

# “...like shooting thru a palm tree.”

Coach Don Reichert and the '58 South Side Archers....

Written by Harry D. Frick III



In the early morning hours of April 8, 1945, United States Navy PT boat 364 idled in the waters of the Molucca Sea, a half mile from the island of Hiri, in the Dutch East Indies, now Indonesia. PT 364 was under the command of Lt. jg Donald C. Reichert of Fort Wayne, Indiana. Lt. Reichert and crew were on a dangerous and most unusual

mission--rescue Sultan Mohammed Jabir Shah, his children and harem, held captive by the Japanese since 1942, on the nearby island of Ternate.

The Sultan's family dynasty had ruled Ternate going back to the 16th century, but Japan seized the Dutch East Indies in 1941 and the Sultan was placed under house arrest. His palace grounds were patrolled by Japanese sentries, around the clock. By the spring of '45, with Japan in retreat across the Pacific, the Sultan got word to the Allies that he believed they were planning to kill him and his family. His desperate plea made it all the way to General Douglas MacArthur, Supreme Commander of Allied forces in the Pacific. MacArthur gave the green light to a rescue mission, codenamed--Operation Opposum.

Lt. Reichert's assignment was to put a commando team ashore on Hiri Island in the early morning hours, and await the Sultan, his 3 wives, 7 children, and four servants, making their way from Ternate in dugout canoes. They would rendezvous with the commando team, and be spirited to the safety of an Allied base on Morotai. The Sultan's entourage sneaked out of the palace at midnight, walked six hours to reach Ternate beach, then disembarked for Hiri in canoes, arriving at dawn. Japanese forces were in hot pursuit. A firefright erupted on Hiri beach. The enemy was forced to withdraw, the Sultan and his entourage boarded PT 364, which sped them to the base on Morotai. Mission accomplished. It was one of 39 combat missions for Lt. Reichert and PT 364.

Joseph and Alvina Reichert of Fort Wayne, Indiana sent three sons to the war. Don was the oldest. He and youngest brother Gene (29th Army Fighter Squadron), returned home safely. Joe, Jr., the middle son, did not. A Navy fighter pilot, flying a Grumman F6F Hellcat, Ensign Joe Reichert, Jr. was killed in 1944 in a carrier accident near the island of Truk, in Micronesia.

Don Reichert grew up in Ft. Wayne, graduated from South High School in '37 (played for Hall of Fame coach Burl Friddle), then Franklin College in '41. He began coaching basketball at Covington High School that year, but after Pearl Harbor, Reichert enlisted in the Navy. He returned to Covington after the war, and won 2 sectionals, a regional, and compiled an 88-55 record. In 1951, he came home to coach, to South Side.

“My first three or four years, I didn't think I could win a tournament to save my soul,” Reichert told Jay Margolis of the Fort Wayne Journal Gazette, years later. But things began to click in '56, as the Archers won the first of four straight sectionals, with the 56-57 team going to the Sweet 16. That team started slow, was 6-6 in January, but went on a tear, winning 14 straight, before losing in the Semi State to #1 ranked and unbeaten South Bend Central (John and Sylvester Coalmon, Herbie Lee, Denny Bishop, and Lee McKnight). That loss stung, but Central was 30-0 and one of Indiana's all-time great teams.

**“You gotta experience the Butler Fieldhouse..... when it's full.”**

“Our state championship season (1958)”, Tom Bolyard recently recalled, “actually began with that Semi-State loss to South Bend Central.” South had all five starters returning--6'4 Bolyard, 7'0 Mike McCoy, 6'5 Danny Howe, 5'10 Rich Miller, and 5'11 Carl Stavreti. The players recall Reichert telling them, “You guys gotta go to the state tourney and experience the Butler Fieldhouse..... when it's full.” They did just that and watched South Bend Central become only the second team in Hoosier basketball history to finish the regular season and tournament undefeated. (Crispus Attucks and the Big O had done it the year before.)

Heading into the 57-58 basketball season, the city of Fort Wayne was loaded with basketball talent. South was #1, Central #4, and Central Catholic and Concordia were top 10. The season began as expected for the Archers, with lopsided wins over Bluffton and Kendallville. But then Concordia came calling, and South squeaked out a 56-54 win. The Archers drilled Huntington, 81-41, Auburn, 62-

47, then Coach Howard Sharpe's Terre Haute Gerstmeyer Black Cats, 74-55. But the Archers lost to perennial powerhouse Muncie Central, 61-58. And just a week later, another loss, at Michigan City, 56-53, in overtime. "We lost twice during the season," Bolyard recalls, with considerable regret. "The Muncie Central game....well, we weren't ready to play and it showed. And the Michigan City loss.....I took a bad shot at the wrong time....and believe me I heard about it."

