

The Annual 398th BGMA Reunion in Brookfield, Wisconsin included an important side trip to see the Aluminum Overcast!



The gang above, all relatives of 398th BG veterans, posing with the Aluminum Overcast and EAA Director of Communications, Dick Knapinski.

Back row standing L-R: Laura Parnell, Linda Parnell, Carolyn Widmann, Nathan Swearingen, Robin Sealey, Bob Swearingen, Cynthia Austad, Craig Austad, Jim Ledlow, Barry Lewis, Ken Howard. Middle row L-R: Wayne Cowgur (in front of Carolyn), Piper Sealey, Cheryl Swearingen, Maddyn DuPerrieu, Mellisa Ledlow, Marilyn Gibb-Rice, Beth Howard, Lee Bradley, Dick Knapinski (EAA). Sitting/kneeling L-R: John Blackwell, Julianna Blackwell, Fallon Rich, Mason Frommeyer, Dani Faye Frommeyer (5 months old!) *The Brookfield, WI Reunion story by Mellisa Ledlow begins on Page 2.*

Next year's 398th BGMA Annual Reunion will be held alongside the 8th AFHS Reunion in Colorado Springs, CO. Oct. 1 - 4, 2025. Please join us!

80 YEARS OF MEMORIES, 1944 - 2024

398th BGMA 2024 Reunion Recap

by Mellisa Ledlow

2024 is an extraordinary anniversary year for the 398th Bomb Group. Eighty years ago, in early 1944, the 398th Bomb Group prepared to leave Rapid City, South Dakota after B-17 combat training and enter WWII at Station 131, Nuthampstead, England. The Group participated in Allied missions until the war ended in Europe in early May 1945.

The airmen returned from war and had families and careers, but also carried many war-time memories. Longing to reunite with their air crews, ground crews and admin officers, the veterans formed the 398th Bomb Group Memorial Association. The first annual Reunion of the 398th BGMA was held in Rapid City, SD in 1984 and had 300 members in attendance.

Forty years later, the 398th BGMA met again in Brookfield, WI (outside Milwaukee) for the annual event June 19-22, 2024. Unfortunately, neither widows nor veterans were able to attend but twenty-eight attendees, covering the 2nd, 3rd, 4th and 5th (!!!) generations made it to the Reunion. Dani Faye, five-month-old great-great-granddaughter of James Crouch (601st Togglier/Waist Gunner) was the youngest in attendance. Chrysta Moore, widow of Cecil "Tex" Moore (602nd Tail Gunner), participated in her very first Zoom call with some of the Members.



5-month-old Dani Faye with her mom, Mason Frommeyer. Mason is James Crouch's great granddaughter, making Dani Faye his great-great granddaughter, 5th generation!

One of the organization's first order of business for the 398th BGMA was the Thursday morning Board Meeting followed that afternoon by the General Meeting. Board members presented various reports covering 9/1/23—5/31/24. Mellisa Ledlow, Treasurer, stated a balance of \$49,463 in the General Account, \$6,196 in the NAM-designated account and \$28,577 in the Wells Fargo Investment Account. The Board intends to continue to discuss ideas and make timely recommendations for 398th BGMA donations/gifts to relevant recipients.

Lee Bradley, Group Historian, Data Coordinator, and Flak News Editor, believes there are 12 living 398th veterans and 67 widows. Current membership count for the organization is 352 active members. Lee revealed she has received many requests for information regarding WWII veterans due to the public interest created by the series, *"Masters of the Air"* and the additional documentaries shown pertaining to the 80th Anniversary of the D-Day landing and the war in Europe. Lee diligently maintains and updates the 398th.org website and the Jack's Books library.

Since a Flag Fund was approved at the 2023 Reunion, John Blackwell, Special Projects Coordinator, obtained 25 American flags. These flags will be continuously flown on the Nuthampstead Airfield. Another order of business was the proposal and announcement of Board Member changes. Karen Neff has retired from the Board after many years of service as Secretary and Flag Coordinator (thank you for all those years, Karen!). 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; John Blackwell, 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.

The Thursday night Welcome Banquet was held in the hotel Memory Room. The Memory Room held the 398th PX, as well as Jack's Books and other photos and displays. Cheryl Swearingen brought several of her dad's (S/Sgt. Ray A. Talbott, Costanza Crew, 601st SQ) uniforms, letters home and other memorabilia. Cheryl also created the 1940's-style table centerpieces to go with other such décor. One of the highlights of the banquet was the third and fourth generations leading the Pledge of Allegiance and Invocation. A lively, quite competitive Pub Quiz was led by Marilyn. There was no undisputed winner—all good fun!

