

Dispatches from DeFuniak



From Councilman Ron Kelley

D E F U N I A K

F L O R I D A

S P R I N G S

SPECIAL POINTS OF INTEREST:

- Walton County Heritage Museum on Circle Drive.
- The DeFuniak Springs Library on Circle Drive.
- The Chautauqua Winery on U.S. Hwy. 331 South.
- DeFuniak Springs Golf Course and Country Club on U.S. Hwy. 90 West.



A TUMULTUOUS UPROAR

Greetings!

February has been a turbulent month in the world. One does not have to look far to see that madness is on the rise while calm reason and intellectual understanding seem difficult to find.

National headlines reveal the frustration and anger of a society at war with itself.

Throughout history, citizens have distrusted government, sometimes with good reason. The last few decades have not helped. From the Kennedy assassination to Watergate, from "Read my lips" to Bill and Monica, from the IRS attacking conservatives to NSA spying on everyone, from Hillary's campaign to Comey's FBI, the scandals have been, well, fast and furious.

People are now encouraged

to believe that they are victims. Everyone is to blame but no one is responsible.

In this climate of relentless anger, it is easy to point a finger, especially at government.



Even here in our lovely town, where people are good and kind, the fires of ugly resentment have recently been stoked and fed.

Because of a wealth of incomplete facts given to a group of honest citizens by the local state attorney's

office, some members of the public now think that the city council should be blamed for having had vital information hidden from it by the mayor and former finance director.

In fact, the conclusion seems to be that this city council is now responsible for every single problem in the city for the last 115 years.

Although that is obviously false, government is such a soft target. It is so easy to forget what you know and just believe what you've heard. However, real truth has a way of coming out and I have faith in the ability of the people in this town to recognize it when it does. They always do.

- Councilman Ron Kelley
February 28, 2018

GOOD FINANCIAL NEWS

As we all discovered last year, the city failed to receive \$220,000 in revenue from the state over a two-year period due to the late filing of the city's annual audit reports. Had it not been for a staff member giving former Interim City Manager Tilman Mears a copy of one of the nine letters from the state that the mayor received, we still might not know.

The letters all warned that money would be withheld if the reports were not filed by the deadline. Not only were they not filed by the deadline, the former finance director did not tell the Council

about the letters he received and never even responded to the state. This ensured that the money would be lost. I am pleased to say that will not happen again.

This time, even though it was not his job to do it, City Attorney Clayton Adkinson kept in regular contact with Kathryn DuBose and Debbie White from the Joint Legislative Auditing Committee and secured a deadline extension. Good thing he did.

City Finance Supervisor Morgan Hulion had been working with our audit firm, Saltmarsh, Cleveland and Gund, to provide them with all the information they needed to complete the

audit, but the auditors admitted they had not made our problem a priority and they did not meet the original deadline.

Thanks to the extension, the Council had time to review, respond and transmit the report. This meant no revenue was forfeited. Better still, thanks to the hard work and diligence of Carr, Riggs and Ingram, CPA, our 2017 accounts are already half reconciled, so completing that task will go quickly. We won't miss again.

Hats off to Clayton Adkinson, Morgan Hulion and the folks at CR&I for stepping up and getting the job done!

ALL SYSTEMS GO AT THE DEFUNIAK SPRINGS AIRPORT

Darryl Centanni, president and founder of Onvoi Global Services (OGS), recently gave the Council an update regarding their continuing activities at the city airport.

Centanni said they have actually met the requirements of the city lease agreement a full six months ahead of schedule. In September, OGS opened its Military Flight Training programs and have since trained 12 Air Force Special Operations Command airmen and four Ugandan students using a Turbo-prop Cessna C-208 aircraft.

In October, OGS leased an on-site corporate apartment to be used by visitors and staff.

In January, OGS opened its new

commercial flight school and have purchased four C-172 aircraft.

Centanni said they are currently averaging six students per month.

According to the city lease agreement, OGS had until April to open the ground school and May to start the flight school operations.

Mission accomplished with plenty of time to spare.

OGS operations have also been good for the economy already.

