

"Cleared Hot" By Lon Holtz

As many of you know, I have been in a number of top-notch fighter squadrons during my military career. I also flew and worked with some of the very best in the Air Force, and I still have a passing relationship with some of the pilots who I'd fly to hell and back with even today. But many of the old wartime units or fighter associations have faded into memory, and I often wondered why. Some of this was due to either a change in the initial charter of the associations to be politically correct, or the old tigers just weren't there anymore. To me, this resulted in a loss of the camaraderie that is important in keeping a group together. There is also the problem of getting the old body moving to travel long distances to see old wingmates or wrench benders.

With all this in mind, the question arose that: If this is all true, why do we, as a group, look forward to the A-37 Association reunions year after year so much? It took me a little while to come up with an answer that tells the whole story. But here it is.

All the other fighter units I have joined had an established history, with proven aircraft, in a number of wars with outstanding accomplishments. So, when you joined such an outfit you automatically became part of that history, and your accomplishments just built on that history with little fanfare. Additionally, manpower was repeatedly changing, so close relationships in (Continued on p. 3)

Inside:	Page
Emails	2
Member Update	2
War Story: "Saving Aircraft"	3
From the Archives	4
"And So It Began"- Fred Long	6

Fifty years ago this month,

the 604th Air Commando Squadron (Fighter) completed training at England AFB, Louisiana, packed up its people, aircraft, and equipment onto C-141s, and deployed en masse to Bien Hoa AB, RVN, beginning a remarkable story of combat operations now well documented in *Dragonfly: A-37s over Vietnam*, a coffee-table book published by the A-37 Association in November 2014.

In Rapid City, South Dakota, this September, the Association is celebrating that 50-year anniversary with a reunion of the people who contributed to the A-37's story. The reunion will be a culmination of Association sponsored events over the past four years, during which the A-37 was commemorated with plaques at the US Air Force Museum at Wright-Patterson AFB in 2014 and in the Southeast Asia Pavilion at the USAF Academy in Colorado Springs in 2016. Between those two occasions was an enjoyable gathering in Nashville, Tennessee, where war stories and tall tales prevailed.

And Rapid City should be special as well. After all, most of us are getting to the age where memories and friendships make up a large part of our lives. In fact, one of the objectives of the A-37 Association is to keep those memories and friendships front and center as long as we are able, and this newsletter is part of that effort. You should have received a registration form for Rapid City by email by now, but you can also find a link to the form at the Association's website, www.a-37.org.

Over the past several newsletter editions, we've tried to trace the A-37's history as documented in unit histories found at the USAF Archives at Maxwell AFB. Currently, we're covering January to March 1968, a period during which the A-37 solidified its reputation as the weapon of choice for close air support by ground commanders. A story published in *Dragonfly*, written by our friend now Gone West, Gus Photides, illustrates the commitment of that period.

Lon Holtz's "Cleared Hot" column reflects on the camaraderie and friendships he has built over his career and why he and Barb enjoy these biannual get-togethers. You've probably had the same thoughts. And Fred Long's chronicle on his time in Vietnam continues with personal experiences that put a face on the job done by the enlisted support troops....Jerry Sailors

"The A-37 Association is for those who flew, worked on/with, were saved by, or have high admiration for the great little fighter."



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The Dragonfly is a publication of the A-37 Association published quarterly (except when within three months of a reunion, then monthly), as a service to the membership, new contacts, and other interested parties.

The views expressed herein are those of the editors/ authors and do not necessarily reflect any official position of the A-37 Association. The editors reserve the right to print any article/letter/email/photo deemed to be of interest to members.

We also reserve the right to edit any article to fit space available and to reject any material considered inappropriate. We invite and encourage members/contacts to submit articles/letters/emails/photos.

Visit our website: www.A-37.org

and supplement to it: https://thea37association.shutterfly.com/

Member Update:

Gone West:

James E. Williamson - 13 October 2016

Email change:

Change of Address:

Hank and Nancy Hoffman

12478 Arrow Creek Ct. Colorado Springs, CO 80921 (Effective: 2 August 2017)

If you have updated information on A-37-related friends or acquaintances to share, email dragonfly369@charter.net

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Emails

From Virginia Ann Williamson:

I saw in the Military Officer magazine that there is going to be a reunion of the A-37 Dragonfly units in SE Asia. My husband flew the A-37 Dragonfly with the South Vietnamese Air Force as their advisor in Danang during the year 1971-1972. He enjoyed his time in that aircraft and it was the only fighter he ever flew that he could just step into!! His earlier tour in VN was in Phan Rang flying the F-100 during 1968-1969.

