

Once-upon-a-time-in-Wynnewood

Welcome back to our new favorite page, and do we have a treat for you. Reporters rarely get to jump over desks but that's exactly what I did when I was given the chance to interview a bona fide America hero from these parts, a man who served our way of life through three wars against five sets of enemies on

multiple continents and while never once losing his humility, charm and biting sense of humor.

They don't call the men and women from that era the 'greatest generation' for nothing.

Our new column is now in overdrive with contributions coming in from far and wide about everything

under the sun which is just what we wanted.

We're now working on stories from statehood to the present day and everything in between. Don't hesitate! Contact the Gazette to have your life featured in these pages because an untold story is the biggest tragedy of all.

Once upon a time in Wynnewood, when everyone was rebuilding the free world after years of war, a dauntless Army Air Corp Airman home from the Pacific once buzzed his home town to send a pointed message to his lost love that sort of went awry. Not to worry though, his aim was better when he took on Zeke, the Chicoms and Victor Charles and he married a beauty queen anyway. Don't believe it? Well, keep reading...

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The 'Love Bomb' that missed the primary drop zone and several other tidbits of a life well lived.

By Shannon Kile as told by Col. John R. Burks U.S. Army (Ret.)

To say that Colonel John R. Burks the quintessential officer and gentleman is a rank understatement.

In fact, it is nearly impossible to scratch the surface of the man's career, even after reading an autobiography, interviewing him at length and reading old magazine stories about his exploits. This man is humble, understated and doesn't boast about battles and awards and victories. To hear him tell it, the most important thing in his life is family.

His eyes brighten when he speaks of his dear departed wife, Rose Marie, a tall and willowy beauty who blundered his heart strings when she was crowned Miss Junction City of 1948 when Burks was but a young butter bar kaiser at Fort Riley, Kansas. He was even thirty minutes late to their first date and nearly blew it, but he made it up the next morning, running into her accidentally at church. He never dated another girl. They were engaged within two months and the rest is history. She gave him four children: Alexa, Lynn, Johnny and "Sam" and stood by his side at garrisons all over the world.

All this was told as we walked together between rooms at Pauls Valley General where Burks was being treated for a minor chronic ailment which comes with age. Many of his friends were suffering in other rooms along that hall, including his first girlfriend, Janice Shirley, who was the first girl he ever took to the movies. (And who cost him a whole quarter because she was a head taller than he. The usher had pity on him and only charged him a dime.)

At age 89, the march down the hall on a walker is the equivalent of those endless road marches back during the "brown shoe" days of the Army. The Colonel never grimaces or cracks a bead of sweat. Even though a bit panchier than his glory days and wearing a Hawaiian shirt rather than starched khakis, there is a straightness to his spine, a hardness still in his chin. Colonel John Burks is a soldier's soldier. The real deal.

People still remember. Many townsfolk who got wind that we were following him for this installment came in to tell us reams of information about how dashing Burks was when he walked the streets of Wynnewood in his Class A uniform back in the 40s. Several, like our resident downtown historian, Wilburn Davenport, even went so far as to tell us about how former Airman Burks once buzzed town after the war with 'Santa Claus' in tow. Santa was even said to have been stricken with an acute case of the heebie jeebies and airsickness post flight.

It turns out, it wasn't really Santa but one of his helpers and the helper came to the airport suffering from weapons grade corn mash inebriation. A neat victory roll over the town square with old Saint Nick nearly becoming a flying reindeer himself was all it took to sober up. Although, the Colonel is certain to this day that the red velvet costume had to be professionally dry cleaned after, at the north pole and the south pole, if you catch my drift.

But not every story about flying was dashing or glorious. Bullets and flak notwithstanding, just the training for war took its toll on Wynnewood's sons and Burks lost two of his best friends before a shot was ever fired. "My good friend, George Vance Rollow, a P-38 fighter pilot, crashed to his death just outside of town. He was on a training flight out of Will Rogers Field. His plane crashed less than three miles from his home. He was caught in a terminal dive. And then Billy Jess Shearon, called 'Red Dog', was killed just before Christmas on a practice mission against Goat Island, Hawaii. I was devastated."

Colonel Burks is one of the oldest living members of the alumni association around here. He graduated from WHS in 1940. After high school, he held out hope of being a doctor and was employed at the Condesa refinery, the forerunner of Kerr-McGee, Gary-Williams

and CVR. He also attended OU a little bit which he hopes this Aggie educated writer won't hold against him too much.

That all changed as it did for an entire generation one Sunday morning, December 7, 1941 when an Imperial Japanese Task Force attacked Pearl Harbor plunging America into a world war. Like virtually every other able bodied man of the time, Burks went to enlist only to find that so many others had done already there was a waiting list for all services.

