

“Mr. L-Bird” – Bill Stratton of the ILPA

Most people who have ever been associated with liaison aircraft are familiar with the name **Bill Stratton**. Many “L-Bird” enthusiasts belong to his organization and are well aware that Bill has single-handedly done more to raise public awareness about the exploits of liaison pilots and their aircraft than anyone living or dead. However, since he prefers to publicize the exploits of others instead of talking about himself, few people other than his close friends know much about the man who founded the **International Liaison Pilots Association** and publishes **Liaison Spoken Here!**, their quarterly newsletter. A few months ago I asked Mr. Stratton if he would write a short biography of himself for our own newsletter, so it is my privilege to present, in his own words, a little bit about the man whom many people regard as “Mr. L-Bird”.

Jim Gray, SOPA editor

My name is Bill Stratton. After volunteering for the U.S. Army Air Corps in early 1940 at Kelly Field, Texas, I became a four-engine-flight-engineer (FEFE) on B-17s, B-24s and B-29's. After V-J Day in 1945 I left the US Army Air Forces and immediately enrolled with the Spartan School of Aeronautics in Tulsa, Oklahoma to turn my military experience into civilian pilot certificates and mechanics ratings. I received the Airline Transport Pilot (ATP) certificate, Single and Multi-engine Land and Sea, the Certified Flight Instructor Certificate (CFI), Instrument Instructor Certificate (CFII), and the Aircraft and Engine (A&E) mechanic certificates, along with a Ground Instructor certificate with all ratings including the Link Trainer Instructor rating and Four Engine Flight Engineer Instructor rating.

After I completed all my courses at Spartan and returned home, the Veterans Administration here in San Antonio asked me to open a flight school, named Medina Valley Flyers, for training veterans how to fly under the G.I. Bill of Rights. I answered, “O.K. but where do I get the trainers?” They wrote a letter to the War Assets Administration (WAA) allowing me to purchase war surplus military trainers. I bought a Taylorcraft L-2, an Aeronca L-3, and a Piper L-4 and started flying the Vets in these “L-Birds”. I enjoyed flying these aircraft so much that I eventually got to wondering what part they had played in “winning” WWII.

I did not have much luck finding the official wartime records [editor's note: much of it was still classified at the time], so I started interviewing pilots, observers, FACs, mechanics, etc. and began to learn some of the amazing stories about the WWII liaison pilots and their aircraft. I then decided to collect a full set of U.S. WWII L-Birds and restore them back to flying condition in their “fighting colors”. In addition to the L-2, L-3 and L-4, I obtained and restored a Stinson L-1, two Stinson L-5's, an Interstate L-6 and an RAF version of our Piper L-4, nicknamed the “Flitfire”.

At the time it was the only complete collection of WWII L-Birds that had ever been restored on the planet. The Air Force Museum did not have a complete set, nor did the Smithsonian, nor Ft. Sill, nor Ft Rucker. Mine were all flyable too, and this may still be the only such collection ever assembled in one place.



Bill Stratton in USAAF uniform posing with his first Stinson L-5, N6438C back in 1985. Presented here as a black-and-white photograph, one might easily believe that it was taken 40 years earlier during World War Two.

About 30 years ago, with all the great L-Bird stories and photos I collected, I founded the *International Liaison Pilot and Aircraft Association* (ILPA). Over the years more than 2,000 people have “signed-on” with the ILPA world wide, and I still “head-up” the organization. About 20 years ago, my great ILPA members asked me to provide a newsletter for them, so I began writing, editing and producing **Liaison Spoken Here!** We also started holding an annual L-Bird gathering at Keokuk, Iowa about 20 years ago and we still meet there each year during the last week in July. Afterward, many participants fly “en masse” on up to Oshkosh, Wisconsin for the EAA annual convention and airshow.

Several years ago, fulfilling a request from Paul Poberezny to bring some L-Birds to the big EAA event, I led seven of them up to Keokuk and on to Oshkosh. We were the only WWII L-Birds at Oshkosh that year. The flight to Keokuk and Oshkosh took three days, we flew in the airshow for three days, and we returned to San Antonio in three days. We safely made it round-trip all in one piece with no "cuts, burns nor bruises"!

I answer from five to ten letters, phone calls, faxes, or emails each day from my great ILPA members and have always included a request in my answers to "write me a page or two about what you and your L-Bird have been up to lately". At least half of my requests have been answered with letters and photos of World War Two L-Bird experiences - so many that I need four large steel file cabinets of four drawers each to hold all of this great stuff. Up to this point in time I have produced 85 issues of Liaison Spoken Here! and could easily write, edit and produce another 80 issues or so just from what is already here in my ILPA file cabinets.

A few years ago I turned all the above mentioned letters, interviews, and photos, along with materials obtained from the National Archives, the Smithsonian, the USAF Museum, Fort Sill and Fort Rucker, over to a TV production company to be turned into a *History Channel* film narrated by the actor/pilot Cliff Robertson. [Editor's note: for various reasons the "L-Bird movie" has not been aired or released to the public yet.]

In all, I have owned eight or nine liaison aircraft, several military vehicles including a Jeep, a Dodge Command Car and a 1939 Chevrolet Staff Car. I have donated and/or sold all of them to museums or collectors except for the 1939 Chevy. We still have it and Georgia Ann and I drive it once in a while in parades. We have been in the *Battle of Flowers* and *Night Parade* in San Antonio several times.

In addition to everything mentioned already, I used to operated a five aircraft "duster and sprayer" business; I was chief pilot for the Phillips Oil Company and was also a personal pilot for President Lyndon B and Lady Bird Johnson on their privately owned Lockheed Lodestar, N601T.

One last comment. About five years ago, several of my great ILPA members, unbeknownst to me, placed my name in nomination to be enshrined into the National Aviation Hall of Fame (NAHF) at Dayton, Ohio. My nomination has been accepted and I am on the list to be "enshrined". Ain't that great!

Respectfully submitted,



Bill Stratton's personal "L-Bird Air Force" headed to Randolph Air Force Base for an airshow. Present are his L-1, L-2, L-3, L-4, L-5, L-6 and British "Flitfire" L-4 (at the middle left)



James Brodie of the famed "trapeze" launch and recovery system for light aircraft looks on as Bill Stratton photographs WWII liaison pilot John Kriegsman in front of Bill's second L-5, N45TX.



Bill Stratton and wife Georgia Ann in a photo well-known to ILPA members.