

Gilbert B. Chambers Biography

Pre-WSC Background

Gilbert Bonn Chambers was born on May 23, 1918 in Yakima, Washington to George and Florine Bonn Chambers.¹ In the 1920 United States Federal Census, George Chambers was noted to be a rancher.² The city of Yakima sits on land that was once a tribal winter gathering place of regional tribes, collectively known as the “Peoples of the Plateau.”³ White cattle ranchers began arriving in the area in the early 1860s, and they discovered how to implement irrigation systems utilizing the rivers that ran through the dry, arid landscape in order to plant vegetables, grain, and orchards.⁴ The Northern Pacific railroad connected the Yakima Valley with Puget Sound, and the city of North Yakima was incorporated in 1886.⁵ Yakima’s population reached 18,539 by 1920, moving from a “raucous haven of gambling and saloons” to a respectable city with eighteen churches, lodges and fraternal orders, and the Yakima Commercial Club, which would later evolve into the Chamber of Commerce.⁶

By the time Chambers was twelve, his family had relocated to Okanogan in central Washington, where George Chambers worked as a district manager for an oil company.⁷ The Chambers again relocated to Wilbur, Washington, a small town in Lincoln County, where George found a position as a salesman. Gilbert Chambers graduated from Wilbur High School and enrolled at Washington State College (WSC) in 1935.⁸

¹ C. James Quann, *WSU Military Veterans: Heroes and Legends* (Spokane, Washington: Tornado Creek Publications, 2005), 175.

² “Geo W Chambers in the 1920 United States Federal Census,” *Ancestry.com*.

³ Jim Kershner, “Yakima – Thumbnail History,” *historylink.org*, <https://www.historylink.org/File/9187> (Accessed July 6, 2019).

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.* “North” would be dropped from “North Yakima” in 1918.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ “Geo W Chambers in the 1930 United States Federal Census,” *Ancestry.com*.

⁸ Quann, *WSU Military Veterans*, 175.

WSC Experience

While at WSC Chambers was a member of the Chinook Business club and Alpha Phi Omega, a national service fraternity, Kappa Psi, a business honorary society, as well as Crimson Circle and Scabbard and Blade.⁹ He was also a member of the Gamma Chi Chapter of Alpha Tau Omega, a leadership development fraternity established on the WSC campus in 1911, and he served two terms as president of the organization.¹⁰ He served as president of his senior class. Chambers was a cadet colonel in the R.O.T.C. at WSC during his senior year of college (1939-1940), and was chosen Chief of the Mens' Big Five for outstanding men on the WSC campus.¹¹ He graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree in Business Administration, Advertising, on June 3, 1940 and was commissioned a reserve officer in the United States Army Air Corps in August of 1941, beginning his active duty service prior to Pearl Harbor.¹² Before embarking on his military service, he worked in California as an advertising manager for *Western Grower and Shipper* magazine, and at Lockheed.¹³

Wartime Service and Death

Second Lieutenant Chambers arrived in the Philippines in September 1941, and during his time there he was assigned to Fort Stotsenburg and Clark Air Field.¹⁴ Following their attack at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii on December 7, 1941, Japanese military forces turned their attention to

⁹ "U.S., School Yearbooks, 1900-1999 for Gilbert Chambers," *Ancestry.com*.

¹⁰ "ATO: America's Leadership Development Fraternity," *ato.org*, <https://ato.org/> (Accessed July 7, 2019).

¹¹ Letter from E.O. Holland to Mr. and Mrs. George W. Chambers, June 11, 1945, Box 1, Folder 5, Washington State University Manuscripts, Archives, and Special Collections (MASC); "Chambers, Gilbert B. Lt. 1942 (3)," typed obituary, undated, transcription courtesy of Yakima Genealogical Society, *Ancestry.com*.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ "Chambers, Gilbert B. Lt. 1942 (3)," typed obituary, undated, transcription courtesy of Yakima Genealogical Society, *Ancestry.com*.

¹⁴ "Chambers, Gilbert B. Lt. 1942 (3)," typed obituary, undated, transcription courtesy of Yakima Genealogical Society, *Ancestry.com*.

the capture of the Philippine Islands as part of their campaign to control the Southwest Pacific, occupy the “resource-rich” Dutch East Indies, and establish protection of their “Southeast Asia flank.”¹⁵ The U.S. Army and Marine garrisons on Guam and Wake Island were unable to counter the Japanese attack, and surrendered on December 10 and 22; British forces surrendered Hong Kong on December 26. Following the defeat of the British forces at Singapore on February 15, 1942, the Japanese pushed to the northwest, facing a prolonged, five-month resistance from combined U.S.-Filipino units in the Philippines.¹⁶

