



THE OFFICIAL NEWSLETTER OF THE 63RD PRESERVATION SOCIETY AND THE WWII FLIGHT TRAINING MUSEUM • DOUGLAS, GEORGIA

John Blair Watson, Jr. – A Cadet's View of Douglas: Part II

*An Account by John Blair Watson,
Jr., as edited by Sue Harrington*

HISTORIC
SIGNIFICANCE

*** In the last issue of *Cadet Flyer*, we followed cadet John Blair Watson on his journey from Maxwell Field in Montgomery to Waycross, Georgia by train. The cadets were to wait in Waycross for trucks to take them to Douglas. After a night on the train, they left the train in search of a clean washroom. ***

“We had little success so decided to sit down on one of the benches which was in a little park next to the station. The town was just beginning to stir with a car driving by now and then. A few people walked along the sidewalk across the street as if they might be going to their employment places rather early. We noticed a line of shops including one very welcome barber shop. We strolled over to find out when it would open and found we would have to wait for over an hour. Luckily, there were some benches in front of the shop, so we decided we could be first in line by occupying them. My buddy, Ed, decided to go looking for something to eat while I maintained our favorable position. It was sometime before he returned with some coffee and egg sandwiches. He had been able to find a restaurant around the corner which was already beginning to fill with other cadets from our train. He told some of them about the barber shop, so we were soon joined by others waiting for it to open.

“By the time the barber shop opened it appeared there would be enough customers for the entire morning. However, our favorable position got us in and out first. The shop was well equipped with a number of wash basins and several shower stalls as well. We got our shower after our shave and haircut. As long as we stayed in the shop we saw a steady line of grimy cadets troop through the place. Once refreshed and feeling clean again, except for rumpled uniforms, we went out to sit in

the park until the trucks came. This must have happened about mid-morning.

“It was a rough ride in the six-by-six army trucks up to Douglas, a distance of approximately thirty miles, taking over an hour I’m sure. However, the sight we found upon arrival was well worth the uncomfortable trip. My first impression was that of a country club which had been just completed. There were areas of brown dirt which would soon have grass growing on them. There were buildings still getting finishing touches.

“The trucks took us through a rather fancy main gate with its guard house where the first truck stopped to be identified. Once inside, one could drive to the left or right around an oval track which enclosed a set of tennis courts, I think six in all.



John Blair Watson, Jr.

Near the main gate was the headquarters for the school. On the far side of the tennis courts were rows of gleaming white cottages which were to be our quarters during the next nine weeks. I kept looking for a swimming pool, but none was ever installed while we were there. The road or track which circumscribed this campus ran behind the cottages, separating them from a line of large metal hangars. Through the spaces between hangars we could see the shining blue fuselages and yellow wings of the Stearman PT-17s we were to learn to fly, our first introduction to the real Army Air Corps. It was all a far cry from the huge but growing Maxwell Field we had left the day before. For a while, at least, we would live in the luxury of a civilian-operated detachment of the regular military establishment. There would be a few officers and enlisted men around, but our flight and ground school instructors would be, for the most part, civilians. This was also true of such personnel as the dining room cooks and waiters.

“We met formations on the road behind the cottage from where we would march to meals or to classes. As the flight line was just on the other side of the hangars along the road, we generally walked singly or in small groups to our flying lessons. Flying and classes were divided into morning or afternoon sessions. If we were assigned to a morning flying section, we went to classes in the afternoon. These changed back and forth but I’m not sure with what frequency.

PT (physical training) was held after classes if I am not mistaken. Although we conducted marching drills and formation, there was still an air of great relaxation around the place. Upper classmen were too intent upon flying and going to ground school to spend much time harassing the underclass. As far as I can remember, we did not march from meals back to our cottages.

“PT was mostly a joyful activity with the exception of mass drills and pushups! There were a number of sports such as volley ball and soft ball. Wade Heard and Robert Formanek conducted the athletic drills and supervised the games. We kept wishing an outdoor swimming pool would be installed, but it never happened during our stay.

“The airfield started its construction in August, 1941, the first buildings going up in October. The flying field was more or less a 2,000 foot square of dirt and grass. The first class came in with the first buildings. In November the second class of cadets arrived, the first hangar was completed, and one volley ball court had been set up. By the time of our arrival in July, there had been nine months of operations. The planes were tied down on a 2,000-foot paved ramp so that the dust had almost entirely disappeared. Two auxiliary fields for practicing landings and takeoffs had been constructed. Seemingly, it had become the country club. Captain John T. Stickney was the Air Corps Command Officer while the civilian owners were Wesley Raymond and Robert Richardson, owners of the Raymond-Richardson-Brinkerhoff Aviation Company.

“I don’t know how many days went by before we got our first instruction in the Stearman PT-17 but it didn’t take long. My log book shows that I began dual instruction on July 8. Because I had gotten my private pilot license in 1940 I was assigned, along with other students who already had learned to fly, to N. I. Hasell, the commander of one of the squadrons. I think he was given nine or ten of us. In short order we also flew with his assistant squadron commander, Wendell A. Holmes. Both were personable individuals, soft spoken and easy going, unlike some of the other wild men instructors about whom we heard horror stories. After almost 10 hours of dual instruction I was able to solo on July 20. As Watson Coffee, the chief dispatcher, kept all the records, I do not have the signature of the instructor who soloed me but I think it was Holmes.

“Soon after soloing, however, I was assigned to a new instructor fresh from having gotten his rating through a Secondary Civilian Pilot Training Program somewhere. He was very demanding but fair in handling us. He wanted to set a good record with his first class of pilots so made sure that

we did everything ‘according to the book’! He even made us keep notebooks in which we described in our own words what particular maneuver he had us practicing.