Max Bell's Elkhart Blue Blazers would suffer the wrath of a smarting South Side, losing 67-40. That was the first of 19 straight for the Archers. They beat Fort Wayne North 63-29, Mishawaka, 54-45, then Fort Wayne Central, 72-63. Muncie Burris fell, 71-45, and then North again, 70-34. South's schedule in the final stretch of the season was brutal.... Indianapolis Shortridge, 70-63, Gary Froebel, 69-64, Central once more, 77-67, then Central Catholic 45-39. Central Coach Herb Banet had seen quite enough of South Side, telling the media "Playing against those guys is like trying to shoot thru a palm tree." Central would get one more crack at the Archers, in the sectional.

Going into the tourney, South was rated #1, Central #3, Central Catholic #8, and Concordia #12. After South disposed of Leo and New Haven, it was Central once more, in what many believed to be essentially the state championship game. South won, 60-56, in overtime, before 9,418 fans in Fort Wayne's War Memorial Coliseum. Bolyard called it "one for the ages." Concordia fell a second time, in the sectional final, 55-34. Fremont and Berne followed in the regional, losing 61-48 and, 68-41, respectively.

Forward Danny Howe recalled, "We didn't have to do anything fancy. There was such chemistry. Don named the 4 seniors as captains, and nobody had to tell us to play over the summer. Plus, those spaghetti dinners at the Stavreti's were awesome." Guard Rich Miller remembers the experience as if it were yesterday. "Don was meticulously organized, with a detailed practice plan written on an index card each day. He'd throw a player out of practice every so often, just to keep us honest. It was an unusual bunch. None of us had an ego...we were just good friends. Losing those two games mid-season was a wake-up call."

### **"Cinderella's slipper..."**

The final four featured "Cinderella" Springs Valley (consolidation of West Baden and French Lick), with a sparkling 25-0 record. The Blackhawks won the Evansville semi-state, beating Gerstmeyer 66-

55, and Princeton, 71-54. John Longfellow's Muncie Central Bearcats squeaked into the Final Four at 22-6 after beating Rushville, 55-53 in OT, and Anderson 53-52 to win the Indianapolis Semi-State. Crawfordsville (23-5), shocked blue bloods Lafayette Jeff, 61-41 and East Chicago Washington, 70-59, to win the Lafayette Semi-State. Crawfordsville's toughest game was actually in the Sectional, where tiny Alamo (enrollment 60), took the Athenians to OT before losing 64-62. South, meanwhile, barely worked up a sweat, beating Bluffton, 71-49 and Elkhart, again, 76-44, to win the Fort Wayne Semi-State. Ben Tenny of the Fort Wayne News Sentinel summed up South's road to the Final Four. "The Archers were truly great in the Semi-State," Tenny wrote, "and turned it into a green-spattered shambles. Only the Central game in the sectional has given the Archers any thrill at all."

Mike McCoy left no doubt about the Archers' attitude heading into the Final Four, telling Dick Denny of Indy News Sports, "Indianapolis needs to know we're not going down there for the thrill of it. We're going down there to win." Reichert, however, was a bit more reserved. He told Frank Wilson, of the News Sentinel, "We realize Springs Valley is the peoples' choice. Heck, in '54, everyone was for Milan....the underdog. I was for Milan myself. But we'll play the game we've played all year." When asked who he'd like to play after Springs Valley, Reichert replied tersely, "Springs Valley is next, period."

The Archers motored down to Indy the night before, and stayed at the Penn Hotel. Fort Wayne South's '38 state championship team, starring Bob Bolyard (Tom's uncle), had stayed there 20 years earlier.

Indianapolis Star Sportswriter Bob Collins (Shootin' the Stars), summed up the first game---"As expected, powerful Fort Wayne South pried loose Cin-

derella's slipper in the opener. With 15,000 fans squeezed into the Butler Fieldhouse, it seemed to South fans that about 13,000 were cheering for Springs Valley." South's size and balance, though, (Bolyard 14, McCoy 18, Stavreti 15) wore down the Blackhawks, and Reichart pulled his starters midway through the final quarter. Final score, 53-42.

Dick Baumgartner's Crawfordsville Athenians didn't have a player over 6'3, and were never ranked in the top 20, but their speed and savvy beat Muncie Central, 53-45 in the second game. Not a bad run for little Crawfordsville—a 3-game stretch beating Lafayette Jeff, EC Washington, and Muncie Central.

