

Book Review – Bomber Pilots

The Lucky Bastards Club, by Eugene Fletcher

Unbroken – A World War II story of survival, resistance and redemption, by Laura Hillenbrand

Review by Chris Hope, Master CFI

Memories are delicate flowers, pressed out flat and gently wrapped in tissue, and then stored away in a box in the back of the garage. And when they next come to light, years later, they are unwrapped and mixed with the memories of another box, and the personal memories of the finder. And so it is this month with two books, dealing with the experiences of two very young men in 1943-44. And reading the stories of these two men in the shadow of another 9-11 anniversary, I am reminded and impressed by the bravery and tenaciousness of our parents and grandparents

In many ways these young men could not be more different. Eugene Fletcher in the late 1930's was the kind of son that made a parent proud – honest and resourceful, a young man who you knew would always do the right thing. By 1939 he held a Private pilot's license and was planning on taking his place in his small Washington town.

Louie Zamperini was just the opposite – brash and daring. If something was stolen, Louie probably took it. If a prank was perpetrated, Louie was probably behind it. While Eugene's parents probably often proudly stated, "Yes, that's my son!", Louie's parents probably said the same with a note of embarrassment and apology. .

"The Lucky Bastards Club" is a compilation of two books. The name comes from the custom of honoring crew members who were lucky enough to live to complete a combat tour in the world of the B-17 in Europe. The first book, "Mister", relates first-hand the experiences of pilot training in the Army Air Corps of 1942. Fletcher writes with a matter-of-fact style, much of it based on letters to his wife Sherry and the rest based on what was then still-recent memories. The second, "Fletcher's Gang", originally written in 1988, is a compilation of letters to his wife, as well as the after-mission reports written by his navigator and copilot as they counted down their 35 missions over Germany and war-torn Europe.

Eugene's experiences in pilot training will be familiar to any military pilot. My own Air Force pilot training occurred twenty-five years after his, but all I needed to do was to replace "Stearman and AT-17" with "T-37 and T-38" and much of it could have been my own story.

His second book is impressive by what is left out. There is no sensationalism in the writing. Both the after-mission reports written by other crew members and his own recollections years afterward are very matter-of-fact

But it is this writing that carries a powerful story. Just another mission. The bombs hang up with the doors open and they need to hang a crew member out of the bomb bay to release them. Heavy flak renders one engine inoperable and flight controls nearly inoperable. Just another mission.

At the end, Mr. Fletcher adds a brief “here they are now” which punctuates for me the fact that these were just young American men who did their duty and came back home and melted back into the community.

“Unbroken” looks at another crew member, half a world away during the same time period. The author, Laura Hillenbrand, is known for her best-selling book, “Seabiscuit” and she brings the same level of research and detail to this book.

Louie Zamperini did not want to fly. In fact, he did not want to do much of anything but run. And, had the war not intervened, he might have been the first man to break the four-minute mile barrier. He found himself on the US Olympic team in Germany in 1936. But he ended up as a bombardier on a B-25 in the Pacific Theater.

The first part of the book deals with Louie’s early life. Then, on April 17th, 1942, his crew had their first real taste of war. It came fast and furious, and Laura, through interviews with the surviving crew members, describes the battle that took place between the B-25 “Super Man” and the Japanese Zeros. The plane limps back home, with holes and pieces missing.

The next mission is a search and rescue a few days later, but this time the crew is not so lucky. The Zeros win, the Louie and his crew are forced to ditch in the Pacific Ocean. Of the crew, three men survive the landing. Of the three, only two survive the forty-seven days that they floated in the ocean.

Landfall brought new perils, as the two survivors were met just off of the coast of a small island by a Japanese gun ship. The two spent the next two years in various Japanese POW camps, where Louie met a jailor who would torment him until VJ day.

The last portion of the book deals with Louie’s life after the war. Like Eugene, he returned home and tried to fit into post-war America. In many ways his life during this phase is as impressive as any phase of his life before. Read the story and learn once again the power of forgiveness.

Both books are definitely worth your time.

Chris loves to read, write, and fly, but not necessarily in that order

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