

Living History

Larry Kelley's B-25 *Panchito*

Larry Kelley and Larry Wilson
WB #4053

B-25 Production and Service History

In production from before U.S. entry into the war through V-J Day, the approximately 9,815 B-25s built saw service in all theaters of war including Alaska, North Africa, China, Europe, and the Southwest Pacific. They were flown by the U.S. Army Air Forces (USAAF) and U.S. Marine Corps, as well as the air forces of Britain, Canada, Australia, Russia, China, Brazil, and the Netherlands East Indies. Postwar, B-25s soldiered on in combat or other roles with the U.S. Air Force and the air forces of Canada, Indonesia, and many Latin American countries.

The B-25 was designed as a

Mention the B-25 Mitchell to many people, and they are likely to respond, "Oh, the Doolittle Raid." While the attack on Tokyo on April 18, 1942, was the most famous B-25 mission, North American Aviation's magnificent bomber played a much larger part in World War II.



PAUL BOWEN

Larry Kelley, *Panchito* owner and caretaker.

medium bomber to operate from altitudes between 8,000 and 12,000 feet. Powered by two 1,700-hp Wright R-2600 engines, the basic configuration stayed the same throughout production. Changes in armament improved both offensive and defensive capabilities through 75 mm cannons, up to 18 .50-caliber machine guns, and rockets. Some were modified to carry torpedoes, both standard aerial and glide versions. Tactics used in the South and Southwest Pacific included low-altitude strikes with strafing and skip-bombing against shipping and para-frag bombs against airfield targets. The B-25 also served as a photomapping platform and as an advanced trainer and fast transport.

The 41st Bombardment Group was the only B-25 medium bomber unit in the 7th Air Force, and it operated in the Central Pacific Theater from December 1943 to October 1944. The unit flew more than 240 missions, mostly in single squadron strength against Japanese shipping and bypassed islands, and often from low altitudes. In October 1944 the 41st transferred to Wheeler Field, Hawaii, for rest, re-equipment, crew replacements, and retraining. Its air-

craft were cycled through the Hawaiian Air Depot, where some B-25Ds and B-25Gs were converted to the eight-gun "strafer" nose. Other aircraft were replaced by new B-25Js.

Meet the Original *Panchito*

It was in Hawaii that B-25J number 43-28147 became the possession of Capt. Don Seiler of the 396th Bomb Squadron. Seiler named his new plane *Panchito* after the feisty Mexican rooster from the 1945 Disney animated musical *The Three Cabarellos*.

Both combat veterans and recent trainees composed *Panchito's* crew. Pilot Capt. Seiler and bombardier Lt. Jud Driver, seasoned combat veterans in their early 20s, were both preparing for their second combat tour. Among the replacements making up the rest of the crew were copilot Lt. T.F. Shea, radio operator and gunner Cpl. Norm Landry, and an unusual pair of gunners: identical twins, Cpls. William and Robert Miller from Hummelston, Pennsylvania. The USAAF

policy that allowed them to be assigned together was so little known that they carried copies of it with them. Bill was the flight engineer and top turret gunner, while Bob served as tail gunner and armorer. Bill liked this arrangement since they could check on each other visually while on missions.

In June 1945, the 41st Bombardment Group was reassigned, along with other 7th Air Force bomber units, to Okinawa to participate in the aerial campaign leading to the planned invasion of Kyushu in November 1945. Until other units were transferred from the 5th Air Force later in July, the 41st was again the only B-25 unit in the 7th Air Force. With its first mission against Chiran Airfield, Kyushu, on July 1, 1945, the 41st became the first unit to attack the Japanese home islands with B-25s since the Doolittle Raid in 1942.

Over the next six weeks, the 41st flew 48 combat or combat-support missions against Japanese targets in Kyushu, the island chain north of Okinawa, and Japanese bases in East-



Top turret gunner on the original *Panchito*, Bill Miller leans against his aircraft at Okinawa in July 1945.



