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B-17s - Like Mated Dragonflies

Taken from: <http://home.wanadoo.nl/a.e.c.oostvogels/WW2.Veterans.htm>

14 August 2003 they laid Glenn Rojohn to rest. The remains of Glenn Rojohn were laid to rest in the Peace Lutheran Cemetery in the little town of Greenock, Pa., just southeast of Pittsburgh. He was 81, and had been in the air conditioning and plumbing business in nearby McKeesport.

If you had seen him on the street he would probably have looked to you like so many other graying, bespectacled old World War II veterans whose names appear so often now on obituary page. But like so many of them, though he seldom talked about it, he could have told you one hell of a story. He won the Distinguished Flying Cross and the Purple Heart all in one swoop in the skies over Germany on Dec. 31, 1944. Swoop indeed! I interviewed Glenn for *Twilight Of Fury* and could use only part of his story. The rest was too incredible for believable fiction!

Capt. Glenn Rojohn, of the 8th Air Force's 100th Bomb Group, was flying his B-17G Flying Fortress bomber on a raid over Hamburg. His formation had braved heavy flak to drop their bombs, and then turned 180 degrees to head out over the North Sea. They had finally turned northwest, headed back to England, when they were jumped by German fighters at 22,000 feet.

The Messerschmitt ME-109s pressed their attack so closely that Capt. Rojohn could see the faces of the German pilots. He and other pilots fought to remain in formation so they could use each other's guns to defend the group. Rojohn saw a B-17 ahead of him burst into flames and slide sickeningly toward the earth. He gunned his ship forward to fill in the gap.

He felt a huge impact. The big bomber shuddered, felt suddenly very heavy and began losing altitude. Rojohn grasped almost immediately that he had collided with another plane. A B-17 below him, piloted by Lt. William G. McNab, had slammed the top of its fuselage into the bottom of Rojohn's.

The top turret gun of McNab's plane was now locked in the belly of Rojohn's plane and the ball turret in

the belly of Rojohn's had smashed through the top of McNab's. The two bombers were almost perfectly aligned - the tail of the lower plane was slightly to the left of Rojohn's tailpiece. They were stuck together, as a crewman later recalled, "like mating dragon flies." No one will ever know exactly how it happened. Perhaps both pilots had moved instinctively to fill the same gap in formation. Perhaps McNab's plane had hit an air pocket. Three of the engines on the bottom plane were still running, as were all four of Rojohn's. The fourth engine on the lower bomber was on fire and the flames were spreading to the rest of the aircraft. The two were losing altitude quickly. Rojohn tried several times to gun his engines and break free of the other plane. The two were inextricably locked together.

Fearing a fire, Rojohn cuts his engines and rang the bailout bell. If his crew had any chance of parachuting, he had to keep the plane under control somehow. The ball turret, hanging below the belly of the B-17, was considered by many to be a death trap - the worst station on the bomber. In this case, both ball turrets figured in a swift and terrible drama of life and death. Staff Sgt. Edward L. Woodall, Jr., in the ball turret of the lower bomber, had felt the impact of the collision above him and saw shards of metal drop past him. Worse, he realized both electrical and hydraulic power was gone. Remembering escape drills, he grabbed the hand crank, released the clutch and cranked the turret and its guns until they were straight down, then turned and climbed out the back of the turret up into the fuselage.

Once inside the plane's belly Woodall saw a chilling sight, the ball turret of the other bomber protruding through the top of the fuselage. In that turret, hopelessly trapped, was Staff Sgt. Joseph Russo. Several crewmembers on Rojohn's plane tried frantically to crank Russo's turret around so he could escape. But, jammed into the fuselage of the lower plane, the turret would not budge. Aware of his plight, but possibly unaware that his

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B-17s—Like Matted Dragonflies—continued from page 1

was going out over the intercom of his plane; Sgt. Russo began reciting his Hail Marys.

Up in the cockpit, Capt. Rojohn and his co-pilot, 2nd Lt. William G. Leek, Jr., had propped their feet against the instrument panel so they could pull back on their controls with all their strength, trying to prevent their plane from going into a spinning dive that would prevent the crew from jumping out. Capt. Rojohn motioned left and the two managed to wheel the grotesque, collision-born hybrid of a plane back toward the German coast. Leek felt like he was intruding on Sgt. Russo as his prayers crackled over the radio, so he pulled off his flying helmet with its earphones.

