

# It's All About the Water

Van Swofford



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If you enjoy reading this book, or even if you don't, please let me know. I would love to hear your comments. And if you have a prayer request, please pass that along as well.

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# Alpha

*“I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.” - Revelation 22:13*

## **Dedication**

This is dedicated to the love of my life, Sandy.

## **Foreword**

When I first met Van Swofford I had no idea that our friendship would be so rich. I met a fellow young engineer and pilot struggling with me to find our way in a big company. I'm still enjoying many years with a smart, outgoing friend who does interesting things, meets very interesting people, and knows how to tell a good story. Van is quite spiritual and a loving husband to his wonderful wife, Sandy. He's kind to animals and children, too! Our children have always known him as Uncle Van.

I'm glad that Van decided to write his stories, and his father's, so others may share in the interesting experiences he's had. I hope this book will be cherished for the family history by his siblings and their offspring. Anyone who knows Van should find it a fun read, especially those mentioned in the book!

I am honored to be one of Van's people and to introduce this book.

Jim Ward  
April 15, 2025

## Preface

I don't think of myself as an author, and yet here I am. It seems there is a storyteller lying beneath the crusty old engineer / pilot exterior after all. But even so, there has to be a reason to take on the challenge of writing something as long as this. And here it is.

One of my life's few regrets is that I never sat down with my Mom and Dad and a tape recorder, and just asked them questions about their lives, and let the narrative go where it takes us. How else will their grandchildren, and *great*-grandchildren be able to know their extraordinary stories? I decided that wasn't going to happen to me. While I have no children to pass my stories down to, I wrote this collection of stories from my life for my family and friends, who have each participated in parts of my life, but not all of it. I hope this will fill in some of the gaps in my story, and give some insight into why I am who I am, and how I got here. Trust me, it has been a very long and dusty road.

My experience in writing this book has been nothing but positive. It has been a great pleasure to revisit some of my life's history, much more than appears here, and pick and choose the stories to include. I highly recommend that each of you who reads this, when you reach the last page, and not before, grab your computer, or anything else that works for you, and write your stories, so that they can be passed down through the generations. Incidentally, I wrote all of the text of these stories in the Notes app on my iPhone, mostly late at night. The final destination for all of that is an app

called Scrivener on my Mac, which is turning out to be an excellent, but complex, authoring tool.

This is not a chronological life story, and doesn't include a lot of things. For example, the 17+ years I spent in school are only touched on as they relate to a specific story. Some stories necessarily overlap. I try to keep the duplications to a minimum, and introduce a different perspective on the overlapping parts.

Photos, photos, everywhere! I'm bleary-eyed from looking at around 20,000 photos to choose the ones that you will see later on. Why so many? Because, it would be too easy for readers who don't know me to dismiss some of these stories as fiction. By including photos of as many stories as I could, it becomes more real.

For those of you who are participants in these stories, if you find errors in the text, or just don't like the way you are portrayed, please let me know. I'd kinda like to get it right!

You might find some formatting errors, particularly with photos whose captions are on the following page. This is a result of the electronic book format, which has to lay out the pages anew whenever you change the size of the app window, or select a different font size. So, if you find it annoying, there are two remedies. First is to resize the app larger until all that stuff fits on the page. That still leaves some bad formatting. Or, if you are reading on Apple Books or a Kindle app, you can change the pagination method from the default of turning pages like a book, to continuous scrolling, which will eliminate the formatting problem completely. Unfortunately, the PDF format is based on pages, and it is what it is.

Bible verses are taken from the NASB 1995 edition.

## **About the Author**

Don't be silly! This is a **BOOK** about the author, so just read on my friend.



Flying a Piper J-3 Cub at Auburn, 1975. (Photo by Bill Pinney)

# Genesis

***“Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness....” - Genesis 1:26***

In the beginning.... Seems like an appropriate place to start. However, there was a whole lot of begetting that just isn't relevant to our story, so why don't we skip ahead a whole bunch of generations, and begin with my grandparents on both my Mother's and Father's sides of the family.

