

398th BGMA 2023 Reunion Recap

by Mellisa Ledlow

As we mentioned last year, many WWII memorial organizations are no longer in operation due to lack of membership and interest, but NOT the 398th Bomb Group Memorial Association. It's all thanks to our hardworking Board and supportive membership. Our numbers may be shrinking, but we are determined to go on. Our 398th Veterans will always be honored and never forgotten.

The 398th Bomb Group Memorial Association held their 39th annual Reunion in Omaha, Nebraska in early September. Those attending gathered at the Holiday Inn in nearby Council Bluffs and were treated to an always interesting Memory Room. Not only was the PX up and running, but many displays and the always absorbing fixture of Jack's Books were on display.

An additional treat came from the Nebraska-native family of T/Sgt. Lonnie D. Mason. The Mason family shared a decorated Eisenhower jacket of their dad's, complete with medals, patches and memorabilia. Other veterans' photos were also displayed. Many of the Mason family members were also able to join the 398th for the Welcoming and Farewell Banquets. Also joining us were several local family members of S/Sgt. Donald J. Shaw, waist gunner of the 602nd SQ Petska Crew.

The 398th was also able to welcome to Omaha a Belgian historian/researcher. Special guest, Kristof de Geyter grew up near Wieze, Belgium. This area was the sight of a B-17 crash landing in a muddy field returning from a Cologne bombing mission on October 17, 1944. The "Betsy Ross" was piloted by 1st Lt. Perry Powell. The entire crew survived—all bailed out to safety but Powell and co-pilot, 1st Lt. Samuel Walker stayed with and landed the salvageable plane (used for parts).

Kristof grew up hearing about the Powell Mission which, in adulthood, led him to an intense, thorough and passionate project to find out more about the Powell crew. Along with other historians and researchers, Kristof gathered pictures and stories and wrote an informative book from all he learned. One of his motivations for coming to Omaha is that Perry Powell's sister, Carol, resides in the Omaha area. Kristof was able to meet with her in person as well as several nieces and nephews. It was surely an emotional meeting, but very gratifying for the family to hear more stories and see photos of their beloved brother/uncle. Sadly, though surviving the Belgian crash landing, the Powell crew was later killed in a mid-air collision on February 3, 1945.

Kristof shared a very interesting slide presentation with Reunion attendees as well as Powell family members and presented a copy of his book about the Powell Crew to the 398th BGMA. Thank you, Kristof—you were a great addition to the Reunion.



Above: Eight members of the Powel family line up for a photo with Kristof D Geyter (center holding book), co-author of an amazing, beautifully done book about pilot Lt. Perry Powell crew crash landing in Belgium upon returning from a mission to Cologne.



Above: Kristof visits with Carol, Perry's sister.



Left: 1st Lt. Perry E. Powell, 603rd SQ pilot. KIA February 3, 1945

2023 Omaha Reunion – continued



A beautiful collection brought to the Memory Room for display by the Mason family. The shadowbox holds T/Sgt. Lonnie Mason's memorabilia.

As is tradition at 398th Reunions, the annual Board and General Membership meetings were held. Updates from Officers and a report about the Nuthampstead Airfield Museum were presented. The Museum has been thriving and has a great relationship with The Woodman Inn. There's lots of local interest and still an influx of "WWII tourists." Historian Lee Bradley told of updates to the 398th website that will help research activities and shared that she still receives photos and memorabilia mostly from veterans' families.

After Mellisa Ledlow, Treasurer, reported an over \$52,000 balance in the 398th's General Account, ideas were suggested about making plans for those funds. Mindful of what our veterans would approve of, two ideas were proposed. Lee Bradley has been in contact with the Experimental Aircraft Association Museum in Oshkosh, Wisconsin. The B-17 "Aluminum Overcast," is based in Oshkosh and the tail markings are the 398th's red triangle with black W. The EAA Museum is looking for donations to repair damage to the horizontal stabilizer attachment points to the tail. The General Membership approved a \$20,000 donation for this project, pending more details and final estimates.

Another project suggested was to set up a Flag Fund for the Nuthampstead Airfield Museum. NAM keeps an American flag flying on the highest elevation at the old airbase in England. In the past, flags have often been donated from deceased veteran's families. This source has unfortunately dwindled, but the 398th and the Museum are committed to the significance of the visible American flag at Station 131. The General Membership approved \$5000 for the flagpole maintenance and flag supply.

Another order of business was the proposal and announcement of Board Member changes. Pete and Sharon Krause have retired from the Board and Board discussions led to the following suggested slate of officers which were nominated by Ken Howard to the Membership:

Marilyn Gibb-Rice, President; Beth Howard, Vice-President; Karen Neff, Secretary; Mellisa Ledlow, Treasurer; Cheryl Swearingen, Unit Contact Manager and Directors Lee Bradley, Carolyn Widmann, Jim Ledlow, and Colin Colbourn. The motion was approved and voted affirmatively.