LARRY KELLEY

Inset, the eight-day clock Bill prried off *Panchito's* panel in 1945 still keeps good time.

B-25 SPECIAL SECTION



JIM KOEPNICK

. . . anyone could fly a B-25, as it is an easy plane to fly. The trick is getting it to the end of the runway. At first I didn't understand . . .

ern China. Targets included airfields, shipping, transportation targets, and rail facilities. *Panchito* flew 19 of these missions, including the last combat mission flown on August 12, 1945, against Kanoya Airfield, Kyushu. Announcement of the Japanese surrender caused the mission scheduled for August 13 to be canceled. This mission was also to include *Panchito*, and Bill Miller retrieved the alert order for this mission from his unit's bulletin board, an order that had been overwritten as "CANCELED." He still has this document, neatly folded in his old wartime diary.

Diaries of the Panchito Crew

Much can be learned of the trials these bomber crews went through by studying official records. But the real

flavor comes out by talking to the crews or reading their diaries. Bill Miller kept a simple diary, and some samples are illustrative. He wrote the following about *Panchito's* second mission on July 10, 1945: "Our first trip over the Jap homeland. Sure don't seem to be Japan—could pass for Penna. woodland. Saw our first flak bursts today—so we wore our "flak suits." Later he wrote: "My friend Arena went down in yesterday's raid. Saw his plane go down in flames after collision with *Corsair*." Cpl. Raymond Arena was a gunner on the first B-25 lost by the 41st during this tour. Mission records show the collision actually was between two B-25s of the 820th Bomb Squadron; the other airplane limped back to base on one engine.

On August 9, flight crews reported and photographed a towering cloud of smoke coming from the Nagasaki

area some 75 miles away. From Bill's diary: "Well, if smoke means damage, then Nagasaki is ruined. The smoke was visible from Kanoya." He later added this note in the margin, "Nagasaki bomb 11:02 a.m.," and a clipping from the base newspaper describing other crews' observations of the 20,000-foot plume of smoke over Nagasaki from the atomic bomb.

The August 15, 1945, entry in Bill's diary expresses the feelings of many when they heard of the Japanese surrender: "...and at last the announcement came that Japan has accepted the peace terms. At 5 o'clock (a.m.) the loudspeaker blared out, 'Mission for today canceled. And all planes will leave for Manilla [sic] at dawn.' Boy we were glad! By noon, all available parking space on the island was taken up by C-54s, C47s, and C-46s awaiting trip to Tokyo Airfield. Can't write on paper my innermost feelings, but it's wonderful. Now to sweat out transportation home."

Finally the war was over for *Panchito* and the Miller brothers. The next day, the 41st packed up and headed for Clark Field in the Philippines, where their beloved Mitchells awaited final disposition. The official Air Force records show aircraft 43-28147 as being "condemned for

reclamation" in the Philippines on December 4, 1946. Reclamation was completed July 13, 1949.

From Trainer to Tanker

The present day *Panchito*, B-25J serial number 44-30734, was manufactured by North American Aviation in Kansas City, Kansas, and delivered to the USAAF on February 16, 1945. It spent some time in storage in Texas, then served in pilot training squadrons at what was to become Vance Air Force Base (AFB) in Oklahoma and James Connally AFB, Texas, with a conversion to a TB-25N in between. The aircraft spent time with various Air National Guard units in New York, South Carolina, and California between March 1954 and May 1958, when it was sent to the Arizona Aircraft Storage Branch at Davis-Monthan AFB. The plane's first civilian owner, a fire-fighting business, purchased it in December 1959.

In 1968, Richard and Bob Howe of Florida purchased the B-25 and added spray bars to the already modified bomber. The Howes operated it off their grass strip as an orange grove sprayer and mosquito bomber well into the 1970s. They called the plane *Big Bertha*. Imagine the sight of a B-25 screaming along at takeoff power, 10 feet above an orange grove and leaving a cloud of mist behind. The noise and sight of a B-25 coming at a mosquito was probably enough to scare it to death!