## **Lewis and Janie Wall - Maternal Grandparents**

I never had the honor of meeting my Mother's parents. Lewis died at the age of 55, and though Janie was still alive when I was born, she passed about 3 months later. Lewis was the station master at the Southern Railroad depot in Campobello, SC, near Spartanburg. I really know nothing at all about Janie. She was born in Cummings, GA in 1888, and married Lewis Wall June 28, 1922. They lived in a small town, surrounded by many square miles of peach orchards. My Mom used to say that they grew more peaches in their county than the whole state of Georgia. From what I saw on our visits to other relatives in Campobello, I believe her. However, the last time I drove through there a few years ago, all of the peach trees are gone, replaced by forests of pine trees for the paper industry. It seems a shame. As we were driving to the town in my youth, sometimes we would take a picnic lunch and stop alongside the road to eat, and pick a fresh peach right off the tree for dessert. Some memories can last forever!

We get a bonus here. Janie Wall's mother, Isabelle High, was still alive in my youth, until I was 9 years old. It was a treat to visit with her in her house near Campobello, and hear her tell stories from her youth. She was born in 1868, and gave us first hand accounts of growing up in the south right after the War of Northern Aggression, as it was known then.

## **Earl and Bess Swofford - Paternal Grandparents**

These are the folks I think of as my only grandparents. Bess Carpenter was born in 1897. Earl, or EJ to his friends, was born in 1899, to William Henry Swofford and Leona Shook Swofford, and was the first of 9 children. Their house was in a small cove at the bottom of a mountain in North Cove, NC. When he was 16, a hurricane got stuck against the mountains and poured rain for days. The Clinchfield Railroad main track was high above their house on the mountain. Not for long, though. The rain created a huge mudslide, and the tracks literally slid down the mountain. The railroad was looking for help and lots of it. Earl joined a work crew to rebuild the track, and that ended his formal education.

As the years rolled by, Grandpa worked his way up the ladder. When my Dad was growing up, they lived in Spartanburg, SC. Their next door neighbor was a professor at Wofford College, and he brought Grandpa books, with the proviso that Grandpa read whatever he brought. Grandpa ended up gaining an education after all. In the process, he gained a love of crossword puzzles. Years later, whenever I was at their house, after dinner he worked the puzzle in that day's newspaper, and looked up any clues he couldn't solve in his tattered dictionary, until the entire puzzle was solved. After the puzzle, he read a passage in the Bible to whomever was present, and ended the day with a prayer.

In 1959, they were living in Marion, NC, and we were in Erwin, TN. Grandpa was section superintendent of the southern section of track, and Dad was working in engineering at the headquarters in Erwin. At that point, Dad was given the assistant superintendent's job, and Grandpa was promoted to Roadmaster, in charge of track maintenance and construction for the entire railroad. We just traded houses. Simple!

In 1965, Grandpa retired, and Dad was promoted into his position. We moved back to Erwin, and sold Grandpa our old house, and bought another for us.

I should stop right here and say a word or two about Erwin, TN, because it is a place that will be frequently referenced in the stories to come. You may have a hard time finding it on the map. Look just south of Johnson City, in the northeast corner of the state, in a little valley surrounded by mountains. Today, Interstate 26 runs through town, but in the 40s and 50s, there was just a two-lane road connecting Erwin with Asheville, NC, and even that had some spots with just a single lane, where if you met another car, one of you was backing up!

Erwin was home to two big businesses, the Clinchfield Railroad, and Nuclear Fuel Services. Nuclear Fuel provided the US Navy with nuclear reactor fuel for every nuclear powered surface ship and submarine in the Navy's fleet. You will hear a lot more about the railroad as we go along.

