A B17 Memorial

Introduction
The day my wife and I completed the purchase of our camp, the former owner good-naturedly informed us—“owners of this camp are responsible for maintaining the flags at the B-17 Memorial and for making sure the grass is cut… There are veterans’ flags in the bunk room.” We laughed and assured him we would accept this honor and responsibility. That was Memorial Day weekend: so we enlisted the help of our friend and neighbor Don Green and dutifully placed new flags at the memorial and fixed several of the directional signs, placed at key intersections, pointing the way for visitors. This has become an annual ritual for the three of us. We usually have to replace the main flag on the pole, as a year of exposure to the northern elements is wearing. We soon learned that others quietly kept the grass cut, the weeds whacked and did decorative plantings, all to honor fallen heroes they did not know.

Over the last ten years, Lynnette and I have visited the memorial many times, stopping to offer a prayer for the brave young men it commemorates. In the process, we have developed a sense of affection for ten men we know by name and circumstance only. It has been a mission of love, honor and respect to learn and share about these men, who they were, where they came from, and something about their families. This is their story.

On behalf of a grateful nation, we thank these ten men for making the highest sacrifice for God and country. They died suddenly and tragically when their B-17G crashed July, 11, 1944, on Deer Mountain, in the township of Parkertown, (T5, R3) as they made their way to a base in England, to help end the death grip of Nazi Germany:

2nd Lt. John T. Cast, Pilot 2nd Lt. John W. Drake, Co-Pilot
2nd Lt. William H. Hudgens, Jr., Navigator 2nd Lt. Robert S. Talley, Bombardier
S/Sgt. Wayne D. McGavran, Engineer Sgt. Cecil L. Murphy, Radio Operator
Sgt. Clarence M. Waln, Gunner Sgt. Gerald V. Biddle, Gunner

Tragically, on the same day the B-17 crashed into Deer Mountain, another bomber crashed in Portland, Maine. Lt. Philip Russell, a native of Portland, left base in an A-26B Invader, twin engine attack bomber. He was accompanied only by flight engineer S/Sgt. Wallace Mifflin on a long-range training mission. Upon his return, late in the afternoon, the field was obscured in a fog, of such severity, the base commander had officially closed the airfield six minutes earlier. The tower instructed Russell to climb to 1500 feet and was preparing to direct the pilot to a field in New Hampshire, when the plane circled the field at about two hundred feet, disappeared into a cloud bank, caught its wing on the ground and cart-wheeled into the Redbank trailer park, disintegrating and setting 16 trailers on fire. Russell, Mifflin and seventeen residents of the park died, mostly young mothers and small children. Thus, the two worse disasters in Maine aviation history occurred on the same day, and both were caused by extreme weather.
The Army Air Corps
In the aftermath of the attack on Pearl Harbor, December 7, 1941, cornfields in Nebraska, ranch-land in Oklahoma and many other large open spaces in rural Midwestern areas were transformed almost overnight into Army airfields. The flat open expanses were deemed ideal for training pilots and crews. As an example, in less than two years time, eleven training bases were constructed across the state of Nebraska alone.

Not only did these new airfields transform the landscape, they made a lasting impression on the small communities where they were built. Small ranch and farm-oriented communities had to learn quickly how to deal with several thousand soldiers strolling down Main Street on a Friday or Saturday night looking for socialization and other diversions. USO clubs were quickly put together and local girls did their best to organize dances and socials, acting as escorts or dates for soldiers to help morale. The sheer number of soldiers often overwhelmed the capacity of the patriotic efforts of the locals. In Kearney, Nebraska town officials looked the other way and allowed five brothels to operate for the duration of the war.

Lincoln, Nebraska was already a city of 82,000 when the army took over the former Lincoln Municipal Airport in 1942. The base was built to house 16,480 soldiers and 300 officers. The men were referred to as soldiers as the Air Corp was an Army operation. At first, the airfield at Lincoln provided aviation related training to young soldiers who had already survived GI basic Training or “boot camp”. Mostly in their early twenties, these young men were trained as plane inspectors, mechanics and ground support personnel. By 1944, Lincoln Airfield’s role changed and it became a processing center for bomber crews preparing for advanced B-17 training elsewhere.

One of the bases providing intensive hands-on B-17 bomber training was Ardmore Army Airfield in Oklahoma. Ardmore was located in Gene Autry, OK, a town of 227 residents, where the town’s namesake, a legendary singer and actor had owned a large horse ranch, before himself joining the Army Air Corps. The name of the base came from the nearest town of any size, Ardmore, OK, with a population of 17,000 in 1940. The base became operational in August 1942. In addition to the approximately 1400 officers and enlisted men stationed at the base, 55 or more B-17 crews would arrive by rail for five month intensive training. Each crew was trained as a single unit. By 1944, a grueling round the clock schedule shortened the training period to three months or less.

Crews were grouped together at processing bases like Lincoln, and were quickly sent to a training base, like Ardmore, to be schooled as B-17 pilots, navigators, radio operators, engineers, bombardiers and gunners, having already received specialty training in their respective discipline elsewhere. Each ten man crew ate together, slept together, studied together and flew together. They were joined at the hip, forcing them to become a single cohesive operating unit, a B-17 crew, an army of ten. Upon graduation, they were sent to bases like the one in Kearney to receive their new B-17G and orders for transfer to European commands.

Kearney Army Airfield was completed in February 1943. The new base was built to house 3,362 soldiers and 542 officers. The civilian population of Kearney at the time was around ten thousand. In the last year of the war an estimated 91,000 soldiers passed through Kearney. Anna
Mae Wong, actress, boosted morale on base in December, 1943, visiting the hospital, the clubs and the mess halls. 1st Lieutenant Clark Gable, who was a member of one of the combat crews processed through the Kearney Army Air Base, received much attention from civilians and soldiers alike. In 1944, B-17 crews were transferred to Kearney awaiting delivery of a new plane and to await orders for deployment overseas. In April 1944, Kearney was capable of handling 388 B-17 crews a month; a B-17 carried a crew of ten men.

The B-17 G Flying Fortress
To say the B-17 was a large aircraft is an understatement. The flying fortress was the backbone of the US war effort in the air. The Army touted not only the craft’s considerable and formidable armaments, but also its durability. The training manual issued to pilots stated that the craft was capable of taking heavy fire, sustaining considerable damage and continue flying, even with all but one of the four engines out. However, the craft’s instruments and electronics were rudimentary. Flying and navigating a Flying Fortress was a hands-on, paper and pencil affair, often requiring the participation of every one of the ten man crew. As in any cooperative effort, a chain is only as strong as its weakest link. A mistake by one, jeopardized the lives and safety of all. The safety net of ground radar was in its infancy. Though developed in the mid thirties, US military applications of radar did not begin being tested until around 1941 and installations in the US were rare in 1944.

The specifications of the B-17 G were: wing span 103 feet, 9 inches, length 74 feet, 4 inches, height 19 feet, 1 inch, weight empty 34,000 pounds, maximum weight fueled, armed and loaded with extra fuel tanks and extra bombs 65,000 pounds, powered by four 1200 horsepower radial nine cylinder engines, propellers three bladed 11 feet 7 inches in diameter, fuel capacity 1,700 gallons, range 1,850 miles, cruising speed 170 miles per hour, maximum speed at 30,000 feet 300 miles per hour, rate of climb 900 feet per minute, armament: thirteen Browning M-2 .50 caliber machine guns with a fire rate of 13 rounds per second, maximum nominal bomb load 8,000 pounds.

