



201 TOURIST CENTER DRIVE, PO BOX 368, HAVELOCK, NC 28532



# AVIATION CONNECTIONS: NEWSLETTER

Spring 2020

Eastern Carolina Aviation Heritage Foundation

March 2020

[WWW.ECAVIATIONHERITAGE.COM](http://WWW.ECAVIATIONHERITAGE.COM)

## 2020 Gala

The 2020 Gala was held on February 21, 2020 at the Havelock Tourist & Event Center. Even though snow was on the ground and the temperature dropped, the Gala was a huge success.

Master of Ceremonies, Tom Braaten, kicked off the evening by welcoming all sponsors and guests. The Mayor of Havelock, Will Lewis, provided a welcome and WCTI-12 Meteorologist, Donnie Cox, provided the invocation for the evening.

Hubie Tolson, an award winning aerobatic pilot, shared stories of his death defying experiences with the aid of photographs. Barry Fetzer began the program with a history of "Barnstorming" followed by a question and answer session with Hubie.

The meal catered by The Flame of New Bern was enjoyed by all. If you missed this exciting and informative event this year, plan to join the fun next year on February 26, 2021.



Without our sponsors, the Gala would not be possible. Thank you to all the businesses, organizations, and individuals for your support of ECAHF.

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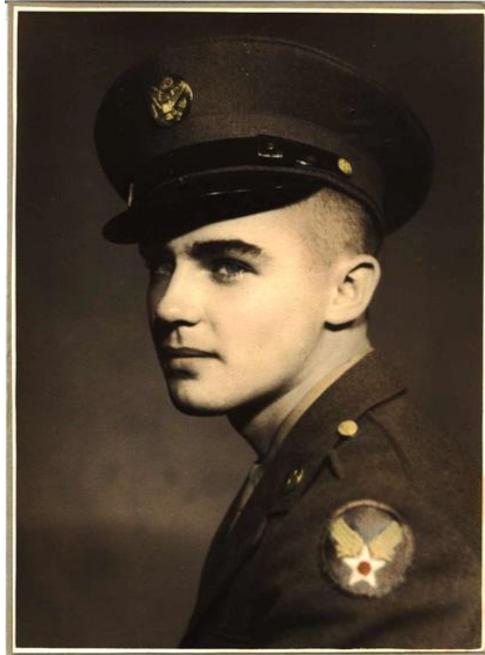
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# Robert J. Fetzer's Military Service During WWII

By Barry Fetzer, ECAHF Historian



**M**y Dad was a son, brother, husband, cousin, uncle, friend, and a soldier as well as a father. He was also an attorney who—coming by his hoarding tendency naturally through his experiences during the Great Depression, his parents' thriftiness, and through experiences earned in law practice—was a major paperwork packrat. Paper was his “thing”. Not only was there reams of legal casework haphazardly stored in dozens of mouse-infested boxes in the hay loft of his barn that we discovered after his death, he also had saved half a dozen photo

albums (with captions) and scrap books, copies of his military orders and discharge records, letters he wrote home and received (including letters from his many girl friends before he married my Mom), and other correspondence: all of which his children came to possess after his death.

Drinking a few beers and sitting around a camp fire for hours, the evening's crickets singing their praises for Robert Fetzer, my two brothers and I reminisced about what a great Dad he was. Brushing off mouse droppings, we culled through every one of hundreds of file folders in those dozens of boxes and burned most his “thing”, most of his “packratiness”, thousands of pages that didn't have a connection to family history or lore. Sorting through it all, we saved important family records mixed amongst Dad's paperwork hoard, including information that helped assemble much of this historical sketch.

Plus, Dad was a story teller and willing to talk a bit about his military service (some of which could have been—and most likely was—embellished with a little hyperbole and legend as many stories are), and I made the time to talk with him about his service in the US Army Air Corps during WWII before he died.

And we were blessed to have the time to do so, given that Dad lived to the ripe, old age of 92 and was still, on the day of his death, in good mental and physical shape. In fact, he drove to lunch with my eldest brother that day. Had I not had the time in his later years to discuss his military service with him, I might not have aged enough myself to mature to the point of being

as interested in his life as much, if not more, as I was interested in my own. And so with all his papers and photographs and the time we spent together talking before his death, I have been able to piece together his WWII service.

