographs, letters, and other documents to the digital project. Mail them to the address at the top of the page.





Three British Land Army girls posing outside their hostel at Milton Ernest in November 1943. Left to right: Florrie \_\_\_\_\_, Peggy Iris Davis Albertson, Dawn Skeggs Filby. Peggy married Joe Albertson, a 306th crew chief. All three girls attended the dances at Thurleigh.

*Photograph courtesy East Anglia Air War Project*



**Joe Conroy**, President  
 Susan O'Konski, Vice President  
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**306th Echoes** is published four times annually: January, April, July and October. *Echoes* is mailed free of charge to all known addresses of 306th personnel, 1942-1945. Contributions in support of this effort may be remitted to the treasurer.

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*The 306th Bomb Group Historical Association is a Federally tax-exempt organization and as a veteran's group is classified as 501 © (19).*

## President's Corner



My name is Joe Conroy, and it is my honor to serve as your President for 2007-08. I am also pleased to announce this year's officers:

Joe Conroy, President  
 Susan O'Konski, Vice President  
 Albert McMahan, Secretary  
 Joel LaBo, Treasurer

2008 is going to be an exciting year for the 306<sup>th</sup>. First and foremost, the membership voted unanimously to keep the 306<sup>th</sup> a viable organization. We will have yearly reunions. However, to carry on our legacy, we must engage second and third - generations. I am excited to announce that two of our officers, Susan O'Konski and Joel LaBo, are second-generation members.

*ECHOES* will now be published both on the web and in hard copy. Dr. Vernon Williams, a history professor at Abilene Christian University, has graciously volunteered to involve his students in publishing quarterly issues of *ECHOES*. This will provide another excellent opportunity to tell our story to another generation.

The 2008 reunion will be held in Little Rock, Arkansas, and Jim Phelan volunteered to be the Reunion Chairman. Jim, another second-generation member, is very enthusiastic and has already started planning the event. We all look forward to our next reunion.

Finally, I must acknowledge the hard work and dedication of last year's President, Rocky Rockwell. Not only did Rocky perform the challenging duties of president, but he also took on the added responsibility of the Dayton Reunion Chairman. Thank you, Rocky.

Things are looking up for the 306<sup>th</sup>, and I am very optimistic that we will have a successful year.

Joe Conroy  
 President

## Obituary Data Needed

Please send the Association details of deaths or complete obituaries if you have them. The obituary column in *Echoes* will continue in the January issue. Please send obituary information to the secretary:

Albert McMahan  
 272 N. Peachtree St.  
 Norcross, GA 30071  
 ancmahan@bellsouth.net



Presque Isle, Maine. Base operations and the control tower, November 1943. This base was a departure and arrival point for many crews assigned to the Eighth Air Force in England during the war. This image is one of many base photographs found in the National Archives that were refueling points for B-17 Fortresses and B-24 Liberators as they made their way across the northern route to the ETO.

*.Courtesy East Anglia Air War Project*

### DONATIONS FOR THE 306TH BOMB GROUP ASSOCIATION

*Those who are able are asked to make an annual contribution to keep everything running smoothly in our Association. There are no dues—so your gift is needed to support the 306th operations. Your gift is tax deductible.*

\_\_\_\_\_  
 Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
 Street and No.

\_\_\_\_\_  
 City, State & Zip

\_\_\_\_\_  
 Telephone No.

\_\_\_\_\_  
 306th Unit

Send to:

Joel LaBo, Treasurer  
 306th Bomb Group Association  
 875 S. Worth  
 Birmingham, Michigan 48009

\_\_\_\_\_  
 Date



# Connections. . . .

## One 306th Family Reaches Across the Twentieth Century and Beyond

By **Vernon L. Williams**  
Abilene Christian University

It all started with Adrian O'Konski. One of six brothers and two sisters growing up on a farm in Kewaunee County, Wisconsin, Adrian became but the first O'Konski link to the 306th Bomb Group and World War II.

The story begins when Adrian joined the Army Air Corps in May 1942 and was commissioned a 2nd Lieutenant. He flew 35 missions over Germany and occupied Europe as a navigator on Walter H. Sumner's crew. Adrian flew an early low altitude mission over St. Lo and Caen, "they threw everything at us," he later said. He finished active duty flying B-29s in Air Sea Rescue work in Alaska and the Aleutian Islands. Meanwhile his brother Alvin was busy elsewhere.

