



Triskaidekaphobia Be Damned *It's Our Heritage and Pride*

By Bill Cowan

If you had it, the 8th or 90th squadrons were your place in the 3rd Bomb Group scheme of things. Roget's Thesaurus even gives a choice of words to describe the aversion to the number thirteen. According to the learned scholars you could even have Tredecaphobia. Then again, if you really knew and cared about what you had we wouldn't have been in the same squadron to start with! Wasn't it fun to thumb your nose at superstition and let the Devil take the hindmost?

Evidently we were not the triska or trede types and relished the idea of being in the Thirteenth with all the connotations of the mystic and bad luck. Some of our own did have a bit of "bad luck", or if your prefer "the absence of assignable cause", and even the everloving "Fickle Finger" got them. Albeit that could be attributed to a Tokyo cab driver or that rotten Korean whiskey that tasted like banana oil as well as bombs and bullets. However, it has been said that life is a crap shoot under the best of circumstances. So you live life to the fullest while you can and love the #13. This gives you the right and allows you to feel superior to the lesser souls with no adventure in their safe and mundane lives!

Well you've read this far and are possibly intrigued as to where I'm leading you. Right? Over the past two years I've had a quest and goal of obtaining a reproducible photo of a World War I SPAD XIII aircraft with the "running skeleton" of the 13th Aero Squadron on the fuselage to display alongside the Invader photo we now have. As many of you are aware our 13th Bomb Squadron has direct lineage to the outstanding unit from WWI. This has proven successful thanks to the efforts of John Rebolt and the Air Force Museum located near his home.

It was while doing research into that phase of my quest through numerous civilian, military, governmental and quasi-governmental entities I was fortunate enough to be directed to Mr. George H. Williams, 81 years young, and his History of Aviation Collection housed at the University of Texas at Dallas. Many additional hours of research have produced another fascinating facet of our squadron heritage.

Mr. Williams provided me with a copy of *The History of the Thirteenth Aero Squadron, June 1917 through April 1919*. This history was written and published by an enlisted man of the squadron over that time period. He was Howard M. Waller of Dayton, Ohio. His name appears in the squadron roster but no rank or duty title

is listed. With the help of our locator CD-ROM and again enlisting the help of the aforementioned John Rebolt we are attempting to contact potential relations in the Dayton area hoping to learn more of this cog in our background. Our best educated(?) guess is that he was the Squadron Clerk or like assignment. (A copy of this publication will be made available to all squadron members in a forthcoming edition of the INVADER.)

The history goes into great detail covering all the aspects of being recruited into the Air Service of the Army Signal Corps where they were promised "Private to pilot" in just three months time. Needless to say the Recruiting Officers were less than candid to say the least! Nevertheless many an eager young man signed on the dotted line and dreamed of the glories of aerial flight. Dreams of "The Knights of the Air" in mortal and brave combat high above the carnage of the trenches below.

Into that dreamscape came the 13th Aero Squadron of the 2nd Pursuit Group with the "running skeleton" emblazoned on the fuselage behind the cockpit for all to see and be forewarned. It wasn't known as the Grim Reaper back then and we've been unable to ascertain just when that name was adapted. That will entail still further research. Am I never going to get out of this trap? The fighting men of the Thirteenth carried that dreaded number into battle with all it's attendant superstitions and acquitted themselves with honor and glory as did their successors. We carried this mantle of greatness and pride well into our generation and hope it will pass on to deserving young "Tigers" of today's Air Force.

Just how did the Second Company A of the Air Service of the United States Army Signal Corps at Camp Kelly, Texas, come by the number thirteen as their squadron to be designator? In June 1917 the Air Service was being expanded from five squadrons in anticipation of our entry into combat with the Allies in France. Captain Maxwell Kirby was designated to lead one of the new squadrons. In that he was ranking officer of the group he was allowed to choose any number between 8 and 20 and he chose number thirteen. As the saying goes "The rest is history". The 13th Aero Squadron became the sixth active aero squadron of the Air Service and set out to prove the number thirteen was not an unlucky number except to the competition both friend and foe.

