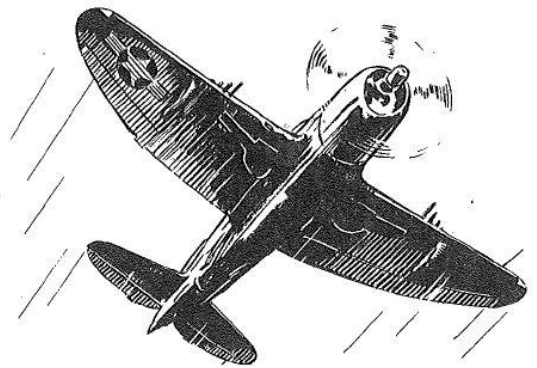




## 367<sup>th</sup> Fighter Group newsletter – Issue # 12 - March 2016

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Dear Friends and 367<sup>th</sup> Fighter Group members,

Thanks to the documentation and pictures I received from David Diefendorf, I was able to write the article dealing with a mission which should have been like any other mission but which became a mission with unexpected consequences for his father, Alan.

Jim Uhl also shared with me the information and pictures concerning his uncle, Cap. James Peck, who was the first C.O. of the 394<sup>th</sup> FS. Jimmy had a lot of influence on the pilots but also on the enlisted men of his squadron.

Sometimes ago I got in touch with Connie Baronne whose uncle was Lt. Dick Brennan, a pilot of the 394<sup>th</sup> FS. I wanted to share with you the pictures of Dick's flying jacket. This jacket is a true treasure.

The pilot in the « Honoring the pilots » article is Lt. Donald K. Erickson. His name was given to a housing estate and a commemorative ceremony was organized to honor his memory.

You can see that this newsletter was made possible thanks to the help of the families of the men of the 367<sup>th</sup> FG. Do not hesitate to share with all of us the documentation you have.

I wish you a good reading.

Olivier Le Floch

### A 367<sup>th</sup> FG pilot who could have started WWII

I have been corresponding with David Diefendorf for some times. His father was Lt. Al Diefendorf, a replacement pilot of the 367<sup>th</sup> FG assigned to the 392<sup>nd</sup> FS in August 1944. After the war, Al stayed in the Air Force until his retirement. Most of you know him as the former president of the 367<sup>th</sup> FG association before Vern. But you certainly did not know that he had almost started WWII ! I let you imagine my surprise when David talked to me about this amazing story. Thanks to the material, pictures and memoirs written by Al, given to me by David, we will see how Al got involved in the mission which had unexpected consequences. Additional information are coming from two articles, one written by Daniel Bauer in the April 1990 issue of Air Classics and one written by J. David Truby in the October 2007 issue of Flight Journal.

After WWII and the hairy missions he flew over France and Germany, Al decided to stay in the Air Force where he jumped into the jet age and flew the P-80, the first jet fighter built by Lockheed after the P-38 Lightning. Al even flew with the first Air Force acrobatic team, the 'Acrojet'. But much too soon for many men like Al, born to fly, the



Cap. Alan Diefendorf, Misawa, 1951  
(David Diefendorf /archives 367<sup>th</sup> FG)





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huge credit reduction forced a lot of pilots to leave the army or to chose to leave the flying status. Al chose to stay in the army, his reasoning was that the 'louzy days', as he called this time, would not last forever. So, in 1950 he received a hard training to become a ground instructor. His reasoning turned out to be right as he learned the following news just after he got married : *'As we headed off to Las Vegas on our honey moon, we heard on the radio that North Korea had invaded the south. We returned to find out they were screening flying records (form 5's) for experience and calling for volunteers. I was offered the opportunity to get back on flying status if I would volunteer for Korea'*. Pretty soon Al resumed flying and flew the 'old' advanced trainer North

American AT-6 and the Lockheed P-80. Next he was sent to the gunnery school in Nellis AFB. Once ready for overseas assignment, Al was sent to a staging area near Concord, CA. Like in all armies, the days spent there were a mix of hurry and wait. One day, Al was at least on the shipping list for the first leg of the trip to Korea. He boarded a cargo plane to Hawaii. His arrival there left him a special memory: *'I remember we parked next to the main civilian terminal and watched the civilian airlines come in, and the passengers being greeted by hula girls with leis being placed around their necks-plain old tourists enjoying themselves and here we were going to another war !'*. To cross the Pacific Ocean, the cargo flew island from island to reach Japan.



*Crew chief Tech. Sgt. Stan Petela, and Lt. Al Diefendorf certainly in Saint Dizier (because of the snow covered airfield) , France, during winter 1944-45 (David Diefendorf/archives 367<sup>th</sup> FG)*



*From left to right, Tech. Sgt. Stan Petela, crew chief, Lt. Al Diefendorf , sgt Ralph Cassetter , asst. crew chief, in A-68 Juvincourt, in 1944 (David Diefendorf/archives 367<sup>th</sup> FG)*

Al was sent to Korea early into the war in August 1950. He had flown 75 missions with the 367<sup>th</sup> FG in the P-38 and the P-47. His flying skills were badly needed as a replacement pilot. Al was assigned to the 9<sup>th</sup> Fighter Bomber Squadron of the 49<sup>th</sup> Fighter Bomber Group in Taegu on the Nacktong River. The 49<sup>th</sup> FBG was flying the P-80 on which Al had already many hours in his logbook. That's why he was cleared for flying after just a local area recce flight and a pattern check. The missions flown by the 49<sup>th</sup> FBG were mainly ground attack missions, a kind of mission Al was also familiar with. They were as dangerous as in Europe during WWII. His third mission could have been his last one but not due to the enemy. After losing his generator, he lost the power needed by the fuel pump whose purpose was to feed the engine with the fuel contained in the tanks. Thanks to his skills, Al managed to





