

WALTER SILER KING, THE FRIEND WE DIDN'T KNOW

By W.A."Bill"Cowan

Lieutenant Colonel Walter Siler King, 10086A, United States Air Force, Commanding Officer 13th Bombardment Squadron, 3rd Bombardment Group, Iwakuni Air Station, Japan. October 1950 to February 1951. Killed in action over North Korea on 21 February 1951.

In August 1950 the 13th Bomb Squadron was blessed by the assignment of Major Walter S. King, late of Headquarters Thirteenth Air Force, Clark Field, Republic of the Philippines. A proven flyer and leader with many combat missions under his belt dating back to 1942 when he was a member of the Southern Bomber Command stationed in Australia. In 1943 he joined the 89th Squadron of the 3rd Bomb Group in New Guinea and stayed with that organization till 1945 and the early occupation of the Japanese home island. Even then he was a charismatic person well received by all those who had the good fortune to know him. He became our squadron commander in late 1950 and was promoted to Lieutenant Colonel in early 1951.

His avowed intentions, as told to others, was to pin on the rank of full colonel eagles before the Korean fracas ended. Those who knew him never doubted for a minute that his goal was obtainable. Unfortunately both for Walter and the squadron Fate had other plans for him.

Now if Walter King had been just another C.O. riding his rank and pushing rather than leading this story would have never seen the light of day. This was not the case and his loss was a heavy blow to the men of the unit. The risks involved during times of war are unpredictable and have many variables. The one sure predictable was that a new commander would appear on the scene and the mission would continue unabated.

Walter King quickly fades into the background and in short time is basically forgotten. Maybe a thought during a "hanger session" at the club but not much more. As is the norm in most combat situations it's best not to become too close to any of the people associated with your line of work and to shield yourself whenever possible. This reduces, but does not eliminate, the hurt potential immensely and helps buffer the mind.

Forty two years later Bill Ricketts and I were reliving our "glory days" during the Korean Police Action when the subject of Walter King came up during the conversation. There again if he had not been the man and friend he was, who would have cared? We found that we knew so very little about our friend and comrade in arms other than the short period of approximately six months he was with us. We determined that he was from the Cisco, Texas area of North Central Texas not far from my home in Saginaw, TX. It was decided that I would visit the area and see what was available in the way of background information. Little realizing what I was getting into! Using the investigative tools honed over many years in CID and other forms of police work, sometimes known as "dumb luck", I pressed on deeper into the morass and did get lucky. I think!!!!!!!

The old files for the Cisco Press are on microfilm and housed in the library at Cisco Junior College. Mrs. Oleta Shirley the Librarian, and former classmate of Walter, threw open the resources to me and also made available names of other people still residing in the area who knew Walter. Several pieces of information from these sources were developed. Mr. Bill Philpott, Cisco Chamber of Commerce President, was another excellent lead developed through her. A search of the Cisco Cemetery was initiated and it was determined that no members of the King family were interred there.

Just about time for lunch. Now when you're out in country Texas the last place you want to eat is where all the fancy automobiles are congregated! You must look for the place that has many old pickups and horse trailers in evidence. Sure enough the White Elephant Cafe filled the bill to a "T". Good food, friendly folks and plenty of each. Got ready to pay my tab and mentioned to the manager what I was doing in the area. She told me to sit in an adjacent booth and wait a minute as she could help me. Like I said, friendly folks.

Shortly she returned with a man who described the typical rancher in looks and actions. Actually he was chairman of the board of a local oil producing company. Mr. Travis Starr was a find! He was a friend and contemporary of Walters two younger brothers, Hub and Alvin King. Travis in turned corralled another local patron and between the two I was able to frame a pretty good idea of the people and the area I needed to visit. I was furnished excellent maps, drawn on napkins, and off to the hinterlands I ventured.

I left the White Elephant with the distinct feeling that Travis Starr and his friends still thought highly about a man who had been missing from the local scene for over fifty years. This feeling was reinforced by every person I came in contact with in my travels throughout the area of his birth and childhood onto his adult years. Walter King was and still is a man well remembered on his home turf.

Utilizing the maps provided I checked the Mitchell Cemetery and a small one named for the Hale family. Still no Kings. Another rural contact directed me to the Scranton Texas Cemetery. Good old "Lady Luck" was sitting on my shoulder again. I found Mr. Hugh Shrader in attendance and he showed the grave sites of both the Kings and also the Stutevilles. John Stuteville became the King boys Stepfather later on. It was apparent that no marker of any sort was in the Scranton Cemetery for Walter. This was not thought to be any big deal at the time as it could be located almost anywhere his widow desired. I did find that Walters name

was inscribed on the "Wall of Honor" at the Eastland County Court House. This was verified by personally visiting and photographing the Korea segment. At least someone recognized the passing of our friend.

