

COMBAT

AIR MUSEUM PLANE TALK



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Ralph Knehans, *Museum Legend*

By Kevin Drewelow with Danny San Romani

Ralph Knehans, a founding member of the Combat Air Museum, passed away on March 10 at the age of 92.

The Air Force brought Ralph to Topeka, Kansas, but his journey began in Nebraska, where he was born in 1931. Ralph joined the Air Force in 1950, trained as an aircraft mechanic specializing in reciprocating engines, and found himself assigned to the 56th Weather Reconnaissance Squadron operating Boeing WB-29 Superfortresses in Japan. Their missions involved many objectives, including gathering weather data for planning air strikes in Korea, tracking typhoons, and gathering air samples after Soviet atomic bomb tests! Ralph often flew along on the 14-15-hour missions. Ralph left the Air Force after his four-year hitch was up, but he didn't stay away for long.

A few months after separating from the Air Force, Ralph re-enlisted and soon found himself maintaining North American F-86D Sabre interceptors at Selfridge Air Force Base in Mount Clemens, Michigan, northeast of Detroit. The F-86D carried an all-weather radar and was armed with 24 unguided "Mighty Mouse" missiles that were fired from an extendable tray. A General Electric J47 afterburning engine, which produced over 5,000 pounds of thrust, powered the Sabre, which was a very different aircraft from the WB-29s on which Ralph began his Air Force career. During his time in Michigan, Ralph met and married Margaret Ann Fry, a schoolteacher, in 1955. They were married for nearly 56 years before Margaret passed away in 2011.

Ralph enjoyed working on fighters, but the Air Force needed experienced B-29 engine mechanics and Ralph was soon on his way to Lajes Air Base in the Azores, a Portuguese-owned archipelago of nine islands 870 miles west of Lisbon. Ralph was assigned to an air-sea rescue unit. In 1958, Ralph saw his first Lockheed C-130 Hercules when aircraft from the 463rd Troop Carrier Wing stopped at Lajes enroute to Lebanon. The turboprop-powered cargo aircraft made quite an impression on young Ralph, so much so that he told the Air Force they would have to transfer him to a Hercules unit if they wanted him to reenlist. They did, and Ralph was transferred to the 463rd at Sewart Air Force Base in Smyrna, Tennessee, southeast of Nashville.

In early January of 1961, Ralph and the 463rd were alerted to deploy to South Vietnam for four months. They loaded the aircraft and were headed west less than eight hours after receiving the order. Stops enroute included California, Hawaii, Midway Island, Wake Island, Guam and finally, Tan Son Nhut Air Base in Saigon, now Ho Chi Minh City. Ralph mentioned "the heat, humidity, rain, mosquitoes, flies and congestion of people" was quite a change from Tennessee! The 463rd flew all over South Vietnam and they accomplished their scheduled aircraft inspections and maintenance on Guam.

The unit completed its four-month deployment and returned to Sewart. About two weeks later, Ralph and his family were enjoying Sunday dinner at the Non-Commissioned Officers club when the



Ralph Knehans (Knehans family)

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PLANE TALK

COMBAT
AIR MUSEUM

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THE OFFICIAL NEWSLETTER OF THE COMBAT AIR MUSEUM
COMBAT
AIR MUSEUM

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We welcome your comments!

Newsletter Layout by Megan Garner

MUSEUM HOURS

January 2 - February 28/29

Mon.-Sun. Noon - 4:30

Last Entry Every Day is 3:30 P.M.

March 1 - December 31

Mon.-Sat. 9 A.M. - 4:30 P.M.

Sun. Noon - 4:30 P.M.

Last Entry Every Day is 3:30 P.M.

Closed

New Year's Day, Easter,
Thanksgiving, Christmas Day

Your membership is important to us! Join the
COMBAT AIR MUSEUM



Here we go again, spring has sprung, and the Combat Air Museum is gearing up for another busy summer! We just experienced a well-attended spring break period with large numbers of guests visiting the Museum, Easter weekend visitors flocked to CAM and tour groups have started arriving. Kevin just conducted his first Scout aviation merit badge class which was a real winner for those attending. Yes, this class saw 100% of the Scouts pass the merit badge requirements! It is a real blessing for the Museum to have a director who is more than qualified to teach such a detailed and high-quality program for the scouting community. He will once again conduct our Young Aviators classes this summer. You can call our office if you have youth who want to enroll in one of these classes.

Among all these happenings the Museum is now getting ready for its annual Celebrity Pancake Feed which is our major spring fundraising raising event. It will take place on Saturday, April 27 and we're signing up volunteers now for the various duties.

Many of you may recall that last spring, several member volunteers gathered to eliminate the overwhelming growth of honeysuckle plants which had taken over the main entrance area to our Museum. Who would have ever guessed those small two-inch pots I planted 25 years ago would have grown to such an overwhelming size? You may remember the biblical story concerning the mustard seed? While they served their original purpose, it was time to see them go away. This spring, with the help of a couple of volunteers, we finalized our landscaping area with a new border and fresh fill dirt. Thank goodness for great volunteers and especially the ones who have the proper tools and equipment! The results have been very satisfying. I have purchased plants in conjunction with my landscaping design and most have been planted. Even though there is still plenty of work to be completed on the project, I hope to have it finished in a few weeks. The instructions say the plants should be watered once or twice a week this summer: well, what will you be doing this warm weather season? Let me know if you have an interest in watering the garden once a week. I think you will find some satisfaction a year from now when watering time will greatly be reduced and the Museum will take on a new look as visitors arrive.

I am looking forward to finalizing the restoration of the F-15 Eagle. Plans are already underway for painting the plane; we even have an experienced technician lined up for the paint job. There is still some prep work which needs to be completed along with a few parts and sheet metal work before painting. We hope to see some progress on this project with completion scheduled for this summer.

