Leverett Richards Highlights Annual Meeting

By William Villani
Happy Birthday, Leverett Richards!
Portland's veteran aviation scribe turned 89 this Valentine's Day. He will highlight the museum's Annual Meeting March 15 at Cottage Grove's Village Green Inn.

Born in Pueblo, Colorado, in 1908, Richards got his start in journalism at age 17 when his first published story (an interview with the then-81-year-old daughter of famed Indian fighter Gen. Nelson Miles) appeared in the Bozeman Chronicle. After graduating cum laude from the University of Washington with a degree in journalism, he went to work first for Vancouver's Clark County Sun and then for the Oregonian. He still goes to the office every weekday looking for one more story to write.

The "Bald Eagle," as some call him, got his first taste of aviation as a youngster in Montana when a barnstormer gave him a hop. Later, after moving to Vancouver, he talked rides out of the 321st Observation Squadron pilots at Pearson Field. "After that, I was hooked," he says.

Together with four others, he went in on a Kinner Bird purchased from Pearson Field personality "Dad" Bacon. The Kinner proved tempestuous on Richards' first trip out of the pattern, blowing a sparkplug and necessitating a forced landing in a pasture. One of the partners later wrote off the Bird by crashing through a fence.

A big scoop for Richards involved the 1937 landing of the Russian pilots at Pearson after their flight over the North Pole. Coverage (continued on page 5)
Random Flight
By Roger Starr

From an obscure classified advertisement to a major Museum undertaking are the words that come to mind when thinking about our Rankin Great Lakes project. In the short span since that ad appeared in Trade-A-Plane late last fall, the Museum has committed to the purchase of the airplane, solicited and collected a portion of the necessary funds and has formulated plans to raise the balance of the purchase price as well as money to restore this artifact.

Director Allen Alsing and Museum member Ron Bartley of Ashland presented their fundraising plans at the February directors meeting. The enthusiasm displayed by both Al and Ron is manifested in their plan. They have unearthed some very exciting sources of information and pictures relating to Tex Rankin and his flying career. This type of dedication and enthusiasm is contagious. We all owe a thank you to Al and Ron.

The last time I wrote about our hangar facility project at Cottage Grove, I mentioned that the Board had made a decision to delay its construction. At that time we were asked to keep the specific reasons under our flying helmets. Since then, the Oregon Aeronautics Division has publicly announced the $1.4 million improvement project at Cottage Grove. This project requires a 10% match from state and local sources, with the balance coming from the FAA. Aeronautics has proposed that the 10% come from the sale to a local developer of approximately four acres of land it owns across from the Village Green. This parcel is currently used for transient aircraft parking. A portion of this parcel was to be leased by OAM for our building site. The Board felt that we should not prevent the sale by proceeding with our building that would have been in the middle of the developer's project.

We have not abandoned our desire to build at Cottage Grove. Our needs have been presented to both Aeronautics and the developer. At this time they are in the very preliminary stages of purchase talks. As a matter of fact, an appraisal of the property has not been completed. There is no assurance that such a sale will even take place. In any event, OAM has proposed that we move our site further east on this parcel in order to retain access to city services and the taxiway. We are very eager to move forward with our building. At the same time, we are mindful of the benefit provided to the entire aviation community by the airport improvement project and our need to not be an impediment to it. Stay tuned for further developments.

Our annual meeting is once again upon us. I hope you are able to attend. The program will be very interesting and I am sure you will be interested to see and hear about our current projects. Thanks to vice-president Royce Beatty for his work arranging this meeting.

I would also like to personally thank Rex Hume of Williams for agreeing to have his name placed on the ballot as a candidate for Director of your Museum. Rex has been a longtime member and supporter of OAM. You may recall his name appearing in this column regarding his work on restoring our Stinson SR-5 project. I am sure Rex will attend the annual meeting and bring us up to date on his progress. Thanks Rex.

P.S. We should have a door prize for the first person able to locate Williams, Oregon on the chart!

IMPORTANT NOTICE
If the address label on this newsletter has a date coupled with an asterisk, your membership is PAST DUE. The museum vitally needs your support to successfully execute the Great Lakes and hangar projects. Please do your part by RENEWING NOW if you fall into this category. It will pay dividends in history preserved, and future generations will thank you.
Oregon Heroes

2nd Lt. Thomas Chatterton 487 BG, 836 BS

Newport, OR

By William Villani

Christmas Eve 1944: German troops are on the move in Western Europe in their last-ditch drive against Eisenhower's armies. Dismal weather has grounded the Allied air forces, but today it has lifted, and the word goes out to the bomber stations: "Total Effort." Over 2,000 aircraft will be launched in what will prove to be the 8th Air Force's biggest day of the war.