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Lt. Alan Diefendorf in the cockpit of his P-47 in 1945 (David Diefendorf/archives 367<sup>th</sup> FG)



Lt. Alan Diefendorf during the Distinguished Flying Cross presentation. Al earned the DFC during the mission against the headquarters of Gen. Von Ruschtet on March 19<sup>th</sup>, 1945 (David Diefendorf/archives 367<sup>th</sup> FG)

glide up to close the Kimpo airfield in Seoul. Unfortunately Al had aligned his ship for the final approach on a runway that was used as a flight line at this stage of the war. He immediately realized that he had no other choice than doing a 270° turn to be aligned to the runway in service. This turn cost him a lot of altitude. It was impossible for him to make it to the runway. As learned for such a situation, the only thing to do was to land the aircraft straight ahead. Al used again his skills to avoid the workers in the rice paddy below and belly landed just after them. Al said to Daniel Bauer "I pushed the nose down and hit the dike dead ahead with my gear as planned. I remember everything that happened then was in slow motion. The three gears were torn off and I saw them slowly fly through the air ahead of me. I bounced and then the nose section broke off in front of the cockpit firewall and very slowly peeled off to the left. I skidded to a stop and knew I was in one piece, with only a few bruises, from my shoulders hitting the sides of the cockpit". Al had almost left the plane that he was immediately rescued by a helicopter of the Marine. After this close call, Al was certainly far from thinking that the worst would come soon. His 5<sup>th</sup>

mission was involving only a flight of 4 F-80's to search for an airfield in an area close to Chonding, far in the north - north east of the US base. That meant a long mission and furthermore partly on instrument. During the very poor briefing they were informed that they would meet a bad weather and a 100 mph wind from north west at 30 000 feet. Unfortunately things started to go wrong quickly when one of the pilots had to abort during takeoff and the leader had to head for the base shortly in the flight due to a rough engine after he had lead the 3 remaining jets above the overcast at 37 000 feet. Then Lt. Alton Quanbeck acted as flight leader and Al as his wing man. Once the 2 pilots reached the estimated point established during the briefing and taking account of the wind, they started their descent into the heavy layer of clouds. They managed to be close to the ground by flying through some holes they found in the clouds. Spotting a truck on a nearby road, Alton Quanbeck directed the flight to be in good position for a strafing pass at this target. At that same moment Al realized that they were also a target when he saw the blazing of the fire arms shooting at them. He also discovered that they were flying close to an airfield



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with 2 ranks of aircrafts with red stars lined up wing tip to wing tip. He and his leader decided to make a strafing run, each aiming at his own line of aircraft. They came back for a second and a third run : *“our third and final run was across the field and we each picked a particular one (aircraft) as a target. I saw mine get hit, the nose wheel collapsed and some smoke appear. We were now minimum fuel and took off on our briefed heading for home, climbing”*. The 2 aircraft reached 37000 feet on their way home. Unable to contact Misawa tower, they managed to reach the Taegu radio beacon. They were surprised when they saw on the beacon receiver instrument that they needed a large heading correction to their right. They at least managed to contact the tower and the corrections given to them were in accordance with their large initial heading correction. The 2 pilots were lucky to make it to the airfield as they met a very strong head wind. Al flamed out while taxiing just when he reached the parking area. The initial post mission briefing made understand the intelligence officer and Wing Commander that this mission was not uneventful. Al and Alton Quanbeck were informed during their late supper that they had to report to general Partridge’s (C.O. of the Fifth Air Force) head quarter. The two pilots told their mission again to the General and staff: *“we told them exactly what had transpired during the mission. They showed us maps and pictures that we never knew existed and that should have been available to aircrews. We drew pictures of the airfield we had attacked and the gist, I thought, was what the General and his staff thought that we had attacked an airfield that might have been inside Russia, just south of Vladivostock, at a place called Rashin”*. The two pilots were grounded and were scheduled for a court martial on November 18<sup>th</sup>, 1950. This court martial could have been a response to the Russians who officially protested to the United Nations. The Russian protested through the Deputy Foreign Minister. This complain was released to the public in the Chicago Daily Tribune whose headline was *“RUSS ACCUSE U.S. OF RAID – 2 Yank Planes hit air field, says Moscow”*. The Russians airplanes were fighters of the 821<sup>st</sup> Interceptor



*F-80, certainly of the 41st Fighter Interceptor Squadron in the sky of Japan (David Diefendorf/archives 367<sup>th</sup> FG)*





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Aviation regiment at the Sukhaya Rechka airbase. They were P-39 and P-63, both built by the American aircraft company Bell. They had been delivered to Russia during WWII and mainly used as ground attack fighters.



P-39 in March field Museum, Ca



Lt. Al Diefendorf and sgt Ralph Cassetter , asst. crew chief, in A68 Juvincourt, in 1944 (David Diefendorf/archives 367<sup>th</sup> FG)



Imagine far more russian's P-39s aligned like those 2 P-39's of the 367<sup>th</sup> FG (Clyde Deavers/archives 367<sup>th</sup> FG)

Although the U.S. Air Force's investigators concluded that no charge has to be filed, the trial of the 2 pilots started on November 18<sup>th</sup>. They were advised by a squadron mate to be defended by a Lt. Col. of the JAG (Judge Advocate General) by the name of Bernard Katz. Al Diefendorf wrote in his memoir : *"The big day finally arrived and the big courtroom at 10e Nagoya Hq had everything but a firing squad hidden in a corner. The Government accused us of three violations under Article 96, the military catch-all; 2 specifications for violation of written orders and one for wrongfully, negligently, carelessly and recklessly attacking a neutral airfield, etc (WOW, what bad guys we really were!). The prosecution presented a series of witnesses (no Russians) and rested their case in mid afternoon. Now it was our turn and our lawyer got up and fired his big guns. To make a long story short he told the court "we have nothing to defend, there is no proof to support any of these alleged violations" and on and on. After several closures of the court the verdict was Not Guilty of the specifications and charges"*.





