

## 1945 May 7-13

### Harry Blair & the Gooney Bird

**Blair Chalks Up 300 Combat Missions During  
15 Months Overseas In Various War Theaters**



—Tribune Photo  
SGT. HARRY A. BLAIR

(*La Crosse Tribune*, 1945 May 13, page 4)

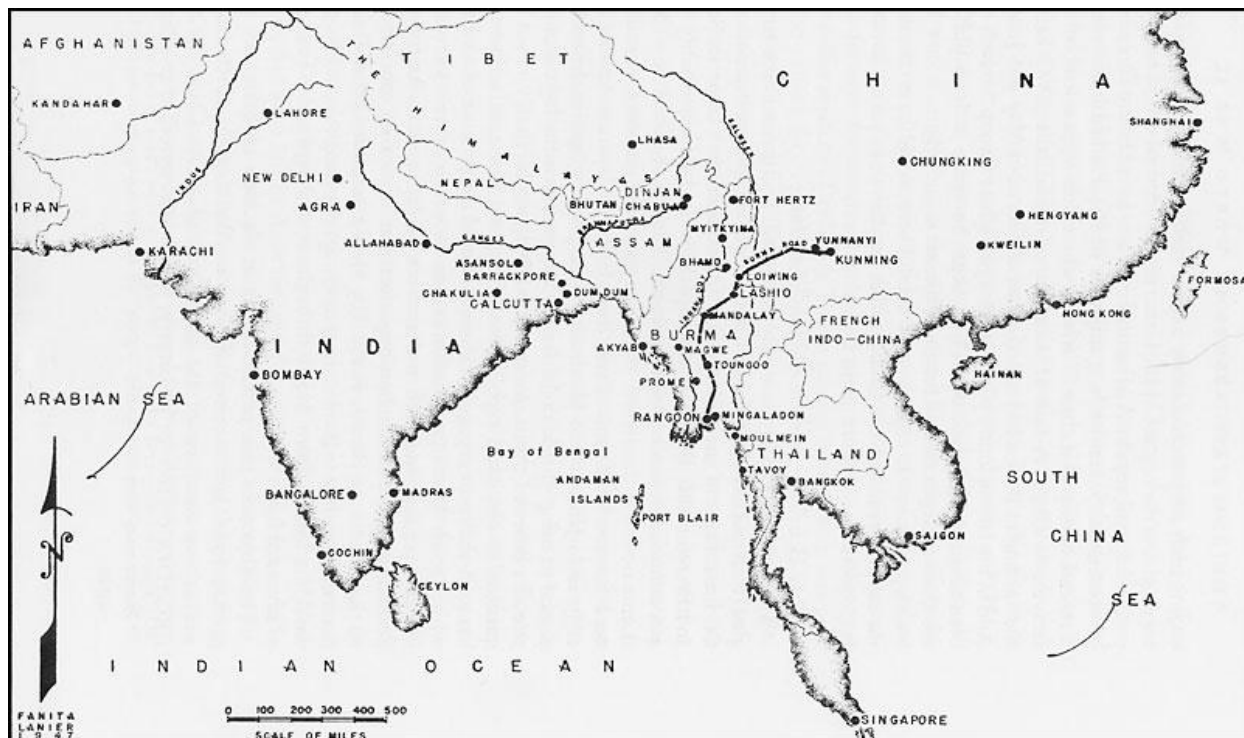
When Harry Blair, Jr. was growing up in La Crosse and dreaming of a career in aviation, he probably never would have imagined that his interest in aviation would take him to the exotic Far East flying in an airplane nicknamed "The Gooney Bird." That most unlikely scenario for a boy from La Crosse turned out to be a significant part of World War II.

Harry Blair, Jr. was born on Thanksgiving Day, November 30, 1922, in La Crosse.<sup>1</sup> He grew up at 1324 State Street<sup>2</sup> and attended the [Washington Elementary School](#).<sup>3</sup>

His father had served in the 3rd Infantry Division in World War I. During his time in the Army, he contracted a health condition that eventually led to his death.<sup>4</sup> Harry Blair, Sr. died in May 1936 at the age of 47. He was buried in Bangor.<sup>5</sup> Young Harry was just 13 years old at the time.

