

GREATER JEFFERSONTOWN HISTORICAL SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

June 2019

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June Meeting

REMEMBER THE MEETING TIME FOR THE JUNE AND AUGUST IS 7:00 P.M.

We will meet at **7:00 P.M.** in the Jeffersontown Library, 10635 Watterson Trail. The Greater Jeffersontown Historical Society meetings are held on the first Monday of the even numbered months of the year. Everyone is encouraged to attend to help guide and grow the Society.

This month Anne Bader is going to tell us about the Beecher Terrace Housing Project located in downtown Louisville and the area's history. Corn Island Archaeology was given the contract to excavate the area before new housing in the area is constructed. Since this is the one of the oldest areas in Louisville, they have unearthed some amazing objects.

GJHS Meeting Times Up in the Air??

With Metro Louisville budget woes and proposed cuts to the Library budget, our meeting times and maybe dates may have to be changed. We will learn more after July1 when the new budget year starts.

February Meeting

Dr. James Wheeler presented "Honoring Their Valor." The talk centered on the men and women in uniform, especially in aviation, who fought in conflicts during WWII in which his aviator father made the ultimate sacrifice during the D-Day Normandy invasion. His talk was in conjunction with the Jeffersontown Historical Museum's exhibit that features Dr. Wheeler's many aircraft and other related models he built, his pictures, and memorabilia. After the presentation all were invited back to the museum to view the exhibit.



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Dr. Jim Wheeler is a native Western Kentuckian who was born in Owensboro and lived in Calhoun until he was six years old. His family later moved to Morganfield, Kentucky.

He was a starter for three years on the Morganfield High School football and basketball teams and ran track, as well. His football coach, Bill Dawson, played for Bear Bryant at UK and was a WWII veteran who piloted a Higgins boat ferrying Marines into Iwo Jima.

Jim married his high school sweetheart, Leta. They both graduated from Western Kentucky University. Leta taught school at Fairdale, Kentucky, while he attended school at the University Of Louisville School Of Dentistry. When he graduated, they moved to Hardinsburg, Kentucky, where Jim practiced dentistry in that small farming community for 32 and 1/2 years. Their son, Gene, is now a Family Practice physician in Jeffersontown at Baptist Health Care.

Both Jim and Leta love to travel and have been to Normandy, France, five times researching his Dad's flight of D-Day, June 6, 1944. They have been to the Battle of the Bulge battlefield in Belgium, as well as to many sites in Germany, Switzerland, Holland, Austria, and England. Jim started making model airplanes early as a

young boy. They were wooden at the time. He has built hundreds of models of military aircraft, tanks and some ships, plus a few dioramas of WWII battles. He started researching his Dad's mission in the early 1980's. The story of Jim Wheeler tracing his father's life in WWII up to his tragic ending was first told by author Hugh Ridenour in the 2004 Winter volume of The Register of the Kentucky Historical Society. At the time Ridenour was a member of the Kentucky Humanities Council's speakers bureau. Ridenour and his wife told the story across the state through the speakers bureau. Byron Crawford also wrote about it in his *Courier-Journal* column.

Here is Jim Wheeler's story:

It is approximately 11:30, p.m. on the night of June 5, 1944. First Lieutenant Ernest Eugene Wheeler, Co-Pilot, and Capt. John Burke McCue, Pilot, are doing their pre-flight check of their Douglas C-47 SkyTrain as it sets on the runway in Merryfield, England. The paratroopers are being helped into the plane as they are so heavily loaded that they cannot enter on their own.

As members of the 441st Troop Carrier Group, Wheeler and McCue's task in the grand strategy of Operation Overlord, the cross-channel assault and seizure of a beachhead, was to drop paratroopers of the 101st Airborne Division behind German beach defenses. Their tactical objective was to place their plane's "stick" of 15 soldiers of the division's 326th Engineers Battalion between Utah Beach, where the American Fourth Infantry Division was to come ashore, and the town of Carentan.

McCue, and Wheeler, my father (2nd from left in photo), taxied down the runway on their first combat mission. My Dad carried a photograph of my mother and wore a tiny infant sock of mine slipped over his dogtags. According to Howard Huggett, the officer in charge of the paratroopers, the plane was so heavily loaded that he did not see how it could get off the runway. It lumbered down the runway, swaying from side to side. It finally became airborne and joined the approximately 900 C-47s, becoming a part of a mighty river of aircraft, flying just 100 feet wing tip to wing tip, stretching back 300 miles and flowing out across the English Channel. A huge naval armada would follow in a few hours.