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After the trial the two pilots were soon reassigned to the 41<sup>st</sup> Fighter Interceptor Squadron, another P-80 outfit at Johnson Air Base, in Japan. Lt Quanbeck was next assigned as Aide-de-Camp to Brigadier General D. Spivey in Nagoya. Al Diefendorf was sent to the detachment at Misawa Air Base, in northern Japan. There he flew many missions of different kind and was certainly happy to do what he had always wanted to do, fly ! Sometimes later he eventually resume to a regular commission flying officer. The war in Korea which gave Al the opportunity to resume flying also could have been the cause of the end of his status of pilot. But the Air Force took the good decision when it released him of all charges. Al's flying skills were put in good use again to help his country as he flew 142 missions in a F-4 Phantom in Vietnam. All in all he flew a total of 222 war missions and retired as a full colonel. The missions flown by the two pilots could have had a lot of consequences. They could have been the match which would have set fire between the allied nations and the USSR. Once the Soviet Union officially involved into the conflict this could have lead to the third world war. According to some analysts the attack by Al and Alton Quanbeck did the opposite. It showed to the Russians that the U.S. Air Force could easily strike their territory. It made Staline realized that his country could not face the USA and its United Nations allies. This attack took place only 5 years



*Cap. Al Diefendorf under the wing of a F-80 in Misawa, Japan, in 1951 (David Diefendorf/archive 367<sup>th</sup> FG)*



*Cap. Al Diefendorf standing in front of a F-80 in Misawa, Japan, in 1951 (David Diefendorf/archive 367<sup>th</sup> FG)*



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*Cap. Al Diefendorf in Misawa, Japan, in 1951 (David Diefendorf/archive 367<sup>th</sup> FG)*



*Cap. Al Diefendorf in Misawa, Japan, in 1951 (David Diefendorf/archive 367<sup>th</sup> FG)*

after the end of WWII. The Russians had lost million of soldiers and could not get involved again into a costly war. Russia also stopped to help North Korea, letting China support the Korean red forces. We certainly will never know if this mission had been scheduled by the big brass, explaining why the pilots were furnished so few materials during their briefing, or if this attack was an example of being at the wrong place at the wrong time. Some analysts also think that the action of the two pilots was the origin of the meeting between President Truman and General Mac Arthur at Wake Island in the following days of the strafing of the Russian airfield. Did Truman need to be sure that Mac Arthur knew he (Truman) was the true leader and that he did not want the Air Force to attack the Russian again?



*Cap. Al Diefendorf on the wing of a F-80 in Misawa, Japan, in 1951 (David Diefendorf/archive 367<sup>th</sup> FG)*





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### Captaine James Peck

In newsletters # 1 and 2 an article was dedicated to Lt. Col. “Mo” Crossen, a key officer of the 367<sup>th</sup> Fighter Group. If “Mo” would have not been killed in action, he certainly would have been the Commanding Officer of the outfit when Col. Young would have finished his tour of operation. Another pilot would have had a great opportunity to become an extremely good leader and a high ranking officer. This man was Cap. James Elvidge Peck and was one of the original officers of the outfit.

Like most of the officers who joined the group as a captain, James was an experienced pilot, more than needed to help the “new bees” become pilots ready to fight the enemy. Although he was only 21 when he was assigned to the 367<sup>th</sup> FG, he had a lot of combat time under his belt. I think that it is not wrong to say that Jim loved aviation as he started flying lessons at age of 15 and got his flying license the day he graduated from high school. He received his pilot training at the Curtis-Wright Tech. Polaris Flight academy in Burbank, CA. Next, he volunteered to fly with the RAF after he got his license. As the USA were not yet at war, he had to go to Canada for his enrollment in the RAF. After a few months of training spent in Ottawa and Fyffes Hine, he boarded a boat for the crossing of the Atlantic. After disembarkment he and his group of fellow pilots were sent near Bournemouth in south England (a city close to Stoney



*Pilots of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Eagle Squadron. James Peck is 5<sup>th</sup> from the left (Jim Uhl /archives 367<sup>th</sup> FG)*

Cross and Ibsley) before being sent to the north to an operational training unit (OTU). In many of his letters to his folks, Jim gives some information about his training in this OTU: “*Sunday we started flying one of the world’s fastest training planes, a Miles Master. It has a 900 H.P. engine in it. After flying the Miles for two hours I soloed it in two landings. I was put in a single seat ship with over 1000 H.P. in it. The particular ship I was flying had been over Dunkirk last summer. It is one of the two most famous ships Britain has. I will name it and hope they won’t censor it. It is the famous Hurricane*”. After his training he was sent with the some other American pilots to a squadron of the RAF flying the Hurricane. But pretty soon these American pilots and Jim were assigned to the second Eagle squadron.





