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Unusual D-Day Remembrance at Owens Field

Article and Pictures by Ron Shelton

Owens Field Airport had a D-Day 60th anniversary remembrance on Sunday, June 6, 2004. We were paid a special return visit by Dan and Sylvia Rossman from Roswell, Ga. Lt. Col. Dan Rossman was a young Lieutenant and the left seat student pilot of B-25, GF-2, based at Donaldson Field (Greenville Army Airbase), Greenville, SC when the aircraft was lost in Lake Greenwood in 1944.

The last flight of GF-2 took place on the afternoon of 6 June 1944. The



Dan and Sylvia visit GF2 at the Curtiss-Wright Hangar on the 60th Anniversary of D-Day.

assigned mission was Pilot training in single-engine emergency procedures to be carried out at the 'auxiliary strip' at Greenwood, SC. GF-2 departed Greenville with instructor Lt. Jackson (recently returned from combat over North Africa and Italy) in the right seat and Lt. Wallace in the Pilot's seat.

Late that afternoon, with Lt. Rossman now in the Pilot's seat the airplane was Southbound over Lake Greenwood when the propellers touched the lake surface, effectively destroying them and making it

necessary to ditch the airplane in the lake. Eight minutes after 'ditching', GF-2 sank. The crew survived and Lt. Rossman continued on Army Air Force flight status for the remainder of WWII and then continued a military flying career for 30 more years. Of course, except for this unfortunate accident, Owens Field and South Carolinians would not have this magnificent artifact of WWII aviation history.

After nearly 40 years of being on the bottom of the lake, in 1983, Mr. Mat Self of Greenwood, SC implemented a recovery plan with the help of a Naval Reserve diving unit which ultimately made the aircraft available for its home in Columbia, SC.

The following is an edited summary of Col. Rossman's story of his Air Force career:

According to my Mom, I was about two when I put two clothespins together and made an airplane. I built my first model when I was six years old and always dreamed of flying like my hero, Jimmy Doolittle. Days after my nineteenth birthday, the Army lowered the entry age for Aviation Cadets to nineteen.

Four months later I started Basic Infantry training at Miami Beach as an Aviation Cadet Candidate Private. Selected for Pilot training in June 1943, I flew PT-19s, BT-13s and twin engine AT-17s and graduated in March 1944.

Primary Flight Training in PT-19s was relatively uneventful. Basic was not. My first day solo ended in a dead stick landing when the fuel pump died. My first night solo was interrupted by a snow storm that

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resulted in my first actual instrument flying after about all of two or three hours instrument training in the plane.

My first night solo cross-country was even worse. The engine caught fire and I joined the Caterpillar Club by rolling inverted, opening the canopy and pulling the belt.

During Basic Flight School we were asked to pick the operational plane we wanted to fly. That was easy-P-38!! Instructor: "O.K. then you want to go to Twin Engine Advanced, right?" "Right"!!! When I got there my Instructor asked the same question and got the same answer. He was puzzled. "If you wanted P-38s you should have gone to Single Engine Advanced".

Toward the end of Advanced I was told to select an operational plane assignment from the following: B-17, B-24, B-26 and C-47. I wrote, 1st: P-38, 2nd: P-38, 3rd: A-20 and ducked; first time I had ever disobeyed a direct order. I graduated with orders sending me to Charlotte, NC for A-20s. While waiting at Columbia, SC for the Charlotte class to start, my orders were changed to B-25s at Greenville, SC.



On 6 June 1944 (D-Day in Europe) during a flight practicing single engine procedures with me in the left seat, the instructor pilot decided that we should also practice combat type low level flying. Flying down Lake Greenwood, SC we got too low, the props touched the water and we had to ditch. It took twenty-four stitches to close the rip in my chin when the seat belt opened.

The court-martial took the Instructor's wings and commission. Not having yet been to combat I was allowed to continue after being reprimanded, fined and made to sign what amounted to an I.O.U. for the plane. That B-25 was recovered from the lake in August '83 and is on display at Columbia, SC. (author's note: Col. Rossman learned of the



Col. Rossman is a master builder and flyer of RC Model Aircraft.

recovery of GF-2 by accident while reading an article in a Philadelphia remote control model aircraft newsletter in early 1984. At that time he made contact with South Carolina persons involved in the recovery and has had a great 20 plus relationship reunion with our State ever since.)

In August 1944 our crew was sent to Savannah, GA to pick up an airplane and fly it to India for assignment to the 14th Air Force in China. Those orders were changed so that we were to fly to Biak, New Guinea via, California, Hawaii, Christmas Island, Canton Island, Tarawa, Guadalcanal and then Biak to deliver the plane and crew to the 13th Air Force in the South Pacific. The trip to California was uneventful except for a prop governor malfunction as we were 'transiting' the Grand Canyon, causing a three-day layover in Kingman, Arizona for repairs. Departure from

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California was delayed for six weeks by an historically severe weather front that kept even B-24s from getting through.



Dans's RC BT-13 Vultee Valiant Trainer.

Finally we were released to go---1:00 AM take-off. Two hours into the flight the weather turned bad--- contrary to the forecast-but we continued. We were never able to contact any of the three surface weather ships positioned to update our navigation and weather; and we never got the recall message. We flew actual instruments in weather all night --- by hand, no autopilot-and I saw my first St. Elmo's Fire. At sunrise, the Navigator came up to say that because of the weather he couldn't be sure of our position. Worse yet, it would be at least two hours before the sun would be high enough to take sun lines and establish our position. We were now in serious fuel trouble.