During the visit with Mr. Shrader and others in the Cisco/Scranton area it was learned that Walters two younger brothers were still alive and residing in the Texas Panhandle area near Lubbock. Obtaining Hub Kings phone number I contacted him and explained what we were doing in regards to a biography on Walter. He was immediately enthused with the project and volunteered his help. He had possession of some of Walters personal effects and explained that both Walters wife Fay and his son Walter Lee King were deceased. Hub stated that he and Alvin would be in the Cisco area in June 1953 for the reunion of the Scranton School Alumni. His offer to bring everything he had in his possession was agreed on and meeting was set and arraigned. It is noted that Hub thought so highly of his big brother that he named his own son after Walter. Seems there was a large dose of love floating around for that brother!

The first weekend in June found me again at the White Elephant where I met Hub and his wife Fay. Once again the dirt roads got a workout as we traveled to the farm of Alvin King that's situated on some of the original family property. Much information on family and about Walter was developed at this meeting. He had several of the medals awarded to his brother and local news items clipped from the local press. As an aside, when Walter came home from the wars he indicated he was most unhappy with brother Hub. Seems Hub was part of the 509th Composite Wing and after they dropped the "Bomb" on Nagasaki the war was essentially over. Walter was unable to complete his 100th Combat Mission and had to settle for 99!!!!!!!!!!!!

It was at this meeting that the information was developed that for reasons unknown Walters widow had never held any type memorial service for her husband after he was confirmed as Killed In Action in 1952.

A truly fitting memorial was in the works in October 1955 when the Base Naming Commission for Abilene Air Force Base was picking names for that facility. Walter and Lt. Col. William E. Dyess are named as finalist. Col. Dyess was from nearby Albany, Texas, and the honor went to him. Again Walter was denied his memorial. Under no circumstances do we denigrate Col. Dyess as he too was deserving of the honor. He was a fighter pilot in the Philippines when the war broke out. After the squadron aircraft were destroyed he and his fellow airmen joined the ground forces on Bataan. Surviving the infamous "Bataan Death March" he became a POW. In 1943 he escaped and made his way out to allied control where he was the first to detail the conditions in the Japanese camps. He was later to be killed in an aircraft accident when he stayed with the P-38 to avoid crashing into a populated area. Yes he to was most deserving.

When Bill Ricketts and I let the full realization of the situation sink in it was decided there and then that the matter had to be rectified at the earliest possible time. We made a compact to the effect that it would be done if we had to do it ourselves. The ball had been put into play. Little did we realize the immensity of the task we were chewing on. Shopping the idea around we had one of the association officers declare that it would not be appropriate to utilize any association funds for such an endeavor. Thanks to so many of Walters friends we will not dip into the hallowed coffers but build with your love and blessings. We say a great big thank you to one and all!!!!!!!!!!!!

Bill Ricketts started inquiries to obtain the personnel records of Walter King from the records center at St Louis, MO. After endless delays and red tape they reported that his records were among those destroyed in a fire a number of years ago. They for some perverse reason led us to believe that the records would be

forthcoming after the required next of kin approval had been received and all the red tape complied with. I've heard from others, including a congressional aide, that the "fire" has been a real work saver for a bunch of overpaid bureaucrats.

We continued to explore other avenues to build a service record via contacts at Maxwell AFB, Washington DC and a letter to the Secretary of the Air Force in an attempt to locate the files of the Base Naming Commission. It would stand to reason they would have had an extensive amount of information available prior to even considering him for that honor. We've not had any reply at this writing. However a fairly accurate compilation of his awards and decorations have been made from secondary sources.

Another trip to the Cisco/Scranton area turned up Mr. Arlan Bint eighty three years young and still working and maintaining his Hereford cattle ranch nearby. Mr. Bint taught school in Cisco, Dan Horn and Scranton districts. He never actually had Walter as a student but remembered him well. He pronounced him an outstanding student with great potential who was born during a period of time that precluded him getting a higher education. An excellent scholar who had a very strong desire to learn. These trips were all most rewarding in that everyone went out of their way to be of assistance. Rural Texas has a lot going for it and the quality and quantity of life makes you wonder why people have to live in the city!!! It just never ceases to amaze me that after all these many years Walter King is still remembered as one of the finest young men the area has ever produced. He still comes out to be the bigger than life all American hero.