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The three Eagle squadrons were created by the RAF in 1940 and were made of American pilots who were already fighting in the RAF. Jim was introduced to the famous Spitfire, the best plane of the RAF. Once considered combat ready, he joined the other pilots for the daily missions. Even if Jim could at least see action, he considered that the few scrambles and convoy protection missions were not enough to fill in his need of combat. When he and his old friend Don 'Mac' McLeod (they graduated the same day at the Curtis-Wright Tech. Polaris Flight academy in Burbank) heard about the Japanese attack of Pearl Harbor, they asked for their transfer to the Far East to "kick hell out of those L.Y.B. (little yellow bastards)" as Jim wrote in a letter to his sister on December 29th, 1941. Like some other pilots of his squadron, he asked his transfer to the far East but also to the middle east, Malta and Libya where the RAF was fighting in the air. His wish was fulfilled when he left England for Gibraltar with a bunch of 15 other pilots, one being his friend Mac. The final destination was Malta. The only way at this time of the war to supply fighters to Malta was to use a task force made of an aircraft carrier protected by cruisers and destroyers. This task force called "Club" by the Navy was based in Gibraltar. The trip from England to Gibraltar was made by sea. The Spitfire were also in the same ship, the Queen Victoria. Once in Gibraltar the aircraft were move during the night inside the Carrier Eagle where they were reassembled. On March 20th, 1942, the task force left Gibraltar and sailed as close of Malta as the Spitfire range would permit. The pilots were launched from the aircraft carrier the next day. None of them had been launched from an aircraft carrier before. 'Mac' McLeod wrote the following comment in his diary: "*I remember, out of the corner of my eye, seeing the deck controller jump*



American flyers in London club are served Coca-Cola by member of the American Red Cross.

James Peck (on the left) and his Eagle squadron mates (Jim Uhl/archives 367<sup>th</sup> FG)



Cap. 'Mac' McLeod and James Peck (Jim Uhl/archives 367<sup>th</sup> FG)

*on my wing and shout meaningless words. He smiled, patted me on the back. I knew he was trying to reassure me, but I was beyond that stage. I again saw that flag, off came my brakes and down that same deck I went. Halfway down I passed the main section. It looked to me like I was slowing down. I didn't see how it was possible that I could fly. I could not quit now. Had I tried to stop I would have gone into the drink. I had no alternative left. I must go on. I must get off that deck or I was a gone pigeon. I passed off the deck and seemed to hover. I felt that feeling of emptiness. I knew that I was in the air. One-fifth of a second would decide whether I would fly or swim. I hung in the*





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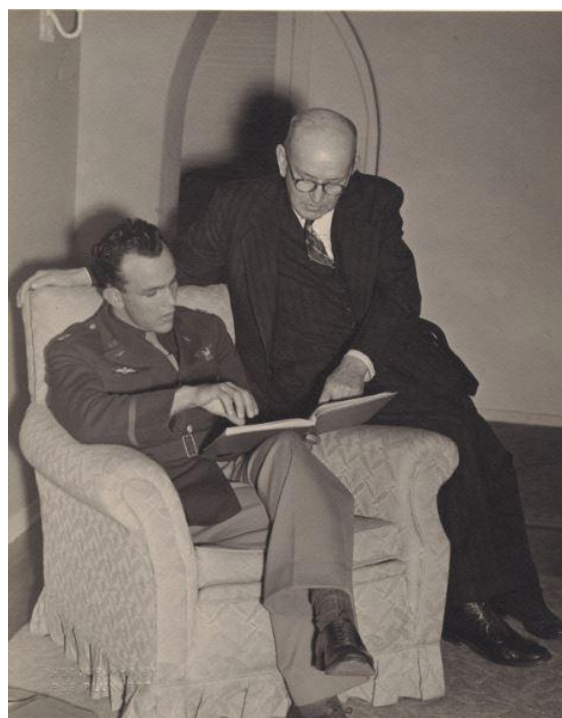
*air, seemed to settle momentarily and then received that wonderful feeling of being airborne. I had made it. With a deep sigh I said, 'It's over'.../...Just after we had set course, a plane slid upside of me, waggled its wings and then it slipped off to my right and once again Jimmy and I were together. I purposely left Jimmy out of previous description (in his diary, McLoad described the pilots who were enroute to Malta except for his buddy Jim Peck) so you could get to know him a little better than the other chaps in the story. It did not seem so far back, not more than a year ago, Jimmy and I met when we joined the Royal Air Force. Jimmy was a nineteen year old kid. As American a boy as any boy could be. Outstandingly brave and afraid of nothing. He was small where I was large, slight where I was heavy, dark where I was fair and quiet where I was boisterous. Jimmy and I had been through the war up until now together, side by side. We had joined the Royal Air Force together, had flown England together, went to the same training school for three long weeks of grueling training. We had shared our first leave together and joined the Second Eagle Squadron together. This together story was to keep on and on until'.*

In a matter of days in Malta, James Peck showed his flying skills to his mates of the 126 squadron. On March 28th, he and his friend 'Mac' shot down two enemy fighters. His score improved very fast and at the end of June 1942 he had reached the ace status. He had 5 destroyed plus 3 not confirmed which he saw fall into the ocean, plus two probably destroyed and eight damaged. He also had been promoted to the rank of Flight Lieutenant which is the equivalent of captain in the Air Corps. His score could certainly have been far better if he would not have been sent back to England in July. With his friend 'Mac' he was assigned to an OTU as an instructor before being transferred to the US Army Air Corps. With his new group, the 52<sup>nd</sup>, he was involved into the invasion of North Africa in November 1942. He shot down his sixth German aircraft on January 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1943 and his seventh a few days later. At this time he had flown 127 missions and had 600 hours of combat time in his logbook. One month later, he ended his tour and was sent home in Berkeley, CA. After a well deserved rest at home, Jim had to report to Hamilton Field on May 18th, 1943. He was joined by other veteran pilots. One of them was already a friend as they flew together in North Africa. This pilot was Jack Reed. This last flew 30 missions over France and other German occupied countries in Western Europe and Africa. He had two and a half confirmed victories, three probable and five damaged. When the 367th FG was activated on July 13th, 1943, Hamilton Field, Jim assumed the command of the 394th FS. On July 31st, he did the trip to Washington D.C. to receive the British Distinguished Flying Cross from Lord Halifax, the British Ambassador in the USA.