Blair graduated from La Crosse Central High School, and his goal was a career in aviation engineering. He enrolled at the local vocational school to start studying engineering.<sup>6</sup> While he was attending the vocational school in 1940, Blair also worked as a general office clerk at the [National Bank](#).<sup>7</sup> He later moved a job at State Bank.<sup>8</sup>

He left his job as a clerk at the State Bank to enlist in the Army Air Corps on November 18, 1942. After induction at [Fort Sheridan, Illinois](#), Blair was sent to Miami Beach, Florida, for basic training. His specialized training took place at three locations: radio communications at Sioux Falls, South Dakota; electronics at [Truax Field](#) in Madison, Wisconsin; and radar operation at Boca Raton, Florida. On February 4, 1944, 23-year-old Harry Blair was headed in an airplane to the China-Burma-India theater of war (commonly known as the CBI).<sup>9</sup>



China-Burma-India Theater  
([ibiblio.org](http://ibiblio.org))

The war against Japan covered a vast area because of wide-ranging Japanese conquests early in the war. The Allied operations to roll back the Japanese were divided into three sectors. In the Central Pacific, Admiral Chester Nimitz commanded naval and Marine forces island-hopping toward Japan. General Douglas MacArthur's naval and Army forces were island-hopping in the Southwest Pacific northward toward Japan. The Far East, or [China-Burma-India](#) (CBI) area, sometimes called "The Forgotten Theater," of the war, was the third area of operations. Because India was an important British colony, British forces took the lead but with significant American contributions in the air and on the ground.

It could be said that World War II actually started in The Forgotten Theater. Japan's Kwantung Army had been stationed in Manchuria, northeastern China, since 1906. In the fall of 1931, officers in that army, without any senior authorization, blew up part of the South Manchurian Railway line. Blaming the Chinese, the Kwantung Army attacked Chinese troops. China was unstable because of warfare between Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist forces and the communist forces of Mao Tse-tung for control of the country. After the Japanese took control of southern Manchuria, China instituted an economic boycott against Japan. Japan's response was a brutal attack on the city of Shanghai in 1932. Japan established a puppet state in Manchuria as a base for further expansion in China. Nationalist and Chinese forces

agreed to a temporary truce between themselves in 1937 to create a unified defense against Japanese advances in China. [By 1937](#), China and Japan were in an [all-out war](#).<sup>10</sup>



Japanese troops in China  
(Pacific Atrocities Education)

Even with the temporary alliance of opposing Chinese forces, the Japanese kept gobbling up Chinese territory. The Nationalists were pushed back to the city of Chungking, just 500 miles from the border of Burma. The Japanese controlled all the major seaports, so Chiang's forces had to be supplied overland.<sup>11</sup>

With Tibet and Nepal dominated by mountains, the only practical overland supply route ran through the British colony of Burma. It started at the seaport of Rangoon, then by rail to Lashio, and finally over the 717-mile Burma Road to Chungking. The Japanese invaded Burma and conquered it by early 1942, thus severing that supply line to China. The British retreated to India. Retaking Burma, while at the same time protecting India, was one of the main British objectives, with American help, for the rest of the war.<sup>12</sup>

Even though keeping China in the war was vital, Chiang Kai-shek proved to be a difficult ally. Extremely nationalistic and resentful of Western influence, Chiang was nonetheless dependent on Allied support to survive against the Japanese. American equipment, money, and personnel kept China in the war, thus tying down large Japanese forces that could not be used elsewhere. A Nationalist government was also the American preference for China in the postwar world to block Russian designs in the Far East.<sup>13</sup>

The Allies used India as their base of operations in the CBI. Supplies were flown from here to China until a land supply route could be reestablished. This meant risky flying over the forbidding Himalayan

Mountains (["Over the Hump"](#)). Allied armies, primarily British and their colonial troops, protected India and made forays into Burma.



Flying "Over the Hump"  
(HistoryNet)

The principal American presence in the CBI was the [Army Air Force](#). This consisted of the Tenth Air Force and the Fourteenth Air Force, the latter including General Claire Chennault's ["Flying Tigers,"](#) which was known as the American Volunteer Group before the United States formally entered World War II.<sup>14</sup> They flew supplies to China and other allies in the region, made bombing raids against Japanese installations, and protected Chinese cities from Japanese bombing raids.