Rojohn, immediately grasping that crew could not exit from the bottom of his plane, ordered his top turret gunner and his radio operator, Tech Sgts. Orville Elkin and Edward G. Neuhaus, to make their way to the back of the fuselage and out the waist door behind the left wing. Then he got his navigator, 2nd Lt. Robert Washington, and his bombardier, Sgt. James Shirley to follow them. As Rojohn and Leek somehow held the plane steady, these four men, as well as waist gunner Sgt. Roy Little and tail gunner Staff Sgt. Francis Chase were able to bail out. Now the plane locked below them was aflame. Fire poured over Rojohn's left wing. He could feel the heat from the plane below and hear the sound of 50-caliber machine gun ammunition "cooking off" in the flames.

Capt. Rojohn ordered Lieut. Leek to bail out. Leek knew that without him helping keep the controls back, the plane would drop in a flaming spiral and the centrifugal force would prevent Rojohn from bailing. He refused the order. Meanwhile, German soldiers and civilians on the ground that afternoon looked up in wonder. Some of them thought they were seeing a new Allied secret weapon - a strange eight-engined double bomber. But anti-aircraft gunners on the North Sea coastal island of Wangerooge had seen the collision. A German battery captain wrote in his logbook at 12:47 P.M.: "Two fortresses collided in a formation in the NE. The planes flew hooked together and flew 20 miles south. The two planes were unable to fight anymore. The crash could be awaited so I stopped the firing at these two planes."

Suspended in his parachute in the cold December sky, Bob Washington watched with deadly fascination as the mated bombers, trailing black smoke, fell to earth about three miles away, their downward trip ending in an ugly boiling blossom of fire. In the cockpit Rojohn and Leek held grimly to the controls trying to ride a falling rock. Leek tersely recalled, "The ground came up faster and faster. Praying was allowed. We gave it one last effort and slammed into the ground." The McNab plane on the bottom exploded, vaulting the other B-17 upward and forward. It hit the ground and slid along until its left wing slammed through a wooden building and the smoldering mass of aluminum came to a stop.

Rojohn and Leek were still seated in their cockpit. The nose of the plane was relatively intact, but everything from the B-17's massive wings back was destroyed. They looked at each other incredulously. Neither was badly injured. Movies have nothing on reality. Still perhaps in shock, Leek crawled out through a huge hole behind the cockpit, felt for the familiar pack in his uniform pocket and pulled out a cigarette. He placed it in his mouth and was about to light it. Then he noticed a young German soldier pointing a rifle at him. The soldier looked scared and annoyed. He grabbed the cigarette out of Leek's mouth and pointed down to the gasoline pouring out over the wing from a ruptured fuel tank.

Two of the six men who parachuted from Rojohn's plane did not survive the jump. But the other four and, amazingly, four men from the other bomber, including ball turret gunner Woodall, survived. All were taken prisoner. Several of them were interrogated at length by the Germans until they were satisfied that what had crashed was not a new American secret weapon.

Rojohn, typically, didn't talk much about his Distinguished Flying Cross. Of Leek, he said, "In all fairness to my co-pilot, he's the reason I'm alive today." Like so many veterans, Rojohn got back to life un sentimentally after the war, marrying and raising a son and daughter. For many years, though, he tried to link back up with Leek, going through government records to try to track him down.

It took him 40 years, but in 1986, he found the number of Leek's mother, in Washington State. Yes, her son Bill was visiting from California. Would Rojohn like to speak with him? Two old men on a phone line, trying to pick up some familiar timbre of youth in each other's voice. One can imagine that first conversation between the two men who had shared that wild ride in the cockpit of a B-17

A year later, the two were reunited at a reunion of the 100th Bomb Group in Long Beach, Calif. Bill Leek died the following year. Glenn Rojohn was the last survivor of the remarkable piggyback light He was like thousands upon thousands of men—soda jerks and lumberjacks, teachers and dentists, students and lawyers and service station attendants and store clerks and farm boys—who in the prime of their lives went to war in World War II.