The first plane, a P-39 Q-10, arrived to the squadron on October 4th. Jim took this aircraft up on a training flight, which



Cap. James Peck after his return from the African Theater (Jim Uhl/archives 367<sup>th</sup> FG)

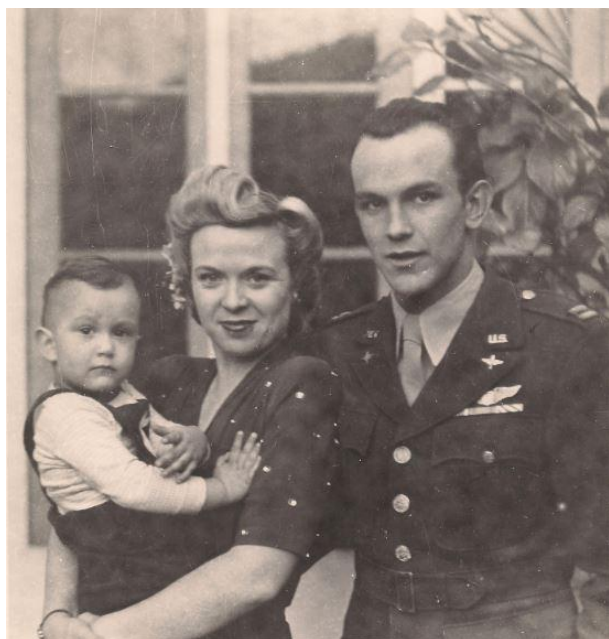


James Peck and his father reading James' log book (Jim Uhl/archives 367<sup>th</sup> FG)





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Capt. James E. Peck, his wife Gerri and his nephew James Peck Uhl (Jim Uhl/archive 367<sup>th</sup> FG)



Capt. Peck and his wife Gerri with guests at wedding. The officer serving the cocktail is Cap. Jack Reed (Jim Uhl/archive 367<sup>th</sup> FG)

was a real morale booster for the men. A few days later the squadron had six planes and James Peck organized the training of the pilots. This training saw a big improvement after the move to Santa Rosa airfield and the arrival of a batch of twenty-six pilots freshly graduated from advanced training in Luke Field.

Jim received the American Distinguished Flying Cross and the Air Medal with three clusters from General Schramm at Hamilton Field on October 17th. On November 28th he was replaced by Maj. Smith as a Commanding Officer of the Squadron and he became a flight leader. Once in UK, James carried on to be an example for the pilots of his squadron. His wish was that they all could master the big twin-engine P-38. If he could do every maneuver with his Lightning, all the pilots could do it also. Unfortunately the chance was not on his side on April 12<sup>th</sup> 1944. As he was on the final approach of the runway in Stoney Cross he understood that he would not be in good condition for the landing and so had to add power on both engines for a go around. Unfortunately one of his engines quit. With the other engine at full power the ship rolled very quickly, making James unable to recover of the roll. His best buddy, Cap. Jack Reed gave us the description of his friend: *“Jimmy Peck was killed tonite. He was up testing a new P-38 which had been assigned to him. He had been up about two hours doing about everything in the book and overshoot the runway coming in to land. When he opened throttles to go around the left engine failed and he spun in on the perimeter track. Needless to say it’s pretty hard to take because Jim was my closest friend. I met him in London in 42 before we transferred. We transferred together, went to Africa on the invasion and went back to the States together. Over there we were in the same group and joined the 367<sup>th</sup> together to come over here. Jimmy had the British D.F.C. and Bar, the American D.F.C. and had done most of his fighting on Malta during the Blitz there. He had seven confirmed, five probable and four damaged, without ever picking up a hole in his kite. Jim was deeply respected by everyone not only for his flying but also his disposition. He would gripe from morning until nite about something and would soon have everyone else griping with him. He was a wonderful guy. Just turned 22. Doc Bleich, our old squadron Doc from the 329<sup>th</sup> and 444<sup>th</sup>, was standing about 50 yds from where it happened and was the first man to him. Jim was thrown clear when the ship hit and exploded. He was not burned but had a bad fracture of the skull and even though Doc had some blood which he had been saving for just such an emergency, Jimmy died about twenty minutes later on the way to the hospital. The time was 8:50 pm. At least I have the satisfaction of knowing that everything possible was done*





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*Brig. General Ned Schramm and Jim Peck at Hamilton Field, Ca 18 October 1943. James received the Distinguished Flying Crosss and the Air Medail with 3 clusters (Jim Uhl/archive 367<sup>th</sup> FG)*

*because Doc knows his business. When we were in the States Doc and Jimmy and I used to plan great things when got to London. Doc went to school here so we all had something in common. Naturally we struck up quite a friendship so it isn't too easy for Doc either".*

After Jim's death, a lot of his squadron mates wrote a letter to his wife Geri. In each letter, we can see the same comment. Lt. Herb Breman : "It was a terrific shock to everyone in the squadron. Jimmy was really our boy. The pilots idolized him. They thought he was wonderful – and he was. From the time I joined the 394<sup>th</sup>, immediately after Jim had come in as C.O., I always felt that he was my closest friend in the outfit. Apparently all the boys felt the same way, for they all admired him tremendously and really loved him. As far as they were concerned he was king of the skies. He was perfect. There was a memorial service for Jim tonight and one of the things the chaplain said was : "now Jimmy Peck is gone, there will be a blank space in the skies".

