Report: Crash of a North American B-25A Mitchell Bomber in New Hyde Park on January 1, 1942

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Town Historian

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Background

- On New Year's Day 1942 a North American B25A Mitchell Bomber #40-2199 took off at 7:20 am from Mitchel Field, fully equipped and fueled for a "routine training flight". Less than one month after the December 7th Pearl Harbor raid, it is likely the bomber was on an anti-submarine patrol and loaded with bombs. Five crew were on the plane.
- Within minutes after take-off, one of the plane's two engines began smoking and failed. The plane's one engine could not carry the heavy load and the 23-year pilot Lieutenant Charles Van Eeuwen struggled to keep the plane aloft, trying a low sweeping turn back to Mitchel Field. He soon realized that he was not going to make it.
- Rather than bailing out and risking having a crash of the medium size bomber into the many homes below in the Hillside Park Oaks community in New Hyde Park, Van Eeuwen attempted to land the plane in a vacant sand pit located south of Hillside Avenue and west of Denton Avenue.
- All five on board were killed when the gasoline tanks exploded upon hitting the sand pit. Van Eeuwen was awarded a posthumous Distinguished Service Medal for avoiding hitting houses during the crash.
- In honor of the sacrifices of the five airmen, New Hyde Park residents placed a bronze plaque on the southwest corner of Hillside Avenue and Oak Drive. The plaque was later moved to the traffic circle at Michael Tully Park in New Hyde Park. Ceremonies honoring the airmen were held in 1942, 1972 and 1981.
- On the 75th anniversary of the airplane crash, a ceremony honoring the airmen will be held on Sunday, January 8, 2017 at Michael Tully Park.

North American B-25A Mitchell Bomber

- An American twin-engine, medium bomber manufactured by North American Aviation (NAA). It was named in honor of Major General William “Billy” Mitchell, a pioneer of U.S. military aviation. Used by many Allied air forces, the B-25 served in every theater of World War II and after the war ended many remained in service, operating across four decades. The B-25 would gain national fame as a result of its use by the famous “Doolittle Raiders” in their raid over Tokyo.

Insight on the Crash

Josh Stoff, Curator of the Cradle of Aviation 12/14/2016

A 1941 photo of Army North American B-25 Mitchell bombers departing from Mitchel Field on an antisubmarine patrol.

“I'm pretty sure they were on an anti-submarine patrol. It was only a month after Pearl Harbor and B-25's out of Mitchel Field flew anti-sub patrols in the northeast. The plane was loaded with bombs, which is why it couldn't hold altitude on one engine. All the reports say there were multiple explosions, which were the bombs going off.”

AviationSafetyNetwork

an exclusive service of Flight Safety Foundation

FLIGHT SAFETY FOUNDATION

www.flightsafety.org

ASN Wikibase Occurrence # 111595
Last updated: 29 November 2016
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Flight Safety Foundation Report

Date:	01-JAN-1942
Time:	7AM?
Type:	North American B-25A Mitchell
Owner/operator:	20th BS/2nd BG USAAF
Registration:	40-2199
C/n / msn:	
Fatalities:	Fatalities: 5 / Occupants: 5
Airplane damage:	Written off (damaged beyond repair)
Location:	New Hyde Park, LI, NY - United States of America
Phase:	Take off
Nature:	Military
Departure airport:	Mitchel Field NY
Destination airport:	

Narrative:
Stalled and spun in just after take off, crashing into sand pit surrounded by housing. Pilot awarded posthumous Distinguished Service Medal for avoiding hitting houses during crash.
2/LT Charles W. Van Eeuwen (Pilot)
2/LT James J. Orr (Co-Pilot)
AVCDT Earl W. Ray (Navigator)
PFC Edwin A, Onufrowicz (Flight Engineer)
PFC Joseph W. Gallic (Radio Operator)

Sources:
http://www.aviationarchaeology.com/src/db.asp

Location of the Crash

The B-25A Mitchel Bomber crashed in a sand pit east of the current location of 82 Maple Drive in New Hyde Park, south of Hillside Avenue and north of Michael Tully Park

Newspaper Accounts

Brooklyn Eagle, January 2, 1942

5 Fliers Dive to Death To Avoid Hitting Homes

Bomber Crashes in Long Island Sandpit After Trouble Develops Over Residential Area

Special to the Brooklyn Eagle

Mitchel Field, Jan. 2—Army Air Corps authorities today were investigating the crash of a Douglas medium-type bomber yesterday near New Hyde Park in which all five members of the crew were killed.