Navigation of a B-17 relied on three separate disciplines, depending on circumstances and conditions. The first was pilotage. Pilotage relied on maintaining visual observation of the ground, to identify landmarks and topography and translate this information onto navigation charts to plot the planes course and to steer for known points, using the compass, air speed, and wind drift calculations. All across North America, radio beacons at known locations, emitted AM signals which the navigator could use to establish or verify where he was relative to a beacon in front of him or behind him. Pilotage was limited by visibility. The pilot and navigator had to fly under cloud cover to maintain sight of the ground. For this reason, careful studying of weather forecasts before takeoff, was essential to determine where and when pilotage could be used for navigation.

When a storm front, clouds or fog caused visual contact with the ground to be impossible, navigation by dead-reckoning could be used. Dead-reckoning relied on a combination of the radio signals from the ground beacons and radio fixes with several air fields at a time to fix the plane’s position and steer by compass, air speed and wind drift. As with pilotage, the navigator used this information to track the plane’s course on navigation charts and steer accordingly. The signals from radio beacons and radio fixes every thirty minutes with several airfields at a time
were essential to navigation by dead reckoning. If, for whatever reason, signals could not be received from directional beacons, radio operators could tune into a commercial radio station and wait for a “station identification” announcement and use this as a fix point for navigation.

The third method of navigation was celestial. Celestial navigation required maintaining visual contact with the heavens rather than the earth to use celestial bodies and a sexton to determine the plane’s location and course. Opposite to navigation by pilotage, the plane had to be above storm fronts and clouds to see the heavens for celestial navigation. This form of navigation was utilized primarily when flying over the sea, where there were no radio beacons, bases for signals and no landmarks to follow on a chart.

The pace at Ardmore, Lincoln, Kearney and other Army airfields was bustling, exuding a sense of urgency. The training for pilots and crews was rushed and intensive. Perhaps this is where the phrase “crash course” began. This is not a criticism, it was a sad reality of a world war and everyone accepted it. Across the nation, soldiers, pilots, sailors, tank crews, mechanics, engineers, armaments and equipment had to be turned out in staggering quantities on short order.

In the case of aircraft, there was no time for shake-down cruises. Not surprising, when it came to the Air Corps, accidents and crashes occurred. On United States’ soil, between 1942 and 1945, there were 1,589 accidents involving B-17’s, with 479 planes wrecked. 284 B-17 accidents involved fatalities, with 1,757 lives lost, according to the Army Air Force Statistical Digest for World War II. Official reports, issued by Army investigators generally listed the cause as pilot or navigator error. In Nebraska, a couple dozen fatal crashes occurred with eleven involving B-17s, of these, three B-17 crashes occurred at Kearney.

While pilot or navigator error may have caused accidents on training bases like Ardmore, where accidents were quite commonplace, I believe the impact of severe weather and equipment failure is dramatically understated, especially in crash investigations for planes lost as they were ferried to bases or headed overseas. I base this conclusion on a number of factors. For example, radio and navigation equipment failure was common, navigation relied on AM radio signals, which were suppressed by stormy weather, also. B-17 aircraft were shipped factory-to-war with no shake-down other than the transportation across the United States and then overseas.

Our Crew

Researching and collecting details on the lives and training of our crew, sixty-seven years after the fact has been a challenge to say the least. Almost every military record for these ten heroes was destroyed in a fire July 12, 1973 at the military personnel records center in St. Louis, Missouri. This project would have been dead in the water if not for the clues already gathered by Art Parchen, first cousin to Cecil L. Murphy. Art had over the course of thirty years determined the home towns for each of the crew, giving me a starting point. On or about March 12, 1944, our ten young heroes were assembled from advanced specialty training bases across the United States and were thrown into the soup in Lincoln, Nebraska, for processing, assignment to a crew and transfer to a bomber training base for intensive hands-on training on the B-17 Flying Fortress. Our ten soldiers were grouped together, spent a very short time in Lincoln, and left in early April, by train, for Ardmore Army Airfield. From here on, they were no longer ten soldiers; they were Crew #105, Combat Group I, Ard 6-30 Prov Group. Crew # 105 consisted of:
2nd Lt., John Thomas Cast, Pilot

John Cast, at 27 years of age, was “the old man” of the outfit. As pilot, he was crew commander. His age, experience, intelligence and demeanor commanded respect as much as his rank. Born March 27, 1917, he hailed from Springfield, OH, a city of 70,000. He came from a large Catholic family, with two older brothers, Edward and Robert, three older sisters, Colletta, Mary (Cattie) and Margaret, and one younger sister, Anne. He and his family were long-time members of St. Raphael Church. John was the son of Earl E. and Clara Cast. His father was employed as a toolmaker in a burial casket company. He also worked cutting hair and repaired shoes. He was a leader in the local union and was highly respected. Until the day he died people came to him for advice. The family was not well-off, but the kids never knew it. They had everything they needed and parents who though strict, loved them. Like many other suburban families of the era, they never owned a car. John was a quiet, serious and studious young man. He also had an easy sense of humor and was well-liked. He took his books with him everywhere. In high school, he was a standout linesman on the football team. He was 5'7”, powerfully built and tough as nails. It is said that on the line, no one could move him. He graduated from Catholic Central High about 1934. He and his family could not afford college, despite his studious nature. He went straight to work without complaint for the New York Central Railroad. While working, John joined the Army Cadet Corps. He married Glenna Merle Garrett, also from Springfield, on May 31, 1941 and on January 23, 1944, their only child, Earl Edward Cast was born. John’s brother, Robert, and sister, Ann, stood up for them at their wedding at St. Raphael. After John’s tragic death, Glenna did not remarry.

John enlisted January 27, 1942, shortly after the attack on Pearl Harbor. Originally with his railroad background, he was assigned to the Quartermaster Corps. Later, he was transferred to the Air Corps and received basic pilot training, graduating from the Army Air Force Cadet Rankin Academy, Tulare, CA. He went by train with his class, 43-H, to advanced pilot training at Ft. Sumner, NM, graduating August 30, 1943. Next, he trained at McDill Field in Florida and by January 1943, when his son Earl was born, John was training on B-17’s at Ardmore, OK. By the spring of 1944, when he was assigned to Crew # 105, John was a seasoned pilot, had been flying extensively for two years, and had more than a year under his belt on B-17’s.

Even before John’s tragic death, the family experienced heartache and loss. John’s sister Cattie died young, about a year after she was married, of a burst appendix. Earl, his father, died in 1938, at the age of fifty-seven, of a heart attack, after years of heart problems.