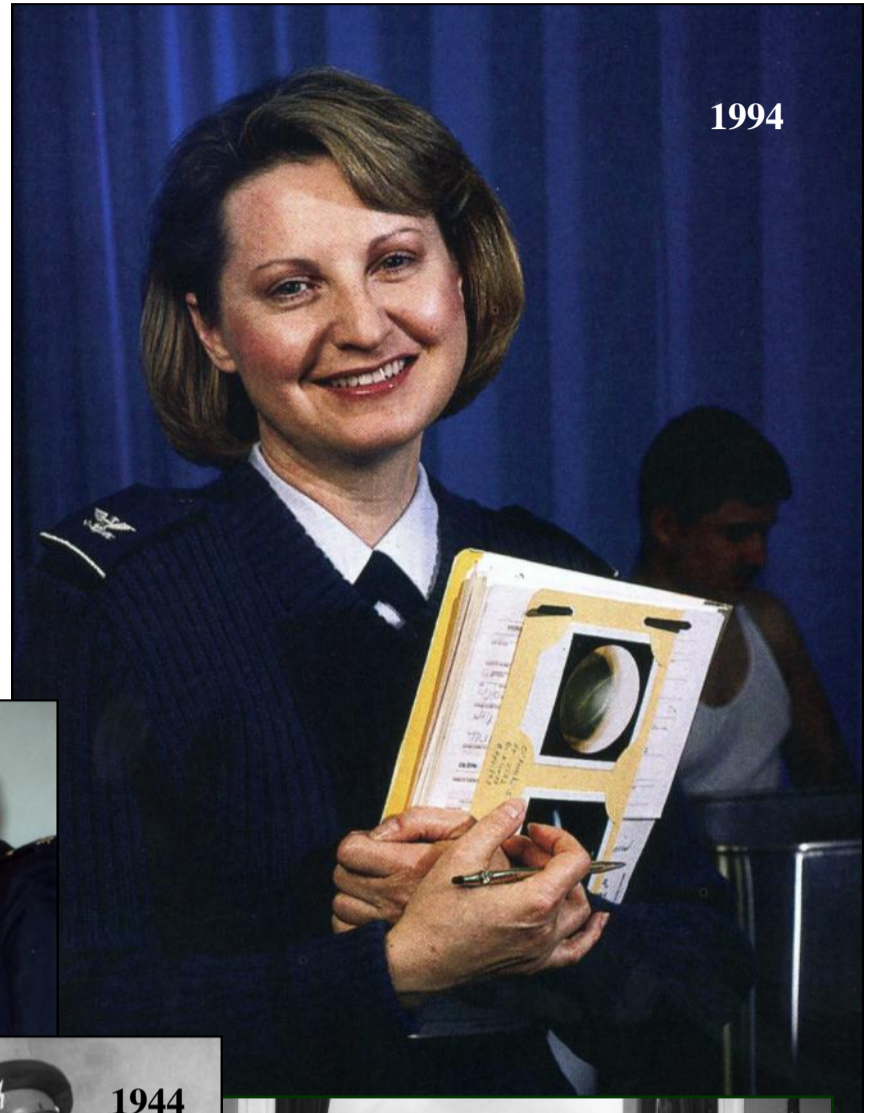
Congressman Alvin O'Konski represented the old 10th Congressional District in Wisconsin and quickly made a difference for the men and women in uniform. He served for many years on the House Armed Services Committee and was a co-author of the GI Bill of Rights. Throughout his congressional career, Alvin made the military a primary focus for his service in Congress. Another brother brings the 306th connection full circle.

After the war Stanley O'Konski had a daughter, Susan. It would be Susan who would complete the O'Konski 306th connection in a way unforeseen by any of the O'Konski clan.

In 1968 after college graduation, Susan received a commission in the Army and became a physical therapist, beginning a military career that would take her to the top of her field. In 1972 Susan transferred to the Air Force. Later she would graduate from the Air Command and Staff College and the Air War College. She ended her career in the rank of Colonel as Chairman, Department of Physical Therapy at Wilford Hall U.S.A.F. Medical Center in San Antonio.

In September, at the 2007

Reunion at Dayton, Susan was elected Vice President of the 306th Bomb Group Association—one of two next generation members to take office. The connection continues. . . .



Bottom to top: **1944**—Adrian O'Konski with his crew at Thurleigh. **1972**—Susan O'Konski sworn into U.S. Air Force, Congressman Alvin O'Konski looks on. **1944**—Adrian O'Konski at the end of the war. **1968**—Adrian O'Konski swearing in his niece, Susan O'Konski, as a 2nd Lieutenant in the U.S. Army. **1994**—Colonel Susan O'Konski, on the job in 1994. Today Colonel O'Konski serves the 306th Bomb Group Association as Vice-President. The family journey has come full circle from wartime Thurleigh to the present 306th Bomb Group Association—still going strong in the 21st century.



