



*I'm rerunning this in tribute of Don, who passed away Wednesday, December 28<sup>th</sup>.*

## Member Profile

*By Don Williamson*

It was during the early fifties that a friend of my dad's landed his J-3 Cub in our pasture near Vale, South Dakota, and that was my first real exposure to airplanes and the world of aviation. The pilot gave me a ride in the Cub and he let me manipulate the controls once we were in the air. What a thrill that was for a young farm boy, and from that time on I was hooked. Several years later, when I was old enough, I started taking flying lessons in an Ercoupe at the Belle Fourche airport under the instruction of Ivan Ellis. I joined the Belle Fourche Flying Cub and enjoyed flying "The Coupe" for 50 hours or so. I later joined the



Newell Flying Club, which had a Tri-Pacer that I obtained my private and commercial license in. I was still working on the family farm near Vale at this time when I decided to pursue the mechanical end of aviation when I could not find employment as a pilot. I enrolled at Colorado and obtained my A&P certificate in 1969. My first mechanic job was with Arnold Kolb in Spearfish, SD, and along the way I had obtained a CFI. I did mechanical work, flew as co-pilot

on the B-17 fire bombers from time to time, and did some charter work. When Arnold Kolb moved the tanker base to New Mexico, I decided to go to work for Hawkins and Powers in Greybull, Wyoming. I worked as an A&P on the fire tankers which were PB4Y-4's, the Navy version of the B-24. I also got some co-pilot time on these planes during the two summers spent in Alaska with the tankers fighting fires. When I was back in Wyoming with Hawkins and Powers, I did mechanical work. When I was not doing that, I was flying predator control, spraying crops, charter work, instructing and rebuilding Super Cubs. I moved to Sheridan and started working for Big Horn Airways, which was a subsidiary of Hawkins and Powers, in 1981. I moved there as a mechanic and then started flying aerial game surveys for the Wyoming Game and Fish, US Fish and Wildlife, and various coal mines that needed to do wildlife surveys on their properties. I flew over 5000 hours doing game surveys in the state of Wyoming, most of which was at 100 feet AGL or less, out on the prairie as well as in the mountains and am proud to say it was all done accident free. The flying slowed down in Wyoming and I took a job with Horizon Airways in Spokane, Washington as a mechanic and was there for a couple of years. I then went to work for Western Air Research out of Driggs, Idaho, flying a Maule doing game

surveys for three years. I worked for various companies throughout Wyoming until I moved back to Rapid City in 1999 and went to work for different contract companies on the National Guard C12 (Beechcraft King Air 200) until I retired a couple of years ago. In going through my log books for this profile it brought back memories of the various airplanes that I have had the opportunity to fly, mostly for business, but some for pleasure. I have flown most of the Cessna, Piper, Beechcraft, and Mooney single engine aircraft, along with a scattering of Maules, Aeroncas, Ercoupes, Call Air, and other agricultural aircraft, accumulating over 7500 hours. During my career I have obtained a Private license, along with Commercial, Instrument, CFI, and Glider ratings. I am also an A&P and IA. I have owned a J-3 Cub, Aeronca Champ, Bellanca 7GCBC, Cessna 175, Stitts Playboy and a VariEze. Currently I own an Aeronca 7CCM and a Piper J-3 which I try and fly weekly. My future goals are to get my float plane rating this summer and flying whenever I can.



*Don was a valuable asset to our chapter and volunteered a lot of his time to our projects. More importantly, he was a wonderful person and a good friend to all. He will be greatly missed.*



John Spangler setting up John Wilkinson (our Christmas dinner speaker) in a Mark 14 Spitfire in his simulator at his house on Wildwood Dr. Hard to tell who was more fun, but when a hint was dropped about "moving on", the only response was "Oh, I am having so much fun, I just want to stay here in my Spitfire"

## EAA Chapter 39 Christmas Dinner

**When:** January 14  
**Open Bar: 5:30**  
**Dinner: 6:00**

*People could start arriving at 5:00 to avoid long lines signing in.*

**Where:** SD Air & Space Museum

**Speaker:** John Wilkinson, RAF Spitfire pilot during WWII

**Cost:** \$25 per per person, \$13 for children (*depending on attendance*)

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*Reservations needed. If you haven't made yours, call Scott at 786-6198.*



### Chapter 39

#### Officers

President	John Glasford
Vice President	Arie LaCroix
Secretary	Gary Schroeder
Treasurer	Scott Christiansen

#### Volunteers

Newsletter & Web Manager	Molly Benkert
Young Eagles	Brenda Nolan
Safety Officer	Jerry Densmore

**Tech Advisor** Jerry Densmore

### TREASURER'S REPORT

*By Scott Christiansen*

Balance brought forward.....	\$3931.13
Income:	
Dues + 2 name tags.....	210.00
Balance on hand.....	\$4121.30

# December Minutes

By Gary Schroeder

- Meeting was held at the Club house
- John called the meeting to order at 7:04
- Minutes read and approved
- Treasures report given-----\$3961.25

## Old Business

- Arie gave us a report about the next open house. He had checked out prices for a DC 3 to possibly come and give rides and talked about the WWII Airborne group which could do a demonstration as a possible attraction.
- Scott advised the Christmas party will be catered by the same people that did it last year and it will be at the EAFB Museum and it was decided that January 14<sup>th</sup> would be the best date.
- The guest speaker lives in Spearfish and will need a ride to the banquet and back to Spearfish that night. This still needs to be arranged.

