





At 'Wings Over Wendy's,' good memories and a 99-year-old who takes the cake

Steven Politis is seen with his daughter and granddaughters: from left to right are daughter Libby Hanson, birthday boy Steven Politis, and granddaughters Rita and Julia Hanson. Politis is a member of "Wings Over Wendy's," and the guys threw him a surprise party for his 99th birthday last Monday. (Photo by Mike LaVere)

The usual suspects began wandering into Wendy's in West Hills around 9 a.m. Monday, grabbing a cup of coffee and pulling up a chair for another weekly, raucous session of "Wings Over Wendy's."

They're a brash, spirited clan of mainly old military flyboys who have been getting together like this every Monday morning for 15 years now — ever since their dearly departed leader Fred "Crash" Blechman gathered half a dozen old combat pilots, bombardiers and flight engineers from World War II and Korea, and said, "let's talk."

Since then, the group has grown to well over 100 veterans showing up every week, including a handful of women vets who keep the guys in line.

Fred was an ace in WWII, but not for our side. He singlehandedly crashed five Navy fighter planes in three years not because he was shot down, he just crashed them. Rumor had it the Japanese wanted to honor him.

At 9:30 sharp, the group's current leader 93-year-old Art Sherman, a B-24 bombardier in WWII picked up the microphone and started the meeting with his usual warm greeting.

"Shut up!" he yelled.

Sitting on Art's left at the main table was Steven Politis, the man of the hour. It was his 99th birthday, making him the group's oldest member in years, but not life.

"I just renewed my driver's license last month," he's telling Barney Leone and Howard Swerdlick. "I don't have to go back again until I'm 104."

Steve scored 100 on the written test, aced the eye chart, and, as always, checked off the organ donor box, although he admits he's not sure if anyone would be interested in a 99-year-old man's organs.

I can think of one place that should. The National Institute of Health's research center, because somebody's got to study the incredible mind and big heart ticking inside this man.

In a political season where all we hear about is what's wrong with this country, Steve Politis is what's right.

He came out of Stuyvesant High School in New York in the middle of the Great Depression with grades good enough to get him into the top universities in the country, but the money only for night school at City College of New York.

He got a day job making radio sets in a shop for \$9 a week, and at night he took trigonometry classes at CCNY, studying to be an engineer like his old man.

By 1940, he was working as a civilian employee for the Army Signal Corp., pulling down \$2,000 a year sitting in a room with other sharp, young minds looking for ways to coordinate swift, accurate communications for our air, ground and naval units.

It was good, clean work, but when Pearl Harbor came along, Steve knew it was time to get his hands dirty. He

became a radioman on a B-17 bomber that was shot down over Croatia — receiving the first of four serious shrapnel injuries he would sustain in combat missions over the next three years.

“John Wayne bails out and lands in the arms of a beautiful woman, I bail out and land in a tree bleeding,” he says.

After the war, Steve went to work in the private defense industry and was instrumental in helping develop the lunar experiments astronaut Neil Armstrong would carry out after he took mankind’s first steps on the moon and planted the American flag.

He was also a key member of an elite team of engineers at Northrop Grumman and later Lockheed that developed guidance-missile systems used in nuclear submarines and sonar-detection equipment for U.S. aircraft.

And that’s just the warm-up. The second chapter of his life, after he retired from aerospace at 65, is even more impressive. He became a math teacher.

“Those were the most rewarding, best years of my life, teaching kids who were struggling in math,” he says. “Six of those students went on to become National Merit Scholarship finalists.”

That’s what Steve did for another two years until he retired again, this time for good, he promised his wife and two children. He tried, Steve says, honestly, but he just didn’t like the way the best and brightest math students were being overlooked in our school system.

“If we’re going to keep doing things better than the rest of the world, we need these kids,” he said.

So Steve went back to work at age 87. He walked into his granddaughter’s old elementary school in West Hills and volunteered to tutor the best and brightest math students in algebra so they’d be ready for it in middle school.

His offer came with one proviso. He only felt comfortable making a 10-year commitment. He figured by 97 he really should retire, which he finally did two years ago.

And now he’s 99, with a brand new driver’s license in his wallet and a mind still sharp as a tack — thinking maybe he pulled the plug a little early.

I can tell he’s getting bored again. While he buddies were snapping off pictures and singing “Happy Birthday” to him, Steve was trying to figure out in his beautiful mind how many days were in 99 years.

As he got ready to blow out the one candle on his birthday cake, he looked over at me and smiled.

“Counting the extra day for leap years, 36, 1959,” the old math teacher said.