“For a while I thought he didn’t have any humor whatsoever for he was always highly serious. It was with great surprise on our last day of flying, September 2, that he got in the rear cockpit when we were ready to take off. He said very seriously, ‘Now, I’m going to be the student and you are going to teach me how to fly.’ It is all very hazy in my mind, but I do remember that while I was demonstrating a chandelle for him to perform I turned the controls over to him to repeat the maneuver. Once he began the exercise the plane began to go through all sorts of gyrations. I looked in the mirror to see what he was doing. There he was waving his hands up in the air and shouting over the noise of the engine, ‘what do I do now?’ If I had not been strapped in the cockpit I might have fallen out, I began to laugh so hard. It was such a reversal of his normal sober self that it threw me completely off guard! I suppose the relief of flying my last flight at Douglas had something to do with his and my elation.

“Although the log book records every minute of flying time, dual and solo, it is void of any explanations of what happened on any particular date. The dispatcher had written in ‘cross-country’ for August 26 and 28, which included both dual and solo. Of course, there were no night-flying hours, our aircraft not having any radios or lights. Those were to come at our next school, basic flight training. I had forgotten that we were also introduced to instrument flying through Link trainers, but I only logged a total of six hours which I suppose was the minimum requirement.”

Watson was commissioned on Jan. 13, 1943 at the age of 27, just under the age limit. He had lost 4 years by working during the Depression before starting college. After A-36 dive bombing training, he was assigned to the 12th Air Force (Mediterranean theater), 86th Fighter-Bomber Group, 525 Fighter-Bomber Squadron, flying A-36s (a P-51 variant with bombs). He flew 85 combat missions in the A-36, 11 in P-40s, and 10 in UC-78s, with one confirmed Me-109 and one probable Me-109. His experience in the 525 Fighter-Bomber Squadron is also documented in *The Men Who Killed the Luftwaffe: The U.S. Army Air Forces Against Germany in World War II*. After the War he remained in the Reserves where his favorite job for the last 12 years before his retirement in 1976 was as the U.S. Air Force Academy Admissions Liaison Officer.

In Memory of William Jasper Brake, Class of 1942-K



William J. Brake, 96, passed away peacefully at the Florida Presbyterian Homes in Lakeland, Florida on Sunday, March 4, 2018. He was born October 7, 1921 in Milledgeville, Ga.

A graduate of Georgia Military College, he received an appointment to the U.S. Military Academy at West Point in 1940. While enrolled at West Point, he went through aviation cadet training, including training at Douglas, Ga. He graduated in the June 1943 class and entered the Army Air Corps as a 2nd Lt. and was assigned to Sebring, FL to fly the B-17 'Flying Fortress.' He joined the 99th Bomb Group (H), 15th Air Force, in Foggia, Italy. Promoted to Captain and Squadron Commander, he flew 22 combat missions. His bomb group was provided fighter coverage by the famous Tuskegee Airmen (Redtails), for whom he always held a special place in his heart.



His distinguished military career continued after the war until he retired in 1970. Bill attended our reunion in 2013 where he was able to sit in the cockpit of both a PT-17 and a B-17 once again. Bill also provided media interviews as our cadet spokesman about the base's designation as a district in the National Register of Historic Places.



Lt. William Jasper Brake (front, left) and crew of B-17 419th Squadron 99th Bomb Group, Foggia Italy, late 1944.



MISSION STATEMENT

The WWII Flight Training Museum is a non-profit organization that is entirely funded by donation, grants and contributions. It is dedicated to sharing the story of the courage and spirit of the American men and women who became pilots during the Second World War. Our primary mission is to preserve, protect, develop and advance the understanding of our nation's aviation training heritage through collections, research, exhibits and interpretation of the 63rd Flight Training Detachment. Our secondary mission is to try to maintain the heritage and as much of the historical integrity of the Raymond-Richardson Aviation School as possible.

The WWII Flight Training Museum
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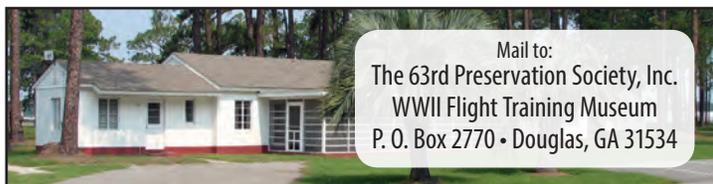
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YOU CAN HELP!



In December of 2003, a small group of local citizens interested in history, aviation and heritage preservation gathered together to both protect the site of the Raymond-Richardson Aviation School in Douglas, Georgia, and to create and operate a historical museum that would tell the story of not only our community's role in WWII, but also share the lives of the men and women who lived, worked and trained at the facility. Thus, the 63rd Preservation Society was formed.



Mail to:
The 63rd Preservation Society, Inc.
WWII Flight Training Museum
P. O. Box 2770 • Douglas, GA 31534

The WWII Flight Training Museum is operated by this non-profit organization and is entirely funded by donations, gifts and grants. We believe that the museum can make a great contribution to the preservation of our heritage and to the education of both children and the public in general.

Is it a future worth securing? We think so. We hope you do, too. Become a friend of the museum through membership and help us preserve WWII aviation's beginnings.

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- 10% discount on museum merchandise
- Participation in special museum events

The 63rd Preservation Society is a 501c3 non-profit educational foundation.
(Proceeds go toward museum maintenance)