

## Owens Dedication

On 9 March 2012, the 381st Training Group, based at Vandenberg Air Force Base, dedicated a new Student Center building in honor of S/Sgt. Francis E. "Bud" Owens. Owens was an original member of the 533rd Bomb Squadron, serving as a waist gunner in the 1st Lt. James Alexander crew. He later served in the crew of 1st Lt. Olof M. Ballinger. The 381st Training Group is a successor organization to the original U.S. Army Air Forces 381st Bomb Group.

Sgt. Owens was the first of many heroes that would serve with distinction in the Group's history. Owens was cited for bravery for saving an armorer's life during the infamous bomb loading accident on 23 June 1943 at Ridgewell Field. He later saved the life of Radio Operator T/Sgt. John K. Lane when his aircraft was going down over Normandy during the 4 July 1943 raid on Le Mans, France.

Sgt. Owens' last heroic effort, which ultimately cost him his life, was helping a disabled fellow evader cross over the Pyrenees Mountains in October 1943.

The steps that ultimately led to Owens' recognition by the 381st Training Group began a little over a year ago when I was contacted by S/Sgt. James Epperson of the 381st Training Support Squadron. Sgt. Epperson had been charged with finding a suitable candidate from the 381st's WW-II history whose record and actions would be an inspiration to present and future generations of airmen and women being trained at Vandenberg in missile and satellite technology.

I was pleased to nominate S/Sgt. Owens for the honor and I later provided the necessary documentation and research data that confirmed Sgt. Owens' record. After the decision was made to name the new Student Center after S/Sgt. Owens, construction began and the building was completed late last summer.

On 9 March 2012, the new Student Center was dedicated in the memory of S/Sgt. Francis Edward Owens. In attendance at the ceremony were Sgt. Owens' only surviving brother, James Owens, and immediate family members. I was also invited to the ceremony and asked to present Sgt. Owens' story to the assembled group of airmen and officers of the 381st Training Group.

Photos of the dedication ceremony were taken by Air Force photographers. Photos of the ceremony and some period photos of S/Sgt. Owens are enclosed and Ray Hecker, President of the 381st BGMA, wrote a letter to the 381st Training Group commemorating the event. It was a distinct privilege to participate in this occasion honoring a hero of the 381st Bomb Group. Sgt. Owens' love of his country and his devotion to duty are an inspiration to all Americans.

Warren B. Carah  
Brighton, MI

---

S/Sgt. Francis "Bud" Owens

Presentation at the Dedication of the 381st Training Group Student Center  
Vandenberg AFB, 9 March 2012, by Warren B. Carah

Good morning and thank you for inviting me to this dedication in honor of S/Sgt. Francis Owens.

A little over 69 years ago the 381st was born. In those days its mission was strategic bombing, but like any military organization it was made up of people from every walk of life that soon learned they could do far more than they ever imagined possible—indeed—become soldiers in the cause of peace. One of those warriors was S/Sgt. Francis E. Owens and I would like to tell you his story.

I never got to meet Sgt. Owens although I feel that I know him well. In the many years I have been doing research on the 381st Bomb Group, I have been repeatedly impressed with the courage of this man. In his brief career with the 381st Bomb Group, he saved the lives of several people and set an example for generations of airmen to come.

I would like to spend a little time today telling you about the military career of S/Sgt. Francis Owens and why it is important for us to remember him some 68 years after his heroic death.

In the aftermath of the Pearl Harbor Attack in late 1941, Americans were enraged and many young men rushed to join the armed services. Francis Owens, “Bud” to his friends, was no exception and he enlisted in the Army Air Forces on 12 Sep 1942, in his hometown of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

After basic training at Miami, Florida, Bud was transferred to the flexible gunnery school at Tyndall Field, Panama City, Florida. In early December 1942, he was transferred to Kearns Field, Salt Lake City, for further training.

At the end of January 1943, Bud was assigned to the 34th Bomb Group at Blythe Field, California where he was introduced to the B-17 bomber. It was here that he first met his crewmates and his first aircraft commander—Lt. James Alexander. At Blythe, Bud and his crewmates were acquainted with the B-17 as part of their bomber transition training. Bud was trained to man and operate guns in the tail and waist positions.