Meanwhile, officials disclosed that the fliers apparently had dived the huge plane deliberately into the sandpit where it crashed rather than risk plunging into private homes in an attempt to return to this field.

The site of the crash was not far from the spot where two Army bombers collided a year ago, setting fire to a house, killing a civilian and ten Air Corps men.

Split-Second Decision

The plane, a North American B-25, two-motored bomber, took off from this field on a routine training flight at 7:20 a.m. Aboard were a pilot, co-pilot, navigator, engineer and radio operator.

Five minutes later, residents of the thickly-populated area around New Hyde Park, three miles from the field, heard the plane's motors misfiring.

Second Lt. Charles W. Van Eeuwen, the pilot, was forced to make a split-second decision between two alternatives—nosing the plane down into the sandpit, directly below, or gambling on the slim chance of making the field across the sea of rooftops shimmering in the early morning haze. He chose the former, and into the pit dived the crippled plane, splashing against a wall of sand 25 feet high.

Gas Tanks Explode

From the depths of the pit, the only spot within a square mile where it could cause no damage, came a terrific explosion as the plane's gas tanks ignited.

Some hundreds of spectators had reached the scene, but police and soldiers kept them away from the wreckage. It was not until 9 o'clock that the heat of the flames had subsided sufficiently to allow removal of the bodies to a Floral Park mortuary.

The victims, all of whom were unmarried, were:

LIEUTENANT VAN EEUWEN, 23, of Allendale, Mich.

SECOND LT. JAMES J. ORR, co-pilot, of Oak Park, Ill.

CADET EARLE W. RAY, 24, navigator, of Kings Mills, Ohio.

PRIVATE FIRST CLASS EDWIN A. ONUFROWISCZ, 21, engineer, of Ipswich, Mass.

PRIVATE FIRST CLASS JOSEPH W. GALLIK, 22, radio operator, of Pittsburgh.

The sandpit, situated on Denton Ave., is owned by De Pasquale Brothers.

WHERE FIVE ARMY FLIERS DIED—Wreckage burning fiercely after the crash of a bomber from Mitchel Field yesterday in a sandpit near New Hyde Park. On the right firemen are dragging a hose to fight the flames, while part of the wing of the plane is visible in the foreground.

Five Die as Crippled Army Bomber Crashes, Explodes: Pilot Sacrifices Self, Crew to Save Civilians
Newsday (1940-1988); Jan 2, 1942; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Newsday
pg. 3

Five Die as Crippled Army Bomber Crashes, Explodes

Pilot Sacrifices Self, Crew to Save Civilians

Newsday, January 2, 1942

Garden City Park—An Army B-25 medium Bomber crashed and exploded in a tower of flame early yesterday morning, and five men died when a 23-year-old lieutenant decided it was better for him and his crew to die, than an untold number of sleeping civilians below.

The plane, with one motor smoking and sputtering, could not carry its heavy load with only the remaining engine. Pilot Charles W. Van Eeuwen fought it as long as he could. There was no landing place, except roof tops—miles of them. Then he sighted a sand pit. There lay death for him and his crew, but safety for scores, perhaps hundreds who live in the little homes of the Hillside Heights section. He chose the sand pit.

Besides Lt. Van Eeuwen, who lived at Allendale, Mich., the dead are:

Second Lt. James J. Orr, 21, co-pilot, of Oaks Park, Ill.

Cadet Earle W. Ray, 24, navigator, of Kings Mills, Ohio.

Pvt. First Class Edwin A. Onufrowicz, 21, engineer, of Newburyport, Mass.

Pvt. First Class Joseph W. Gallik, 22, radio operator, of Pittsburgh, Pa.

The plane had taken off at 7.20 for a routine training flight. Full equipment, a crew of five and loaded gasoline tanks made every ounce of power in the two gigantic engines necessary.

Almost from the moment of takeoff, it was apparent that there was trouble with the port engine. A plume of smoke trailed behind the gleaming plane, while engineer Pvt. Onufrowicz must have labored to determine the trouble. The plane never gained altitude. The pilot was apparently trying a low, sweeping turn, almost level, to reach Mitchel Field. Somewhere in that turn he realized that he had but a few seconds to live.