Master Sgt. George Phillips, a crew chief, wrote also : "In all the pilots I admired and enjoyed working for is Capt. Peck. He was the father of all those young pilots and they all looked up to him as a father".

His friends o f the American Eagle squadron also sent a letter to Jim's father and mother. Even General Hap Arnold, the C.O. of the Army Air Force, sent them a letter.

Jim left his mark on the men of his squadron and even on the men of the group. The spirit he gave them helped the group to be one of the best of the Ninth Air Force.





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### HONORING THE PILOTS – 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt. Donald K. Erickson, 392<sup>nd</sup> Fighter Squadron

On July 31st 1944, the 392<sup>nd</sup> FS flew a dive bomb mission in Tours, France. It was a full squadron effort but not all bombs were released on the target, an oil facility, as some of them would not be released over the target. After the bombing the squadron was divided into 2 groups of 2 flights each.

Each group flew in different directions in the area to find targets of opportunity. One of them found a train in a small village 32 miles west of Tours. During the strafing of the train, Lt. Eugene Fleming's P-38 was hit and crashed landed close to the Cher River (see newsletter 10 in « honoring the pilots »). The other group flew very close to the Air Base in Tours and spotted a German convoy. Lt. Clyde Deavers was acting as top cover while his buddy, Lt. Ray Jackson, was in his strafing run. Unfortunately Clyde's P-38 was hit by the flak. He managed to gain some altitude to bail out but was badly injured when he hit the stabilizer of his ship (see newsletter #11 in article « A very special flying helmet »). Next this group of pilots strafed several targets of opportunity still close to Tours until they spotted another German convoy in the vicinity of Sonzay, 15 miles north west of Tours. During the strafing run, Lt. Don Erickson's P-38 was hit. The aircraft was not hit by the German gunners but by the blast of his own bomb, a big one pounder (one thousand pounds). Like some of the pilots, the bomb on Don's ship would not release over the main target in Tours. So it is thought that Don released his bomb over the German convoy during the strafing. He hit the release button on the stick and this time the bomb was gone. As the fuse was 1/10 seconds delay, he flew just over the bomb when it exploded.



*From left to right : Lts Dupont, Donald K. Erickson, Erkamp and Jennings (or Jennings) at Van Nuys, Ca, certainly during their transition to the P-38 Lightning probably during spring 1944 (Lillian Dillon/archives 367<sup>th</sup> FG)*

Lt. Ray Jackson wrote the following comment in the missing air crew report : *« I observed Lt. Erickson making a pass on a gas truck at a point approximately 2 miles SW of Thilouze, France. He released his bomb 100 feet short of the target and instantaneous fuse setting caused a bomb blast directly beneath his ship. At this time he was at an altitude of approximately 100 feet. He continued on a course a quarter of a mile climbing to approximately 200 feet.*





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Mr. Marc Roy, a teen-ager at the time, who saw the Lightning flying before him told me that he could hear the engines coughing, stopping and running again and saw the gas leaking from the belly side of the P-38. Next he saw a shape falling from the plane. He thought that the pilots had jettisoned a belly tank but in fact he saw Don Erickson bailing out. It is believed that he lost some speed while trying to avoid the village of Sonzay just in front of him. It is possible that Don lost his last chance of gaining some altitude when he turned in the left as he did not want his P-38 to fall onto the houses. Don bailed out but was too low for his chute to open and was killed when he hit the ground in a middle of a wood. A short time later his body was found by some men of the village. His body was taken to the city where he was watched over all night by Jean Cabal, one of the men who found Don's body. The next day, a lot of people of the village gathered in the church for the burial ceremony. Don was buried into the communal cemetery. His body was brought back to the USA in 1949 and was reburied in the cemetery in Inglewood close to Los Angeles airport. Don was 25 years old when he was killed in action and was married to Mary L. Davis.



*The 4 buddies. Lts Robert Dillon, Donald Erickson and Owen Fincher making a hair cut to Lt. Ray Davis before they left California for their assignment to the 392<sup>nd</sup> FS. They joined the squadron in June 1944. Only Bob Dillon and Owen Fincher made it home (Owen Fincher/archives 367<sup>th</sup> FG)*

In spring 2007 I went with some friends to Sonzay to meet Mr. Marc Roy and Jean Cabal, the two eyewitnesses of the crash and the mayor and we headed to the wood where Don's P-38s crash landed. After a few minutes we saw a sheet of burned metal against a oak tree. This part was quickly identified as a part of a P-38. We soon discovered other parts hidden under the leaves. Marc Roy and Jean Cabal explained us what they saw.

Jean Cabal gave us the following account: « on July 31, 1944, at the beginning of the afternoon, a big boom, black smoke rose up above the wood of Breuil. A plane has just crash landed. I grab my bike with tires made of garden hose (during WWII, a lot of things were impossible to find as the German had requisitioned everything) and rushed toward the place where the aircraft fell. Mr Guay, our rural policeman, and the game officer, Mr Turquais, are already there. We cannot go closer because of small explosions and the intense fire. As we were going around we found the body of the pilot with his parachute badly open. It seems that his legs are broken. He is deceased. Next the German came to take away the papers of the pilot. They left us his body. Mr Turquais would have taken the watch of the pilot and gave it to Mr Darblay who would have sent it to the family of the pilot in the USA.