*The Sumner Crew: Left to right, first row (kneeling)—Walter H. Sumner, pilot; Robert J. Scolnick, co-pilot; Adrian E. O'Konski, navigator; Parker Snead, bombardier. Left to right, second row (standing)—Roy C. Ficklin, Jr., tail gunner; Robert M. Horste, waist gunner; Richard E. Dobbs, engineer; Roger F. Combs, radioman; George L. Barber, ball turret gunner. Photo courtesy Susan O'Konski.*





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### East Anglia Air War Project

## Agreement 306<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group Association And the East Anglia Air War Project

The East Anglia Air War Project [hereafter referred to as EAAWP] in the History Department at Abilene Christian University and the 306<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group Association [hereafter referred to as the Association] have entered into an agreement designed to allow the 306<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group Association operations to continue. This agreement contains provisions whereby the EAAWP under the direction of Dr. Vernon L. Williams and his duly appointed successor (or successors) will supervise appointed university student interns to do the 306<sup>th</sup> work.

### Summary of the Agreement

The Agreement will –

- Allow the Association to continue under the leadership of the 306<sup>th</sup> veterans and their families and descendants. The Association and its officers will oversee the operations performed by the EAAWP and its Director and Student Interns.
- Develop a new and expanded web presence where EAAWP will provide members of the 306<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group and other interested parties a forum for the Association news and historical information. The new web address will be: [www.306bg.org](http://www.306bg.org). The new website for the 306<sup>th</sup> will be an expanded version of the present website with no limit on content and new areas of web publication to appear, it being understood that such content will not be objectionable to the Association. Preliminary plans call for a research section where WWII history of the 306<sup>th</sup> will be available online for 306<sup>th</sup> veterans and families, students, researchers, and the public at large. Over the years much of the history collected by the Association will be digitized and placed on the website. Under this plan the history of the 306<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group would be more accessible to the public worldwide and would make the preservation of that history more practical and possible.
- The 306<sup>th</sup> Bomb group archives will be shipped to the EAAWP in order for the intern team to digitize all materials. As the EAAWP completes the digitizing of sections of the archives, those archives will be (1) returned to the 306<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group, or (2) retired to The Mighty Eighth Air Force Heritage Museum, Pooler, Georgia in accordance with the 306<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group Association directive(s).
- One funded scholarship will provide for one student intern to serve as the Assistant Director of 306<sup>th</sup> Operations and work 15 hours per week during the fall and spring semesters as the senior student staff member for the project. In addition to the funded scholarship for the student so appointed, six (6) unpaid student interns will be selected by the EAAWP to serve as staff for the EAAWP 306<sup>th</sup> operations. The Association has created named internships and the EAAWP will make formal appointments to student interns every year. Other than the single funded scholarship, there will be no cost to the Association for the six (6) additional interns. The funded intern and the six (6) unpaid interns constitute important appointments which may be used on their resumes as they finish their university degrees and begin history-based professions. The naming of internships will also provide opportunities for the Association to honor 306<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group personnel who made significant contributions during the war and to the Association in the years following WWII.
- EAAWP will provide reunion planning and interns to staff the reunion event at the hotel site chosen by the Association.
- *Echoes* will be published online and print quarterly. The hard copy of each issue will be mailed to those members who request that service. The online issue would be available to everyone, including the public at large. Dr. Vernon L. Williams and his successor(s), will serve as the editor of both versions of the *Echoes* and as director of all 306<sup>th</sup> operations within the EAAWP umbrella. The first issue of the *Echoes* produced by EAAWP will be the October 2007 issue.

### Cost Summary

- Anticipated Cost: \$84.70 (\$8.47 per year) for a 10 year registration for the domain: [www.306bg.org](http://www.306bg.org)
- Anticipated Cost: Expenses to set up the reunion at the selected site and travel expenses for the interns who will host the event. It is expected that the reunion fee will cover such costs and no allocation of funds will be needed from the Association.
- Anticipated Cost: Publications expenses for the printed issue of *Echoes*. It is expected that the cost of publishing *Echoes* in the printed form will continue at a rate similar to that of recent issues produced by Russell Strong.
- Anticipated Cost: Funded scholarship for the upper level student to be the Assistant Director of the 306<sup>th</sup> Project. \$2500.00.
- Other Costs: None, all other work will be provided by volunteer interns under the supervision of Dr. Vernon L. Williams and successor(s) as director of the EAAWP.