## New Business

- No meeting in January due to the Christmas Party.
- The Chapter Vice President resigned and John appointed Arie to the position to finish the term.
- The National EAA Chapter renewal is due.
- The Open House Board is to be set up using chapter members and the general aviation committee members as well as other none aviation people.
- There was a motion to pay higher rent for the club house; the rent will be \$15.00 now. Jerry P made the motion and Dan B second the motion, the motion passed.
- We can pay 2017 chapter dues anytime now to Scott.

## The Program

Jerry Densmore talked to us about winter operations and safety and there was some great discussion about Icing stories and maintenance ideas.

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## Visions of Grandeur



Submitted by Al N.

## *George Blair, B-25 bomber pilot, remembers World War II*

by *Duke Doering*

Writing in a long-ago declassified report, an officer from Sturgis rancher George Blair's World War II Air Corps Squadron described enemy response as "...meager inaccurate to accurate fire..."

On March 28, 71 years ago, Japanese machine gunners were "accurate" enough to cripple Blair's B-25J medium bomber, put the 10-ton airplane into ocean off Indo China (today's Vietnam) and compel Blair to generate a vision of his girlfriend that prevented him from drowning.

As South Dakotans join others across the nation to celebrate Veterans Day, the re-telling of Blair's Army Air Corps service in the Pacific Theater reminds everyone how the skill, bravery and sometimes luck of this veteran contributed to victory against Axis forces. Part of the 16 million men and women who served in uniform during that war, Blair also is symbolic of the countless veterans who returned to civilian life to marry, raise a family, be successful in a career and continue to serve, in Blair's case with four terms in the South Dakota House of Representatives.

Blair was born in 1921 in Pleasant Valley, six miles south and east of Sturgis. Learning in a one-room school, graduation from Sturgis High School in 1939 and work on a busy family cattle ranch were predictable milestones in his life until the 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor. From that point, Blair wanted to support the war effort as a pilot. However, to be accepted as a flying cadet during the start of the war, at least two years of college had to be part of a volunteer's academic resume, something Blair lacked.

So Blair traveled to Spearfish and talked with already legendary aviator Clyde Ice. The largely self-taught barnstormer, air transporter and flight instructor advised Blair to ignore the two-year college requirement because the military would soon be unable to recruit enough pre-qualified potential pilots. To enhance his eligibility for selection, Ice recommended immediate enrollment in classes at Black Hills Teachers College plus simultaneous evening courses in ground school. Along with classroom instruction, Ice could provide flying lessons in his two-seat Aeronca. By March 1942, Blair was in class with nine other College Training Program students and in the air over the Black Hills and surrounding prairie. Blair also started a courtship with Viola Hays, a college algebra classmate.



Next came extensive physical, mental and psychological testing. In May, Blair was sworn into the Army Air Corps. Learning the rudiments of being a soldier-airman followed at Randolph Field, Texas, where Blair was accepted into flight training in October. His military flight school began at the dual controls of the Stearman Kaydet bi-plane, followed by a second phase in the more powerful and complex BT-13A, the Vulcan Valiant, also nicknamed "The Vibrator" for its ability to shake aviators' bones plus the nuts and bolts that held everything together.

Commissioned as a 2nd Lt., and wearing hard-earned flight wings in August 1943, Blair wanted an assignment with the B-25 medium bomber in honor and respect for Lt. Col. “Jimmy” Doolittle, the leader of the nicknamed Raiders who completed a daring bombing mission over Japan in April of 1942, flying the versatile twin-engine plane from the deck of the aircraft carrier USS Hornet. Just 16 months after joining the military, one of the Air Corps’ newest pilots and former rancher got his wish. McClellan Army Airfield in northern California was Blair’s next duty station where he learned the fundamentals of operating the B-25, the winged workhorse that the nation’s aircraft industry eventually duplicated in several variants more than 9,800 times.

During night training missions, Blair and fellow students sometimes flew over Los Angeles where intense spotlights constantly scanned the skies. Blair still remembers getting “great advice” from instructors who cautioned the students to ignore the searing lights by looking down at the instrument panel and never outside.