Just 80 miles north of Brookfield, Oshkosh, WI is the home of the Experimental Aircraft Association (EAA) Museum. Housed within the Museum is the B-17, "Aluminum Overcast." Though the Aluminum Overcast never saw combat, it commemorates a B-17 shot down over France in 1944. The plane carries the colors of the 398th Bomb Group—red tail/black triangle/white W. On Friday, the Reunion group participated in a private tour of the plane including the interior. Marilyn Gibb-Rice, President of the 398th BGMA, presented a \$20,000 check (a donation previously approved by the 398th membership at the 2023 Omaha Reunion) from the Group to the EAA Museum to help with repairs and maintenance.

2024 Brookfield WI Reunion Recap – *continued from previous page*

As the Reunion drew to a close, the traditional Farewell Banquet was held Saturday night. The highlight of the evening were presentations by three sons of 398th veterans. Craig Austad, son of S/Sgt. Kermit O. Austad, Richard Shaw, son of S/Sgt. Donald J. Shaw and John Blackwell, son of 1st Lt. Wally Blackwell, gave very moving tributes of their fathers. What they described resonated with the audience—many of their stories and descriptions were similar to everyone’s veteran-father. The stories were interesting, nostalgic, relatable and very well done. Lee Bradley also read a moving article printed in the Washington Post, “Invisible Memorials and the Presence of Absence.”

The Reunion was a great success, thanks to Ken and Beth Howard, Coordinators. There were a great many conversations around the Memory Room tables, lots of purchases at the PX, groups gathering for lunch and some sight-seeing in the area. And a warm welcome to first time Reunion attendees, Craig and Cynthia Austad! We hope to see them again along with many more Members in Colorado Springs October 1-5, 2025!



The ‘Welcome 398th BGMA’ display in the Memory Room. Cheryl Sweringen crafted several vintage 1940’s peach can flower arrangements for our tables.

The Brookfield Wisconsin Reunion in Photos



Above: Cheryl Sweringen brought her dad’s (Ray Talbott, 601st SQ) original uniform and B-10 jacket to display in the Memory Room. This style jacket is a rare one to have and it is in *great* condition.

Above right: PX Mgr. Carolyn Widman thumbing through a 1945 issue of the *Stars and Stripes* newspaper while Cheryl looks on.

Right: Cynthia Austad buying one of everything at the PX. Her husband, Craig, knowingly grins as he is the one who has the checkbook! Craig’s dad was Kermit O. Austad, 601st SQ. Also pictured is Marilyn Gibb-Rice and the boy is Fallon Rich. Carolyn and Marilyn’s dad, and Fallon’s great-great granddad, was S/Sgt. James C. Crouch, 601st SQ togglie and gunner.



The Brookfield Wisconsin Reunion in Photos



Top left photo, L-R: Cynthia & Craig Austad, Linda Parnell, Wayne Cowgur, Laura Parnell at the Welcome Dinner.

Top right photo, L-R: Mellisa Ledlow, Beth Howard, Ken Howard, Marilyn Gibb-Rice, Lee Bradley at the Welcome Dinner.

Middle photo: The Aluminum Overcast displayed in the EAA's Museum Hangar

Photo at left: Marilyn Gibb-Rice, President of the 398th BGMA, presents a \$20,000 check to Christopher Musha, Major Gifts Officer of the EAA, while Ken Howard, 398th BGMA Reunion Chairman, and Cheryl Sweringen, 398th BGMA Contact Officer, looks on. This donation from the 398th BGMA is designated to help with repair costs for the Aluminum Overcast.



Left:
Beth and Ken
Howard
check out the
Aluminum
Overcast's
Ball Turret.
How could
anyone fit in
there??!

Left:
Mellisa & Jim Ledlow,
Cheryl Sweringen,
Julianna Blackwell
gather around John Blackwell,
newly appointed 398th
BGMA Secretary, for a
photo op with the
Aluminum Overcast.



Right: Cynthia Austad
helps cram her husband
Craig into the Ball Turret!



Above: Descendants of S/Sgt. James C. Crouch, 601st SQ. **L-R:** Piper Sealey-great granddaughter, Robin Sealey-granddaughter, Carolyn Widmann-daughter, Maddyn DuPerrieu-great granddaughter, Mason Frommeyer-great granddaughter, Dani Faye Frommeyer (5-mos)-great-granddaughter, & 4-year-old Fallon Rich-great-great grandson.



Left:
During the Farewell
Dinner, Richard Shaw
related WWII stories
about his dad, S/Sgt.
Donald J. Shaw, Waist
Gunner, 602nd SQ
Petska Crew

Right:
John Blackwell
spoke about his
dad as well, 1st Lt.
Wally Blackwell,
601st SQ Pilot.
Wally was also
past president of
the 398th BGMA.