Anyway, I say all this to say that my husband Colonel (USAF Ret) James E. Williamson passed away last year, October 13, 2016. Were he still here, I'm sure he would have tried to make this reunion.

Good luck to you all

From Dee Friesen:

I saw the ad for the September A-37 reunion in the Military Officer magazine.

I was a member of the 90 Attack Squadron at Bien Hoa from Dec 69 to Oct 70, when we stood down and gave the aircraft to the Vietnamese.

I am interested in attending and will let several of my squadron mates know about the event.

Is there a web site for the event?

Join us!



Rapid City, South Dakota, 14-17 September 2017, recognizing the 50-year anniversary of the A-37 Dragonfly's first combat action in Southeast Asia. Download the pdf registration form from the A-37 Association website: www.a-37.org.

"Cleared Hot"

(Continued from p. 1)

most cases were few and far between. But we were different. We came from all walks of Air Force life and started from scratch, as one, with an unproven aircraft that was modified from an underpowered training bird into an aircraft with fangs and an attitude. You already know of our records and accomplishments as you were the ones that built them and showed the Air Force the need and effectiveness of a close-air-support aircraft.

We not only survived, we excelled. Starting with one squadron, logging 15,000 sorties in the first year with exceptional results, we quickly expanded to three and set records for weapons accuracy, maintenance availability, and weapons loading in the span of five short years. It didn't matter if you were a Rap, a Dice, a Dog, a Hawk, we all pulled together as one with pride in our accomplishments. And although our little aircraft had a short operational life, we continue to keep its memory alive.

What is heartwarming about this tale is that I still see, unlike the other fighter units I have belonged, is that the togetherness is still evident in every reunion I've attended. These gatherings remind me of the old TV show "Cheers" and their theme song you want to go "Where Everyone Knows Your Name, and they're always glad you came." And even as I get older and longer in the tooth, you'll still see Barb and I until we can't anymore. And hope you will too.

See you in September in Rapid city.



Only 14 of the hard back (\$29.95) and 9 of the soft cover (\$19.95) are available, plus \$7 shipping, of course. Order form on the A-37 Association website: www.a-37.org.

War Story



Saving Aircraft by Gus Photides

(Adapted from Dragonfly: A-37s over Vietnam)

Seeking cover under 750-pound bombs during a rocket and mortar attack is not the safest thing to do, but it may have meant the difference between life and death.

I know it may sound foolish, but at the time it seemed the most logical thing to do. It was a few minutes after 0300 on January 31, 1968, when Bien Hoa came under an intense mortar and rocket barrage by the VC and NVA elements.

I was on the night crew when the first rocket hit 50 yards from me. It scored a direct hit on one of the A-37's (*ed. note: tail #517*) and touched off one of the 750-pound bombs on the aircraft. Things got a little hot. In fact, burning debris gave me quite a scorch on my back.

I didn't want to continue using some of the bombs on storage racks for cover, so I began looking for extinguishers to put out the numerous fires in the area.

One of the security policemen on duty at the guard shack post Delta Eight, A1C Lawrence L. Handel, Jr, left his post to help extinguish the flames and turn off the night lights so the enemy wouldn't have a lighted

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Gus Photides demonstrates how he used the flight line fire extinguisher to save other aircraft on the morning of 31 January 1968.

aiming point. Between the two of us, we used up seven fire extinguisher canisters and managed to save two other aircraft.

Airman Handel showed much courage that morning. He left the safety of his protected guard post to assist me. My safety was a moot point in my case as I was trapped there, but he could have stayed where he was.

While we were dousing the flames, more rockets started coming in. Handel yelled,

"Let's get out of here!"

Believe me, I didn't need a second invitation. Since we had again turned the work lights on when it had appeared to quiet down, I quickly tuned them off and sought shelter at the base fire station. Handel returned to his post.

