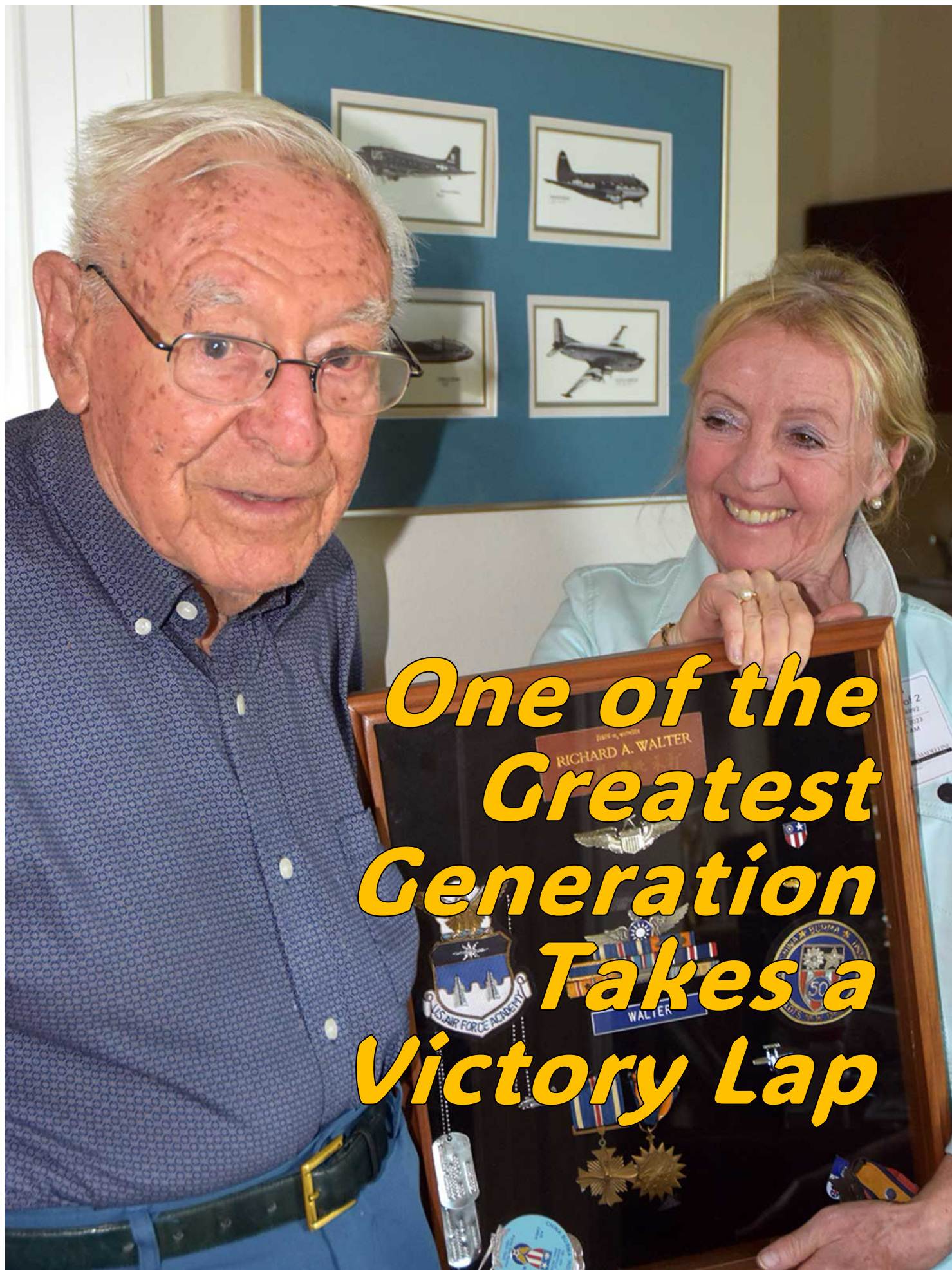




*One of the
Greatest
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Takes a
Victory Lap*

One of the Greatest Generation Takes a Victory Lap

By Mike Jones

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In the movie “Independence Day” there is a marvelous scene which celebrates personal vindication and the joy of a second chance. An inebriated crop-dusting pilot, Russell Casse had proclaimed for years he had been abducted by aliens — aliens just like the ones attacking Earth. Just before destroying the alien ship with his F-18, Russell (flawlessly played by the great Randy Quaid) stares into the glare of the attacking spaceship and bellows, “Hello boys, I’m baaaccckkk!”

