

**The Life of the First Commander  
of the Nevada Wing**

**Maj Edward J. Questa**



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The story of the Nevada Wing's founding and its first wing commander is one that traces its beginnings to a small agricultural community that no longer exists. It is the story of the first-generation son of Italian immigrants, a son imbued by his parents with an overwhelming desire to better himself, to rise above the station to which he was born. It is the story of the urgency of a peaceful, isolationist nation, trying to prepare itself to be dragged into the bloodletting that was raging in Europe and Asia and the confusion caused by the fog of sudden war.

The Civil Air Patrol (CAP) was fortunate that in the sudden onset of full-blown hostilities that a highly competent, yet quiet man, would be found to lead the Nevada Wing within days of the United States declaring war. That man was Edward John Questa.

### **Beginning and Early Years**

Edward John Questa, or EJ as he was normally called, was the typical American, a first-generation son of immigrants driven to succeed.

His father, Effurtino Questa (better known as Frank) was born in Italy in on January 14, 1863 and immigrated to the United States in 1882. His mother, Camelia Persolia, was born in Italy on July 24, 1873 and immigrated to the United States in 1889.

By the early 1890's, Frank and Camelia had met, married, and settled in Huffaker's Station, Nevada, a small agricultural community just south of the booming city of Reno. There, they ran their own sheep ranch, and Frank augmented the family's income by operating his own saloon.

Over the next decade, Mr. and Mrs. Questa would have four children: Ernest arrived on November 19, 1892; two and a half years later, on May 30, 1895, daughter Edith arrived; and on April 30, 1898 son EJ arrived. A fourth child died either at birth or sometime during childhood, an unpleasant but common occurrence during those days.

Growing up on a working ranch at the turn of the century was hard work but brought with it an opportunity for a lot of fun. There was the caring for the livestock, the annual shearing of the sheep, chickens to care for, barns and fences to keep repaired, errands to run for their dad's saloon, and school to attend. But there was also ample opportunity to ride horses, fish, camp, and hunt, particularly in the early 1900's. Marksmanship was a necessary skill in order to keep predators such as wolves and coyotes away from the livestock and helped provide meat for the table. Even in adulthood when he had long ago left the ranch behind him, EJ would still enjoy horseback riding, shooting, hunting, camping, and fishing. The small schoolhouse the Questa children attended is now a museum, the Historic Huffaker Schoolhouse, now located two miles west of its original site.

The eldest son, Ernest, graduated high school and as was common for immigrants, his parents encouraged him and his brother to do what it took to better themselves to get ahead in this land of opportunity. So, he enrolled in Heald Business College and began taking classes. On September 10, 1911 he was stricken with what was diagnosed as appendicitis. Antibiotics were not available then, so despite the best treatment available at the time, Ernest died of infection on September 15.

A second tragedy would befall the Questa family within a few years. Daughter Edith was diagnosed with serious mental illness and committed to an asylum. She would spend the remainder of her life in a mental institution.

When EJ finished high school, he took college courses which helped him secure his entry position in his chosen profession, banking. His first job in the banking industry was as an assistant teller with the Stockgrowers and Ranchers Bank in Reno.

The Questas had reason to be worried about the outlook for their surviving son in 1918. The Spanish Flu (otherwise known as the Great Influenza Pandemic of 1918-1920) had begun burning through the U.S.

population in early 1918, and the second wave, which was ultimately the most severe, began affecting the population around August. Uncharacteristically the greatest mortalities were among young, healthy adults. Mr. and Mrs. Questa, working at the ranch and outdoors, were not exposed to as many different people, whereas EJ, working in an enclosed office which saw dozens if not hundreds of different people pass through in a day, faced greater exposure and therefore risk of contracting the disease. Secondly, the United States had declared war on Germany in April 1917.

EJ Questa's WW I Draft Registration Card

On September 10, 1918, EJ registered for the draft and faced the real possibility of being called up and sent to fight in the trenches of Europe. His draft registration card notes EJ as being of medium height and build, with blue eyes and brown hair. On October 14, the *Reno Gazette Journal* published the draft list. EJ's number was fairly low in the order. Things were not looking too optimistic for the Questa family.

Luckily, the Questa family was spared from the Spanish Flu, and the Armistice was signed on November 1, 1918, without EJ being called up to serve in the Great War.

By 1920, EJ's banking career was on the move. Keenly aware that his profession would require more from him than just showing up for work, he joined Toastmasters and the Reno Chamber of Commerce to make the necessary connections he would need to progress in his career.

EJ was lured away from Reno to San Francisco by the Bank of Italy (forerunner of the Bank of America), and on January 12, 1926 was promoted to assistant cashier.

At the time, the position of cashier was a middle-management position, above that of a teller, equivalent to today's comptroller. Young EJ was proving himself, rapidly rising within the banking profession. By 1930, the Bank of Italy had been renamed the Bank of America, and he had been promoted to a branch manager.

In 1928 A.P Giannini, founder of the Bank of Italy/Bank of America, in his effort to fulfill his vision of a nationwide bank, created the Transamerica Corporation, and transferred his banks to the corporation. EJ, now working for Transamerica Corporation, was transferred back to Reno on June 15, 1932, when he was appointed as their District Manager for Nevada. His star was rising and, in line with his duties as a banking executive, EJ began to make the necessary social rounds, his presence at society affairs being reported in the society columns.

EJ took up golf, a passion he regularly enjoyed up to the time of his death, and his participation in golf competitions was also regularly reported in the Reno newspapers.

At the time he was living at the El Cortez Hotel, a residency hotel that had been built in 1931 to cash-in on Nevada's lucrative divorce trade when Nevada reduced the residency requirements from 3 months to 6 weeks and an influx of temporary residents was expected. It might not have been a deliberate consideration, but EJ now had a 'target rich environment' for dates to accompany him to his social engagements. The El Cortez, built in the Art Deco style, at six stories was the tallest building in Reno when it opened and was considered quite opulent at the time. It still stands, and in 1984 was placed on the National Register of Historic Places.