## **Glenn and Helen Swofford - Parents**

My Mom was born in 1925 in Campobello, SC, not far from Spartanburg. Dad was born in 1922 in North Cove, NC, not far from where his Dad was born, and soon after that, they moved to Spartanburg. So the two of them grew up just a few miles apart, and their fathers were railroad workers for two different railroads. Wonder how I got railroads in my blood...

Dad had 3 siblings, Evelyn, a school teacher in Chicago, Lee, a teacher of history and German language, as well as pig farmer, in Cullman, AL, and Roy, a former Marine drill sergeant turned air conditioning repairman, in Erwin, TN. Mom had a half sister, Kitty, who was 15 years older and a school teacher, in Hendersonville, NC.

Mom was born musical. When she was ready for college, her Dad bought her a violin. Not just any violin either. This one was made by a violin maker in Prague, Czechoslovakia in 1764, a man named Eberle, famous in his day

for his work. And, according to the label he placed inside, he made it personally, not another worker in his shop. A violin like that should fetch a high price in 1939, and it did, but not as high as it might have been. You see, somewhere in its history, it had been dropped right on the button at the base of the instrument, and there were cracks in the wood around the bottom end. Not devastating, but also not fixable. To permanently fix it would require replacing the wood in that area which would totally change, and perhaps ruin, the beautiful sound it made. So, every so often it has gotten a careful glue job from a skilled luthier and today it still has the same beautiful sound. So even damaged, my Grandfather paid \$500 for it, probably 4 or 5 months of his salary. Mom graduated from Winthrop College in Rock Hill, SC, then a women's school, in 1944, at the ripe old age of 19, with a degree in music.

Meanwhile, there was a war going on. Dad had started college in 1940 at Wofford College in Spartanburg, studying applied mathematics, which is sort of like engineering. He wanted to be an architect. He was working 3 jobs, one of which was as a soda jerk at the Bluebird Ice Cream Shop. He could see that in time, he would be going off to war, and so he learned to fly, hoping to become a pilot in the Army Air Corps. He succeeded, gaining his private pilot's license on September 19, 1942. From there, he entered the service, trained at several bases, and went off to war, returning home after the war ended in Europe, in July, 1945. Upon his return home, he went back to Wofford to finish his degree under the GI Bill. While he was in school, my sister Janie Lew was born in 1946, and my brother William Glenn, Jr. came along a year later. After graduating, Dad accepted a job as a draftsman with the Clinchfield Railroad engineering department in Erwin, TN, and the family was on the move.

## **I Got the Music in Me**

1955 was a very good year. A baby named James Van was born into the household. Luckily, Dad overruled Mom on my name, or I would have been Van Buren, named for a distant grandfather that fought in the War of Northern Aggression, which some people call the American Civil War. Whew! Dodged a bullet there! I got the James from Grandpa.

Mom played violin with several groups around town. She had a string quartet that played together at civic events and church services. They practiced at our house because we had a piano, and Mom had a new baby and it was easier that way. What do you do with a baby while you play violin? She got me a rocking chair that was just my size, and tied a little rope around my waist so I wouldn't fall out, that's how. Usually, I'd start rocking and by the second verse of the first song, I was sound asleep. Very effective child care! And it explains why I love music, especially violin, so much, not to mention that I hate sitting in chairs that don't move. Teach 'em right when they are young, mothers, because those early lessons stick!

## Photos



Lewis and Janie Wall on their honeymoon to Niagara Falls, 1922.



Granny High, Janie Wall's Mother, 1934.



Helen with "G", her beloved nurse, on her first birthday, 1926.



Helen at the farmhouse, already an accomplished young violinist, 1934.



Lewis and Helen when she was in high school. Dig those fancy pants!



Helen in her room studying.



Helen in the band.



Helen played in an ensemble called the Swanks at Winthrop. She is second from right in the first row.



Helen (on right) with a friend, college graduates!



William Henry Swofford, Leona Shook Swofford, and little James Earl Swofford, circa 1901.