This article is another in a series for the Eastern Carolina Aviation Heritage Foundation newsletter about my relatives who served our nation in the military. Interestingly, Dad had ties from his service in the Army...admittedly with a little of my own hyperbole and poetic license...to some of the most important events of WWII as we'll see as we proceed through his service from 1943-1946.

Following induction at Camp Perry, Ohio and recruit training at Keesler Field in Biloxi, Mississippi, Robert Fetzer was transported by train to Fort Monmouth, New Jersey in 1943 where he received training on the *Sferics* (short for Atmospheric) System, a (then) experimental, secret, weather forecasting system designed to help the allied forces forecast the development of and track typhoons in the Far East by monitoring lightning strikes inside the massive storms. Typhoons would endanger the massive assault on the Japanese mainland ultimately planned for the fall of 1945. More about *Sferics* later. But first to end of War planning, Kamikazes, and their link to typhoons.

“While [at the end of the War in the Pacific it] was being fought in the Philippines and Okinawa, plans were ripening rapidly for the largest amphibious operation in the history of warfare. *Downfall*, the grand plan for the invasion of Japan, contemplated a gargantuan blow against the islands of Kyushu and Honshu, using the entire available combined resources of the allied army, navy, and air forces.

The plans for *Downfall* were first developed early in 1945 by the Combined Chiefs of Staff at the Argonaut Conference held on the tiny island of Malta in the Mediterranean. On February 9<sup>th</sup>, just a few days before the historic Three-Power meeting at Yalta, President Roosevelt and Prime Minister Churchill were informed of the conclusions reached at Argonaut. At that time, the strategic concept of future operations in the Pacific embodied the defeat of Japan within eighteen months after Germany's surrender and included the following series of proposed objectives:

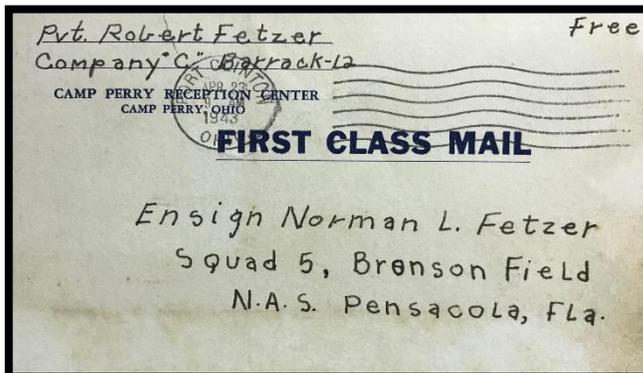
- a. Following the Okinawa operation, to seize additional positions to intensify the blockade air bombardment of Japan in order to create a situation favorable to:*
- b. An assault on Kyushu for the purpose of further reducing Japanese capabilities by containing and destroying major enemy forces and further intensifying the blockade and air bombardment in order to establish a tactical condition favorable to:*
- c. The decisive invasion of the industrial heart of Japan through the Tokyo Plain.*

On March 29<sup>th</sup>, the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, working on the assumptions that the war in Europe would be over by July 1, 1945 and that the forthcoming Okinawa operation would be concluded by mid-August of 1945, set a tentative schedule for the invasion of Japan. The invasion plan

was assigned the cover name *Downfall* and consisted of two main operations: *Olympic*, the preliminary assault on the southern island of Kyushu, which was slated for December 1, 1945, and *Coronet*, the subsequent landing on Honshu, which was scheduled for March 1, 1946. It was proposed that forces already in the Pacific be used to the fullest extent possible in planning for the assault and follow-up phases of *Olympic*. Reserve and follow-up divisions for *Coronet* would be obtained by redeployment, either directly or via the United States, of troops and equipment from the European Theater.” (<https://history.army.mil/books/wwii/MacArthur%20Reports/MacArthur%20V1/ch13.htm>)

