

COLONEL CHARLES W. ABBITT, U.S. AIR FORCE, RETIRED

Charles Webb Abbitt was born May 25, 1920 in the pre-Civil War ancestral home on Gravel Knoll Farm near the Appomattox Surrender Grounds. He graduated at age 16 from Appomattox Agriculture High School as Salutatorian and Class Prophet. Charles continued there another year taking additional college preparatory classes and a course in shorthand and typing, preparing him to work in his brothers' law office after school and during subsequent summers. He played second base on the High School baseball team and on the "Town Team". He also learned to play mandolin and guitar in groups with his brothers.

Charles entered the Virginia Military Institute on September 13, 1937, and graduated in May 1941, with a Bachelor of Science degree in Electrical Engineering, and a Second Lieutenant commission in the US Infantry. Charles is ever thankful for the great sacrifices made by the entire family to put him through VMI. He was immediately called to duty in the Fourth Infantry Division at Fort Benning, Georgia.

His career in the Infantry was short lived -- in a few weeks he received orders to report to Harvard University for special classified technical training. The tour at Harvard lasted 3 months and consisted of training in the principles of radar, a new and secret technology which was to play a key role in military operations of the future. After 3 more months at a special Army Unit at MIT, the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor hastened more training at the Signal Corps School at Fort Monmouth, N.J. and transfer to the 501 Aircraft Warning Regiment at Fort Dix, N.J. Shortly thereafter, effective February 1942, Charles was promoted to First Lieutenant.

He applied for pilot training, was turned down because of "critical skills". He began training as a Navigator and by spring 1943 joined a class of student officers to begin training at Hondo, Texas, one of Air Training Command's largest navigational schools of World War II. After graduation August 5, 1943, and receiving his Navigator wings, he was bestowed the unusual honor of assignment as an instructor there.

While serving there he married Ann Boleyn Charles on December 26, 1943.

In June 1944 he was promoted to Captain and during the summer transferred to the European Theater (ETO) as a crew member of the Air Transport Command to deliver a C-47 aircraft to England, through Labrador, Greenland, Iceland and Scotland. Subsequently at Group Headquarters as Group Navigator, his position entailed the assignment of support mission coming down from the 50th Troop Carrier Wing to our squadrons and combat missions involving the entire group, where he would be the Navigator for the 90 some planes in the Commander's C-47. By far the most important mission was leading the Group in the Rhineland invasion, crossing the Rhine River, which in turn led directly to Germany's surrender. For a considerable time they were hauling gasoline in jerry cans directly to the Third Army as Patton pushed for Berlin. After V-E Day they began training and being equipped to deploy to the China-Burma-India (CBI) theatre, while still flying their share of support missions. Air evacuation missions brought wounded soldiers on stretchers from forward based hospitals to better-equipped medical facilities, and they also flew many "displaced persons (DP's)" from Nazi prisons to their home countries.

When V-J Day occurred, transfer to the CBI theatre was cancelled, and subsequently he took a circuitous trek home culminating with a train from Charleston, S.C. to San Antonio where Ann was living with her Mother.

Charles II was born on March 20, 1946, in a Pittsburgh hospital.

In September 1947 Charles was assigned as a Captain, Navigator to the 37th Troop Carrier Squadron of the 313th Troop Carrier Group, in Greenville, S.C. with similar peacetime missions as the support missions in Europe.

Ann and Charles II had remained with her family in Austin, as Ann was too pregnant to undergo the stress of a household move at the time. Caroline Patricia was born October 26, 1947. When Mother and child were able to travel the family of 4 traveled to Greenville by auto. In May 1948, he was ordered to the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor to pursue a master's degree in electrical engineering.

After completing studies at Michigan, with all A's and an A+ in the final semester, Charles was transferred to Wright-Patterson Air Force Base into the Radar Techniques Section of the Aircraft Radiation Laboratory on February 23, 1950. Wright-Patterson was the primary Air Force development center for all aircraft and their components (not including ground launched missiles). The assignment was in connection with Joint Task Force Three, the organization to test the effects of atomic bomb weapons in Eniwetok Atoll in the Marshall Islands in 1952, code named Operation Greenhouse.

JTF-3 was assigned a B-50 aircraft, equipped with an AN/APQ-24 Bombing System, and a special set of receivers, scopes, circuits, etc. and film recorders to examine radar reception in the target area. Tests on atomic effects were subsequently conducted at Fenchman's Flat, Nevada, the AEC Proving Ground. Charles was promoted to Major on April 15, 1951.