After transition training was completed in late February, 1943, the Lt. James Alexander crew was transferred to Pyote Field, Texas where they joined the newly forming 381st Bomb Group.

Pyote Field was arguably the most inhospitable base in the U.S. Army Air Forces inventory. Literally scratched out of the desert of West Texas, it was fondly called the “Rattlesnake Base,” by its inhabitants due to the proclivity of the reptiles to seek out the comforts of the warm footgear left at bedside when the weary airmen caught some sack time.

At Pyote, the fledgling 381st drilled for hours each day in formation flying, night flying, blind flying, and crew skill development. The schedule was exhausting, but the Group was becoming proficient at putting bombers up into the air in difficult conditions, flying wingtip-to-wingtip and somehow not colliding with one another.

Bud’s crew was assigned to the 533rd Bomb Squadron which was made up of six other aircraft.

On 4 April 1943, the 381st Bomb Group moved to Pueblo Army Air Field for further training. On the 12th of May the group went to Salina, Kansas where they picked up their combat planes—brand new B-17F’s from the Boeing assembly lines in Washington State.

Bud and his crew flew to England on 20 May 1943, and settled in their new home at Ridgewell Field, Essex, England. Each

bomb Squadron had its own portion of the former RAF base where they lived, slept and ate together. The 381st then spent another month training the crews to be able to cope with the frequently inclement weather and poor visibility of northern Europe.

Bud's first mission of the war was on 22 June 1943, where he served as a tail gunner aboard Lt. Alexander's B-17 on a bombing mission to destroy a former General Motors plant in Antwerp, Belgium.

This mission was not the cake-walk you usually expect for first missions and the 381st lost several planes, with their crews killed, wounded or taken prisoner. This was a shocking and sobering event to the young and inexperienced airmen of the 381st. Death was now a very real and unpredictable event in their lives.

And the airmen of the 381st did not have to wait long for more tragedy.

In the morning of 23 June 1943, the aircraft of the 381st were being prepared for their second mission of the war—a foray into occupied France at St. Martin-Bernay.

Although the planes of the 533rd Bomb Squadron were not scheduled for this mission, they were lined up in their revetments while dozens of mechanics, armorers, and airmen were busily going about their work preparing the aircraft for later engagements.

At 11:00 AM there occurred a terrific explosion under one of the parked aircraft, quickly followed by several more. Evidently fused bombs had been dropped, starting a catastrophe for the 533rd Bomb Squadron. In the explosive inferno some 23 men lost their lives and scores more were wounded. A number of aircraft were damaged or destroyed.

And in the midst of this chaos, S/Sgt. Francis Owens kept his head. When the first explosion rocked the area, he was cleaning the machine guns aboard his new aircraft, 42-29928, piloted by 1st Lt. Olof M. Ballinger, and my father, 2nd Lt. John M. Carah.

While "Bud" was running for cover, he saw one of the armorers lying helpless under the wing of the blown-up plane with a compound leg fracture. Despite the danger of flying shrapnel and head ringing explosions, Sgt. Owens immediately ran over to the stricken airman and dragged him to safety.

When I think about this event, character traits like bravery, commitment, and duty come to mind, but the real force in Sgt. Owens character was his deep love of his fellow man. I feel that way because he would demonstrate it again and again for the rest of his life.

Sgt. Owens was awarded the Soldier's Medal for his actions on that tragic day in June, but there was a war on, and it was time to move on.

Bud Owens flew two more missions in June with the Ballinger crew, and then they stood down for a few days rest before a "big show" scheduled for the 4th of July.

The target was an aircraft engine factory at Le Mans, France. The participating squadrons of the 381st Bomb Group included the 533rd. Owens was aboard B-17 42-29928 and serving as a waist gunner.

While the bomber formation was at the start of their bomb run, an anti-aircraft shell exploded directly under the radio room of Owens' bomber. The damage was significant, several were killed, and the oxygen supply lines were cut to the rear of the aircraft.

Since the plane was flying at 21,000 ft., the men in the rear of the aircraft would suffocate unless they got oxygen. There was no choice but to descend to lower altitude and make a run for home.