Volunteers are the life blood of our organization. If you are interested in volunteering your time with us, please let us hear from you. We really need a few more people in the gift shop and some additional tour guides. Perhaps you have other skills you would like to share with us. Some volunteers like to help with plane towing, which is often needed. We hope to see all of you soon at the Museum. Have a great spring and summer! ♦

Flying into History: Wallace Buford's Final Flight ©

By J. Arron Small

You've probably never heard of Wally Buford of Kansas City, Kansas, though you should have, since he was one of the first two American combat deaths in Vietnam. He died years before the United States was even officially involved in the complicated Vietnamese conflict and before most Americans had even heard of Vietnam or could find it on a map. But he died doing what he loved most – flying for his country. Wally Buford particularly loved flying in dangerous situations. On his final visit home to see his parents before leaving on his fateful trip to French Indochina, he had a conversation with his mother. "I love flying, Mom. Flying is my work," he told her after she asked why he wanted to do something so dangerous.

Wallace "Wally" Abbott Buford was born on 11 June 1925, in Ogden, Utah, to George and Lillian Buford. When he was ten years old, George and Lillian brought their family back to Kansas City, Kansas, where Wally went on to graduate from Wyandotte High School in 1943. A gifted athlete, he was a standout guard on the Wyandotte Bulldogs' football team, as well as on the Kansas City Kansas Junior College football team. Not long after his graduation from KCKJC, he enlisted in the U. S. Army Air Corps and was trained at Scott Field (now Scott Air Force Base) near Belleville, Illinois. Commissioned as a second lieutenant, during World War II, Wally piloted B-24 heavy bombers in Europe with the U. S. Eighth Air Force.

Discharged from the Army in 1946, Wally returned home to Kansas City and eventually enrolled in the University of Kansas in Lawrence, where he pursued a degree in engineering. Unable to shake his love of flying and adventure, he also joined the U. S. Air Force Reserve's 442nd Troop Carrier Wing then stationed in Olathe, Kansas at the former Naval Air Station (NAS). His college career was cut short in 1950 when he was recalled to active duty by what had become the U. S. Air Force and sent to Korea.

During his 29 months serving in Korea, Wally performed his most courageous acts as a pilot to date. He was an artillery spotter flying the AT-6. Flying over 100 missions as a pilot observer, his sole job was to draw Communist anti-aircraft fire so that every pilot who followed him knew where each of the enemy anti-aircraft batteries was located. His dangerous flights earned him the U. S. Air Force's Distinguished Flying Cross. In what would play a big role later in his life, Wally also learned to fly the Fairchild C-119 "Flying Boxcar" while in Korea.

Not too long after returning home from

his second war and while on duty at the Olathe NAS, Wally saw a rather plain notice tacked to a bulletin board. The notice that would change his life's trajectory and put Wally in the history books was from a little-known company called Civil Air Transport (CAT). Headquartered in Taipei, Taiwan, CAT was looking for experienced pilots to help them in the Far East. Without hesitation or even a second thought, and in keeping with his great love of adventure, Wally took the job. He just wasn't cut out to be an engineer.

Civil Air Transport was founded in 1946 by the world-famous former commander of the Flying Tigers (14th Air Force, USAAF), General Claire Chennault. The airline's first mission was helping supply the anti-communist forces of Chiang Kai-shek who were at that time fighting a losing battle against the Chinese Red Army during the Chinese Civil War. After Chiang's defeat and retreat to Taiwan, CAT became a subsidiary of the Central Intelligence Agency's Airdale Corporation. While maintaining the appearance of an ordinary airline that flew regularly scheduled passenger flights around Asia, simultaneously CAT was also being used in a variety of covert operations for the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), during the Chinese Civil War, the Korean War, and eventually the First Indochina War that saw the French defeated and ultimately expelled from Vietnam.

Wally's new job as a CAT pilot took him to a very remote and dangerous corner of Vietnam as the First Indochina War was coming to its dramatic and bloody conclusion. The communist Viet Minh forces—fighting to sever Vietnam from colonial French rule once and for all—had surrounded the last French army on the peninsula at Dien Bien Phu and were close to overwhelming it. Determined to stop yet another communist victory in Asia, the CIA with John Foster Dulles at the helm, engaged in secretly supporting the beleaguered French forces. 37 CAT pilots, between 13 March 1954 and 7 May 1954, flew 682 combat missions to resupply the desperate French troops trapped in the valley.

On 24 April 1954, about two weeks after he arrived at the air base in Cat Bi, located near Haiphong, Wally was piloting a "loaned" C-119 over Dien Bien Phu when a 37 mm anti-aircraft shell hit his plane and exploded on the flight deck. The explosion severely wounded his companion, a veteran pilot, and fellow Kansan, Paul Holden from the small town of Greenleaf, Kansas. Despite the shock and the damage to the plane and his



Wally Buford (A. Small collection)

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Bela Hazan: The Courier Who Redefined Resistance and Changed History

By Kevin Drewelow

The April Combat Air Museum membership luncheon featured two notable events: a near-total eclipse and the final presentation by students of Seaman High School social studies teacher Susan Sittenauer. Susan will retire at the end of this school year, her 39th year and all of it spent at Seaman. She was the first woman hired as a social studies teacher at the school.

Susan has also been teaching Seaman's advanced placement history class for years, in which students must research and present a subject at the annual Washburn University History Day competition. Many of her students have gone on to win awards at the state and national level. 22 years ago, Susan brought her first students to speak at a Museum luncheon, and found it was a great opportunity for her students to practice giving their presentations in an unfamiliar setting. Our members have always found the students' presentations fascinating and very well done.

Seaman juniors Anna McLaughlin and Danika Szopinski told us the amazing story of Bela Hazan, a Polish-born Jewish girl who, with others in World War II, facilitated resistance against the Nazis in occupied Poland by smuggling resources between Jewish ghettos. Anna and Danika initially learned of Bela while listening to the BBC podcast "Secret Heroes in History" hosted by Helena Bonham Carter. They were amazed at Bela's story, but were struck by the fact that Bela was only 17 – their own age – when she began risking her life to benefit others. They researched Bela's story and produced a 10-minute video which



Bela Hazan (www.jwa.org photo)

they will enter in the Kansas and National History Day competitions. Anna and Danika ran their video and took questions afterwards.

