

Veteran Bill Ebersole

WWII Fighter Pilot Chances Death In Japanese Skies and Later Becomes Local Leader

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY MICHAEL STONE

Anna Ebersole and her husband, Bill, settle into chairs along their dining table, freshly cleared of newspaper and mail to provide a blank field for photo albums, commemorative military caps, a .50 caliber bullet, and other war souvenirs that reflect a time when Bill was a mere teenager playing fighter pilot.

Behind them, among the many trinkets on the hutch, is a winking Yoda figurine atop the inscription “YODA’ MAN!” Lying on the floor nearby is a live Yoda, the 11-year-old schnauzer, who hasn’t been the same since becoming diabetic.

“I never did know dogs could get diabetes,” Bill explains. “But anyway, he’s diabetic, and he has to have insulin twice a day.”

“Oh, he and Bill were having the best time in the world out in this dog park,” Anna says of the fenced-in yard with dog obstacles outside their Gainesville retirement-community apartment. “Bill could go out there, and he’d say, ‘Yoda, jump!’ ... He just loved it, and then that hit him.”

Yoda isn’t the only one having a bite of health woes. Bill, too, has had something pop up recently: awful rashes on his legs that he can’t help but scratch.

After telling him to stop and go see a doctor, Anna quickly eliminates one possibility. “I’ve had shingles three times. I know shingles. I think he’s got some kind of allergy.”

But the health setbacks of the Ebersole household aren’t ones to take the smiles off the welcoming couple’s faces.

In fact, authentic laughter emerges almost seemingly non-stop when Anna and Bill are together. And though the church friends have been married only since 2012 — joining after

Bill’s wife of 61 years, Wanda, passed away from Alzheimer’s — they share each other’s stories like their union has lasted decades.

“My grandchildren call him grandpa Bill,” Anna says.

The historical anecdotes the Ebersoles — Bill, 91, and Anna, who’s eight years his junior — reminisce about would be considered alien by many today.

Trustful hitchhiking. Linotype machines printing newspapers. Outdoor survival. And the unquestioning patriotism that carried 16 million U.S. men and women into the greatest armed conflict of all time.

“I didn’t have any fear,” remembers Bill, who flew a P-51 on escort, bombing and staffing missions over the Japanese mainland and elsewhere in the Pacific during World War II. “I wouldn’t sit around worrying about it. I figured if I’m going to get shot down or hit or killed, so be it — that my job is to go out there and do it.”

Bill started life in the small town of Arcadia, Florida, where he learned how to thrive in the woods as a Boy Scout and grew up to be quarterback for the DeSoto County Bulldogs.

He graduated in June 1942 at age 17 and didn’t turn 18 until after he’d started college at the University of Florida that fall. The draft had launched even before Pearl Harbor, on Sept. 16, 1940, so to make sure he didn’t end up in a foxhole, Bill signed up as a reservist for the Army Air Forces soon after his birthday.

“They wanted the youngsters, who are fearless,” Anna remembered. “They were.”

During Bill’s time at UF, he got to make a few marks, in-



Mustangs and striped tails away from the mission at North Field. Identification numbers (from the left) are '582' P-51s (44-72672), '565', '575' My Madge (44-72602), '593' (44-72803), '591' Miss French and '592' Susie Kae (Harrison Shipman)

Acco... eng... all... Ebersole, wrote... received credit... ground (on 23 June). When... fear of our 16-aeroplane squad... target, firing at random to delect...



Mice were a constant problem in the quarters on Iwo Jima, but the little critters met their match in 1Lt William G Ebersole, youngest pilot in the 462nd FS. When the men in his Quonset hut held a contest to see who could kill the most mice, and began keeping a trigger for 1Lt Bob Graham's trap - known as the 'Graham Cracker' - and won hands down. Here, Ebersole (left) is presented with a medal honouring his success in front of the scoreboard (Bill Ebersole)

“With all the bullets ricocheting and [the enemy] shooting at you, it’s a real exciting time to be in the middle of that.”



cluding joining a fraternity, Sigma Chi, which at the time lived in the 1930s six-white-column house on University Avenue that still stands today but is now home to Delta Upsilon.

He characterized joining a fraternity back then as “kind of brutal” and said the process involved “a lot of hazing.” Pledges, he said, had to collect signatures on a 3-foot-long paddle from all brothers; to get a signature, the pledge had to let the brother use the paddle.

“What do the members get out of this?” Anna inquired.

“Some of those guys would say, ‘This is kind of a smart-ass boy. I’m going to really knock him halfway across the room,’” Bill recalled.