On October 15, 1953, he was transferred from Wright Field to Headquarters USAF, Pentagon Building, in Arlington, Virginia, to conceive methods and select equipment to provide reconnaissance data on tactical (battlefield) targets using electronic sensors.

One of the redeeming factors of an assignment in Washington was that an officer near the end of his tour could select his next station, barring a critical shortage of talent or a defense emergency. Charles selected Patrick Air Force Base, Florida. The family loved Florida, and Charles wanted to shift into a missile career. Patrick being the owner of Cape Canaveral and the Atlantic Missile Range was the place to start. Most of his colleagues in the Pentagon thought this field was not logical, as they perceived the field as having little or no potential as a weapon of war!

This assignment from July 1957 to August 1962 was most satisfying: The family loved the Florida environment, Charles was promoted twice, to Lieutenant Colonel and Colonel, and the work was most exciting and led to a prosperous and enjoyable career for the subsequent 20 years.

During the early part of this assignment one particular project was starting to demand more and more attention and effort: Project Mercury of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, NASA, the priority national effort to put a man in space. Charles stayed at Patrick as Chief of the Mercury Support Planning Office through Scott Carpenter's Aurora-7 flight.

On August 10, 1962 he was transferred to Electronics Systems Division, L.G. Hanscom Field, Bedford, Massachusetts, as Director of Aerospace Instrumentation. The office was responsible for developing plans and projects for the National Ranges so they could support new weapon systems during their development and test phases (e.g. precise measurements of position, velocity, acceleration, altitude, flight parameters).

In May 1963 during his annual physical exam required of all aviators (he was then rated a Master Navigator), Charles was discovered to experience glaucoma in both eyes. With this diagnosis, the Air Force Flight Surgeon grounded him permanently. That led to a decision to retire, as the grounding would be a significant loss in pay.

Philco Houston Operations (PHO) had just won a large contract from NASA to build and operate the Integrated Mission Control Center at Houston, Texas, known as the IMCC-H. Charles and the family moved to Houston for his new position as Manager of Engineering, Office of Network Planning. When the office moved from Houston to Clear Lake City, just a small distance from the developing Johnson Space Center (new name), the family also moved to Clear Lake. The job continued with steady progress, with the addition of an Apollo Launch Data System.

In January 1965 Charles became Manager, Mission Control Center Operations Activity. This entailed the management of the MCC facility, its equipment and operations and maintenance people with the objective of operational readiness by launch time of Gemini-Titan-4, June 1965. Gemini's purpose was to define the onboard and ground control techniques that were needed for spacecraft-to-spacecraft maneuvering for rendezvous, docking, and extravehicular activities (EVA) as related to a lunar mission.

It was in this job that Charles received much praise and prestige from NASA: Chris Kraft, Pete Clements, Sig Sjoberg, Jim Stokes, Gene Krantz, etc. The task was to build up a 300 man crew of technicians who would man the Control Center, 3 shifts a day, and 7 days a week. Meanwhile, Mission Control at the Cape was controlling NASA missions. On Gemini 4 (GT-4) in June 1965 the Houston MCC was prime for control and the first Flight Control team remained in Houston, where they were then stationed. Operational readiness had been accomplished. During this period Chris Kraft gave a large degree of the credit for the successful operations of the MCC to Charles and to John Hatcher. From the NASA view the Gemini program had produced the answers sought on rendezvous, docking, EVA and man's ability to survive in space.

Charles became the MCC Program Manager, responsible for Philco's performance under the \$20 million per year contract supporting President Kennedy's challenge to have an American on the surface of the moon by the end of the 60s. The MCC configuration updates increased as Apollo orbital flights continued and ultimately the Armstrong and Aldrin landing of the Eagle on the Sea of Tranquility on July 20, 1969, while Collins circled the moon.

In September 1983 Charles and Ann "faded away" to a second retirement in Central Texas, first to a 100-acre farm in Bartlett, then in 1986 to Salado. Everything was very pleasant in Salado until 1996. Ann was diagnosed with small cell lung cancer. Ann died on Christmas Eve 1996, the same day the entire Texas Abbitt clan was heading for Salado for Christmas together. She is buried in the Salado Cemetery.

In 2005, Charles moved to The Wellington at Arapaho retirement community in Richardson, Texas. He maintains an extraordinary level of activity and service there, organizing Sunday vespers services, leading hospital visitations, etc. He still finds time for his guitar and gives occasional concerts for the residents. Some of his performances can be seen on YouTube as "Charlie Abbitt Live at the Wellington".