Perennial Pilot

World War II Veteran Still Flying

By Amy Morgan

Richard Rakes, born Aug. 29, 1925, is one of a very small group of Americans living who defended our country in World War II. He served as a bombardier with the Army Air Corps (a precursor to the U.S. Air Force) while he was still a teenager. He flew with the 15th Air Force in Southern Italy in 1945.

Rakes dreamed of flying planes from a very young age, when he was inspired by the sight of an Army plane that flew over his family’s farm in Southwest Arkansas. Although he passed the pilot’s test upon joining the military, he wasn’t needed as a pilot. Instead, Rakes studied aero gunnery and attended bombardier training until he was sent overseas.

He credits the hand of God’s protection, not only bringing him through the war unscathed, but also in dangerous circumstances as a boy: covering himself with lye as a baby, being bitten by a poisonous snake at 6, and a diagnosis of tuberculosis. None of which affected him for the worse.

Once he returned home from the war, Rakes was ready to settle down and find a mate, he said, and committed his search to the Lord. Several friends urged him to meet the office manager at the local cheese plant (Kraft Foods). One look was all it took.

“The Lord picked her out for me,” he said. “Our hearts talked to each other.” He and Mary Lou married in 1950. They moved to Tulsa, Okla., where Rakes studied mechanics, flight engineering and finally trained to be a pilot at Spartan College. His dream of learning to fly was fulfilled, paid for by the G.I. Bill.

Rakes joined American Airlines immediately following college, and the next phase of his life began. He was hired as the third man in the cockpit, the Flight Engineer. The Engineer is a member of the flight crew who monitors and operates its complex aircraft systems.

He spent 35 ½ years flying with American, Rakes said, until he retired in 1986. He flew DC-10s, 747s, models of which he still proudly displays on the mantle of his home at Independence Village, where he has lived since 2008.

He remembers his last flight, Oct. 1, 1986, on which included his wife and treated her to long layover in England. Rakes lost Mary Lou in 2011 after her lengthy illness. His daughter, Andrea Broker, lives just a few miles away in San Antonio. His son, James, is in Austin. Between them, they blessed Rakes with five grandchildren.

When James was just 6, Rakes took him to fly a model airplane. That first flight led to a passion for flying models that still continues. Rakes’ garage is filled with a dozen model airplanes – some more than nine feet long – that he controls electronically with a remote. He built some of them himself from scratch, he added, and flies them at a field in Northeast San Antonio.

Piloting models isn’t the only flying Rakes does – he still takes a plane up when the mood strikes. His most recent flight was just this March, when he flew a Cessna 172-S 4-seater from Boerne.

In his spare time, Rakes conducts computer flight simulations. He attends University United Methodist Church with his family and enjoys music and photography. He loves living at Independence Village, a resort style neighborhood of homes for adults 55+ because it is quiet, conveniently located and his neighbors and the staff are very friendly.

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