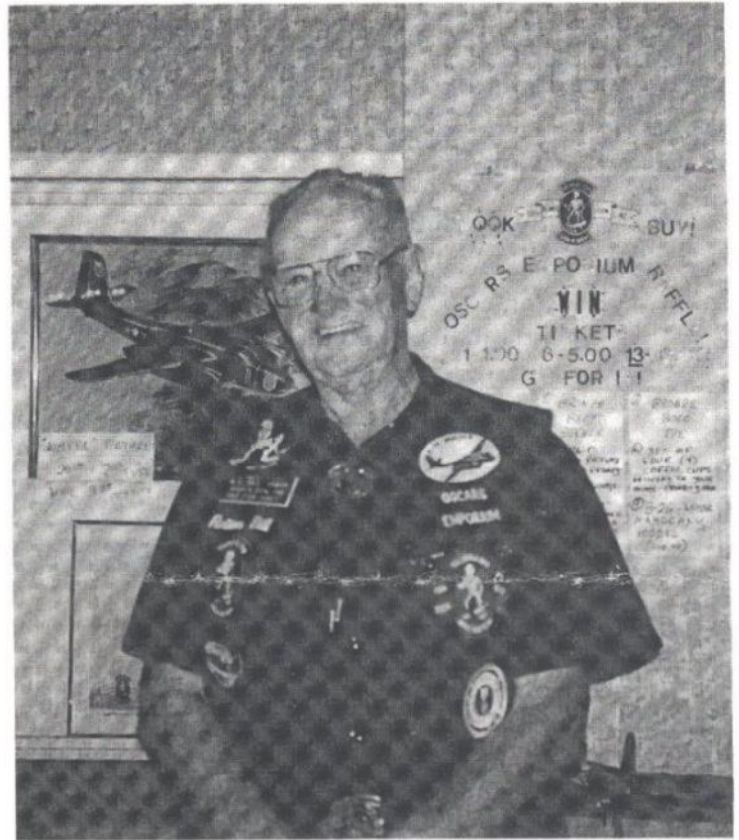


In his history Waller goes on to extol how the squadron went on to excel in all phases of service and morale despite the so-called "unlucky number". The same attitude and esprit we knew in our time is well documented in our history since that fateful day in June 1917. The onus of triskaidekaphobia has been a rally point and challenge to every person blessed with the opportunity to wear the squadron insignia. The friendly rivalry with sister squadrons is legendary and fills countless pages and memories.

So now you know how we obtained the coveted "unlucky" number thirteen. You don't have to be told or sold on the great esprit de corps the members have and continue to display at the least provocation. This has been an ongoing thing for nearly 80 years and we have high hopes of soon passing the mantle to another group of airmen so that our history will continue to thrive with greater honor and glory that will reflect on us all. The lowest point in our illustrious history came soon after the Vietnam War when our squadron colors were retired and the 13th placed in an inactive status due to cutbacks and mission requirements of the Air Force.

During his tenure as Air Force Chief of Staff General McPeak initiated a program to reactivate the colors of many outstanding Air Force units that had been deactivated. His reasoning was that the units had given so much to the country that to allow them to remain in limbo would be a blot on the proud heritage of the USAF. Under this program many distinguished units were reactivated and their colors and logos once again adorned the aircraft of combat units worldwide. Unfortunately "Oscar" was not one of the chosen. It seems that our logo and motto was not "Politically Correct" for the times in this kinder and gentler world we now occupy. The thanks for this faux pas goes to the Air Force Historical people. What couldn't be done by the enemies we faced in combat these past eighty years was done by "friendly fire" and we were shot down in flames. Ah but remember the legendary Phoenix! That mythical bird who rose from the ashes to once again soar on high.

This past November 11th, after raising our flag, I was sitting around the house kinda reminiscing about the "Gods of War" and thinking of the many friends who are no longer with us. I thought of the long and glorious history of the Air Force and in particular the 13th. Thoughts about the many units whose colors were reactivated and their logos once again proudly displayed for all the world to see and be aware that this is a fighting unit second to none so don't mess with us. Alas the 13th was not one of these. When some of the membership queried this fact they were told of political correctness. Seems our logo and old "Oscar" might offend the puri-



Bill Cowan, point man.

tanical sensibilities of the masses. Blessed are the peacekeepers etc. Found they couldn't get the job done so people with "Oscars" on their aircraft had to go in and do it for them. Dearly love you in war but stay away from my daughter!

