A Fine Pilot and a Fine Man

W. D. WORKMAN

Since the flight of Icarus, flying had always been seen as a dangerous endeavor. Many had been killed during man's centuries-long experimentations with flight. Even after the Wrights finally conquered the air, tragedy was a frequent companion. In 1908, while riding as a passenger during a demonstration flight for the Army at Fort Myers, Virginia, Thomas Selfridge, a twenty-six year-old first lieutenant in the Signal Corps, was killed when a broken propeller caused the Wright Flyer, piloted by its co-inventor Orville Wright, to crash. Selfridge claimed the distinction as the first passenger to die in the crash of a powered airplane. Selfridge wouldn't be the last military man to perish in an aircraft accident.

William Duncan Workman arrived on the Clemson campus in the late summer of 1937 along with the other members of his Class of 1941. "Dunc" was a general science student from Clinton who served as treasurer of the Laurens-Union County Club. A four-year private in the cadet brigade, Workman's cadet career was undistinguished, yet soon after graduation, he was in the service, eventually assigned to the Army Air Forces and flight training.

At the time Workman and his classmates graduated, the Army Air Corps was gearing up its flight training operations to fill the expanding ranks of aviators needed to face the world crisis. In June 1941, this training was divided into three phases: primary, basic, and advanced—each twelve weeks long. Before long, each phase was reduced to ten weeks; and after Pearl Harbor to nine weeks.

Perhaps the reduction in training time contributed to the high numbers of accidents and fatalities incurred during training. According to historian Marlyn Pierce, more than 54,000 training accidents occurred in the continental United States over the course of the war. The peak year for these accidents was 1943. Heavy losses in the daylight bombing campaign over Europe had to be replaced. As a result, thousands of young men were involved in stateside flight training. Dunc Workman was one of these, assigned as a student-pilot to the 29th Training Group at Gowen Field in Boise, Idaho.

Second lieutenant Workman had progressed to the third part of his flight training, advanced phase. He was flying the Army Air Forces' workhorse heavy bomber, the B-17. The weather in Idaho had been dreary all winter, with frequent snow, ice and fog. Nearby mountains added to the challenging flying environment, as did the demanding training schedule.

On Tuesday, April 13, 1943, Workman was assigned as the student-pilot on a training mission during which he would practice instrument take-offs. Flying "under the hood," operating the aircraft solely on the basis of its instruments and without visual reference to the world beyond

the cockpit, Workman was to coax his aircraft into the sky. To assist in this hazardous task was flight instructor and safety pilot first lieutenant Richard Pease. Also on board were four other crew members.

AT 0816 hours, Workman began his take-off, rolling more than fifteen hundred feet down the runway. Due to the torque created by the B-17's four big twelve-hundred horsepower engines, the airplane tended to veer to the right when under full power. Workman applied opposite rudder to counter the torque and straighten the aircraft. When he relaxed rudder pressure, the aircraft again veered to the right. Proceeding in a wide arc, the B-17 collided with another aircraft parked on a nearby ramp. Still under full power and moving at a speed of seventy to eighty miles per hour, Workman's aircraft crashed head-on into a second parked B-17. The collision started a fire which quickly destroyed both aircraft. One man on the ground and four in the aircraft, including Workman, were killed.

An investigation identified the probable cause of the accident as the safety pilot's slow reaction and failure to close the throttles when the aircraft became unmanageable.

The loss of Workman and the others, tragic and preventable as it was, was not unusual. It was, in fact, merely average. During that pivotal year of 1943, the Army Air Forces averaged more than fifteen accidents and six fatalities *per day*. Historian Pierce writes that these high loss rates, which over the course of the war were equivalent to a full infantry division, brought about a culture change within the service. As the Army Air Force evolved into the post-war Air Force, a commitment to safety dramatically reduced training accidents and fatalities.

The changes would come too late for Workman and the 15,530 other airman killed in stateside training accidents during the war. Yet, Army Air Force leaders knew that accidents were inevitable. Their gnawing dilemma was to determine an "acceptable" level of losses both in training and in combat.

William Duncan Workman was survived by his mother, Mrs. Gene Workman. Mrs. Workman planted a flower garden in memory of her son. Mothers of other men serving in the military sent her tulips, irises, dahlias, and azaleas to add to the plot. She also received a letter from the operations officer of her son's squadron. "Your son was in my flight here at Gowen Field. I flew with him many times — he was a fine pilot and a fine man and his passing is a loss not only to you and his loved ones, but also to his country which he served so well." The author of the letter was Captain Jimmy Stewart.