

PASS IN REVIEW

"Shedding Light on Idaho's Military History"



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Idaho Military Historical Society
and Museum | Winter 2016

WWII B-17 pilot's history found at the museum

By Pamela Eldridge
Special to the Idaho Military History Museum

Idaho's Military History Museum on Gowen Field had something I had hoped for years to find: Bombing mission reports from the 303rd Bomb Group, which trained on Gowen Field, when based in Molesworth, England during WWII. My father-in-law, Truman K. Eldridge, was a B-17 pilot assigned to that unit in 1944.

Truman joined the Army Air Force 1942 and flew his first bombing mission in June, 1944. His 26th mission was a bomb raid to Merseburg, Germany, on August 24, 1944.

Just before reaching the target area his plane was hit with heavy flak. Eldridge made his crew bail out while he wrestled with the controls, then he parachuted into the waiting arms of the Germans. That day he became a POW and spent the rest of the war at Stalag Luft 1 near Barth, Germany, on the Black Sea coast. All the men on his crew were captured and were sent to different POW camps. A second plane went down at the same time. All perished.

Through the years researching his service, I sent for his military records from various government and military repositories, always hoping to receive documentation of his last bombing mission and POW experiences but these documents were never in the papers I received.

In early February 2015, I sent one more form, this time to a wrong address and the Postal Service forwarded it somewhere. The person at this somewhere-address did something extraordinary – he put in a requisition for replacement medals my father-in-law earned during all the years of his AAF and AF service. One day six months later I opened my front door to go outside and found a large padded envelope placed squarely on the welcome mat. The medals were delivered



Lt. Eldridge and crew of the 303rd Bomb Group beside a Boeing B-17 "Flying Fortress" in Molesworth, England, 26 June 1944.

Back row, left to right: S/Sgt Ralph T Strong (BTG)(POW); S/Sgt Andrew T Panos (TG)(POW); T/Sgt Samuel A Rowlett, Jr. (R)(POW); T/Sgt Frederick E Barnes (E)(POW); S/Sgt LaFon Wesley (WG)(POW); Cpl. Darwin D Hopkins (WG). Front row, left to right: 1LT Truman K Eldridge (P)(POW); 2LT Lt James A Durkin (N); 1LT Sanders H Campbell (B); 2LT Daniel J Sheehan, Jr (CP)(POW). (Note: not everyone in this crew photo were on Eldridge's plane on August 24, 1944). Photo courtesy of Gary Moncur, webmaster of Hell's Angels 303rd Bomb Group (H). URL: www.303rdbg.com. Also available on Fold3 in conjunction with NARA, listed under WWII photos. URL: www.fold3.com/image/32144975.

without much ceremony. All the medals were clearly labeled except a single ribbon and several tiny pins that had tape placed over them in an X holding these items together on the paper invoice.

I had no idea what these were or what to do with them, but I did have an idea to go to the Idaho Military History Museum on Gowen Field (Boise Air Terminal) to see if someone there could help identify this ribbon and pins. There I found what I was looking for plus something I had hoped to find for years: bombing mission reports from the 303rd Bomb Group

See "WWII B-17 Pilot," page 3

Museum's PT-23 was used to train WWII pilots

By Capt. Robert J. Taylor
Idaho Army National Guard
State Command Historian

The Fairchild PT-23 was used during World War II to train future fighter pilots. It is a variation of the Fairchild PT-19, which featured an open cockpit design.

"Everybody who went through flight school had to learn on one of these primary trainers before moving onto an advance trainer," said Ken Swanson, Emeritus Director and former Executive Director, Idaho Military Museum.

"It didn't matter if you were going to become a fighter pilot, a transport pilot or a bomber pilot, this was your first plane," Swanson said.

The Army selected the PT-19 to train pilots out of 17 possible training planes in 1939. In 1942 the PT-23 was designed due to concerns of a shortage of the PT-19 engines. The only difference between the two models is the slight differences in the engines.

The PT-23 features two tandem seats, which means the flight instructor sat behind the student pilot in a straight line. The fuselage is steel while the rest of the plane is built from plywood and covered in fabric.