*By Dennis McCarthy, LA Daily News Posted: 01/14/16,
Dennis McCarthy’s column runs on Friday. He can be reached at
dmccarthynews@gmail.com.*



3 Purple Hearts for U.S. Army Air Corps Steve Politis

Steve Politis, above left, celebrated his 99th Birthday Monday at Wings Over Wendy’s with his friend, Barney Leone, also a Wings Over Wendy’s, member. US Army Officer Steve Politis served from 1942-1945 in the North Africa invasion, the invasion of Sicily and combat missions as a radar expert with the 15th Air Force in Italy. He served as a radio man on a B-17 bomber when it was shot down over Croatia in 1944. He landed in a tree and was discovered by the local underground who hid him for 4 days before returning him to his troops. After the war, Politis was among the elite team of engineers who worked on the first lunar landing. his commendations include three Purple Hearts and the Soldier’s Medal awarded after a ship explosion in Bari, Italy, where despite being wounded himself, he returned time and again to rescue unconscious sailors in the waters. Up to age 97 he was teaching pre-algebra to students at Welby Way Elementary School for the past 10 years. At 99 years old, Politis still active at both Wings Over Wendy’s and also Operation Gratitude who has recently assembled over a million care packages to servicemen and women around the world. He is a tireless volunteer and a member of our greatest generation ever!

KING COLE

Jeff called out to me "Get in!" as he open the car door on the passenger side. "We have to pick up Howard Gielow near Strathern and De Soto" I jumped in and begin to listen to his GPS directing Jeff "Turn left on Fallbrook." "Turn right on Sherman Way" "You are a mile from De Soto" " You are one half mile to De Soto."

I finally questioned Jeff, "Why did you get a man barking the directions instead the sweet voice of a female?" He strongly replied, "I don't take orders from a woman!"

Jeff is Alicia's husband. She organized the 55th Reunion of the classes of 1959, 1960, and 1961 of Reseda High. Teachers were invited to meet their former students. Howard was a Science teacher, I was a Spanish teacher and Bonnie Feers was a Chemistry and Science teacher. A few other teachers were slated to attend.

As we drove to the event, Howard shared with me that he had a book I should read.

A week later I began reading KING COLE. I assumed it was about the singer Nat King Cole.

As I read the Preface and the characters were Jody and Art, the light went on. It was about Art Cole, Jr. the Speech and English teacher and his sweetheart and wife Jody. At Reseda High there were many male teachers who served in WWII.

Art Cole, Jr. was a P-38 pilot, the principal Ernie Naumann was ferrying planes from Lockheed to Alaska and points east, and a former Wings Over Wendy's member, math teacher, Chuck McClure piloted B-17's and B-29's. Bernie Goodman was at the Battle of the Bulge, I stretch my brain cells to recall facts that Art Cole, Jr. shared about himself as he was growing up in Castle Rock, Colorado. Every day the faculty in the Academic Building would gather in the coffee den to share stories, their lives, and food or personal problems.

Art's mother, Elizabeth Ellen Buck, was a pianist who traveled performing in concerts and with popular bands like Paul Whitman. She knew she was not a stay at home mom. Art loved his mom and he knew she loved him. She left on her piano playing tours.

Art's dad, Arthur Vincent Cole, Sr. nourished his son in many ways. Art read well at an early age and his dad bought him the World Book of Knowledge. Soon the Public Library created the exciting world Art sought.

At 23 years old Art met Jody. They knew that they were made for each other. Art joined the Air Force in September of 1941 even though he had already been accepted in the Canadian Air Force. Now he was headed to King City where cadets were trained in PT-17's (Stearman biplanes). On Sunday, Dec. 7, 1941 training changed and was accelerated.

Moffit Field was his next training base. Night flying in BT-13's was intense. Upon graduating as a 2nd Lieutenant in the U.S. Air Corps Reserve, Art was assigned

to Hamilton Field then to March Air Force Base by Riverside, Calif. He was trained as a pilot for a Lockheed P-38 Lightning.

On July 25, 1942 Art and his fellow pilots flew to Westover Field, Massachusetts where a B-17 outfit waited for them. Four P-38's accompanied one B-17 and off to Greenland they flew.

Next, the planes were ordered to Ayr, Scotland where Art meet two South African officers. Art bragged about his P-38 and they were adamant about the performance of their "Beau" the English Beau fighter. The next day they put on a show for the base.

Not more than five months later "Tweedie" the bombardier and gunner of the Beau fighter and Art would meet in Chieti, Italy as a fellow prisoner of war.

Decisions by Prime Minister Churchill and President Roosevelt established the US 12th Air Force in August 1942 and took the P-38's from England to support the invasion of North Africa. This event cost the 14th Fighter Group the lives of thirty two pilots out of fifty four in the Group. The result was a scattering of Doolittle's US 12th Air Force over 600 miles in North Africa to support ground commanders.