Dear Norm, 4/22/43

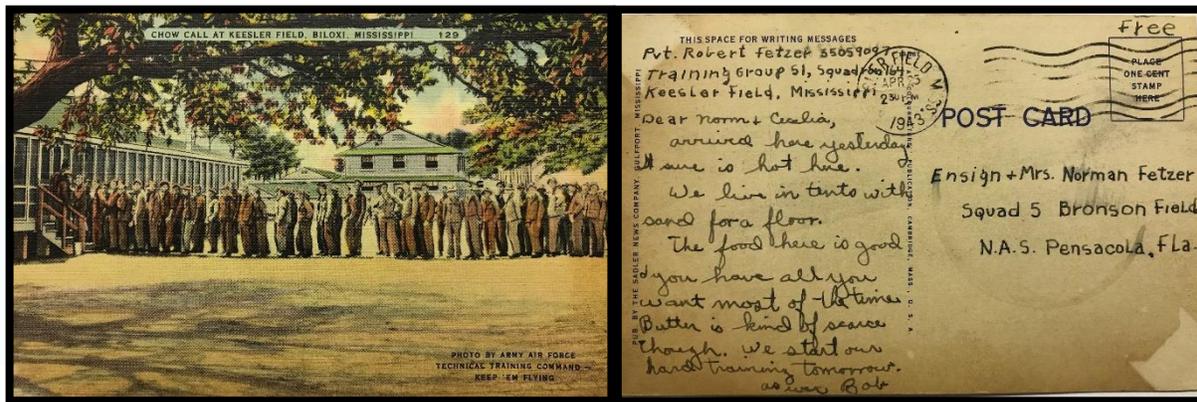
Well here I am. a  
 buck private in the army.  
 we had a bunch of  
 mental tests today, + they  
 also jabbed us with a  
 couple of vaccinations.  
 I'm leaving here soon  
 for Keesler Field I  
 guess, so don't write here  
 if you write. I'll be  
 only about a hundred  
 miles from you at  
 Keesler. If I ever get  
 a weekend pass, I'll  
 bum over + see you. My  
 clam arm is getting  
 sore!  
 as ever, Rob



Left and above: first correspondence from Robert Fetzer to his brother Norman (a US Navy ensign, in flight training at NAS Pensacola, FL.) upon Robert's induction into the US Army Air Corps at Camp Perry, Ohio in April 1943. He was enlisted in the US Army Air Forces after two quarters of college at Kent State University. Robert would never return to KSU, completing his college education at the University of Southern California and Ohio State University (B.S., mechanical engineering) under the GI Bill after the War, ultimately earning a law degree from the Marshal Law School in Cleveland, Ohio. He served as a patent attorney in Cleveland for 40 years. (Photos credit: Fetzer Family)

Below: Front and back of a postcard to his brother Norman and sister-in-law Cecelia upon Robert's arrival at Keesler Field, Biloxi, Mississippi for recruit training. He also received some initial Army Air Corps Training in Goldsboro, NC. Robert, having grown up in northern Ohio (Bedford) had not experienced what pre-air-conditioned life in the South was like.

(Photos credit: Fetzer Family)



“It sure is hot here. We live in tents with sand for a floor.” But, “The food is good,” Dad wrote.

In desperation during the last years of the War, and knowing the Allies were preparing to attack their precious homeland, “...the Japanese developed the concept of formally organized suicide units. Suicide attacks, beginning in 1944, followed critical military and strategic defeats for Japan. These attacks also occurred due to Japan’s decreasing capacity to wage war (including the loss of experienced pilots), the increasing industrial might of the allies (especially the United States), and reflected Japan’s *Bushido* tradition or “way of the warrior” tradition which, amongst other qualities, included a reluctance to surrender.”

“In Japanese, the formal term used for units carrying out suicide attacks during 1944-45 is *tokubetsu kōgeki tai*, which literally means “special attack unit”. More specifically, air suicide attack units from the Imperial Japanese Navy were officially called *shinpū tokubetsu kōgeki tai* (“divine wind special attack units”). *Shinpū* is the Chinese-derived pronunciation of the same characters that form the word *Kamikaze* in Japanese. During World War II, the actual word *Kamikaze* was rarely used in Japan in relation to suicide attacks. US translators during the war erroneously used the *kun'yomi* (indigenous Japanese pronunciation) for *Shinpū*, giving the English language the word *Kamikaze* for Japanese suicide units in general. This usage gained acceptance worldwide. After the war, Japanese speakers re-imported both the word and the English language pronunciation under the influence of US media sources. As a result, the special attack units are sometimes known in Japan today as *kamikaze tokubetsu kōgeki tai*.”



