

Air and Space this Week

Item of the Week

MSgt HENRY E. ERWIN

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Only a handful of enlisted American airmen were awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor in World War II. You met one of them, Maynard “Snuffy” Smith, in a previous Item of the Week from a year ago ([here](#)). The following is the story of S/Sgt Henry Eugene “Red” Erwin, a B-29 radio operator whose actions over Japan were the stuff of legend.

STATUS OF THE PACIFIC WAR IN SPRING, 1945

World War II in the Pacific Theater was reaching its climactic end by the springtime of 1945. The Americans had seized bases in the Marianas Islands from which they could bomb the Japanese home islands with their new highly-capable B-29 Superfortress bombers. The island of Iwo Jima was seized by then, too, and was put in service as a base for B-29 supporting fighters and as an emergency landing field for damaged B-29s coming back from missions.

Precision bombing of Japan was difficult, both due to jet stream winds and target identification. The growth of American bombing missions worldwide put a strain on crew training time, and some of the B-29 crews were relatively inexperienced, including the bombardiers. In some cases, Japan had fewer landmarks that would guide navigators, and fewer objects on the ground to help pinpoint targets. One solution to these problems available was to put the best navigators and bombardiers in a “Pathfinder” B-29 that would mark the exact target for the bombers in the formation(s) following to aim at by dropping a phosphorus flare when over it. The expert bombardier in the lead aircraft of a given bombing formation would then use the flare and a good bombsight to drop on target and the other bombers in the unit would drop when they saw the lead plane do so.

Phosphorus flares were also used to help bombers assemble after the bomb run was finished; the lead plane would reveal its position by dropping a flare, the other planes would approach and resume formation. The flares were ideal for both uses, they would burn with an intense brightness (at over 1100 °F!) and leave a large trail of white smoke.

HENRY EUGENE “RED” ERWIN

Henry Erwin was born on May 8, 1921, in Adamsville, Alabama. His father died when Henry was young, and his family struggled to make ends meet. He signed up for the Army Reserves after turning 21, and was called to active duty on February 3, 1943, as an aviation cadet. He washed out of flight school, but showed a mechanical aptitude that got him sent to technical

school at Kessler AFB, where he was trained as a radio operator and mechanic. He was assigned to an active bombing unit and sent to the Pacific in early 1945.

Erwin's unit began bombing missions in February, and by April 1, they had completed a series of small, un-escorted bombing strikes against Japanese cities. By April 12, Red and his crew had flown ten missions, for which Red would receive two Air Medals.

THE DAY

The eleventh mission for Erwin was on **April 12**, 1945. He was the radio operator for a B-29 named *City of Los Angeles*, piloted by Capt. George Simeral. [NOTE: There are conflicting reports about the B-29's name; another good source has it as the *Snatch Blatch*.] Erwin's battle station was to man one of the B-29's defensive machine guns, and to drop the phosphorus flares when ordered, to help the formation assemble. The flare could be released through a tube that led from a hole in the deck through the bomb bay to outside the aircraft.

B-29s had been having trouble hitting small targets from six miles up, even though their bombsights were good enough to do so. The problem was the then-unknown jet stream and other high-altitude winds. When Gen. LeMay ordered bombing missions from MUCH lower altitudes the month previous, the damage to the Japanese war effort soared. Therefore, Erwin's formation would be bombing from very low altitude on "the Day." The target was a chemical plant at Koriyama, 120 miles north of Tokyo.

The attack was successful, and Simeral moved southeast to assemble his planes at a pre-designated spot just off the coast. Erwin was ordered to drop a flare as planned.

The fuse on the flare malfunctioned as it started down the tube through the floor, igniting the flare and blowing it back in Erwin's face!

The intense flame immediately burned off Erwin's nose and one ear, and temporarily blinded him. Flare smoke filled the fuselage, reducing visibility to zero for the crew. Erwin knew that a flare that hot and energetic might well burn through the deck into the bomb bay. That could be very bad for the *City of Los Angeles*; even without bombs left to ignite, the flare could cause a lot of damage to fuel and hydraulic lines and other critical aircraft components.

S/Sgt. Erwin was a man of action. In the words of his Medal of Honor citation, he, "(w)ithout regard for his own safety, picked it up and feeling his way, instinctively, crawled around the gun turret and headed for the copilot's window. He found the navigator's table obstructing his passage. Grasping the burning bomb between his forearm and body, he unleashed the spring lock and raised the table. Struggling through the narrow passage he stumbled forward into the smoke-filled pilot's compartment. Groping with his burning hands, he located the window and threw the bomb out. Completely aflame, he fell back upon the floor. The smoke cleared, the pilot, at 300 feet, pulled the plane out of its dive. S/Sgt. Erwin's gallantry and heroism above and beyond the call of duty saved the lives of his comrades." [The device was a flare, not a bomb.]

Erwin suffered grievous injuries and lay on the deck, clothes afire. His crewmates leapt to his side, trying to put out the flames and render what aid they could. When they tried to dress his

wounds, the phosphorus imbedded in his flesh re-ignited. The wounds seemed fatal, but the pilot flew as fast as he could to the emergency field on Iwo Jima, the closest medical care available. The doctors at Iwo gave him essentially zero chance of survival, but they went to work on him aggressively, anyway.

When Gen. LeMay heard of Erwin's bravery, he immediately ramrodded a Medal of Honor approval in a matter of hours, and had the nearest actual medal, then in Hawaii, flown in to Guam ASAP. LeMay wanted to personally give the Medal to Erwin while he was still (barely) alive.