Below him loomed the sand pit. There was one chance in a million, Army men said, that a successful landing could be made there. Lt. Van Eeuwen tried for it. Telephone and electric wires were in his way, but the heavy plane snapped them. A few feet from the brink of the pit, the undercarriage struck. Another instant and the bomber, a flam-

—Continued on Page 31.

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5 Die as Army Bomber Crashes, Burns

—Continued from Page 3.

ing mass, lay on the bottom of the pit. Then came a series of explosions, as the gasoline tanks burst.

With the first explosion, which shook people awake for miles around, the New Hyde Park fire whistle sounded. Before apparatus could arrive, a second explosion came. Firemen poured water on the wreckage for two hours before it was finally cool.

The gas explosions brought hundreds to the spot, but they were kept at a distance by a cordon of police and soldiers. The bodies were so intermingled with twisted wreckage that hours were required to remove them. Ambulances took them to a Floral Park undertaking establishment, while an Army Accident Classification Board met to try to determine the cause of the tragedy.

March Field, Cal., Jan. 2 (U.P.) —A twin-motored bomber missing in the San Bernardino mountain area with nine men aboard was "presumed" lost today.

New York Times (1923-Current file): Jan 8, 1942; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times
pg. 19

DEAD AIRMEN HONORED FOR HEROISM IN CRASH

Hillside Heights, L. I., Sends Flowers to 5 Who Died There

Special to THE NEW YORK TIMES.

HILLSIDE HEIGHTS, L. I., Jan. 7—In appreciation of the heroic sacrifice of the five Army airmen who were killed last Thursday in averting possible damage to private homes, the residents of this community have sent flowers to the homes of the fliers, it was learned today.

The tribute was accomplished through public subscription, with the entire community participating, but the residents in the Zenith, Wade and Sunbeam developments, which are closest to the scene of the tragedy, sponsored the subscription and were the chief contributors.

Flowers also were sent by the New Hyde Park Civic Association, a neighboring group. The organization also is sponsoring a move to have Leonard Boulevard, near the scene of the crash, renamed Van Eeuwen Boulevard in honor of Lieutenant Charles W. Van Eeuwen of Grant, Mich., pilot of the plane.

Lieutenant Van Eeuwen made a forced landing in a medium-type bomber in a sand pit here, although he easily could have glided about twenty feet farther and landed on much better terrain. The gasoline tanks exploded and the flier and his crew were killed instantly. The explosion shook windows for a considerable distance, but there was no damage to private property.

Besides Lieutenant Van Eeuwen, the airmen killed were Lieutenant James J. Orr of Oak Park, Ill., copilot; Aviation Cadet Earle W. Ray of Kings Mills, Ohio, navigator; Private Edwin A. Onufrowicz of Ipswich, Mass., engineer, and Private Joseph W. Gallik of Pittsburgh, radio operator.

The New York Times, January 8, 1942

To Hold Mass for Mitchel Crash Heroes
Newsday (1940-1988); Jan 23, 1942; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Newsday
pg. 12

To Hold Mass for Mitchel Crash Heroes

New Hyde Park—Col. Douglas Johnston, Mitchel Field post commander, Mitchel Field's Catholic Chaplain Paul J. Giegerich and other officers of the post will attend a Requiem Mass at Notre Dame R. C. Church, New Hyde Park, Sunday for the five Mitchel Field fliers who died in a crash here on New Year's Day.

Lt. Charles W. Van Eeuwen was the pilot who chose to crash his crippled Army bomber in a sandpit rather than risk the lives of New Hyde Park residents by trying to land. Others in the bomber's crew, all of whom were killed in the accident, were: Second Lt. James J. Orr, co-pilot; Cadet Earle W. Ray, navigator; P. F. C. Edwin A. Omnowicz, engineer, and P. F. C. Joseph W. Gallik, radio operator.

Newsday, January 23, 1942

Heroic Mitchel Fliers Honored: 1,500 at Rites for Five Killed in Bomber Crash
Newsday (1940-1988); Jan 26, 1942; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Newsday
pg. 3

Heroic Mitchel Fliers Honored

1,500 at Rites for Five Killed in Bomber Crash

Newsday, January 26, 1942

Garden City Park—More than 1,500 residents of this area yesterday paid tribute to five Mitchel Field fliers who died in a sandpit, here, on New Year's Day, so that they might live.