They hired 10 local employees and are recruiting for another 12 positions by the end of the year.

Maintenance for all five aircraft is being done on-site by Monarch Aviation, located at the city airport.

In fact, Monarch has had to hire

two additional aircraft mechanics to handle the workload. So far, Onvoi has purchased over \$50,000 worth of jet fuel and anticipate purchasing about \$164,000 worth of fuel in 2018.

Onvoi will be closing its corporate headquarters in Mississippi this year and relocating to DeFuniak Springs.

Centanni said they are very happy with their decision to locate their operations here. "OGS seeks to work with the community of DeFuniak Springs, to grow our business and positively impact the economic growth of our community," he said.

I am sure I speak for the Council when I say that we are thrilled to have OGS here and wish them great success for years to come!

The manner in which we endure that which must be endured, is more important than the thing which must be endured.

- Dean Acheson

STATE AGENCY COMING TO TOWN

At the February 26 meeting of the Council, a land use category and zoning change was approved for a parcel of land on U.S. 331 South, between the Acenria Insurance building and Aaron's Rentals.

The property was once a residence but since it is located on one of most heavily-travelled commercial corridors in town, it makes more sense from a zoning standpoint to rezone it from R1 Residential to C2 Commercial. The city Planning Board recom-

mended approval of the zoning/land use change, too.

The Council voted unanimously to approve the request, which was being handled by local realtor Gus Andrews on behalf of owners Jeff and Harriet Parrish. A required Public Hearing was held and the changes were adopted.

There are some wetlands in the back portion of the lot which will have to be reviewed and permitted by the state, as all wetlands

are handled. It is not known at this time whether a new structure will be placed there or the existing residence will be brought up to code.

What is known is that, once completed, the parcel will be home to a new field office of the Northwest Florida Water Management District, which manages conservation lands and protects vital water functions and natural systems, including our unique plant and wildlife communities.
WELCOME !

HUBBARD STREET DEMOLITION

When city departments work together, important things get done. Code Enforcement Director Dustin Beck brought a serious problem to the attention of the Council regarding an unsafe structure on Hubbard Street, near Walton Middle School. Repeated notices by Beck had gone unanswered. He requested direction. The Council voted to proceed with legal action to have it removed. City Attorney Clayton Adkinson managed to locate and speak with the out-of-state owner who agreed to have the structure removed and the lot cleared. Local demolition contractor Greg Chrishon was hired by the property owner to do the work. Chrishon tore down the wood-frame building and cleared the lot.

Thus, the neighborhood benefitted, further legal action was not required, the lot owner avoided fines and legal fees and the city was able to cross another unsafe structure off their list. Excellent work!

FOR DISTINGUISHED SERVICE

Most of us are aware of the recent homecoming celebration for Lt. Ewart Sconiers of DeFuniak Springs, whose remains were finally discovered and returned to American soil after 74 years. However, some of us may not be aware of the details of Lt. Sconiers' heroic story.

Lt. Ewart Sconiers was Bombardier on B-17 41-9089 'Johnny Reb', one of the 12 B-17s participating in the first heavy bomber raid of the 8th Air Force on August 17, 1942. The target was the shipyards of Rouen/Sotteville, France.

He also flew on 41-9103 "Dixie Demo" on the August 19 sortie, which planned to bomb the German airfield at Abbeville/Drucat, France. This mission was flown to occupy the Luftwaffe and to try to prevent them from opposing the invasion of Dieppe, France by over 5,000 allied troops.

On the third mission staged by the 8th AF on August 21, 1942 to shipyards in Rotterdam, The Netherlands, 41-9089 "Johnny Reb" lagged in the back of the formation and became easy prey for German Fw190s. A shell went through the right windscreen and the co-pilot, 2nd Lt Donald A. Walter, was killed instantly. The cockpit was wrecked, the top turret was blown out and pilot 2nd Lt Richard S. Starks was severely wounded, in the chest, an arm and legs, his hands badly burned.

Starks' mask had been knocked off and, lacking oxygen, barely conscious, Starks managed to call Sconiers on the radio. Coming to the cabin, Sconiers quickly sized up the situation. He put Starks' mask back on, pulled the body of the dead co-pilot

from the control seat and took his place.

