

## Air and Space this Week

### Item of the Week

## FOUR BRAVEST AIRMEN

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**KEY WORDS:** Medal of Honor Maynard Smith Forrest Vosler Archibald Mathies  
Henry Erwin

*Only four enlisted aviators have been awarded our Nation's highest military decoration, the Congressional Medal of Honor. You met one of them, Maynard Smith, in a previous Item of the Week. Here are the stirring stories of the other three.*

### INTRODUCTION

Heroism and (combat) aviation are over a century old, and flyers have been gaining the appropriate recognition the whole time. Since planes are expensive war tools, pilots usually have been officers. There was a program to expand quickly the number of pilots available early in WWII, but the number of enlisted pilots was relatively small and that particular program (NAP) did not last long. Military recognition devices and the conditions of award have also change with time.

WWI saw only two enlisted aviators receive a high award, the Distinguished Flying Cross. 1Sgt Fred Graveline, an observer and aerial gunner in the 20<sup>th</sup> Aero Squadron. He flew 15 missions, more than any other U.S. enlisted airman, and scored two confirmed victories. 1Sgt Harold Nicholls won the DFC as a balloon observer (hydrogen filled!) and survived three flaming downings. Both were for actions in 1919.

The DFC has had an interesting history; it was not strictly a military-only award in its early days. Established in July 2, 1926, it was retroactively awarded to Graveline and Nichols.

The DFC was also given to the Wright Brothers, Wiley Post, Jacky Cochran, Roscoe Tanner, Harold Gatty, Amelia Earhart, Glenn Curtiss, Eugene Ely, and Neil Armstrong.

Note that Graveline was not a pilot, and Nicholls was an observer in a balloon. Pilots won Medals of Honor in WWI aviation, including Eddie Rickenbacker and Ralph Talbot, the first Marine flying ace, but no enlisted aviator was so recognized.

The DFC was awarded to enlisted flyers in WWII and later. In WWII, there were "about" 150 DFCs awarded to Army Air Force personnel. Two enlisted men were awarded Distinguished Service Cross for aviation-related actions in the Korean Conflict.

During Viet Nam, two airmen received the Medal of Honor, William Pitsengbarger, a pararescue jumper who was killed defending the crew of a crashed helicopter; and John Levitow, an AC-47

loadmaster, whose quick actions after being wounded saved his aircraft. Nineteen enlisted personnel received the Air Force Cross for actions in Southeast Asia.

More recently, one airman won the AFC for action during the Blackhawk Down incident in Somalia. Eight received the AFC for action in Afghanistan.

WWII saw the widespread usage of large bomber aircraft. A typical B-17 or B-24 crew would include four officers (pilot, co-pilot, navigator, and bombardier), whose duties and responsibilities were higher and required a lot of additional training, and a number of enlisted men, who served as aircraft engineer, radioman, and aerial gunners.

In four separate incidents, actions of enlisted bomber personnel were noteworthy enough, and were witnessed or otherwise well-documented enough, to justify the Nation's highest award for valor in combat, the Congressional Medal of Honor.

One of them, Maynard Smith, you have met in a [previous Item of the Week](#). This is the story of the other three. They deserve our attention, too!

### **STAFF SERGEANT MAYNARD H. SMITH**

Maynard Smith's heroic exploits were one of the subjects of the A+StW Item of the Week on April 26, 2021 (along with Frances Gary Power's U-2 Incident and Richard H. O'Kane's exploits on the submarine *USS Tang* in rescuing 22 downed airmen off the Japanese bastion of Truk during Operation Hailstone. I will refer you to the [Item](#) for details.

More has been written about Smith because he was the first enlisted airman to win the Medal of Honor, because he overcame a very rocky start in life, and because he served with *60 Minutes* guy Andy Rooney.

### **TECHNICAL SERGEANT FORREST L. VOSLER**

I selected the topic of "Four Bravest Airmen" at this time because the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Vosler's Medal of Honor winning feat is **December 20**.

Forrest Vosler was born on July 29, 1923, in New York. His boyhood was spent in the town of Livonia, in the Finger Lakes region, south of Rochester. His childhood was pretty typical for the day; he was a Boy Scout and liked playing basketball [I know from personal experience that the Finger Lakes were a great place to grow up!].

He was not college-bound, but he was mechanically-inclined and took a job at the General Motors plant in Rochester, operating a drill press. He was 18 when Pearl Harbor happened, and he enlisted in the Army nine months later, on October 8, 1942. After a year of training, he reached the rank of Staff Sergeant, and was sent to the ETO to be a B-17 radio operator/gunner in the 8<sup>th</sup> Air Force's 358<sup>th</sup> Bombardment Squadron.

His bravery was on big display early on, when on one of his first combat missions he won an Air Medal for bravery. German fighters hit his B-17, named *Jersey Bounce Jr.*, damaging the oxygen

system that kept the crew alive at altitude. Two of the crew near him passed out from lack of oxygen. Fighting hypoxia himself, he managed to repair the system enough to keep his two buddies alive, all the while using one of their guns to fight off other attacking planes.