I'll now try to introduce you to the Walter Siler King so that you'll know him better and realize that "He was a man to ride the river with"!!!!

Walter was born June 9, 1921 to Bervie and Alvin Hawkins King in the Dan Horn Community of rural Southwestern Eastland County, Texas. He enjoyed a normal robust childhood on the family farm

and was able to get into devilment with little effort or assistance. He attended the Dan Horn Elementary School through the 7th Grade and Scranton High School to the 9th Grade. His prowess as a football player was noted by the folks over at Cisco High School. They recruited Walter and another star player for the Cisco team. This was of course well before the advent of the University Interscholastic League and subsequent rules to govern this aspect of life. To understand high school football in Texas you must remember that it ranks just one rung below Jesus Christ on the popularity poll. Now Walter and his friend were given a reconditioned Model-T Ford to commute with, several suits of new khaki clothing and free meals at a local cafe.

Walter not only excelled at sports but has been described as a scholastic whiz kid. He would go to great lengths to master any subject he put his mind to. His forte seemed to lay in the mathematics vein. On many occasions when a problem eluded him it was not unusual for him to arise early and walk the quarter mile to the teachers house to get help before classes. His essays on varied subjects were read throughout the school system. As Mr. Bint has indicated the lack of opportunity for higher education was the waste of a magnificent mind.

On the death of his father, Hawk King in 1928, the family was taken in by their paternal grandfather. The older sons were able to help with the farm chores as was normal in those times. Many neighbors pitched in to help raise the brood and at times they were separated. It was later in this period that Walters mother Bervie married Mr. John Stuteville a widower with one son and they were able to become a family again.

When Walter graduated from school the Great Depression was sweeping the land and jobs were not there. He joined the Civilian Conservation Corps, better known as the CCC's. He assigned to the town of Cleburne, Texas about 100 miles to the East. The CCC's earned \$30.00 per month plus lodging, food and clothing. Normally

\$25.00 of this was sent to the family to alleviate a cash shortage that was rampant during this era. The additional income from Walter allowed them to improve the living standard and afford medical care. After his initial contract with the CCC was up he went to work for the organization in their San Antonio office. It was while in San Antonio the he met and married Fay Flores on July 3, 1941 in nearby Seguin, Texas.

December 7th, 1941..... Walter and his friends were at the recruiting office at Randolph Air Corp Base early on December 8th, 1941 to enlist. On call to active duty he was assigned to the Aviation Cadet Program where he completed his training in mid 1942. It is noted that he was the first non-college graduate to complete this program and in addition was in the top ten of his class. Would you doubt or be surprised at this?

Training completed he is sent to Australia where he joins the Southern Bomber Command and participates in strikes on Guadalcanal and the Solomon Islands. He quickly becomes rated in B-24 Liberators, B-25 Mitchells, P-38 Lightnings, P-40 Kittyhawks, and A-20 Havocs. Would appear that he was on the way to being a pretty fair pilot.

On December 1st, 1942 Fay presented him with a bouncy boy who was given the name Walter Lee King. He and his mother were residing on the family farm while Walter was overseas.

In 1943 he was transferred to the 89th Bomb Squadron of the 3rd Bomb Group on New Guinea. From what can be determined Walter flew in all the major Pacific campaigns up to the surrender of the Japanese Empire in 1945. While flying from Okinawa he was on missions that struck at the Japanese Naval Air Station at Iwakuni, Japan. That has a familiar ring! There is also an unconfirmed story floating about that after the surrender he landed his A-26 on a Japanese airfield in Southern Japan and the whole town turned out to surrender to him. Now that sounds good to me and would



definitely fit the mold.

Early 1946 finds him back in the states and reunited with his family and being accorded a heroes welcome. A great amount of adulation and celebration of his exploits was heaped upon him by the local populace. The younger generation was in awe of him and hung on every word. As previously stated this feeling still exists to this date among friends.