This day 2nd Lt. Thomas Chatterton of Newport will fly as copilot on a B-17 of the 487th Bombardment Group's 836th Squadron. The Chatterton family was by this time well-established in Yaquina Bay fishing circles, and Tom Chatterton Sr. had become a veteran and respected skipper after his return from service in World War I. Now his son was working to bring that conflict's sequel to an end.

Chatterton and crew had completed 16 missions and were scheduled to fly element lead. They were on a 48-hour pass when the weather suddenly cleared, however, and it took some time to assemble everyone back at base. As a result they ended up as the trailing plane (number 13) of the low squadron - "coffin corner," the position most vulnerable to fighter attack.

Brigadier General Fred Castle had come down from headquarters to lead the 487th on this mission, testifying to its importance. The target was Babenhausen, Germany. To get there the Fortresses had to cross over Belgium, and they were intercepted by a gruppe of Me-109s near Spa. Ground haze had delayed the P-51 escort back in England, and the Messerschmitts were able to tear into the bomber formation.

Chatterton's B-17, serial number 44-8614, was among those hit, the right wing being set afire. The plane was crippled, but Chatterton had the controls and could not leave his position without dooming the plane to a spin. Had that happened, the centrifugal forces would have trapped the crew in the dying bomber - no one would have gotten out. He stayed despite the flames.

Bombardier Richard Ceder later wrote of what happened. Dazed after being blown from his seat, he saw Chatterton crawl down from the cockpit. The severity of the burns his copilot had incurred in the fight to keep the plane airborne for a few more minutes was apparent. Chatterton took Ceder's hand, said, "goodbye, Dick," and collapsed.

Convinced his copilot was dead, Ceder bailed out a couple of minutes later. He was one of five who parachuted successfully over friendly territory. The bodies of Chatterton and Sgt. Stanton, the engineer, were later found in the wreckage of the plane. Their bodies were returned to the U.S. for reburial in 1950. The Pentagon did not bother to notify Chatterton's survivors that his remains had come home.

The 487th lost three other B-17s during the attack, plus five others damaged beyond repair. One of those shot down was that of Gen. Castle, who like Chatterton had stayed with his burning Fortress and died giving his crew a chance to escape. Castle received the Medal of Honor, and Castle AFB in California was named for him. Lt. Chatterton received no decoration for his sacrifice.

Besides a young widow, 21-year-old Tommy Chatterton left a son he had never seen.

Acknowledgements: thanks are due to the Chatterton family, Neil Matz, Harold Chatterton, Tim Dean, and the Lincoln County Historical Society.
Tex Rankin Update

By Art Lumley

On February 24, 1947, John G. "Tex" Rankin, one of America's greatest pilots, died in the crash of a Republic Seabee amphibian at Klamath Falls while on a routine business flight. During a career which spanned the period from the end of World War I to the end of World War II, he inspired and trained untold thousands of our nation's aviators. Recently, the Oregon Aviation Museum completed arrangements to acquire the remains of the "Rankin Special" Great Lakes biplane which he used in his Air Circus. After languishing for years in a Pennsylvania junkyard, this famous aircraft will soon be transported to Oregon for restoration.

In 1922, "Tex" started the Rankin Flying Service in the Portland area and as an instructor and flying school operator trained 3,500 pilots prior to WWII. During the war, his Rankin Aeronautical Academy trained over 10,450 cadets for the Army Air Force, twelve of whom became aces.

When NC315Y left the Great Lakes factory in 1931, it had been built with aeronautics in mind. Later that year, Tex used this airplane to set his longstanding record of 131 consecutive outside loops, an amazing feat for a craft that had only a 100-horsepower engine. He sold the Great Lakes in 1932, but bought it back in 1936 and had it rebuilt utilizing a 150-horsepower Menasco engine. It was then re-registered as NX315Y and referred to as the "Rankin Special."

A fundraising drive has been initiated to complete the purchase and restoration of the Rankin Special. This project is being headed up by Ron Bartley of Ashland. Ron's father, Ray, was the chief mechanic for Tex Rankin for three years. Individuals and groups are encouraged to make tax-deductible donations to the Museum on behalf of this undertaking.

Those individuals who have actually seen Tex fly are eligible to join a unique organization: the "I Saw Tex Fly Club." Membership will be granted to each qualified person who donates a minimum of $25. Members will receive a copy of an autographed photo of Tex standing beside his Great Lakes and a certificate with the member's name, location, and approximate date of the event, as furnished by the applicant. This type of donation is also tax-deductible and can be sent to the museum at its regular address. (Please note on check: Tex's Great Lakes.)

