

June 2010

Experimental Aircraft Association Chapter 33

A monthly publication of the Dr. Alexander M. Lippisch Chapter of the Experimental Aircraft Association, Cedar Rapids, Iowa.

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Read Back - Ghost of a Chance

By Jim Meade

Bill Somers was born March 23, 1920 and grew up in Hartwick, Iowa which is north of I-80 and west of Victor in Poweshiek county, one of six children of a man who made a living cutting hair in the Great Depression. After high school, the family moved to Lake City, southwest of Fort Dodge and Bill started trying his hand at various jobs and lived in several towns before ending up back home. With war clouds gathering, Bill decided on his 21st birthday to get a jump on the draft board and enlist in the Army Air Corps. He went to Jefferson Barracks, Missouri, for basic training. He wanted to be a pilot but his eyesight and lack of education made him look for other ratings. Somers ended up being an armaments specialist after training at Lowry Field in Denver. Just before Pearl Harbor day, he was assigned to become an aerial gunnery instructor at Las Vegas, NV. There, he trained airmen destined for overseas in all aspects of .50 caliber machine gunnery. After 15 months, he was a staff sergeant and got a furlough to home.

Leave at home included a visit to a roller rink where he had the nerve to cut in on a couple of cute girls and persuaded one to continue skating with him. They dated every night until he had to go back to base. This begins the core of Somers' memoir, which he describes as a love story about a man, a woman and a war. After these introductory prose chapters, much of the rest of the book are excerpts of the more than 400 letters that Bill wrote to Dorothy over the next four years of the war. Those of us of a certain age will remember what it is like to begin a wartime relationship that is filled with uncertainty and doubt. Where will Bill go? What will he do? Will Dorothy wait for him? Will he even survive to return? Letters were a way to nurture and develop a relationship. They let one vent



frustrations and say things one couldn't say to one's buddies or superiors. Letters were a way to spend time. Sending and getting them became a major staple of one's existence. Somers uses the letters as the framework for his memoir. He did not keep her letters, as he didn't want a clerk to see them if he were killed. Therefore, much of the structure is provided by his letters to her, which she saved.

In August 1943, Somers is assigned to a B-24 bomber at Biggs Field, Texas where he trained until being sent to Cerignola, Italy in January, 1944. They took over a plane called Ghost Of A Chance and decided to keep the name. Because of his armaments training, Bill was initially assigned as a waist gunner. The ball turret gunner was injured so Somers, at 5'6" one of the smaller member of the crew, took over the assignment for the rest of the tour. On one of his first missions, he is searching for enemy fighters at 25,000 feet when a crewman in the front of the plane needs to use the relief tube. Immediately, the ball turret window is covered with golden ice except for about a 2" hole to see through. Bill said it's a good thing there were no ME-109s around at the time.

This memoir gives a good overview of what a typical enlisted bomber crew member experienced in a tour of duty. He comments on tactics that seem to work and some of their narrow escapes. He ends up flying 35 missions which counts for 50, as longer missions give double credit. During his tour he shot down one German fighter. He also had the scary assignment to release some stuck bombs in a space too tight to wear a parachute. Somers flew on some of the worst missions of the war, including Ploesti. He also participated in the controversial bombing of Monte Casino.



When the crew completed their missions they were at first not taken off flight status because no replacement crew showed up. Somers gives a clear and direct description of their anger and frustration, and tells how they were so mad they almost refused to fly, which would have been a serious offense. In the end, weather kept them on the ground until another crew showed up and they did not have to fly another mission. The next crew to take their old plane out failed to come back from the very next raid.

As large a part of the book as the military life is the story of his courtship of the woman he would marry soon after he was released from service. The book includes some of Somers' life after the war. He goes to Iowa State College under the GI bill and becomes a successful ceramics engineer. His wartime experiences affected him greatly and he displayed his opposition to the Vietnam war. Somers died of heart disease in 1986.

This book shows the boredom, fear, hopes and frustrations of young people who came of age during or after the Great Depression and in time for World War II. Somers tells you in his simple, direct style how a young couple coped and adapted in one of the seminal periods of our times. He does not write deathless prose or have a gift with words, but his feelings come through clearly. Ghost Of A Chance was self-published. It's probably easiest to get the book from your local library, who can use an inter-library loan to get it for you. If you'd like to buy a copy, visit <http://www.booksurge.com/> or <http://ghostofachancebybillsomers.com/>

Last Meeting

For our may meeting we had the pleasure of having Norman Rudi of Ames Iowa talk with us. Norman, a WWII veteran, has authored four books describing the military experiences of twenty World War II veterans. Most of these veterans ended up living in the central Iowa area and include airmen, soldiers, sailors, and marines. Norman experienced the military first hand as a WWII veteran serving as a paratrooper in the 11th Airborne Division in the Occupation of Japan, after the fighting ceased and before the Korean conflict. Norman is in the middle of a fifth book and has a sixth book underway. He continues to interview World War Two veterans to get their stories, because he believes these stories should be preserved for future generations



Next Meeting - Change of Plans

Due to a scheduling conflict, Dave Lammer and his RV-10 will not be available. Also, we will not be meeting at McBride airport as we had planned. We hope to re-schedule that project visit soon in the future.

We will be meeting at the old Administration Building at the Eastern Iowa Airport (next to the Cell Phone Waiting Lot) from 10:00 AM to Noon on June 12th. Tentative agenda for the meeting:

1. Update on the B-17 Tour Stop scheduled for July 20-21.
2. Discussion with a local B-17 Pilot, Don Thompson (Not confirmed yet)
3. Presentation on upcoming runway construction at the airport (not confirmed yet)

Young Eagles

We will have a YE Rally at Washington June 6th from 9 AM till at least 11 or may be 12 noon. As always we need ground crew as well as pilots. If you can help out with either please contact Connie White rewwhite691@msn.com 319-393-6484

B-17 tour stop

Chapter 33 will host the B-17 "Aluminum Overcast" at Cedar Rapids, July 20-21, 2010. To book a flight please call 1-800-359-6217. Self Guided Ground Tours daily from 2-5 pm. Cost \$5 per adult, \$15 per family. Active Military or Veterans receive free ground tour.

Fly Market

FOR SALE the Lycoming engine I use to have in my Long ez is up for sale. It is a 0290 G 125 HP with 1900 hours on it The engine is short a fuel pump and Mags. It has an extra jug with piston and rings ready to install. It has a new set of rings for the overhaul and logs with the specs when first built and history while in the Long-ez. Asking \$1000 or best

Chapter 33 Calendar

Jun 12 10:30-noon Chapter meeting at the old Administration Building at the Eastern Iowa Airport, B-17 update, local B-17 Pilot, Don Thompson & CID construction.

June 13 Northwest Iowa Regional Airport - Spencer Airshow and fly-in breakfast. 7 a.m. Fly-in breakfast 10:30 a.m. Airshow

June 19 Keosauqua Municipal Airport, Fly-In Breakfast

June 27 6-11:30 am Marion Fly In Breakfast (C17)

July 20-21 Chapter 33 will host the B-17 "Aluminum Overcast" at Cedar Rapids

July 09 7pm - 9pm Chapter Meeting: Family day and cook-out Location: TBD



Wait a sec' ... this isn't the road to the terminal

In The June 2010 Issue...

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