He elected to remain in the military service and he, Fay and Walter Lee traveled to several assignments in Texas and Oklahoma. He served as Provost Marshal at both Vance and Tinker AFB's. Now that's kinda out of line considering his background but as usual Walter King responded to the best of his ability. His assignment to Randolph AFB, where it all began, finds him as Cadet Squadron Commander in 1948 and 1949. Talking so some of his cadet charges the old theme keeps being replayed. A prince of a person who would go to bat for you in flick of the eyelash. They cannot say enough good about him. We have been told that among the cadets under his command he was known as "Steve Canyon" after the mythical pilot in Terry and The Pirates by Milt Caniff. Tall, handsome, highly decorated war hero and a fine humanist. The name does seem to fit!

His last duty assignment in the US was at Perrin AFB, Texas. It was here that he received his orders transferring him to Clark Field, Republic of the Philippines. There he joins the staff at Headquarters 13th Air Force as the Command Provost Marshal in early 1950. His wife Fay did not elect to follow him on this assignment and returned to the family farm once again to await his return.

June 1950 came down hard on the Korean peninsula and the people of South Korea. The United Nations Forces were in disarray and the outlook was bleak. Walter King was at his desk in the Philippines and "chompin' at the bit" to rejoin his 3rd Bomb Group and get into the thick of things again. Could anyone doubt the fierce loyalty to the United States Air Force and in particular the 3rd Bomb Group? Walter King was a combat flier and leader of men who would have never spent that onerous time behind a desk.

As previously noted the 13th Bomb Squadron was blessed to have this airman assigned to our unit. The promotion to Squadron Commander and subsequently to Lt.Col. indicated what Air Staff thought of this outstanding person. We knew him as commander, leader and friend. Most of all friend. I can think of no man in the squadron who would not have followed him anywhere he chose to lead. Not only aircrews but the many ground echelon personnel who kept us flying day in and day out. Lt.Col. Walter King was well aware of these men and their contribution to our esprit de corp. He was always there for us.

Fate! On that February morning in 1951 another officer was slated to lead the attack by four of our aircraft on a daylight bombing attack deep in enemy territory. Asserting his privilege as the Squadron Commander he decided he would lead this mission. Along with his Navigator Captain Charles Woolam and Gunner SSGT Vorhees Root they went forth to do their job. Supremely confident in his abilities and with little thought of failure they climbed into their aircraft and took up the gauntlet. Nothing they did or did not do and nothing they could control cost them their lives. A bomb malfunction and the sympathetic explosion of the other weapons vaporized the aircraft. They did not have time to feel the pain.

For the short time we were privileged to know Walter King in the 13th we are most grateful. Would it have been different. Now we can each say that we know a bit more about our friend. He was in no sense a saint and did possess those human frailties and weaknesses so many of us exhibit. He was a mans man and a true leader. He was our friend as well as our commander. Walter King was four months shy of his thirtieth birthday when we lost him. So much packed into so short a time.

As previously outlined we've been able to pretty well track his career from childhood through his final day with us. Most of this has been gleaned by pure research into the mans friends, family and associates. His many decorations and honors have been reconstructed as best possible. Without the missing military records we cannot be positive. But as the old saying goes, "close enough for government work"!!! Until officially corrected it will stand the test. These medals and decorations will be part of the official memorial dedication ceremony and will presented to the family at that time.

They are as follows: Silver Star, Distinguished Flying Cross with two Oak Leaf Clusters, Bronze Star Medal, Purple Heart Medal, Air Medal w/ 12OLC, Presidential Unit Citation w/3 OLC, American Campaign Medal, Asiatic-Pacific Campaign Medal w/13 Battle Stars, World War Two Victory Medal, Army of Occupation Medal, Japan., National Defense Service Medal, Korean Service Medal w/4 BS, Philippine Liberation Medal, Philippine Presidential Unit Citation, Republic of Korea Presidential Unit Citation, United Nations Service Medal, Korea.

During the extensive research over the past year we were able to verify that Captain Woolam and Sgt. Root did receive military honors and memorial services provided by their families. Walter King will now receive those honors presented by those who knew, loved and respected him. All the costs associated with this pro-

ject have been donated by his friends and contemporaries from the 13th Bomb Squadron Association (Korea) class of 1950/51. The replies to our solicitations were most gratifying to say the least. By the time this goes to press the final mold should have been poured for the plaque.

We can now say rest in peace Walter Siler King, friend and comrade in arms. It was truly good to know and serve with you. Sometime in the not to distant future we'll all be gathered in that "Big Hanger" and tell our war stories again. What was basically a quick trip to gather information for your biography has grown tenfold. Truthfully and sincerely a labor of love and great respect. It is our great privilege to honor your memory with the ceremony that will take place near the place of your birth in the immediate future. -30-