

# **8th Air Force Association Historical Society Oregon Chapter**

## **Quarterly Meeting**

May 8, 2003

## **Meeting Notes**

Greeting to Attendees: John Horne, President

Invocation: Roland Stewart

Pledge of Allegiance: Bob Miller

## **Chapter Business**

### **Treasurer's Report**

Jerry Andrews

The chapter has a financial balance of \$1273 in checking and \$867. \$2140 total. (rounded)

#### **Dues collection**

Of the 178 members on the roll for 2003 only two 8th AF veterans and 3 associates have not paid.

## **Display**

Del Reed's widow donated his original oil paintings to the organization. Three finished as well as one painting in progress was on display.

Excess copies of newsletters from the 385th BG were there for anyone to have.

The letter written by the National President concerning "The Mighty 8th AF" for year 2003 annual proclamation. This is used by chapters as a supporting document in order to get local and state governments to honor the 8th AF every October. Bob, and Sam will try and get the Oregon governor to declare the proclamation for Oregon.

## **Meeting Times Ideas**

It was suggested that we have one meeting during the year on a Saturday. This would allow associate members to have an easier time to attend. The May or August meeting was suggested as the two best times to have it.

Also suggested was the possibility of holding the meeting further south in Eugene area. This would allow southern Oregon members a chance to attend. Also possible a combination of the two ideas.

# National Convention

Colorado Springs is where it is at this year Oct 8th-14th. (1300 miles from Portland).

It is a two day drive from Portland to the convention. Next year the convention is in Kansas.

## Budget Issues

Memorial Recognition issues

2004 Dues are \$10.

In past we would donate \$25 to a charity of their choice upon the death of a member. This is becoming uneconomical.

Instead of giving them a check to donate to a charity we give them a certificate that would list the members accomplishments. We would give them could be held onto and be passed along instead of money to their survivor.

This was put into a motion and passed.

On the certificate change the wording to add in "board and members" . It was also suggested that it be done by "the members".

Clint Grueber , after years of working on the board, has resigned from the board of the directors. A round of applause of appreciation was given to him for all the work that he has done over the years.

Joe Conroy stated that we have 178 members. 115 veterans, 63 are associate.

Life membership, for both national and local, can be done.

## Featured Speaker Presentation

### Don Bourgeois: Rex Barber and the Yamamoto Mission

Don is a historian and is interested in all types of material. This year marks the 60th anniversary of April 18, 1943 shoot down of Admiral Yamamoto in the South Pacific during World War Two.

#### Background

A year before, on April 16 1942, Col. Jimmy Doolittle lead the raid of 16 Army B-25s against Japan - launched off the Navy carrier Hornet. It was done to make a point (Prime Minister Tojo even saw the planes flying over Tokyo) to Japanese military that we are in very much in the fight in the war against them even though the US had not won a single battle so far. (All 16 planes were lost, 6 men were captured, of which 3 were executed. The rest all eventually made it back to allied lines.) One consequence of the raid it is estimated that at least 250,000 Chinese were executed since the Japanese military thought they were helping the Allies in the war. A direct result of the raid against mainland Japan the IJN (Imperial Japanese Navy) plan for the capture of Midway was again put into motion planned by Admiral Yamamoto.

(Editor's note: Japan lost the Midway battle (4 carriers: Akagi, Hiryu, Soyu, Kaga, and 1 cruiser sunk to 1 US carrier: Yorktown, and 1 destroyer sunk). This shifted Japanese offensive focus back into the South Pacific.)

On April 14, 1943 the US Navy crypto analysts read (code named MAGIC) a Japanese Navy (version JN-25) coded message that was transmitted in the South Pacific. It stated that Admiral Yamamoto was doing an inspection tour from Rabaul to an island off of Bougainville called Ballale. This was some 400 miles NW of Guadalcanal in the [Solomon Islands](#).

(Editor's note: Admiral Yamamoto was chief war architect and planner of the Pacific war for Japan. He had approved all war plans and had designed both the Pearl Harbor and Midway attacks. He had also had visited in the US during the 1920s and 1930s and was familiar with the US Naval abilities.)

