

Franklin Forum

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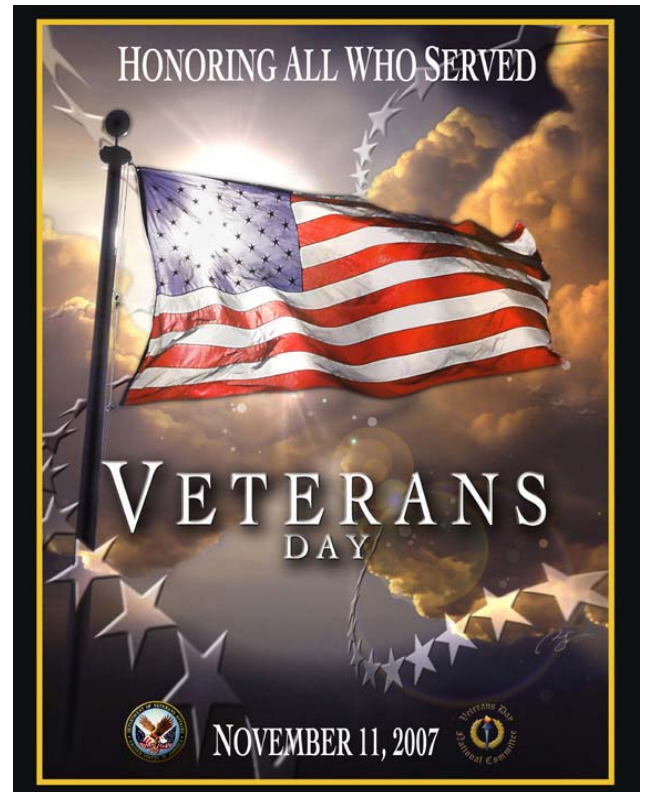
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November 11, 2007

WASHINGTON -- Department of Veterans Affairs facilities across the country will observe Veterans Day (Sunday, Nov. 11) with events including parades featuring military bands, wheelchair races, motorcycle rides, aircraft flyovers and appearances by celebrities and political leaders.

The variety of local events occurring over this weekend will be in addition to those taking place around the nation's capital, including the traditional wreath-laying ceremony on Sunday morning at the Tomb of the Unknowns at Arlington National Cemetery. A special Veterans Day Observance early Sunday afternoon at the Wall will mark the 25th anniversary of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and will feature a keynote address by Gen. Colin Powell.

“There are events taking place just about everywhere in our country to show our nation's veterans how proud our people are of the service and sacrifices they have made for our country,” said Acting VA Secretary Gordon Mansfield. “We at VA are honored to help organize and take part in these activities because our mission is to provide the best possible care, treatment and benefits for our nation's veterans.”



Franklin Reunion 2008

Kansas City, MO

June 5 – 8, 2008

The 2008 USS Franklin Reunion will be held at the Hyatt Regency Crown Center June 5th – 8th, 2008. It will be hosted by Annette Bownds, in honor of Leonard Hall, her grandfather. You can contact Annette at 1-913-231-1179 or USSFranklin2008@yahoo.com.

See you there!

Book recounts crew's nightmare on carrier during kamikaze attack

By Deborah Gertz Husar

Herald-Whig Staff Writer

November 4th, 2007

PLEASANT HILL, Ill. — Joe Springer already knew a key part of the story when he started work on a book about the USS Franklin, a World War II aircraft carrier.

But it's the charges of desertion and other details surrounding the well-publicized devastating attack by a Japanese bomber and the resulting fire that claimed more than 1,200 lives that shape his latest book.

"Inferno: The Epic Life and Death Struggle of the USS Franklin in World War II," an oral history published in September, tells the story of life at sea aboard the aircraft carrier with the most decorated crew in naval history.

"It's not a happy story, but bottom line, war is not happy," Springer said.

Springer, who retired from the Air Force after 25 years as an aircraft weapons specialist, interviewed more than 150 of the Franklin crewmen for the book, with many telling their stories for the first time to put the past to rest.

"The Franklin and the air group had an extraordinary combat record," Springer said. "It was overlooked because of the March 19, 1945, fire. That's what everyone remembers the Franklin for."

The Franklin fought in the Battle of Leyte Gulf in October 1944 and was the first fleet carrier struck by a Japanese kamikaze. Repaired in Bremerton, Wash., and under the command of a new captain, Leslie Gehres, the Franklin sailed to Japan in March 1945 as part of Task Force 58, which targeted airfields to nullify the kamikaze threat.

On the morning of March 19, the Franklin was launching aircraft to attack Kobe Harbor when a Japanese aircraft was detected by radar.

Springer said Gehres, by most accounts a pompous man unpopular with the crew and his peers, had a 14-minute warning of the attack but never called the crew to battle stations, leaving half the guns unmanned.

"This aircraft came in and hit the Franklin with a bomb at the worst possible moment because all the aircraft on the flight deck and hangar were fueled and loaded with ordnance for the strike," Springer said.

"Within 20 minutes, the ship was an inferno. The planes exploded. The bombs exploded. It was almost beyond description for the men to tell me what it was like there on the flight deck."

Ultimately, 1,700 crewmen were blown off the ship or jumped into the cold water of the North Pacific to escape the flames and were picked up by neighboring vessels.

By late that morning, the Franklin was dead in the water, less than 50 miles from Japan and listing at 13 degrees.

"Everyone I talked to said she was gone, she was lost, but a cruiser, the USS Pittsburgh, started towing the Franklin out of the area," Springer said.

"It's a remarkable story of survival, of extraordinary resilience. Those remaining on the ship, they were not going to give it up. Eventually the engineers and the crew got the engines restarted. They brought her back to Hawaii ... and to New York, where the Franklin ended her career."

Springer's research highlighted another side to the heroic story.

"Just as soon as I started the interviewing process, I discovered that the captain accused those men who went over the side with desertion," he said.

Many crew members believe Gehres made the accusation to deflect blame because he had not called the crew to general quarters.

Gehres began court-martial proceedings against a select group of men in New York, then was told the Navy knew the ship was not at battle stations even with advance warning, so he was offered a deal.

"If you drop the charges against the crew, we'll let it drop. They never charged him with anything. He was a hero by that time. He brought the ship back," Springer said. "This was an underlying theme that nobody knew ... and a lot of these men never recovered from the accusation."

Gehres didn't allow the men back on the Franklin, and Springer said they weren't well-treated in Pearl Harbor while waiting to be reassigned.

"The charges were dropped, but the men were not vindicated. This accusation followed them, and for many, it followed them to this day," Springer said. "One man called me and told me we can die in peace."

Springer spent three years writing the book, his second after "Black Devil Brigade," the personal story of his uncle who served in the first special service force in World War II and was killed at Anzio.

"I went into the Franklin story just as a historian and a writer, but interviewing combat veterans is always a very personal story. Combat is personal," Springer said. "Whatever I learned of the torment, the anguish that hundreds of these men lived with, that's when I decided to tell the truth for their sake."

Contact Staff Writer Deborah Gertz Husar at dhusar@whig.com or (217) 221-3379

WHERE TO GET IT

"Inferno: The Epic Life and Death Struggle of the USS Franklin in World War II" is available from online book retailers and at Waldenbooks in the Quincy Mall.

It can also be purchased during book signing event for author Joe Springer from 1 to 3 p.m. Saturday at the Fairfield Library in Pleasant Hill. A limited number of books will be available for sale.

<http://www.whig.com>

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