# Reunion at Dayton Ushers in a New Chapter for the 306th Bomb Group Association

## New Agreement with the East Anglia Air War Project and Special Events for 306th Families Highlight the Dayton Reunion

The question facing the Board of Directors at the Dayton Reunion was: will the 306th Bomb Group Association continue on into the 21st Century, and if the answer is yes, then how can that be accomplished? The Board decisively answered the question with a resounding YES vote to continue and adopted an innovative partnership with the East Anglia Air War Project (EAAWP) to get the job done. According to the agreement, a new web site will be created and over time, the entire 306th Historical Collection will be uploaded so that the 306th historical record will be available in digital form to every member of the 306th family and also to those throughout the world who are interested in researching the history of the bomb group. This issue of *Echoes* will be the first item uploaded on the new web site. As 2008 unfolds more and more 306th history will find its way to the web site. The new web address is: [www.306bg.org](http://www.306bg.org)

Under the supervision of the 306th BGA Board of Directors, the EAAWP will do much more. Beginning with this issue of *Echoes*, Dr. Vernon L. Williams will assume the editorship of the 306th quarterly newsletter, making sure there is no interruption in the publication. Students will be involved in every aspect of the *Echoes* and the web site. Another feature of the new agreement will be the organization and running of annual reunions beginning in 2009. See the agreement document at left for more information .



On hand at the 2007 Dayton Reunion. 1. William Houlihan (Director), Reggie and Ray Yerak. 2. Hon. L. Eugene (Director) and Jean Smith. 3. Bernard and Judith Hermley (Special Projects). 4. Rita and Sheldon Beigel (Director).





**Dayton 2007**



**IMPORTANT NOTICE TO ALL 306TH BOMB GROUP MEMBERS**

Continuing the directive of last year's Board requesting the status of all members, whether living or deceased, please fill out the form below for each 306<sup>th</sup> BG Association member in your family. The cost of sending ECHOES has continued to increase so we need to update our mailing lists.

Please fill out and sign the information sheet below. Send the completed sheet to Judy Hermley, indicating whether the member is alive or deceased. If we do not receive this information by 31 January 2008, we must reluctantly cease sending you the ECHOES.

**Fill out the following information, sign and mail to:  
Judy Hermley – 5314 Bob Sikes Blvd., Jay, FL 32565**

Member Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

Phone Number (include area code) \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ I am ALIVE and doing well. Please continue the ECHOES.

\_\_\_\_\_ This member was deceased on \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature (Member or Survivor)

*(If there are any changes in the future, please let Judy know)*



All individual photograph descriptions are left to right. 5. Gloria Lo, Sally Mula, Bernadine and Jack Persac (Director), Dr. Herman Kaye (Director). 6. Joel LaBo (Treasurer), Nena Leary, William Houlihan (Director), Susan O'Konski (Vice President). 7. Pat and Joe Conroy (Incoming President), John Hickey. 8. Lori and Norman Armbrust, Gary Armbrust, Janet and Grover Goode (Director), Carolyn Tate. 9. Theodore Cumberledge, Merle and Ed Brown. 10. Hugh and Evelyn Phelan, Dick Phelan. 11. Ralph and Daphne Franklin, Nell Bordner. 12. Roland and Bari Lissner. 13. Norma and George Roberts. 14. Melvin and Delka Cooper. 15. Anna and Dick Phelan. 16. "Em" Christianson, John Hickey. 17. William Carlile, Wayne Stellish. 18. Robert "Rocky" (Outgoing President and Reunion Chairman) and Ruth Rockwell.

All reunion photographs courtesy "Em" Christianson

**More Dayton Reunion pictures upcoming in the January issue of Echoes.**



## Seven Internships Established at Abilene to Staff the 306th Digital Project

As reported elsewhere in this issue, the Board of Directors established seven new internships for students at Abilene Christian University. These students, along with other volunteers, will help preserve the 306th Bomb Group's historical collections, serve as web editors and digital producers for the new 306th website, publish the *Echoes* four times per year, and do a host of special jobs for the Association. As these students serve the Association, they will be gaining valuable professional experience as public historians. Many of them will go on to careers in teaching, museums, archives, digital design and production, and other public service occupations. At graduation they will leave Abilene Christian University with a deep knowledge of the history of the 306th Bomb Group and the role it played in the victory won in World War II. More importantly, these interns will take the story of the 306th to generations of Americans not yet born. I know that their connection to the 306th Bomb Group Association will be a rewarding experience for each of them and at the same time, will benefit each and every 306th family.

In the next issue of *Echoes* you will meet the new interns. By then they will be well on their way to carving out their place in the new system. The interns will play a major role in producing the January 2008 issue of *Echoes* so you will get to meet them up close and personal.