It's really a wonder though that both of us didn't break our necks from another unsuspected danger. We were running around in the dark trying to save aircraft and I'll bet we ran past this ten-foot wide and four-foot deep crater (caused by the bomb on the A-37 exploding) at least 20 times without realizing it was there in the darkness.



The remains of 517

(According to the 604th Unit History for Jan-Mar 1968, Gus Photides was submitted for the Bronze Star with Valor for action on 31 January.)



From the Archives



(The following is taken

from the 604th ACS Unit History, January-March 1968.)

During this period, the 604th Air Commando Squadron (Fighter) of Bien Hoa AB, RVN, flew 4,519 combat sorties against the Communist Viet Cong, North Vietnamese insurgents, and Pathet Lao. Operating out of its home base and its operating location (OL 1) at Pleiku, the 604th supported operations from the Demilitarized Zone to the tip of the Mekong Delta, flying close air support and interdiction missions day and night.

When the Communists launched the "Tet Offensive" in the early morning hours of 31 January, both Bien Hoa and Pleiku came under heavy attack. At Bien Hoa, enemy ground forces followed a barrage of mortars and 122 mm rockets by penetrating the base and advancing as far as the arming area of runway 27 where they were stopped and eventually eliminated. However, one rocket scored a direct hit on one of the squadron's A-37's, which had just been loaded with ordnance, including two M-117's (750-lb general purpose bombs). The aircraft disintegrated and showered shrapnel throughout the area.

Amid the ensuing confusion, several fires broke out which endangered other aircraft and equipment. One of the 604th's crew chiefs, Technical Sergeant Constantine Photides, and a security guard in the area grabbed fire extinguishers and set out to fight the blaze while rockets were still coming into the base. They were successful in saving several valuable pieces of equipment, including two aircraft. Because of his bravery under extremely dangerous conditions, TSgt Photides was submitted for the Bronze Star with Valor decoration.

Fortunately no 604th personnel were seriously injured during the attack with only two people suffering minor wounds. Many bunkers were reinforced the next day.

The attack slowed operations on 31 January with only two sorties getting airborne at Bien Hoa and 13 at Pleiku. Of the 16 aircraft at Bien Hoa, one was completely destroyed, one was severely damaged, and six received light to medium damage. Pilots were put on 15-minute standby for 24 hours a day. From 31 January through 4 February, Bien Hoa operations logged 168 combat sorties with the majority of targets within a few miles of the base while others were within the perimeter of Tan Son Nhut

Air Base at Saigon, 17 miles to the southwest. A flight of two aircraft loaded with two Mk-82's, two BLU-32 napalm canisters, and two CBU-25 canisters was in the air at all times during the night covering the area from Saigon to Bien Hoa. Two, and sometimes three, flights loaded with CBU and napalm were put on alert during the evening also. Each was scrambled several times a night.

At Pleiku, the intensity of the attack prompted 7th Air Force to curtail OL 1 operations into Laos and direct efforts toward close air support in I and II Corps. No personnel injuries or aircraft damage was received although several close rocket hits and air strikes were put in within sight of the base itself. OL 1 flew 90 sorties during the first five days of the enemy offensive and lent much needed support to friendly ground troops throughout the area.

Before switching to in-country operations, OL 1 was becoming a significant factor in stopping the flow of supplies coming from North Vietnam down the Ho Chi Minh Trail. During the month of January, the 11 pilots of the detachment were credited with destroying 58 trucks and damaging 30 more, cutting 56 roads, starting 82 secondary fires, igniting 44 secondary explosions, and destroying 19 gun positions.

Most OL 1 sorties were flown at night by single aircraft, which evidently induced the enemy gunners manning the 23 mm, 37 mm, and ZPU sites to fire at the aircraft with some degree of freedom. Occasionally, a flight of two A-37's would rendezvous over the area with one aircraft loaded with nothing but CBU-25's and the other with hard bombs, usually four M-117's. Both aircraft were blacked out. The idea was to draw fire from the gun positions, revealing locations.

Using this concept, Major Billy Turner made low passes on a truck convoy with his CBU's while Captain Ollie Maier orbited overhead with the hard bombs. When the enemy gunners opened fire on Major Turner, Captain Maier rolled in and dropped two M-117's on the gun position, destroying it. This tactic was quite successful and tended to lessen the gunners' willingness to fire at succeeding passes made on the convoy.