In the championship game, Crawfordsville jumped to a quick 6-0 lead, but that was their last hurrah. South pulled away and coasted, winning 63-34.



The Archers completely dominated Crawfordsville, outscoring them 20-5 in the last quarter. Trestor Award winner Dick Haslam recalled half-jokingly telling his teammates, years later, "With a 6-0 lead, maybe we should have gone into four-corners and stalled the rest of the game. In retrospect it might have been a lot better than getting clobbered like we did."

Jimmie Angelopolous, writing in the Indianapolis News, observed, "Few would doubt South is one of the best ever, and perhaps the greatest defensive team in Indiana history, with a 29-point victory margin in the final game." It was the most lopsided final game since Lebanon whipped Frankfort, 51-11, back in 1912.

***"As much as the law would allow..."***

The postgame celebration was spirited, but a bit anti-climactic. South's starters managed to decompress by sitting out the final minutes of the game. Governor Harold Handley got into the celebration, and proudly had his photo taken with McCoy and Reichert. In the dressing room pandemonium, Reichert, Assistant Coach Bill Geyer, and even Athletic Director Wayne Scott, got tossed in the showers.

The city of Fort Wayne went berserk. Some thought it was the biggest mass sports celebration Fort Wayne had ever seen. Just forty-five minutes after the gun sounded, a crowd estimated at 7,000 assembled at the Sears & Roebuck parking lot, and the party began. "The dancing was of the more enthusiastic type," one observer noted, "about as much as the law would allow." The accent, of course, was on Rock 'n Roll. A Fort Wayne traffic cop, scanning the crowd, said to a colleague--"I guess South Side won."

The champs left Indianapolis Sunday morning, stopped in Elwood for lunch, and arrived at Baer Field early afternoon. Legendary sportscaster Hilliard Gates of WKJG presided over what was essentially organized chaos. A parade then proceeded from Baer Field, down Broadway, and ended up at Southgate Plaza, where a mob of 10,000 fans had gathered. The celebration continued into Monday, with a pep session at the high school, followed by an all-city, 6-hour, "sock hop" at the Coliseum, featuring radio station WOWO's "Fabulous Four"--Bob Severs, Jack Underwood, Marv Hunter, and Bob Chase.

In his 1998 best seller *The Greatest Generation*, author Tom Brokaw writes, "The men and women who came of age during the depression, fought the war in Europe and the Pacific, and returned to help build their communities and raise their families, are the greatest generation any society has ever produced. They sacrificed not for fame or recognition, but because it was the right thing to do."

Many of the youngsters who grew up in the shad-

ow of World War II weren't able to fully appreciate what Brokaw meant... the extraordinary sacrifices made by citizens like Don Reichert, his brothers Gene, and Joe, Jr., and millions of men and women, from all walks of life, who did their duty and helped to win the war.

WOWO's Bob Chase captured Brokaw's sentiment in his February 4, 2005, broadcast when he reminisced about 1958. Chase said, "Reichert was a father image, when needed, a drill sergeant when he had to be, always a friend, and always a builder of character. He blended the big 7' footer, McCoy, with two hardnosed forwards—Bolyard and Howe, and two incredible guards—Carl Stavreti and Rich Miller into a versatile, explosive offense that was almost impossible to stop." The next day, two green entrance signs and a gymnasium banner were unveiled, formally naming the South Side High School gym after Don Reichert.

Writing as a guest columnist in the Fort Wayne News-Sentinel on March 9, 1995, Dan Howe confessed that his memory was a bit foggy regarding much of the championship game, the tremendous welcome home celebration by Fort Wayne citizens, the dance at the Coliseum, and the victory banquet, but Howe recalled "we had parents and coaches who instilled in us a strong work ethic, and provided a support system built on respect, and the relationships between the players, the coaches, and our families," Howe wrote, "are still very much alive in my heart and soul, and will be forever."

*Harry D. Frick III lives in Carmel, Indiana. He can be contacted by e-mailing Harryfrick4@gmail.com.*

*Burl Friddle and Hilliard Gates were inducted into the Indiana Basketball Hall of Fame in 1969; Howard Sharpe, 1971; Don Reichert, 1977; Oscar Robertson, 1982; Bob Collins, 1988; Tom Bolyard, 1992; Jimmie Angelopolous, 1993; Dick Baumgartner, 1997; Mike McCoy and John Longfellow, 1998; Herb Banet, 2000; Sylvester Coalmon, 2006; John Coalmon, 2008; and Dick Haslam, 2012.*