On August 1, 1934, EJ began his association with the First National Bank. As was common for the period, he worked in a variety of positions at the main office with increasing responsibilities at the same location, and on January 13, 1938 the Board of Directors rewarded EJ by promoting him to Vice President.

At some point, EJ learned to fly, and would do his flying primarily out of the Reno Sky Ranch airport which had opened in the 1930's a few miles northeast of Reno. The first two Reno Air Races would come to be held at the airport until they were moved their current venue of Reno-Stead Airport. Reno Sky Ranch is now long gone and the site of a housing development like so many other small airfields of the time.

A characteristic that would continually dominate EJ's free time was his commitment to civic interests and activities. Again, he became a member of the Reno Chamber of Commerce, served as a trustee of the Washoe Medical Center, sponsored musical concerts, and was the treasurer for the Reno Rodeo Association.

### **A \$10 Bet**

He may have been a middle-aged banker, but he was not without a sense of daring. In 1941, when the main attraction for the opening of a small airport outside of Reno did not show up, the airport owner was stuck with a crowd of 3,000 spectators expecting a show. For some reason, the desperate owner approached EJ and bet \$10 that EJ would not parachute out of an airplane. Having received some verbal instructions on parachuting (but never any practice) EJ was confident on his ability to do it, so he shook hands on the wager. Strapping on a 'chute, climbed aboard a Fairchild airplane, and they took off, climbing to 3,000 feet. The first pass over the field, EJ was sitting in the doorway and gave himself a shove but did not move – his hands would not let go of the aircraft. They swung around for a second pass – there were 3,000 spectators below and they wanted a show -- EJ was determined to give it to them. The second time was the charm, and out he went. However, he was tumbling as he fell, and the expectant crowd below were holding their breath – when would he pop his 'chute? He fell about 1500 feet before he was right-side up again, pulled the ring, and his canopy unfurled to the relief of the crowd below. The crowd got quite a show and, ever the banker, EJ collected his \$10. When asked if he was worried that he would forget where the pull ring was while he was falling, EJ replied “No sir. You remember that very well! In fact, if you are going to parachute, I would say give it no thought. You will remember. Oh yes, absolutely, that you will remember!”

### **Founding of the Nevada Wing**

Gill Robb Wilson, described in Frank Blazich's recent book on the Civil Air Patrol as the 'intellectual founder' of the organization, started the ball rolling on the creation of the Civil Air Patrol in 1939. He realized that aviation in the United States would be severely curtailed, if not outright banned, within the country should it be dragged into the wars that were being fought on the sides of the oceans that flanked the U.S. mainland. He sought out other similarly minded individuals and they studied what could be done to utilize civilian general aviation as a very useful tool to support whatever national effort for the upcoming involvement in the two-ocean war would look like. By 1941 some individual states were attempting to do the same within their own borders, but Wilson, et al, were thinking along the lines of a national organization.

They studied with great interest the individual state aviation plans. In Ohio, the Civilian Air Reserve (CAR) had been formed in 1939, and by 1941 other CAR units had been formed in Colorado, Connecticut, Florida, Maine, Massachusetts, New York, and Pennsylvania. These groups, with a military organizational structure, would serve their individual states and remain distant from the military. It was clear that civilian pilots wanted to contribute their skills and their machines to a worthy cause.

The Federal government also realized that organizing the civilian side of the house was a necessary priority, and President Roosevelt began creating several agencies and offices to study what was needed to prepare the civilian population for war: The Office of Emergency Management, Council on National Defense, National Defense Advisory Commission, and others, came into existence.

In September 1940, Roosevelt called up the National Guard. States that were counting on being able to use the Guard's aviation units now found themselves without their own air forces.

Although the concept of the CAR was catching on and was the front runner for what the national organization would be, it was New Jersey's Civil Air Defense Service (CADS), with its Civil Air Guard (CAG), that really fit the bill (It didn't hurt that Wilson was assisting in its creation) It stressed civilian cooperation with the military. That was the clincher as far as Wilson and his group were concerned.

On May 20, 1941, President Roosevelt created another agency, the Office of Civilian Defense (OCD), and named New York's Mayor, Fiorello LaGuardia, as its director. LaGuardia himself was a former Great War bomber pilot. LaGuardia created a committee to advise him on aviation matters, and appointed Wilson as one of its members. Wilson now had the ear of the head of the OCD.

In early July, Wilson and LaGuardia sent their plan to Washington for consideration. Because it was an aviation matter, the plan was delivered to the Army's aviation office. The sign on the office door read "Major General Henry H. Arnold, Commander, U.S. Army Air Forces". General Arnold was receptive to the plan and began detailing officers to work on making the plan a reality. The CADS plan was considered superior, more fleshed out and with a better chance of success. General Arnold would have several discussions with LaGuardia and Wilson, and the staff he had assigned, as well as other civilians in related agencies over the next months. By September they had refined the program and decided to call it the Civil Air Patrol.

Although most of the political and civic leaders of the day knew that America's involvement in the war was imminent, nobody knew exactly when, or where, the real war for the U.S. would start. The U.S. was already being shot at by Japan and Germany. In December 1937, the gunboat U.S.S. *Panay*, PR-5, and four small Standard American oil tankers were sunk on the Yangtze River in China by Japanese aircraft, supposedly a case of misidentification. In the Atlantic, two American destroyers that were escorting British convoys were torpedoed; on October 17, 1941, the U.S.S. *Kearney*, DD-432, was torpedoed and severely damaged near Iceland, and two weeks later, on October 31, the U.S.S. *Reuben James*, DD-245, was torpedoed and sunk, also near Iceland. The shooting had already started.

On December 1, 1941, LaGuardia signed a memo that was apparently intended to get the pamphlet about CAP to the GPO. Later that week, he was informed that General Curry's name had never made it the GPO; the presses were still waiting for the name so they could start printing the CAP pamphlet and CAP enlistment forms. The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor caught everyone – the U.S. government, the military, the OCD, and the fledgling National Headquarters staff - by surprise. Nobody was truly ready. On December 8, LaGuardia signed OCD Administration Order No. 9, formally creating the Civil Air Patrol and naming General Curry to the position of National Commander of the Civil Air Patrol. The presses at the GPO finally started rolling.