Even though the hostile ground fire was very intense and pilots were operating in an area where there were very few friendlies, the pilots at Pleiku, who were rotated back to Bien Hoa about every two months, were very enthusiastic about their mission in Tigerhound and considered it well worthwhile.

The A-37A was certified to carry several pieces of ordnance for the first time during this period. Creating (Continued on p. 5)



(Continued from p. 4)

quite a stir with their performance were the CBU-24 and CBU-29. Delivered in a dive-bomb delivery technique, these weapons covered large areas with their deadly bomblets, which proved to be ideal for gun positions or open targets when no friendlies were in the immediate vicinity. Also welcomed were the BLU-1 and BLU-27 napalm canisters, both classified in the 750-lb group. Return of napalm to the arsenal of the A-37A gave it much more effective capability in the close air support role, especially when coupled with the CBU-14 or 25. The napalm delivery airspeed of BLU-23 and 31 were limited to 280 knots by the commander to reduce the possibility of the unfinned napalm hitting ailerons and flaps upon release.

As a result of the loss of Major Ronald D. Bond on 11 March while strafing a target just north of Vung Tau in III Corps, a limit of two strafe passes on a high-angle delivery and pullout was invoked, exceptions only if absolutely necessary. Major Bond's aircraft was observed to fly straight into the ground with no attempt to pull out and no reported radio calls. None of the wreckage or the body has been recovered at this point. No official cause for the incident has been established, but it is supposed the pilot was hit by ground fire and possibly dead before hitting the ground.

On 3 March on a mission in IV Corps southeast of Soc Trang near the coast, 1/Lt John T. Welshan acknowledged his rocket hit to the FAC and then disappeared. Because the other aircraft in the flight and the FAC were busy with the target, no one observed a crash or heard any radio call or beeper from Lt Welshan. Neither he nor his aircraft has ever been found. Cause is still open.

Maintenance problems with the 7.62 mm minigun continued to plague the munitions section. Frequent gun jams and failure to fire were prevalent. Attempts to find a solution to preventing the nose gun blast tube from coming loose during firing, thus allowing gases to pass the gun seal and blowing off the nose gun bay door, continue.

A major problem for Lt Richard F. Ennis and his supply section has been the airlift support for the operations at Pleiku. The best available so far has been space available aircraft booked on the day prior to departure. A continuing problem has been the supply of oxygen at OL-1, which has sometimes dwindled to the last day before a combat essential priority could be obtained.

Impact of the 31 January attack was felt by the supply and equipment sections to a large degree. Finding parts for battle-damaged aircraft was difficult because storage areas were very close to the fighting itself. The delivery

of items from the deport at Tan Son Nhut was slowed considerably. In spite of the imposed conditions, the squadron NORS-G rate rose from 0.6% in January to only 1.2% in February.

One of the most noteworthy achievements of the maintenance personnel was the 907 consecutive combat sorties without a ground abort, maintenance non-delivery, or squadron caused mission lost, all of which was accomplished at the height of the Communist offensive from 30 January to 17 February. The previous record for consecutive sorties was 522 set in early January. While flying 600 scheduled and 307 alert sorties, the squadron dropped 1200 tons of ordnance and maintained an OR rate of 88.3%. During February alone, the average flying time per aircraft was 81.9 hours with three aircraft logging more than 100 hours each. Lt Col Weber noted the record was "indicative of the dedication and efforts continually put forth by this unit."

The rotation of personnel who had completed their tour of duty began on 6 February when Major Terrell B. Horne departed having flown 230 missions in the A-37 since the unit's arrival the previous summer. Also leaving were Major Joseph A. Byrnes on 1 March and Major Roger B. Myhrum on 23 March, having completed 231 and 306 missions respectively.

Several arrivals in February and March marked the beginning of a gradual transition of personnel in the squadron. Many enlisted troops, mostly seven and five skill levels, were transferred to other units while five and three skill levels were received in return. The objective was to maintain a somewhat steady level of experience when the great majority of those now present would leave in July. A number of the maintenance personnel were notified that their tours may be curtailed during May and June.

At Pleiku, the rotation of 12 officers, 51 enlisted, and eight aircraft either to another operating location or back to Bien Hoa was a distinct possibility by the end of March. Arrival of A-1H's of the 6th Air Commando Squadron crowded the available revetment space and the 604th was required to release some of its ramp. At the end of the quarter, exact date of the proposed departure was still unknown.



