

GEORGE HOBART "HOBIE" STEBBINS JR WAR HISTORY

1941: Summer father accepts position in Seattle to act as General Mgr at Puget Sound Bridge and Drydock. Hobie drives his Mother, older sister and younger brother cross country to join their father and returns to Boston by train to attend school at MIT.

1942: Attending college at MIT, majoring in Physics.

1943-1944: Attends college at MIT through spring quarter and travels by train to Seattle to spend the summer with his family in Seattle. Concerned that he may be drafted into the service while in Boston going to school and not be able to see his family before being shipped out he decides to transfer from MIT to the University of Washington. Attends fall quarter at U ofW. Sometime during fall quarter his 53 year old father receives his draft notice for service. Understanding this to be a mistake, he explains to the draft board that they must mean his son. Remarkably, although Hobie had registered for the draft, the draft board had no record of his existence. Within 30 days Hobie was on his way to Army boot camp (in Texas?). He recalled to us how the first four weeks of training all they did was March. While in Army boot camp he read a notice requesting volunteers for the Army Air Force. He applied, was accepted and was sent to a new camp where he again marched for three weeks. While in Army Air Force boot camp he read a notice requesting applicants for Air Force officer training. He filed an application took some tests and was accepted into the officer training program. Once again, more marching. He was accepted into the pilot training program and the flying exhilarating. On one of his early solo flights he was instructed to fly a triangle route and then return to the base. Slightly bored by the long straight flight he spied some cows in a pasture. He couldn't resist diving down and buzzing the cows. As he approached the frenzied cows ran in all directions. Looking over his shoulder to see the mayhem he had created his focus shifted from flying to laughing at the cows. When he turned back, immediately in front of him loomed a big tree. He gunned the trainer and pulled back on the yoke to narrowly clear the tree. He heard a "thunk" at the back of the plane but wasn't concerned because the plane seemed to fly fine. With this out of his system he resumed his course and finished the exercise. Upon landing his flight instructor to ask him if he knew anything about a complaint they had received from a farmer about a pilot diving at his cows. While they spoke the flight instructor pulled a tree limb from the tail wheel of the trainer. Hobie admitted his transgression and explained how the limb had become lodged in the wheel fearing that he would be dropped from the program and punished. His instructor concluded the discussion by saying that Hobie's spirit was what they needed for pilots but that he would have to work on his judgment. A later judgment issue proved to change his path. After having logged several training flights in twin engine air planes in one of his final training flights before graduating from that class of airplane he flew with a new instructor. During a touch and go landing in the session Hobie landed hard, bouncing the plane off the runway. Because his most recent instructor had immediately taken control of the craft any time he had previously made a mistake, he instinctively let go of the wheel to avoid "wrestling" with the instructor. Unfortunately for both of them this instructor expected him to correct his error and regain control of the plane himself. The hard bounce and momentary lack of pilot response caused the plane to wildly veer. The disgusted instructor regained control of the craft and landed the plane. With little discussion the instructor informed him that he was washed out from pilot training. This was a tremendous disappointment. He was offered the opportunity to either train to be a navigator or a bombardier. He chose to train as a navigator. With his math and physics

back ground he was able to master the skills of a navigator easily. Upon completion of his training he was assigned to the Pacific and would fly from San Francisco to his assignment. His mother took the train from Seattle to San Francisco to see her son off to the war.

He was assigned to the island of Moritia (sp?) in the Marianas Islands. The island had been reclaimed from the Japanese within a few months of his arrival. Although they were cautioned that enemy forces remained on the island he saw no evidence of their presence.

They flew once every four or five days, many of the flights were submarine patrols. As such the time passed slowly. Being a strong swimmer he explored the coves and beaches for good places to swim. Other athletic airmen would occasionally join him to swim in the warm tropical waters.

One time while swimming one of his companions cut his foot on some coral. The fellow's foot became infected and he had to be hospitalized. When Hobie visited his friend he was intrigued with the possibility of securing a hospital mattress to put on top of his uncomfortable Government issued cot. Without any thought, he grabbed his friend's duffle bag and stuffed the mattress from the bed next to his friend in the bag. His friend could not believe his eyes. Cheerfully he bounded out of the hospital to deliver his new mattress to its new home. Just outside the door an MP stopped him. His heart sank. Remarkably, at that very moment the chaplain drove up in his jeep and offered Hobie a lift in his jeep. Seeing Hobie's standing with the chaplain, the MP let him pass.