On his fourth combat mission, his conduct warranted him becoming the second enlisted airman to win the Congressional Medal of Honor.

The 358<sup>th</sup> target was Bremen; the date was **December 20, 1943, eighty years ago this week.**

Anti-aircraft fire from the ground was intense over Bremen that day, and it forced *Jersey Bounce* out of formation, making it more vulnerable to defending fighters. They pounced, firing their deadly 20mm cannons with explosive shells. Several hit the tail of the B-17, disabling both the tail gun and tail gunner. Another 20mm shell hit near Vosler's position, and fragments from it peppered him in both chest and face, lodging in both eyes.

Vosler stood by his .50 caliber machine gun in spite of his injuries, firing away. *Jersey Bounce* was very badly damaged, too. The crew tried desperately to lighten the load their plane had to keep aloft. Vosler volunteered to be thrown overboard, too, but his crewmates refused. The B-17's radio had been shot up, so when the fighter attacks abated, Vosler turned to the damaged radio, and using touch alone managed to get it operational, even though he passed out from his injuries several times in the process. A distress call was made before they crash-landed in the Channel.

Even though a B-17 is by no means amphibious, the pilot pulled a Sullenberger and managed a gentle ditching, enough so that the *Jersey Bounce* stayed afloat long enough for the crew to evacuate and deploy their life raft. The crew managed to get the badly-wounded tail gunner to the wing, where he was joined by Vosler. Wave action and blood made the wing slippery, and Vosler hung on to a cable with one hand and the tail gunner with the other. Had he let go, the now-unconscious gunner would have no doubt drowned. A nearby ship had heard the *Jersey Bounce's* repaired-radio distress call, and the entire crew was rescued.

Vosler was promoted to Technical Sergeant while he was still in the hospital. His right eye was beyond repair, but the doctors were able to restore partial sight to his left. He was in the hospital for an extended period, interrupted only by an invitation to the White House, where on August 30, 1944, he received the Medal of Honor from the hand of President Roosevelt.

After the War, Vosler was one of the founding fathers of the Air Force Association. He lived in Syracuse, New York, and tried to attend Syracuse University to study business administration, but his damaged eyesight made studying very difficult. He did manage to get married and raise three children, however. He worked for the Veterans Administration for 30 years. He retired and with his wife moved to Florida, in 1991. He passed away from a heart attack on February 17, 1992.

He was buried at Arlington. The Academic Development Center at Keesler AFB was named in his honor. In 2015, Syracuse University reviewed his academic record and awarded him a posthumous Associate Degree of Arts.

## STAFF SERGEANT ARCHIBALD MATHIES

Archibald Mathies was born on June 3, 1918, in Stonehouse, South Lanarkshire, Scotland. He emigrated to the U.S. as a boy. Little else is known of his formative years.

Mathies enlisted in the Army on December 30, 1940, in Pittsburgh. He was initially attached to the HQ Squadron of the 8<sup>th</sup> Pursuit Wing, then assigned to the 36<sup>th</sup> Air Base Group at Maxwell Field in Alabama. He was then shuffled around a bit in the months before Pearl Harbor, ending up at the Airplane Mechanics School in Chanute Field, Illinois, from which he graduated on October 1, 1941.

Mathies was attached to the 33<sup>rd</sup> Pursuit Group at Morris Field, North Carolina three days before Pearl Harbor. He'd serve there for more than a year before taking training as an aerial gunner, completing the course on March 22, 1943. The rest of 1943 consisted of a series of assignments, culminating in joining the 796<sup>th</sup> Bombardment Squadron, based in Alexandria, Louisiana, which departed for duty in the ETO in December, 1943. He was placed in the replacement pool as an engineer/gunner. On January 19, 1944, he was assigned to the 510<sup>th</sup> Bomb Squadron, and was promoted to Staff Sergeant on February 17, 1944. He and a navigator, 2Lt. Walter E. Truemper, joined the crew of a B-17 named *Ten Horsepower*, and immediately began flying bombing missions.

On only his second combat mission (February 29, 1944), *Ten Horsepower* was sent on a raid on Leipzig, Germany. Severe defensive fire from both ground and fighters hit the B-17, killing the co-pilot outright and disabling the pilot. Mathies and Truemper teamed up to fly the badly-damaged bomber back to England. The captain of an accompanying bomber saw how badly shot up *Ten Horsepower* was and ordered the rest of the crew to bail out, which they did safely, but both Truemper and Mathies would not leave the pilot to certain death, and decided to try to land the crippled bomber and get the pilot life-saving medical care.

Hollywood would have the two heroes overcome all odds, successfully land the *Ten Horsepower*, and save the pilot. Alas, this was real life and not Hollywood. The bomber made three wobbly approaches, and crashed on the third, killing the two heroes. The pilot survived the crash, but died soon thereafter from his injuries.