Ironically, Sconiers had tried to become a pilot, but had washed out in primary training and had gone back to civilian life before joining again as a Bombardier. Now at the controls, the Bombardier noticed that two engines were losing power as he flew the stricken plane in sight of the coast of England. Struggling with the plane, trying to manage the gyrocompass and stabilize the air speed, advised by pilot Starks, Lt. Ewart Sconiers finally managed to bring the plane safely back, landing at Horsham St. Faith. The story made the headlines all over the U.S., as well as in the United Kingdom.

Both Lt. Starks and Lt. Sconiers were awarded the DSC (Distinguished Service Cross) in a ceremony at Polebrook airfield on September 17, 1942. A newsreel of the ceremony can be viewed at www.britishpathe.com/video/us-air-heroes-decorated.

Lt. Sconiers flew some other missions and was on the 97th Bomb Group's last mission before being transferred to North Africa, to raid the German submarine pens at Lorient/Kerovan, France. On October 21, 1942, Sconiers' plane, "Johnny Reb II" was one of three B-17s shot down that day. Sconiers bailed out over land and the plane crashed in the Bay of Biscay, with the rest of the crew being saved by a French fishing boat. All were made prisoner. There was no Missing Air Crew Report (MACR) for the plane's loss and Sconiers was listed as missing in action.

Lt. Ewart Sconiers was held at Stalag Luft 3, later made famous by the movie *The Great Escape*. Sconiers died in a hos-

pital in Lubin, Poland on January 23, 1944, the cause of his death was officially declared by the Germans as schizophrenia. There is some reason to doubt this. Sconiers had a severe ear infection that had not been treated properly, which most probably led to meningitis and the associated bizarre behavior.

Lt. Sconiers was buried in the municipal cemetery of Lubin, but the remains were later removed. Efforts to locate and retrieve his remains after the war have long been in vain. Still listed as Missing In Action (MIA) and the last Stalag Luft 3 POW not to have been brought home, new hopes were raised in August 2015, when a grave marked "Edouard Sconiers" was miraculously located at the French Military cemetery in Gdansk, Poland.

On the premise that these could be the remains of Lt. Ewart Sconiers, the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency took up the question. After meetings in Poland, and with the help of the Polish and French authorities, permission was granted in 2016 to have that grave opened and the remains there analyzed. A first examination made in a Polish laboratory proved positive enough to have a second test performed at the DPAA laboratory in Offutt Air Force Base, Nebraska. At long last, in the first days of April 2017, the DPAA officially announced to Lt. Ewart Sconiers' grateful family that his remains had been positively identified.

Lt. Sconiers was finally returned home and reburied next to his mother, Maude Sconiers at Southwide Baptist Church Cemetery in DeFuniak Springs on Jan. 28,

2018, the anniversary of his death.

The Distinguished Service Cross is the second highest military award that can be given to a member of the United States Army (the former United States Army Air Forces and the United States Air Force), for extreme gallantry and risk of life in actual combat with an armed enemy force. Actions that merit the Distinguished Service Cross must be of such a high degree that they are above all of those required for all other U.S. combat decorations except for the Medal of Honor.

By any measure, Lt. Ewart Sconiers is recognized as a genuine American Hero. His heroism and gallantry in combat and the triumphant return of his remains accomplished by his niece, Pamela Sconiers Whitelock, and a host of Promise Keepers from around the world, has served to remind all of us, young and old, what real heroism looks like. That lesson must be cherished and remembered.

For this reason, I have asked the Council to honor Lt. Ewart Sconiers of DeFuniak Springs from this day forward by renaming the DeFuniak Springs Municipal Airport in recognition of his courageous and distinguished service so that henceforth our airport may be known as Sconiers Field.

Please let all your Council members know how you feel about this issue by sending an email to City Clerk Loretta Laird at cityclerk@defuniaksprings.net or mailing a letter to her c/o DeFuniak Springs City Hall, 71 U.S. Hwy. 90 West, DeFuniak Springs, Florida 32435.