Bela was born in 1922 in a small town in Poland, now located in Ukraine about 100 miles northeast of Lviv. She attended Hebrew-speaking schools while growing up and was active in Jewish cultural groups.

Hitler's rise in Germany institutionalized antisemitism: Jews were forced to register, prevented from working, deprived of their German citizenship, prevented from voting, and the list went on. Germany and Russia signed their Non-Aggression Pact on August 23, 1939 and a few days later, Germany invaded Poland. Near the end of September, Germany and Russia divided Poland.

Bela had taken classes on resistance skills before the war and was teaching the classes when the war began. Bela and nine others

began traveling to Vilnius, then part of Poland, because they'd heard it was not yet occupied, but the Russians had annexed that part of Poland. The group encountered Russian soldiers at the German-Russian border, who assumed Bela's group were German spies. Bela was released after three weeks and waited for the others to be freed. During that time, she visited her hometown to visit her family; it was the last time she would see them alive. Bela and her group finally arrived in Vilnius.

Germany invaded Russia in June of 1941 and were soon in Vilnius. They forced the city's Jews into ghettos and then began the slaughter. Taking advantage of her perceived "Aryan" facial features, Bela and two of her friends were able to obtain Polish passports, created false identities and began to work as "couriers," transporting guns, money, food...anything...between members of their group located in the various ghettos. Such supplies and resources facilitated resistance and uprisings against the occupying Germans. Bela even got a job working as a receptionist in the local Gestapo office! She soon stole Gestapo stationery and other documents which she passed on to forgers. Bela and her two friends attended a Gestapo Christmas party and was photographed with her two friends and the photo was later displayed in the Gestapo office: if only they'd known!

When Lonka, one of her fellow couriers went missing in Warsaw while on a mission, Bela was sent to find her. She was also carrying documents and two pistols when the Gestapo arrested her on suspicion of being a member of the Polish



Bela at Auschwitz (Auschwitz-Birkenau Museum photo)

resistance. Bela was tortured and interrogated before being sent to a nearby concentration camp, where she found Lonka! The two were sent to Birkenau where they experienced forced labor. They both contracted typhus; Bela survived but not Lonka.

Bela was transferred to three more concentration camps, working in the hospitals where she smuggled medicine and supplies to other prisoners. As the war was drawing to a close, life for the prisoners got even worse, with forced marches, aerial attacks by Allied aircraft, and even an SS death squad sent to kill the prisoners. Bela and the assigned doctor were able to help a large group of sick inmates escape one night and after a long trip, the group encountered American soldiers...and freedom!

Bela arrived in Haifa, Israel in November of 1945. She married and had two children, Esther and Yoel. Bela passed away in 2004.

While researching this amazing story, Anna and Danika contacted Bela's son, Yoel, and he replied! He exchanged several email messages and held a Zoom call with the students, providing many key details and photographs.

While writing this brief report, it became apparent how much astonishing information Anna and Danika had to leave out to fit into the ten-minute limit for the video. Any reader interested in learning more need only go online and enter "Bela Hazan" and you'll quickly be immersed in one of the most compelling stories you'll ever read. This presentation was a fitting end to Susan Sittenauer's teaching career! ♦

In Remembrance

Patricia Ann Thomas
March 31, 1940-December 21, 2023
CAM #5276

Patricia and her husband, retired Air National Guard Colonel Tom Thomas, joined the Combat Air Museum on September 1, 2012 and immediately became strong supporters.

Pat and Tom married on July 30, 1960 and Tom completed Air Force flight training two years later. While serving in the New York Air National Guard, he began a 30-year career flying for American Airlines. Pat and Tom relocated to Topeka so Tom could commute to Dallas for American.

Pat was a wonderful homemaker. She had a flair for sewing and embroidery and made beautiful wedding dresses and other items. Her work benefitted many charitable organizations such as the Combat Air Museum. Patricia was a fine Christian lady and leaves behind a memorable legacy to all who knew her. Thanks, Pat, for your support of the Combat Air Museum. - *Gene Howerter*

Dave Meggars
May 13, 1954-January 17, 2024
CAM #6434

Ralph Knehans
September 5, 1931-March 10, 2024
CAM #40

Museum Notes

By Kevin Drewelow

Room...ten-HUT! January 7 was a quiet Sunday afternoon at the Museum gift shop; John Plumb and Kevin Drewelow were exchanging small talk until the door to the hangar opened and a voice boomed, "WHAT'S GOING ON IN HERE?!!" It was Air Force General Mike Minihan, the four-star commander of the Air Force's Air Mobility Command! He introduced himself and said that he enjoys stopping for fuel at Topeka Regional Airport, loves the Combat Air Museum and visits our Museum whenever he has time. He and his officers were delighted to meet John Plumb and learn that he'd flown Boeing KC-97s from Forbes Air Force Base in the 'Fifties! General Minihan's favorite aircraft here is our Lockheed EC-121T Warning Star. I apologized and said the aircraft was closed to visitors as we had temporarily removed electrical power, but after the third time hearing it was his favorite aircraft, I got the keys and let them in. He appreciated it, gave some challenge coins to the Museum, John and I and was soon heading back to Million Air to depart. It was a pleasure meeting and spending some time with General Minihan!



John Plumb, Gen. Minihan and Kevin Drewelow (l-r) (K. Drewelow photo)

Winter weather...Right on the heels of setting an all-time attendance record in 2023, Old Man Winter kicked in the door and we closed for seven days in January! Nathan Benfield cleared snow from our parking lot with his truck and we're grateful for his assistance! We observed winter hours from January through March and have returned to normal hours.

F-84F tire change...Gary Naylor and Joe Wulfkuhle removed and replaced the left main tire on our Republic F-84F Thunderstreak in late January, completing main tire replacement on the jet. They then added some much-needed weight to the nose of our Grumman F9F Panther to improve its handling while being towed.