It's a fact that the career of a U.S. Army Air Forces airman flying over Europe in 1943 was mighty short—only a few made it to their 25 mission milestone. And it was even shorter if you were in a lone bomber without the protection of the formation.

And this is where Sgt. Owens and his crewmates found themselves at 12 noon over the l'Orne, Normandy countryside. The bomber was singled out by multiple fighters and in a 50 mile juggernaut the aircraft was slowly destroyed by machine gun and cannon fire.

With engines on fire and the plane barely controllable, the crew was ordered to bail out. But before he exited the plane, Sgt. Owens took another look around. No one had seen or heard from the radio operator since the flak explosion which started the demise of their aircraft.

Owens found the radio operator semi-conscious and badly wounded on the floor of the radio room. He dragged the stricken man the length of the aircraft to the rear door. He then clipped on a parachute to the radioman's harness and pushed him out of the plane, pulling the parachute release as the man fell away. Only after he saw the chute open did Owens clip on his own parachute and leave the burning plane.

Sgt. Owens was never decorated for that action, but the man he saved certainly knew the risks that were involved. While the wounded radioman was captured immediately upon reaching the ground, and spent months in hospitals and filthy POW camps, he got a new lease on life that lasted an additional 44 years.

Upon reaching the ground in France, Sgt. Owens began the shadowy and dangerous life as an evader. With enemy soldiers and secret police looking for you day and night it was nerve wracking experience. Who could you trust? How do you even communicate when you can't speak French? How do you eat in country kept in a state of near starvation by the enemy?

Sgt. Owens and the four other survivors of his crew were kept hidden and alive by the French Underground or the "Organization" as it was called by the U.S. Military Intelligence Service.

Sgt. Owens and Lt. Ballinger had spent several months hiding in Normandy when they were finally moved to Paris by the resistance to begin the dangerous journey to Spain. They were undernourished and their clothes patched and ill fitting, but the prospect of home was overpowering.

On 21 October 1943, Bud Owens joined six other American airmen and six French military officers at a train station in southern Paris to begin their journey to freedom. Their journey took them by train to Toulouse and then to the southern French town of Giron and then by bus and foot to Suc, their jumping off point to climb the Pyrenees Mountains.

The climb had hardly begun and Lt. Ballinger had to drop out due to severe leg cramps. Shortly after, another airman became

violently sick and delirious after taking too many Benzedrine tablets in an effort to generate enough energy to make the climb.

Owens volunteered to help the sick man up the mountain, carrying and dragging the man some 30 straight hours up treacherous slopes. Near the summit a fierce storm struck and high winds, freezing temperatures and blowing snow battered the evaders.

All of the airmen were reduced to walking in bare feet in the snow because their French cardboard shoes had disintegrated.

As they reached the summit of the Pyrenees at a place called Port de Rat on the Andorra border, Sgt. Owens could go no further. His legs would not obey his will and he lay helpless, unable to move. The cold, his lack of adequate food and the human burden he had carried up the mountain had robbed him of all his energy.

His comrades were too weak to help. They had to find shelter or they too would collapse and be unable to get up. They moved on down the mountain and eventually found shelter, but could not find Sgt. Owens when they returned for him several hours later.

Sgt. Owens' remains were found by Andorran mountain patrols in the spring of 1944. He was interred in a local cemetery in the village of Arinsal, Andorra as an unknown victim of the mountains.

His remains were recovered by U.S. Army Mortuary troops in 1950 and he was positively identified in 1951. His remains were interred by his family's request at the Ardennes American Military Cemetery in Belgium on 1 Oct 1951.

In the course of his short military career, Sgt. Francis Owens had selflessly risked all to assist others who were helpless. His strength of character, which started with his faith and his upbringing, matured with his sense of responsibility and duty in the service of his country.

We all owe men and woman like Sgt. Owens a debt of gratitude for not only the sacrifices they made, but the hope their actions engender.

It is fitting and proper that this center of learning be named after Bud Owens and it is my personal hope that all airmen and airwomen that pass through this building stop and reflect on the power of the values he stood for: love of country, love of freedom and love for your fellow man.

Thank you.

Warren B. Carah