One advantage to being a new student on UF’s campus: the

orange-and-blue skull caps freshmen wore, making hitchhiking back to Arcadia easier for Bill at a time when only one member of his fraternity had a car.

“With your little rat cap on, they knew that you were a student, and [it] was easy to get rides,” he said.

“I remember then that if you had a car and there was a boy hitchhiking, you picked him up,” Anna added. “You knew that a soldier, too, was safe to pick up.”

One day in January 1943, Bill overheard on campus that the Air Forces’ reserve units had been called up, so he went back to the Sigma Chi house to call his dad and confirm. Sure enough, Bill had received a letter saying to be in Miami Beach on Feb. 24 to start his training. Still newly 18, he hadn’t even



Bill Ebersole, a 91-year-old World War II fighter pilot veteran, holds a jacket with his various medals (above) in his Gainesville retirement-community apartment. Time often claims WWII veterans' mementos from the war, but over the decades, Ebersole has kept tabs on his, including his military ID card (below).



finished his first semester because fall semesters at the time extended past Christmas.

Miami Beach was the first in a string of cities and airfields — Clemson, South Carolina; Maxwell Field in Montgomery, Alabama; Craig Field near Selma, Alabama; Tallahassee and others — Bill bounced around to during his two years of training.

Bill even got back to Arcadia, which was near Dorr Field, an old World War I air base. He figures his dad, an Army flyer who was still training when WWI ended, had something to do with the move because of his connections through doing printing for the Air Forces.

The trainings included navigation, engine mechanics, a whole lot of drills and eventually flying, which he did for the first time at Dorr. Bill remembered many of his classmates getting lost over the Florida landscape, but his time outdoors allowed him to skip their mistakes.

“I’d hunted and fished in all the rivers and lakes,” he said. “I knew the [area].”

Flying started out with heading straight and level, then precise turns were added, then chandelles and lazy eights, then spins and flips.

After a while at Dorr, Bill was selected to compete in an air acrobatics competition, and his parents came to see him compete.

“I was a little bit sloppy on the recovery,” he said of a slow roll, “so I came in second.”

Planes Bill learned in included the PT-17 biplane, the Vultee B-13 Valiant trainer monoplane, the North American T-6 Texan trainer monoplane, and eventually the iconic P-51 Mustang fighter, used mostly during the war for strafing and escorting bombers over long distances.

Bill recalled advancing at a faster pace than many of his classmates.

“I’ve never been an A student, but when you’re getting ready to go into something that’s that serious, I didn’t have anything else to do and I really worked at it,” he said.

And on April 15, 1944, at Craig Field, he graduated with his wings as a second lieutenant. He was just 19.

“Who was it who said they liked to get you young ‘cause your brain wasn’t fully formed?” Anna joked.

The thing to do upon graduation was age the wing badge by soaking it in lemon juice and polishing it, making the wearer appear more venerable, and there was also a trick to age the cap. But no amount of uniform erosion could disguise a baby face.

One day, soon after graduation, a sergeant was walking opposite Bill and offered a salute.

“Excuse me, sir,” the sergeant said to Bill. “Can I ask you a personal question?” I said, ‘Sure. What is it, sergeant?’ He says, ‘How old are you?’”

Signing up in October 1942, Bill’s orders to ship out finally came around Christmastime 1944. He was assigned to the 20th Air Force, 506th Fighter Group, 462nd Fighter Squadron in Lakeland, Florida, and from there, Bill and his fellow flyers left for Seattle, then Pearl Harbor in Hawaii, then eventually Iwo Jima, reaching the island on May 11, 1945.

In February and March, the Marines had lost almost 7,000 of their own taking Iwo Jima from the Japanese. The move had three purposes: stop the Japanese fighter-plane base there, give U.S. bombers returning from Japan a place to land, and provide a launch site for U.S. fighter planes to escort the bombers.

The Japanese hadn’t been fully removed by the time Bill arrived — in fact, the last two holdouts didn’t surrender until 1949, according to the History channel. When Bill arrived, trip flares were still lighting up the night’s sky, no one went anywhere at night, and soldiers weren’t sleeping directly atop their beds for fear of being stabbed.

“At night, you’d hear somebody say, ‘Halt! Halt!’ And they’d go *Buh-duh-duh-duh-duh*. You hear a machine gun. Everybody was so jumpy.”

Though Bill and other P-51 pilots were brought to the island to serve as bomber escorts, the bombers needed less and less protection as Japan’s air power dwindled.