John’s mother, Clara, died March 22, 1966 in Springfield. His wife, Glenna, died February 13, 1982. Their son, Earl, still resides in Springfield. John is also survived by first cousins Bob Cast and Bryon Stultz, also of Springfield.
2nd Lt., John W. Drake, Co-Pilot

John was born August 3, 1922 in Port Arthur, TX, a city of 46,000 in 1940. His father, George W., a corporal with the 140 Engineers during WWI, was an assistant cashier at Merchants National Bank. His mother was Agnes Cowart Drake. John had a younger sister, Gloria Louise. The family belonged to St. George’s Episcopal Church. The family lived at 1835 Lake Shore Drive, a rather lovely street bordering the Sabine-Neches Channel, which is a major waterway leading through Sabine Pass and on into the Gulf. The family home may have since been torn down to make way for Lamar University. John is remembered by his sister as being a quiet young man and a good student. He attended college for one year to study engineering, until duty called and he left to enlist in the Army Air Corps February 18, 1943. As if the tragedy of the crash, the painful five days waiting to learn of John’s fate and finally news of his death were not enough, the train bearing John’s body home, and the honor guard accompanying it, 1st Lt. Cleveland A. Barker missed a connection, forcing the postponement of his funeral by a day. As was customary, the Army paid for all the funeral arrangements and later, provided a granite grave marker. George Drake requested that the inscription on the marker read- ARMY AIR CORPS, rather than just AIR CORPS. His request was denied. John’s father died suddenly June 17, 1954, a result of a brain tumor or aneurism. His mother, Agnes, died November 3, 1996 in Wichita Falls, TX. John, his mother and father are buried side by side in Greenlawn Memorial Park in Port Arthur. His sister Gloria Drake Howerton lives in Wichita Falls and other than her son, is John’s only living relative. Sadly, at the age of eighty-five, Gloria remembers very few details of her brother’s life.

2nd Lt., William Humphrey Hudgens, Jr., Navigator

Bill, or Hudge, as his friends called him, was born in Flagstaff, AZ on July 10, 1923. His father, William, was a meat cutter and later partner in the packing plant where he worked for forty-two years. His mother was Ellen Daisy May Johnson Hudgens, or Ella. He had two older sisters, Alice and Louise. Ella’s mother, Matilda Johnson, lived with them as well. The family was extremely close-knit. Bill senior and Ella had moved to Flagstaff in 1917, when Bill was hired by Babbitt Bros. Trading Co., a meat packing plant. Nights and weekends he labored to build the family three bedroom home. The family was active in the Federated Church.

Bill grew up in Flagstaff, a town of only 3,500 in his youth. As a child, Bill contracted lobar pneumonia and was lucky to survive. The previous year a young girl from Flagstaff died from the same affliction, and coincidentally sat at the same desk Bill was assigned the next year. There was not a hospital in Flagstaff, so the local
doctor constructed an oxygen tent over his bed at home and arranged for round-the-clock nursing care. He was extremely weak for a long time after, and a neighbor, Baxter Womack, met him at the foot of the hill on which the family home was situated, and wheeled him up the hill in a wheelbarrow. Bill was left with a heart condition, which as he got older, he worried would prevent him from playing sports. It did not.

Bill was an extremely popular young man at Flagstaff High School, through his teen years. He played football for four years and was captain and quarterback of the Eagles his senior year (1941). He also played basketball, tennis and track and was a member of the National Honor Society. His senior year, he was elected class president. He attended Arizona State University at Temple, under a scholarship to play football. He remained at Temple for two years before leaving to enlist in the Army Air Corps, September 1942 in Phoenix. He was called up for training February 26, 1943. He received his basic training in Fresno, CA and was then transferred to College Training Detachment at Washington State College, Pullman, Washington. He was classified for navigation at Santa Ana Air Base and received both primary and advanced training at Ellington Field, Houston, TX. He was commissioned as an officer April 8, 1944. The Saturday before the ill-fated flight, he phoned home to tell his parents he was ready to go overseas. Bill celebrated his twenty-first birthday the day before the crash.

2nd Lt., Robert Sheppard Talley, Bombadier

Robert “Buck” Talley was born March 24, 1918 in Pampa, TX, a ranching community of about 10,000. His father, Earl was a farmer and county sheriff. His mother was Martha Roberta (Bertie) Talley. He had two older sisters, Frances L., and Naida C. The family belonged to the Methodist Church. Those who knew Buck described him as kind, gentle, sensitive and sentimental. In high school, Buck was a member of the National Honor Society and an Eagle Scout. He had a passion for golf and won the National Scouting Golf title when he was sixteen.

His sister Naida was married to Thomas Jefferson Lewter. The marriage failed, leaving Naida with the care of a two and a half year old year old son, Ronald L. Lewter. Naida came back with her son to live with her family. Young Ronald grew up like a younger brother to Buck. Thankfully, Ronald’s widow and son are still living in Oklahoma and were helpful tracking down details of Buck’s life, and for leading me to Buck’s daughter Ann.

After graduating from High school in 1935, Buck attended the University of Texas for two years. Buck’s father died on June 7, 1938 at age 52, following complications from appendix surgery. At the time, he and Bertie were living in an apartment over the county jail. With her husband dead, Bertie had nowhere to live, so the town elected her honorary sheriff, so she could stay in the apartment until she made other arrangements. For several months, she had the honor of being the only woman sheriff in Texas.
Buck left college after two years, to work in construction for the Cabot Shops in Kermit, TX, and later moved to west Texas, where he went to work for Keystone at their gasoline plant. A letter of reference written on his behalf, described him as being honest, industrious and diligent. He left Keystone to join the Army Air Corps.

Buck was married to Gloriadel Bowen of San Angelo, TX on June 15, 1941 and had a daughter, Ann Sheppard Talley, born September 1, 1942. Buck and Gloriadel met in Wink, TX, a tiny town where Gloriadel was a school teacher and while Buck was working for Keystone.

Buck’s favorite food was watermelon, a love his daughter Ann, who lives in Colorado, shares to this day. Ann was eighteen months old when her father died. Ann recalls that her mother had just visited her father before he was to fly out. Gloriadel was still on the bus for San Angelo from Kearney, when the plane disappeared. The next five days were the longest of her life, not knowing the fate of her husband. Years earlier, Buck’s father had given Buck as a gift, a black onyx ring with a large diamond. Though a bit ostentatious for Buck, it was a prized possession, because it reminded him of his father. When Buck’s body was brought home, the ring was missing. Gloriadel believed looters got to the crash before the Army recovery team and stole the ring. Later, the Army sent her a wedding band they subsequently found which they believed was her husband’s. It was not. She contacted the other widows from the crew and determined the ring did not belong to any of them. She learned that one of the crew members, Jim Benson, was about to propose to his girlfriend and probably had the ring in his pocket. Gloriadel sent her the ring, through the young man’s family.

S/Sgt., Wayne Dewey McGavran, Engineer, Top Turret Gunner

Wayne was born in Centerville, Iowa on January 26, 1920. In 1923 his family moved to Seymour, IA, a coal mining town of fewer than 1,000 people. His father, Earl worked as a coal miner. His mother was Beatrice (Betty) Winger. He had three older brothers, Garald, Burl and Charley, and three younger ones, Robert, Raymond and Carl. Though Baptists, they were active in the Methodist Church in Seymour. His younger brother Ray remembers Wayne as happy-go-lucky and very outgoing. He liked to hunt and fish, was captain of his football team and often had the lead in school plays, as he was a wonderful singer.

Wayne went to work in 1941 as a mechanic at Boeing in Seattle, WA, after graduating high school. He already had two brothers living in Seattle and went to live with them. Wayne enlisted December 11, 1941, four days after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. He was one of 5,000 men working at Boeing, who marched to Victory Square in Seattle and enlisted. He was off for basic training by December 15th. Two of Wayne’s younger brothers also enlisted later. Bob was sent to the
European Theater and Earl to the South Pacific. Two of the older brothers were denied enlistment, as their jobs were deemed vital to the war effort.