Earl Swofford (with hat), and the next 2 brothers and 2 sisters, circa 1912.



William Henry Swofford, Leona Shook Swofford, both seated, plus 8 of their 9 children. Earl is the tall one in the back, circa 1916.



Just one example of the hurricane damage in western NC in 1916. (Photo by Steve Nicklas, NOS, NGS; Courtesy of NOAA/Department of Commerce)



Earl and Bess Swofford, late 1970s.



Bill, Janie, Grandma, Grandpa, and Van, late 1970s.



Gone fishin'. Brothers Lee, Roy, and Glenn, 1931.



Mom and Dad in Mexico City for YMCA convention, 1950.



Hello World!



Van, circa 1958.



Snoozin' to the Classics, with seatbelt, 1956.



Dad at home, 1990s.

# My Dad the Pilot Warrior

*“All of them are wielders of the sword, expert in war...” - Song of Solomon 3:8*

Please forgive me for providing more detail than most people will have the patience to endure. This is my Dad's story, which I regrettably did not document when he was alive to answer questions. I have pieced together the details from a scrapbook he made and some of his pilot logbooks. The rest is my best recollection of the stories he told me years ago. Read on for a lifetime of adventure.

## **Training**

There was a war going on in the 1940s. Dad knew that all able bodied men were being called upon to fight, and he certainly would fit the qualifications as soon as he was a little older, so he decided to go on his terms, and entered the CPT, Civilian Pilot Training, program, and began learning to fly, beginning instruction in a Taylorcraft for Primary Training. Then he flew the PT-17 Stearman biplane. And here is where the trouble began.

Dad was a bit of a free spirit when it came to flying, something he passed down to his son. He was taught to do a maneuver called eights-on-pylons, above two radio towers that were close together. The object was to fly a perfect circle around one, then roll the other way and fly a circle around the other, making a figure 8, while maintaining a constant distance from the tower. Easy to do with calm wind, not so easy on a windy day. He went out to practice, and the airport got an angry call from the radio station. He

wasn't flying 500 feet above them. No, he was flying as near to the ground as he could, under the tops of the towers.

Then one day he went looking for Grandpa's work crew on the railroad track outside of Spartanburg. Found 'em! He rolled into a "strafing run", and flew right down the track, just a few feet high and as fast as that Stearman would go. Straight at the crew! The crew scattered to the sides of the track leaving my Grandpa standing defiantly in the middle of the track shaking his fist at Dad as he flew over. That picture says so much about both of those men who shaped my life, one irresistible force, one immovable object.

But he wasn't done yet. By that time, he and Mom were dating, so he would regularly go over to her house and fly down the driveway, and wave to her. She said she never ran from it, but she thought he was low enough that if she stretched, she could touch the landing gear. That's my Dad!

After he got his private pilot's license on September 19, 1942, he joined the service. He first went to Kutztown State Teachers College in Pennsylvania, with the 33rd College Training Detachment, and flew 10 hours in Piper Cubs, at the Reading, PA airport, as part of the Controlled Indoctrination Flight Course. He was graded "Satisfactory" on all of his flights, and finished the program on June 2, 1943.

Then, on December 10, 1943, he moved on to Basic Training in a BT-13 Vultee Vibrator, so named because it shook and vibrated a lot. That was at Garden City, KS Army Airfield. He flew 71 hours in the BT-13 (bless his heart!), made 151 landings, and performed 33 spins, and recoveries. Recoveries are the important part! February 1, 1944 was the end of his Basic Training.

He immediately went on to Advanced Training in Enid, OK, making his first flight on February 14, 1944. There he flew the AT-6, a big single engine trainer with retractable landing gear and a 600 HP radial Pratt & Whitney engine. When he was out for solo practice, he liked to fly over to a dry riverbed, which consisted mostly of sand and small pebbles, pretty smooth. The pilots had a little game they liked to play. He put his landing gear down

and flew very low over the riverbed, skipping the tires off the sandy bottom, left then right as he negotiated the bends in the river. He stopped doing that one day, after he met a P-38 coming the other way doing the same thing. Abrupt maneuvering was required by both to avoid embarrassment.