First, there were services in Notre Dame R. C. Church, New Hyde Park, when the Rev. Father George G. Morrow, Ph. D., offered memorial services for the men. The church was filled and people stood on the steps and the sidewalk outside. At the services were Col. Douglas B. Johnston, commandant at Mitchel Field ;his staff of 12 officers and the Rev. Paul J. Giegerich, Field chaplain.

An hour and a half later, a plaque was unveiled at Oak Dr. and New Hyde Park Rd., Hillside Park Oaks, just half a mile from the scene of the fatal crash of the bomber.

The bronze plaque, on a four-foot marble monument, bears this inscription:

"To Lt. Charles W. Van Feuwen, Second Lt. James J. Orr, Cadet Earle W. Ray, Pvt. First Class Edwin A. Omufrowicz, Pvt. First Class Joseph W. Gallik, who gave their lives so the people of Hillside Park Oaks and their property might be spared."

Major Dale O. Smith, "a bombing officer, unveiled the plaque Col. Johnston, after placing a wreath, accepted the memorial in behalf of the Presi-

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1,500 at Rites for Five Killed in Bomber Crash

—Continued from Page 3.

dent and the United States Army. He was escorted to the monument by a color guard of the New Hyde Park Legion. Wreaths were also placed upon the plaque by members of the Garden City Park and New Hyde Park fire departments, the New Hyde Park American Legion and the Lakeville Estates Civic Association. A bouquet in memoriam was donated by the local Girl Scout troop.

After the Rev. Geigerich's invocation, the residents marched the half-mile to the sand pit and gathered in groups around the edge.

Ray W. Bonitz, president of the Hillside Park Oaks Civic Association, addressed the group.

"Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. . . .

"Not one of these boys was kin to any of us here, as the world looks at men, but each of them in that high spiritual concept of relativity in the common fatherhood of God and brotherhood to man, accepted his duty of life to his brother; laid down his life that we might live. . . .

"We, whom their unselfish sacrifice has spared, pledge our word and sacred honor that our lives will be dedicated to our land and their land, so that never for a moment shall they have cause to question the supreme sacrifice they made for us."

Father Morrow gave the benediction. Then taps was blown and a squad from Mitchel Field fired a salute. The 700 civic association members and attending residents tossed flowers into the pit.

Relatives of the fliers, from all parts of the United States, came to attend the services.

The rites were arranged by a committee of the Hillside Park Oaks Civic Association, headed by Chairman Robert Strain. They are Joseph Price, John Lagberg, W. C. Mischler, Edward Hance, John Aberts, Ralph Peters, Louis Lubrano, George Baches, Anthony Dean and William Kruse.

The plane had taken off from Mitchel Field at 7:20 on New Year's morning, fully equipped for a routine training flight. It never gained altitude. The pilot apparently was trying a low, sweeping turn, almost level, to return to the Field, when he realized that if he did not make it he would crash onto the houses below. The sandpit was the only open spot. He had one chance in a million of landing safely. He took it.

Board May Name NHP School for Hero
Newsday (1940-1988); Jan 29, 1955; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Newsday
pg. 11

