WINGS



News

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Happy New Year to all of you and your families

Local Tradition Veterans wing it at West Hills Wendy's

By Bob Strauss Staff Writer



Ten years. ago two World War 11 flying veterans began meeting every Monday at a Wendy's restaurant in West Hills, on Monday, more than 100 veterans of all services, and their spouses and supporters packed the Platt Avenue franchise for the 520th Wings Over Wendy's gathering.

"I never dreamed it would get this big," marveled Ron Ross, owner of the Wendy's franchise, as be looked at his packed restaurant. "It's kind of wild. It means a lot to them, and that's what's nice."

The 10th anniversary celebration featured free coffee, doughnuts, bagels and three kinds of cakes. The place was trimmed with red, white and blue balloons, bunting, flags and framed pictures of Corsairs, B-17s and other classic warplanes. There was a big group photo shoot in the parking lot.

The tone of the event reflected the attitude associated with. the WWII generation of citizen soldiers: Simultaneously reverent and irreverent, patriotic but rich with a "so-what" sense of their own heroism and irrepressible good humor. "You'll hear a lot of stories here, a lot of history," said WOW chairman Art Sherman, adding with a comedian's perfect timing: "Some of it's even true!

Sherman took over the loose-knit organization's leadership following the deaths of founders Fred "Crash" Blechman and Mickey Epstein.

"We're camaraderie for older veterans, basically," Sherman, a former bombardier and still active 90-year-old furniture rep from Encino. "We started out *as* fliers, that's why it's Wings Over Wendy's. But we take any branch of the service, or anyone who's interested."

No dues, no rules, no tests. That's WOW. Besides the weekly breakfast meet-ups, the group supports charities such as Operation Gratitude, organizes speaking engagements at local schools and sponsors excursions to places such as the Jet Propulsion Laboratory.

Regulars include World War II's most decorated fighter pilot, 90-year-old Clyde East, who shot down 13 German planes; and oldest member Steve Politis, 95, who went from the Signal Corps to a bomber assignment that got him shot down behind enemy lines in Yugoslavia

"That was no fun." the electrical engineer, who volunteers as an algebra teacher at Welby Way School, deadpanned. "They had an underground, fortunately."

One of the younger vets who's come to cherish the Monday morning invasions is 56-year-old Brian

MacGregor, who was a helicopter door-gunner in Vietnam. "Camaraderie, all the stories, the lies and the big fish tales that go along with the stories," said the Northridge resident, who coached school sports after his tour of duty. "Its great to hear the history and meet all the different people."

Michael LaVere, a West Hills 87-year-old who looked pretty snazzy in a dress uniform he admitted was not the one that fit him in the 1940s, summed up the pleasures of WOWing it up for the past decade.

"I get a good feeling sharing my stories and others' stories," said LaVere, a navigator who survived 36 B-24 combat missions over Germany. "It's just a great group, and every one of these guys are my friends. They'd do anything for you; it's like nothing I've ever experienced."

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R.I.P. Clyde East and Brian MacGregor

Aviation heroes a down-to-earth bunch

The party starts at 9 every Monday morning at Wendy's restaurant in West Hills and ends around 11 a.m.

The vets finish their last cup of coffee, tell their last joke, and head for the exits to make room for the lunch crowd starting to wander in.

"See you next week," they say, shaking hands. Drive safe.

No one passing them in the parking lot seems to have any idea who these men are, because if they did they'd probably stop and thank them.

They certainly deserve it. When this country asked them to leave their families and help us out of some tight spots around the world they did.

World War II, Korea, Vietnam.

Most of them were pilots, navigators and bombardiers. They call themselves "Wings Over Wendys" and a more colorful, down to earth bunch of people you're not going to find.

When I walked in to talk to them Monday, the raffle winners were just being announced. The prizes included a pack of 10 ballpoint pens, two small sacks of oranges from somebody's backyard tree, and a videotape of "All Quiet on the Western Front."

Beautiful.

"Crash" Blechman, Ed Figueroa, Mickey Epstein, and a handful of aviation veterans came up with the idea of a weekly Monday morning get together at Wendy's about nine years ago. Today, the group has over 140 members.

Crash who died last year, earned his dubious nickname after crashing five navy fighter planes during his military career.

He always joked that the Japanese acknowledged him as one of their aces.

Laughs are part of this exclusive club. War grudges are hard to keep when one of your former members flew for the German Luftwaffe.

He told Figueroa that the war in Europe was almost over when he took off one day with 40 other Luftwaffe pilots and were met by 1200 American planes.

"We never imagined when we started Wings Over Wendy's that it would grow this big," Figueroa said Monday, looking around the packed room.

Sitting a few feet away from the former B-26 gunner, 89-year-old Clyde East -- the most decorated combat pilot in the room — sat with his young granddaughter.

He felt it was important that she have the chance to be here with him and meet some of these men, said East, a quiet unassuming man.

The great ones usually are. East flew more than 200 combat missions in World War H and another 100 combat missions in Korea during his 25 years of service.

He was awarded dozens of war medals including the Silver Star and the Distinguished Flying Cross, and that was just from our government.

He was also decorated by the government of England, France and Belgium. In 1955, Col. East made the Guiness Book of World Records for the highest number of combat medals up to that time.

And on Monday morning -- holding his granddaughter's hand -- this incredible old war hero walked to his parked car without getting a second look.

Across town, Lindsay Lohan walked out of jail and back into the headlines. Go figure.

Dennis McCarthy ,Daily News

JANUARY BIRTHDAYS

Rich Raymond January 1, 1931 Bud Lindahl-January 2, 1924 Peter K. Howenstin-January 3, 1925 Frank Paplanus-January 3, 1948 John Martin January 7, 1923 Stephan Sherman-January 10, 1921 Steve Politis-January 11, 1917 Stephanie Pofcher-January 12, 1976 Stan Opatowsky-January 17, 1931 Donald Eisenberg-January 18, 1937 Ron Hackney-January 19, 1937 Al Yoselle-January 23, 1919 Irv Brounstein-January 27, Sherwood Francis-January 26, 1922 Al Lewis January 30, 1924 Tom Williamson-January 30,

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