With archives at the Nevada State Capitol and the University of Nevada, Reno, unavailable right now due to the current COVID-19 pandemic, the exact date when Nevada Governor Edward Carville received the message about his needing to appoint a wing commander, as well as any memos that may have been written on the topic (such as who was considered or recommended), are not currently known. What can be surmised is that it was sometime between November 28 and December 11.

Buried on page 20 of the December 11 edition of the *Reno Gazette Journal* was a two-sentence announcement of the appointment that day by Gov. Carville of E.J. Questa as "the director of the civilian

aeronautics organization for Nevada” and that EJ would head to Washington D.C. on Saturday for a conference.

Immediately upon returning from the three-day conference, EJ spoke to reporters. On December 18 he met with the press and explained the organization’s purpose and what its organizational structure would be. Still buried on page 20, but with its own headline, for the first time a Nevada newspaper called the new organization by its correct name: “Civil Air Patrol To Be Organized Here”.

Upon returning from the conference, EJ hit the ground running. He began by speaking with many of the contacts he had developed over the years -- businessmen, educators, airport owners, pilots, local ranchers, law enforcement, forestry service and government leaders -- explained what this new organization was about, and convinced many of them to join, assigning several to key staff positions on his nascent wing staff.

EJ had his work cut out for him – trying to form a working state organization that had no equipment, no well-defined mission, and only him as a member – and trying to function as a bank vice president to boot. His office at 206 North Virginia Street would function as the Nevada Wing Headquarters until January 1942, when the headquarters moved across the street to 130 North Virginia Street and into the office of one of his wing staff members.

The folks that would make up National Headquarters had spent the months prior to December 1 doing their homework, compiling a vast number of statistics: populations of states (the 1940 census having just been completed), the number of airports within each state, the number of pilots within each state according to the Civil Aeronautics Administration (CAA), the number of schools, especially high schools, and so on. By December 1941, they had developed a basic plan with goals for each wing. Nevada, with its population of 110,000, had the lowest population of any of the 48 states (Wyoming, the second least populated state, had more than twice the population of Nevada), so the Nevada Wing was expected to have the fewest numbers of members (smaller than Rhode Island!) if things were to go to plan.

Meeting with his key staff, EJ and the staff came to realize that, in all likelihood, the bulk of their air missions would be focused on search and rescue. With Army Air Force training taking place either directly over, or passing through, the airspace over Nevada, there would be a number of crashes, either due to pilot inexperience, bad weather, or mechanical failure (military piston aircraft engines of the time, although quite good for the era, were not as reliable as the engines that power the aircraft of today – aircraft engine technology, as well as that of radio navigation technology, has come a long way).

But it would not be enough to simply locate a downed aircraft by air. If a pilot and/or crew had survived the crash, most probably it would be necessary to get to them with medical aid and bring them out. Some sort of ground units would also be required. Helicopters were still undergoing development at the time, and therefore unavailable.

Most of Nevada was quite barren, more so than today. A small network of paved roads existed, with most other roads being dirt and gravel, with almost all of them located on ranchland. An ambulance could possibly make it to the dirt road nearest a crash site, but even then, most of the crash sites would still be miles away. So, in addition to aviation units, Nevada Wing formed a mechanized unit, the *Washoe Mechanized Unit*\* (by the fall of 1942 it would be complete with a mobile hospital).

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\* *The Reno Mechanized Unit was disbanded after the war and not to be confused with the Washoe Jeep Squadron that was founded about December 1950.*



Also formed within Nevada Wing was the only mounted unit ever formed within CAP. Working together, the air units would find the objective of the search, communicate the position of the target to the ground units by either radio (if the aircraft had one) or message drop, and the ground units would converge on the crash site. The mechanized units would get as close as possible, and the mounted unit would get to the crash, render first aid, and bring the victim(s) to the waiting CAP ambulance(s), either on horseback or on a stretcher carried between two horses.

The first unit to be stood up was the Squadron 961-1 (Air). It was quickly followed by the second unit, Squadron 962-1 (Mounted). The third unit quickly followed, Squadron 963-1 (Mechanized). During the war, only three units were designated squadrons within Nevada Wing, all of them in Reno. The other units raised further away from Reno were designated as flights. This was probably since Reno was the population center of the state, and therefore, could raise larger units more easily. Las Vegas would not overtake Reno in terms of population until after the war.

EJ found that getting airport operators and pilots to work with the Nevada Wing was not as hard as one would have thought. Not only were airport operators filled with patriotism, but for the smaller airport operators there were financial considerations. Given that all flying within 100 miles of all coasts was now prohibited and general aviation even within the interior of the U.S was all but eliminated, if an airport that was not already servicing commercial air flights wanted to survive, and if Nevada pilots wanted to still fly, EJ's Nevada Wing was the only game in town.

EJ began hitting the speaking circuit talking up CAP and the Nevada Wing wherever he went -- Kiwanis Club meetings, business clubs, professional organizations, pilot associations and clubs, ladies garden clubs -- none were immune to his efforts.

He found himself not only going to meetings to try and advance CAP and the Nevada Wing, but in one instance he worked to get members of a Reno squadron exempted from a local ordinance. In Reno, a zoning ordinance made it illegal to keep livestock in the backyard of a residence. This posed a problem for the equestrian members of Squadron 962-1 (Mounted). Most of them boarded their horses outside the city on farms and small ranches. They argued that valuable time was wasted in driving to wherever their mounts were stabled to get them into trailers and moved to the mission location. Lives could possibly be saved if they could load their mounts into the trailers at their homes, and head directly to the search area from there. EJ, Nevada Wing, and Squadron 962-1 (Mounted) prevailed, and on June 20 the Reno City Council granted members of the mounted unit an exemption to the no-livestock ordinance that remained in force for the duration.