The plywood did not hold up on training bases with high heat or humidity, which caused them to rot within just a few months. As a result, all metal wings became the standard for fixed-wing training aircraft.

You're invited to attend museum board meetings

The museum's Board of Directors extends an ongoing, open invitation to anyone interested to attend and participate in monthly museum board meetings. The meetings are usually held the last Wednesday of the month at the Museum starting at 18:30 and last for about 60 minutes.

We want and value the involvement and help of our fellow museum supporters. We welcome both questions and suggestions. We don't claim to have all the answers, so we can always use the input,

ideas and enthusiasm of our board members and supporters.

Anyone interested in contributing as a future member on the board is encouraged to attend and learn how they might help to make the museum better and better.

If you are interested in attending, call Jeff Packer at 208-272-4841.



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facebook.com/Idaho
MilitaryHistoryMuseum



The museum's Fairchild PT-23 WWII Primary Trainer was once owned by the late Steve Appleton and was the subject of an Idaho State Supreme Court case. The model was the first plane pilots trained on during WWII. The silver paint scheme of the U.S. Army Training Command is the correct color for the American usage of the PT-26. The Canadian Cornells were painted yellow. Blue and yellow colors were discontinued before all but a very few PT-26s were put into service. (IMHS photo)

The museum's PT-23, one of 774, was built in 1943 and found its way to the museum after a lengthy court battle that reached the state's Supreme Court.

Micron's former CEO Steve Appleton donated the plane to the Idaho Aviation Hall of Fame in 1999, which intended to build a museum but donated the plane to the Idaho Military Museum in 2008 after it could not raise the funds to do so.

See Museum's PT-23, page 3

PASS IN REVIEW

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Opinions expressed herein are often those of volunteers and museum supporters, and may not represent policies or positions of the State of Idaho, the Idaho Military Division, or the Idaho State Historical Society.

Your comments or article suggestions are welcomed. Call the museum at 208-272-4841 during our scheduled hours or visit us on line at museum.mil.idaho.gov.

WWII B-17 Pilot from Page 1

while it was based in England in 1944. The museum was easy to find and access even though it's on base at Gowen Field.

I parked under the shade of a tree and went inside. I was greeted by a pleasant volunteer who gave an enthusiastic explanation of the museum's holdings. When I explained about the ribbon, he suggested I talk to Vic and pointed to a man standing by a large display of medals and colorful ribbons.

Vic listened intently as I asked questions and he patiently explained the medals and ribbons and how to properly display them. But then he went one step further. He asked for my father-in-law's name and date of the bombing mission. Soon Vic returned with the bombing mission report for August 24, 1944. We looked for my father-in-law's name and there it was.

The report shows he piloted the Deputy PFF aircraft behind the lead plane of the combat wing (his was one of the two radar equipped ships that flew that day). This report of the bombing mission is complete, from the assembly

of thirty-nine B-17 crews at six o'clock in the morning through the final landing of the last surviving B-17 that afternoon at 1510 hours. Vic explained the museum has all the bombing reports of the 303rd BG. He pointed to a row of dark green metal filing cabinets in a small room. After years of searching and hoping, I was holding the actual report in my hands. For a donation to the museum, I had my own copy.

I was astonished to finally have this report. This happened because I was not only in the right place, at the Idaho Military Museum, but because Vic's thoughtful questioning and knowledge of the Museum's resources helped answer our family's longstanding question about what happened the day Truman K. Eldridge was shot down over Germany.

Vic recalled a book in their books for sale section about what life was like for the POWs at the same camp my father-in-law was held. There is also a sizeable reading library which deserves another visit to the museum. For now, though, I've got some reading material.

Museum's PT-23 from page 2

The owner of a hanger where the plane had been stored prior to its donation to the Idaho Military Museum filed a lien against the plane, claiming he was owed compensation for storing and maintaining the plane prior to its donation. The district court did not agree with him and awarded the Idaho Military Museum more than \$70,000 of legal fees as a result of the law suit that followed. The Idaho Supreme Court affirmed the district court's ruling.