Once this was found out there was some discussion in the higher levels of Naval and political areas on whether to attempt a mission to shoot him down. This was in part that they were worried that if we succeeded then the Japanese would suspect that we are reading their codes if our planes showed up just at the right time and place to shoot down Admiral Yamamoto and they would then change their Naval codes. The Midway defeat did not tip them off that we were reading their code. They thought that during the battle when Torpedo 8 (and other torpedo groups) attacked and were all shot down that they lost due to just bad luck and our willingness to sacrifice torpedo bombers to lure down their combat air patrol allowing our dive bombers an easy attack. In other words acting how their pilots would act.

However someone finally made a point that if we do not use the knowledge gained why bother reading their codes at all so it was told to go ahead after it had traveled up to President Roosevelt (who was just advised of the plan). Nimitz was sole person to choose to the "Go" or "NO GO" on the mission.

They thought the odds were about 1000:1 to get him. We had all the technical details of his flight times, arrival times etc. However, if a change in wind, weather, crosswinds, unlucky enemy plane or ship interceptions threw off the flight more than a few minutes then no interception would be made.

## **The Planning and the Unit**

The whole attack was a full Navy show - but no navy planes had the range to fly from Guadalcanal to Bougainville. Carriers could not get there without being detected. (Editor's note: the Japanese did have radar in 1939 but not on many ships. They also had land based radar scattered throughout the Pacific also on a very rare basis). The Army, however, did have an aircraft that could get there the Lockheed P-38.

Thus, yet again, a big mission would be accomplished by Army personnel with the the Navy playing a supporting role.

The 339th Fighter Squadron was assigned the mission. Initially the unit did not have P-38s. Rex Barber's unit was initially trained on flying the P-39s on Fiji. When they learned there were P-38s in Australia his unit went to Australia to get them and ferried them north to Guadalcanal in the Solomons.

Red had heard great things about the P-38 Lightning but on the flight back the starboard engine quit the plane was jumping around and he had all sorts of problems keeping it airborne and under control. He was also using up more fuel than expected and he barely got it to Guadalcanal. When he landed he complained to the crew chief that the plane was lousy on one engine — then the crew chief asked him why didn't he feather the prop on the engine that had quit. He answered back that he did not know he could do that that!

The P-38 carried a standard armament of four .50 caliber machine guns and one 20mm cannon in its nose. This created a concentrated cone of fire out to the guns maximum range unlike wing mounted guns that were boresighted to concentrate at a fixed point in front of the plane (harmonized in British parlance).

A problem for any fighter pilot is target fixation. This is when you concentrate so much on hitting a target you lose "situational awareness" of your surroundings of both other aircraft and the ground. On one of his combat flights with the P-38 Rex concentrated so hard at aiming at a ship he flew between a ship's two masts and took off the left wingtip during a strafing run. The ruggedness of the P-38 allowed him to make it back to base. This meant all the pilots had several months to learn the P-38s strength and weaknesses. Of note is the fact that the 339th Sq. had only 20 P-38s and 40 pilots on hand on the day of the mission.

## **The Mission**

The route that was planned and taken for the attack was not a straight line. It was only 375 miles direct to Bougainville, but the planned route was 500 in order to avoid detection. Some books mention that it was done to avoid radar.

The CO of the unit knew that he had to fly precisely using only dead reckoning abilities so he ordered a special naval ship compass and had it installed in his plane since it had better accuracy than the standard military plane issue.

In order to get that range they had to use two different types of wing tanks 385 and 110 gal. It was mentioned that this was due to the inability to mount two 385 gallon tanks side by side so a 385 and a 110 gal could be mounted under the center of the plane.

The planning was down to the detail but only the CO knew who the target was and no one knew who would be in the "killer" flight till that morning. The CO put LT. Lamphere as the element lead and Rex Barber winging him. The complete "killer" section consisted of 4 planes. The other 14 planes would be the cover planes.

West of the interception point was a Japanese airbase at Kalili. It was a primary field and had 75 planes on it. The two GM2 "Betty" bombers had 6 Zeros as escorts.

The Japanese bombers had been modified to carry extra cargo needed by Yamamoto and party by having the rear twin 20mm tail cannons removed.

## **The Course.**

The first leg was on a course of 265, 183 miles, 53 min;

2nd leg was a course of 290, 88 miles, 27 min;

3rd Leg was a course of 305, 115 miles, 38 min

then they would turn northeast and be heading toward Bougainville and should spot the planes a shortly after their turn.