Fast forward to today, this magazine, and me. For the past six months I have taken a brief hiatus from this inestimable journal to devote myself to a different kind of writing: a PhD dissertation about great airports. It has been an all-consuming task. My journey involved reading hundreds of scholarly articles, gathering data from some wild and wacky sources, torturing those numbers with advanced statistical techniques, and then memorializing my learnings in a book-sized report more tedious than a tax return. I perfected the dispassionate passive voice. By the time you read these words, my tome will have been published and I will be, according to the registrar, the oldest person to earn a doctorate at the University of Florida in the last 150 years. Go Gators!

With that accomplishment behind me, I have a bit of free time these days. Those empty hours allow me to return to these pages. Like Russell Casse, I'm baaaccckkk! Please hold your applause.



Dick Walter and his wife, Joan, with Annie and myself. This photo is fifteen years old, because on Dick's 85th birthday we bought him an hour of time in this beautiful DC-3, the same type of plane he flew over the hump.

Because I had another aeronautical adventure just last week, when my nearly-sainted wife and I made two long flights in one day. We were wheels-up before sunrise and dashed south to the FBO operated by the Florida Institute of Technology in breezy Melbourne, FL in time for lunch. Late in the same storm-filled afternoon, we reversed the trip and returned home. Almost seven hours on the Hobbs in one day; that's a lot of stick-time for old Mr. Garmin. The reason for this extraordinary effort? My friend and co-pilot of many years, Dick Walter, was turning 100 years old.

Dick is no stranger to these pages; I described his superlative aviation career in the March 2018 edition. Here is the “Cliff Notes” version, so you don’t strain your grey cells trying to remember the details:

Completely Unqualified

Born in upstate New York, Dick was a freshman at Cornell University when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. He joined the ROTC program which allowed him to stay at Cornell until the Army needed him. Activated in his junior year, his ROTC experience made him a standout. He was allowed to choose his specialty and he requested the Army Air Force. “I’d take any job, anywhere,” he said, “that didn’t involve a lot of marching.”



The sun was not yet up and the full moon had not yet set when we pulled old '91N out of the hangar for our trip to the birthday party, but Annie was in a dancing mood.

Oddly, Dick’s rank was the now-obsolete status of “Flight Officer.” By this point in the war, the Army had produced all the commissioned officers Congress would pay for but there were still empty cockpits needing to be filled. Rather than starting a budget fight, the Pentagon simply created a new rank and began dishing out wings to their graduates.

Dick wasn’t even sure he was going to be a pilot. When he arrived at the Army’s facility in New Jersey where new recruits were detected, suspected and inspected (but rarely rejected) they assigned him a series of tests to determine his aeronautical proficiency. The first one was a physical exam. The sergeant-in-charge proudly announced that anybody who could pass this test was the

cream of the crop and would be rewarded with a quick trip to aerial gunnery school. Dick carefully flunked that test. Damn the bad luck.

The next test was for his mathematical skills, to see if he had the smarts to be a navigator. Strike two.

The last test was for mechanical skills, and if he knew enough about engines and gears to be a flight engineer. Zero for three was the reply.

“Well, sir,” the sergeant told him as he looked through the paperwork, “You’re really not qualified for anything. We’ll just have to make you a pilot.” Which suited Dick just fine.



Inside the cockpit on the ride south, the rising sun illuminating the interior of the plane.

Accustomed to frigid New York winters, Dick enjoyed basic training in Miami Beach, Florida. Advanced pilot training was in Pampa, TX, a town so rural that the main street still had hitching racks for

horses. Eighteen months after being activated, he received orders to India. He joined 6,000 soldiers on a troop ship for the month-long trip. The ship was relatively speedy, making 17 knots, but the continuous zigging and zagging to avoid Japanese submarines made the trip far slower than it could have been. The enlisted troops, down in the bowels of the ship, had an awful ride, especially when they sailed into a typhoon.

India Issues

India's infrastructure was completely inadequate for the war, including the sewers. "You could smell Bombay long before you could see it," Dick remembers.

Dick and other pilots were put on a troop train heading northeast but the locomotive was so worn out and under-powered it could not climb the Himalayan foothills. Everyone was ordered off the train and they walked along the tracks while the engine struggled up the grade. Eventually, the tracks simply ended at a river. The soldiers hired bearers to carry their bags down the embankment while barges took them across to another train. That train was "an ancient rolling slum" Dick recalls, with ragged seats, no lights, and holes in the floor for sanitation. But Walter realized it was New Year's Eve and he had a bottle of scotch he had smuggled all the way from the U.S. Lurching along in the dark, that small band of flyers welcomed the New Year in style.