They sometimes did incredible things, endured awful things, and for the most part most of them pretty much kept it to themselves and just faded back into the fabric of civilian life. Capt. Glenn Rojohn, AAF, died last Saturday after a long siege of illness. But he apparently faced that final battle with the same grim aplomb he displayed that remarkable day over Germany so long ago. A great story. I wonder how many more stories like this one are lost each day as members of the Greatest Generation pass on. Let us be thankful for such men.

China Lake Museum Foundation

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Leroy Doig III, NAWCWD Museum Curator

Eric Bengston, NAWCWD Exhibits Manager

President's Report by Paul Homer

Mark your calendar for 3 June 2006. That is the date for this year's annual China Lake Museum Foundation Dinner Auction. This event promises to be bigger and better every year, and is the major fund raising activity for the Foundation, and furthers our support to the Museum.

Beth Sumners is leading the planning committee structuring the Dinner Auction, and they are well on the way to solidifying a great program. We will have dinner and drinks provided by a local caterer, a live auction, a silent auction, special raffles, and door prizes.

The Dinner Auction Committee is asking for donations of quality auction items, including works of art, China Lake memorabilia, historical items, hobby and home items, and unique and/or interesting services. We will have works of original art from our local fine artists, China Lake historical prints, jewelry, electronics, and

recreational equipment. Examples of services we have had in the past are Mammoth vacations, resort golf outings, horse back riding in the local area, pheasant hunts, gourmet dinners for groups, expert clock cleanings, and special tours. If you have some quality items, please take them to the Museum and drop them off in the Gift Shop. While there, enjoy a tour with one of our able docents, and see the new displays in the Museum.

A new item this year is an advertising brochure in which businesses and individuals can purchase ads to further their business and to support the Foundation. We have already solid commitments from several businesses to support this element of the event, and we will be contacting others in the next few weeks.

Thanks for your support in 2005, and let's make 2006 even better!

AUCTION----- AUCTION----- AUCTION----- AUCTION

Remember the All New Auction & Dinner Program will be 3 June 2006

Your Foundation's Planning Committee is creating a new program for the dinner and auction. The program will include a variety of new dining cuisines and beverages for your pleasure and all at a more affordable price. But the main event and evenings excitement will be the Live and Silent Auctions, which are planned this year to ensure everyone can participate and take home outstanding and top quality items. This year we will have a Professional Auctioneer, Jim Summers, of Plainview, Texas. The Auction and Dinner Program is a main fundraiser for the Foundation and for it to be successful we not only need your participation at the Auction & Dinner, but we need your donations of items to be auctioned. Therefore:

START NOW CONSIDERING WHAT YOU CAN DONATE TO THE AUCTION. JUNE 3 IS LESS THAN THREE MONTHS AWAY; SO DON'T DELAY IN GETTING THOSE GOOD DONATIONS UNDER WAY. THEY CAN RANGE FROM:

FINE ART YOU HAVE GROWN WEARY OF (AND CAN USE A TAX DEDUCTION) TO --

GREAT BUT NOT NEEDED CHRISTMAS GIFTS (AND CAN USE A TAX DEDUCTION) TO -----

ITEMS YOU LOVE TO PURCHASE FOR THE THRILL OF SHOPPING TO -----

GOOD STUFF IN THE HOUSE OR GARAGE THAT YOU HAVE OUTGROWN TO -----

GREAT HOBBY, CRAFT, COLLECTION, ANTIQUES, ETC., ITEMS YOU HAVE. IN OTHER WORDS, "USE YOUR IMAGINATION".

AND, GIVE SERIOUS CONSIDERATION TO DONATING A HIGH-QUALITY ITEM THAT MIGHT BRING IN \$500 OR MORE.

Bring donations to the Museum Gift shop or call and we will pick them up. If you have ideas for making this our most successful event ever, or if you would like to volunteer to participate in preparing for the Auction & Dinner Program, please call:

Beth Summers (Bus. 377-5766, email bsumners@firequick.com)

Cathy Smith (939-3530, email clmfl@ridgenet.net)

Paul Homer (375-7535, email phomer@ridgenet.net)

New Members received since Summer 2005 Newsletter:

Business Members (\$1,000.00 Annually)
New Directions Technologies Inc – Ridgecrest CA

Business Contributor Members (\$100.00 Annually)

Lifetime Members (\$1,000.00)
Saxton, Les & Nancy – Ridgecrest CA
Tunget, Barbara – Ridgecrest CA
Webster, Willard & Nancy – Ridgecrest CA