A painting of Shizu, better known as Kublai Khan, Mongolian emperor of the Yuan Dynasty

“*Kamikaze* or “Divine Wind” units were named as such to commemorate great typhoons that dispersed fleets of 4,400 Kublai Khan-led Mongol ships that sank off of the coast of Takashima during ill-fated missions to occupy Japan in 1274 and 1281 during the Middle Ages, saving the Japanese Kingdom from attack and destruction.” (Above derived from Wikipedia.) Knowing this history, the US Army Air Corps pursued development of the *Sferics* system to help forecast

typhoons, which like the “Divine Winds” of the Middle Ages, might endanger the attacking Allied fleet.

The Allies had good reason to worry about their attacking fleets and not just from Middle Age history and legend. Not only would the assault on the Japanese main islands result in horrific losses for the Allies—particularly the US—and the Japanese people themselves as well as their infrastructure, but should another “Divine Wind” typhoon occur during the final assault on the main Japanese islands, horrific losses could occur to the attacking fleets just as they had to the Mongol “hordes” some seven centuries earlier.



**USS Santa Fe (CL-60) at near maximum starboard roll during 1944’s Typhoon *Cobra***  
(Photo credit: US Navy)

Experiences with Pacific typhoons substantiated the Allies’ concern. On December 18, 1944, Task Force 38 of US Pacific Fleet commanded by Admiral “Bull” Halsey “...sailed directly into the teeth of Typhoon *Cobra*, a vicious Category 4 tropical cyclone with sustained winds of 140 MPH. At the time of the incident, Task Force 38 has been in the Philippine Sea conducting air raids on Japanese airfields in the Philippines in support of Army General Douglas MacArthur’s ground forces. Unaware of the size, path and intensity of the approaching tropical storm, the fleet was in the process of refueling its ships when the wind picked up and the sea started to churn.”

“What followed was one of the worst weather-related catastrophes in US naval history. Three destroyers—USS *Hull* (DD-350), USS *Spence* (DD-512), and USS *Monaghan* (DD-354)—capsized and sank; a cruiser, five aircraft carriers, and three destroyers were seriously damaged; a total of 146 planes were lost or damaged beyond repair and approximately 790 officers and men were lost or killed.

Halsey was caught by surprise because of the inadequate forecast information regarding the location, direction, and intensity of the deadly storm. In the aftermath, he called for a

consolidation of resources that would prevent such a (tragic) event in the future.” (*Dan Vaughan, Military Officer Magazine, July 2014, page 60*) The result was the establishment of the Joint Typhoon Warning Center (JTWC) in 1959—the formation of which can be partly attributed to the *Sferics* system and the forecasting capabilities it provided.

Unfortunately the JTWC had not yet formed when Mother Nature (and Japan’s, as it would ultimately turn out, pointless hope) once again struck six months later on June 3, 1945, when the ships of Task Group (TG) 38.1, built around aircraft carriers USS *Hornet* (CV-12) and USS *Bennington* (CV-20), and the oilers in Task Group 30.8 were operating east of Okinawa, having just completed two weeks of air attacks against Japanese airfields on Okinawa and Kyushu. Although a tropical disturbance had been reported forming east of the Philippines, confused sighting reports and communications delays deprived Third Fleet of timely and accurate location information.

Contradictory weather reports did not help the situation. On June 5<sup>th</sup>, the small and tight typhoon overtook TG 38.1, which passed through the eye of the storm at 0700 that morning. Hurricane force winds of 70 knots (80.5 miles per hour), with gusts up to 100 knots (115 miles per hour), damaged almost every ship in TG 38.1 and TG 30.8. In the former, heavy cruiser USS *Pittsburgh* (CA-72) lost her bow and two other cruisers suffered frame damage. All the fleet carriers suffered flight deck damage, while USS *Belleau Wood* (CV-24) also lost an elevator. The destroyers rode out the storm rather well, only USS *Samuel N. Moore* (DD-747) suffering major superstructure damage. In the refueling group, escort carriers USS *Windham Bay* (CVE-92) and USS *Salamaua* (CVE-96) lost part of their flight decks and tanker USS *Millicoma* (AO-73) suffered severe topside damage. One officer and five men were lost or killed, with another four seriously injured. Storm damage wrecked 43 planes and another 33 were washed overboard.

After continued strong recommendations, the Pacific Fleet established uncoded, plain language typhoon advisory dispatch procedures on 10 June and, two days later, began flying B-29 aircraft on storm reconnaissance missions.” (*Above derived from Wikipedia*).