Dick collected quite a few medals and other honors during his two decades of military flying. The ladies always love a guy with medals on his chest.

Dick flew from Sookerating, a rural area in what is today Bangladesh. Japanese forces controlled most of China, Thailand, Malaysia and Burma — this was "Bridge over the River Kwai" territory — and the only way to move supplies was by air. Especially for the soldiers in China, every drop of fuel, every weapon, bullet, can of C-rations, even paper and cigarettes, had to be flown in by plane.

The airfield was built on the grounds of a tea plantation. Living conditions were described by historian Herbert Weaver as “by far the worst in the entire theater, with primitive quarters, poor sanitation, bad food, pervasive disease.” The mess hall was the tea-planter’s old bungalow and made of woven bamboo. They slept in thatched-roof shacks and at night used their .45 caliber pistols to shoot the rats running amongst the rafters.

Almost immediately after his arrival, Dick was scheduled for his first flight. Climbing into the C-47 he found it mostly empty except for some lumpy burlap bags on the floor. He clambered up the steeply sloping deck into the cockpit.

“Hey, Captain,” he asked, “Do we have to fly to Ledo to get our cargo?”

“Nope,” the captain said dismissively. “That’s what 6,000 pounds of potatoes looks like.”



Dick Walter, about 23 years old, flying left seat in a C-47. Initially, Dick casually wore sneakers and tee shirts because the odds were so bad he figured he would never survive the war. As the months went on, he began to think he might make it and he began wearing combat boots and eventually even his flak jacket. Oddly, usually he sat on his flak jacket because the enemy was always shooting up at his plane, from the ground.

Within 30 days Walter was an aircraft commander. He flew mules to Chinese troops and goats to Indian Gurkas. He parachuted radios to OSS special forces which were busy sabotaging Japanese railroads. He often re-supplied troops without landing the plane; they had discovered that bags of rice, half-filled and double-bagged, could be dropped from 300 feet without bursting. Instead of wearing his flak jacket he always sat on it because enemy bullets usually would come up through the floor.

It was a ferociously busy time. Dick once flew five round-trips into Burma in one long thirteen-hour day as they only could drop supplies during daylight.



Before the birthday party, Dick and I sat in his apartment and talked about the old days. I recorded his memories on my cellphone for accuracy.

Amazingly, the only person in Dick's squadron who did not survive was one drunk captain, who fell out of his jeep and was fatally wounded when the .45 on his hip discharged.

Treacherous Skies

If flying in Burma was bad, driving over-loaded and under-powered planes over the Himalayas into China was worse. There was only one route through the mountains — "Hell's Gate" — and with six different airfields sending their planes to the same narrow pass the risk of collisions was constant. Navigation aids were non-existent, radios were fickle and weather forecasts were mere guestimates. Using a compass, a stopwatch and guestimates of the wind, they'd

dead-reckon their position and time their turns between the mountain peaks, hoping to clear the rocks. “Flying blind” in clouds, they were unable to see either planes or mountains. More than 600 planes were lost. The route into China was dubbed the “Aluminum Trail” for the number of planes crashed on the mountains. Nonetheless, the mission helped win the war with more than 650,000 tons of cargo delivered to soldiers in China.

Dick remembers one mission when they flew into the heart of a thunderstorm. “The co-pilot and I were literally standing in our seats,” he said, “alternately pulling up on the yoke and then pushing it down, fighting the thunderstorm. I didn’t think the plane would hold together.”

When flying into China, each pilot wore a special leather jacket. Stitched into the back was an American flag, a Chinese flag and a message in Chinese which read, “This pilot is a friend of the Chinese. Bring him to safety and you will be rewarded with rice and gold.” Amazingly, eight decades later, Dick still fits into his jacket.

The war ended in August 1945 while Dick was in China. He had accumulated more than 800 flying hours, a Distinguished Flying Cross, three Air Medals, a promotion to Second Lieutenant, and a fast troopship home. On Christmas 1945 he was demobilized and went on to finish college; eventually he earned an MBA from the Cornell University he had abandoned for the war. He enjoyed a very successful business career in the New York City area, was married and raised two sons. He also stayed in the Reserves and was reactivated in 1956 for 13 more years, flying C-119 “Flying Boxcars” during the Cuban Missile Crisis and C-124 Globemasters into the Cold War, eventually retiring as a major. Not a bad career, Dick Walter, not bad at all, even if you were a Second Lieutenant for twelve years.

