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Project Warrior

WWII pilot.....P. 12
An Army Air Corps veteran who enlisted at Fort F.E. Warren, had some hair-raising experiences as a flyer.

WWII pilot no stranger to danger

By SrA. Bill Harrison
Photo: Jeffery Dawson

TELEGRAM - FORT WARREN WYO.
5:23 PM FEB 21, 1942
MR W. LABERTEW
REPORT THIS OFFICE EIGHT THIRTY
A.M. FEBRUARY TWENTY THIRD FOR
ENLISTMENT FURLOUGH WILL BE
GRANTED IMMEDIATELY. YOU WILL
RETURN HOME UNTIL CALLED AT OWN
OFFENSE
AVIATION CADET EXAMINING BOARD

Those were just the words 21-year-old John Labertew wanted to read - his lifelong dream of being an aviator was going to come true. But little did the Cheyenne postal worker know, that before his World War II flying career would end, he would be involved in three crashes and one near miss of a mountain.

But if Labertew had any fear of crashing, he probably wouldn't have enlisted. The Mitchell, Neb., native had come in work at the post office to finish his recovery from his first airplane accident. He and a friend had crashed a single-engine plane into a field near Scottsbluff, Neb., in August 1941. He had received his private flying license the previous spring at Scottsbluff Junior College.

"Clyde Garrett and I were flying his two-place monoplane 800 feet above the ground doing figure eights. It must have stalled out and we spun in - hitting the ground between 95 and 100 mph," recalls Mr. Labertew, a retired state highway department engineer, now living in Wheatland, Wyo.

He walked away from that accident with several fractured vertebrae, a broken jaw, and internal injuries. A photo taken of the cockpit shows his teeth imprints in the instrument panel.

Not one to become discouraged, even after several months in bed, Labertew came to Cheyenne to finish his recovery and he came to Fort Francis E. Warren. Making frequent special delivery mail runs to the fort, Labertew eventually became acquainted with a post doctor who arranged for him to receive a flight physical. He passed the exam and was soon on his way to Aviation Cadet School.

He was nine months into his Army Air Corps training when his next crash occurred. Labertew was attending advanced pursuit fighter training at Mason Field in McAllen, Texas.

A journal entry written by him recounts the incident: "I was flying a P-11, which was a heavy wing loaded fighter with a 2,000-horsepower engine. Upon landing, it became uncontrollable - immediately I knew a tire had become deflated in the air. It began ground looping - quite a thrill at 10 to 100 mph."



Lieutenant Labertew's final crash on Iwo Jima, April 24, 1945.

Fearing the plane would nose over and explode, he unstrapped his seatbelt, hit the latch release and jumped out, landing on his back. This time he was cushioned by a parachute pack. "However, rolling on the ground didn't help my face, legs and arms very much," the journal entry reads.

The P-43 was a total loss, but Labertew wasn't shaken, and flew for another five months before his next close call.

It was an April day in 1943 when he was flying a group of cadets in navigator training to Denver from El Paso, Texas. He was flying a Beechcraft AT-10 twin-engine aircraft with a seating capacity of six to eight trainees. Flying over Colorado Springs, Labertew couldn't resist the opportunity to take a closer look at Pikes Peak. A journal entry written the next day explains the rest:

"This great force of wind took charge! The down-draft on the down-wind side of the peak forced the ship nose down and spinning down the side of the vertical edge of the peak. As the ship turned, the wing tips didn't appear to be more than five to 10 feet from the red-tinted vertical cliff. It appeared as if we were going to hit the ground, however, this great force of air sent us soaring upward and forced the ship over the mountain...and I gained control of the ship."

He landed the craft safely at Buckley Field near Denver, where two engine bolts were replaced. His journal entry about the incident concludes: "Never fly close to Pikes Peak. If you ever want your ship

dusted out, this is the perfect way to do it!"

It was another 11 months before Lieutenant Labertew found himself piloting a plane on a crash course. This time it was in Big Springs, Texas - flying a group of bombardier training school cadets in a Beechcraft AT-11.

There were five cadets with him on this low-level training run, when the aircraft suddenly lost all power. One of the cadets had unknowingly caught his parachute pack on the plane's main power switch located behind the pilot.

Lieutenant Labertew did a wheels-landing near a power line, narrowly missing a windmill, stock tanks, and a herd of cattle. No one was injured, and the AT-11 was back on flying status within a couple of weeks.

The lieutenant's final crash, and probably most spectacular, turned out to be his last mission as an Army Air Corps pilot.

It was April 24, 1945, and he was assigned to the 594th Bomb Group, on the Pacific island of Tinian in the Marianas. Labertew and the 10-man crew of his B-29 Superfortress bomber were headed for Tokyo with 10 tons of bombs - for special delivery to the Hitachi Aircraft plant.

The mission was going smoothly as the formation of seven B-29s neared their Tokyo target. They were about 15 minutes from releasing their bombs when things suddenly changed. They were hit with a barrage of Japanese gunfire. He and his crew watched as the B-29 flying next to them disintegrated into pieces.

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Seconds later, their craft was hit by the flack.

A quick damage assessment showed that both left engines were out, controls weren't responding, and radio, radar and intercom were gone. Japanese fighters were flying nearby, waiting for the crippled craft to stray away from the rest of the pack.

The B-29's two remaining engines strained as the large bomber climbed to its 21,000-foot bombing altitude.

One minute away from the target, the bombardier took control of the bomb run. Soon the bomber was 10 tons lighter - and the Hitachi plant was in flames.

"Our formation was spreading out as we wanted to gain speed - and get the hell out of there," wrote Labertew. "I immediately stunk the nose down to gain speed, and in a few minutes our engine gauges had backed off to the normal range."

The lieutenant and his crew limped the crippled craft to Iwo Jima. They circled the island, waiting for a thunderstorm to move out of the way.

Labertew made two landing attempts, but pulled up each time because the bomber pulled suddenly to the left of the runway on each approach.

On the third time around he said to his co-pilot, "John, I'll fly directly over the field, and those that want to, can bail out." The co-pilot relayed the message - and received a unanimous answer - "We will stay with the ship if Lieutenant Labertew does."

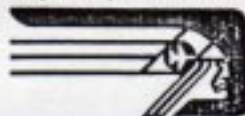
Once again the craft veered to the left, but Lieutenant Labertew managed to get it on the ground this time. It skidded uncontrollably until it struck a large piece of road equipment and came to rest on top of a row of P-51 fighters.

His co-pilot pulled him from the burning B-29. They knew there was little time, because of the hundreds of gallons of high-octane fuel still on board. They made it to a waiting ambulance that whisked them away to a hospital tent. The entire crew had escaped the burning wreckage.

A colonel came into the tent to inform Labertew that he had landed the plane with the rudder and vertical stabilizer completely blown away. "You put on the best air show I've ever seen," the colonel remarked.

It was Lieutenant Labertew's last performance, because soon he would be heading back home to Cheyenne. Having survived four crashes and one near miss, the final entry in his flying journal reads, "Any landing you can walk away from is a good landing." and 40 years later, John Labertew is living proof of the wisdom of those words.

Project



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