## **Takeoff**

On the morning of the mission two a/c aborted on takeoff and those were replaced with the ready spares. Rex Barber was flying someone else's plane named — "Miss Virginia" — on this day and not his own plane which was in the shop for maintenance.

The squadron flew 50 feet off the water. They were warned before takeoff "Don't fall asleep". This was done since on the deck it was hot and boring. One plane got too low and clipped a wave that sprayed salt water over the plane and canopy - which once it dried blocked most of his view forward due to salt.

## **The Fight**

Just a few moments after they turned toward Bougainville and the 14 cover planes had started to climb to be top cover for the killer flight someone called out that they had spotted the enemy.

Besby Holmes, part of the kill flight, could not get his drop tanks released so went to side to try and release them and so did his wingman. This left only Lamphere and Barber to attack the Bettys.

Lamphere saw the 6 escorting zeros to the left and behind the bombers and peeled off to attack them head-on. Rex did not follow and went right toward the Bettys since that was the mission — to shoot them down. The attack angle on the closest Betty was initially 90 degrees so he kept turning to make it a 0 degree deflection shot from behind the bomber. He slowed down and raked it from right to left. then from left to right. The plane's right engine started to smoke and the plane headed toward Bougainville. His tactic of raking of the Betty from behind forced him to slow down so as not to overrun the bomber which allowed the escorting Zeros to catch up to him. They started firing on him as he was speeding back up so he turned away southwest to go home. (Upon landing they counted 106 holes his plane).

As he was exiting the area he saw the other Betty that had since been attacked by the two others planes in the killer flight (after the pilot had cleared his drop tanks) but it was still flying well. He made a single close in pass at this aircraft and it started to go down also then he left the combat area and rejoined the rest of the flight.

The whole squadron then disengaged and headed home. One 38 reported problems soon after they started back and fell behind and was never seen again.

### **The Controversy**

Upon landing back on Guadalcanal Lamphere jumped out of his plane and yelled that he got Yamamoto. But no one was sure who got what or even if Yamamoto was in the planes.

All the pilots involved in the attack were pulled out of combat in order to preserve the MAGIC secret (in case they were caught and tortured) and two days later all were back in Australia. Rex and one other pilot were playing golf and an Associated Press newsman asked them about that mission. Since the reporter obviously knew about it they told him more details. Soon a newspaper article was published about it. Because of that lapse in judgement the initial recommendation award for the Medal of Honor to Rex and the CO was downgraded to the Navy Cross instead.

In the initial Navy records about the mission it stated there were three Betty bombers shot down. This was due to Lamphere's account of shooting down a Betty and watching the wing come off and Rex Barber's account of his attack on the two bombers. After the war the Japanese records revealed that there were only two in the flight and both were shot down: one ditched in the jungle and one crashed into the water. All six Zero fighters returned to base. So, the Air Force dropped the victory awarded to Lamphere and Barber from 1 each to 1/2 each. Lamphere's score then dropped to 4 1/2 and he was mad since he lost his "ACE" status. Barber's score dropped to 6 1/2.

In the after action report Lamphere stated that there was a tail gunner - but the records showed that there were no guns in that planes to make room for luggage (see above).

The plane that headed toward Bougainville and landed in the jungle has been examined many times (the government will not allow it to be removed). The plane exams showed that damage to it was both right to left and left to right - confirming that Barber shot it down.

Lt. Lamphere stated right wing fell off - the plane in jungle plane shows the wing was sheared off by a tree once on the ground. It is but a few hundred feet before the main wreckage. He never stated that he attacked the plane over the water that Rex and the two others in the flight shot at.

Autopsy records indicate that a bullet fired from the rear of the Betty struck Admiral Yamamoto and killed him

before the Betty made it to the ground. Thus Rex not only shot down the plane but actually killed the Admiral as well.

Rex Barber died in 2001 but he fought the awards downgrade since he wanted the full credit for a full plane - regardless if it was Yamamoto's exact plane or not. His legal appeals went to the US Court of Appeals but the redress of this (now) Air Force administrative error has been denied each court level. Most of the denials was based on the US Air Force stating that they do not want to change official records (but over the past few years many records have been amended: MOH to three people, Purple Hearts, Navy Crosses, Air Medal and others in all branches of the services.)

It is unknown if the lawyer that represented Rex before his death will continue the appeals process.