Danny, Gary and Joe with the F-84 (l-r) (K. Drewelow photo)

Aviation merit badge...The Combat Air Museum offers an Aviation merit badge class and Scout troops always pick the coldest part of the year to take it! Troop 358 from Shawnee, Kansas spent January 20-21 at CAM working on badge requirements and capped the evening by sleeping in our Sikorsky NCH-53A Sea Stallion helicopter. All of the scouts passed their interview and earned their merit badge the next day!

Salute Our Heroes...WIBW-TV in Topeka honors veterans and civic leaders in a series called "Salute Our Heroes." In mid-February, they interviewed our own Bruce Couch about his experiences as a Navy aircraft mechanic aboard the U.S.S. Constellation during the war in Vietnam. Bruce also got to talk about his work supporting area veterans over the years. Bruce's segment is available online at <https://www.wibw.com/2024/02/13/salute-our-heroes-topeka-veteran-shares-his-military-aviation-insight/>

Aviation Day at the Capitol...CAM participated in Aviation Day at the Capitol on February 15. Bruce Couch, Kevin Drewelow and Dave Murray staffed a display and told visiting lawmakers and others about our Museum. We rarely miss an opportunity to share CAM's story with the public!

Facility maintenance...Late February was unseasonably warm and our volunteers took full advantage. Our Fix-It Friday team replaced broken plastic panels on our mower shed, replaced very deteriorated stairs at our south loading dock, improved the stair installation at our Lockheed EC-121T Warning Star, and began a lengthy project to landscape the area around the main entrance to hangar 602. Gary Naylor and Nathan Benfield also levelled the soil on the east side of the EC-121 to aid mowing this summer.

Tool inventory...The Combat Air Museum has an amazing collection of vintage aircraft tools tucked away. Danny San Romani and his Saturday restoration team took on the daunting task of cleaning, identifying and storing the tools. Danny and Deb Lamere spent hours researching the tools; it seemed more like aviation archeology! They identified an engine sling for a Westinghouse J34 turbojet engine, like the ones used in our Douglas F3D Skyknight. After cleaning the sling, Danny and Deb rolled the J34 into the workshop and attached the sling, just to confirm it fit properly, which it did! Our thanks to everyone who devoted time to identifying this fascinating tool collection!



Deb and Danny rig the J34 sling (K. Drewelow photo)

North American F-86D/L ejection seat...Danny San Romani and his Saturday restoration crew completed their restoration of our Sabre Dog ejection seat and were able to shoehorn it into a showcase, which is located near our F-86H Sabre. This is a great addition to our collection of ejection seats; his team did a great job with the seat!

Douglas DC-9 simulator...Several years ago, CAM received a Douglas DC-9 emergency procedures trainer from the former Octave Chanute Aerospace Museum in Illinois. The wire bundles in the trainer had been cut and it didn't seem to have a bright future. CAM member Paul Williams is patiently changing that. He is adding lights and sound to the trainer that is transforming it to a hands-on display that kids of all ages will enjoy. The trainer is in the south end of hangar 604; stop by and see Paul's progress for yourself!



Gene, Mike and Ted spreading mulch (K. Drewelow photo)

Landscaping the Museum's main entrance...Our chairman, Gene Howerter has always been quite a gardener, and Museum members above a certain age remember the extraordinary beauty of the flowers and plants Gene placed around our main entrance decades ago. With the assistance of our Fix-It Friday crew and other Museum members, Gene is starting over with the main entrance landscaping. Volunteers have removed the remnants of the old plants, re-set the various stones and bricks, added dirt and tilled the soil. Gene selected a great variety of shrubs, plants and grasses and the team put down landscaping fabric before adding mulch and rock. Our volunteers have accomplished a lot, but there is still much to be accomplished before the work is done. Why not join us and watch what happens?

In The Hangar: The Sikorsky CH-54A Skycrane

By Kevin Drewelow

Towering over all other aircraft in our collection, the Sikorsky CH-54A Tarhe, better known as the Skycrane, is a remarkable helicopter with an unusual name; more about that later. The CH-54 was the last helicopter conceived of by Igor Sikorsky, the founder of the company.

Sikorsky was born in Kiev, then a part of Russia, in 1889. He became interested in aviation by the work of the Wright brothers and Count Ferdinand von Zeppelin. Sikorsky studied aviation and engineering and designed his first helicopter in 1910, but it lacked a suitably powerful engine, so he turned to fixed-wing aircraft. His designs were successful and led to young Igor, a licensed pilot, being appointed to head an aircraft design company which produced the world's first four-engine airliner in 1913 and bombers used in the First World War. Disillusioned by the Bolshevik Revolution, Sikorsky emigrated to America and founded Sikorsky Aircraft which supplied flying boats to Pan American Airways. He never lost interest in helicopters; he designed, built and flew the first successful helicopter, the VS-300, in 1939. The United States and Great Britain bought over 200 Sikorsky helicopters before the end of World War II.

Sikorsky Aircraft specialized in helicopters that could carry heavy loads, internally in the cabin and externally on a sling, but Igor dreamed of a flying crane, with all loads carried externally. He pitched his idea for an experimental flying crane to the company's directors, and they approved. Igor used the transmissions, engines and rotor system of the CH-37 Mojave mounted on a beam instead of a traditional fuselage and called it the S-60. The S-60 was very successful, able to carry a 12,000-pound load. It completed its flight test program and the company was ready to invest in the concept.

Igor made several improvements upon the S-60 for what would become the S-64 Skycrane. Most importantly, he selected a pair of Pratt & Whitney JFTD12 gas turbine engines, each of which produced 4,500 shaft horsepower at 9,000 r.p.m., takeoff setting. The main rotor had a diameter of 72 feet and used six blades. They fitted a nose landing gear to replace the tail wheel.