That night, the Reunion attendees met for the traditional Welcome Banquet. The group was shown an official US Armed Forces film, "A Welcome to Britain, 1943". The movie, starring Burgess Meredith with a cameo by Bob Hope, was shown to new young military army or airmen that may have just arrived in England during wartime. It was helpful in showing some of the young Americans British customs, language, expected manners, etc. and aimed to keep the "Yanks" on good terms with their hosts.

Friday and Saturday led most attendees to venture out and visit historical and tourist sites in the Omaha area. Some set off for the museum of Great Plains Wing of the Commemorative Air Force where most were actually permitted to climb into the P-51 Mustang, "Gunfighter" (see photo). Jerry Mason, son of T/Sgt. Lonnie D. Mason, engineer/top turret gunner of the 603rd SQ William E. Engel Crew, is actually the crew chief for the "Gunfighter", clearly continuing the family legacy of enjoying flying and airplanes! Other interesting places around Omaha included the SAC Aerospace Museum, Union Pacific Museum, the Omaha Zoo, Dodge House and of course, the casinos (conveniently attached to the hotel!).



Beth Howard, our new VP, gives two thumbs up from P-51 Gunfighter at the Great Plains Wing CAF Museum.

2023 Omaha Reunion – *continued*

After several days in Omaha visiting, chatting and perusing Jack's Books in the Memory Room, everyone attended the Saturday night Farewell Banquet. Third generation 398th member, Colin Colbourn, gave a brief presentation about Project Recover. Project Recover is a non-profit associated with University of Delaware and the Scripps Institute (among others) that aims to locate MIA WWII aircraft and their crews primarily in the Pacific. Colin, great-nephew of KIA 1st Lt. Charles Howell, Jr., is Lead Historian for Project Recover. His research and expertise and the use of state-of-the-art subsea robotic and scanning equipment on these projects have helped lead to the discovery and actual repatriation of some remains of MIA's. There are over 700 cases in their database being researched and investigated. Colin revealed that very recently a previously MIA WWII veteran was able to be buried in California, amongst his family and with full military honors. (author's note: I highly recommend you look up www.projectrecover.org to find a wealth of information about these missions).

The Reunion Group was also privileged to view a very personal 16mm movie created by 398th airman, Leonard Streitfeld, bombardier of the 600th SQ Al Shimek crew. Before heading overseas, Len borrowed his father's 16mm Bell and Howell motion picture camera. His intention was to record his day-to-day life while serving in Nuthampstead. Len captured many funny moments with his crew and buddies (and even a couple of adopted dogs) as they "hung about" waiting for their next mission. There was also a good deal of actual mission footage, in both color and black and white, when the camera was aimed out a window of Len's plane and seeing a fleet of B-17's flying in formation. Len caught real-time bomb drops and flak hits and then after the German surrender, there were several what was termed as "sightseeing" missions flown to assess and document damage that was done during the many battles and campaigns. It was sobering and poignant to see this film but all agreed that it's wonderful that it's been preserved and also that descriptive captions were added throughout.



L-R: Jim Evans, Ellen Stupak-Shaw, Richard Shaw, Sidney Evans, Todd Evans. Richard & Sidney's dad was S/Sgt. Donald J. Shaw, 602nd SQ waist gunner.

Carolyn Mason and Jerry Mason enjoying the Memory Room. Jerry is the Crew Chief for the P-51 "Gunfighter" at Council Bluffs Airport, where the Great Plains Wing CAF Museum is also located.



Though attendance numbers were small, it was another heart-warming reminder of our Dads, Granddads, family members and other WWII veterans. We're so pleased that members of the Shaw, Powell and Mason families from the Omaha area joined us, as well as our new Belgian friend, Kristof.

However, the most special 398th Reunion attendee, hands-down, was Chrysta Moore. Chrysta, is the widow of Cecil ("Tex") Moore, 398th Tail Gunner, 602nd Sq. She and her friend, Anna, drove the farthest to get to Omaha from near San Antonio, TX—950 miles!!! We so appreciate their efforts and can't wait to see them again in Oshkosh!



398th BGMA President Marilyn Gibb-Rice with Brian Mason who is proudly showing off a 603rd SQ logo art rug created by Brian's son, Justin. If you would like to order one of your squadron, email Brian at: btmason@hotmail.com



Project Recover's Lead Historian Colin Colbourn catches up with his dear friend Chrysta Moore, widow of tail gunner Cecil "Tex" Moore, 602nd SQ