Wayne attempted to become an Army Air Corps pilot, but did not qualify. He trained at Enid, OK, Miami, FL, Grand Forks, ND, Santa Ana, CA and AAF, Las Vegas. Having received engineering training at Boeing and at Muskogee, OK, he was assigned as an instructor. He felt that this service was not as important as what his brothers, Bob and Earl were sacrificing and contributing, so he worked to get his duty changed. With considerable effort, he was transferred to crew on a B-17 as flight engineer. Throughout his time in the Army and while he worked at Boeing, Wayne sent most of his pay home to his mother and father, who were not well-off.

His mother and father stated, after learning of their son’s tragic death-“We are Americans and can expect that sacrifices have to be made as long as war continues.”

Ray, 81, is Wayne’s only surviving brother and lives in Urbana, IL.

Sgt., Cecil Leon Murphy, Radio Operator/Gunner/Medic

His friends and family called him “Cec.” Cecil Leon Murphy was born to a devout Catholic family on March 3, 1923 in Falls City, NE, the only child of Florence and Paul Murphy. His father worked as a copper fitter for the railroad. His mother was a devoted Red Cross worker throughout and after the war. The family lived on a small dairy farm in the town of about 5,000. Ces was an altar boy and attended Sacred Heart parochial school, where he excelled, making the All-Conference teams, in basketball and football. He also ran track. He was an excellent student and a fine trumpet player.

Cec attended one year of college, where he is believed to have majored in theater. He left college to enlist in the Army on June 20, 1942 in Omaha, NE and was assigned to the Air Corps.

His cousin, Art Parchen, was quite close to Cecil and considered him to be like an older brother and a role-model. Art recalls-“Cec celebrated his 21st birthday on April 3rd. My mother brought my sister Mary and me by bus from our home in Falls City, to Lincoln. My mother had baked him a large sheet cake for his birthday. Cec shared it with his buddies and anyone else who wanted some cake at the NCO Club. The crew was confined to the base, awaiting orders to depart for training at a bomber base. This was the last time I saw Cec.” Younger cousin Art drew three pictures of Ces’s new B-17 and mailed them to him with suggestions for names to be painted on the craft. Ces wrote back thanking Art for the pictures, which he called “swell” and promised to pass the name suggestions on to his officers.
Sgt., Clarence Marvin Waln, Tail Gunner

Clarence Waln came from a tiny Wyoming ranching community called Ten Sleep. He was born on July 30, 1921 and from birth was called by his middle name, Marvin. The town of about 250 got its name from the Native Americans. The spot was a popular encampment site for Native Americans and was so called because it was 10 days travel, or “10 sleeps,” from Fort Laramie, the region now called Yellowstone, and the Indian Agency on the Stillwater River in Montana. The Waln family had been in Ten Sleep for four generations. Marvin’s great-grandmother Martha Bull Waln was the first white woman in the Big Horn basin.

Marvin’s family were Seventh Day Adventists. He was a happy-go-lucky kid, a cowboy, and a ranch hand, who loved to play the guitar and sing. His parents were Clarence Arnold and Florence Brown Waln. Marvin’s father was a rancher, along with most of his family, and was a veteran of WWI. Marvin had a younger brother, Theron, who just passed away in April 2011, after a long battle with cancer. Marvin had two older sisters, Thelma and Florence. Marvin’s only living relative is Archie Howard, 91, who was married to Clarence’s younger sister Pauline. In World War II, Archie was an anti-aircraft battery gunner.

Marvin attended public school through the 8th grade in Ten Sleep and then attended high school at Campion Academy, a Seventh Day Adventist school in Loveland, CO. After graduation from Campion, Marvin lived with his sister Thelma in California for a while. While there he had a steady girlfriend, drove truck and hauled hay. Marvin reported for Army Basic training at Ft. Warren in Cheyenne, WY. Initially, he was assigned to the Quartermaster Corps, but was later transferred to the Air Corps.

Ironically, a B-17 crashed in the mountains visible from Ten Sleep on June 28, 1943. The wreckage on Mather Peak, was not discovered until after the War, two years after the plane was reported missing.

Sgt., Gerald (Jerry) Vincent Biddle, Waist Gunner

Gerald was born on April 5, 1921 and raised in Akron, Ohio. His father, Ambrose “Doc” J. Biddle was a druggist and his mother was Gertrude E. Biddle. Gerald had one older sister, Dolores, and a younger sister, Margaret. He graduated from North High School in 1940 and was then employed as a bookkeeper at Firestone Bank, where he was a member of the bank’s bowling league. He enlisted in the Army Air Corp September 4, 1942, at Patterson Field in Fairfield, OH. For fourteen months after basic training, he was stationed in Newark, NJ. Here he met his future wife, Carol (Bertha Carol Cichewicz at a USO
Club. After Newark, Jerry attended flexible gunnery school at Laredo Army Airfield, TX. In December of 1943, Jerry passed all the entrance requirements to become an Aviation Cadet, and receive flyer training, but was not able to pursue the training. B-17 training at Ardmore Army Airfield in Oklahoma conflicted. Jerry and Carol were married near the end of his training at Ardmore, June 12, 1944, on base. Cecil Murphy was his best man and Jerry’s younger sister Margaret was Carol’s maid of honor. This was less than a month before Jerry’s deployment overseas.

**Sgt., James Alan Benson, Armorer/Waist Gunner**

Jim was born June 7, 1923 in the tiny town of Garfield, South Dakota. His father Berhnard (Ben) was a farmer and his mother was Laura Mable Bailey Benson. He had an older brother, Max and two older sisters, Joyce and Kathryn, and one younger sister, Margaret. Jim attended school in nearby Clark and was active in football, bowling and baseball. He was good-natured and had an easy and disarming smile. He graduated in 1941 and moved to California a year later. Jim worked for Lockheed for nine months before returning home to help on the farm. A year later, Jim went to work for Northeastern Aeronautical Corp., a glider manufacturer in Minneapolis. He was inducted into the Army April 27, 1943. He trained at Shepherd Field, TX, received armament training at Lowery Field, CO., a base in Utah, gunnery training at AAF, Las Vegas and finally B-17 training at Ardmore Field in Gene Autry, TX. He was on the verge of becoming engaged to Valoris Reinka and carried a ring in his pocket. For a time, after Jim’s death, Valoris maintained correspondence with the family. It is believed that it was Jim’s brother, Max, who made sure Valoris received the ring the Army mistakenly sent to Gloriadel Talley. Jim’s sister, Kathryn Benson Porter, died in 1943, a year before Jim.