The S-64 had four methods of lifting loads up to 20,000 pounds: the main hoist with a 100-foot-long cable; four small hoists mounted on the fuselage capable of 5,000 pounds each; 32 hard points attached along the fuselage; a cargo pod attached to the four hoists. The Skycrane's landing gear could "kneel" to facilitate attaching loads, and the main hoist had a device which would accurately measure the weight of the load



CH-54 lifts an A-7 (unknown photo)

before flight; this feature averted many accidents later in Vietnam. A third pilot, facing aft with his own flight controls (limited to 10% control authority in pitch, roll and yaw) was able to precisely position any load the Skycrane carried. The aft pilot's flight controls were the first electric, non-mechanical controls installed in a production helicopter.

The S-64 made its first flight on May 9, 1962, and flew its initial demonstration flight for the Army two months later. The Army ordered six YCH-54As in June, 1963. The six Skycranes began Army testing at Fort Benning in June of 1964 and were shipped to Vietnam in May, 1965. The new helicopters immediately made a great impression upon all who were involved in their use.

Sikorsky began producing CH-54s for the Army and built a total of 97 Skycranes between 1965 and 1972. They produced 54 A-models, 35 B-models with more powerful engines and other improvements, and a few other variants. The Skycranes flew a wide range of missions in Vietnam, such as ship-to-shore cargo movements, transporting oversize cargo to outlying fire bases, moving damaged aircraft, and in one instance, dropping a 10,000-pound bomb to clear a landing zone!

As the war in Vietnam began to wind down, the Army began transferring Skycranes to seven Army National Guard units, including Kansas. The 130th Transportation Company (Heavy Helicopter) operated Sikorsky CH-37 Mojave cargo helicopters at Billard Airport in Topeka. On February 10, 1971, the first of nine Skycranes arrived at Billard straight from the Sikorsky



CH-54 engine and rotor head (K. Drewelow photo)

factory in Connecticut. After Forbes Air Force Base closed in 1973, the 137th and Army Aviation Support Facility #1 moved into hangar 601 at Forbes Field, the new name of the base. They later moved into the hangars at the south end of the airport, where they remain today.

Skycranes were a common sight in the skies above Topeka for the next 23 years. They were a crowd favorite at air shows, where a CH-54 would compete with any jet fighter to see which aircraft could climb to 10,000 feet above the airfield...the fighter had no chance! Throughout the day of the air show, announcements could be heard about an improperly parked car that had to be moved. Near the end of the show, the announcer said no one moved the car so a 137th Skycrane would move it. A CH-54 then appeared, slinging a car from a local junkyard beneath it. The Skycrane flew out over the infield, climbed several hundred feet and then released the car...no one knew a Cadillac would bounce that many times!

In addition to the military, Sikorsky had found commercial interest in the Skycrane, obviously hauling outsized loads, but also in the logging and firefighting fields. In the early 1990s, Sikorsky sold its Skycrane type certificate and entire program to Erickson, Incorporated of Portland, Oregon. Erickson changed the name to Air-Crane and remains in business to this day, providing heavy lift helicopter services around the world, especially firefighting.

The Skycrane was getting long in the tooth in the 1990s and its day was done. The Army began retiring the CH-54s and the last Army flight took place in 1995. A few years earlier, the Combat Air Museum looked into acquiring a Skycrane for our growing collection. A crew from the 137th ferried an old friend from Ft. Indiantown Gap, Pennsylvania to the Combat Air Museum, arriving on December 19, 1991. Sikorsky CH-54A serial number 67-18424, had once been assigned to the 137th but was transferred away at some point. The crew was happy to bring it "home." 424 had been delivered to the Army in October, 1967. Its historical records are unclear and incomplete, but the Skycrane spent time at Ft. Sill, Oklahoma; Ft. Benning, Georgia; South Vietnam; in 1973 was loaned to the NASA Langley Research Center in Hampton, Virginia; Forbes AFB in Topeka, Kansas; and Pennsylvania. The 137th changed names and helicopters, becoming the 1st Battalion, 108th



The 137th, Kansas Army National Guard
(K. Drewelow photo)

Aviation Company operating Bell UH-1 Iroquois (Huey) helicopters; they now operate Sikorsky UH-60 Black Hawk helicopters.

And about that name, Tarhe (pronounced TAR-hey)? The Army has named its helicopters after native Americans since 1947. Grand Sachem Tarhe was an esteemed chief of the Wyandot nation. He was 6'4" tall and thin, and early French settlers called him "Le Chef Grue" - "Chief Crane" - because he reminded them of the tall bird. Other people assumed Tarhe meant crane in Wyandot, when it actually means "at him" or "at the tree." For decades, it was thought Tarhe was a Wyandot word for crane, so the connection seemed natural, but we now know better. ♦

Next Membership Luncheon

Our next membership luncheon will take place on Monday, June 10 at 11:30 a.m. at the Combat Air Museum. Museum member and volunteer Dan Hinnah will talk about his father's service and experiences in the Army Air Force from October 1942 to February 1946. His father began his career as an aircraft mechanic but volunteered to serve as a Boeing B-17 tail gunner flying combat missions from Great Britain over Europe.

His bomber was shot down over Germany in 1944 and he became a "guest" of the Luftwaffe in a prisoner of war camp in northeast Germany. In February of 1945, the Germans force-marched the prisoners west for three months to avoid capture by the oncoming Russian army. The Germans turned over the surviving prisoners to the American army near Hamburg. Dan's father spent several months recuperating in France and England before being sent to the Veterans Administration hospital in Springfield, Missouri in July of 1945. ♦

Ralph Knehans *Continued from page 1*

463rd was alerted for another four-month deployment to South Vietnam. Ralph's duties were split between performing aircraft maintenance and occasionally flying with the aircraft to help with loading and unloading cargo.

Ralph and the 463rd returned to Tennessee for a month before their next deployment, this time to Europe. Ralph visited France, Germany and Belgium, among others. Near the end of 1963, the 463rd moved to Langley Air Force Base in Hampton, Virginia, near Newport News. Ralph participated in deployments to Europe, Greece and Turkey. By late 1965, the 463rd moved again, this time to the Philippines. Ralph became a C-130 flight engineer, a member of the flight crew. He bought a home near Langley for his family and was soon off to another deployment to South Vietnam, this time for a year.