After more than a decade of crop spraying, the B-25 grew weary, and the corrosion from the chemicals began to take its toll. Since they were now using C-47 Dakotas and Beech 18s for their spraying business, the Howes donated their beloved B-25 to a museum in St. Cloud, Florida. They arranged with the Florida State Police to block off U.S. 192 in St. Cloud where they landed the B-25 on the highway. While taxiing to the museum, one

engine in the weak old bird seized, and the aircraft had to be towed the last few feet to its new home. This once magnificent, powerful, fire-breathing beast now looked like a leaky, corroded, crippled derelict.

Shortly thereafter the museum went defunct and liquidated its assets. Tom Reilly of the Flying Tigers Warbird Restoration Museum acquired the airframe and moved it to his storage facility in Orlando. He began a total rebuild back to the aircraft's original "J" model configuration, completing it for new Texan owners in 1986. After arriving in Texas, serial number 44-30734 received its *Panchito* nose art and markings. In the early 1990s Rick Korf bought the plane, and operated it with the National Warplane Museum in Geneseo, New York. Rick moved *Panchito* to the Valiant Air Command in Titusville, Florida, in the late 1990s.

Larry Kelley Finds a B-25

In July 1992, I (Larry Kelley) was standing in the EAA AirVenture Oshkosh Warbird parking area, near my UC-78 Bobcat, watching a line of B-25s coming in to land after flying a tribute to the 50th anniversary of the Doolittle Raid. I clearly remember thinking, "What a magnificent airplane," never imagining that five years later I would own *Panchito*, one of the planes I was watching. By 1997, I found myself in the position of being able to buy another warbird. I had been flying my UC-78 for seven years, and still loved it dearly, but I wanted something more powerful, and my love of the B-25 directed me to call Tom Reilly and ask if he knew of a good B-25 for sale. He responded that *Panchito*, his favorite restoration, was listed with a broker in Ft. Lauderdale. By that weekend I was the new owner of *Panchito*. I will always remember standing with Tom, after he finished his pre-buy inspec-

tion and I had spent the day with the broker handling the paperwork, and asking him, "How do you get in it?" I had a lot to learn!

Learning to fly the B-25 was easier than I thought. Ironically, I found myself following the same training route of many World War II bomber pilots who first flew primary trainers like the PT-17, PT-19, PT-22, or PT-23, then basic trainers BT-13 and BT-15, and finally advanced trainers AT-6, AT-17 (aka UC-78), and AT-9, or AT-10 if going into bombers and transports. After graduating from advanced training and getting their wings, cadets would be assigned to units where they transitioned into their warplanes. I had also begun flying in the PT-17 and PT-26, and of course the Cessna 150 and 182. I had restored my UC-78 and had been flying it for seven years, had flown a friend's BT-13, and was now transitioning into the B-25.

The first thing Tom told me was that anyone could fly a B-25, as it is an easy plane to fly. The trick is getting it to the end of the runway. At first I did not understand what he meant. I had been humbled years earlier by my brother's Aero Commander with its free-castering nose wheel, but I had mastered it quickly. How hard could it be? Experienced warbirds pilots Bill Dodds and Jeff Ethell called taxiing the B-25 the "Baghdad Dance." I thought that B-25 free-castering nose wheel had a demon in it! Don Seiler, *Panchito's* pilot in combat, best described this experience in a 1979 article he wrote in *Wings* magazine: "The initial stumbling block, surprisingly, was taxiing! Learning to taxi a Mitchell was a task that caused fledgling pilots undisguised anguish, bordering on near apoplexy, and required monumental patience on the part of an instructor until his charges developed 'feel' for the braking power unleashed by the press of a pedal.... Use of the brakes was further complicated by the free-castering of the

B-25 SPECIAL SECTION



nose wheel. At slow speed the nose wheel had a disconcerting tendency to kick quickly, first one way and then the other, as uncoordinated applications of the pedals alternately released hydraulic pressure to the brakes. This resulted in what was commonly referred to as a 'conga' with the plane in the hands of a suddenly panic-stricken novice pilot—a humorous and not unusual

28 JULY 2003

sight at transition school.”