An A-37A on a mission in the Steel Tiger area of Laos. (John J. Sullivan Collection)



AND SO IT BEGAN

(Continued, Chapter 8, of an unpublished book by Fred Long)

The days went quickly at Pleiku. The primary concern was what would happen to us when it was over. We didn't know if we would be broken up and transferred to other squadrons, at other bases, or stay in this squadron. We felt that at least some of us would remain in the 604th, but no one knew for sure what would happen. The rumors that the squadron would be broken up made everyone edgy. It was reasoned, since we all arrived at the same time, some of us would be transferred so the squadron would not experience a complete change in personnel when each tour of duty ended at the same time. On the other side of the coin, the squadron had performed with optimum efficiency and it would be against military logic to break up the coordination of such accomplishment. This thought had an immediacy of discord, an increase in our anxiety, because nothing about the war was done according to any rules of logic. Still, we had orders saying we would return to Bien Hoa after the test period, and although orders can change, we strained with the hope that no change would be made in our tour of duty.

Our mission involved severing the many trails in Laos known collectively as the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Our pilots were trying to put the bombs in the road, and doing a good job of it, but as soon as they left, the enemy started refilling them as fast as they could, and nothing was being accomplished. Traffic may have slowed down, but it didn't stop. When we cut a road, they opened another. The only way to stop it was at the heart of it in North Vietnam, but we couldn't go there. It was frustrating for the pilots but they, like us, had to do what they were told to do.

The United States never declared war against North Vietnam. We were assisting South Vietnam in their war against the North, but we were doing the majority of the fighting for them under rules that had us continually on the defensive. It was like going into a prizefight with one arm tied behind your back. The North Vietnamese would take ground, we would run them out, then we would retreat and the North Vietnamese would take the ground again. It was just a continual cycle of getting nowhere. Fighting for the same territory over and over, winning by the numbers, but advancing nowhere. Never taking ground and holding it. Never pushing the enemy back. Never doing anything but count numbers and say we were winning. But they were everywhere, on each and every side of us, and the numbers didn't mean a thing. We would soon find that out.

...the smallest fighter... the fastest gun

But, for now, the death toll of the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong gave us the feeling that the war couldn't last much longer. At the time, I did not realize North Vietnam could resupply their forces with a hundred thousand new troops every year; that they could afford to lose that many in battle and still stay at full strength. I did not realize that from the time they were infants they had been taught to die for their country. That war was life to them. That they were never going to give up.

The last phase of Combat Dragon ended on Thursday, November 30. Two days later, a courier from Bien Hoa arrived with the good news that everyone would remain in the squadron and the 604th would remain intact. On top of this, all correspondence would be addressed to the 604th Air Commando Squadron and not the Third Combat Support Group. Finally, after four months of combat, the squadron was recognized as an entity, an independent arm of the United States Air Force. Along with this good news was the fact that we would return to Bien Hoa on December 15.

I returned to Bien Hoa to a new barracks, a room on the ground floor, and a new roommate—Leonard Barnett. Leonard joined the squadron about the end of our first month in Vietnam, escorting the last of the A-37s from England Air Force Base. We became friends almost immediately. Leonard was a likable airman with a cheerful and friendly personality—and he was fun to be around—but we never actually worked together.

After I moved in with him we became as close to one another as if we were brothers and, like brothers, shared things. Like a bar of soap. It became Leonard's habit to ask if he could borrow my soap when he went for his shower. I was not adverse to this in any way, cheerfully handing him the plastic container every night without any thought or concern. This went on for several weeks until the soap had gotten somewhat thin. It occurred to me, as if corresponding to some inner devilish behavior, to make it as thin as I possibly could, scrubbing it against my chest and pressing it carefully in my hands to keep it from falling apart. I worked with it and pressed it tightly against my hands to flatten it as much as possible until it resembled the thickness of a comb. When I was satisfied, I returned it to its plastic container and took it to our cubicle. It was a small, pitiful looking thing.