The plane is the largest artifact inside the Idaho Military Museum. Three other planes and four Army tracked vehicles sit in the museum's parking lot. PT-23 quick facts:

- Crew: two (pilot, student)
- Length: 28 feet
- Wingspan: 36 feet
- Maximum speed: 132 mph
- Ceiling: 13,200 feet
- Range: 400 miles

124FW dedicates A-10s to Idaho cities

Idaho's 124th Fighter Wing has dedicated two of its A-10C Thunderbolt II attack jets to the cities of Caldwell and Nampa by marking each of the aircraft—affectionately known as “Warthogs”—with nose art identifying the two Idaho cities.

The dedication ceremonies took place Dec. 10 on Gowen Field, with Caldwell mayor Garrett Nancolas and officials from the city of Nampa on hand.

The 124th will eventually dedicate each of its 21 aircraft to Idaho communities to show the Wing's appreciation for their support of Idaho's 1,300 citizen airmen, most of whom are traditional Air National Guard members.

MEMBERSHIP RENEWALS

Don't forget to renew your IMHS membership!

A renewal form is available on our webpage: <http://museum.mil.idaho.gov/Application.htm>.

Annual renewal rates are:

General Membership:	\$25
Senior (60 and older):	\$15
Associate (Spouse):	\$10
Student:	\$10
Lifetime Membership:	\$375

(Lifetime payment may be spread out over a one-year period)

The Idaho State Tax Commission offers a tax credit for contributions to Idaho's educational entities which include “An Idaho public or private nonprofit museum.”

The Idaho Military Historical Society is such an organization and donations to the Society qualify for this credit. Please remember the Museum as you plan your donations for the year.

WWII Volunteer Reserve armbands identified

A reader recently sent us images of military-looking armbands and a shoulder patch, asking if we could tell him what they were. Here's what we found out:

The armbands and patch were worn by the more than 8,500 men who served in the Idaho Volunteer Reserve, a statewide civil defense force created early in WWII. Members furnished their own weapons, ammunition and equipment.

Armbands worn by members identified the county they were from with number and letter designations in use in 1942 (today's numbering system started in 1945). For example, Twin Falls county was

See Armbands, page 5



Armbands and the shoulder patch worn by members of the Idaho Volunteer Reserve, a statewide civil defense force, from April 1942 to April 1944. Numbers and letters identified the county members were from using codes in effect prior to 1945, when Idaho's current county codes were published. The group included one battalion per county plus a military police battalion. Members of the Idaho Volunteer Reserve furnished their own weapons, ammunition, and equipment, wore unit insignia and carried certificates of enrollment. The force included more than 8,500 men in 165 companies across the state by the time it was disbanded in 1944.

Volunteers needed to support the Museum

The Idaho Military History Museum has a great need for volunteers to conduct an effective museum and educational program. We are looking for volunteers with the following skills:

Museum Docents and Living History Volunteers

We need docents (tour guide/Museum host) for mid-week and weekends.

WWII Reenactors

Our WWII Living History Group is looking for new recruits. Guys: If you are at least 16 years old, have parental permission, and completed a Hunter Safety Training Course, you are eligible to become a member of the group.

Ladies: We are looking for female Living Historians to portray Military Nurses and Home Front Ladies to expand our public event displays. We are especially interested in forming a medical group that can staff our new military ambulance. If you are interested in becoming a WWII Living Historian Re-enactor, please contact us.

Carpenters

Display cases need to be repaired and diorama layouts built.

Oral History Development

We need a project director. Lots of stories need to be

recorded before it is too late. There is a lot of interest in this project.

Fund Raising

We are a non-profit organization trying to build up an Endowment and maintain day to day operations. We are also looking for experienced grant writers.

Library and Archival Operations

We need a computer "savvy" volunteer to help out. A basic knowl edge of Excel or similar spreadsheet programs would be helpful. We are also looking for an assistant librarian.

Historians/Historical Researchers

We have several items and projects in need of a historical researcher.

If you're interested in serving in the museum in any volunteer capacity, please email Gayle Alvarez at galvarez@imd.idaho.gov or call the museum at (208) 272-4841 during business hours: Tuesday through Saturday noon to 4 p.m.