On January 7, 1942, National Headquarters belatedly published General Order No. 1 which formally appointed all 48 wing commanders. As there were only 48 states, only 48 wing commanders were appointed. It would not be until after the war that the remaining 4 wings -- Alaska, Hawaii, Puerto Rico,

and the National Capitol Wings -- would be added to the organization. EJ was among those listed, but without grade.

Unlike today's grade structure, once the wear of military was authorized, grade then was determined by the duties one was assigned. Wing commanders, unless they had held a higher grade in the military prior to joining CAP, were Majors. Squadron commanders were 1<sup>st</sup> Lieutenants. Pilots, observers, mechanics, radio operators and others were given enlisted grade. For most of EJ's CAP career, Nevada's first wing commander served without grade.

By the end of January 1942, EJ commanded a wing of 70 members. It may not sound like a lot, but given Nevada's population size of only 110,000, his percentage of Nevadans as members was better than those of all the larger states such as California, New York, and Texas. By March 10, the membership of Nevada Wing had more than doubled to 161, placing Nevada Wing at the 43<sup>rd</sup> largest wing in terms of overall membership. With 68.5% of the civilian pilots of Nevada enlisted into CAP, Nevada Wing placed at the number two spot in terms of pilot percentages, earning the wing a mention in that month's *CAP Bulletin* that made the rounds of the OCD.

At the end of January, EJ authorized a press release which was carried by the papers. In it he announced that it would be necessary to have five ground support personnel for every pilot. Meetings would be held once a week, and all members were required to wear CAP uniforms and to exercise military courtesies while on duty (this included meetings and training). Although National Headquarters was still trying to formulate what the mission(s) would be, EJ's press release let the public know just what the Nevada Wing would be doing: searching for lost fliers and aircraft, patrolling remote areas and roads, evacuation support, and transporting Army and OCD personnel and material when needed. This last item would be a mission the CAP soon created the Courier Service to handle this last mission and the Nevada Wing would continue to support.

## Range Command Recruits Sought

Enlistments in the range command of the civil air patrol are now being accepted. Wing Commander E. J. Questa announced yesterday, with Nevadans living in sparsely populated areas on ranches or in mining districts urged to apply.

Enlistment is much like the army and a careful check of each applicant is made. Upon acceptance, an enlistment oath is administered. The new recruit, however, is required to take a training course, which for the range command will include study in first aid, crash procedure in ground rescue work, signaling and plane identification.

The range command, when completed, Questa said, will form a state-wide network of ground observers, rescue crews and guides who will work with units flying overhead in rough country. Most sheriff's offices are cooperating.

By March, not only were there three squadrons in Reno, but flights were also popping up in other locations. The papers announced the founding of a flight in Winnemucca on the 10<sup>th</sup>, while groups in other locales were considering forming a flight.

Nevada Wing Headquarters, realizing that most of the operations would be taking place on private ranches, needed to establish some sort of working arrangement with the ranchers. So, in May, EJ announced the formation of the 'Range Command' and appealed to the farmers, ranchers, ranchers, and residents in mining districts in the remote areas to apply. Their knowledge of the surrounding areas would be invaluable to the mission of the Nevada Wing.

Additionally, it would put CAP rescue assets closer to where they would be needed, instead of having to either fly or drive from Reno, where most members and assets were located. Soon, flights were popping up in communities such as Battle Mountain, Carson City, Elko, Ely, Garnerville, Hawthorne, Las Vegas, Yerington, and others.

While EJ was proving immensely successful at recruiting members and starting up units, he was plagued by the same problem faced by every CAP commander since the beginning -- that of retention of members. But his problem came from a different circumstance than current commanders have. He was not losing members because of boredom or dissatisfaction with the program. His problem was that many, if not most, of the young men who were not classified as

exempt from military service due to being employed in a critical capacity, were being called up at some point after enlisting with CAP (all were over 18 years of age, and the Cadet Program, had not yet been authorized). CAP from the beginning had been created with the understanding that membership did not confer exemption from military service. Some units were losing members almost as fast as they were joining! In some cases, he was losing members to the Coastal Patrol activity as early as January 1942. Two of the members he 'lost' were among those later awarded the Air Medal for their Coastal Patrol service: 1<sup>st</sup> Lts, K.H. Lloyd (9-6-278) and W.A. Rowse (9-6-040), both of whom served at Coastal Patrol Base 12 in Brownsville, TX.

On July 12, the Nevada Wing held what was probably their very first practice mission, which would come to be called a SAREX (Search And Rescue Exercise). The scenario was a crashed bomber with a group of saboteurs closing in to capture a special bombsight. The search target was located and the 'saboteurs' captured. At the end of the effort, EJ conducted a review of the mounted unit. The effort was covered by the press, both print and film. In the paper the following day the press dubbed the activity "The Battle of Hunter Creek".

A week later, a photo was taken of (the now) Maj. Questa for distribution to the wire services. It is the only photo known at this time of him as wing commander. In the photo, he is shown in his role as a bank vice president, dressed in a two-piece suit, with a handkerchief in his left breast pocket, standing in the doorway to his bank's vault examining some sort of document. The man is of slender build, thin nosed and as typical for a 43-year-old man, with a receding hairline, his dark hair parted on the right.

### Active Duty

## Edward J. Questa Given Commission



EDWARD J. QUESTA

*Nevada State Journal, May 21, 1942*

In September 1942 Maj. Questa received notice that he was being called up for duty. Maj. Questa was commissioned a Lieutenant Commander in the US Naval Reserve (USNR) on September 9; he was still wearing gold oak leaves, but now he was getting paid for his service -- however not as much as a bank vice president! Presumably because of his pilot's license and his age (44) and banking background, his officer classification was "A-VS", which meant he was a USNR aviation officer qualified for specialist duties.

Maj. Questa submitted his resignation as Nevada Wing commander effective September 15 and spent the next four weeks getting his and the bank's affairs in order as well as making provisions for the care of his mother.