The other thing that immediately caught my attention was the noise level on the flight deck during flight, especially on takeoff. Imagine you have a metal bucket over your head with two jackhammers attacking each side of that bucket; now you know how it sounds in a B-25! And now I know why most of the men who flew

these airplanes wear hearing aids.

Keeping 'em Flying!

We base the B-25 and UC-78 at Georgetown, Delaware, airport (GED), where we have found a warm welcome from airport manager John Kenny. We can only keep these old warbirds flying with the help of volunteers who share our



JIM KOEPNICK

Parlett, Howdy McCann, Larry Wilson, Lou Ridley, and many others make it possible for me to “Keep ‘em Flying.” Just changing the oil requires a forklift, 74 gallons of oil, two empty barrels, and clothing you are willing to throw away when finished. A polish job on the bare metal requires four crews of two, each with a buffer, gallons of Mothers metal polish, and eight 16-hour days in the sun! You forget all the pain, however, when one old veteran takes your hand and thanks you for keeping it flying.

We started to take the plane around the air show circuit and began to meet the veterans who flew B-25s during the war. I had been around warbirds since the early 1980s when Jeff Ethell and I would travel together, but the one-on-one with the veterans had never touched me so deeply. Standing under the wing of the B-25, many veterans began to open up about their experiences in Corsica, Italy, North Africa, China, the Pacific Islands, and Okinawa. Many had tears in their eyes as their memories were stimulated by the sight, sounds, and smell of the airplane. It was in the B-25 that many a farm boy became a man. Some told of losing a good friend or crew member. Stories of dedication to duty and mission, love of country, and shocking losses were, to them, just doing their duty. Stories we call heroic are to those veterans just doing what they were asked to do.

Over the years, I met and became friends with several of the Doolittle Raiders. Nolan Herndon, navigator/bombardier on the No. 10 airplane off the USS Hornet, best described how all the Raiders feel about their mission. They don’t feel comfortable with being called heroes. They were just ordinary soldiers and airmen who happened to be already trained in the B-25 when the mission was planned. They were no better or



LARRY KELLEY

Hundreds of B-25 veterans have signed *Panchito's* replica bombs.

passion. The skill and dedication of volunteers like Josh Kelley, Paul Nuwer, Jerry Jeffers, Lorie Thomsen, Steve Nuwer, Bobby Snead, Harry Fox, Kevin Smith, Otis Bramble, Dean Caputo, Donnie

B-25 SPECIAL SECTION

worse than any other outfit. When asked to volunteer for a special, but very dangerous mission, they were too young and eager to get at the Japanese to *not* volunteer. The greatest honor of my flying career was being asked to plan and lead the formation of 11 B-25s at the 60th Doolittle Raiders Reunion in April 2002, Columbia, South Carolina.

Meeting A Twin

Standing under the wing of *Panchito* at the World War II Weekend, at the Mid Atlantic Air Museum in June 1998, a soft-spoken, white-haired man with a briefcase walked up and politely asked to speak to the owner. I identified myself, and he said he had something he wanted to show me. *Panchito* had been the 1980s Monogram B-25J 1:48 scale model kit, and the box cover had a good color painting of *Panchito* landing at an island airstrip. He removed from his briefcase the box cover from the model kit, but quickly I noticed a photograph taped to the top left corner. My heart stopped! It was Bill Miller, as a 19-year-old in Okinawa, July 1945, standing next to his airplane, *Panchito*. Here stood a living connection to the original airplane.