**Cpl., John Harry Jones, Jr., Ball Turret Gunner**

John H. “Jack” Jones, Jr. at twenty years of age, was the youngest member of the crew. He was raised in Buffalo, New York. Born in Michigan, March 3, 1924 to John H. and Minnie E. Jones, he had a younger sister, Aldine. John’s father was employed as a salesman for a shoe company. Jack loved to draw, especially cartoons and caricatures. After his parents divorced, his mother remarried around 1935 to Nelson E. Schutt and together they had a son Ronald N. Schutt, born October 2, 1937. Jack never lived with his mother, step-father and half- brother. John had to drop out of Fosdick-Masten Park High School after two years and worked at the Buffalo Arms Corporation, a manufacturer of
military gun barrels and munitions. He enlisted in the Army March 20, 1943 in Buffalo, at the age of nineteen, and was later transferred to the Air Corps. Sometime after his enlistment, John married Dorothy Mae Richter possibly in April or May 1943 and they had a son, Jeffrey Allen, born December 13, 1943. Before Jack was transferred to the Air Corps, he was stationed for a time at Ft. Leonard Wood in Waynesville, MO. Dorothy traveled by train to see him, taking infant son Jeffrey. They missed a connection and were stranded. They were directed to the local Salvation Army, where they received shelter for the night. The next morning, the kind volunteers made sure Dorothy and Jeff were put on the right train. To this day, Dorothy remembers being helped by the charity of the Salvation Army, and cannot pass a kettle, without stopping to make a donation. While they were on the train, Dorothy remembers all the soldiers on board taking turns holding Jeff, because they missed their own children so much. Dorothy was two months pregnant when Jack was to be deployed. She did not tell him, as she did not want him to worry. Their daughter, Jackie M. Jones was born February 19, 1945.

Dorothy was given a second chance at happiness. Jack’s sister, Aldine, introduced Dorothy to Glen Barr. Dorothy married Glen September 17, 1948. Jeff and Jackie accompanied them on their honeymoon. Together, Dorothy and Glen had two children, Bruce, born March 13, 1950 and Colleen, born March 18, 1956. Glen passed away October 1, 2000, leaving Dorothy a widow for the second time. She resides in Florida. Jack’s sister Aldine Dehn is now a widow and is living in a nursing home. Son, Jeff resides in Florida and Vermont and daughter, Jackie in Buffalo.

After successfully completing B-17 training together, Crew # 105 graduated from Ardmore in June 1944 and were transported to Kearney Army Airfield to get their plane and their orders. They did not have long to wait. Their new plane, B-17G, SN 43-38023 was ready at Boeing in Seattle on June 19, 1944. It was flown to Kearney via Great Falls, Montana, a cog in the Air Transport Command (ATC) and Cheyenne, Wyoming, arriving July first. Our crew knew that very soon they were headed overseas. Sgt. Biddle wrote home just before leaving to let them know he was flying out. John Cast let his wife and parents know when he would be passing over Springfield, OH and Gloriadel Talley was at Kearney to see Buck off.

The Flight
No one knows for sure what happened to our boys and B-17G, SN 43-38023. The following account is a forensic re-creation based on ATC crash reports, investigations, and weather reports, as well as critical input from Bill Schock a World War II pilot who made this same trip en route to England, and boots-on-the-ground research conducted over a thirty year period by Art Parchen, first cousin of Cecil Murphy. This re-creation also relies on technical critique from Peter Nodin, Maine Aviation Historical Society, pilot and WWII era navigation expert and crew position and responsibility information from the Arizona Wing of the Commemorative Air Force in Mesa, AZ. I do not pretend that the following account is one hundred percent factual, only that based on research it is feasible, plausible and above average in probability.
On July tenth, Pilot John Cast, Co-pilot John Drake and Navigator William Hudgens poured over weather reports and forecasts, carefully laying out their route. They would have preferred calm clear skies for the longest hop in their young careers, but that was not to be. They would be flying into increasing clouds, fog and then rain and thunderstorms with turbulence. With this information Cast, Drake and Hudgens laboriously figured and refigured their route. Standard procedure led them to select alternate air fields all along their course in case of emergencies. Cast decided the airspeed and altitude he wished to fly and from this information Hudgens did the math and prepared his navigation charts and flight plan. Together, they decided in advance, when and where they would be navigating by pilotage (visual ground), dead reckoning, radio, or celestial methods. They determined check points and planned when and where to make radio fixes. Eager, confident and ready, the three synchronized their watches, and with the rest of the crew turned in early for a very short night’s sleep or more accurately, a nap.

Just after midnight Tuesday, July 11, 1944, a group of approximately twenty B17G Bombers, including #43-38023, took off from Kearney Air Base in south-central Nebraska, bound for a stop at Dow Field in Bangor, ME, then Gander, Newfoundland, over the Atlantic to Prestwick Scotland and finally to the 8th Air Force Base in the English midlands. World War II was raging and the plane and crew were headed to join the war effort against Nazi Germany. The flight path would take the Flying Fortresses north and east in a steady arc, to Dow Field in Bangor, ME for refueling, before continuing its course over Newfoundland and then finally to England. Though it was common for bombers to leave in groups of twenty or so, they did not fly in formation, each plane was on its own. The same would be true for groups of aircraft leaving Dow for England.

At take off, Cast and Drake were in the cockpit, Cast at the controls. Buck Talley sat in the bombardier’s compartment in the nose of the craft, to assist is navigating by sighting landmarks on the ground, as pilotage would be used for navigation for the first leg of their flight. Hudge was at his station to the rear of the nose compartment behind the bombardier’s station. Charts arranged on his navigator’s table and his instruments in front of him. His station was below and forward of the cockpit. Mid-ship was the radio room. The radio room had limited visibility outside, but was the safest and most stable area of the B-17. Cecil Murphy sat at the radio, tuned in and turned on. The rest of the crew sat on cushions on the floor of the radio compartment with their backs to the bulkheads and walls.

Everyone was in high spirits, adrenaline flowed. They were excited to be off, but inwardly apprehensive about what lay ahead. Four 1200 horsepower engines produced a roar that made conversation impossible, except by shouting. Cast maintained order and discipline and discouraged chatting over the intercom for the first couple hours.

At 1:30 AM the craft buzzed low over the small town of Falls City, 225 miles east of Kearney, deviating slightly from the most direct flight path to bid farewell to the family and friends of radio man Cecil Murphy. Cast knew this was Murphy’s town and had covertly planned it into the route with Drake and Hudgens, the day before. Cec was not told until minutes beforehand, so he could rush forward to the bombardier’s compartment for a birds-eye view. Buck Talley slapped Cec on the back as he moved out of the way, giving Cec his seat. Cec was the sort of man that
walked into a room and immediately everyone loved. He was regarded fondly by the rest of the crew; it was known he would do anything for anybody. This not so small gesture was Cast’s way of recognizing Cecil’s value to the crew’s morale. For the next couple hours Cec was grinning ear to ear.

At 7:20 AM Springfield, Ohio was startled as the huge B-17 did a very low altitude fly-by of the city, circling the water tower, near John’s home. His family, on the ground were able to see him wave goodbye as he dipped the wing. Pilot John T. Cast was saying goodbye to his wife Glenna and five month old son, Earl, and the rest of his family and neighbors. The privilege of rank, this too had been incorporated into the flight plan the day before. John had a picture of his wife and baby clipped to the console in front of him and a pair of Earl Edward’s booties hung nearby. John turned his head to hide his emotions from his copilot and wiped a tear from his eye and turned the controls over to John Drake.

An hour later, Jerry Biddle lobbied hard for a detour to East Orange, NJ to kiss his bride, Carol, goodbye. The crew was amused by the request and good-natured banter erupted, with almost everyone adding their two cents. Jack Jones pretended to pout and suggested they bang a left for Buffalo instead, so he could wave to his wife Dorothy and son Jeffrey. Marvin did a passable Floyd Tillman impression and sang the newest country music hit “They Took the Stars Out of Heaven.”