Unlike his previous trips to Tan Son Nhut, the air base was often targeted by Viet Cong guerillas, attacking with rockets, mortars and infiltrators. The war was heating up and the mechanics became accustomed to repairing battle damage on their Hercules aircraft. The 463rd set up maintenance capabilities on remote airstrips to accomplish temporary repairs to get damaged aircraft back to Tan Son Nhut for permanent repairs. Ralph worked at some of these sites and had some interesting experiences!

Ralph returned to Langley just in time for Christmas, 1966. Soon after, he received orders to the 313th Tactical Airlift Wing at Forbes Air Force Base in Topeka, Kansas. Ralph was a maintenance flight chief, supervising and managing crew chiefs and mechanics while still participating in short deployments. He later became the dock chief, responsible for the team conducting scheduled inspections of their assigned C-130E aircraft.



313th Lockheed C-130 (abpic.co.uk)

Ralph was nearing the end of his Air Force career. In 1969, he was transferred to the 373rd Tactical Airlift Wing in Okinawa. He and his family moved yet again and Ralph got to work. The 373rd flew old and tired C-130A aircraft and Ralph was the dock chief. His unit was short on maintenance personnel and they routinely worked sixteen hours a day, seven days a week. Ralph took on additional duties as other people left. By 1971, Ralph was scheduled to retire. He and his family were transferred to Forbes, where he retired in June.

Ralph took a truck driving job with The Costelow Company, Inc., a local steel tower construction company. He traveled all over the United States delivering tower parts and components. Ralph's job would soon have a significant impact on a new museum in Topeka.

The Air Force had held an annual open house and air show at Forbes for years. In 1973, the Air Force closed Forbes Air Force Base and turned it over to the city of Topeka. Three years later, some area businessmen organized an air show and the U.S. Navy's Blue Angels were the headline act. The return of an airshow at Forbes got people excited about military aviation and this led to conversations about starting an air museum in one of the vacant hangars at Forbes. Before long, a group of like-minded individuals attended a meeting at Washburn University which led to the formation of Yesterday's Air Force (YAF)-Kansas Wing. The group rented a hangar at the north end of the civilian ramp at the aircraft, and David Tallichet, a World War II bomber pilot turned restaurateur, brought some of his vintage military aircraft to Topeka – including a flyable Consolidated B-24 bomber. The plan was for members of the YAF-Kansas Wing to perform a certain amount of restoration work on Tallichet's aircraft in exchange for displaying them. By 1977, the museum reorganized under its current name, Combat Air Museum (CAM), and moved into its current location.

Ralph continued working for Costelow, driving all over the United States. Anytime he stopped for fuel or a meal, he would ask local people if they knew where he could find any old military airplanes...and it paid off sometimes! Ralph heard about a derelict Lockheed T-33 Shooting Star in a city park in Viborg, South Dakota. Museum leaders spoke with the National Museum of the United States Air Force, and before long, Ralph and some museum volunteers loaded the T-33 onto a Costelow flatbed trailer and delivered the jet to Topeka! Ralph learned about a neglected Grumman F9F Panther in open storage in Elkton, Minnesota and followed up on the lead; once again, Ralph and others brought a vintage jet to CAM on a Costelow trailer. Ralph was also involved in recovering other aircraft and artifacts that are now part of CAM's collection.

New & Renewing Members

Ralph served CAM in other ways. During the years that CAM flew some of the aircraft it owned, Ralph applied his extensive knowledge of aircraft maintenance and aviation safety to the restoration and maintenance effort, to keep our aircraft and members flying safely. When CAM chose to cease flying operations in the mid 'Nineties, Ralph continued to serve CAM and its visitors as a tour guide. He assembled information about the aircraft in our collection in binders that new tour guides could use to learn more about our aircraft. Ralph gave detailed tours that took a little longer than other guides, but people loved it and he even received fan mail from time to time! Eventually, Ralph was not able to drive and cut back on tours, until his health stopped his touring days. Ralph moved into an assisted living facility. Ralph returned to CAM this year on February 23 for a visit and he had quite a day! The weather was beautiful and several CAM members were on hand to greet him and reminisce about his time at the museum. He went outside and couldn't have been happier as our neighbors in the Army National Guard were operating several of their Sikorsky UH-60 Black Hawk helicopters. Ralph was grinning from ear to ear and why not? He was back on the flight line at Forbes, watching aircraft operations, as he had done for decades in the Air Force and the Combat Air Museum. He had come home. ♦



Staff Sergeant Knehans (Knehans family)

New:

Chuck Atherson | Harold Benoit & family | Samuel Carkhuff | Daniel Coughlin & family | Yasheila Cass Crespo & family | Thomas Keyes & family | Benjamin Konda & family | Joseph Ledbetter III & family | Ruben Lopez | Karen Smilgis & family | Scott Wagner & family

Renewing:

Mark Allen & family | Jon Antrim & family | David Bainum | Lynne Bourne | Chuck & Connie Bradshaw II | Les Carlson | Michael Clarkin | Stef Cunningham | Dennis Donahue | John M. Davis | Norman Dysart | Phil & Darlene Elwood | William & Donna Gilliland | John & Julie Goehrung | Ron & Judi Gray | David Hargitt | Connie Houser | Col. Paul Idol & family | Mike & Pat Kozubek | Joseph Ledbetter | James & Ruby Leighton | Roland Mayhew & family | Emily McGee & family | Ron Morrison | Steve & Monica Morrison | John & Rita Moyer | Dave & Judy Murray | Ted & Sharon Nolde | Shaun O'Keefe & family | Lawrence Oxenberg | Michael Rockefeller & family | Chris Rundel & family | Wes Russell & family | Rance & Laraine Sackrider | David Salguero | Gipsy Schneider | Gregory Smith & family | Jay Stevenson & family | Mike & Kimberly Stewart | Ramon Washington | Terry Wages | Dr. Howard & Marilyn Ward | Cathy Witte & family | Dr. James Young & family

New Lifetime Members:

Jane Fortin

Pilot's Notes: a Book Review

“Surprised at Being Alive: An Accidental Helicopter Pilot in Vietnam and Beyond” by Robert F. Curtis

Reviewed by Kevin Dzewelow

“Surprised at Being Alive” is one of the best aviation books I’ve ever read. Between 1968 and 1992, Robert Curtis flew helicopters in the U.S. Army, the Kentucky Army National Guard and the U.S. Marine Corps, including a two-year exchange tour with the Royal Navy.