Of Bill’s 14 missions, only two — both to Osaka, Japan — had him serving as an escort. Yet with pilots still needing tasks, most missions wound up being strafing ones, plus two in which he dropped the bombs himself from his P-51.

Those two short-range dive-bombing missions were to Chichi Jima, an island about 150 miles north of Iwo Jima that linked Japanese communications and was a frequent and costly target for the Americans.

Chichi Jima is most famed for perhaps its link to a young pilot named George H. W. Bush, who barely survived an attack on the island in September 1944. Though Bush’s Avenger bomber was shot down and lost its two other crewmembers, he successfully parachuted into the ocean, and a U.S. submarine was later able to rescue him thanks to the still-aloft

planes fending off the Japanese boats that zipped out to imprison him.

During each of the two missions, Bill dropped two 500-pound bombs on the island’s communications infrastructure. He didn’t witness whether they caused damage, though, because the bombs were meant to force their way into the ground and go off six hours after being released.

“I remember watching my watch and saying, ‘In five more minutes, that thing’s going off;’” Bill said. “And I was sitting back at Iwo.”

Though Bill didn’t get entangled in any dogfights, the action

was intense and dangerous. During several missions, anti-aircraft bursts dotted the sky, and one caught the plane directly to Bill’s side piloted by a man named Rosenblum.

The burst knocked out Rosenblum’s coolant, meaning the engine would eventually overheat and catch on fire. So he ejected, but the plane was going too fast, sending its horizontal stabilizer straight into Rosenblum immediately after ejection. He didn’t deploy his parachute.

Bill saw it all and circled above for a long time so the body could at least be recovered, but he had to eventually head back because of low fuel.

Because of the P-51’s distance capabilities, Bill’s missions were often VLR (very long-range) ones, with five of the 14 being between seven and

eight hours and another five being more than eight. (Once, he landed with only five minutes of gas left.)

Strafing took place on airfields on the Japanese mainland or boats at sea. For an airfield attack, 12 planes would fly in a line 30 yards apart at treetop height while another four would circle above for protection against counterattacks.

With the 12 planes going 400 miles per hour together, bullets from their six .50-caliber machine guns whizzing this way and that, and the Japanese firing from the ground, Bill called airfield runs his scariest yet most exciting times during the war.

His first of two documented successes happened during one, the destruction of a grounded bomber, and his other was helping sink a “sugar dog,” a tanker of less than 1,000 tons, in the Inland Sea, which is encircled by three of Japan’s four main islands.

Bill flew his last mission on Aug. 5, 1945, strafing the Tachikawa airfield in Tokyo, and the next day, the Little Boy



Ebersole, who wasn’t yet 21 when he flew his last mission the day before the Little Boy atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, is still called “the kid” at Army Air Forces reunions.



The Ebersoles go through Bill's notes from his time in the Air Forces. Too young then to serve in the war, Anna is directly connected in a few ways, including Bill and her son-in-law's father, Thomas Ferebee, the bombardier on the Enola Gay who held the controls that released the Little Boy atomic bomb on Hiroshima, Japan. "He hit the target exactly like they wanted it hit," she said.

