



## 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 II 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 Guinness 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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