Contributor Members (\$100.00 Annually)**Sponsor Members (\$33.00 Annually)****Enlisted Military Members (Free, from Sponsor Members)**

Blaschke, AM1 William E. & Josephine – China Lake CA	Owen, HM1 Jason D. & Lora – Ridgecrest CA
DeBons, Chris – China Lake CA	Patnoudes, AMAN James C. – China Lake CA
Frizzell, Kaleb C. – Ridgecrest CA	Patterson, PR1 Robin M. & Thomas – Ridgecrest CA
Givens, AC3 Eric C & Karelle – Ridgecrest CA	Pineda, CPL Reminfelix N. – China Lake CA
Hume, AMEAN Cole A. – China Lake CA	Rull, AD3 Mary Joy – Ridgecrest CA
Love, AC1 (AW) Tod D. & Brooke – Ridgecrest, CA	Turk, Jon C. & Amy – China Lake CA

Regular Members (\$25.00 Annually)

Baldwin, James & Katherine – Ridgecrest CA	Mathewson, Wes & Joan – Ridgecrest CA
Coraggio, Michael – Middletown MD	McMahon, Brian & Elaina – Ridgecrest CA
Craig, Dan - Bakersfield CA	McManis, James – Ridgecrest CA
Doran, Sam – Ridgecrest CA	Mello, Richard J. & Louise – Ridgecrest CA
Evans, Carroll L. – Ridgecrest CA	Mumford, Mike & Jerry – Ridgecrest CA
Gibson, Gene & Jeri – Inyokern CA	Nalley, Pat & Colett - Ridgecrest CA
Goldstrand, Dale & Theresa – Inyokern CA	Ortiz, Steve & Kirsten – Ridgecrest CA
Harris, Paul & Lee – Chalfant Valley CA	Smith, Cathy M. – Ridgecrest CA
Henderson, Brian & Marilyn – Bakersfield CA	Suhr, James & Clessie – Ridgecrest CA
Hofer, Tim & Janet – Ridgecrest CA	Vanderpoel II, CAPT Eric (USN Ret.) – Alexandria VA
Kersey, Roger D. – Riverside CA	Verone, Howard & Barbara – Ridgecrest CA
Kolstoe, Mark & Susan – Ridgecrest CA	Wutzke, Gloria J. – Ridgecrest CA
Martinez, Doris – Ridgecrest CA	Zinke, Richard A. & Margy – Ridgecrest CA

NOTE: IF YOU PAID YOUR ANNUAL MEMBERSHIP DUES DURING THE MONTH OF DECEMBER AND HAVE NOT RECEIVED YOUR MEMBERSHIP CARD OR RECEIPT, PLEASE CONTACT PAT DOUCETTE (760) 375-5962.

ANNUAL BUILDING FUND DONOR PROGRAM

The Building Fund has grown by \$6400 as a result of the annual Building Fund donor program we launched in December. We now have over \$46,000 in the Building Fund. Your donations to this Building Fund program reflect the critical "grass roots" element of the overall campaign to raise money for the new Museum Facility. We are soliciting donations from major aerospace corporations, Foundations, County, State and Federal funding sources. Your donations provide leverage for receiving their support. The Building Fund donor program is separate from the membership program. Membership receipts, gift shop profits and special sponsor donations will continue to be utilized to cover the Foundation administrative and daily operations requirements. The funds received through the Building Fund program are allocated as restricted funds to support expenses for a design and construction of a new Museum facility, new exhibit creation, and related fund raising expenses. Our goal is to have the necessary resources to open a facility in the new location just outside the main gate within

five years. Please consider committing to be a donor on an annual basis. Several one-time donations were also submitted and are welcome. The annual Building Fund donor categories are shown below with names of those who have committed as a result of the December appeal:

- \$200-\$499 Friend of the Museum: Ed & Carol Jeter, Curt & Gretchen Bryan, Joseph & Beverly Clavet, Harvey & Audrey Nelson, Fred Weals, Paul and Pat Homer
- \$500-\$999 Museum Benefactor: Jack and Pat Connell, Seldon Staniloff
- \$1000-\$2,999 Silver: Burrell & Lesta Hays, Bob & Alice Campbell
- \$3000-\$4,999 Gold
- \$5000 and up Platinum

**MESSAGE FROM THE DIRECTOR
BY DEBBIE RIOS**

Hi All

Our Naval Museum of Armament and Technology (NMAT) Team has made it through our first year, YOO HOO! We have had some challenging times and some fun times over the year. I do believe our biggest challenges lie in front of us. We have been given the opportunity (not to mention some money) to get our artifacts in order. We will be going through all of the artifacts that our Center Historian (Leroy Doig) has collected over the past twenty some years. That is a big job, but we will be able to take the time to identify all of the items we have as well as pull together a database that will aid in future exhibits.

