

The L-Bird and a Young Vermonter who flew them

The American Hero's Channel called the plane the "last great untold story of World War II"

The L- Bird (actually Stinson L-5 or similar plane) consisted of mostly wood covered with cloth, a 75 horsepower engine, weighing less than 800 pounds and was completely unarmed. The aircraft was shipped to the combat area where it was assembled using some of wood from the shipping crates as part of the structure. (photo)

The U.S. Army had developed the 155MM Howitzer, called "Long Tom", an artillery weapon that could fire with great accuracy at targets up to 18 miles away. What was essential was the means to direct the distant fire of the guns. That was the mission of the L-Birds

Leo R. Abair of Winooski joined the Army in 1941. He already held a civilian pilots license through the Civilian Pilots Training Corps (CPTC) started by President Roosevelt to prepare private citizens should the Country become involved with the war that was raging in Europe.

Abair was eventually stationed at Camp Roberts, California where he joined the 983 Field Artillery Unit which was assigned to the South Pacific Theatre of Operations to serve under the command of General Douglas MacArthur. The 983rd was the only long-range artillery unit there and was involved in every major action there until the end of the War.

The aircraft was able to take off and land at small unimproved airstrips or when necessary on beaches, roads or farm fields. In action they were required to fly close to the ground and slowly to detect enemy movement, making them tempting targets from below. They were often spared ground fire since the forces below knew the small plane's mission and that were their position was revealed heavy artillery fire could follow. Besides their primary mission the L- Plane pilots were called upon to perform many other essential duties including transporting wounded soldiers back to base hospitals, assisting in fighter/ bomber missions, and aerial photography. In European Theatre the small plane served a similar mission and was the primary means used by General George Patton to visit combat zones under his command.

In 1944 while engaged in the Battle of New Guinea SSgt Abair received word from MacArthur headquarters, at that time still in Australia, that he had been awarded a field commission promoting him to the rank of 2nd Lieutenant. In October of that year the 983rd Artillery landed on the Island of Leyte and was engaged in the heavy combat. For "gallantry in action" during that campaign the young Lieutenant was awarded the Silver Star one of our Nation's highest honors. ". (see attached) Shortly thereafter the General waded ashore on Leyte to fulfill his promise " I Shall Return"

Allied forces then moved on to the Philippine Islands where the Japanese army was still held a stronghold. During the action on Mindanao, Lt. Abair was awarded the Air Medal for "courage in the face of danger" citing 60 missions flown for behind enemy lines missions sometimes taking off while enemy shells were falling on the landing strip. This honor special since the Air Medal was seldom given to a pilot that was not in the Army Air Corps. (see attached)

After the War Lt. Leo returned to Vermont and served in the Vermont National Guard from 1945 until 1977 retiring with the rank of Colonel serving as Chief of Staff for three Adjutant Generals. He became the first pilot attached to the Vermont Army National in 1947 assigned to their first aircraft, yes a Stinson L5A, the L-Plane. (attached) As a pilot he was rated a Senior Army Aviator logging over 7,000 flight hours.)

Mr. Abair is now 96 years old and spends his time between his homes in Vermont and Florida

FIRST LIEUTENANT LEO R. ABAIR, 0548757, Field Artillery, United States Army. For meritorious achievement while participating in aerial flights on MINDANAO, PHILIPPINE ISLANDS, from 7 May 1945 to 7 June 1945. First Lieutenant Abair flew 60 missions far behind enemy lines, adjusting artillery fire. During this time he successfully adjusted fire on seven enemy artillery pieces that were shelling our troops and neutralized each of these guns. Several times he took off to locate enemy guns while their shells were falling on the landing strip. He also adjusted artillery fire on many pillboxes and strong points which were blocking the advance of the Infantry. All missions were flown over territory from which anti-aircraft fire was being received. His courage in the face of danger contributed greatly to the destruction of many enemy targets.

Home address: Mrs. Mary E. Abair (wife), 357 Saint Paul Street, Burlington, Vermont.

I. SILVER STAR. By direction of the President, under the provisions of the act of Congress approved 9 July 1918 (Bull 43, WD, 1918), the Silver Star was awarded by the Commanding General, X Corps, to the following named officer:

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FIRST LIEUTENANT LEO R ABAIR, 0548757, Field Artillery, United States Army. For gallantry in action during operations in Leyte Province, Philippine Islands, on 20 October 1944. While piloting a liaison plane, although instructed to return to his base when he was attacked by enemy planes and, also under heavy ground fire, without regard to his personal safety, he continued his mission and successfully adjusted artillery fire which resulted in the destruction of an enemy command post and a large enemy supply dump. Lieutenant Abair's courage was a great benefit to our forces.

Home Address: Mrs Mary E Abair (wife), 357 St Paul Street, Burlington, Vermont.

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Maj. Gen. Leo Abair pictured above in 1947 in the cockpit of a Stinson L5A the first aircraft assigned to the Vermont National Guard. He was the first Army aviator in Vermont shown here with Tech. Sgt. Loren Avery, the first aviation technician