Upon reaching the French Coast, the air was filled with flak and a plane, to my Dad's left exploded. Then, the left-side engine of his aircraft was hit and caught fire. A few seconds later, the forward section was struck by a shell which killed instantly the Radio Operator, James Arthur Freda, and wounded a paratrooper named Julius Holin. My Father and Capt. McCue kept the plane airborne until all of the paratroopers exited the plane, except Julius Holin, who was wounded, and then they were unable to get out themselves. At approximately 1:35 a.m. on June 6th, Howard Huggett witnessed the plane crashing in flames near the village of St. Pellerin, just east of Carentan. The entire crew and the one wounded paratrooper perished in the crash.

My Mother, Alma Blancett Wheeler and my Father, Ernest Eugene Wheeler were high school sweethearts at Calhoun, Ky. My Dad was a year ahead of my mother and attended Western Kentucky University in 1939. Mother started Western in 1940 to, as my Grandmother said, "to be with Gene Wheeler!" Dad was a junior at Western and a ROTC member and was in his 3rd year as a pre-dental student. When the war broke out, he decided to go ahead and enlist so that he could choose the Army Air Corp.

In February of 1943, mother took a train to Maxwell Field in Montgomery, Alabama to marry Dad. I arrived on January 6, 1944, and my Mother and I lived with my Grandparents in Calhoun as Dad was still in training.



Dad only got to see me 1 time when I was born. Soon after his visit to see me, he was transferred with his Air Group to southwest England. He was in the 9th Air Force, the 441st Troop Carrier Group, the 100th Squadron, at Merryfield, England.

I was told over and over about my Father who was a star basketball player at Calhoun High School. All comments about my Father were so kind and complimentary. I could tell that he was well respected and loved by those who knew him.

Through the years, my Mother told me all that she knew about my Dad's mission, but, I didn't know the full story until I started heavily researching on my own on in the 1980's. Up until that time, I was so busy with my own dental practice and helping my wife, Leta, raise our son, Dr. Gene Wheeler, who is a physician here in Jeffersontown at Baptist Health, that I didn't have a lot of time to concentrate on my research.

In 1988, I read in the newspaper about a reunion of the 82nd Airborne that was to be held at the Gault House here in Louisville. I went to that reunion with the intention of learning about my Father's mission on D-Day. In talking with several of the gentlemen there, I learned that my Dad was dropping members of the 101st Airborne, not the 82nd, the 326th Engineer Battalion, whose mission was to hold the La Brouquet Locks on the Douve River. If this were not possible, they were to blow up the bridge.

They gave me several names to whom to write for more information concerning this. However, on Derby Day of May 1989, my big break occurred. My wife, son, and I went to a WWII "Fighter Symposium" in Chicago, Illinois. While there, we struck up a conversation with a gentleman by the name of Bob Norman who overheard us talking about my Dad's mission. He knew of a Frenchman by the name of Philippe Nekrassoff, who was writing about the three planes that did not return that night of June 6th. Of the 90 C-47s from Merryfield, only those three failed to return. My Dad's plane was one of those! I couldn't believe it! This was so revealing, as I was getting closer to the truth of that night so long ago.

In 1994, after contacting Mr. Nekrassoff and arranging a meeting with him, my wife, son, and I went to Normandy. Mr. Nekrassoff, who was a motorcycle policeman in Paris, and his friend, met us in Bayeau and took us on a tour of the beaches, points of interest concerning the invasion, and, even though he didn't speak English, my wife was able to translate enough due to her college French class that we learned a lot. At that time, Philippe was able to take us to the site where his research led him to believe that my Dad's plane crashed. However, through his continuing research, Philippe was able to find the exact crash site which my wife and I visited in 2014. I was overwhelmed with emotion realizing that I was standing where my Dad flew into eternity.

Philippe Nekrassoff also put me in touch with Mr. Howard Huggett, who was the officer in charge of the paratroopers on my Dad's plane. My wife, son, and I flew down to Charlotte, North Carolina, in June of 1998 to meet Mr. Huggett who told us exactly what happened from loading the plane to his exit from the plane when it was hit. He told us that the paratroopers were so heavily loaded that they had to be helped to enter the plane. He witnessed everything from their entering a fog bank, to being hit by flak, and to giving the order to exit the burning plane. He also told us his feelings as he was floating down to earth, helplessly raising his legs up trying to protect himself from flak, to finding himself landing in a pasture where his only companion was a very surprised cow. Mr. Huggett was later captured by the Germans. He was able to escape captivity and was "rescued" by the Russians whom he found to be as bad as the Germans!

Mr. Huggett and my son, brother, and I were going to return to Normandy in June, 2003, but he was diagnosed with cancer in 2002 and the trip was postponed. In April, 2003, Mr. Huggett died. I was devastated, as I thought of him as my "surrogate" father.