Once qualified in the B-25, Blair was transferred across country to Columbia, S.C., for six months of additional flight training. By April 1944, Blair was cleared to join an operational bomber unit. He became part of three crews that flew shiny B-25s from a base in Savannah, Ga., back to his bomber starting point in California. The crews remained there for a week preparing for an island-hopping journey to Hawaii, Christmas Island, Guadalcanal and, eventually, a maintenance facility at Townsville, Australia, where the aircraft were painted in combat colors and retrofitted with newer machine guns. The first tactical duty station for the newly qualified aircrews became Biak, New Guinea, where Blair and his colleagues learned the fundamentals of in-theater operations and launched their first combat mission against a Japanese airfield.

All returned unscathed from their first taste of battle. Blair still can recall, “While we were dropping the bombs, I noticed some black spots occasionally appearing in front of me. It took a few seconds, and suddenly I realized they were shooting at me.” For nearly a year, he flew 46 more combat missions with the 501st “Black Panthers” Squadron of the 345th Bombardment Group, moving operational bases closer and closer toward Japan.

On March 28, 1945, Blair was part of a large mission that involved aircraft from all four of the Bomb Group’s squadrons. In his routine report, 1st Lt. Issac Baker, the squadron’s assistant intelligence officer, wrote the primary target for that day was to intercept a shipping convoy that had been sighted moving north in the Indo China Sea, with a secondary target of any land installation on the coast. By the time Group leaders got the formation over the anticipated ocean target area, no ships could be found.



They turned inland, with Black Panther aircraft assigned to sweep 60 miles of coastline from Phan Thiet to Phan Rang. Three flights of B-25Js found the My Thanh rail yard, dropping 27 bombs at maximum speed from very low altitudes and strafing the area with .50-caliber machine gun fire. Return fire from the defenders was not heavy, but it was enough to create a crippling oil leak in the starboard engine of Blair’s plane and pepper another Black Panther aircraft with holes. Blair made a quick decision to shut down the 14-cylinder Wright

Cyclone engine and “feather” its propeller to avoid further damage. Flying 15 more miles back to the mainland became a swiftly discarded option. If they landed safely, all would immediately become prisoners of war. Ditching at sea or landing on an unoccupied island were alternatives, with the more realistic hope that a U.S. submarine would be in the area to provide rescue.

Writing a summary of the attack the next day, Baker tersely described the few known details: “Plane 175 (Blair’s plane), hit by ack ack was forced to go on a single engine and when last seen was flying on a single engine at 1,230/1 [altitude] 15 miles off Cape Faux Varella on a 102 degree course. Pilot radioed squadron leader that everything was under control and he was trying to make it to Two Island.” He then goes on to identify Blair and five additional crewmen as “missing.”

What Baker did not know or did not report was the tense radio traffic drama in the sky in the minutes after Blair’s bomber received enemy fire. The leader of a different Black Panther flight quickly learned that Blair’s aircraft was in trouble and radioed the surfaced submarine U.S.S. Guavina that was patrolling in the area. Blair started transmitting a “Blue Fish, this is Blue Flyer,” message to contact the sub. The Guavina’s signalman then provided its location to Blair on the radio frequency his crew was monitoring. Ditching at sea, as close to the 311 ft. vessel as possible, became Blair’s best option. “We never had any practice ditching an airplane,” the longtime rancher ironically recalls, a maneuver impossible to rehearse with a land-based aircraft.

As the bomber started skipping across the ocean waves, Blair hit his head on a gunsight and was knocked unconscious. The plane settled into the water and temporarily remained afloat, an unconventional landing that Blair says was, “more luck than skill.” Within minutes, Blair regained consciousness and joined the other crewmen who were able to escape from the soon-to-sink aircraft. Blair was on the wing of the plane for a few moments before it went under, struggling to inflate both sides of his life jacket. Just half of the jacket filled, a perilous circumstance that nearly killed Blair as he fought “to get in sync” with the 10-foot swells that covered the airplane as it went to the floor of the Pacific Ocean. Tailgunner Staff Sgt. J.R. Richardson made it out of the fuselage but told a crewmate that he could not swim and was not seen again.

The attack on the rail yard became Blair’s last combat mission. By then he had exceeded the 100 points necessary for departure from the front lines of the war in the Pacific. Back home in Meade County, discharged from the Air Corps and married to his “vision” girlfriend Viola Marie. The couple soon was busy with post-war life, eventually raising nine children and managing the ranch. Viola passed away in 2002, just a few months before Blair was honored to receive a belated Purple Heart medal during a surprise, family arranged ceremony. Blair, now 95, continues to live on his ranch in Pleasant Valley.

***Ed. Note:*** A few of us were privileged to meet Gorge when a B-25 was flown into the SD Air & Space Museum. The crew of the B-25 was especially excited to meet George!