He drove to California to enlist in the Marines only to find a two year wait there. He even tried the Merchant Marine only to be told the duty would be primarily in the North Atlantic. No, Burks wanted a piece of Emperor Hirohito. He eventually joined the Army Air Corp Reserves and underwent flight training, adding as many civilian pilot hours as he could on the side. America had been in the war for almost two years when he finally pulled enough strings to be assigned to active duty in the Pacific as an enlisted Army Air Corp aircrewman on a B-24 Liberator bomber in the 7th Air Force. As one of the smaller men aboard, he was stuffed into the ball turret position slung underneath the massive bomber and sent many thousands of rounds toward attacking Japanese fighters screaming through their formations.

Burks and his crew flew 40 missions over the Japanese held Pacific islands, bombing the literal hell out of installations on places you may have heard about: Truk, Guam, Ichi Jima, Iwo Jima. The fighting was intense, not only because of anti-aircraft flak and the cannon fire from attacking fighters, but also because the Japanese began to employ suicidal kamikaze planes against navy ships and bombers in flight. Casualties were high but somehow, Burks and his original crew made it home unscathed. *Lucky Dogs*, just like their aircraft was named.

He had already amassed an impressive military record by the time the war ended. The United States Army Air Corp split from the Army and became the United States Air Force in 1947. After a short period of civilian life, Burks stayed with the Army and was even commissioned via officer candidate school. Burks was going to be a career Army man and what a career it was going to be.

His vast experiences in two more wars as well as holding virtually every rank from 2nd Lieutenant to full bird Colonel cannot be adequately printed in one flimsy newspaper page. Suffice it to say that when then Lieutenant Burks went to war again in Korea against the tenacious North Korean Army and a horde of screaming Communist Chinese soldiers, this humble man from Garvin County very nearly made it into the registry of Arlington National Cemetery.

Digging into the dead paper morgue again we found this tidbit from the May 10, 1951 issue of the Wynnewood Gazette (Volume 51 Number 19):

Close Call For Burks:
Word was received this week by Mr. and Mrs. Roy E. Burks from their son, Lt. John R. Burks, stationed in Korea, stating that he was in the ambush the first week of May, which annihilated a battalion mostly made up of Turks. Burks was one of 28 men who managed to escape alive.

And even that wasn't enough. Given a battlefield promotion to Captain, Burks served at numerous garrisons in the continental U.S. and the world, including two stints at the Pentagon. He worked his way up the ranks from Major to full Colonel. He even relentlessly lobbied to be assigned to a MACV combat tour of Vietnam well beyond the age where most men would want to go play Jungle Jim.

In post Tet Vietnam, the fighting was up close and personal, and he commanded artillery batteries that were sending 105mm love notes through the mail slots of the



insidious NVA and Viet Cong enemy crawling outside the wire. Burks has probably seen more horror and man's inhumanity to man than any of us combined can imagine. Through it all he adhered to the simple truths he was taught right here in Wynnewood: service to God, to country and to his fellow man. He was and ever is, proud to be an American.

Even after retiring from the Army after 34 years, John Burks went on to a stellar career locally in public service. His military years are detailed in the book 'A Fair Share of War' which can be purchased on amazon.com.

What sets Colonel Burks apart from other tried and true cold war warriors is the fact that he understands quite clearly that he is just a man. He speaks carefully and directly about the things most important to him. He's also not averse to a little self deprecating humor like the real background on drunken Santa's loop de loop and this following story he told us about the only unsuccessful bombing mission he ever flew.

"A little bit after the Santa flight, early 1948 I think, is when I bombed my ex-girlfriend's yard with the love letters she had returned to me after our break-up. I had packed them into as tight a ball as I could, and I flew from the local airport in this bulky trainer type of plane. I think it was a Waco UFF-7. I simply flew over the house and dropped them overboard by hand. I hit her yard dead center like I had planned, but I guess I didn't account for my forward speed. The letter bomb bounced off the turf and went spinning right through her parent's picture window with a crash. Her father made it quite clear that he didn't want me flying anywhere close to their property ever again."

Okay, so mission #41 didn't go all that well, but I think we'll overlook that snafu and be proud to know that our tiny burg has produced the likes of John Burks and an entire generation of selfless men and women like him whose sacrifices allow us the freedoms we hold so dear.

Colonel, we here at the Gazette salute you.

By the way, here's a shout out to all our current soldiers, sailors, airmen, marines and coastguardmen who are away from their families but still standing tall. Likely as not, they're lonely, cold, hungry, scared, covered in grit but never wavering even as this article goes to press. Maybe a copy will get to them soon. The Wynnewood Gazette is proud of your service, ladies and gentlemen. Come home safe. Hooah! Hoo-yah! Oorah! Haa!

Until next time.—SK



HANGING ON HIS EVERY WORD Daughter "Sam" Anderson and granddaughter, Leah Maples listen to the wealth of stories from an old war horse. At 89, Colonel Burks is still as squared away as he was in 1942. [Photo by Shannon Kile]



MR. GARVIN COUNTY MEETS MISS JUNCTION CITY Burks met his wife Rose Marie while stationed at Fort Riley, Kansas. As belittling a man of his stature she swept him off his feet.