One day after Howard died my wife and I were sitting on our back porch. It was a beautiful warm spring morning. Suddenly, we heard the sound of a plane's engine. It didn't sound like a private plane, but a WWII engine. We jumped up to see what it was, and, directly over our heads, flying so low that we could see the side door open and the occupants standing in the doorway, was a Douglas SkyTrain C-47! We had never seen one flying over our house before! Something we had never felt before went through me and my wife - was it coincidence? Was it mystical? Was it an unexplainable incident? We both had goosebumps! Or, was it Howard Huggett, his paratroopers, Capt. McCue, my Father, and the crew of C-47 #101019 flying into eternity?? Somewhere in time, space, eternity, they were reunited. It was as though my Father and Howard were saying, "It's O.K. - It's O.K. We're on our way home – Mission Accomplished!"

We will never know the truth, but, this experience is forever etched into our memory and MY memory of my Father, First Lieutenant Ernest Eugene Wheeler. My wife, son, and I flew to Washington to his funeral at Arlington which was a very moving experience and he was laid to rest. Half of his ashes were buried at Arlington and half were taken back to Normandy in 2004, the 60th anniversary of D-Day, and strewn to the wind on a beach there as he wanted. He was a wonderful man in every way and we were so blessed to have known him.

Another caveat that I would like to share with you is this - my Mother did not know whether my Father was dead, or whether he was missing in action, for over a year. She only received a telegram that he was missing in action. Although devastating news, she lived with hope and despair for over a year. She had the responsibility of an infant son who was growing by leaps and bounds, walking, playing, etc.

“The Secretary of War desires me to express regret that your husband Second Lieutenant Ernest E. Wheeler has been reported missing in action since June Six over France If further details or other information are received you will be promptly notified”.

On January 1, 1945, Alma began writing a diary, as she told us, to let my Dad know what was happening with my development and to pour out her heart to the only man she would ever love.

Gene Wheeler's body was found four days later and buried near La Cambe, France. The army captured a photograph taken by the Germans at the crash site. Wheeler's remains were identified by the name on his parachute.

Gene's body had been buried under the wrong name and as Jim said in his talk, Alma had to wait for over a year, December 1945, to truly learn of his fate. His remains were returned to Calhoun, Kentucky in February 1948.

Here some excerpts from Alma's diary:

January 14, 1945: Darling, you left Jimbo & me a year ago today. It seems like ten years instead of one year since I saw you. I still think and dream of you all the time. I will always love you, even if I live to be one hundred.

February 12: Two years ago tonight I married the sweetest boy I the world. You made me so happy and I love you so dearly. We've only been together three months out of two years, but those months were so close to heaven as I can be on this earth.

April 15: Darling, when I read of prisoners being released I feel sure you are one of them. I still haven't heard a single thing yet though.

May 9: Got a letter today from the War Dept. stating you had not been reported as a p.o.w. and you were still "missing in action." I just wonder how much longer I'll go without hearing something good.

May 30: Today is Decoration Day. I wondered a million times if you have a grave. There is really no reason for me to keep hoping.

June 6: Jimbo and I were awake at 1:35 A.M. the last time your plane was sighted. A year has past and there is really no reason for me to keep hoping because I feel you could have got me some word by now. My consolation is this: If you are gone I know you are in heaven because no better man ever lived on earth except Jesus. My aim is to live a good life so I can meet you there some day. I love you Gene, and you must help me raise our baby.

September 28: Your monument was set this morning about 10:30. Bubby (Gene's brother) and I went out to the grave yard and watched them put it up. It's a nice looking monument but I can't understand why I had to ever buy one for you, darling. We were so happy and I loved you dearly. I will until the day I die & I love you even more after death. I love you precious.

Alma stopped writing in her diary on December 31, 1945.

On June 6, 1946, Alma put a poem in the local newspaper:

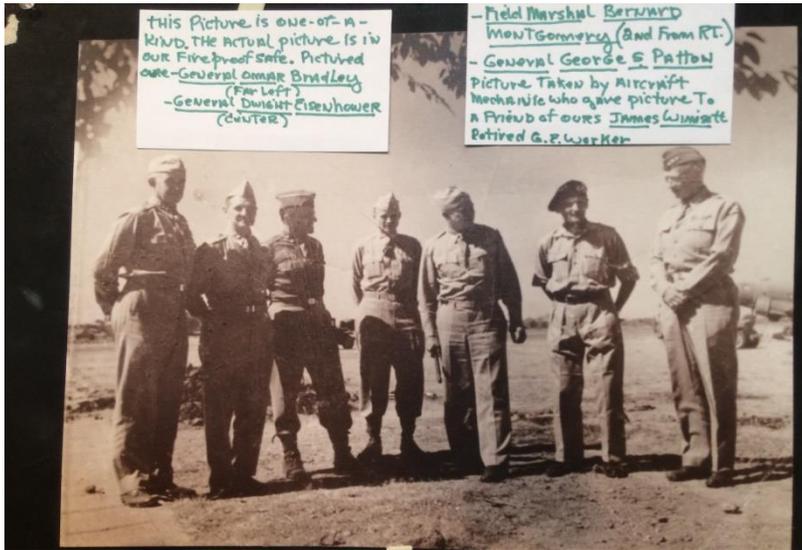
"In loving memory of Lt. E. E. Wheeler, who was killed in action over France two years ago June 6th.

