

Buckeye

George Isham Belch worked his way through the Army Air Force's three phases of flight training to become a fighter pilot. Then he became an instructor pilot teaching other young men to fly.

George Belch grew up in Massillon, Ohio. A high school football standout, Belch enrolled at Ohio State University in 1940. He played on the freshman football team and participated in ROTC. In 1941, Belch transferred from Ohio State to Clemson where he was an engineering major assigned to Company H, 2nd Battalion, 2nd Regiment in the Cadet Brigade. With American entry into World War II, Belch in 1942 signed up for the Army Air Corps. He was called to active duty in January 1943.

Belch was inducted at Fort Benjamin Harrison, Indiana and from there was sent to Keesler Field in Mississippi. Next, he was ordered to Birmingham, Alabama and then Albany, Georgia to continue technical training. He earned his wings as a fighter pilot at Mariano Air Base in Florida in April 1944. After a brief stop at Randolph Field, Texas, the newly minted pilot was assigned as an instructor at Bainbridge Army Air Field in south Georgia.



LT. GEORGE I. BELCH

Bainbridge, located about 40 miles north of Tallahassee, Florida, was a Basic flight training facility. There, student pilots who had completed the primary phase of flight instruction moved to more powerful and more complex aircraft like the BT-13 Vultee Valiant. The Valiant was equipped with a two-way radio to communicate with the ground, with landing flaps, and with a controllable-pitch propeller, increasing not only the capabilities of the aircraft, but the workload on the student pilot as well.



On August 1, 1944, Second Lieutenant Belch climbed into a Valiant trainer with student pilot William Hill for a local training flight. They departed Babcock Auxiliary Field about seven miles northwest of Bainbridge and climbed to an altitude of 1,000 feet. The Valiant was last seen at an altitude of 200 feet with its engine idling. Accident investigators

surmised that Hill was practicing forced landings and that the plane stalled when he made a tight turn toward the field. The Valiant crashed and caught fire about one-and-a-half miles southwest of Babcock Field. Both Hill and Belch were killed.

Second Lieutenant Belch was survived by his parents and his brother, then in a Navy flight training program. His remains were returned to Massillon and buried in Rose Hill Memorial Park.