In 1943, most of the Allied campaign in Burma was focused on commando and guerilla warfare behind Japanese lines. Burmese natives, assisted by American and British special operations, conducted guerilla raids on the Japanese. British General [Orde Wingate](#) developed a concept called Long Range Penetration Groups, nicknamed ["Chindits,"](#) that operated behind Japanese lines. Many were inserted and supplied by air.<sup>15</sup>



General Orde Wingate in the light uniform, inspecting some of his Chindits  
(Chindits.info)

In early 1944 when Harry Blair arrived in the CBI, the Allies had launched a three-pronged campaign into Burma. British and colonial troops went on an offensive toward the city of Akyab on the Bay of Bengal that continued the rest of the year. An American-Chinese force nicknamed "[Merrill's Marauders](#)" moved to take the airfield and railhead at Myitkyina. They had captured the airstrip in May, but the town held out until August 1944. At the same time, two divisions of Indian troops advanced into north-central Burma.<sup>16</sup>



Some of "Merrill's Marauders" crossing a river in Burma  
(Army.mil)

All of this military activity required an almost constant movement of equipment, troops, and supplies. To accomplish this, the Army Air Force had at its disposal one of the most remarkable cargo aircraft ever built---the [Douglas C-47 Skytrain](#).



C-47 Skytrain/Dakota  
(Flyinglegends.com)

Unlike the fighters and the bombers of World War II, the C-47 had a civilian origin. The Douglas Commercial company debuted the DC-1 in July 1933 as a passenger plane. The DC-2 came out in 1934, and the Army Air Corps bought one in 1936. Its designation was changed to C-32, and this was the progenitor famous C-47.<sup>17</sup>



Douglas DC-3, the civilian version of the C-47, at the La Crosse Regional Airport  
(Jeff Rand, 2019 July 28)

The Douglas DC-3 first flew in December 1935. It was adapted by the Army Air Force into the Douglas C-47 Skytrain. Two 1,200 horsepower engines gave it a top speed of 220 miles per hour with a range of 1,500 miles. Crewed by a pilot, copilot, and flight engineer, the C-47 could accommodate 32 passengers on its bench seats or 27 combat-loaded troops. For medical evacuations, it could hold 24 stretchers. It could carry 6,000 to 12,000 pounds of cargo. Besides carrying troops, wounded, and cargo, C-47s towed gliders and dropped paratroopers.<sup>18</sup> C-47s were part of all the Allied air forces. The British, who had 2,000 of them, called them the Dakota.<sup>19</sup>





C-47 at the Deke Slayton Airfest, La Crosse, Wisconsin  
(Jeff Rand, 2001 June 17)

It was nicknamed "Gooney Bird" because it reminded some people of the giant [albatrosses](#) living on Midway Island in the Pacific.

By the middle of March 1944, Corporal Harry Blair was stationed in India.<sup>20</sup> As a flight engineer on C-47s, Blair was soon to develop an intimate working relationship with the Gooney Bird. Flying unarmed over rugged mountains and trackless jungles, the Gooney Birds proved to be valuable and versatile assets in the CBI.



The cockpit of a C-47  
(Jeff Rand, 2001 June 17)

As a radar and radio operator on a C-47 in the [27th Troop Carrier Squadron](#), Harry Blair was part of over 300 combat missions in his 15 months in the Far East. From their base in India, his squadron parachuted troops and supplies to support the invasion of Burma in early 1944. They performed this duty until the capture of Myitkyina. Several times they landed behind Japanese lines to evacuate wounded British troops. Blair had much praise for the Burmese natives who helped and hid wounded Allied soldiers until they could be evacuated. He also saw outstanding work by American Army nurses in caring for the wounded.<sup>21</sup>

After four months in India, the 27th Squadron was put under the control of the Chinese during the campaign to [re-open the Burma Road](#) from the east. They flew in many areas of China and assisted with the evacuation of Chinese troops from Kweilin and Liuchow when the Japanese attacked there.<sup>22</sup> While in China, the squadron was attached to General Claire Chennault's "Fighting Tigers" fighter group.<sup>23</sup>

The Gooney Birds of the 27th Troop Carrier Squadron flew 6,805 missions in the Far East during World War II.<sup>24</sup>



Cargo area of a C-47  
(Jeff Rand, 2001 June 17)

