



Times Photo. by Esther Groves

REUNITED AFTER 34 years, four B-24 crewmembers were brought together by Randy Sims of Kismet as a present for his father. Visiting in front of the "Delectable Doris"

were from left to right Morgan G. Sims of Hollis, Okla.; Mike Whalen, Billings, Mont.; John Kennedy, Cincinnati, Ohio; and Emmett Burns, Syracuse, N.Y.

Reunion Reunited Crew

By Esther Groves
 Times Area Editor

Four members of a B-24 crew who flew 43 bombing missions together during World War II met for the first time since 1945 at the Liberal Airbase Reunion this past weekend.

As hundreds of reunion guests munched their way through beans and chips Saturday noon in an airfield roundtop while waiting to go through or ride on the B-24, the four friends met with a Times reporter in the nearby airport lounge.

Emmett Burns, now of Syracuse, N.Y., had been division lead pilot, "and a good one," said one of his former crewmen. He was so much respected that when the 10-man crew completed a tour of 25 missions in Europe and were eligible to be rotated stateside, and Burns decided to stay on ("I just didn't want to go to the South Pacific"), five of his crew decided to stay with him for a second tour.

This was despite his youth. When Franklin D. Roosevelt was re-elected for a fourth term, Burns was still not old enough to vote. And when his crew pooled money to buy his captain's bars for him and pinned them on, Burns was still two days short of being 21.

"And a good young clean-

shaven fellow he was," joshed John Kennedy of Cincinnati, Ohio, and everyone laughed at this reference to Burns's beard.

Kennedy had been flight engineer. "We worried equally and we got scared equally," he said. "My total ambition in life then was to be 29—I was 28." Every Christmas Eve, Kennedy pays for a conference call so that the group can visit together via telephone.

Mike Whalen of Billings, Mont., was radio gunner; he operated the radio and traded off in the top turret with Kennedy.

"Our messages often had to be coded and translated—the problem was getting it translated before the flight was over! You had voice contact for about 500 miles, and beyond that used Morse code. You could let an antenna out to 60 feet if not flying in close formation, to use for Morse Code."

Morgan G. Sims of Hollis, Okla., was the tail gunner.

"I was the one who looked where we'd been instead of where we were going, and when the flak got heavy I said to move over. Burns always liked to fly low. Once when we were flying over a church and someone asked what time it was, I looked and said, "12.30."

It was Sims' son, Randy Sims of Kismet, who had been the

sparkplug for this reunion. Randy Sims flies occasionally with Liberal mayor Jodie Mahan, and when Mahan mentioned the airbase reunion, Sims got the idea to get together his father's former crewmates. He contacted Kennedy, and Kennedy phoned the others.

Like the other groups visiting together in the roundtop, the men did not discuss their roles as both agents and victims of destruction and death but talked about the routines in which they had been trained and which enabled them to keep going.

"We lived in scattered sites," Whalen said. If your mission was to take off at 6 a.m., trucks would come two hours earlier to pick you up—the officers to the officers' mess, the enlisted men to the enlisted men's mess.

"THEN YOU WENT to the drying room and put on flying clothes that could be heated—they wore sheepskins before that—and everything fastened together and was covered by flying coveralls. You could plug into the side by your seat, and frost would form as you came down. We had no pressurized cabins then, and it was COLD. After so many missions, parachutes were to be turned in and repacked."

"Gunnery went to the armament shack and picked up their guns, which had been cleaned and checked. They delivered them to the plane for us, and we had to put them in," Sims said.

"The pilot, co-pilot, radio operator, navigator and bombardier went to the briefing room where there was a large map of Europe marked with primary target, secondary target and target of last resort. You were told what to expect from fighters or German ack-ack (anti-aircraft guns), and they'd try to route you away from them, but often the target was in a highly industrial area," Whalen said.

"A shell barrage would come up between you and the target, up to 18,000-20,000 feet. Ack-ack guns had shells to explode at different altitudes, and after they read your altitude they'd pull those out. The German fighter planes wouldn't fly in their own ack-ack but wait until you were closer to targets."

"A chaplain said a prayer at the end of the briefing. Then we went out and loaded the planes and took off at 30-second intervals. Usually we took off in the dark. You had anywhere from 150 to 1,000 planes, with each squadron and each group assigned a different color flare to set off so others would know where you were. You also had to be at a certain altitude at a certain time, so you might be circling the airbase two hours after you took off while everyone was getting into place.

The rest—the inhuman side of war and the B-24's that did not return—they did not talk about, except Burns mentioned a time when two of their own planes iced up and crashed just off the end of the runway, "and we flew right over them."

They considered themselves fortunate to be survivors. Sims said they flew two low-flying expeditions to drop supplies at Best and at Wessel. After the trip to Best, when five crewmen had been back in the waist of the plane rolling out supplies, 50 holes were found in the plane and in one man's parachute, but somehow no one had been

