

Remembering Allan Wiersema

A Tribute To A Fallen Hero

By Michael D. Senneff

(August 20, 2012 Versailles, France) I was standing on hallowed ground. For all appearances, this clearing in a grove of old elm trees, in a remote and restricted area of the Palace of Versailles in Versailles, France, an area where Louis XIV used to hunt for game, was just a wooded area. The sun was shining, the sky was clear, and in this quiet area all that could be heard were the sounds of birds and an occasional aircraft climbing out of Paris's Orly airport. But nearly seventy years earlier, on June 5, 1944, this was a quite different place. On that date, the skies overhead were filled with the sight and thunderous roar of a flight of sixteen American Army Air Force P47 Thunderbolt fighter-bomber aircraft on a low level bombing mission as they made their way through a treacherous field of enemy anti-aircraft fire. And in this very clearing on that day in 1944, a P47 aircraft, struck by enemy fire, would crash and burn, killing its twenty two year old pilot, Fulton native and First Lieutenant John A. Wiersema. With Memorial Day approaching, this is a story of remembrance and tribute written in honor of this fallen airman of World War II.

John Allan Wiersema, his friends and school pals called him Allan, graduated from Fulton High School in 1939. Earlier this year, in the dining room of Barb Mask's home I sat with Allan's cousins, Jan Falk, Dale and Warren Wiersema, and schoolmates and acquaintances Phyllis Jones, Pauline Wiersema, Jackie Pollard, Clara Klavenga and Jim Field, and listened as they talked about their memories of Allan. They recalled the times that they spent with Allan at the Breezeway enjoying cheese sandwiches and malts; having group wiener roasts and pulling a toboggan behind one of their cars on 15th Avenue. It was remembered that by the time Allan left for the service he was engaged to a girl from Savanna named Ruth. Jim recalled that it was Allan who taught the boys in their social group how to dance, and Jackie told of the time that Allan showed up with a Clinton 'No Parking' sign that somehow ended up in her bedroom. They spoke of Allan's best and closest friend being Richard Mitchell who lived across street from Allan. All remembered Allan as a nice person.

On March 14, 1942, at the age of twenty one, Allan enlisted in the Army Air Corp under its Aviation Cadet Program. Within two weeks of enlisting, Allan began his training at the Army's Aviation Training Cadet Center in Santa Ana, California. Assigned the rank of Aviation Cadet, he was addressed as 'Mister' and was paid seventy five dollars per month as he began seven months of intense pilot training. While at Santa Ana he would learn about military bearing, the dynamics of flight, train in small single engine trainer aircraft, learn how to navigate, fly at night and fly for long distances. With successful completion of basic flight training at Santa Ana, Cadet Wiersema was assigned to Luke Army Airfield at Phoenix, Arizona for advanced training. There he would train in larger single engine aircraft, and it was at Luke where he graduated out of the Cadet Program on October 30, 1942 and was awarded his pilot wings and the grade of Second Lieutenant. He was then assigned to the newly created 367th Fighter-Bomber Squadron, where he would fly as a fighter pilot. From Luke Airfield, 2nd Lieutenant Wiersema traveled to Millville (New Jersey) Army Airfield, where he underwent two months of training in the aircraft that he would ultimately fly with the 367th Fighter Squadron in combat, the P47 Thunderbolt.

The P47 was a single engine plane and one of the main fighter aircraft of the war. It was unlike anything that Lt. Wiersema had flown in training. With a 2,000 horsepower engine and a weight of over 8 tons, the P47 was designed to be effective for high altitude bomber escort, aerial combat and low altitude ground attack. Its wings housed eight fifty caliber machine guns and it was capable of carrying up to 2,500 pounds in bombs and air to ground rockets.



Lieutenant Allan Wiersema 367th Fighter-Bomber Squadron
(Date known)



Lieutenant Allan Wiersema 367th Fighter-Bomber Squadron
(Date known)



Crash site of Allan Wiersema's P47 on June 5, 1944 on the grounds of the Palace of Versailles in Versailles, France

----CONTINUED----

After his training at Millville, Lt. Wiersema joined the 367th as an operationally ready pilot, and for the next several months in 1943 the new squadron would undergo pre-combat training as a fighting unit. In September the squadron was deemed ready for combat duty, and on the 25th Lt. Wiersema and the rest of the squadron arrived at Camp Kilmer, New Jersey to prepare for an Atlantic crossing and a combat assignment in the European theater. After giving up their familiar P47s, the pilots boarded the luxury cruise liner turned troop transport, the S.S. Monterey and joined 6,700 troops of the 2nd Infantry Division for a journey to England, departing New York on October 6. Fellow 367th pilot, Lt. Joe ('Hairless Joe') Holloway, now 90 years old and living in San Antonio, recalls that the ship was in a storm for most of the two week journey, before arriving in Liverpool on the 18th of October. After disembarking, the squadron went in convoy from Liverpool to Grimsby, a city located on the east coast of England, where after a few days of waiting, the squadron greeted the arrival of their factory new P47 Thunderbolts.