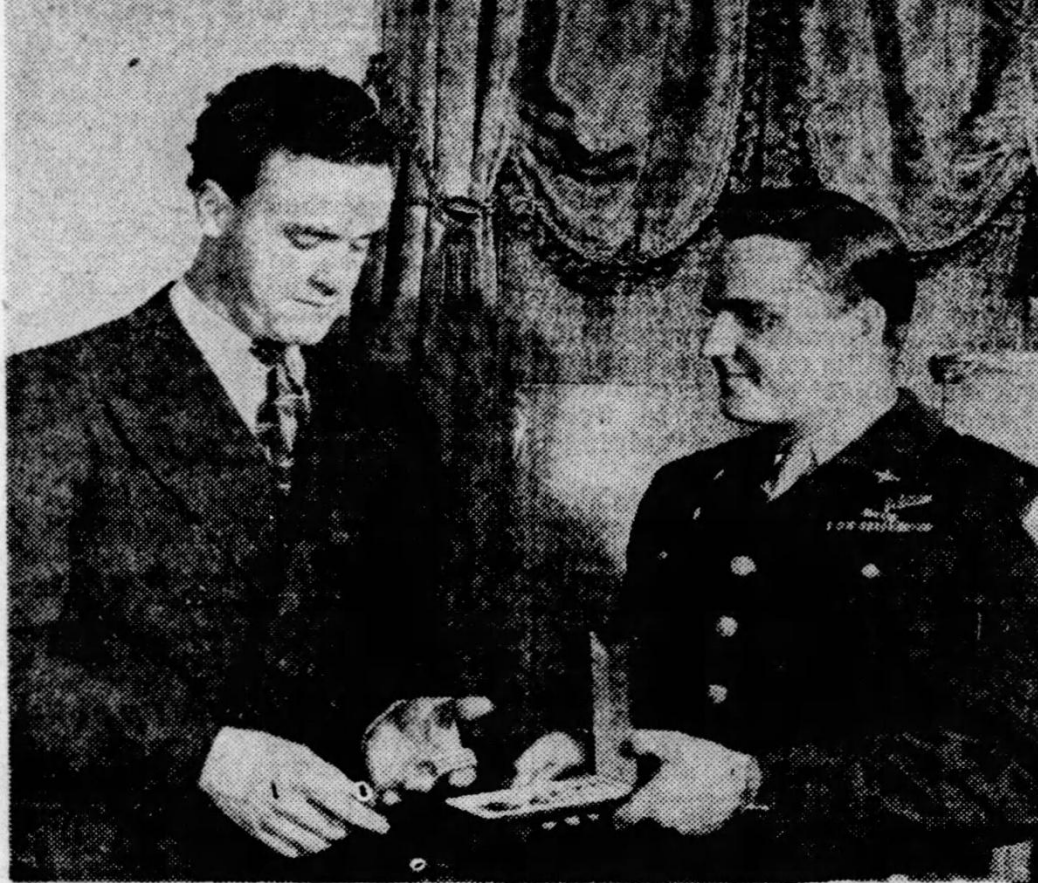
Days off were few, but Blair was able to do a little sightseeing on day trips back over the mountains to India. In Calcutta, he dodged the sacred cows that seemed to be everywhere. He saw Hindu temples and dead bodies being bathed in the holy Ganges River before being taken to the constantly burning funeral pyres called Ghats. Blair saw Mount Everest from an airplane. He also visited the Nationalist Chinese capital of Kuming.<sup>25</sup>

After returning from China, Blair also saw service in Brazil and northern South America during the war.<sup>26</sup>

Back in the United States, he was based at Stout Field in Indianapolis, Indiana. But the air evacuation duties of his squadron meant he never spent more than five days in any one place.<sup>27</sup>

During his World War II service in the Army Air Force, Harry Blair earned the Asiatic-Pacific service ribbon with two bronze campaign stars, the air medal with one oak leaf cluster, the Distinguished Flying Cross with an oak leaf cluster, the American theater of operations service ribbon, and the Good Conduct Badge.<sup>28</sup> The citation for his Distinguished Flying Cross stated: "Although their aircraft were unarmed and awkward with cargo, they often flew over enemy territory and near battle lines where attack by hostile aircraft and ground installations was probable and expected. They delivered supplies and personnel to forward units which were almost inaccessible by land routes, frequently flying in treacherous weather over rugged terrain with minimum navigational aids."<sup>29</sup>

Harry Blair received his honorable discharge in October 1945, and he returned to his job at State Bank.<sup>30</sup>



—Tribune Photo

**Credited With Two Army Air Force Awards** for service in the China-Burma-India theater, Harry A. Blair (left) did not receive them until last week when the distinguished flying cross and air medal were presented by Capt. Walter Olson of the army recruiting office.

