

Prillaman, others to be honored in England for service

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Accent Editor

Though seven decades have passed since World War II, Arnold Prillaman again is being honored in England for his military service.

However, now 89, the former gunner, who flew 30 missions, doesn't feel up to riding in a plane over the Atlantic.

He'll be there in spirit for a big event on Nov. 9. It will be the dedication ceremony for the replacement of a memorial honoring Prillaman and his fellow members of the 34th Heavy Bombardment Group.

The unit of the U.S. 8th Air Force was based out of

Mendlesham Aerodome in Suffolk, England. "I was in one of 41 bomb groups," he said. "Each bomb group normally flew 36 planes."

Prillaman was a gunner on a nine-member bomber crew. He flew missions over Germany from Dec. 6, 1944, to March 20, 1945.

"If you flew enough, they called it a tour," he said — so his service constituted a tour.

"All of my targets were over Berlin," he said. "Earlier in the war, they were over" Hamburg, Bremen and Munich.

The Lucky Bastard Club

Three thousand personnel were based on the airfield, according to an article in the East Anglian Daily Times. Almost 200 of those airmen died between 1944 and 1945.

After the war, the men of the 34th started getting together for yearly reunions, Prillaman said. They also are members of an informal brotherhood called The Lucky Bastard Club — men who survived flying combat missions over Europe. A first memorial honoring the 34th Bombardment Group was unveiled around 1949, and it was moved to a site along a highway, the busy A140 next to the former airfield, in the 1980s, according to the article.

Prillaman and his fellow veterans sent funding for its maintenance, including keeping the grass around it mown, he said.

"In 2009 or 10, somebody stole it," Prillaman said. Officials "spent one year looking for it, but they gave up, They decided they'd never find it."

A replacement

So it was that an effort was made to create a replacement. This time, it would be placed on the grounds of St. Mary's Church in Mendlesham, at its 400-year-old cemetery.

The church is was a special place for the troops. "We used to have dances at that church," he said. "That was the center of the village." The church also is near the airfield.

At least 6 by 6 feet, the memorial depicts a co-pilot leaning out of the window of a B-17 holding an olive branch, which represents peace. The new memorial will be an exact replica of the original, except instead of brass, it will be made of green slate to "hopefully avoid it being stolen again," said Sharon Jones, the parish clerk for Mendlesham Parish Council in Suffolk, England.

'Overwhelming response'



Arnold Prillaman shows an invitation to the dedication of a memorial honoring the 34th heavy Bombardment Group, with which he served in World War II. (Contributed photo)

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The appeal for funds for a replacement memorial was launched in February, Jones said.

The goal was to raise 35,000 pounds (\$56,100).

There has been “an overwhelming response from veterans and their families in the States (and) local British individuals and businesses,” Jones stated. Even The Walter Hines Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution in London made a donation.

“The Brits are very conservative, but they were very generous in helping finance it,” Prillaman said. “Between myself and my children, we made a good donation to it,” he added.

The financial support is “very much recognizing not only the sacrifice made by the American airmen in World War II, but also showing the gratitude and loss is still felt by those generations to follow, both by the families but also by the British able to live our lives as we do now,” Jones added.

So far, 28,000 pounds (\$44,900) has been raised. That is enough to make, place and insure the memorial, she said. The rest would have been for future costs of maintenance.

‘We’re not alone’

The memorial will be dedicated by the Bishop of Richborough on England’s Remembrance Sunday, Nov. 9. That is two days before England’s Remembrance Day and Veterans Day in the U.S.

The normal Remembrance Sunday church service “includes lighting candles for all of those lost in conflict, whatever their nationality, including the 190 Americans,”

Jones said. The bishop will dedicate the memorial after the candle-lighting service.

Jones said about 30 to 35 people from the United States are being expected, “including a couple of veterans. We are also very much aware of veterans who are unable to make the journey. Some of these are being represented” by family members.

Afterward, in the community hall, an event will be held for both U.S. and British veterans and local representatives. The hall will be decorated with authentic World War II decorations, Jones said, and some historical photographs and American vehicles will be on display.

Prillaman has been to reunions of the 34th in England three times, but now, “I’m just not able to fight the plane ride anymore,” he said.

There were 41 bomb groups in the 8th Air Force, he said. “We’re not alone,”

Prillaman said. “A lot of them have erected memorials.”

Of his nine-man crew, Prillaman is the only one left, he said. He was the youngest of their group.