They took the stars out of heaven  
The day they took her from me  
All the sunshine and sweet things in life  
Are just a memory.

I’ll never find another sweetheart  
I know it never can be  
They took the stars out of heaven  
The day they took her from me.

John Cast smiled, allowing this break in discipline and “abuse” of the intercom. He remembered all too well what it was like to be newlywed and to be leaving a wife and son behind.

Sitting on the floor of the radio room, with the others, Jim Benson did not join in the banter. He was lost in thought. He had planned to propose to Valoris before leaving, but the schedule of the last few weeks got in the way. He fondled the ring in his pocket, regretting that he had not been able to put it on her finger before flying out. They had talked on the phone the day before, but Jim did not want to propose over the phone. Buck also remained silent in the bombardier’s compartment. His thoughts were on his wife, Gloria, and daughter Ann, back in San Angelo. He closed his eyes and smiled, picturing them waving goodbye. His smile faded as he unconsciously twirled the onyx ring on his finger and wondered if he would ever see them again. Every minute that passed, he was getting further and further away from the people he loved most.

By 8:30 AM, the weather had grown steadily worse; cloud cover thickened and then the rain started. Visibility of the ground could only be maintained at a dangerously low altitude. Drake
and Hudgens compared notes over the intercom and took the plane up from five to ten thousand feet, anticipating less turbulence and wanting to stay well above the four thousand foot peaks along the Appalachians. Hudgens switched from navigating by pilotage to dead reckoning. Now, Buck could leave the nose and join the rest of the crew on the floor of the radio room. Though the forecasts had called for increasing clouds and rain and the crew had incorporated it into their flight plan, what they actually experienced between Williamsport, PA and Albany, NY was nail-biting. The weather above the Appalachians was horrible as, wind, turbulence, thunder, rain and hail buffeted the plane.

The crew knew enough to stay off the intercom so Drake, Hudgens and Cast could stay in constant communication. Accurate navigation by dead reckoning required a steady airspeed and level flight. Drake employed every ounce of skill and experience he had acquired to keep the plane as steady as possible. Hudgens made constant calculations from his instrument readings to adjust for the wind and drift of the plane. It was a bumpy, lurching, stomach-turning bone-jarring ride.

For two hours the big plane pitched, bucked and lurched like a leaf carried aloft on a windy fall day. Without warning, it would drop suddenly for a couple hundred feet, like an elevator free of its cables, only to bottom out, causing a jolt, which made every inch of the plane rattle. Marvin had been dozing off and on. He looked up and studied his friends on the floor of the radio room, smiling to himself at the looks on their faces, with their teeth clenched, eyes closed and knuckles white as they waited for the next sudden drop which would launch their stomachs upward toward their throats and the ensuing jolt which would drive their tailbones through the thin cushions between them and the unforgiving hard metal floor of the plane. Clarence closed his eyes again and just before dozing off, remembered a few of the horses he had ridden that made this flight seem like a cake-walk.

Until just after 9:30 AM, Cecil had maintained radio contact with the ground, every thirty minutes, all along their route to establish radio fixes for Hudgens. When he attempted a call at 10:00 AM, he could not raise anyone, nor could he pick up transmissions from radio beacons. At first he assumed that the thunderstorms were wreaking havoc with the AM signals emitted by the towers and also the radio beacons used as additional navigational targets. After trying unsuccessfully for almost half an hour to lock on a signal, he summoned Wayne McGavran the engineer to help him troubleshoot the equipment. McGavran, who could fix anything, found that some of the tubes in the radio equipment had shattered in the turbulence and he replaced them from the ample supply of spares he carried, as this was a common occurrence. When this failed to fully remedy the problem, he and Hudgens further determined that the weather was preventing signal reception. Without radio fixes, Hudgens knew that he could not accurately calculate the plane’s drift and position, with the precision he was known for, but based on his experience did not believe the plane was very far off course. Cecil kept trying to pick up signals, but could not find even commercial radio stations.

Cast knew that Drake needed a break after two harrowing hours in the maelstrom. He took back the controls at 10:30 AM. Unknown to anyone on board, in addition to being unable to lock on radio signals, the constant jarring had knocked Hudgens’ gyro magnetic compass out of
calibration, causing it to provide a false reading. This threw off his constant calculations and adjustments, which he was continuously relaying to Cast over the intercom. The plane was following an erroneous heading. In all likelihood, the radio compass was also not functioning. It received its signal from a rotating loop antenna located just forward of the bomb bay and from a fixed sense antenna mounted along the bottom of the craft’s nose. The signals from these antennae indicated the planes position on the face of the radio compass as a relative bearing to a radio station. Next to the radio compass was the gyro-magnetic compass. On the opposite side of the navigator’s table from the two compasses, was the drift meter. This was used to calculate the angle between the aircraft’s heading and its actual track over the ground. Any compromise in the accuracy (calibration) with any of these instruments rendered navigation by dead reckoning useless. In effect, the aircraft was truly flying blind. Without knowing it, Hudgens had no way to reliably calculate wind drift. A navigator was expected to be able to pinpoint his craft’s exact position at any time to within a quarter of a mile.

At 10:55 AM, Cecil succeeded in raising Grenier Field in Manchester, NH and established a radio fix, their first in over an hour. The plane had just passed over Albany, NY and was sixty miles north of its calculated position. Grenier instructed the B-17 to proceed on to Dow Field. Hudgens recalculated his charts with the new position information and passed along the coordinates to Cast, unaware that his gyro-magnetic compass was giving a false reading. The flight plan was to follow a course fifty miles inland of the Atlantic coast all the way to Dow. Instead, the faulty gyro-magnetic compass, failure of the radio compass, and lack of accurate wind drift compensation, sent them steadily fifteen degrees north, away from this plotted course.

Cast, Drake and Hudgens discussed taking the bird up to 30,000 feet to get above the weather and switch to celestial navigation. This had not been part of their flight plan. It was decided that the extra fuel this would require, the below freezing temperatures they would encounter and the necessity to put on oxygen masks outweighed the benefits. They still believed they were on course and saw no need for this more drastic precautionary measure.

Rather than keeping to the coast, the B-17 soared over the Green Mountains of Vermont and the northern extremes of New Hampshire’s White Mountains. If Cast had not maintained an altitude of 10,000 feet, the plane would have run into one of the 5,000 foot peaks beneath them, without ever knowing they were there.

Cecil kept a constant vigil on the radio, trying to raise anyone, to get a radio fix for Hudgens. By noon, Cast, Drake and Hudgens were frustrated not knowing exactly where they were. Their calculations and dead reckoning put them in the vicinity of Lewiston, Maine. There were no hills or mountains of any concern on the charts, so they decided bring the plane down closer to the deck for a look. They wanted to establish visual contact with the ground, identify landmarks and switch to navigation by pilotage for the last eighty-five miles to Dow.

Cast was acutely aware that they had been in the air for eleven hours and had no margin for error on fuel. He ordered the crew to take up their combat positions, getting as many pairs of eyes on the ground as possible. Leaving the radio room quickly, each of the men took up their positions. Buck Talley climbed back into the bombardier compartment in the nose of the plane. Wayne McGavran took his position in the top turret behind the cockpit. Jack Jones lowered himself into
the ball turret on the underside of the craft, bending himself into a near fetal position to fit the cramped space. Jerry Biddle and Jim Benson took up their positions mid-ship in the waist gunner spots. Marvin Waln scurried to the rear of the B-17 and climbed into the tail gunner compartment.