### The Judge Donald R. Ross Internship

Donald R. Ross was born 8 June 1922 at Orleans, Nebraska to Roe M. and Leila Reed Ross. In April 1939 he graduated from Nebraska School of Agriculture, Curtis, Nebraska and attended the University of Nebraska, 1939-1941.

He enlisted in the Air Force Cadets in March 1942 as a bombardier student, had basic training at Ft. Worth, Texas, ground school at Houston, Texas, and flight training at Big Spring, Texas, graduating as a 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant on 15 July 1943.

Ross had combat crew training at Rapid City, South Dakota and in October 1943, he shipped overseas on the *Queen Mary* and was assigned to the 368<sup>th</sup> Squadron, 306<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group at Thurleigh, England. He flew his first mission on 17 December 1943 and completed a 30-mission combat tour on 30 June 1944, receiving the Distinguished Flying Cross.

He elected to fly a second tour, took a 30-day leave back to the US, and as lead and group bombardier flew 11 missions, the last being 16 April 1945 to Plattling, Germany. He was awarded a second Distinguished Flying Cross and promoted to Major. He returned to the U.S. in September 1945.

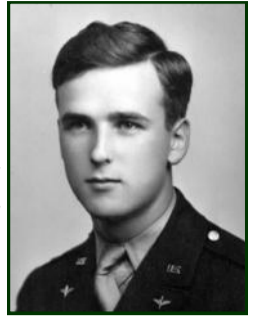
With the war over he entered the University of Nebraska Law School and graduated in February 1948. Ross then practiced law and later became politically active. During this period he served as mayor of Lexington, Nebraska, U.S. District Attorney for Nebraska, Republican National Committeeman for Nebraska, National Vice Chairman for the Republican National Committee, member of the first National Election Finance Committee, and in 1969, Ross was appointed Chairman of the Ad Hoc Committee on the Presidential Vote for Puerto Rico. In 1970 he was appointed U.S. Circuit Judge for the 8th Circuit, a position he held for 30 years before retiring. In 1990 Judge Ross received an Honorary Doctor of Laws degree from the University of Nebraska.

In 1983 in Omaha, Nebraska, he held the first 306<sup>th</sup> reunion with over 400 attendees, and the 306<sup>th</sup> has been having a reunion ever since. He has been reunion chairman twice, Omaha in 1983 and London and Thurleigh in 1992 on the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the 306<sup>th</sup> arrival in England. He has been president of the 306<sup>th</sup> Association for two terms and legal advisor for many years.



### The Russell A. Strong Internship

*Editor's note: The 306th Board of Directors established one \$2500 internship—the Russell A. Strong Internship for Historical Preservation. The intern receiving this internship each year will serve as 306th Project Assistant Director under the direction of Professor Vernon L. Williams. The Strong Intern will assume duties in the digital/web project, work on the Echoes each quarter, and work closely with the other 306th interns.*



Russell Strong began his writing career on his high school and college newspapers in Kalamazoo, Michigan.

Graduation at the liberal arts college was a Monday morning event, and he was at the regional editor's desk of the *Kalamazoo Gazette* the same day. Soon war intervened and he became an aviation cadet, and after preflight he entered navigation training San Marcos, TX. Later he joined Milton Adams' 10-man crew for training in B-17s at Alexandria, LA. The crew soon received orders for overseas and boarded a train for New York. They embarked on a troop ship bound for England and combat service with the Eighth Air Force.

Strong flew a total of 34 missions over France and Germany, including missions to Berlin and Munich. In years after the war he was able to visit many target areas where he had bombed.

Leaving combat, Strong served as a navigation instructor at Houston, Texas and in California. Once discharged, Strong returned to Kalamazoo College to complete his academic work and marry June Thomas. Eventually they brought five sons into the world, each of whom has been a joy to their parents. Now there are nine grandchildren and three great-grandchildren.

Strong worked for Western Michigan University in public relations, as a director of publications and as alumni director. During this academic experience he contributed his talents to the 306th Bomb Group Association. Serving them as a part time editor and writer and after retirement, his workday was fulltime with the 306<sup>th</sup>. He first got interested researching and writing a history of the 306<sup>th</sup> which also led him to create 306th *Echoes*, a quarterly publication with a broad circulation which proved to be highly regarded by the 306<sup>th</sup> personnel and others.

Strong continued his close association with the 306<sup>th</sup> for 30 years, finally giving up the work for family history and genealogy. He remains an active member of the Association.