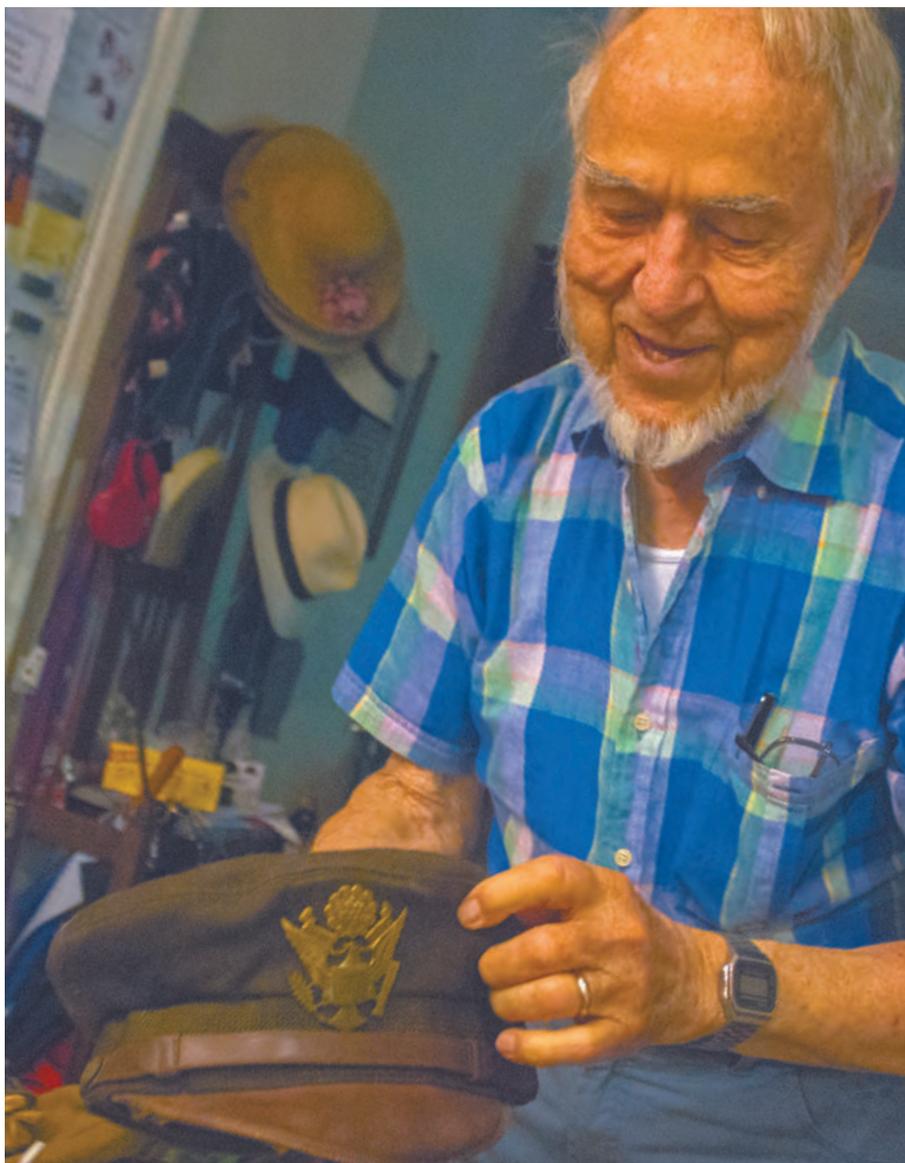
atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima. The second atomic bomb, Fat Man, fell on Nagasaki on Aug. 9, and Japan publicly announced its surrender six days later.

Oddly enough, Anna's daughter married the son of Thomas Ferebee, the bombardier of the 12-man crew on Little Boy's bomber, the Enola Gay. He was chosen to select the specific target (he went with the Aioi Bridge because its T shape was easily recognizable from the sky), and he held the controls that released Little Boy, essentially making him the first to drop an atomic bomb in war and only one of two to do so.

Ferebee died in 2000.

"He hit the target exactly like they wanted it hit," said Anna, who didn't have vivid recollections but remembered talking with him at family events. "It's pretty clear, I think, that [the bomb] was the proud moment in his personal history."

After the war, Bill went back to UF under the G.I. Bill and graduated with his journalism degree in 1949, studying under early journalism teachers Elmer Emig, Bill Lowery and John Paul Jones. He started with the Gainesville Sun while still in school, working nights operating the bulky Linotype typeset-



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ting machine.

He climbed up to daytime advertising, then general manager from 1965 to 1971, then publisher from 1971 until his first retirement in 1985. (He took on real estate for another 20 years before really retiring.)

In 1984, he gave the Sun’s last Linotype machine, which had been in storage, to UF’s College of Journalism and Communications, and all two tons still stand in Weimer Hall’s open-air first floor.

“You could see it coming,” Bill noted of the monumental changes in the news business during his career and after. “It wasn’t a surprise. In fact, we [at the Sun] kind of led the charge in many areas.”

Today, Anna and Bill frequent area veterans events and travel to World War II pilot reunions, during which 91-year-old Bill is called “the kid” because he was just 20 when the war ended.

Among his post-war recognitions was being selected as an honorary Mr. Two Bits before UF’s November 2014 football game against Eastern Kentucky.

“For me, I was a little bit threatened by it,” the father of two and grandfather of two said of leading the pre-game chant in front of so many people. “But I got through it all right.”

When reflecting on the war as a whole, Bill’s first thought is appreciation for the thousands of Marines who gave their lives taking Iwo Jima.

But as for himself, he said: “I feel like I did a lot more than most everybody would’ve had a chance to do,” namely the rush of strafing an enemy airfield. “With all the bullets ricocheting and [the enemy] shooting at you, it’s a real exciting time to be in the middle of that.”

But because of his training and focus, he added, “I don’t remember ever being afraid of anything.” ■