*Lt Don Erickson flew in P-38J-10-LO 42-67909 'MISWIS' the fateful day he lost his life on July 31, 1944. This aircraft was the one of Lt. Milton Jaeger (Mick Jaeger/archives 367<sup>th</sup> FG)*





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*We had to find a way to take the body to the village. This is the van of Mr Godeau which is used for the sinister trip. The body was laid into the city hall of Sonzay in a small room whose door on the street do not exist anymore. We spent all night on the steps of this room. I remember I was all night with Mr Gruson and some other ones I do not remember the name to guard the body.*

*The burial ceremony was organized and a lot of people attended at the church and cemetery with a lot of flowers. We were a team of first aiders following the courses of Doctor Jouanneau, 4 women and 4 men. The women had a red-cross armband and the men had a red-cross armband and a white helmet.*

*During the ceremonies in the church and the cemetery we formed a guard of honor. In the church the priest made an sermon full of praise and took the risk to say that the village was burying a liberator».*



*Burial ceremony of Lt. Donald K Erickson in Sonzay, France, on August 1, 1944. These men and women are young persons of the village who received the training of the general practitioner of the village to act as first aiders. They have the armband on their arm. You can see the big amount of flowers covering the coffin of Don Erickson (Jean Cabal/archives 367<sup>th</sup> FG)*

The group of people who investigated the crash site agreed to organize a dedication in honor of Don. This dedication was scheduled on July 7<sup>th</sup>, 2007. Unfortunately I did not manage to find any relative of Don to ask them to attend but I had the chance and pleasure to get in touch with Gayle Reese, the daughter of Lt. Hugh Hallman, a close buddy of Lts Clyde Deavers, Gene Fleming and Ray Jackson. All were original pilots of the A flight of the 392nd FS. Hugh flew the mission on July 31, 1944, and saw Don Erickson bailing out. Gayle agreed to come in France to attend to the dedication. She came with her son Kyle and grandson Colton.

Col. Frank Trippi (Ret.) of the Air Force came especially from Washington. Frank was a volunteer at the AFRAA at Boling Air Force Base. He helped me a numerous of time, answering my letters requesting information on the 367<sup>th</sup> FG. He said that if one day I would organize a dedication he would do the trip and that is what he did. I picked him up at Paris airport a couple of days before the dedication and we headed to the Loire valley to meet Gayle, Kyle and Colton. We were all ready for the dedication.

On July 7<sup>th</sup>, 2007, Mr. Simier, the mayor of Sonzay, read his speech as well as Mr. Philippe Brian, the congress man. We also had the chance to have Arthur Schwartz and Richard Vasquez, veterans of foreign wars of the United States, Post N°605 as well as Eddie L. Rosier, representing the 367<sup>th</sup> FG in the name of Jack Curtis. Kyle Reese read a speech also and Gayle came with a speech written by Major General Kevin J. Sullivan, the Commanding Officer of Hill Air Force base where she worked. Frank Trippi also offered an American flag, which had been raised above the Capitol in Washington, to the village of Sonzay. He also read the speech of William D. Euille, the Mayor of Alexandria, Vi.





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*Kyle Reese reading the text of Major General K. J. Sullivan with Mayor of Sonzay. American Veterans, Arthur Schwartz and Richard Vasquez and Eddie Rosier are discussing with Congress man Philippe Brian (archives 367<sup>th</sup> FG)*

After the speeches, everybody walked to the nearby place of the village for the rest of the ceremony. Col. Trippi was asked by the mayor to unveil the street name of this new house estate of the village where a group of houses would be built very shortly. The street was named after Lt. Donald Erickson.

To finish this busy afternoon, the exhibit on the mission and Don Erickson was inaugurated in a communal building. A painting of the late painter Francis Dartois was unveiled. This painting was representing Don's P-38 trailing smoke before it would crash landed in Sonzay.



*Col. Frank Trippi with the American flag which had been raised over the Capitol in Washington DC with mayor Michel Simier and Gayle Reese, daughter of Lt. Hugh Hallman, 392<sup>nd</sup> FS (archives 367<sup>th</sup> FG)*

*Mayor of Sonzay, Michel Simier with American veterans in the background and Gayle, Kyle and Colton Reese on his side on July 7, 2007 (archives 367<sup>th</sup> FG)*





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*Above, above right and right, Col. Frank Trippi and mayor Simier have just to unvaild the street name of a new house estate of the village. The street was named after Lt. Donald Erickson (archives 367<sup>th</sup> FG)*



*From left to right Jean-Pierre Verneau, president of the 'syndicat d'initiative', Col. Frank Trippi , Olivier Le Floch and his daughters, Gayle, Kyle and Colton Reese before the new street named after Don Ercikson (archives 367<sup>th</sup> FG)*





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Gayle Reese and Col. Frank Trippi at the exact spot in the forest where Lt. Donald Erickson's body was found as well as some parts of his P-38 in Sonzay (archives 367<sup>th</sup> FG)



Col. Frank Trippi and mayor Simier put a bouquet in honor of Lt. Donald Erickson in the forest where this last lost his life in Sonzay, France (archives 367<sup>th</sup> FG)



Left and above left exhibit in honor of Lt. Donald Erickson in Sonzay. The panels were explaining the mission of July 31, 1944. They also gave information on the 367<sup>th</sup> FG and of course Donald Erickson. Some parts of the P-38 "MISWIS" were also shown to the public (archives 367<sup>th</sup> FG)





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*Clos Donald K. Erickson in Sonzay a few months after the inauguration. The first houses are almost finished (archives 367<sup>th</sup> FG)*



*Mr. Marc Roy explaining to the reporter of the local TV channel that he saw Don Erickson's P-38 trying to gain altitude just before his eyes and that he saw him bailing out, thinking first that it was a belly tank (archives 367<sup>th</sup> FG)*

I would like to had a comment of an amazing thing that happened the day I went to the cemetery in Inglewood to see Don Erickson's grave. I took the opportunity of a trip in California last summer for a recollection on Don Erickson's grave just before our return flight. As we parked our car on the parking lot of the mosoleum of the cemetery, where Don's name was engraved, the only car already parked was exactly the same as ours. And as I just had put my foot on the first step to enter the building, a huge Airbus A380 of Air France flew over the cemetery during its final approach to LAX airport. It was a really amazing coincidence.