The United States had maintained military forces, which included a large number of indigenous units, in the Philippines since their annexation in 1898. The Washington Naval Treaty of 1922 had compelled the U.S. to cease construction of “any new fortifications in its Pacific possessions,” resulting in a lack of protection of its military installations with the exception of Corregidor, near the entrance to Manila Bay.¹⁷ General Douglas MacArthur arrived in Manila to oversee the organization of the new Philippine Army after his retirement as Chief of Staff in 1937, a task wrought with difficulties, including a shortage of weapons, transportation, communications equipment, housing and uniforms for his men.¹⁸ Following Japan’s establishment of a protectorate over French Indochina on July 25, 1941, Chief of Staff George C. Marshall approved plans to reinforce and equip MacArthur’s command. Despite a 40 percent increase in manpower by December 1, 1941 and a significant build-up of air power, the

¹⁵ “Philippine Islands: The U.S. Army Campaigns of World War II,” *history.army.mil.*, <https://history.army.mil/brochures/pi/PI.htm> (Accessed July 8, 2019).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

Philippines still lacked critical maintenance and repair facilities and a sufficient number of airfields.¹⁹

Following the attack on Pearl Harbor, Japanese pilots of the 11th Air Fleet attacked Clark Field in the Philippines on December 8, 1941, achieving “complete tactical surprise” and destroying most of the American heavy bombers.²⁰ A simultaneous attack on Iba Field in northwest Luzon achieved success, as well; combined, the Far East Air Force lost one-half of its planes on the first day of the war. This allowed for the first Japanese amphibious landing to take place at Bataan on the same day.

Due to the successful Japanese landings in the Philippines in the early days of the war, resupply of the Bataan and Corregidor strongholds was essentially impossible, resulting in food, ammunition, weapons, and medical supply shortages.²¹ Despite this, American and Filipino forces were able to hold off successive Japanese attacks between January 22 and February 2, 1942, in what became known as the Battle of the Points.²² Despite this, the Bataan jungle and lack of supplies led to American and Filipino soldiers facing minimal food rations and the devastation of malaria due to the absence of quinine. MacArthur left Corregidor for Australia via submarine on March 12, 1942, at the order of President Franklin Roosevelt. After a sustained aerial and artillery bombardment, the Japanese attack on Bataan began in earnest on April 3, 1942.²³ After the fall of Bataan, the Japanese set their sights on Corregidor.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

While troops on Corregidor were in better health than their peers on Bataan, they were still vulnerable after having lived through the effects of a prolonged siege. The Japanese began their assault on Corregidor on May 1, 1942, and by June 9, almost all American and Filipino forces had surrendered.²⁴ Some units had at first refused to surrender and some individuals escaped to fight as guerrillas. Second Lieutenant Chambers was reported as missing in action on Bataan effective May 7, 1942.²⁵ In an undated newspaper clipping, the article noted that despite not knowing if their son had been imprisoned by the Japanese, Chambers' parents felt that "their son may have escaped into the Philippine island mountain regions where bands of men are reported continuing to fight the invaders."²⁶ It wasn't until May 1945 that the War Department confirmed that Chambers died. His date of death is listed as May 8, 1942.²⁷

Postwar Legacy

Chambers and his fellow American and Filipino troops and their defense of the Philippines helped delay the Japanese timetable for the conquest of south Asia, ultimately inflicting more casualties and loss of material resources than anticipated. The spirited defense of Bataan and Corregidor also served as a beacon of hope for the U.S. in the early days of the war.²⁸ Chambers was posthumously awarded the Purple Heart, and his remains were interred next to his sister, Marguerite Florine, who had died in infancy in 1917, in Tahoma Cemetery in Yakima,

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ "Chambers, Gilbert B. Lt. 1942 (3)," typed obituary, undated, transcription courtesy of Yakima Genealogical Society, *Ancestry.com*.

²⁶ Newspaper clipping, undated, Box 1, Folder 19, Washington State University Manuscripts, Archives, and Special Collections (MASC).

²⁷ *Chronicle*, May 18, 1945, newspaper clipping, Box 1, Folder 19, Washington State University Manuscripts, Archives, and Special Collections (MASC).

²⁸ "Philippine Islands: The U.S. Army Campaigns of World War II," *history.army.mil*, <https://history.army.mil/brochures/pi/PI.htm> (Accessed July 8, 2019).

Washington on November 8, 1948.²⁹ He was survived by his parents, his sister, Dorothy Grundman, his grandmother, Mrs. Ella Chambers, an aunt, Miss Cecil Chambers, and a cousin, Ruth Chambers.³⁰

²⁹ Public Member Photos & Scanned Documents, "Gilbert Bonn Chambers," Funeral Record, Shaw & Sons Funeral Service, information from Yakima Genealogical Society, *Ancestry.com*.

³⁰ "Chambers, Gilbert B. Lt. 1942 (3)," typed obituary, undated, transcription courtesy of Yakima Genealogical Society, *Ancestry.com*.