**Severe bow damage on USS Bennington’s (CV-20) bow flight deck from the 1945 Okinawa Typhoon (Photo credit: US Navy)**

The allied assault on the main Japanese islands, *Operation Downfall*, while planned, blessedly never occurred. Instead, President Truman decided to destroy the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki using the only two atomic bombs possessed by the United States (in fact, the only two in the world) at the time.

The decision to usher the earth into the perilous era of the atomic age and the threat of nuclear warfare was made, at least in part, due to the tens of thousands of allied forces men and millions of Japanese citizens allied war planners assumed would die during the assaults on the Japanese homeland. This assumption was based on the experiences of the Army and Marine Corps amphibious assaults against the Japanese islands of Iwo Jima and Okinawa (and the massive *Banzai* charge in Alaska near Massacre Bay on Attu Island in May 1943 mentioned in my last newsletter that my Uncle Bill Hay may have participated in), where the “never surrender” and “fight until the last man dies” *Bushido* code was strictly adhered to by the Japanese. As a result, some of the most costly battles of WWII occurred on these and other Japanese-held islands, the carnage on both sides being horrific.



Model 52c Zeros ready to take part in a *Kamikaze* attack (early 1945).  
(Photo credit: Wikipedia)

Even after *Operation Meetinghouse* “...a firebombing raid conducted on the night of March 9-10, 1945 by 300+ US Army Air Forces bombers, regarded as the single most destructive bombing raid in human history where 16 square miles of central Tokyo were destroyed leaving an estimated 100,000 civilians dead and over one million homeless...” (*Wikipedia*) the Japanese refused to capitulate. But after witnessing the horrendous deaths of their citizens and the virtual leveling of their cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki by this new, atomic “divine wind” weapon, the Japanese decided that prudence was the better part of *Bushido* and finally accepted the Allies’ terms. The Japanese surrendered “unconditionally” (the only condition being that the US and its allies permitted the revered Japanese Emperor to remain in place) aboard the US Battleship USS *Missouri* in Tokyo Bay on September 2, 1945.

So my Dad’s role in the War was as a *Sferics* operator. While he could not have known it at the time—and it was obviously a small role but a role nonetheless—his duties were tied to helping the Allies to forecast, and therefore prevent, the “Divine Winds”...those typhoons that had once saved Japan from the Mongol fleet centuries earlier...from washing away the 20<sup>th</sup> Century allied fleet the Japanese knew would ultimately come to destroy their homeland.

The *Sferics* machine was similar to radar. But instead of capturing the reflected electromagnetic echoes of aircraft or ships, *Sferics* received the electrical bursts from lightning emanating from the massive typhoon storms, allowing operators to track their formation, path, and their speed. Weather forecasters trained as *Sferics* operators like Dad could then advise war planners of this information to assist leaders in their strategic decision-making regarding the timing and locations of final assault on Japan, *Operation Downfall*.

The Army Air Corps—like military service does to us all who experience it—changed my Dad from the younger version of himself, a happy-go-lucky farmer’s grandson and a feed store owner’s son. He would line his boys up and order us, “Chin up! Stomach in! Chest out!” mimicking what his drill sergeant must have instructed him about the proper position of attention at recruit training. He also instructed us boys, especially if some toy was left astray in our shared bedroom, that the rules the Army taught him...and therefore would teach us...included, “If it moves, salute it; if it doesn’t move, pick it up; and if you can’t pick it up, paint it.” Maybe Dad’s lessons—we’ll never know for sure—ultimately oriented me to my nearly 30-year career in the Marines.

While we knew Dad had served in China during the War, he never spoke of his role as a *Sferics* operator until near the end of his life during conversations I had with him. Still, his experiences with weather technology in the Army whet his appetite for an education as a mechanical engineer and then as a patent attorney, a career he might not have pursued, save for his experiences in the Army. It’s funny how—and where—life takes us, isn’t it? Though his life, like all our lives do, took some unexpected twists and turns, Dad accepted his life with gratitude. Consequently, his life reminds me of the following quotation by Jonathan Lockwood Huie:

*Play to win, but be a good loser.  
Have a plan for your life,  
but accept whatever comes your way  
with grace and gratitude.*

Dad did that! We’ll see a little more of how he did that and finish the story of what I learned about Robert Fetzer’s service during WWII in the next edition of the Eastern Carolina Aviation Heritage Foundation newsletter. Happy history!



Army Air Forces Insignia (Image credit: Wikipedia)

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