### The Michael J. Roskovitch Internship

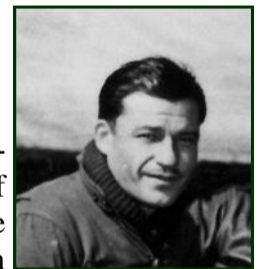
Michael J. "Mike" Roskovitch was born 20 August 1922 in Fayette City, PA, one of 11 children of his Russian immigrant parents. He enlisted in the Air Force before Pearl Harbor and beginning in September 1941 attended the 20 week radio operator-mechanic school at Scott Field, Illinois, graduating in February 1942 and transferred to Wendover, UT, where he was assigned to the newly formed 306<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group, 423<sup>rd</sup> Squadron.

After four months of concentrated training at Wendover, the air echelon flew to Westover Field, Massachusetts and spent much time in formation work, gunnery practice and Atlantic Submarine Patrol.

On 2 September 1942 the planes departed Westover for England with stops at Gander Lake, Newfoundland and Prestwick, Scotland, and on 11 September landed at Thurleigh, England.

Roskovitch became the first 8<sup>th</sup> Air Force flyer to complete a 25-mission tour of combat on 5 April 1943. He was known to one and all as the "Mad Russian." His antics on the base and in the air were something to behold. On base he wore a tall, furry brilliant color Cossack hat, officers held no special place in his heart and anyone daring to venture into "his" plane wearing a necktie, the Russian quickly brandished a pair of scissors and cut off the offending piece of clothing. He also was noted for dropping a 100 pound practice bomb filled with latrine waste over the target.

In June 1943 Roskovitch was commissioned a 2nd Lieutenant, later returning to Thurleigh as a gunnery officer. On 4 February 1944 Roskovitch flew to Edinburgh, Scotland and on the return to Thurleigh, one of the engines would not start so the pilot began take-off on three engines, hoping to start the engine by letting it windmill in the air. The plane dipped a wing on takeoff and caught a fighter abutment wall causing the plane to crash, killing all on board.





## The Leland Kessler Internship

Leland (Lee) Kessler was born in 1921 in Canton, Ohio and later became an avid artist and football hero at McKinley High School in that city.

Shortly after Pearl Harbor Kessler enlisted in the Army Air Corps and applied for training as a combat airman. After completion of basic training at Ft. Hayes, Columbus, Ohio and aircraft mechanics training at Shepard Field, Mississippi, he joined the 306<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group at Wendover Field, Utah. While at this base, Kessler applied for gunnery school at Las Vegas, Nevada where he completed the course with high honors and returned to his home base at Wendover Field.

His next assignment at Wendover was as top turret gunner/engineer on a B-17 bomber at the rank of Technical Sergeant. In addition to improving his skills as a combat aerial engineer, Lee displayed his other interests by painting nose art on planes and murals on walls.

The 306<sup>th</sup> completed training 31 July 1942 and the next day departed Wendover for Westover Field, Massachusetts and completed final training. Enroute to Thurleigh, England one plane was lost over the Atlantic, and Lee's plane lost two of its four engines requiring it to ditch in the sea off the coast of Northern Ireland (all crew members were saved).

At Thurleigh Kessler settled into a routine of combat missions. On his 19<sup>th</sup> mission enroute to Wilhelmshaven, Germany, German fighters severely damaged his plane, killing the navigator and bombardier and wounding the pilot, causing the crew to bail out. He became a Prisoner of War for the next two years and ended his incarceration at the infamous Stalag 17B. He was returned to the US in May 1945 and discharged from active duty in September of that year.

After being released, he returned to his home in Canton, Ohio, married, raised a family, and eventually retired from the Canton School system.

Lee died 2 October 2003, at the time he was president of the Association.



## The Maynard H. Smith Internship

Maynard Harrison "Snuffy" Smith was born in 1912 and raised in Caro, Michigan. Maynard attended Caro schools. He enlisted in the US Army Air Corps 31 August 1942 at Sheppard Field, Texas, went to gunnery school at Harlingen Field, Texas, trained for three more months and went overseas. He was assigned to the 306<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group, 423<sup>rd</sup> Bomb Squadron, Thurleigh, England on Lt. L. P. Johnson's crew.

On 1 May 1942, only one month after arriving at the 306<sup>th</sup> he flew his first mission to bomb the harbor installations at St. Nazaire, France. After bombing the harbor the 306<sup>th</sup> turned out to sea on a north-westerly course to skirt the Brest Peninsula. The group somehow miscalculated and made a turn to the north and England too early. That turn threw off the navigation to such an extent that Brest, France was mistaken for Land's End, England.