Board May Name NHP School for Hero

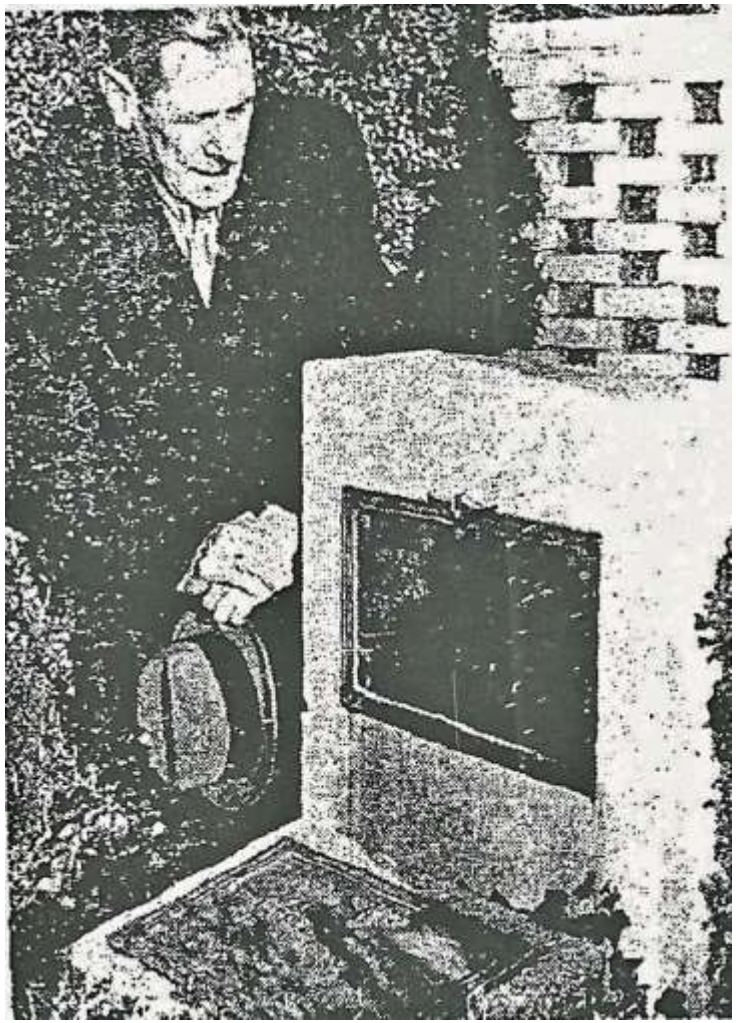
New Hyde Park—A junior-senior high school may be named for a World War II bomber pilot who died preventing his crippled plane from crashing into homes here.

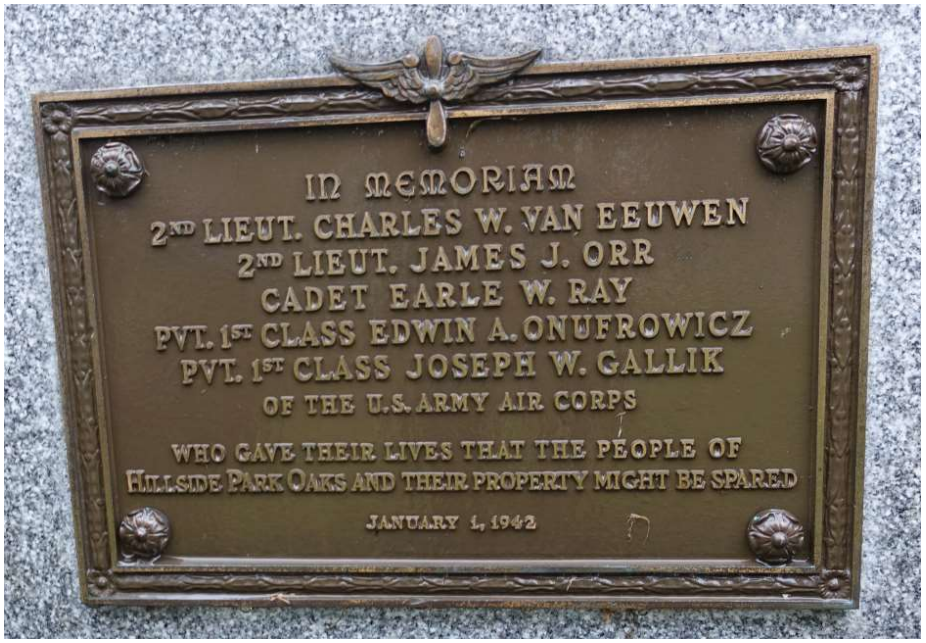
The school is to be erected adjacent to the site of the Jan. 1, 1942 bomber crash. The Sewanhaka High School board, which will let contracts for the school next month, may act on the civic proposal to name the school for the pilot, Lt. Charles W. Van Eeuwen, at its meeting Monday night.

The 23-year-old Allendale, Mich. pilot and four crewmen were killed when their bomb-laden plane crashed and exploded shortly after taking off from Mitchel Field. The pilot deliberately crashed his plane in an empty sandpit to avoid hitting nearby houses.

The school at 1950 Hillside Avenue is currently named the Manor Oaks William Bowie School.

The Bronze Plaque





30 Years... but Crash Is Not Forgotten

Garden City Park—An Army B-25 medium bomber crashed and exploded in a tower of flame early yesterday morning, and five men died when a 23-year-old lieutenant decided it was better for him and his crew to die, than an untold number of sleeping civilians below.