Thanking the Chaplain for the ride Hobie placed his trophy on top of his cot. For the remainder of his service he enjoyed the comfort of a mattress. When he would return from a mission inevitably he would find someone in his cot enjoying his mattress. He didn't begrudge them using it while he was gone but didn't hesitate to boot them out when he returned.

Despite being in a tropical paradise, the long gaps between missions became tedious. He didn't play cards and found that one way to relieve boredom was to volunteer for additional missions. He found that occasionally the navigators from other crews would fall ill and that flight crews often needed replacements. This suited him fine as the time would pass quickly for a navigator on a mission. He logged numerous flights with other crews and in that way helped relieve the boredom of military service on the isolated island. Ultimately this proved to be advantageous. At the end of the war they sent the fellows who had accumulated the most missions home first. Although he and his crew had arrived latter than a large number of other crews, he had accumulated enough missions that he was one of the first to be sent back home. This frustrated his crew mates but after over 2 years away from home he was more than ready to leave.

In a pre-flight meeting for a troop support bombing mission, they learned that the Australian Army was bogged down in their efforts to take a hill top held by the Japanese and that they were being sent to soften things up. They were told that once over the target area the Aussies would provide them grid coordinates for dropping the payload. When they arrived at the bombing site they were greeted by an anxious request (in perfect English, to drop their bombs over the area where a green smoke bomb was to be deployed. Immediately green smoke appeared. Since these directions did not match their pre-flight instructions they were confused and hesitant to act. Suddenly over the radio in a clearly Australian accent, an enthusiastic voice rattled off coordinates which matched their chart. They made their bombing run and literally blew the top of the mountain off.

Circling the mountain after they had bombed it they could see the Australian forces storming the mountain top from the very location of the green smoke. The Australian voice thanked them and they realized that an English speaking Japanese soldier had attempted to coax them into dropping their payload onto the friendly forces. There is no substitute for proper training.

A dark story Hobie told involved how primitive native islanders were dragged into the war. Apparently an American air crew whose plane was badly shot-up by the Japanese succeeded in landing safely on a small tropical island. Unfortunately the Japanese were the first to get to the island and out of fear for the Japanese, the islanders turned the American flight crew over to the Japanese. When word of this reached the American forces the commanders were compelled to take definitive action. To intimidate the islanders into protecting stricken American air crews in the future, within the week a group of bombers were sent to level the island. Likely dozens of islanders were killed but the message was sent that the islanders had more to fear from turning over stricken airmen over to the Japanese than to risk attempting to hide the airmen from the Japanese. According to Hobie, throughout the rest of the war the islanders in this area made sure that American airmen were well taken care of and quickly turned over to American forces ..

The mission

The most remarkable mission Hobie flew was a mission to Borneo to bomb an oil refinery. Bombing missions to Borneo were routinely 14 hours and the planes flew in groups of twenty airplanes. As they approached the primary target they found it was covered in broken clouds. Out of radio contact with the other planes (7), the pilot (Ansley) decided to drop down to a lower elevation and hopefully break through the clouds. The cloud cover was persistent and Ansley decided to drop down to 15,000 feet. Suddenly they broke out of the clouds and Hobie and the bombardier identified the target directly in front of them. Clearing the clouds also permitted enemy anti-aircraft guns to spot them. Immediately the plane was rocked by an onslaught of AA fire. The bombardier steered the plane over the target and released the bombs. Upon impact the entire target area lit up in a huge explosion. The plane was instantaneously lifted 500 feet by the heat of the explosion. The explosion was photographically recorded. Heavily damaged by anti-aircraft fire the plane hastily headed away from the target. Soon if not immediately one of the four engines had to be shut down due to low oil pressure. Monitoring the radio they heard that the rest of the group had not been able to pierce the cloud cover at either the primary or secondary targets and had dropped their bombs on the "Snafu" target. Proudly they reported that they had hit and wiped out the primary target. Their adventure was not over.