We will see in the next newsletter the investigation of Don Erickson's crash site. The wreck was removed by the German soldiers but we found very interesting parts of « MISWIS ».



*Only 2 cars on the parking lot of the mausoleum in Inglewood cemetery, CA. They are exactly the same (archives 367<sup>th</sup> FG)*

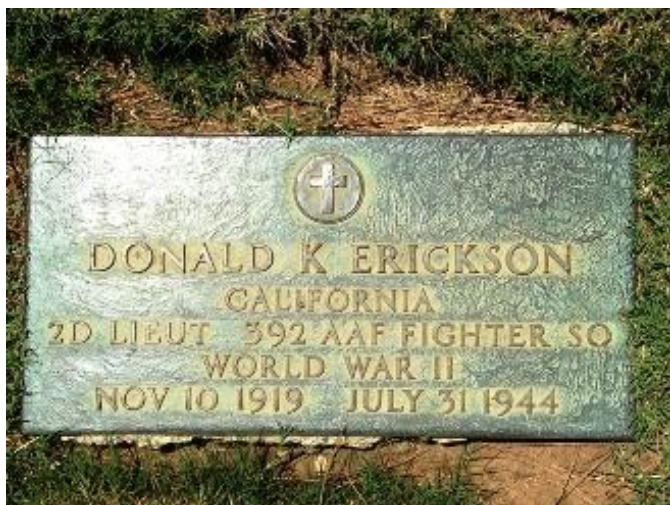


*An Airbus A380 on final of LAX airport just at the moment I put onr foot on the stairs of the mausoleum in Inglewood cemetery, CA (archives 367<sup>th</sup> FG)*





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Grave of Donald K. Erickson in Inglewood cemetery, CA  
(archives 367<sup>th</sup> FG)



The name of Donald K. Erickson in the mausoleum in the  
Inglewood cemetery, CA (archives 367<sup>th</sup> FG)



Entrance of the mausoleum in the Inglewood cemetery, CA,  
where are honored the men who gave their life for our liberty  
who are buried in the cemetery like Donald K. Erickson  
(archives 367<sup>th</sup> FG)

We will see in the next newsletter the investigation of Don Erickson's crash site. The wreck was removed by the German soldiers but we found some very interesting parts of « MISWIS ».





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### FAMILY TREASURE

A few years ago I got in touch with Connie Brennan Barone, the niece of Lt. Donald “Dick” Brennan of the 394<sup>th</sup> FS.

Connie shared some pictures with me and among them were two pictures of Dick’s flying jacket. To me this flying jacket is, like the medals or the pilot’s insignia, a family treasure.

Thank you Connie for sharing with us these great pictures !



Picture of the yearly book of Class 44A of Williams Field (archives 367<sup>th</sup> FG)



Flying jacket, glasses and flying helmet of Lt. Don Brennan. The patch with the dog on the front of the jacket is the patch of the 394<sup>th</sup> FS. Both aircrafts, P-38 and P-47, of Dick Brennan were named “Sleezy” (Connie B. Barone/archives 367<sup>th</sup> FG)



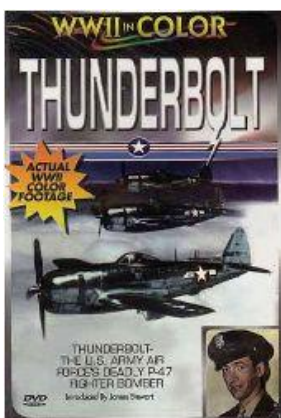


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### Books, DVDs and Links

#### WWII in Color : THUNDERBOLT

I received this DVD a few weeks ago from John Cely, son of Cap. Claude Cely of the 394th FS. This DVD is a video in color of a Thunderbolt fighter group of the 12<sup>th</sup> Air Force in Corsica Island. Although the fighter group is not a fighter group of the 9th Air Force, it is really amazing this see the action from the cockpit. Thanks John for this DVD



#### AIR Classic (April 1990 issue) and Flight Journal (October 2007 issue)

You can read in these issues of these two magazines an article on the mission flown by Al Diefendorf in Korea

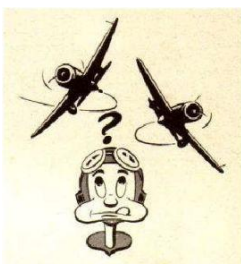


#### The American Air Museum

<http://www.americanairmuseum.com/unit/314>

This site made by the Imperial War Museum has a page on the 367<sup>th</sup> FG. You will not find too much information but the few pictures are really amazing. The pictures taken from the nose of a P-38 Droop Snoot of the 367<sup>th</sup> FG by the reporter of Life are great

#### Coming in the next Newsletter



- The advanced landing grounds in Normandy
- Investigation of a crash site
- Honoring the pilots, part 6