—Newsday, Jan. 2, 1942

By Michael Unger

There is a white stone tablet in the midst of carefully tended shrubbery at the corner of Oak Drive and New Hyde Park Road, hardly visible to motorists using the busy street.

The bronze plaque set in the stone reads: "In Memoriam: 2nd Lieut. Charles W. Von Eeuwen; 2nd Lieut. James J. Orr; Cadet Earle W. Ray; Pvt. 1st Class Edwin A. Onufrowicz; Pvt. 1st Class Joseph W. Gallik, of the U.S. Army Air Corps, who gave their lives that the people of Hillside Park Oaks and their property might be spared." Thirty years later, the people of Hillside Park Oaks still remember.

"The whole house shook, and my wife and I got up and dressed and went right out," recalled George J. Schrader, 72, whose house at 27 Maple Dr. is only a short walk from the former sand pit where Van Eeuwen, the pilot, managed to bring the bomber down. It had taken off from Mitchel Field at 7:20 AM on a routine training flight. With one engine gone, it never gained altitude. Trying a low, sweeping turn back to the field, the pilot saw only miles of rooftops and the sand pit. And he made his choice.

"I think the Germans are here," Mrs. Josephine Schrader told her husband that morning. "We've got to put on our best clothes because we may not come back." They hurried up the street just past the intersection of Maple, Pinewood Lane and Leonard Boulevard, where a crowd had gathered at the edge of the huge sand excavation. There were 300 families living in the newly-built, fieldstone-and-brick Cape Cods, and the builder was putting up more for sale at $6,200.

On the walk yesterday, Schrader turned in at a house at 82 Maple Dr., which hadn't been there three decades ago when he stood watching firemen and soldiers extinguishing the flaming wreckage. Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Jenal moved in four years ago and a wooden fence screens the backyard from the crash site, now the landfill area for North Hempstead's Denton Avenue incinerator. "After the crash, we had a quite a service for them," Mrs. Schrader said. "We had a parade, and everybody threw carnations in the sand pit —then it was just a big hole and there was water down there."

A Wreath in Memoriam

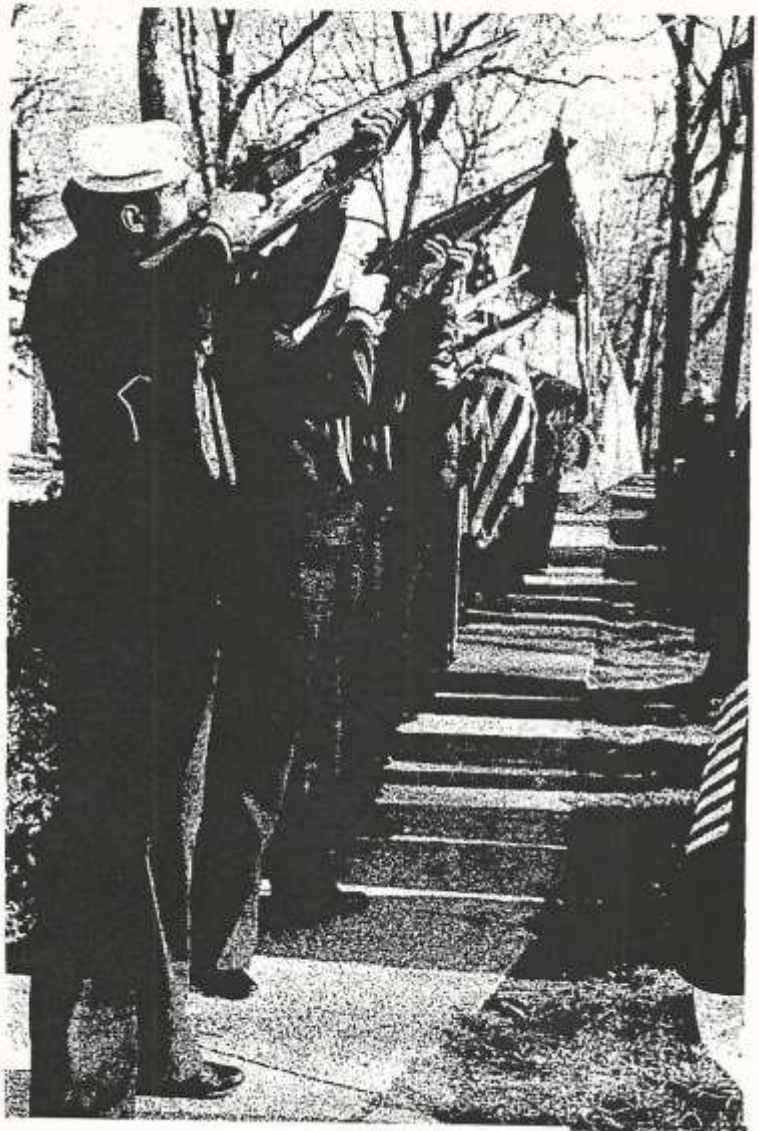
Saturday, as on each New Year's Day for the last 30 years, a florist will deliver a wreath to the stone marker. For the last 18 years, Schrader has been taking care of that for the Hillside Park Oaks Civic Association. On Memorial Day, the civic group and the local posts of the American Legion and Veterans of Foreign Wars place wreaths, and the Hillside Park Oaks Garden Club women plant flowers and tend to the shrubbery. "It's the least we can do," Mrs. Schrader said. "If it weren't for them, we might not be here to tell about it."