He finished Advanced Training on April 10, 1944, with a total of 205 hours in his logbook. Dad received a diploma for completing his pilot training, on April 15, 1944, at Aloe Army Air Field in Victoria, TX.

Next, he was assigned to fly the B-24, and went to Pueblo, CO for final training before being sent to Italy. Once joined with his crew, he quickly earned the nickname "Spoat", because he was a "sport", and with a Spartanburg accent, he didn't pronounce the "R". Mom joined him in Pueblo, and they were married on July 2, 1944, before he deployed. They had a weekend honeymoon at the Broadmoor Hotel in Colorado Springs.

The crew was assigned to Camp Patrick Henry in Virginia prior to their deployment, from September 4 - 21, 1944. I don't know what they did there, as all the information I have is a scrapbook page with a few photos of the crew in a wooded setting.

## **War!**

Dad went off to war with his crew. Patrick Tolson was the aircraft commander, Dad was copilot, plus they had a navigator, bombardier, and 6 gunners. They traveled to Cerignola, Italy, in a ship called the Richard J. Gatlin, crowded with flight crews. He referred to it as "27 days in a life raft". They arrived at base on October 17, 1944, and spent about 3 weeks training before going on their first mission. They were a part of the 15th Air Force, 454th Bomber Group (Heavy), 737 squadron. The runway at San Giovanni Field was sod (grass to the rest of us), and was surrounded by olive groves. The men lived in tents, in a perpetual quagmire. Winter of 1944 was a particularly harsh one. Europe was blanketed with snow, and the temperatures were brutal throughout the season. They had 6 deep snows in Cerignola, which is situated pretty far south, near the Adriatic Sea. This weather pattern played havoc with the bombing missions, causing several

targets to be covered with clouds upon their arrival, forcing a switch to a secondary target, or an abort and return to base.

The crew got their first mission on November 11, 1944, Armistice Day. Villach, Austria, was the target, and being obscured by clouds, they had to turn back. By luck of the draw, the airplane they were assigned had been sabotaged. There was a total electrical failure, and the number 4 engine caught fire about 50 miles south of Zagreb, Yugoslavia. They had been briefed that north of a ridge near the town of Kistanje, the land was held by Nazis, and downed crews would be shot. Tolson was flying, and called for the crew to abandon ship. Dad said "Oh hell no, we're not going out here." They were losing altitude fast. They dumped the bombs, and being lighter, that helped. Still, Tolson didn't think they would make it over the ridge, so Dad, being highly motivated by the word "Nazis", took over and with his magic touch on the controls, they just cleared the ridge, dragging wing tips through the trees in a gap. His flying skills? Satisfactory, of course! On the other side, with lots of air below them, they bailed out through the open bomb bay doors, and came down near the small village of Macure, Yugoslavia (now Croatia). While this area of Yugoslavia was primarily populated by Croats, who sided with the Nazis, in the region around Kistanje, which included Macure, the population was mostly Serbian. This was their lucky day! They were quickly picked up by the Serbian resistance, loyal to Tito, who sided with the allies. For the next 11 days, they were hidden in barns and houses, slowly moving toward the coast. On their last night, they were smuggled to the coastal town of Split in the back of a stolen German troop truck. From there, they boarded a partisan boat, the Ljubljana, for an uneventful trip across the Adriatic back to base in Italy, by way of Bari.

Dad tore out one panel from his parachute and had all of the people who helped them escape to sign it. The ink has faded but it is still intact today. He also came away with a letter typed by the resistance leader, but for 44 years, he didn't know what it said. Then, when he met my friend Vlado Lench's Dad at Oshkosh in 1988, he, being a native of Yugoslavia, had no trouble translating it for Dad. Here is what it said: "November 11, 1944 at 9 AM, near Macure Kistanje in Yugoslavia, ten American soldiers parachuted from a plane which was on fire. The rescue that arrived first on the scene

was the section of the 19<sup>th</sup> division of the National Liberation Army of Yugoslavia, under the leadership of Lt. Medic N. Djuro. Death to Fascism -- Freedom to our nation!", and it was signed Lt. D.N. Medic.