Red Erwin was one tough Alabama farm boy; he actually survived. He was flown back to the States, and had 41 separate surgeries over 30 months of recovery, resulting in him getting his eyesight back as well as the use of one arm. He received a disability discharge from the service in 1947, with a MoH, a Purple Heart, two Bronze Stars, and a host of other honors. He was the only crewman, of any rank, who won a Medal of Honor for actions aboard a B-29 (one other who flew missions in a B-29 did also, but his MoH was for actions later as a Huey pilot in Vietnam).

The spectacular nature of Erwin's bravery attracted considerable public attention, and his story was actually incorporated into a 1951 patriotic movie, *The Wild Blue Yonder*. More about that in the next section.

Erwin then went to work for the VA, serving as a benefits counselor in Birmingham for 37 years.

The Air Force had one more honor to bestow on Red Erwin. In 1987, the "Henry E. Erwin Outstanding Enlisted Aircrew Member of the Year Award" was created, only the second such Air Force award to be named for an enlisted man.

S/Sgt Erwin's son, Henry Eugene "Hank" Erwin, Jr., became a radio/television evangelist, who also served eight years in the Alabama State Senate and unsuccessfully ran for the office of Alabama Lieutenant Governor.

Red Erwin passed away on January 16, 2002, at the age of 80. He is buried in Birmingham.

***THE WILD BLUE YONDER* and ITS CONNECTIONS**

I have a great fondness for connections between disparate things when assessing historical events, as you long-time recipients of A+StW well know. Henry Erwin's story is no different, especially when the above-mentioned movie that featured him is considered.

The sophistication level of military-themed films grew significantly during WWII and its immediate aftermath. Films like *Stalag 17* and *Twelve O'Clock High* were well-written, relatively high-budget works, and everyone's recent experience with world war made the topics familiar to many. After the USSR got The Bomb and Korea heated up, movies about the SAC and jet piloting became more common; an example previously mentioned in an Item of the Week ([here](#)) was *The McConnell Story*, about a Korean War ace who flew the F-86 (McConnell died in a flight test accident before the movie premiered).

The Wild Blue Yonder was released in December, 1951, by Republic Pictures. It was about the preparation for combat by crews learning to fly the B-29 for service in the Pacific Theater. The movie had an unlikely love triangle, a tragic mission over Japan, and one of the suitors was badly wounded (sound familiar?). Onto that story was grafted the actions of Henry Erwin on his MoH mission. As you might expect, there was considerable “Hollywood-ization” of the story, but the Erwin component was played much more accurately than you might expect.

And now the connections begin.

The film’s screenplay was written by Richard Tregaskis. During the War, he had been a newspaper reporter embedded in the Marine invasion of Guadalcanal in 1942. His first-person reporting was very popular, and the military approved a book version of his account for immediate publication. *Guadalcanal Diary* hit print in 1943 and was made into a [movie](#) right away. [Marine ace pilot Marion Carl had an un-credited speaking role as himself in the film. Avgas was in short supply on Guadalcanal in the early days, and drums of it had to be airlifted in. Carl, seeing the cargo plane approaching, said, “Don’t look now, fellas, but a truck of gas just came on the field.” For more about this heroic pilot, see [here](#).]

The biggest star in *The Wild Blue Yonder* was Walter Brennan, a WWI veteran who had already won three Academy Best Supporting Actor Awards (*Come and Get It* (1936), *Kentucky* (1938), and *The Westerner* (1940)). Boomers know him best from his role as crochety Amos McCoy in the TV show *The Real McCoys* in the late 1950s. His son, Andy, had an un-credited role in the film.

The two involved in the love story angle were Wendell Corey, a minor actor, and WWII veteran and ex-pro footballer, Forrest Tucker. You likely know him best as Sgt. O’Rourke from the 60s-era TV comedy, *F Troop*. Now get that theme song out of your head!

The love interest for Wendell and Forrest was Vera Ralston, an ice skater from Czechoslovakia who had limited acting skills but was the mistress of Republic’s chief, Herbert Yates. Nuff said.

Kathleen Freeman was an uncredited actress appearing in the film. You might not recognize the name, but if you were around in the 60s you might remember her. She guested on the *Beverly Hillbillies* as the wife of Shifty Shafer, played by Phil Silvers, and she was Gen. Burkhalter’s widowed sister, pursuer of Col. Klink, on *Hogan’s Heroes*.

Another down-list cast member has an even more obscure link to that same period. Phillip Pine had a successful Hollywood career guesting on a number of shows; *Star Trek Original Series* fans might remember the dreadful episode, *The Savage Curtain*, where he portrayed the genocidal madman, Colonel Green.

Even Tonto got into the act. Actor Jay Silverheels found time to hold down a minor part in *The Wild Blue Yonder* during the production of *The Lone Ranger*.

The actor who portrayed Red Erwin (by name in the film) was one David Sharpe. You might not recall the name, and I certainly didn’t, but when I checked him out, I was astonished to find that Sharpe had been on-camera in more movies than just about anyone ever! He was an expert gymnast, and became a very busy stunt man in Hollywood’s earliest days (his first film was in

1922). He was popular with low-budget producers because he could both act and perform stunts, a two-fer that lowered costs considerably; he ended up stunting in 358 films and TV shows, ending in 1978. Add those to the 169 films he acted in, and you have a very full career! He even stunted for two of the STTOS episodes (*Requiem for Methuselah* and *Day of the Dove*). A similar tactic was used for the actor who portrayed Gen. LeMay in *The Wild Blue Yonder* – he was also a director for Republic films with a total of only four acting appearances.

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