Newsday Photo

Newsday, January 1972

Remembering A Heroic Action
English, Merle
Newsday (1940-1988); Dec 31, 1981; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Newsday
pg. 7

Newsday, December 31, 1981



Newsday / Walter del Toro

A Navy unit fires a salute to the crew of the B-25 who died in the crash in 1942

Remembering A Heroic Action

By Merle English

New Hyde Park—It was New Year's Day, 1942, nearly a month after Japan had bombed Pearl Harbor. Shortly after 7 AM, an equipment-and-fuel-laden B-25 bomber took off from Mitchel Field on a routine training flight.

Within minutes, one of the plane's two engines started to sputter and smoke. Lt. Charles W. Van Eeuwen, the 23-year-old pilot, fought to stay aloft, but the remaining engine could not carry the heavy load. Except for a sandpit and the rooftops of the Hillside Park Oaks housing development, there was no place to land.

The pilot received orders to bail out, but instead of allowing his plane to crash into the homes, he directed it into the sandpit. It crashed there, killing Van Eeuwen and his four crewmen.

Since the crash, a few Hillside Park Oaks residents have gathered annually at a simple stone monument that they erected at New Hyde Park Road and Oak Drive to pay quiet tribute to the five airmen who sacrificed their own lives so that the residents could be spared.