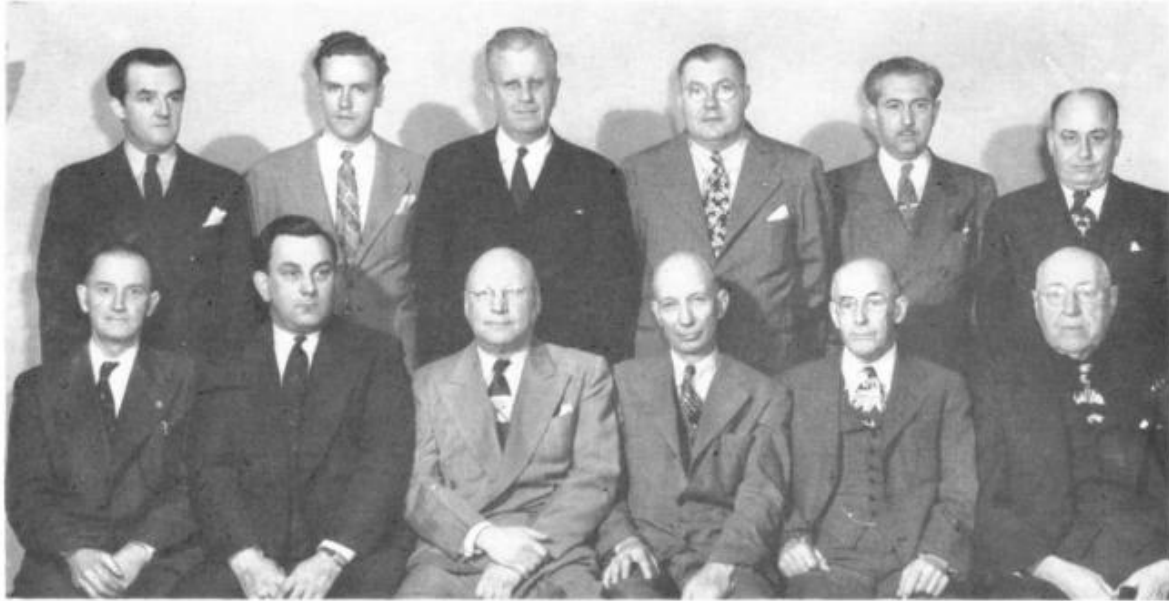
(*La Crosse Tribune*, 1945 December 16, page 13)

Like so many veterans, Harry Blair settled back into civilian life in his hometown. He married Myrle Luce of 1657 Barlow Street on May 10, 1947.<sup>31</sup> He was active in the La Crosse Jaycees, including a stint as president.<sup>32</sup> After leaving his job at the State Bank, Blair became a building designer for Roth's Flor-Mart. Blair was active in several other youth-oriented organizations, veterans groups, and his church. He and his wife had a son, named Harry Blair III.<sup>33</sup>

Blair's interest in aviation continued after the war. He was a member of the executive committee for the [La Crosse Airport Dedication](#) in 1947. In 1951, Blair was elected as a city alderman for the 14th Ward, and then he was appointed to the aviation board.<sup>34</sup>

# Airport Dedication

## EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE



Seated, left to right: Clyde Carr, Alfred W. Rice, R. L. Bangsberg, O. F. Paulson, E. H. Erickson and Frank Sisson. Standing: John Elliott, Harry Blair, Dr. R. W. Bardwell, Norman Schulze, George Hall and George A. MacLachlan.

(1947 La Crosse Airport Dedication program, page 22)

His interest in preserving the history of his World War II unit was also important to him as the historian for the [Twenty-Seventh Troop Carrier Squadron](#).