For the next several hours my questions flowed as he graciously told me the story of how he and his brother went through gunnery training together, and being twins, they used a little known Air Corps regulation that parenthetically states, *"twins, if in the same branch of service, and if militarily feasible, shall be assigned together—and once assigned, shall not be separated."* The Miller twins were assigned together to Capt. Don Seiler's crew while at Wheeler Field in Hawaii. The following year we stopped off in Bill Miller's hometown, Lancaster, Pennsylvania, to pick him up and take



We owe it to present and future generations to wisely maintain and operate these treasures as living history monuments . . .

—Larry Kelley

him with us, as an honored guest, to the same event in Reading, Pennsylvania. The whole town must have turned out! Television crews at Lancaster and Reading airports filmed his departure and arrival. The newspapers ran the headline, "He flew the unfriendly skies," as they described his wartime duty. Bill flew the entire trip in the turret, his old "office" in 1945.

At the end of the war, when the 41st Bombardment Group had delivered its B-25s to Clark Field for "final disposition," crews were ordered to park the planes, leave everything, and walk away. After Capt. Seiler and Lt. Shea left the flight deck, Bill began to quickly remove the eight-day clock from the instrument panel. Now at his home in Lancaster, it has an honored place on his mantel, and keeps perfect time.

These Bombs Carry Signatures, not Explosives

We have accumulated hundreds of signatures of B-25 combat crews on the replica 500-pound bombs in the bomb bay. Once, at an air show in Columbia, South Carolina, we were talking to a former B-25 tail gunner from the 5th Air Force. Parkinson's disease had confined him to a wheelchair, but he wanted

to sign the bomb in memory of his many friends who died attacking Rabaul. We ran all over the airport gathering up wheel chocks and boards to build a makeshift ramp to get him high enough to sign and write his message. His signature trailed across the bomb, nearly illegible, and he strained to hold his hand steady. After about five minutes of straining, he had finally affixed his name to the bomb and a short message to his "lost" friends. He still had a tear in his eye when his son pushed his wheelchair back to the VIP tent.

I will forever remember sitting in the cockpit with Col. "Tic" Tokaz, former commander of the 340th Bomb Group, a B-25 outfit in Italy during World War II. As he sat there, he developed a blank look and turned pale as he sat silently and stared out the windscreen. I finally asked if he was okay. After a moment, he replied that the memories were flooding over him like it was yesterday. A mission against German gun emplacements in Italy had cost him his copilot, bombardier, and waist gunner. He had to fly a crippled aircraft home with three dead crew members, himself wounded. His son and daughter, standing behind us, said they had never heard that story.

Those of us who are honored to own and fly these unique aircraft are only temporary custodians of these icons of our military history. We owe it to present and future generations to wisely maintain and operate these treasures as living history monuments to those veterans who turned back tyranny more than 50 years ago to give us the freedoms we enjoy today. We must never forget the sacrifice of the American soldiers, sailors, airmen, and marines of World War II and subsequent wars, who never refused the call of their country to protect our way of life. ✈

WARBIRD FLIGHTS!!!

FRONT SEAT FLIGHTS FOR NON-PILOTS AND PILOTS ALIKE.
AVAILABLE EVERY DAY, ALL YEAR.

**NO FLYING
EXPERIENCE
NECESSARY!!!**



FOR INFORMATION
OR SCHEDULING, CALL:

(800) 386-1593

(407) 870-7366

WARBIRD ADVENTURES, INC.
KISSIMMEE GATEWAY AIRPORT (ISM)
233 N. HOAGLAND BLVD.
KISSIMMEE, FL 34741, USA

WWW.WARBIRDADVENTURES.COM

FLYING TIGERS WARBIRD RESTORATION MUSEUM



A working Restoration
facility and Museum
where History flies again!

See dozens of Warbirds
on display being
restored to flying condition

HOME OF TOM REILLY'S WARBIRD RESTORATION SCHOOL

Learn every aspect of restoring a Warbird back into flying condition during this 5-day Hands-on school. Students receive a *FREE* flight in an Authentic Warbird.

231 N. HOAGLAND BLVD. KISSIMMEE, FL 34741 (407) 933-1942

WWW.WARBIRDMUSEUM.COM