The flight was planned for about ten hours and we were approaching that time without the least idea of our position. We agreed to maintain our heading, told the radioman to keep trying on his radio and I used my commercial broadcast band radio to see if I could pick up anything.

Eventually, I faintly heard what I recognized as the Coca Cola theme song and realized I had picked up a commercial station, which hopefully would be Honolulu. Homing on that station indicated a 45-degree right turn to reach it. Maintaining the previous course would have taken us Southwest of Hawaii, an area no one would have thought to search. Finally, Diamond Head came into sight; I declared a fuel emergency and requested a straight-in approach. We landed with less than 50 gallons of useable fuel after flying thirteen hours, five minutes. We were the only plane to get through that day.

The trip to Guadalcanal was uneventful, but having reached that hellhole of an island, I couldn't wait to leave; the heat and humidity were unbearable. My admiration for the people who fought for that island is infinite. Take off the next morning was routine until we reached 5,000 feet and pulled the throttles back to level off. The right engine would not respond and stayed at a manifold pressure setting equal to the ambient pressure. Landing was uneventful.

Three of the people who met us had no insignia on their uniforms. During the interviews they identified themselves as Army Counter Intelligence. It took three days to find and repair the problem-a bolt was missing from the throttle line.



Dan and Sylvia visit the D-Day exhibit at the State Museum.

Some months later I was told the plane had been sabotaged while in Hawaii and the perpetrator had been caught. We had been in a long line of planes to have unusual problems.

From Biak, we were sent to Jungle Survival School-done excellently by the Aussies, and flew practice missions against 'soft' Jap targets. Prior to leaving this school I attended a Pilots Only briefing that graphically spelled out the gruesome fate that awaited captured American Pilots. Finally, we reported to the 75th Bomb Sq.

I have never forgotten the incoming briefing. It included statements such as, "...welcome to the war, you're not gonna like it..." and, ".. If you're here for medals, you've come to the wrong war. You won't get medals for doing what you're paid and volunteered to do."

At the time we joined the 75th, they were about two weeks into conversion from medium

altitude bombing to low level and everybody was learning how to do what the Pilots had always been prohibited from doing-low flying. Now, lower was better. In addition to fixed targets, we would be doing infantry close air support, shipping sweeps and road chasing.

My war has been characterized as 'combat at twenty feet' and 'the war in the trees.' A sign in front of Group Headquarters stated, "Home of the 42nd Bomb Group, specialists in no-altitude attack".

My first mission, flak suppression one minute ahead of B-24s bombing from 5,000 feet, gave me my first sight of the Japanese - I missed. My second mission, the next day, was a shipping sweep. I now fully understood what the Briefer had meant. The next day brought strike number three, against a Japanese headquarters complex. We went over the target in a right echelon. I was number five; number six got out of position and slid left in front of me.

Catching his propwash kept me from climbing over a palm tree sticking up from the palm tree farm we were overflying to the target. The impact took six to eight feet off the left wing and made it necessary to ditch the plane. 24 hours 15 minutes, 4.98743+ agonizing seconds later we were rescued.

When I returned from rest leave a week later, tactics had changed drastically and we went over targets in one or two plane strikes. Depending on the availability of aircraft, we flew five or six times a week, actual strike or practice.

By late July 1945, we had already been told that because of the upcoming invasion and a shortage of aircrews, all mission limits had been waived. And, briefings on the invasion assured us that air-to-air Kamikaze, already being experienced by the B-29s, were a certainty.

We already knew that the favorite Japanese attack was head-on and having twelve forward firing .50s under my thumb was little comfort. To make it worse, there was no Underground in Japan. If you came down, you were strictly on your own.

At war's end, two months short of my twenty second birthday, I had been flying 22 months, had over 700 combat hours, bailed out once, ditched twice, 'crash landed' three times, survived a dead stick landing (in a BT-13),

survived two engine fires and a double engine failure-this on take-off the last time I flew overseas. In total, I had lost six planes. As much as I loved flying, I had had enough! For some reason, I was having trouble sleeping.

When I processed off active duty in January '46, I agreed to stay in the Reserves. In the early fifties, the Air Force established a 'School House' program and I picked up qualifications in Automotive and Aircraft Maintenance. A few years later I decided to go back to flying and joined the Pennsylvania Air National Guard as an Aircraft Maintenance Officer and Pilot.

In the Guard, I flew the T-6, T-33, C-47 and TB-25K which we used to train F-94 Starfighter Pilot/Radar Observer crews. In 1959 I transferred to the Air Force Reserve which was flying the Troop/Cargo drop mission in C-119Gs as a Flight Test Maintenance Officer and Pilot. The 512th Troop Carrier Wing was one of the fourteen Reserve wings called to Active Duty in the Cuba Missile Crisis. I have always felt that President Kennedy's willingness to effect such a large scale call-up must have indicated U.S. seriousness to the Soviets.

The call-up orders stated two years, but thirty days later I was home. Those that wanted to stay two years were given the opportunity to do so. In 1970 the Air Force decided to equip the Reserves with C-130s. At that point I became Deputy Group Commander, Operations, and we were the first Reserve Group to be transitioned into C-130s.

After a rough 22 months of flying in the war, my flying years after the war were quite peaceful: One hung gear-successfully lowered eventually, one 'frozen aileron', one single engine and one total communications radio failure-fortunately on a clear night. All those flights ended with successful landings. An officer's length of service in the military is a function of rank.

My time ran out in 1972 and I retired. I have always been thankful for the opportunities that my country gave me, particularly that of being an Air Force Pilot.

Author's note: Please visit the World War II memorial web site and enter Rossman, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania in the registry search: <http://www.wwiimemorial.com>.