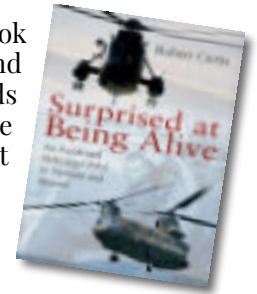
Robert Curtis was born in 1950. By 1968, he had dropped out of high school – twice; obtained a GED; got married and was working in a factory when his draft board directed him to take the physical exam. The writing was on the wall so Curtis decided to enlist in his service of choice rather than let the draft decide for him. At the Army recruiting office he found a brochure entitled “90 Days Between You and the Sky” and learned that he could become a helicopter pilot. If he had to die in Vietnam, he reasoned, he’d rather fly to the appointment than walk! He enlisted and was selected for the Warrant Officer Candidate School, and then flight school, where he learned to fly the Hiller OH-23 Raven, a wooden-bladed helicopter like the one in the Combat Air Museum. He later qualified on the Boeing-Vertol CH-47 Chinook heavy-lift helicopter, again, like the one on display at CAM.

In September 1970, Curtis found himself at Phu Bai, South Vietnam, assigned to C Company, 159th Aviation Battalion, 101st Airborne Division (Airmobile). The unit’s radio call sign was “Playtex.” I told Deb Lamere, who crewed our Chinook in Iraq and has been researching its

service history. She said our Chinook was assigned to Playtex in 1970 and showed me some maintenance records confirming that fact, so we’re quite certain Warrant Officer Curtis spent some time in our CH-47!

Curtis once caught a ride to Da Nang with a 70-year-old pilot flying for Air America. After shutting down the engines after an uneventful flight, the pilot said to Curtis, “Well, son, looks like we cheated death once again, didn’t we? Luck and superstition, that’s all it is.” That made quite an impression upon Curtis, so much so that he repeated that statement at the conclusion of every flight throughout his career; it is also the theme of this book.

Curtis divides the book into four sections or “flying lives.” The first covers his time flying in the Army from 1968-1971; the second part describes his time with the Kentucky Army National Guard; the third talks about his career in the Marine Corps; the final section is about his time with the Royal Navy. Each chapter within the four sections gives an account of an extraordinary or interesting event that ties into luck or superstition. This reader suspects experience, judgement and training also played a part in the author’s remarkable career! ♦



CAM Events!



2024 Calendar of Events

Museum Notes *Continued from page 7*



Visiting the Longren Flyer (D. Murray photo)

CAM assists the Kansas History Museum...In early April, a handful of CAM members had the opportunity to get close to the 1914 Longren Flyer at the Kansas Museum of history (KMH). KMH staff were working on a presentation and wanted to confirm equipment details about the vintage aircraft built in Topeka by A.K. Longren and asked CAM Director Kevin Drewelow for assistance. Other CAM members accompanied Kevin to the KMH, where Patrick Zollner, KMH Executive Director/State Historic Preservation Officer; Bobbi Athon, Director of Communications; and Nikaela Zimmerman, Collections Manager, met our group. Mr. Zollner has supported CAM several times at our pancake feeds and plans to do so again this month! We answered all of their questions as best we could and were delighted to hear of their plans to make the Longren more accessible to visitors once remodeling is complete. This 1914 Flyer was the second Longren aircraft owned and operated by Philip Billard, who was fond of flying it around the Capitol building in Topeka! It was a privilege and an honor to get so close to such an important part of Kansas aviation history!



CAM members watching the eclipse (K. Hobbs photo)

April

27—Celebrity Pancake Feed

May

27—Taps Across America

June

10—Membership Luncheon, Brown Bag

17-21—Young Aviators Class

July

15-19—Young Aviators Class

August

12—Membership Luncheon, Brown Bag

September

14—Be Filled/CAM Truck Pull

21—Girls in Aviation Day

October

6—CAM Car Show

11-13—Thunder Over the Heartland Air Show
at Topeka Regional Airport

14—Membership Luncheon, Brown Bag

November

3—Daylight Savings Time ends

28—Thanksgiving, Museum closed

December

9—Membership Luncheon—bring a covered dish

25—Christmas, Museum closed



Eclipse!...Monday, April 8 was a busy day at the Combat Air Museum, and just like everyone else that day, we all took time to view the partial solar eclipse. We hosted our bimonthly membership luncheon and presentation which concluded just before the eclipse began. Quite a few members stayed to view the celestial event from the Museum, where both the sky and our line of sight was clear! ♦

Wallace Buford *Continued from page 3*

own serious injuries, Wally was able to stabilize the aircraft, tie a tourniquet around Holden's bloody arm, drop the seven tons of vital supplies carried on board to the waiting French, and return to the airbase at Cat Bi. That's when the other CAT pilots learned that, when it mattered most, Wally Buford was the real deal. They were impressed with his flying skills and his unflappable demeanor in the damaged cockpit.

A photo taken not long after Wally brought the damaged plane and the injured Holden back to base shows Wally standing relaxed with his heavily bandaged hands hidden behind his back and a shy, boyish grin on his face in front of the clearly damaged C-119, as if what he had just done really was no big deal. The hole in the side of the plane was bigger than a beach ball. Wally deliberately hid his hands so that when he sent the photo to his parents they would not be alarmed.

Wally's skills that day made headlines around Asia. In his last letter home, he wrote, trying to reassure his parents in his usual understatement mixed with bravado, that his clandestine flights weren't really that dangerous: "My name was [all] over the news broadcast from Hong Kong several days ago; you may never hear about what happened but there is nothing to worry about anyway."