His orders had him reporting to Naval Air Station (NAS) Quonset, RI for basic training (he missed by a couple of months being in the same class with a future U.S. President, Richard M. Nixon). He resigned from CAP on October 10, the day after the founding of the CAP Cadet Program, and departed Reno on Wednesday, October 14. His departure was subject to front page coverage in the Reno newspaper, compete with the second known newspaper photo of him, this time wearing the uniform of a USNR Lt. Cmdr. Two columns over, the paper also ran an article announcing a CAP recruiting night in Reno no less. From NAS Quonset his next duty station was Naval Auxiliary Air Station (NAAS) Kingsville, TX where he was assigned duties as Executive Officer.

NAAS Kingsville was an auxiliary field for nearby Naval Air Station (NAS) Corpus Christi. There, 800 instructors were providing

intermediate flight training to naval aviators in SNJ, SNV, SNB, OS2U, PBY and N3N aircraft. They were graduating 600 pilots a month, and by 1944 they were the largest naval aviation training facility in the world. By the end of the war, over 35,000 naval aviators had earned their gold wings there. After graduating, the pilots would go on to their advanced training, becoming either fighter, dive bomber, torpedo, or cargo pilots. One pilot they graduated in 1943 went on to become a torpedo-bomber pilot and on to government service, culminating as another U.S. President, George H.W. Bush.

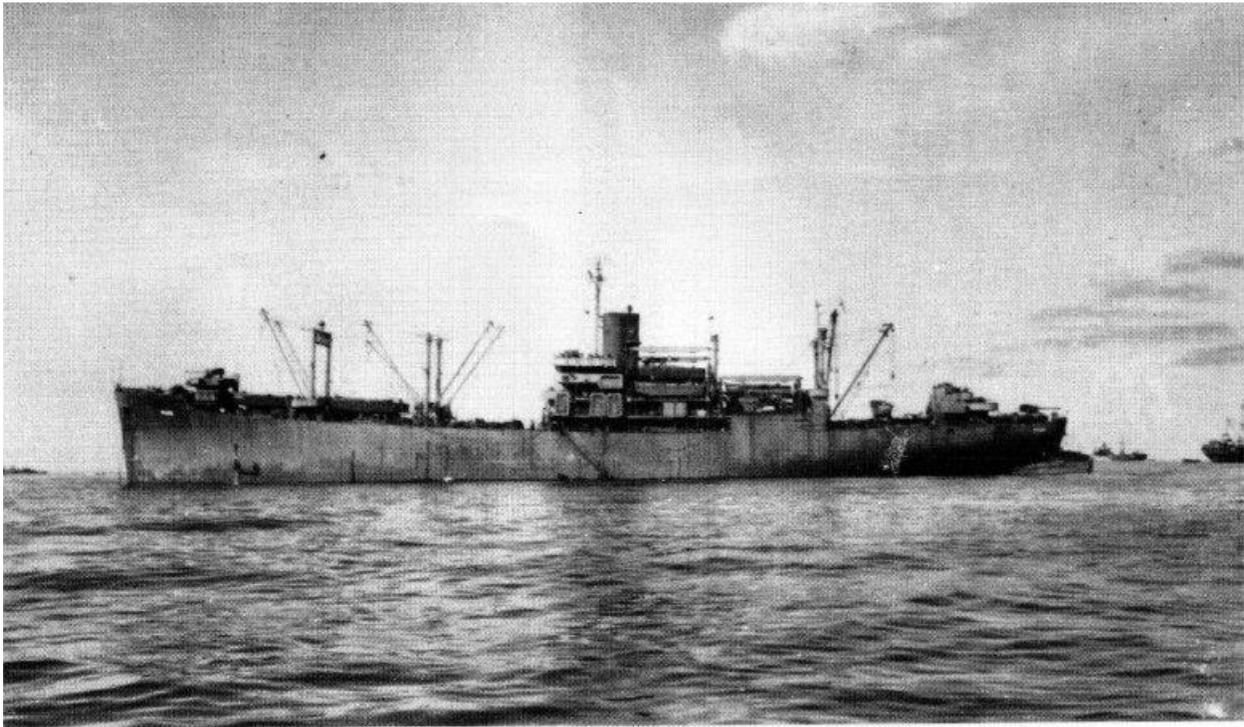
QUESTA—In Reno, September 13, 1943, Camelia Questa; mother of Lieut. Cmdr. E. J. Questa of the United States naval reserve; sister of Mrs. Letty Zolezzi and John Prosole of Reno; a native of Italy; aged 71 years.

Funeral services will be held at 11 a. m. Wednesday at St. Thomas Aquinas cathedral when a high requiem mass will be celebrated by the Rev. Luigi Roteglia. Interment, St. Thomas cemetery. Recitation of the rosary at 8:15 p. m. Tuesday at the O'Brien-Rogers chapel.

On September 13, 1943, with her son overseas serving his country, Mrs. Questa underwent exploratory surgery, developed bronchial pneumonia, and passed away.

In September 1944, the Navy decided to reorganize its classification system of officers, and now Lt. Cmdr. Questa went from being classified as an “A-VS” to a “(D)L”, which meant “Limited General Service, Deck Duties”. Not that it changed his duties any, but after two years of watching younger men prepare to go off to battle, it was beginning to eat at him, and it was time for a further change.

During times of war, there are some men who are perfectly content to sit out the hazards with a safe, comfy billet in the U.S. There are others that desire to see the action, or to test their mettle in the face of danger, or just feel that doing their duty requires them to go into harm’s way. Whatever the case, this 46-year-old Lt. Cmdr., who was too old to fly for the Navy, no longer having any dependents at home, and could otherwise sit out the war in a safe assignment in Texas, wanted to be closer to the action, so he applied for a transfer to an area he already knew, the Pacific.



U.S.S. Custer, APA-40 1

Lt. Cmdr. Questa’s request for transfer was granted, and on February 13, 1945 he reported aboard the U.S.S. *Custer*, APA-40 at Terraguna, Philippine Islands. By the time Lt. Cmdr. Questa reported aboard, the *Custer* and her sister ships were veterans of several invasions: Kwajalein, Eniwetok, Saipan, Guam, Leyte, had just completed the Lingayen invasion and were engaged in mopping up the area.