Lt. Wiersema and the other squadron pilots received training in aerial combat, enemy evasion, POW interrogation and other combat related skills before being moved to their first operational location, a Royal Air Force base located at Leiston, on the east coast of England. On December 20, 1943, Lt. Wiersema and his P47, named the 'Lucky Strike', went out with the squadron on his first combat mission - escort of a B24 bomber group that was to attack Bremen, Germany. On his introductory flight into combat, Lt. Wiersema no doubt knew that his training was over when, according to squadron records, the pilots saw their first German fighter aircraft, their first bursts of German enemy anti-aircraft fire, and the explosion and fatal fall of a B24 bomber and its crew of eleven.

For the next six months the squadron would carry out bomber escort missions and ground attacks. During that period the squadron would move in January of 1944 from RAF Leiston to an RAF base at Raydon, England. P47 pilot Joe Holloway recalls that the pilots bunked in metal Quonset huts and recalls that he shared a hut with Lt. Wiersema and ten to twelve other pilots. He summed up his recollection of Lt. Wiersema with the words, "He was what I would call a nice guy."

On April 13, 1944 the squadron moved again, this time to what was termed an 'Advanced Landing Ground' near High Halden, England. At this location the squadron was approximately 18 miles from the English coast, and the squadron missions shifted in large part from bomber escort to dive bombing missions in preparation for D-Day. Joe Holloway remembers this period at High Halden: "For the six weeks leading up to D-Day we were bombing every bridge between Paris and Normandy." For his part, Lt. Wiersema carried out his duties with distinction. He received a promotion to First Lieutenant, and was awarded the Air Medal for 'meritorious achievement while participating in an aerial flight.' By June of 1944 Lt. Wiersema had been cited four additional times for meritorious achievement in flight, with the last award being received on June 2, 1944.

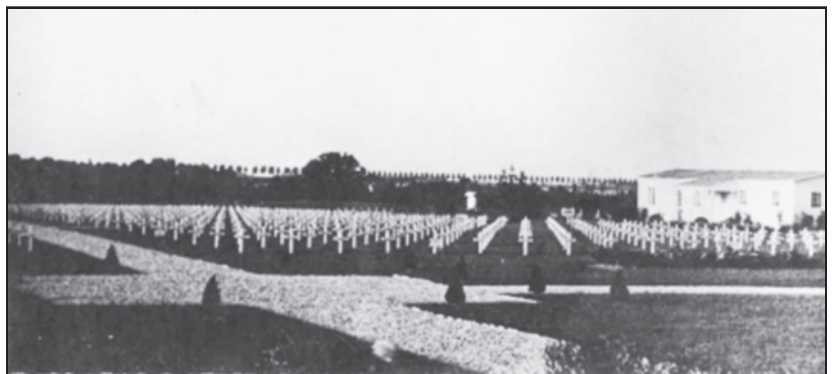
On June 5, Lt. Wiersema and his P47 Thunderbolt took off from High Halden with fifteen other aircraft of the 367th Squadron. Each aircraft was armed with two 500 pound bombs. Their mission was to dive bomb a bridge near St. Germaine, France. The squadron was grouped into four flights of four aircraft each. Lt. Wiersema was in White Flight. Milford 'Pete' Peterson, now ninety years old and living in Portland, Oregon was on the same mission, flying his P47 'Repeat' in Red Flight. He remembers that the anti-aircraft flak was very heavy as they approached the target. Peterson recounts, 'I was right behind Wiersema when he was hit. His plane just blew up. I will never forget it. He was right in front of me.'

The leader of White Flight, in an after-mission report wrote,

Lt. Wiersema was flying my wing as White Four. On our approach to target at approximately 2,000 feet, I glanced back to ascertain if Lt. Wiersema was in proper position, when I observed a large burst of flames coming from the cowl of his engine. The fire completely surrounded his fuselage from the engine to the tail. He hit the ground about two to three seconds later and exploded. It is my opinion that Lt. Wiersema had no chance to leave his airplane because he went straight in.



A P47 Thunderbolt, the aircraft that Allan Wiersema flew while serving with the 367th Fighter-Bomber Squadron in England



U.S. Temporary Military Cemetery, Solers, France. The remains of Lieutenant Wiersema were interred here between February 1945 and October 1948.

The mission was completed and deemed a success, but Lt. Wiersema was officially reported as 'missing in action'. On June 7, in accordance with procedures for missing or killed airmen, Lt. Wiersema's space in his assigned tent at High Halden was cleared of his uniforms and personnel effects for eventual shipment to his designated next of kin. Milford Peterson recalls Lt. Wiersema with these words: "He was a nice fella." On June 20 Lt. Wiersema's mother, Mrs. Albert Wiersema, received a telegram from the War Department informing her that her son was missing in action from a mission over occupied France. No other details were given.