As they descended from 10,000 feet Cast called into the intercom- “Eyes everyone! Tell me what you see. The big plane kept coming down. At five thousand feet, there was still nothing but clouds. The same at three thousand feet- “Cpl. Jones! Can you see anything down there?” “Just clouds sir,” was the reply. Not until one thousand feet did the big plane begin to break through the impenetrable ceiling. Simultaneously, from all over the plane came a chorus of “Trees and water, we are surrounded by trees and water.” Then, “watch out for the hills!”

Cast began circling in wide sweeping arcs, holding between five hundred and one thousand feet. He followed the contour of the lakes and kept away from the hills, their tops obscured by clouds. As he circled, everyone on the plane reported in to Hudgens everything they saw which could be used as identifying landmarks. Hudgens furiously jotted down short-hand notes as he poured over his charts. It did not take him long to determine that the plane was nowhere near Lewiston, Auburn or any of the other towns that should have been beneath them. For an hour and a half the plane circled and Hudgens’ notes began to take the shape of an amazingly accurate topographical map approximately ten miles square, all the while, Hudgens was ruling out locations on the charts and determining just how far inland they were.

At 1:30 PM, Cast knew from the fuel gauge that the plane was running dangerously low on fuel. Aside from the reading on the gauge, he knew that his plane burned approximately fifty gallons of fuel per hour, per engine with a full load. His B-17 carried no bomb load and was probably using one hundred forty to one hundred sixty gallons per hour, at an average air speed of one hundred seventy miles per hour. In eleven hours, they would have used up fifteen to seventeen hundred gallons of precious fuel. (The craft had a fuel capacity of seventeen hundred gallons) “Please God”, he prayed “show us where we are.” He was flying at five hundred feet over a lake when Jones called up, “Sir, we just scared the hell out of two fishermen in a boat!” At the same instant Hudgens shouted into the intercom, “Mooselookmeguntic! We just flew over Mooselookmeguntic! John, you need to take this bird up now! These lakes we have been cruising are surrounded by mountains and hills of fifteen hundred to four thousand feet. Take it up to five thousand feet now! That town we’ve been circling is Rangeley.”

“One hundred miles dead west!” Hudge yelled back.

A B-17G does not climb quickly, at only nine hundred feet per minute. John Cast, John Drake and Bill Hudgens knew it would take a miracle for them to get up to five thousand feet without hitting something. In less than thirty seconds the plane was back in the clouds and completely blind. “God help us,” John prayed to himself as he pushed the plane as hard as it would take. He knew it would be five nerve-wracking minutes for the plane to reach safe altitude and in that time it would travel more than ten miles. “We don’t have enough gas for this.” he thought to himself, with Bangor still one hundred miles away.
Hudge seemed to read John’s mind and had never stopped combing the charts for a place to put down. “There is an airstrip in Rangeley!” He yelled into the interphone and without hesitation gave John the heading, altitude and range. John Cast reacted instinctively and without letting off the climb began banking sharply, seventy degrees to the left. The airstrip in Rangeley was short, part of the Reddington Pond Range, but it could work in an emergency.

Minutes later enveloped in clouds, without ever knowing what hit them, or having time to react, a tree took the left wing tip off the B-17. The nose of the big plane, with all four engines throttled up, was driven toward the ground in a cartwheel spin. In a matter of seconds it cut a swath through the spruce and fir at first about thirty feet wide, then fanning out to a width of 200 feet for a distance of 800 feet before the biggest piece of wreckage came to a rest. In the few seconds it took for this to transpire, the plane and everything and everyone in it was torn apart. An explosion ripped through the craft as it cart-wheeled. All ten crew members died instantly. It was approximately 1:35 PM. The explosion consumed what little fuel remained in the craft, so there was no fire.

Sadly, in another thirty-three seconds John Cast and his crew would have gained enough altitude to clear Deer Mountain, which is 3,455 feet. They crashed just five hundred feet from the top and about fifteen miles from the airstrip at Rangeley.

The Search and Recovery

Col. C.W. Cousland, Base Commander, Kearney Army Air Field, telegraphed all the families of the crew that night, via Western Union, to let them know the plane was missing, and continued providing them with reports as the search and recovery progressed. Col. Cousland was contacted by Dow Field as soon as his plane was overdue beyond any reasonable explanation. Shortly thereafter, he was informed that the last radio contact with the plane had been at 10:55 AM EST, with Grenier Field. After speaking with Grenier, he had the ATC Search and Rescue Section notified, which was closest to Dow Field, Station # 2 in Presque Isle, ME and then began contacting the crew’s families.

On July twelfth, Grenier Field began sending out search planes to look for the B-17 G, now presumed to be downed. The all-out air search also included more than one hundred spotters from the Civil Air Patrol, the Army Air Corps, the Navy, and the Royal Canadian Air Force. The search and rescue team from Presque Isle held ready in stand-by mode. The official crash investigation report issued by the War Department on July 29, 1944 does not indicate when contact was made with eye witnesses on the ground in Rangeley and Mooselookmeguntic. I surmise that their reports came to light on July twelfth, because the next day, search planes from Grenier focused on the Rangeley Lakes Region. The search and rescue unit from Presque Isle had been ordered to fly to Grenier and assist the air search on the thirteenth. They were en route when they were notified the downed B-17 had been found. A search plane from Grenier Field located the wreckage at 4:30 PM on July thirteenth and notified the War Department, ATC, Dow Field and Kearney. In their message, they indicated that from the air, the aircraft appeared to be a complete wreck and suggested the CO at Kearney be notified of the presumed status of personnel on board.
The search and rescue unit from Presque Isle, headed by Capt. Shearer turned around immediately and flew to Dow Field. At Dow, they secured medical supplies, Flight Surgeon Capt. Humphrey, a jeep, trailer and a ton and a half truck. They left Bangor for Rangeley at 8:30 PM and arrived at 4:30 AM July fourteenth. While the rest of the unit got some sleep, Captains Shearer and Humphrey contacted two local fire wardens, who volunteered to accompany and guide the search and rescue party. One of the two was Harold York of Stratton, ME.

The unit attempted to wait for Maj. Vaughn, Rescue wing Officer, but when he had not arrived by 6:30 AM, they headed out without him. They reached the fire tower on Deer Mountain and surveyed the estimated crash area. From that vantage, they could see nothing definite through the trees, except a small brown shading of trees. They cut a trail for about three miles on the bearing they had determined at the fire tower. The rescue unit arrived at the crash site at 11:30 AM. They determined the B-17 had exploded with great violence, tearing it completely apart scattering pieces and crew over a wide area. They determined that all men on board had died instantly. Only body parts could be found. A number found on a piece of cowling verified that this was in fact B-17 G, SN 43-38023. A quick search confirmed there were no secret documents or other sensitive military equipment to be secured. Though the party had sleeping bags and rations, they decided to return to the base of the mountain, having had little or no sleep the night before.

Maj. Vaughn reached Rangeley well after the unit had already left for the mountain. He secured his own guide and reached the wreck by a different but easier route, after Captains Shearer and Humphrey had already headed off the mountain. He accessed the crash site by a relatively clear logging trail. The following day, July fifteenth, Maj. Vaughn with six soldiers, two drivers and Capt. Humphrey returned to the crash site. The unit combed the crash site and carefully collected all the remains of the crew that could be found. Once the remains were carried off the mountain, Humphrey and Vaughn took them immediately to Dow Field.