The *Custer* was a *Bayfield* class attack transport, and the flagship of CTD-39 (Commander, Transport Division 39). Although the *Custer* was 492 feet long and displaced 8,100 tons and carried two 5"/38 caliber guns, four 40 mm and 18 20 mm antiaircraft guns, her true weapons were the nineteen small landing craft she and her sister ships carried to land the 1200 heavily armed troops and 4700 tons of combat cargo each ship contained within their hulls: ammunition, guns, tanks, explosives, food, radios, medical equipment, tents, jeeps, bulldozers, etc. Attack transports had one purpose: to get troops to an enemy held beachhead, to take it, and with the assistance of attack cargo ships loaded with more supplies, to keep it.

Lt. Cmdr. Questa was detailed to the staff of CTD-39, along with 42 other officers and 108 enlisted men. Their job was to help plan the next invasion, Operation Iceberg -- that of Okinawa. His planning skills quickly got him named the chief of transport for the landings.

In mid-March the *Custer* began taking on cargo and troops. The *Custer* weighed anchor March 27 and formed up with the rest of Task Force 55 force for Operation Iceberg. This would be the largest amphibious invasion in the Pacific – 1,300 ships in all. The *Custer* and the other attack transports and tank landing ships (LSTs) were going to put 183,000 troops ashore and wrest the first piece of the Japanese homeland from 76,000 Japanese troops and 40,000 Okinawan draftees, both of which were determined and fanatical, expected to fight hard and make the U.S. pay dearly for the island. The expectations were right – this operation was the bloodiest of the war, with 20,000 U.S. troops killed, about 110,000 Japanese and Okinawan defenders killed, and another 40,000 – 150,000 civilians dead or missing.

L-Day for the Okinawa invasion was April 1, and CTD-39 was assigned to Task Group 55.1, which was part of the Southern Attack Group. Lt. Cmdr. Questa orchestrated his portion of the invasion flawlessly, his planning went off without a hitch. The *Custer* and three other attack transports and two attack cargo ships of their division began landing men and combat cargo on Hagushi beach. H-Hour was 0830, and most of the landing craft hit the beach on time. The landings were relatively unopposed, with the occasional sniper the exception. Some Japanese aircraft managed to make it to the ships, and a few kamikazes found their mark.

By nightfall over 60,000 U.S. troops were ashore, the beachhead was 15,000 yards wide and in places 5,000 yards deep. Almost no casualties had been sustained. The real fighting would not start until April 4.

The *Custer* continued to empty her holds, landing troops, supplies, and equipment, and when the serious fighting started, landing craft began returning from the beaches carrying the wounded and the dying, first to the waiting hospital ships, and when they were full, to the anchored transports. During this time, the anchored ships were under Japanese air attack, frequently by kamikazes. To understand what these attacks were like for Lt. Cmdr. Questa and the men on the transports, take in the 1956 movie “Away All Boats” (for the eagle-eyed, try spotting Clint Eastwood in one of his earliest film roles!)

On April 6 the *Custer*, now filled with wounded, departed Okinawa, bound for Pearl Harbor. Once at Pearl and her cargo of wounded troops offloaded to the waiting ambulances, the *Custer* headed stateside for a needed overhaul. It was her first time in American waters since December 1943.

During this period stateside, Lt. Cmdr. Questa was probably given some leave and returned to Reno to visit his friends and perhaps his sister. Once his leave was over, he would have reported back to his ship for refresher training, as well as being briefed on the initial plans for Operation Downfall, the planned invasion of Japan. Operation Downfall, if executed, would be the largest invasion in history and was so complex that it was divided into two parts: Operation Olympic would come first, and in late 1945 would land troops in the southern part of Japan. Operation Coronet would take place in early 1946 and would land troops in northern Japan. Additionally, in July 1945, EJ traded the gold oak leaf and two and a half stripes of a Lt. Cmdr. for the silver oak leaf and three full stripes of a full Commander.

Her overhaul complete, the *Custer* departed San Diego in company with several other ships on August 5 for Pearl Harbor. The bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki which took place while the *Custer* was enroute changed everything. Arriving at Pearl soon after the Nagasaki bombing, the *Custer* anchored and Cmdr. Questa and the crew, like everyone else, waited to see what the Japanese would do. They were rewarded on August 14, when the Japanese capitulated and accepted the unconditional terms of surrender. On September 2, the "Instrument of Surrender" was signed aboard the U.S.S. *Missouri*.

According to the *Dictionary of American Fighting Ships*, at some point after the surrender of Japan, the *Custer* "embarked troops at Pearl Harbor for the occupation of Japan, landing them. She sailed to transport troops from Manila to Sasebo, then embarked homeward bound servicemen for San Pedro, Calif., arriving 21 November".

With no need to plan for Operations Olympic and Coronet, CTD-39 was quickly disbanded.

## **Post War**

Cmdr. Questa, having served his country admirably, was released from military service as part of the massive demobilization effort the U.S. conducted at the end of the war, and by the end of 1945 was a civilian again.

After a short period of rest, he returned to his old job of Vice President of the First National Bank on January 1, 1946. Two years later, in October 1948, L.M. Giannini, now president of the Bank of America, offered their former clerk and bank manager a job as Vice President of Bank of America as Far East Representative. EJ accepted, and soon found himself back in the Philippines, although this time not living aboard the cramped, hot confines of an attack transport, but a more palatial home in Manila.

His duties took him to a variety of exotic places, many of which were struggling to rebuild after the devastation of the fighting and bombing of the war. He made frequent visits to Tokyo, Shanghai, New Delhi, Karachi, and other cities of the Orient. Trying to work with the Chinese during his tour of assignment was particularly trying: the Chinese Civil War, although in its final stages, was still being fought, and campaigns and combat actions were many. Chiang Kai-shek and Mao Zedong were still duking it out on the Chinese mainland. And the French were having problems reestablishing their control in one of their pre-war colonies, a place called Vietnam.

