

The Air Show

By John Gilbert, December 2014

Several years ago, while living in Spokane, WA, we received a postcard offering a four-day trip to a casino in Nevada. The price was reasonable, so we made reservations. We had taken several jaunts over the years to Reno, Laughlin, and Elko, Nevada where the travel package included airfare on a jet and several nights in a hotel-casino. I assumed it was one of those cities and skipped reading the website details.

We arrived at the Spokane airport and boarded a Boeing jet that appeared full. The flight was smooth, so I dozed off and 1-½ hours later we were landing at what I assumed was Elko, NV.

The plane taxied and stopped in front of an odd assortment of low buildings. Something seemed wrong as I noticed two people roll out a small ramp for us to get off the plane. We were among the first off, the plane, and we were directed towards a small gate in an old chain link fence where we could see buses waiting on the other side. I glanced down the field towards the large aircraft hangers. They were all dilapidated and rusty looking.

We had landed at an abandoned WWII airfield! I had an immediate flash back to an old 1949 movie, "Twelve O'clock High," starring Gregory Peck and Dean Jagger. The movie started with Dean Jagger riding a bicycle down a narrow lane in Great Britain to an open field where he stopped and looked across tall weeds towards where an airfield had once been. The actual movie started then as a flash back to WW II wartime drama.

We exited the gate and were herded onto waiting buses. Standing in that line recalled a science fiction movie where aliens had landed in Washington, DC and announced they were from outer space and came to transport humans to their planet where we could exist in perpetual peace and without

want. Their leader used as proof of their intention a sacred book written in their alien language titled, "Serving Mankind." The aliens sent space ships and many people, like me today, had accepted the offer to go to the Promised Land. The sacred book was later translated and identified to be a cookbook, "How to Serve Man."

When our bus driver announced that we were in Wendover, Nevada, I was satisfied we were not on an alien voyage. Wendover is near the Bonneville Salt Flats where all land speed records are made and straddles the state line between Utah and Nevada on I-80. We could see from the bus a flat expanse for miles both to the south and the east. Our casino was only two miles from the airport.

After checking in at the casino I found the newspaper section. The casino did not sell magazines or books, but it had two newspapers, "The weekly Wendover Times" and "USA Today." The "USA Today" paper was from the previous weekend so I took the "Wendover" paper to the cashier. He said with a smile, "To you it's free." The front-page story was the air show on Saturday - that sounded interesting. A small article was titled, "Bobcat found in Enola Gay Hanger." Where had I heard that name before?

Saturday morning we boarded the casino bus to the air show. The driver gave us a brief tour of the streets near the airfield. We passed the base swimming pool surrounded by metal chain link fencing. The empty pool was in plain view and weeds were growing inside the fence. Windows and doors of the rather large pool house were boarded up and looked very desolate. I was reminded of such a pool from many years ago. Further on we passed the base chapel. The steeple was still intact but the church had been converted to living quarters. Who would live there?

The road continued for a quarter mile parallel to the airfield behind the row of old hangers. Part way down the road we

passed another chain link fence enclosure of perhaps two square blocks encircling old military barracks. Here also weeds were everywhere inside the fence, giving it a very depressing appearance. I remembered barracks like those, and didn't need to be in one to know the interior layout.

The driver took the road back toward where we had come through the gate on Thursday. He pointed out the building called "Enola Gay Hanger" as we passed and explained that was where the "Enola Gay B-29 Bomber" was kept when the crew trained for the flight to drop an atomic bomb on Hiroshima, Japan in 1945.

The bus left us off adjacent to the 1940's wooden control tower and walk-through gate we had used when arriving Thursday. Looking around I saw directly across the road a building with a small sign in front of it. Out of curiosity I walked over to read the sign that explained this was the Airbase Officer's Club that was being renovated by volunteers in and around Wendover. The wide front steps were disassembled and lying around where workers had left them. The doors to the entrance were gone and there was temporary planking leading up to the opening. There was no one around so I decided to look inside.

Inside looked like all military clubs from that era. The entrance to the main ballroom was to the right, so I walked thru the debris to look. Just inside were the stairs on each side that led up to the narrow open balcony that surrounded the ballroom. I walked up the stairs and visualized below how the bar, tables, entertainment platform and dance floor would have been in the 1940's.

Then, like a tourist visiting such a site, I had the sensation that the commanding officer of the "Enola Gay" may have stood in this very spot in 1945 and thought about the atomic bomb mission ahead that only he, of his crew, knew about. I also thought about how he would with one bomb kill 80,000 people, mostly innocent civilians, dropped from a plane he had ironically named after his mother.

The air show was low-key and anti-climactic, with only a few interesting planes and entertainment. However, I had seen an interesting air show while in Wendover. Albeit, much of it in my imagination.