Well, the more I thought about the situation the madder I got. The injustices foisted on us by the "namby pambies" that fill too many decision making agencies had to be called to account. 1917 in WWI to Vietnam we were there and stood up to be counted. I guess if we were to research the casualty list since the 13th Aero Squadron fought over France and Germany to the interdiction of the Ho Chi Minh Trail we could tally up a dreadful loss of lives. But to me that would be redundant for when that first airman lost his life carrying our squadron colors into battle in WWI our history and honor was paid in full. We proved then and continued to prove over the years that we were out front and leading at every turn. In summary, the organization that receives our colors will have some really big shoes to fill. They'll be at the forefront of the USAF. We did not deserve to be swept under the rug for any reason known to man or God!

With all this in mind this hallowed Armistice/Veterans Day of 1995 I sat down and wrote the now AFCS General Fogleman a three page letter stating precisely

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what I thought of "Political Correctness" and the injustice inflicted on the 13th through this insipid and demeaning phrase. I laid it on as thick as I could and still remain within the bounds of good taste and civility.

All the facts in brief from WWI to date were presented. Our organizational decorations and awards were detailed. Our many battle honors and leadership over the years were outlined in depth. The many outstanding innovations we have been associated with and the Air Force leaders who have passed through our ranks over the years starting with the legendary "Tooe" Spaatz who flew with us in France and proudly carried the "running skeleton" with the scythe on the SPAD XIII he brought with him to fly when on TDY prior to going stateside. The story goes that Tooe was only supposed to be there for two weeks while on leave. Seems he got carried away with all the fun he was having and the chief of the air service had to come and get him after three weeks. That of course was back during the "War To End All Wars". I let the general know in no uncertain terms just how proud I am of this organization and the fact that we were there when needed and something of a reciprocal nature was long past due. "Oscar" needs to be carried on a combat aircraft of the USAF again. As Walter Brennan was wont to say "No brag, just fact"!

In late November 1995 I received a personal letter from General Fogleman stating that he had directed the Air Force Historical Research Agency to once again review our records. This is the same outfit that did us in the last time. However the personal interest of the AFCS is on the table now and I have good feelings about the potential of things going our way finally. He assured me that when information was received from the historians that he would get back to me. At this time we were finally getting off the bottom of the pile. The status quo is being left behind.

So my fellow "Reapers" keep the fingers crossed and think positive. I've already alerted Bill Ricketts to get a mass mailing ready to announce the final decision. So with very high hopes that when this happens it will be in the ZI and not some remote outpost. That way we will be able to fill the stands with a sea of red hats and once more "Oscar" will be ready to lead the USAF into

the fray if that sad time falls upon us again. That very fortunate organization will have a mammoth heritage to live up to and we stand ready to help them in any manner. The "999th Messkit Repair Squadron" does not need to be active but the 13th sure as blazes does!

In July 1996 I again contacted General Fogleman and told him of our upcoming reunion to be held in Las Vegas and wondered if we might have any positive information to pass on to the membership. Well, with great personal satisfaction and pride that all my efforts have proven effective, the results were announced to the general membership meeting in Las Vegas.

Dick Schumann, Bill Ricketts and I sat on this letter that was received in mid-August from General Fogleman so that the information could be read at that time. The letter from General Fogleman is reproduced below. I believe that each and every member should sit down and write General Fogleman a personal thank you note for the efforts he has made in our behalf. Mine has already gone forward!



CHIEF OF STAFF
UNITED STATES AIR FORCE
WASHINGTON

13 August 1996

Dear Sergeant Cowan

Thank you for your most recent letter regarding the 13th Bomb Squadron. We've continued to review the heritage of that especially notable unit, and as you indicated, it is one of the most decorated squadrons in our Air Force and deserving of recognition.

The Air Force has not forgotten the proud heritage of the 13th Bomb Squadron, and I am pleased to inform you that it will be reactivated in the future as part of Air Combat Command. We will ensure your organization is notified when this will occur.

You and your fellow squadron members are justified in the pride you hold for a unit so rich in history. I am most appreciative of your continuing efforts to emphasize the squadron's outstanding heritage.

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