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Gainesville home to extensive 416th Bomb Group Archive

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Doris and Wayne Sayles discuss an exhibit in the 416th Bomb Group Archive, which they began in Gainesville.

GAINESVILLE – Glittering rings often signify memories and monumental life events — just like one, set with a sparkling stone, that launched an extensive World War II archive in Gainesville.

The West Point class ring is held near and dear to Wayne Sayles, founder of the archive, who came to own the piece of jewelry several years ago. The ring's acquisition started Sayles on a treasure hunt into history: It found and fueled a desire to learn more about William Cramsie, whose name is preserved in the ring's band, and Cramsie's service during World War II.

During the search, Sayles was led to the 416th Bomb Group in what was then the U.S. Army Air Corps, and with which Cramsie served and died. Eventually, Sayle's interest grew from curiosity to advocacy: He published a biography about the fallen airman in 2008, and later began an archive in honor of Cramsie's bomb group.

"I don't know of anything like this for any other group," says Sayles, who has a degree in history and is a veteran of the U.S. Air Force, which came into being as a branch of the military separate from the Army following World War II. "A few (bomb groups) have websites. But they don't match in comparison. When you get into looking at what we do, you will see very quickly that this is a massive operation."

Cramsie's ring



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Cramsie's class ring, which he obtained while attending the United States Military Academy at West Point.

And it all began with Cramsie and his ring.

A fresh-faced graduate from the United States Military Academy at West Point, Cramsie gave the ring to his mother for safekeeping before heading off to war.

"He knew there was a chance he wouldn't come back," says Sayles of the grim reality. But that fact likely didn't dampen the excitement of graduating from the prestigious institution, which had been a longtime goal of the young man.

"He went through a lot to get to West Point, and it was something he'd wanted since he was a small boy," says Sayles. "He was fascinated with airplanes and wanted to fly."

Cramsie got his chance with the 416th, which executed around 285 bombing missions between 1943 and 1945.

"They would fly 36 planes on a mission, and the mission would have what they called 'boxes,'" notes Sayles of the flying formation designed to maximize the effectiveness of the bombers' defensive guns in warding off enemy fighter aircraft. "There were two boxes of 18 planes each. And within each box, they had a flight of six planes, so there were three flights. Each plane carried 2,000 pounds of bombs."

One of those missions, however, turned tragic for Cramsie.

"He got hit by flack," says Sayles. "They had to make another round because they couldn't drop on the target, it was obscured by clouds. On the second round they got hit again and then started back out across the (English) Channel. He got within about four or five miles of landing and went into the sea."

Cramsie's death caused his ring to be put away, hidden perhaps by well-meaning family members along with their pain. Eventually, it ended up in a pawn shop, where one of Sayles' friends purchased it.

Later, that friend told Sayles about the ring while Sayles was visiting him in California. As it turned out, the conversation wasn't over with Sayles' departure: A few days after Sayles returned to Gainesville, the ring showed up in the mail.

"He sent it to me with an invoice," says Sayles. "He wanted me to buy this ring."

Sayles initially declined the purchase, and prepared to ship back the ring. Something, however, just wouldn't let him put it in the box, let alone put it in the mail.

"I had the ring here and the box here, and I just couldn't put it in the box," he says. "My hand wouldn't go there."

"Finally, I sat down and wrote a check. I had no idea why I had this thing."

Sayles might have questioned why he had the ring, but at least he knew who it originally belonged to. He started searching for information on Cramsie, whose name was inscribed inside the band, and discovered his ties to the 416th.

"So I searched for 416th Bomb Group, and I found that there was a book written by one of the members of the group," says Sayles. After purchasing the book, he found the author's telephone number on the inside cover.

A call to the author ended up with another phone number: This time, it was to Cramsie's nephew, who gave Sayles some additional information.

"That got me started," says Sayles. "Then I got started exploring the 416th. Exploring the Cramsie family. To make a long, long, long story short, **I ended up writing his biography.**"

Starting the archive

But Sayles wasn't satisfied with simply writing Cramsie's biography. His connections grew through his associated research on the 416th, which got him and his wife, Doris, an invitation to the group's annual reunion in 2006.

"We showed up there, and boy, we were received like royalty because we had an interest," says Sayles. "We started talking to all those veterans, and by the time the reunion was over, we were part of the 416th family. We haven't missed a reunion since then."

Through those events — of which the Sayles have hosted four — the couple became adopted into the 416th family.

"Each of them has their own story to tell, and we know them all very well by now," says Sayles. "Like kin. Like blood relatives. And we stay in touch with them regularly."

In 2009, those like-family connections helped solve a problem: One of the member's widows didn't know what to do with her late husband's war records and artifacts. Museums were too overwhelmed with offers to take such items, and it seemed sacrilege to throw them away.