On Sunday, July sixteenth, Col. C.W. Cousland fulfilled his solemn duty and notified the families of the crew that their loved ones were dead. His compassionate telegrams ended five days of torture for the families, suspended in limbo, not knowing the fate of their sons, brothers and husbands. Now they waited for arrival of the bodies and began making funeral preparations for their heroes.

Over the next three days, the Search and Rescue Unit from Presque Isle continued the unenviable and gruesome task of combing and sifting through the wreckage for bodies and body parts. They succeeded in finding remains of three additional crew members on July sixteenth and seventeenth. The remains were brought off the mountain as gently and reverently as possible on pack horses and taken to Dow Field on July eighteenth by S/Sgt. Bright of the Search and Rescue Unit.

The Search and Rescue Unit had worked against the clock to recover the bodies of the crew. Sadly, it was learned earlier in the week that several local guides had escorted curiosity seekers to view the wreckage. The unit was committed to preventing desecration of the remains of their fellow soldiers at the hands of a few thoughtless individuals. The Search and Rescue Unit returned to Presque Isle by train.
Each of the ten crew members was transported home to their loved ones, via rail, accompanied by a military escort. Each of the escorts remained with the family until after the funeral and assisted in any way they could. Most of the funerals and burials took place on or about July twenty-fifth.

The Army sent the following citation to each of the families:

“He lived to bear his country’s arms. He died to save its honor. He was a soldier… and he knew a soldier’s duty. His sacrifice will help keep aglow the flaming torch that lights our lives… That millions yet unborn may know the priceless joy of Liberty. And we who pay him homage, and revere his memory, in solemn pride rededicate ourselves to a complete fulfillment of the task for which he so gallantly has placed his life upon the altar of man’s freedom.”  


On Tuesday, July eighteenth, a Reclamation Unit from Dow started up the mountain with a tractor-dozer and a salvage sled, by way of the old logging road. It was slow going as there were many obstructions, trees, boulders and brooks, etc. The first day they made it one-third of the way in and returned to base camp. They resumed building the road the next day and reached the site at 8:00 PM. It was the Army’s intent to remove wreckage from the mountain, especially arms and munitions. This salvage effort took three days.

It is reported that townspeople from Wilsons Mills and other surrounding towns checked out the crash site after the Army had left. They were not pleased with the job that had been done and complained. Still on the site amongst other things were pistols, machine guns and other gear.

In response, the command at Dow Field determined that it was justifiable from a cost stand-point to complete a more comprehensive salvage operation at Deer Mountain. At noon on July twenty-sixth, a detail consisting of fifteen men left Bangor with a C-2 Wrecking Unit, forty foot trailer, crane mounted diesel Roustabout, ton and a half truck and a Jeep. They arrived in Rangeley at 9:30 PM. As with many of the earlier search, rescue and salvage parties, they stayed the night at the Mountain View Hotel.

It was raining the next morning so part of the party went ahead by foot to establish a camp, dig latrines and erect shelters. They spent the remainder of the day searching for and collecting parts of the plane for salvage. The rest of the crew with the heavy equipment proceeded up the mountain with considerable difficulty and reached the camp at 10:00 PM.

The next day, rain continued and hampered the details effort to bring the first load of salvage off the mountain. A small party had to go in advance of the tractor and sled to build corduroy roads through wet spots. Those remaining at the camp on the mountain continued to locate, gather and concentrate pieces of wreckage for loading on the sled.

This slow process continued until the eighth of August, when the detail, satisfied it had salvaged all that was possible, broke camp and went off the mountain. Altogether, twelve tons of salvage were taken off Deer Mountain and the rest buried with the dozer. It is reported that despite their work, one engine, landing gear and bits and pieces of wreckage still littered the ground on the
mountain for a decade or more. In 1957, Brown Company put a logging road over Deer Mountain and the site became accessible to the public. In building the road, which was on the periphery of the crash site, additional pieces of wreckage were brought to the surface, after being buried for thirteen years. Slow but sure, the big pieces and a lot of small ones were taken away. To this day, bits and pieces of aluminum tubing, sheathing and other small pieces of metal can be found poking through the leaves along Deer Mountain Road near the crash site. Under the porch of our camp are bits and pieces of the wreckage the previous owner collected over the years in his trips to maintain the memorial.

The Memorial
The crash site remained all but forgotten for almost fifty years. Michael J. Rozek, an engineer for Mead Company, learned about the crash from an old logger and began to research the crash. He began to plan a fitting memorial in the back of his mind. Later, he told a reporter- “I figured if nobody else was going to do anything, then I would.” In 1999, he began an effort to construct a suitable memorial for the ten soldiers. Local historian, writer and columnist Richard Pinette used his considerable influence and powers of persuasion to gain permission for the monument to be constructed near the crash site, which was on Mead Company land. Donald Piper, owner of Nicoletti memorials in Berlin offered to donate the 600 pound piece of granite for the memorial, and others donated money for the engraving. Volunteers lugged the stone to the top of Deer Mountain, poured a concrete foundation and set the monument. In July 2000, a small group gathered at the memorial to dedicate the site and remember ten heroes who died fifty-six years earlier. Later, an aluminum flag pole and flag were placed behind the monument.

The monument reads:

**THIS WW2 MEMORIAL IS DEDICATED**
**TO THE CREW OF THE B-17-J 43-38023**
**WHICH CRASHED ON THIS LOCATION ON 11 JULY 1944**
**THEY GAVE THEIR LIVES FOR THIS COUNTRY**

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<th>NAME</th>
<th>RANK</th>
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<td>CAST, JOHN T</td>
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<td>WALN, CLARENCE M</td>
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The inscription above, on the granite memorial stone, refers to the crashed Flying Fortress as a B-17J. The organizers of the Memorial relied on the Army Air Corps Archives crash report which, through a typo, indicated the craft was a “J” model B-17, a model which never existed.
Crew 43-38023, now we know you. We will always remember you. We love you. We miss you. We thank you. God bless you and may light perpetual shine upon you and the family and friends you left behind.

A Prayer for Soldiers
Loving God, so long as there are souls who do not know Thee, souls who despise Thee and souls indifferent to Thee, there will be a need for soldiers to fight for righteousness and peace. We pray for Your love and protection for all our soldiers. Please grant them the courage to fight for Thee and to defend the oppressed, persecuted, enslaved and downtrodden with unwavering conviction. In the cause of what is right and just, we beg You to preserve them from all physical, spiritual, emotional and moral harm. Keep them always in Your loving care, while they do what they must do. May they feel the grace of Your loving presence and feel Your gentle hand on their shoulders to support and guide them. Please help them throw off the shackles of hate and indifference Satan employs to enslave the world. May our soldiers’ service and sacrifice not be in vain. Though distance separates us from them, may they know they are loved and appreciated, and may they always know our thoughts and prayers are with them. God of all goodness, grant us faith and hope while we wait for the safe return of our loved ones, who answered the call to serve. We turn to you for comfort. May we trust in your Divine Mercy as we await peace and our soldiers’ coming home for good. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen

May 30, 2011, Memorial Day
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