A Centennial Party

Today Walter and his wife of 35 years, Joan, live in the modestly posh digs of Chateau Madeline in Melbourne, FL. Chateau Madeline is a new residence for assisted living and has all the modern conveniences any aviator could desire, including a bar in the lobby, an excellent kitchen, outdoor dining, and views of the launches from the Kennedy Space Center. The Chateau sponsors a joint birthday party every month for the residents, and ten residents shared the March party with Dick. Photographs of all the birthday celebrants flashed on large television screens throughout the facility, even in the elevators. But there can be no doubt that Dick's centennial made the occasion exceptional.



The food was superb, including conch fritters, pigs in a blanket (my favorite), and empanadas. None of the residents had to wait in line; the Chateau's

staff served all the guests individually and respectfully. Champagne highlighted the festivities along with a

Dick is astoundingly energetic, and when he was given the microphone he gave quite a good story. Notice the posters featuring his flying career, and the television featuring Dick and the party.



handsome cake commemorating Walter's 100 years. Eric Hardoon, the facility director, was a most charming master of ceremonies who introduced Dick and enticed him, normally a very modest man, to say a few words to the crowd. A guitarist entertained the group with old favorites that everybody could sing. A vibrant Stella Tobin, Director of Activities at the Chateau, encouraged all the residents to participate. They even had valet parking for all the walkers, neatly arrayed along a hallway.



Dick and Joan Walter both enjoyed the food, the excitement of the party, and the energy of the day. Hugging Joan is Stella Tobin, the Director of Activities at the Chateau. Both she and the entire staff made every effort to get everyone smiling, clapping, and singing along. It really was quite a happy event.

In assisted living facilities, the parties end early (and I was happy when it did). The Florida skies were grey and blustery as the party wound down. Annie and I hitched a ride back to the FBO at Melbourne. (I was tickled to see their fuel prices were about \$2 per gallon cheaper than the other FBOs at that field.) We filed a flight plan, grabbed a weather briefing and by 4pm were rolling down the short Runway 5 at MLB.

Note to self: next time, chose a different runway. There is a huge hangar, big enough for the space shuttle, perfectly aligned with the end of Runway 5. Its gaping maw looks like the mouth of a space monster in a bad episode of

“Starwars.” It gets bigger and bigger as you race towards it, burning up runway and wondering if Vy is a real thing.

The flight home was long; headwinds, always of course, so we stayed low to avoid the higher winds aloft. We bounced our way through build-up after build-up; good thing Cessna builds them strong. There was a TFR around the Kennedy Space Center and another one near JAX. The controllers were excellent and awarded me short-cuts when I groveled nicely, but there’s a limit to what they can do. Additionally, my otherwise perfect bride does NOT like flying over water so our route was stretched even a little longer. The only thing we didn’t do was zig-zag to avoid torpedoes.

After three hours in the air, I had burned about half the fuel in the main tanks. I refilled them in flight from my Flint tip-tanks, which are a great addition to an already capable airplane (and an advertiser in this magazine: support your friends).



It was a long slog back home; we were tired, there were headwinds, it was bumpy, and we had re-routes around TFRs. As the sun went down I added a stylish flashlight to my aeronautical rigging; the panel lights work fine on the Cessna but it's good to have a back-up at the ready if it was needed.

Approaching Pinehurst about an hour after sunset, I requested the ILS to Runway 5. The Garmin autopilot flew it neatly, and I followed a friend in his King Air who was finishing his long day of charter flights. It's always a thrill to click the mike five times and see the runway lights magically appear out of the darkness. Flaring at 75 knots, we thumped on to the runway after 3.6 hours in the air. The Pinehurst unicom lady greeted us warmly and I requested help pushing the plane back into the hangar. A tiring day, a long day, but a really *worthy* day.

Dick officially turned 100 on March 14th. He's outlived one wife, two life insurance policies, and even his Florida driver's license. While his hearing is weak and he relies on a walker for mobility, Walter's eyes are sharp and his memory clear.

"I hope I get ten more years," he said to the gathering at the party. "I've still got a lot to do."

Postscript

Joan Walters quietly passed away six months after the birthday party, taking her sixteen holes-in-one with her. Major Dick Walters never made it to his 101st birthday. He died in January, aged 100 years and ten months. They both will be missed.

About the Author

Mike Jones is a 4,000 hour commercial-rated pilot who has more than 50 aircraft types in his logbook. His pride and joy is a Cessna T210, which has carried him to every corner of the U.S. and Canada for more than twenty years. He's always accessible at PilotMike2012@gmail.com.