He's flying now. He has his wings
And they are perfect. God made things.
God made these wings and they are bomb-proof.
His soul's been growing them since youth.
Not feathered like the cherubim
But oh, so much a part of him!
Not life nor death can stop his flight.

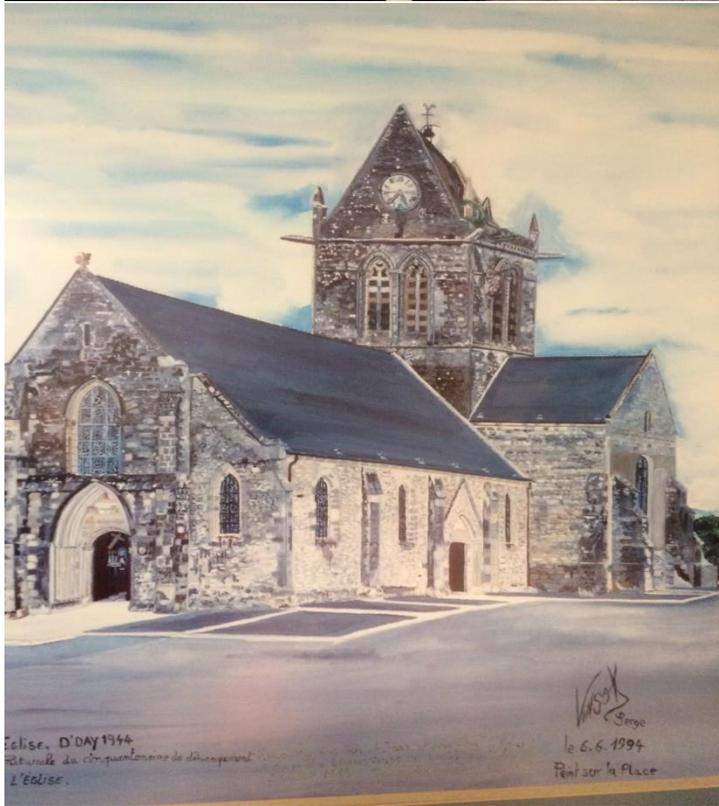
Through all the years of Jim's research he met many people in Europe, who gladly helped, when they learned his mission. Here are a few of the photos, and a story, he was given.



On one of his trips to England, Jim went to a still active Merryfield Air Base – now a helicopter base. He asked the guard at the gate if he could possibly take a photo, telling the guard his story. The guard called in with his request. The Officer-in-Charge (OIC) not only allowed him to take a photo, he stopped all flight operations, took Jim and Leta to the end of the runway and Jim took this picture of the view Gene Wheeler had as their C-47 took off.



This picture is one-of-a-kind. The original is in a deposit box. It was taken by an aircraft mechanic at the scene, who realized what he was seeing, and was given permission by General Eisenhower to take it. The mechanic gave it to a friend of the Wheeler's, who gave it to them. From the left: Gen. Omar Bradley, Gen. D. Eisenhower; from the right: MG Geo. Patton, British Field Marshals Montgomery and Bernard. The other two men are un-named.



This is a photograph of a painting of the Church of Ste. Mere Eglise. If you saw the motion picture, *The Longest Day*, the right front spire in this painting is where the actor, Red Buttons, was hanging by his parachute. The trapped parachutist is painted here. He was John Steele of the 505th Parachute Infantry Regiment, who hung there for two hours before the Germans captured him. The Wheeler's saw this painting as the artist was finishing it. The artist dated the painting 6-6-1994.

Jeffersontown Friends of the Library

The Jeffersontown Friends meet every other month, on the second Wednesday at 10:30 A.M. Yearly dues to join the friends of the library are \$15, but all are welcome to the meetings, regardless of dues. The Friends group is a way for folks to help the library by advocating and fundraising, and they are looking for new members. Some of their regular activities include book sales at the branch, helping us with the booth at the Gaslight Festival, a yearly staff luncheon, and hosting Café Louie.

GJHS on Facebook

Thanks to Anne Bader GJHS is now on Facebook and Facebook.com. Please look at all the pictures of Jeffersontown she has put on it.

Contact Us

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