Despite that harrowing flight, CAT continued its supply missions over Dien Bien Phu. On 6 May 1954, Wally was the co-pilot in C-119, No. 149. That morning the China-Burma Theater veteran, James B. McGovern, Jr. (famously known all over the Far East as "Earthquake McGoon" of the Flying Tigers) piloted the ill-fated aircraft that was trying to drop a howitzer and ammunition to the surrounded French forces.



Painting of Buford and McGovern's last flight (www.cia.gov)

The anti-aircraft fire over the drop zone was thick; Viet Minh gunners had plenty of time to zero in on the first aircraft, and Wally and McGovern were in the second plane in a flight of six. Their plane took a direct hit to its left engine and moments later another anti-aircraft round hit No. 149's horizontal stabilizer. The damaged stabilizer made it very difficult to keep the aircraft level.

Despite the damage, McGovern kept the plane flying for nearly forty minutes, out of the valley filled with anti-aircraft guns and Viet Minh. With only one working engine, C-119 No. 149 flew seventy-five miles into Laos while slowly losing altitude. Their goal was to reach a remote small landing strip that had been created for such emergencies as theirs. Finally, just a few hundred yards short of their goal, No. 149 was so low that a wing clipped a tree and it spun into the ground near the village of Muang Et in Houaphan Province and very near the Nam Ma River.

Wally and McGovern were killed instantly as their aircraft was ripped in half. Two of the French aircrew were also killed; one more died shortly after, and just one, 1st. Lt. Jean Arloux, survived to tell the heroic tale of Wally and McGovern's final flight to Dien Bien Phu. Due to an unfortunate clerical error, Wally's parents learned of his death from a news bulletin on the radio as they were sitting down to breakfast back home in Kansas City.

The very next day, 7 May 1954, after a punishing siege of 57 days, the French army of almost 12,000 soldiers surrendered. Although the United States eventually recovered McGovern's remains in 2002 and interred them in Arlington National Cemetery in 2007, Wally's remains have yet to be found. He is still in Laos waiting to return home.

Very few people get to follow their life's passions as determinedly as Wallace Abbott Buford—and that's why everyone needs to remember Wally's passion and bravery as a patriotic American pilot who flew into history. "He would have done it again without hesitation," Roger Buford said of his older brother. "He loved being up in the clouds."

[Ed. Note: A fifth generation Kansan, J. Arron Small is a published author, a dealer in used and rare books, as well as a freelance writer and editor. He currently teaches in the English Department of Johnson County Community College. He earned a bachelor's and master's degree from Kansas State University, as well as a Master of Fine Arts from Purdue University. Arron and his family researched the story of Wallace Buford and created the display in a custom showcase they commissioned which can be seen in the area adjacent to our gift shop. Arron spoke to our membership meeting on February 12 before the dedication of the new display.] ♦

Ways You Can Support the Combat Air Museum

Dillon's Community Rewards Program



If you shop at Dillon's and have a Plus Shopper's Card, you can help support the Combat Air Museum with just a phone call or a few keystrokes. Dillon's Stores donates millions to non-profit organizations. Our Museum benefits from CAM members who have registered with Dillon's Community Rewards Program. Enrolling in this program will not increase your grocery bill and will not affect your fuel points.



Enrolling in the Community Rewards program is a one-time event and no longer requires annual registration. If you've already signed up, no further action is required. Go to <https://www.dillons.com/i/community/community-rewards> to create a Dillon's account before enrolling in the Community Rewards program. You can also call **800.576.4377** and the Dillon's customer service representative will register you. You'll need to provide them with the Combat Air Museum's new five-character Non-Profit Organization (NPO) account number, **GA302**. Thanks to your generosity, each quarter the Museum receives a check from Dillon's that really helps us maintain the collection and facilities and provide the classes and service our visitors enjoy. Last year, Dillon's donated \$815 to CAM; that amount is less than the previous year because we have fewer donors than before. If you haven't joined, why not take a few moments now to do so: Dillon's and CAM will do the rest!

Volunteer

The Combat Air Museum exists solely upon the money we raise from admissions, donations and gift shop sales. We rely on volunteers to run our gift shop, and the need for these volunteers has become even more urgent. We'll train you for this crucial and enjoyable task. If you could spare one day a month, please call the Museum Monday through Friday between 9 a.m. and noon at **785.862.3303** and ask for Nelson, our office manager and volunteer coordinator.

Visitors

417 people from 21 states, Puerto Rico, India, Mexico, Russia and Spain visited the Combat Air Museum in January.

In February, 679 visitors from 28 states, Australia, the Czech Republic, Dubai, Italy, Uganda and Ukraine toured your Museum.

1,483 people from 35 states, Puerto Rico, France, Germany, Great Britain, Indonesia, Ireland, Italy, Malaysia, Mongolia, Nicaragua, Poland, Saudi Arabia, Spain and Sweden visited the Combat Air Museum in March.

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PLANE TALK

Visit the Combat Air Museum for fun, information and an educational experience.

COMBAT 16
AIR MUSEUM

An Old Airfield

Glimpsed from the road through upstart conifers,
With pink-splashed rhododendrons on its rim,
A concrete disc resists the spreading wood.
This old dispersal point makes fifty years
Vanish like fifty seconds as I scan
These rough, flat acres stretched towards the sea.

The taxi track remains, a few black huts.
A square control tower, boarded up and blind
To that long runway it commanded once.
A great wide road devoid of purpose now,
Whiskered with weeds, coarse grasses bursting out
Through every crack and softening every edge.

How still this place is. Only drifting gulls
Cry listlessly above the airfield now
Where once the noisy squadrons coughed to life,
Growling and rumbling to the runway's end.
A pause, a wave, a green light flickering,
Then silhouettes slow-climbing to the east.

You must have guessed I meant to come this way.
Now, sensing ghosts, I do not wish to stay.

Flying Officer Ian Rae, RAF