In March 1952, EJ was offered the job of President of the First National Bank. He left the Bank of America and Manila behind and returned to his beloved Reno and Nevada. Under his leadership, the First National Bank expanded and by January 1962 had 24 offices scattered throughout Nevada with 914 people in its employ handling 193,000 accounts, and transacting \$335 million in business each year, a large sum for those days.

But his efforts and energies were not limited to the banking profession. Among his civic interests and activities, he was a member of the Reno Chamber of Commerce, served on the education committee of the Chamber of Commerce of the United States, was the Nevada treasurer of the National Council on Crime and Delinquency, served as a trustee of the Washoe Medical Center and the Lake Tahoe Area Council, continued his involvement with the Reno Rodeo Association, and was a member of the Atomic Energy Utilization Committee, and the Citizen's Advisory Committee of the University of Nevada's College of Business Administration.

And yet despite all these commitments, he still had time to play golf, hunt, shoot trap, and attend the various recreational and social functions befitting a bank president. He even found the time to visit his relatives in the old country, making several trips to Italy during the 1950's and early 1960's. Yep, he was a busy man!

But all was not joy. On November October 28, 1958, his last remaining sibling, Edith, passed away, having spent the past forty or so years living in mental hospitals. He was now alone.

Perhaps because of his beginnings working on his father's sheep ranch, EJ had more than a perfunctory interest in the activities of youth that were involved in agriculture and livestock. He became involved with the Future Farmers of America as well as the 4-H, which in 1960 recognized him for his meritorious contributions to their agricultural-livestock program.

He also took an interest in helping young people to get started in gaining business experience, and so he helped start the Junior Achievement program in high schools throughout Nevada. His involvement was such that he became a national director of Junior Achievement, as well as for the Future Farmers of America.

EJ's aid and service to education in banking and finance was recognized in 1959 when the University of Nevada bestowed an honorary degree upon him.

Because of his Italian descent, he was asked to serve as the vice-consul for Nevada by the Italian Embassy. His efforts on behalf of the embassy were such that in May 1961 the Consul-General of Italy in San Francisco conferred upon him the Cross of the Order for Merit of the Republic of Italy, the highest order that could be bestowed upon a non-citizen of Italy. Mr. Questa was the first Nevadan so honored.

Perhaps one of EJ's greatest achievements for Nevada was playing an instrumental role in getting Squaw Valley selected as the site for the 1960 Winter Olympics. He served as Chairman of the Nevada Olympic Committee, and as such worked with renown skier Wayne Poulsen, himself a graduate of the University of Nevada. Together, they were successful in snatching the ski-ski competition from the front running contender for the games, Innsbruck, Austria, during the planning stages in 1955. The 1960 Winter Games at Squaw Valley were the first televised in history and allowed millions of people to watch the games in real-time for the first time. U.S skiers saw that world class skiing was not just in Europe but could be found at home in the Tahoe Basin. Questa would also serve as a director of the 8<sup>th</sup> International Winter Olympics Committee.

### **Final Flight**

By early 1962 a well-deserved vacation was in order. At the end of January, EJ and a close friend of his, Col. Newton "Newt" Crumley, climbed into Crumley's maroon and white executive twin engine Aero Commander and flew from Reno to Palm Springs for two weeks of relaxation and to play in a golf tournament.



*Col. Newton Crumley*

Col. Crumley was himself a former Nevada Wing commander. Born in Tonopah, Newton "Newt" Crumley had grown up in Reno, graduating from Reno High School and then from the University of Nevada. Crumley joined the Army Air Corps, was commissioned a 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt., and during his first tour of duty was one of the pilots to fly the air mail when the U.S. Government had to take that operation over.

After leaving the Air Corps, Crumley became involved in the hotel industry with his father, first operating the Commercial Hotel, and then adding the Ranchinn to their holdings. Col. Crumley was single handedly instrumental in changing the Nevada hotel and gaming industry.

Previously, nonresidents of Nevada would often travel to Nevada just for the chance to "pay their Nevada taxes". Col. Crumley hit on the idea to bring big name acts to his hotel to attract more guests and give his hotel a leg up on his competitors. Famous names of the day such as Tommy Dorsey, Chico Marx, Tex Ritter, Ted Lewis, Sophie Tucker, Paul Whitman, and many other well-known entertainers of the time

played at Newt's Commercial Hotel. Hence, today's Nevada entertainment industry is the creation of Col. "Newt" Crumley.

Recalled to active duty in July 1941, Col Crumley commanded Minter Air Force Base (AFB), CA. In January 1946 Col. Crumley again left active duty, transferred to the Air Force Reserves, and was assigned as the deputy wing commander for the 93<sup>rd</sup> Bomb Wing at Castle AFB, CA, and additionally worked on several other assignments for General Curtis LeMay. At the same time Col. Crumley and his wife moved to Elko to be closer to their hotel and ranching businesses. In 1950 he was named to the Board of Regents of the University of Nevada.

On November 13, 1953 Col. Crumley took command of the Nevada Wing. His decision to move wing headquarters to Elko was not surprising since it was where he resided and was covered by the Nevada press. In June 1954 he decided to run for the Nevada Senate and resigned as wing commander (at the time National regulations prohibited wing commanders from holding elected public office). After serving as a state senator, he returned to serving on the board of regents of the University of Nevada and moved back to Reno in 1958.

Although he had sold his hotel businesses in 1955 after his father passed away, it seems he still had an interest in being a hotelier. In 1957 he formed an investment group that purchased the newly built Holiday Hotel in Reno. He was named the operating head of the hotel, and by 1961 was the majority owner. Like EJ, he was involved in a wide variety of community endeavors and was a member of several of the same organizations as well.

Col. Crumley probably returned to Reno on or about February 2, as the following day, February 3 was his 51<sup>st</sup> birthday, as well as to take care of some hotel business. He then flew back to Palm Springs on either February 9th or the morning of February 10th to pick up EJ.

Saturday February 10 would be a day of joy and tragedy. Half a world away, on the Glienicke Bridge in Berlin, U-2 pilot Francis Gary Powers was traded for Soviet KGB Col. William Fisher in a well-publicized spy swap between the United States and the Soviet Union, bringing an end to one of the Cold War's most dramatic incidents. The world's attention would be focused on this event for the next couple of weeks, and only Nevada would care about what would transpire within their state in the next few hours.