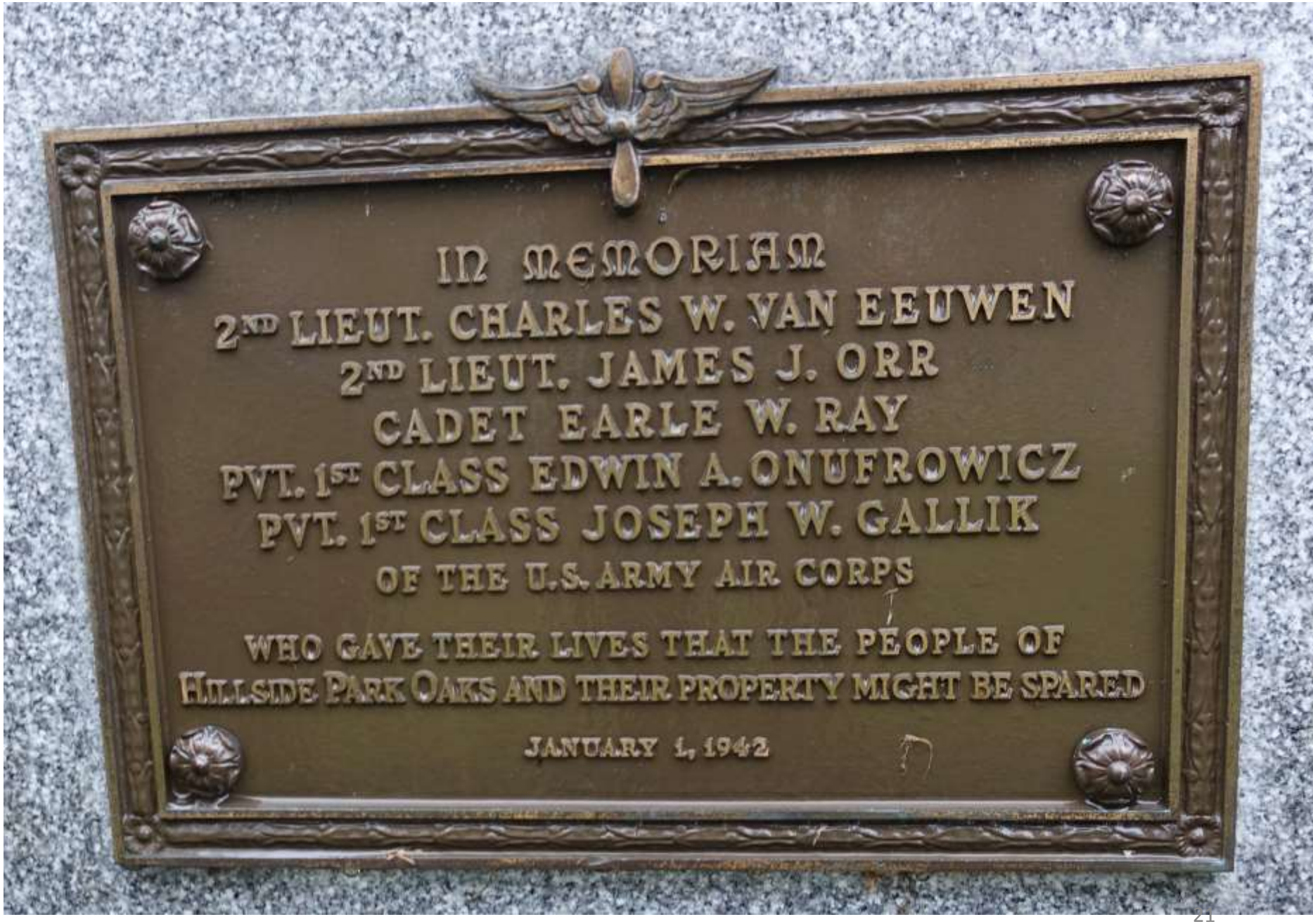
The residents came together again yesterday for the 40th anniversary observance. But this year, the Town of North Hempstead joined their tribute, as did color guards; representatives of the Navy, Air Force and police, business officials and veterans of both World War I and World War II. There were speeches by Supervisor Michael Tully and other town officials, prayers by a minister and a rabbi, volleys from a firing squad, and patriotic songs. Taps was soundedfor Van Eeuwen, 2nd Lt. James J. Orr, 23, of Oak Park, Ill.; Cadet Earl W. Ray, 24, Kings Mills, Ohio; Pfc. Edwin A. Onufrowicz, 21, of Newburyport, Mass., and Pfc. Joseph W. Gallok, 22, of Pittsburgh.

Explaining the town's involvement, Frank Pistone, commissioner of community services and president of the town's Historical Society, said North Hempstead wanted to pay tribute not only to the men who died, but to the residents who honored their memory. It was also in keeping with the Historical Society's ongoing program of locating memorial sites, he said.

Before the ceremony began, Vincent and Grace Forino, long-time residents of New Hyde Park, recalled the events on the day the plane crashed. "People started running, saying 'The [Japanese] are here,'" said Forino. "Everybody was crying," said his wife.

John Podgorsky, a fire fighter who was one of the first persons at the scene, said, "I was in bed. I jumped up, and was running down there when one of the bombs went off."

Florence George, of 2 Oak Drive, on whose property the stone monument is located, said she was proud to have it there. "I'm a patriot," she said.


IN MEMORIAM
2ND LIEUT. CHARLES W. VAN EEUWEN
2ND LIEUT. JAMES J. ORR
CADET EARLE W. RAY
PVT. 1ST CLASS EDWIN A. ONUFROWICZ
PVT. 1ST CLASS JOSEPH W. GALLIK
OF THE U.S. ARMY AIR CORPS
WHO GAVE THEIR LIVES THAT THE PEOPLE OF
HILLSIDE PARK OAKS AND THEIR PROPERTY MIGHT BE SPARED
JANUARY 1, 1942

Sources

- Communications Department, Town of North Hempstead
- Cradle of Aviation
- Joel Friedman, Volunteer, Cradle of Aviation
- Josh Stoff, Curator of the Cradle of Aviation