If you are a military retiree, veteran, military history buff, or student who enjoys history and wants to help serve the community, give us a call or visit the museum. You may discover that we have just the volunteer opportunity for you.



Heroic Past... Proud Future

Donations

In memory of
MG James S. Brooks
made by
Joan Brooks

New member
Richard V. Ostrogorsky

Director's Message ...

Looking back on 2015, ahead to a new year



Jeff Packer

2015 has ended. The past year has brought us many ups and downs. We endured the passing of our Curator, Charles Blake, in January and one of our long-time museum docents, Don McNarie, in September. Both are greatly missed.

Our Curator position was filled by Idaho Air National Guard retiree Vic Higgins. Vic did an excellent job for us throughout the year. Vic has since moved on to a Teaching Assistant position at Boise State University. Our loss is BSU's gain. Vic will still be around to volunteer and maybe Docent from time to time.

We experienced an increase in the visitors at the museum this year with over 5,000 guests coming through the door. The freeway signage and additional advertising is paying off.

We look forward to the upcoming year and are planning for several great events. Hope to see everyone in 2016.

— Jeff Packer, Executive Director/Curator

Armbands from page 4

"6-R," rather than today's "2T." Volunteers from Idaho County, "I" today, wore "7-H."

The Volunteer Reserve helped 200 families escape the flooding Boise River in 1943, then stayed to guard the abandoned farms.

The IVR was disbanded in 1944 as the threat of civil disaster or invasion diminished, according to author Orlan J. Svingen in his

book, "The History of the Idaho National Guard," published in 1995. The Idaho Volunteer Reserve is described on pages 85 and 86.

A history of Idaho's 44 county codes, many of which have

changed four times since their creation in 1932, is available on line from the Automobile License Plate Collectors Association at <http://www.bprlicenseplates.com/Idaho%20-%20county%20codes.htm>.

MG Brooks' family donation will help the IMHS

By Gayle Alvarez
Idaho Military History Society

General Brooks was a strong advocate and dedicated member of the Idaho Military History Society. He was our first financial donor and it was his check that enabled us to open our checking account back in 1993. He was one of our first Charter Life members, and each year he faithfully donated to our operating fund.

In his memory, his widow, Joan, has made a sizeable donation to the IMHS. The funds will be used to purchase updated reference books so that when some of the newer military equipment items come in, we can identify them.

We are extremely grateful to Mrs. Brooks for this significant and lasting memorial to a truly wonderful man.

RETIRED MAJOR GENERAL JAMES S. BROOKS, Idaho's Adjutant General from 1974 to 1985, passed away in 2015 at his home in Seattle.

During his tenure as adjutant general, Brooks also served on several committees at the national level, including chairman of the Army Reserve Forces Policy Committee with responsibilities to advise the secretary and chief of staff of the Army on Reserve and Guard affairs. He also served as aviation consultant to the chief of the National Guard Bureau. (IMHS photo)



Idaho's Air Guard enters the 'Jet Age' in 1953

Editor's note: The following excerpt comes from the "Idaho Air National Guard 40th Anniversary" book published by the 124th Reconnaissance Group in 1986.

Idaho's Air National Guard entered the "jet age" in 1953 with the arrival of 25 North American F-86A "Sabre" jets, the U.S. Air Force's first swept-wing fighter aircraft.

The F-86 had proven itself in Korea, where it became the Air Force's mainstay in that conflict.

The single-seat jet, powered by a gas turbine engine, could fly at supersonic speeds—more than 600 miles per hour—and was armed with six .50 caliber machine guns mounted in the nose of the aircraft.

Idaho airmen flew and supported the F-86A for two years, honing the knowledge and skills they would need to meet the many challenges that we would face in years to come.



Idaho airmen "scramble" to launch their F-86A "Sabre" jets during an alert exercise held on Gowen Field. The F-86A, Idaho's first jet fighter, was a proven veteran of the Korean War. A fully restored "Sabre" jet, decorated to match those flown by Idaho's 190th Fighter Squadron, is on display in front of the Idaho Military History Museum. (IDANG photo)

Idaho Military Historical Society

4040 W. Guard St.
Boise, ID 83705-5004

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