With one engine out and another damaged but operable, they recognized that they were going to have trouble maintaining their altitude. This complicated their return because a mountain range that they would normally pass several thousand feet above, at the altitude they were flying might prove an obstacle. Hobie plotted a course that would have them pass between two mountains if they continued to lose altitude. Fortunately they cleared the mountains fairly easily. Bit by bit they did continue to lose altitude. Finally the cockpit crew resolved that every thing loose, including the guns, be jettisoned to lighten the plan. No sooner had they discarded their guns than they saw a small plane closing in on them from the opposite direction. They recognized this plane to be a Japanese zero. Their hearts sank. Amazingly, the plane passed them at a high rate of speed and just kept

going. Perhaps he was out of fuel and ammunition, regardless they were grateful. With 45 minutes to go the second engine had to be shut down. The cockpit crew recognized that they could not afford to lose anymore altitude. Ansley pushed the throttles of the two remaining engines through the red wire stops to gain thrust. The pilots had been trained that the throttles were not to be run beyond the stops for more than 30 minutes and they had 40 minutes to go. Within sight of the island they requested the runway be cleared for a potential crash landing" this is Boxcar 409 requesting an emergency landing, we have 2 engines out and are badly damaged". They could hear the tower order the runway cleared and then reported to the damaged craft that they were cleared to land. The plane landed smoothly and as the crew pulled back on the throttles of the overworked engines they both seized up. Climbing out of the plane one of the airmen actually dropped to the tarmac through a hole in the fuselage. "Daddy Longlegs" had flown its last mission. The damage was so severe that the plane was towed to the end of the runway, useless and beyond repair.

The photographs of the bombing confirmed that they had single handedly wiped out the primary target. They were the talk of the base.

The next mission

The group commander (?) was so impressed by the crew that he decided that he was going to fly the next mission with them to see how hot these hot shots were. He piloted the new replacement craft with Ansley as his co-pilot. The mission was uneventful but once the bombs had been dropped things began to take a strange twist. Rather than turn and head back, the commander backed the large plane into a steep dive. This caught all of them by complete surprise. The commander leveled the plane at well below 5,000 feet (?) and ordered the gunners to strafe the town. Despite protests from the crew they complied. Hobie was haunted by the vision of a lone bicyclist, one moment riding peacefully down the middle of the road, the next launched into the air, off his bicycle by multiple 50 caliber rounds. He and the rest of the crew were sickened. The commander pulled the plane into a climb and headed it back home, Defeated in the knowledge that this crew wasn't what he was hoping for._

The end of the war

In August of 1945 they heard news of two great atomic bombs which had each individually leveled two large Japanese cities. Having witnessed the effect of hundreds of bombs, this seemed inconceivable. When within 10 days the Japanese agreed to surrender, Hobie's only thought was at last I can go home.

Going home proved a challenge to his loyalties. The extra missions he flew qualified him to be discharged ahead of the rest of his crew mates. After all that they had been through together they all wanted to fly home together. Nevertheless, he had been given the opportunity to head home with the first group and no one knew for sure how soon his crew would be discharged. He made up his mind that he owed it to himself and his family to return home as soon as possible. Within a short time he was on his way home.

The return flight

Hobie was put in as Navigator with a more senior crew whose Navigator had become ill during the war and had missed a significant number of missions. Although he had flown with several different crews, he had never flown with this crew. They would be flying in a group of six planes past Jonson Island to Hawaii and then after a few days of layover to San Francisco. The atmosphere in the plane was relaxed with most of the crew playing cards. Hobie took celestial fixes and at day break a sun line (?) to plot their progress.

Though weather reports had forecast 80 knot tail winds, his readings indicated 80 knot head winds. Alarmed he quickly took another fix, performed the calculations and arrived at the same result. Immediately he advised the pilot of his findings and told him that they would not have sufficient fuel to reach Hawaii. The pilot radioed the lead plane and after a few minutes the lead plane radioed back that their navigator was equally confident that there was in fact an 80 knot tail wind and that they were much closer to Hawaii than Hobie's calculations indicated. After a brief conversation with Hobie, the pilot radioed the lead pilot that he was revising his course to Johnson Island. The plane arrived at Johnson Island at the exact time Hobie had calculated. Advised of the situation, immediately upon landing, Hobie was escorted to the control tower to review his calculations with flight operations personnel. They proved correct, and sadly, to his knowledge the other five crews were never heard from again