The 306<sup>th</sup> flew over the severe flak at Brest and the 423<sup>rd</sup> lost two planes and the 367<sup>th</sup> lost one plane. On the way back, over the Channel, Lt. Johnson's plane was attacked by several FW190s and hit, igniting an oxygen fire. The back of the plane was enveloped in flames, which grew so intense that three of the gunners bailed out and drowned, the tail gunner was critically injured, and the navigator was wounded in his leg.

The fire gutted the radio room and the waist of the plane. Sgt. Smith, ball turret gunner, disregarding his own safety, wrapped a towel around his head and fought his way through the flames and exploding .50 caliber machine gun shells to the radio room. There he heroically fought the flames, and was largely responsible for the safe return of the aircraft to an airfield in southwest England.

On 15 July 1943 Sgt. Smith was awarded the Medal of Honor by Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson. He was the only member of the 306<sup>th</sup> to be awarded the Medal of Honor. He was a controversial figure, widely known for his screwball antics. He flew five missions, four following the 1 May flight, earned an Air Medal and Oak Leaf cluster and the Medal of Honor.



## The Peg Haapa Internship

Peg Haapa was born 11 June 1917 at Warren, Ohio, was educated at Cleveland Heights High School, Cleveland, Ohio and majored in journalism at Ohio Wesleyan University. Upon graduation she took a job on the writing staff of the *Columbus Citizen* and began a life long on-and-off career as a journalist.

In early 1943 after training for work with the American Red Cross (ARC), Peg, along with other Red Cross girls and thousands of GIs, boarded the *Acquatainia* bound for Scotland. She reported to the 381<sup>st</sup> Bomb Group located at Ridgewell near Cambridge.

In September 1943 Peg transferred to Thurleigh to be the director of the large ARC Club on the base there. The club had a snooker room and other game facilities for GIs to use during off times. A large living room/lounge was adjacent to the game room, a library and a good sized hall where dances were held.

While at Thurleigh Peg married her home town boyfriend, Lt. Arvo Haapa, who arrived overseas 6 months after she did. Permission to marry took 2 months and 19 sets of papers (3 of them were signed by General Dwight D. Eisenhower).

At the end of 1944 Peg transferred to the continent and worked at Red Cross facilities in France and Belgium. When the war ended she was working at a club at Epinal, France and at a redeployment depot where soldiers from German prison camps were re-outfitted and given new papers. As the war ended, Peg went to Germany and established a Red Cross club in Berchtesgaden, the site of Hitler's Eagle Nest.

After three years overseas Peg returned to the US and she and her husband Arvo went to the University of Minnesota. Later they moved to California and in 1948 founded the Newport Harbor Ensign Newspaper, official newspaper of the city of Newport Beach which they published for 30 years. After selling the newspaper they traveled extensively including returns to Thurleigh and 306<sup>th</sup> reunions.

Since Arvo's death in October 1984, Peg travels less, but enjoys getting together with her 306<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group friends.



## The Thurman Shuller Internship

Thurman Shuller was born 6 May 1914 on a farm near Ozark, Arkansas. After attending local schools, he graduated from the University of Arkansas School of Medicine and accepted a commission as a first Lieutenant in the U.S. Army Medical Corps Reserve and completed a two-year medical internship at Charity Hospital in New Orleans, Louisiana.

He began his active duty career as a medical officer in the U.S. Army Air Corp in July 1941, assigned first to the Air Corp Gunnery School in Las Vegas, Nevada, and later he attended a 12-week course at the School of Aviation Medicine at Randolph Field, Texas where he qualified as a flight surgeon.

In April 1942, he received his first combat assignment to the 306<sup>th</sup> Bombardment Group as the 369<sup>th</sup> Squadron Flight Surgeon and was promoted to Captain. The Flight Surgeons were faced with many difficult tasks in maintaining day to day activities and preparing the bomb group in a medical sense for combat. In July 1942 Dr. Shuller became the Group Flight Surgeon and soon received promotion to major.

In September 1942, the 306<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group left the U.S. for their new home in Thurleigh, England. The medical facilities consisted of a station dispensary with a minimum of 28 beds and a mortuary.

Heavy losses in the first months led to a significant decrease in morale and cases of flying fatigue. Higher command had not established a ceiling of missions that combat men had to complete before being relieved from further combat duty. Dr. Shuller prepared and issued a letter to the attention of higher command citing the problem and recommending that a maximum 20 missions be established to provide relief from further combat missions. Higher command subsequently issued a policy of requiring 25 missions. There is no doubt that the impact of this change in policy resulted in the saving of many lives, as well as significantly raising the morale of combat men and other men in the group.