"So Doris and I said we would hold the material until we could come up with a solution," says Sayles. A few months later, the answer presented itself when Gainesville's city hall went up for sale — and the Sayles bought the building.

"It was just one of those things in a long series of events that let me know it was the right thing to do," says Sayles. "So then, we had a place to put things, and we let that be known, and the floods started. And material came in from just everywhere."

Since that time, the archive has expanded from its walls and onto the web, where an extensive site allows researchers to gather information online.

"We have a page for every mission the 416th flew in World War II," says Sayles. "Each page has on it the loading list — which is a list of everybody who flew on the mission — where the mission went to, the history. All of the details. We've got every record that the Air Force historical research agency had in its possession. They gave them all to us. So we can do more research than anybody in the world — and we do."

"We've been involved with over a dozen professional researchers in Europe, England, Germany, Belgium, France, Netherlands," Sayles continues. "People that are writing books, stories, articles, all kinds of things about their experiences and they want to know (more)."

One of those professional researchers is Dr. Vernon Williams, a history professor at Abilene Christian University in Texas, who recently created a 15-minute documentary about the group entitled "Under Fire." After finishing the project, Sayles says, he gave the archive **resale rights** to the film.

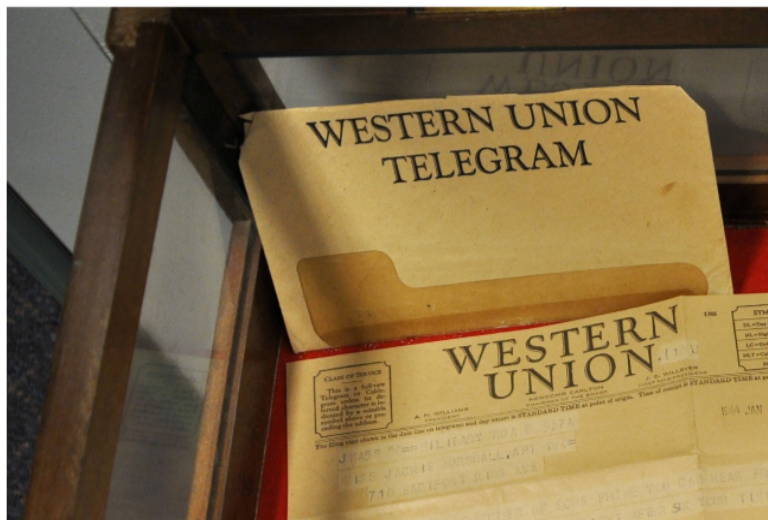
Other curious people, Sayles notes, are actually from the countries bombed by the group.

"Germans who were bombed by these 416th pilots want to know about those pilots," says Sayles. "They want to know what they felt like, and what they went through. And it's very friendly. It's not an antagonistic environment at all."

The Sayles' quick action to save such World War II stories hasn't gone unnoticed. The husband-and-wife team was awarded the George Bledsoe Medal for Historic Preservation in 2016, which is given by the East Anglia Air War Project Award for significant contributions to the preservation of WWII military aviation history.

Additionally, Sayles received another special honor in 2013.

"They inducted me into the 416th as an honorary veteran," says Sayles.



Displays chronicle 416th history through its members' lives.

Inside the archive's stone, WPA-built home, Sayles sits surrounded by history.

Mementoes and photos silently tell stories from shadow boxes. Displays and filing cabinets offer research materials to read, and uniforms to see. A library of oral interviews offers a look at days when their creators were young and hellbent on protecting a world at war.

Time is of the essence to capture those memories and information: Nearly 75 years since the end of World War II, only a handful of the bomb group's 2,600 members remain.

Five of those surviving members peer from a photo on the archive's wall, taken at their most recent reunion in October 2017. Now in their 90s, some of the soldiers sit in wheelchairs, while another stands resolutely with the aid of a cane. One wears his uniform, smiling with pride at the camera. Age-worn hands lay clasped in laps; the same fingers, now calmly intertwined, that once helped bring peace by executing bombing missions across Europe.



The archive is housed in a building constructed in 1935 by the WPA.



Sayles speaks of the most recent reunion attendees, which are pictured on the archive's wall.

These men flew into danger to save the free world. They're ones so dedicated that they still attend an annual reunion for a cause nearly 75 years complete. And even though their time to tell memories isn't infinite, their stories will live on through the archive.

"We're at a point now where we've got more work than we could do in a lifetime. And we don't have any staff for it, so our next step is to try and develop some method of getting professional researchers to work here on projects," says Sayles of the materials the archive has in its possession. "We're amateurs. We can't dedicate our whole lives to this, but we dedicate an awful lot of time."

Want to learn more?

The 416th Bomb Group is open by appointment. To visit, call, email or write the archive via the avenues [available here](#). The group's website also offers extensive information about its history, and is accessible [here](#).

◀ Although silent, these Quiet People still speak to visitors

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