But details regarding the fate of Lt. Wiersema would come. As the American Army pushed across France from the beaches of Normandy, driving the German army before it, the area of Versailles and Paris would find itself liberated on August 28, 1944. With the coming of Liberation, a resident of the village of Versailles by the name of Roger Nicolleau approached an officer of the local French Forces of the Interior (French Resistance) and reported the following:

On 5 June 1944, at about 2015 hours, as I came back from my garden, I noticed that one of the American pursuit planes composing a group flying over Versailles had been hit by the German anti-aircraft defense and fell down not far from the Porte de Bailly. On the following Saturday, 10 June, while I walked with my father-in-law, I found the exact place where the plane had fallen. The plane, which was totally destroyed, had exploded as it touched the ground. I could see that the pilot had been carbonized. I observed that on the right part of his shirt, which was more or less undamaged, were sewn two metal identification tags. On each of them I read and noted: John A. Wiersema. These tags were separated from each other by a dotted line and I noticed the following name, which seems apparently to be the person to inform in case of accident: Mrs. Forest Cady, 621 1/2 Renchiworth C.T. - Clinton, Iowa.

Among the human remains, I found ten coins of English and American money and I could identify a silver dollar coin. I also found a rubberized pocket map made of a kind of rubberized cloth, representing France, Spain, Germany and the French Colonies. Among the same remains I found a charred compass, a charred lighter, a spectacle case, a corner of an O.D. shirt-collar with a white metallic stripe, and a seal-ring with the following inscription: NIEW-School -F 1929. At the upper part of the ring was a kind of red colored chaton. In my opinion this jewel was made of gold, since its color was not changed by the heat. Its weight was certainly beyond 20 grams. I would like to inform you also that in a dark-red wallet I found a picture of a brunette woman, as well as an American blank check. After having carefully picked up these items, I dugged out a grave and interred the flier's remains. I surrounded the grave with makeshift means and put a cross without any other identification on it, but a tricolored cockade. I always kept up this grave with respect and I adorned it with flowers several times a week. As soon as the Liberation came, I put a wreath of flowers on it.

In February of 1945 a Graves Registration unit of the U.S. Army, based on a map provided by Mr. Nicolleau, located the site of Lt. Wiersema's crash, recovered his remains from the makeshift burial site and reburied them in a temporary military cemetery located in Solers, France. A simple white wooden cross with a metal tag bearing the name John A. Wiersema marked the location of the fallen airman in Plot E, Row 4, Grave 74. As a reminder that in death, rank has no privilege, Army records indicate that Lt. Wiersema was buried next to a private from the 38th Infantry Regiment.

By the end of the war, over 330,000 Americans had died overseas, with 40,000 of those being airmen. Most of the dead that could be recovered, like Lt. Wiersema, were buried in temporary military cemeteries. In 1947 Congress passed Public Law 368, which allowed the next of kin of the soldier or airman to decide whether they wished the remains of their loved one to be permanently interred in an American designed and maintained cemetery overseas, or repatriated to the U.S. and placed in a national military or private cemetery. The family of Lt. Wiersema elected to have him returned to Fulton. In mid-October of 1948, the remains of Lt. Wiersema were exhumed from the Solers cemetery, placed in a brown metal casket, and with several hundred other fAllan began a return journey to the United States and home aboard the specially fitted Liberty Ship, the Carroll Victory. Special Army rail cars under 24 hour honor guard carried the flag draped coffins from Brooklyn New York to destinations all across the United States. The last leg of Lt. Wiersema's journey took place on November 18 on a Chicago Northwestern train bound for Clinton, Iowa. The military escort that accompanied Lt. Wiersema on that train was his lifelong friend and Fulton native, Air Force First Lieutenant Richard Mitchell.

The grounds in France where Allan Wiersema died are today a private place of peace and solitude. If one looks just below the surface, evidence of what took place there on June 5th, 1944 can be found: machine gun bullets; parts of a machine gun ammunition belt; a portion of an engine cylinder; a section of armor plating. All evidence of a sacrifice made in defense of freedom. Allan was the first of Fulton area residents to die during the war. He would be followed by Paul Heun the very next day on Omaha Beach, and later by Allan's cousin Stewart Wiersema, and then Byron Snyder and Henry Post. Each of these young men made the ultimate sacrifice for our freedom, a freedom that we can enjoy during this Memorial holiday. They deserve our honor and our remembrance.

We remember Allan Wiersema.



On November 19, 1948 the remains of Lt. Wiersema were interred in the Fulton, Illinois cemetery.

----END----