Leonard, as I expected, asked for the soap. I removed it from its container and handed it to him as straight-faced as I could. With a slight pressing of the lips, he took it in his hand, studying its composition carefully. Presently, with me watching patiently, he took it between the fingers of



each hand, fixed his eyes upon it, and with a perplexing look that darted from the soap back to me slowly held it to the light. "I can see through it," he told me and placed it back into its container. I produced a new bar of soap, laughing at the look on his face as I handed it to him, his eyes still showing a look of bewilderment. Leonard decided I was trying to tell him something and bought soap the next day.

I was no longer assigned to the gunroom. My job now required me to work in the shop area taking work orders as they came up. This involved getting out on the flight line rotating the minigun and MA-4A racks along with any inside shop repairs.

Nothing about the work schedule had changed and we continued working twelve-hour shifts, seven days a week, and we still didn't know when we would get a day off. They put me on the noon-to-midnight shift. It was much cooler after dark so I was glad to be on that shift. My new cubicle was on the ground floor, next to the latrine. I took the lower bunk next to the latrine wall and Leonard had the lower bunk on the opposite side. The upper bunks were empty and would stay that way until our tour ended. The cubicle had a sturdy table, with a top drawer, and a matching chair that Leonard had placed against the outside wall. It was a nicer, larger table than the one I had earlier. Our lockers were at the front of the room with ample space between them for access.

Around the first of the year I bought an oak-stained plaque that was especially made for our squadron. It was attractively designed with the squadron patch centered below the arched name of the 604th ACS squadron and its base location. The upper left corner had the flag of the United States while the right-hand corner had the South Vietnamese flag with its yellow background flanked by three bright red horizontal strips. All were colorful and expertly reproduced in metal, and affixed to the polished surface of the plaque with an epoxy type substance. At the bottom was a small metal emblem with my name, rank, and the beginning and ending year of my Vietnam tour. After finding a box suitable for its configuration, I sent it to my parents asking them if they would put it on the wall.

On January 15, 1968, we went to an eight-hour day. It was an immediate boost to morale. I was moved to the early morning shift, reporting for work at 4:00 A.M. till noon. My job was to clean the MA-4A racks and identify and fix any that were in need of repair. I was the only one on duty until the regular morning shift came in at 6:30. It was a dull job. I would take all the MA-4A racks apart and

clean them, which was a very simple task, and set them on a shelf to be used again. Most of them didn't even need cleaning, but I did it anyway and it helped make the time go faster. When I was finished I really didn't have anything to do, so I would go around cleaning up the shop until people started coming in.

Operations began to step up shortly after this and by the 20th, everyone was on a ten-hour day, except me. I guess I was held to an eight-hour shift because I started so early in the morning. I had been told I would be on this shift until February 3, then going on a ten-hour day too.

Things had slowed down, but now the aircraft were making more missions, making us leery because of rumors circulating that the enemy was planning a major offensive below the DMZ (demilitarized zone), a line drawn between North and South Vietnam. We had just been told that the U.S. was preparing for a major mass invasion from the north by something like 35,000 or 40,000 North Vietnamese and Viet Cong troops. At least 4,000 U.S. Marines were digging in below the DMZ in anticipation of the attack and thousands more were being sent in that direction to await the invasion. We knew those servicemen stationed at air bases near the DMZ were uneasy, afflicted by an atmosphere of apprehension, nervousness and awkward helplessness, unable to act against an enemy intent on their total destruction. Guys in the shop were grumbling among themselves, questioning why were we waiting for the enemy to attack us, and not attacking them before they became mobilized. We weren't concerned about our base coming under attack because we were so far south of the DMZ. But we were concerned about the war strategy that did nothing to deter enemy invasion—a strategy that was being called "Johnson's no-win policy."

But it was business as usual at Bien Hoa Air Base. The base showed no sign of urgency at all. People were going about their daily task with no sign of increased security, or concern. Everyone was complacent, self-absorbed; we went about our daily assignments feeling no threat from rumors that an invasion might penetrate the DMZ. That would have no effect on us. Anyway, rumors had circulated before without any immediate danger. But I was suffering from some anxiety on January 30 when I finished work and walked slowly back to the barracks that afternoon, seeing freshly-washed sheets and pillowcases spread out on the ground by the barracks mamasans for drying—looking to me like patches of snow. I thought how nice it would be to be back in West Virginia, seeing real snow.

(Continued in August 2017 newsletter)



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