*The Desert Sun, February 10, 1962*

That morning, the Palm Springs newspaper, *The Desert Sun*, headline screamed "Powers In Spy Trade – U2 Pilot Freed In Trade for Soviet Flyer". However, the banner at the top of the paper also ominously warned, "New Storm On Way To Rain Soaked Coast – Springs Driest Section Through Southern State". That same morning the *Los Angeles Times* noted that snow was being reported as low as 5,000 feet. Palm Springs was an island surrounded by an ocean of bad weather delivering record amounts of rain to California and Nevada.

Around 2:30 PM Col. Crumley strapped himself into the left seat of his Aero Commander while his friend, EJ, strapped himself into the right seat, and at 2:50 PM it was wheels up as the two pilots turned north and began their journey towards Elko. Col. Crumley, who was a high-ranking official in the Shriners, was due to officiate at a Shriners installation that night. Plans were for the pair to fly to Reno the following morning.

The weather was poor as the two cruised at 15000 feet - cloudy and with rain. At 4:18 PM Col. Crumley radioed a routine position report placing them east of Tonopah. Twelve minutes later, at 4:30 PM, Crumley radioed that he was encountering icing conditions and requested permission to climb from 15000 feet to 17000 feet (climbing to higher altitudes where the air is known to be warmer is a common practice when ice starts forming). Five minutes later Col. Crumley radioed his aircraft was "icing out of control" and he was attempting to reverse course and head to Tonopah. The ominous silence that followed indicated Col. Crumley and EJ were probably down somewhere in Monitor Valley, an area guarded by 11,800-foot peaks.

It took some time to get the search and rescue operation moving. Two H-19 Chickasaw helicopters out of Stead were fortunately already on the ground at nearby Tonopah due to another tasking but falling night conditions and weather would keep them grounded until the following morning as well as the other helicopters available at Stead. Sheriff posses were dispatched, and by 5:30 PM CAP units had been alerted. Maj James Selma was the CAP Mission Coordinator (MC's were later retitled IC's when CAP adopted the Incident Command System).

CAP aircraft were grounded for the same reasons the Air Force helicopters were, sitting on the ground, frustrated by their inability to come to the aid of two of their own. Those CAP units so equipped immediately dispatched their jeeps and their crews – 11 from Washoe, 7 from Hawthorne, and other jeep teams from Mineral, Nye and Clark converged on Monitor Valley and began a night of desperate searching in miserable, snowy weather.

There was still hope for the missing airmen. Col. Crumley was himself a member of the "Caterpillar Club", having twice been forced to parachute out of airplanes, and once he and his passenger had been given up for dead when their aircraft crashed, yet they both turned up very much alive days later.

Sunday morning low clouds and rain still hampered the search, but conditions did allow the two Air Force helicopters on the ground at Tonopah to get airborne and into the search area as well as eight member owned CAP aircraft (at the time member owned aircraft were often used on CAP missions). Just before noon four more Air Force helicopters went "light on the skids" and were headed for the search area. Forty other CAP aircraft and numerous other jeeps were on alert but did not leave their bases at Reno, Carson City, Elko, Ely, and Yerington due to the treacherous weather.

Just after noon, Maj. Jack Cannon, flying one of the Stead helicopters, spotted the twisted, mangled, unburned wreckage of Crumley's Aero Commander, a mile and a half off a dirt road, five miles northeast of Belmont. The four helicopters that had just left Stead were recalled; their services no longer required.



The first ground unit to arrive at the crash site was, fittingly, a CAP jeep unit, attracted to the location by the sight of the orbiting Air Force helicopter. Other CAP jeeps and sheriff posse units soon arrived. EJ's and Crumley's bodies were removed from the wreckage and transported to Tonopah where a coroner duly filled out the death certificates, then to Reno.

At the time, rules concerning speaking to the press were non-existent. Several of those who were involved with the search (CAP, USAF and law enforcement) spoke to the press, and the papers luridly printed their

statements: "the plane, iced beyond any hope of control, plunged almost straight down, at perhaps 250 mph – 40 mph above its normal cruising speed", "the plane just disintegrated", "one body was found partly in the wreckage, the other was about 300 yards away", and "one propeller had buried itself two feet deep". Mercifully EJ had never married or had children, so there was no immediate family to be spared from these grisly comments. Col. Crumley's widow, four daughters, and son were not so lucky.

The weather had not improved on Tuesday February 13 when the first of two funeral services were held at Trinity Episcopal Church for the two friends. Col. Crumley's was first, starting at 2 PM. The pews were filled with Nevada's finest. Non-essential personnel from nearby Stead AFB were excused from duty to attend the services. The notice in the papers describing the service in detail, and the list of pallbearers and honorary pallbearers was a veritable who's who of Nevada society.

The skies had not cleared on Wednesday either when EJ Questa's services were held, also at the same church and at the same hour as his friend's. Again, the pews were filled by many of Nevada's finest, and from across Nevada community movers and shakers attended the service. The eulogy praised many of EJ's efforts and achievements for Reno and Nevada. And, like his friend the day before, his service made the news, with numerous well-known names of the times listed as pallbearers and honorary pallbearers. After the service, several hundred mourners accompanied the funeral cortege to its destination.

Both friends and former Nevada Wing commanders were laid to rest in the Masonic section of the Mountain View Cemetery in Reno.

EJ's will left the bulk of his estate to the University of Nevada, to be used for scholarships for Nevada high school graduates active in 4-H or agriculture, scholarships that are still being granted to this day, almost 60 years after his death. Proceeds from the sale of EJ's luxury home at 142 Greenridge Drive also went to the University of Nevada. Those wishing to make donations in his memory were requested to make them to the Washoe Medical Center or St. Mary's Hospital.

Edward John Questa lives on in the legacy he left the state of Nevada: the creation of the Nevada Wing; the scholarships for Nevada students at the University of Nevada; and the numerous civic and education programs he served.

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