To facilitate the Great Lakes restoration project, the museum would also like to obtain memorabilia and information that pertains to Tex Rankin's career including dates and locations where the Tex Rankin Air Circus performed. Any such items can be sent to Ron Bartley, PO Box 3069, Ashland, OR 97520-0303, phone (541) 482-8561.
Richards

(Continued from page 1)

like this eventually earned him the byline of Aviation Editor for The Oregonian, a title previously used by Webster Jones, whom Richards remembers as a "good reporter." Richards would go on to cover most of the major aviation stories of the Portland area, in the process interviewing such luminaries as Tex Rankin and Edith Foltz.

His writing career was interrupted by service in World War II. Richards joined the Civilian Pilot Training Program and went to Bessie Gale Halliday's operation in Ontario to become certified as an instructor. After that he was sent to California, where he introduced trainees to the ways of the sky.

Some of them weren't so quick to catch on. Richards was shooting landings with one pupil when the student unexpectedly cut back the mixture on approach. Fancy turns were called for as other trainees cut in front of the now-glicing airplane. They got down safely, in spite of the fact that control never answered Richards' transmissions.

Later on he was introduced to the B-29, but the war ended before he and his crew saw combat. Richards then returned to Portland and the aviation beat, reporting on and also helping plan several of the air tours of the late 1940s. He also joined the reserve troop carrier wing at Portland Airbase, serving with the unit from its date of inception.

One of those he flew with was former B-17 pilot and eccentric cartoonist Homer Groening. (Groening's son, Matt, went on to create the popular television program The Simpsons.) Richards remembers that Groening could hold his breath longer than anyone he'd ever seen - six whole minutes. "I'd sit there in the copilot's seat and time him," Richards recalls.

Richards was with the 403rd Wing when it transitioned from C-46s to the newer Fairchild C-119 Flying Boxcars. Many negative comments concerning the Fairchild product have made their way into print, but Richards remembers them as a step up from the Curtiss Commandos. Once he had an engine fail in a C-119 at 11,000 feet over Eugene. (Fortunately there was no load on board.) "It happened on a Sunday afternoon, so of course the whole squadron was on hand to judge the landing," says Richards.

It was through his connection with the reserve wing and its onetime commander, Portlander Gen. Chester McCarty, that Richards was assigned as a press officer to Operation Deep Freeze in 1956. (Tales of Deep Freeze will serve as the basis for Richards' slide presentation at the annual meeting.) This Navy-Air Force operation in the difficult Antarctic region would see the first aircraft land at the South Pole. Richards was circling above in a C-124 and photographed the event.

Over the years Richards has built up close to 11,000 flying hours. He has climbed many mountains, including Mt. Fuji, and published three books: Ice Age Coming: The Story of Glaciers, Bergs and Ice Caps; TAC: The Story of the Tactical Air Command; and his latest work, Elephants Don't Snore. This book, which will be available at the annual meeting, includes many anecdotes from his flying and reporting days. Come out and pick up a copy.

(The author would like to thank Leverett and Virginia Richards for their hospitality and assistance with this article.)

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1997 Annual Meeting

Featuring Leverett Richards, formerly aviation editor for The Oregonian

Saturday, March 15

1PM in the Map Room, Village Green Inn, Cottage Grove

- Light refreshments will be served -

Mr. Richards will present a 10-15 minute color slide presentation concerning Operation Deep Freeze, the joint Navy-Air Force expedition to Antarctica in 1956. A short question-and-answer session will follow.

Copies of his new book, Elephants Don't Snore, will be available at the meeting for $16.95. The book contains anecdotes of northwest aviation events including the landing of the Russian ANT-25 at Pearson in 1937 and the first documented manmade snowstorm, seeded by a BT-13 over the Columbia Gorge.

The meeting is open to the public, so bring a friend and enjoy this presentation by one of the area's most remarkable aviation personalities.
OAM at RV Mall

During January, visitors to Medford's Rogue Valley Mall had a chance to view an attractive display "window" concerning the museum designed and installed by Pamela Davis-Lumley. This featured a sectional map and George Yates material from the museum collection; a Douglas World Cruiser model loaned by Don Wells; a helmet from Ron Bartley; a headset courtesy of Merle Mills; an aviator's scarf from Al Alsing; and an artificial horizon from Art Lumley. The exhibit has now been retired and the loaned items returned.

Informational brochures were made available to interested members of the public courtesy of the mall information desk while the display was in place. The museum wishes to thank the Rogue Valley Mall for this opportunity to publicize our mission and Pamela Davis-Lumley for her initiative and skill in preparing and putting together the display. Thanks are also due to those mentioned above who loaned artifacts. Good job!

(Photocourtesy Art Lumley.)

Oregon Aviation Museum
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