We did have a beautiful "Ribbon Cutting" Ceremony (actually a "Remove Before Flight" pin pulling ceremony). The new History of Naval Aviation at China Lake exhibit was welcomed into the Museum with a very large group of visitors and dignitaries. I really would like to thank a few people who, without their hard work and support, we would not have been able to have the beautiful and informative exhibit it is today. I have to start with VX-31 Command Master Chief, Scott Wood, who originally approached the Museum with a lot of enthusiasm and some great ideas. Scott wanted to tell the sailors' story from the beginnings at Harvey Field all the way to today and the role VX-31 plays here at China Lake. Scott shared his ideas with VX-31 management and they whole-heartedly supported the development of the exhibit (thank's Skipper!).

I would also like to thank Leroy Doig for doing the research and pulling together all of the information that was required to tell the story of Naval Aviation at China Lake. He also wrote the prose, (in his own inimitable way) that visually and poetically, describe the growth we have gone through.

I would like to recognize Mark Pahuta for the work he has done on the footage he pulled together, not to mention the selection of music, which captures our history in his 11-minute video. Mark has done a very professional job (as always) and left a door open for us to create many more videos with aviation stories to keep telling our history.

Lastly I would like to thank Eric Bengtson for designing the exhibit, which tells "a very large story in a very small space". Eric has created an artistic canvas that presents the work of Leroy and Mark in a fashion that provides the "flash" and respect that it deserves. I am always impressed at what Eric is able to accomplish with the few tools and meager budget he is provided. Great Job Guys!

I am looking forward to the future!

MEMORIAL ROCK MEMBERS IN THE SHADOWS
Information from Rocketeer, Vol. V, No. 7, Feb. 16, 1949, and Vol. XLV, No. 13, Mar. 30, 1990

For several issues now we have been telling you about members of the Memorial Rock, a memorial that is located so beautifully amongst the airplanes on display near the U.S. Naval Museum of Armament and Technology. Thus far, the heroes we have described have been well recognized by the China Lake community. We still have descriptions of the three most spectacular accidents since 1998. There are, however, many names on that honored list that have now only a minimal bit of information associated with them. We need you, the reader, to help us recognize these heroes so they will not be forgotten.



We outline below the little information we have about two China Lake heroes from the past. If you know anything about these men or others memorialized on the Rock, please let us know. We will especially appreciate any little personal item about these heroes so we may know these men for the human beings they were. We, in particular, would like to have photos of them.

Lt. Mark A. Prusinski, age 28, died on March 28, 1990, when the QF-86 Sabrejet he was flying crashed near Trona between the Ballarat ghost town and Wildrose Canyon. Lt. Prusinski of the United States Navy was a native of New York. He was educated in Minnesota and later graduated from the Naval Academy. He came to China Lake the August before his fatal accident. He was survived by his wife, his mother, a brother and two sisters.

Captain Robert M. Madison of the United States Air Force came to NOTS (Naval Ordnance Test Station) in 1946 to work with upper air research studies. He served as Operations Officer and B-29 pilot while at China Lake. He was on official travel returning to his home in China Lake when his airplane crashed into Lake Ponchartrain, New Orleans, Louisiana, on February 4, 1949. Captain Madison received his commission as a second lieutenant in 1940 and spent 16 months in Alaska during World War II. He was a recipient of the Distinguished Flying Cross and the Air Medal. His education included the University of Oregon where he studied electrical engineering for three years. He was survived by his wife, two children ages three and five, and his parents.

The above is very little to know about these men who served their country and all of us here at China Lake. If you can add anything, please contact us. Also, please take time to explore the display of aircraft near the museum. Look through the list of names on the Memorial Rock. Then send us any memories you have of these loyal men and two women who gave their lives for their country in the performance of their duties at China Lake.