On November 27th of 1942 after King Cole, Art's nickname given to him by his fellow pilots, had strafed a German column of supply vehicles and the shooting down of a JU-88. King Cole and his fellow pilot Bob Elliot flew beyond Tunis into the well fortified Kasserine Pass. As darkness fell Bob was hit and Art led them to seek a flat spot to land their P-38's. They landed in a desert wilderness. The planes were no longer flyable. They took whatever supplies they had and wondered into the wilderness before them.

In the early morning King Cole and Bob Elliot heard the sounds of bells approaching, then sheep bleating, soon the smell of camels and lastly desert Arabs. The Arabs were friendly. First, they all touched the pilot's hands, and then their own. Next they each placed an egg at their feet. They would repeat 'Salaam aleikim'. The Arabs insisted that both pilots eat with them before being taken to the American lines. They understood Bob's high school French.

They did not understand Art's German.

After riding a donkey for twenty miles these American pilots reached Allied hands. Soon the Germans recaptured these pilots. The Germans took a few American pilots - including Bob Elliot -and British officers and placed them in a German submarine. The submarine was sighted by British planes and sunk. A few escaped, but Bob perished with the sub.

Art's next adventure landed him in an Italian POW camp. The German s had turned American pilots over to the Italians. This camp was called Capua near Naples. It was intended for British Officers, but many American pilots were captured and placed with the British. Shortly,

fifty American pilots were taken to Chieti, Italy along the Adriatic coast. As Italy started to fall, the Germans took American pilots to Germany. The few that escaped were captured and placed in a camp near Rome. Art's last months in the service were spent in different POW camps.

WWII ended and Art returned to his sweetheart Jody, married her, had four sons and taught English at Reseda High while living the good life in the San Fernando Valley.

Ed Moreno

HAPPY 99TH BIRTHDAY

As members arrived for the Monday morning meeting of Wings Over Wendy's, we were greeted by balloons on posts, patriotic banners on the extended front table, posters taped to the windows in the east and west of the dining room. They proclaimed Happy 99th Birthday Steve Politis. Few grumbled, "no raffle today."

January 1st was not a patriotic, ethnic or religious holiday. It was Steve Politis 99th birthday. He was being recognized and honored for his service in WWII and his continuous service to his greater family the community of youth. Steve has been tutoring and helping elementary and high school students in math for decades. Moreover, he has been a loyal, hard working and dedicated volunteer from the beginning of Operation Gratitude.

Surrounding Steve, who was sitting on his throne, was Dennis McCarthy, writer and friend of Wings Over Wendy's. On his right was our leader Art and Mike. Seated along the left wall was Steve's family, his daughter, Libby Hanson and granddaughters, Rita and Julia.

Steve led the members in the pledge of allegiance. Howard, the Master of Ceremonies, properly dressed for this occasion, gave a brief review of Steve's deeds. In turn Dennis added to Steve's accomplishments. Mrs. Carolyn Blashek, founder and President of Operation Gratitude, was there to attest to Steve's loyalty to our soldiers overseas.

The mike was passed to all the members to wish this 99 year young vet a Happy Birthday. Concurrently, cake was enjoyed by the membership. Happy Birthday Steve!

Ed Moreno

Editors Note



Thank you so very much contributing writers for our monthly news letter. Your stories from our veterans of past long ago wars, where they have been and the lives they have led is what holds Wings over Wendy's together.

Here is an accounting of the fine members who make the effort to put their stories in print for us.

We started with Dennis McCarthy of the Daily News, then Art Sherman, Jan Begg, Alice K. Stone, Guy Chookoorian, Bud Davis, Peggy Jean Basset, Barney Leone Ray Rosenbaum, and Ed Moreno with fifteen articles so far.

With out you there would be no "Wings News".

Fred R. Kaplan

February Birthdays

- Boyd T. Davis-February 28, 1946
- Alice K. Stone February 8, 1924
- Richard O. Kinder-February 21, 1922
- Hugh Stevens-February 28, 1923
- Mort Green-February 6, 1933
- David Alvarez-February 13, 1947
- Richard Raskoff-February 4, 1938
- Thomas Derango-February 16, 1926
- Warren King-February 16, 1924
- Leon Frank-February 11, 1923
- Jane Leisure-February 6,
- Richard Comberg-February 18, 1954
- Brittany Coronilla-February 15, 1989
- Paul Boghossian-February 27, 1947
- Bradley Geber-February 2, 2001
- Ramoth Mosley-February 22, 1930
- James Pavik-2-14-1965

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