In August 1943, Dr. Shuller transferred and assumed the duties of First Bomb Wing Flight Surgeon, where he was promoted to the rank of Lieutenant Colonel. He returned to the U.S. in December 1945 and was discharged with a rank of Colonel, Medical Corps.





# Museum Notes

## Thurleigh Airfield 306th Bomb Group Museum



Left to right: Dr. Jonathon Palmer and Ralph Franklin. Palmer and Franklin stand outside the future museum building in 1999. At the time this photograph was taken, the 306th Museum was just a dream. Today the Museum is one of the finest World War II unit museums in England. The work of Ralph and Daphne Franklin over the last two decades stands as a lasting monument to the 306th Bomb Group and to those who served at Thurleigh during World War II.

### A Long Time Dream Comes True

by Ralph Franklin  
Keysoe, England

I suppose it all began back in the 1940s, when as a young boy at school I used to wake to the sounds of B-17s taking off for their dangerous missions over occupied Europe. It must have been at that time the seeds were sown in my young mind that in some way I would be able to create a living memorial to those traumatic times.

That dream became a reality when in late 1999 I was invited by Dr Jonathon Palmer, the owner of Bedford Autodrome (who had developed the old airfield into a first class corporate driving area) to join him in his office as he had a proposition for me. I was not prepared for what was to follow. His words were "I have been giving this a lot of thought following our previous meeting, with your knowledge of the war years and enthusiasm for the 306th, if I were to make one of the remaining wartime buildings available to you, are you prepared to work on it to develop it into a museum, recreating the life and times on and around the airfield during the war years?"

It was to be a further two years before we were able to open the museum. Obviously I had not realised just how much work would be involved in assembling displays of a high enough quality to present to the general public. The area had to be cleared of the bushes and shrubbery, as nature had taken

over during the years since the building was last used. It required decorating, both inside and out. Most of this was done with the help of one of the Autodrome's general maintenance men. At the same time Daphne and I were travelling around the country purchasing male and female mannequins to exhibit the period uniforms and civilian clothing in our displays.

Along with this there were displays required, to show off the many artifacts we had acquired, many we had purchased, some were donated, and others on loan. In terms of display cabinets we are fortunate in having a son whose profession is that of a cabinet maker, this has been a great help in getting units made to our specification. Some of the glass cabinets he was unable to make himself were kindly made by the company for whom he works.

It was almost fun when we installed both a sound and video system, as this was about the final act before we were ready for opening. A couple of amateurs had achieved something that at times we thought would never happen. We are proud of it, come and judge for yourselves, we would love to see you.

### An Assessment of the Thurleigh Museum from a Historian's Perspective

I have walked into the Thurleigh Museum any number of times in the last several years. In fact, it has become a regular stop during my frequent interview trips across the English countryside for the East Anglia Air War Project. Ralph and Daphne always seem to have something going on there every time I stop by.

In July this year I was in the Bedford area twice and got to watch Ralph in action with a group of British civic club members who arrived with their wives for an evening at the Thurleigh Museum. Ralph and Daphne, ever the consummate hosts, represented the 306th well as the visitors received a first class tour of the exhibits.

In all future issues you will find the *Museum Notes* page with important goings on at the museum. One particular focus will be updates on the exhibits and the programming taking place there during each museum season. It is the exhibits that I believe make the Thurleigh Museum special and

unique.

Using the exhibitions at Thurleigh, I could take a university class or any other group of students and have them learn a great deal about World War II that is not in their textbooks. The detail and comprehensive content in the displays, coupled with Ralph's extraordinary reservoir of knowledge about the 306th Bomb Group, make for a remarkable educational experience during a visit to Thurleigh. Young or old, there is much to see and hear at the museum.

During World War II Thurleigh was a busy place, as most of you know—you lived that history. But throughout the late spring, summer, and early fall of each year, there are still busy times for a small part of the old airfield. The 306th windsock is flying (see below) and people come from all over the world to gain a glimpse of the world that was Thurleigh. Ralph and Daphne play an important role in keeping that world alive and making sure that those who come their way can travel back in time and visit once again wartime Thurleigh. So welcome, Ralph, to the pages of *Museum Notes*. We look forward to visiting Thurleigh each quarter through the columns of this page.

At left: Ralph Franklin (right) and his brother during the war years. Notice the ring Ralph is wearing on his left hand, a gift from an Italian POW. Below: A typical opening day at the Thurleigh Museum, flags flying and the windsock drifting in the breeze, waiting for the B-17s to return from a mission..



**2008 REUNION — SAVE THE DATE**

Peabody Hotel, Little Rock, Arkansas

October 29-November 2, 2008

Jim Phelan, Reunion Chairman

More details coming in the next issue of *Echoes*.