2Lt Truemper and SSgt Mathies were both awarded the Medal of Honor for their gallantry. A number of military facilities were named for Mathies, as was a Pittsburgh-area [coal mine](#). He was [buried](#) in the Finleyville Cemetery, Washington County, Pennsylvania.

## STAFF SERGEANT HENRY E. ERWIN

Henry E. "Red" Erwin was born on May 8, 1921, in Adamsville, Alabama, the oldest of a large family. His coal-mining father died when Henry was 10 years old, so Henry took a part-time job to help support his brothers and sisters. He dropped out of high school a few years later, during the height of the Depression. He worked in the CCC for a while, then found a job in a steel mill.

Erwin joined the Army Reserve in 1942. He washed out of pilot training, but was successful in radio/mechanic schooling. He got married in December, 1944, and was sent to the Pacific Theater in February, 1945, for service in the 20<sup>th</sup> Air Force's 52<sup>nd</sup> Bomb Squadron, which was equipped with the new B-29 Superfortress. Erwin earned two air medals and a promotion to Staff Sergeant, based on his performance on several bombing missions.

Erwin's big day came on April 12, 1945. He was the radio operator on a B-29 named *City of Los Angeles*, which was the lead bomber on a strike against a chemical plant in Koriyama, near Tokyo. The plant was a small target, and the lead bomber's job was to mark it with phosphorus flares that would trail smoke on the way down as a targeting guide for the following B-29s. Red's job was to put the flares into a tube that would allow them to drop from the *City of Los Angeles* before igniting. The launching tube was located behind the forward gun turret.

One of the flares ignited prematurely and exploded, blowing flaming phosphorus back into the aircraft, right in Erwin's face. Phosphorus burns *very* intensely and is almost impossible to extinguish. Red's nose, hair, and an ear were immediately burned off, and smoke from the bomb quickly filled the cockpit, obscuring the pilots' vision.

Red knew that a burning phosphorus flare could quickly burn through the deck of the B-29, perhaps setting off its bomb load, and certainly causing the loss of the aircraft and crew. Without thought for his own safety, he actually grabbed the flaming flare at his feet, and groped his way to the cockpit. His clothes immediately caught fire, and he could feel the flesh burning from his body as he moved to find a window out of which he could throw the flare. He had to work his way around the navigator's table on the way, burning, burning, burning. He finally was able to get the flare out the co-pilot's window. He then collapsed in the cockpit, still afire.

The B-29 had been in a dive all this time, pilots blinded by smoke. By the time the smoke cleared through the window through which the flare had been thrown, they were very close to the water and barely had time to pull out.

Red Erwin was a real mess. The crew used fire extinguishers (plural) to douse the flames, then, aghast, hit him with morphine. Red was still conscious all this time, and, ever faithful, even enquired as to the safety of the crew. The pilot made a beeline for the emergency field at newly-captured Iwo Jima, despairing for Erwin's life.

They made Iwo, and got Red off the plane. Nobody thought he could possibly survive, but the doctors went to work on him with a will anyway. It took hours for them to remove bits of phosphorus from his face; as soon as they were exposed to air the phosphorus bits would flame up. That Erwin was still alive astonished everyone, and the brass immediately began the paperwork necessary for the Medal of Honor, hoping to get it done and awarded before the grievously-injured Erwin expired. General Curtis LeMay moved Heaven and Earth getting the MoH approved.

Three days later (April 15), Erwin was flown to the medical center on Guam. The doctors had been working on him continuously, and would continue to do so. Meanwhile, General LeMay

had aggressively scrounged around to find the only actual Medal of Honor then in the Pacific; it had to be taken from a display at the U.S. Army HQ in Honolulu and flown directly to Guam, where it was pinned on Erwin's chest.

LeMay had the personnel records for the PTO scoured, and found that Erwin's brother was also stationed in the PTO. He was given immediate leave and flown to Red's side. They hadn't seen one another in three years. Red couldn't actually see him, as his facial injuries were too severe, but he took great comfort from the visit.

Red was flown back to the States a month later, still smoldering from phosphorus buried in his face. He endured 43 operations over the next thirty months. He lost an eye, an ear, his nose, and several fingers, but eventually could see with the remaining eye after a fashion and regained the use of his left arm. He was promoted to Master Sergeant in October, 1945, and honorably discharged from service immediately thereafter.

But Red's duty and devotion to his fellow soldiers was not done by any means. For the next 37 years, he worked with burn patients as a benefits counselor for the Department of Veterans Affairs in Birmingham, AL. He and his wife had four children, and one of them, Henry Erwin Jr., would in time become an Alabama State Senator.

The U.S. Air Force established the Henry E. Erwin Outstanding Enlisted Aircrew Member of the Year Award in 1997. Red died on January 16, 2002; he was 80 years old.

## CONCLUSION

This was a difficult item for me to write, and to edit. I hope you got the same sense of appreciation I got when learning about the actions of these brave men.

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