About 13,000 C-47s were produced and eventually used by more than 40 countries. This durable aircraft also saw service in the Berlin Airlift, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War. In the latter, they were modified into the AC-47 gunship for close ground support. C-47s "have flown more miles, hauled more freight and carried more passengers than any other aircraft in history."<sup>35</sup> The last American military C-47 was finally retired in 2012.<sup>36</sup>

Harry Blair's wife of 58 years, Myrle, died on April 17, 2006. Harry died less than a year later, on March 3, 2007. He is buried in the Mormon Coulee Memorial Park Cemetery.<sup>37</sup>



(*La Crosse Tribune*, 2007 March 7, page B-3)

General Dwight D. Eisenhower once said that the bazooka, the Jeep, the atomic bomb, and the [C-47 "Gooney Bird"](#) were the four things that won World War II for the Allies.<sup>38</sup> The things General Eisenhower listed were important tools, but it went without saying that it was men like Harry A. Blair, and women too, who were the real reason the Allies were victorious in World War II.

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#### Sources & Notes:

<sup>1</sup> "Harry Arthur Blair Jr.," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 2007 March 7, page B-3.

<sup>2</sup> "Harry Blair," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1936 May 20, page 6.

<sup>3</sup> *La Crosse Tribune*, 2007 March 7.

<sup>4</sup> "Blair, In CBI Theater With Army Air Force, Given Distinguished Flying Cross, Air Medal," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1945 December 16, page 13.

<sup>5</sup> "Harry Blair," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1936 May 20, page 6.

<sup>6</sup> *La Crosse Tribune*, 2007 March 7.

<sup>7</sup> "School Makes Nine Student Placements," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1940 November 30, page 4.

<sup>8</sup> *La Crosse Tribune*, 2007 March 7.

<sup>9</sup> "Blair Chalks Up 300 Combat Missions During 15 Months Overseas IN Various War Theaters," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1945 May 13, page 4.

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- <sup>10</sup> David M. Kennedy, *The Library of Congress World War II Companion* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2007), 20-22.
- <sup>11</sup> Kennedy, 621.
- <sup>12</sup> Kennedy, 503-504.
- <sup>13</sup> Kennedy, 264.
- <sup>14</sup> Kennedy, 307.
- <sup>15</sup> Kennedy, 542-544.
- <sup>16</sup> Kennedy, 575-577.
- <sup>17</sup> Andrew W. Waters, *All the U.S. Air Force Airplanes, 1907-1983* (New York: Hippocrene Books, 1983), 128.
- <sup>18</sup> Waters, 133-134.
- <sup>19</sup> Enzo Angelucci, *The Rand McNally Encyclopedia of Military Aircraft 1914-1980* (New York: The Military Press, 1983), 355.
- <sup>20</sup> "Corp. Harry Blair," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1944 March 16, page 10.
- <sup>21</sup> *La Crosse Tribune*, 1945 May 13.
- <sup>22</sup> *La Crosse Tribune*, 1945 May 13.
- <sup>23</sup> *La Crosse Tribune*, 1945 December 16.
- <sup>24</sup> "14 USAAF 27 Troop Carrier Squadron," accessed 2020 May 18, <http://14usaaf27tcs.4mg.com/index2.html>.
- <sup>25</sup> *La Crosse Tribune*, 1945 May 13.
- <sup>26</sup> *La Crosse Tribune*, 1945 May 13.
- <sup>27</sup> *La Crosse Tribune*, 1945 December 16.
- <sup>28</sup> *La Crosse Tribune*, 1945 May 13.
- <sup>29</sup> *La Crosse Tribune*, 1945 December 16.
- <sup>30</sup> *La Crosse Tribune*, 1945 December 16.
- <sup>31</sup> "Marriage Licenses," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1947 April 30, page 8.
- <sup>32</sup> "Jaycees Honor Prep Gridders," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1946 December 5, page 20.
- <sup>33</sup> *La Crosse Tribune*, 2007 March 7.
- <sup>34</sup> "Newburg New President Of City Council," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1951 April 18, page 1.
- <sup>35</sup> Waters, 134-135.
- <sup>36</sup> "The Gooney Bird: Unsung Hero of WWII," *Museum of Flight*, accessed 2020 May 17, <https://blog.museumofflight.org/the-gooney-bird-unsung-hero-of-wwii>.
- <sup>37</sup> *La Crosse Tribune*, 2007 March 7.
- <sup>38</sup> Waters, 135.