But what about the rest of his parachute? Normally, they bury them to avoid detection, but the daughter of one of the men in the resistance group that rescued them was getting married. Due to wartime shortages, everybody was suffering from lack of food, fuel, and common everyday items like white silk fabric with which to make a wedding dress. You see where this is going. Dad's parachute was given to the daughter, who made her wedding dress from it.

Meanwhile, back home, Mom had moved in with Dad's parents in Erwin, TN, and was teaching at Martin's Chapel Elementary School, where she had a student in her class that was older than she was! The day after Thanksgiving, there was a knock at the door. She was handed a telegram from the War Department stating that her husband was missing in action, and giving no other details. Not the way you would want to "celebrate" the holiday.

As it turned out, by the time Mom received the MIA telegram, Dad was already back at base. Such was the speed of communications back then. Dad couldn't tell her where he had been or how he got home, because escape and evasion tactics were kept secret, so he sent her a blank postcard in an envelope, that he had picked up on his way out of Split. It was a picture of the town, with the word "Split" as the caption. To be sure she got it, he sent a second one a week later.

They were back in the air for their next mission on January 4, 1945. After their sixth mission, they got a bit of R&R on the Isle of Capri. How nice it is to be operating in a country with such beautiful places!

Then it was back to the grind. In all, he flew 21 missions before the war ended. Of the last 20, there was only 1 close call. As they approached the heavily defended target, they saw a burst of anti-aircraft artillery headed their way. The way that worked was there were 3 shells in a cluster. The first exploded low, the second higher, and the third higher still. They

watched as the first two stepped up toward them and they knew the third would explode right in their path. It blew just below the airplane, causing it to rise. That was close! When they got back to base, the airplane was riddled with holes. But there was not one critical system damaged. Not a scratch on any of the 10 crewmembers. When Dad got out of his seat, there was a piece of shrapnel lying right next to his foot!

Dad saved everything, including the shrapnel. I plan to donate his war file to the Air Force Museum in Dayton, OH. One of my favorite artifacts was his slingshot, which he had made before going to Italy. After each mission, he carved a notch in the handle, like a gunslinger in the old west. 21 notches adorn the handle. Throughout my youth, that was my slingshot. I flung a lot of rocks with it. But then, that was before the day of video games and social media. Kids actually went outside and played back then. Can you imagine?

## The Missions

The 21 missions were as follows, including date, airplane type, flight time, target, and notes:

<b>Mission</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>A/C</b>	<b>Time</b>	<b>Target</b>	<b>Note</b>
1.	11/11/1944	B-24G	4:00	Villach, Austria	Bailed out over Macure, Yugoslavia
2.	1/4/1945	B-24J	5:15	Verona, Italy	Heavy flak. Scared!
3.	1/15/1945	B-24J	7:45	Vienna, Austria	Heavy losses
4.	1/31/1945	B-24J	8:00	Moosbierbaum, Austria	
5.	2/5/1945	B-24J	8:30	Regensburg, Germany	

<b>Mission</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>A/C</b>	<b>Time</b>	<b>Target</b>	<b>Note</b>
6.	2/13/1945	B-24J	5:45	Maribor, Yugoslavia	Lost friends. Scared!
7.	3/1/1945	B-24J	7:00	Jesenice, Yugoslavia	Birthday - 23 years
8.	3/10/1945	B-24M	6:45	Verona, Italy	Brenner Pass RR Bridge
9.	3/14/1945	B-24H	6:30	Weiner Neustadt, Austria	377 flak guns!
10.	3/19/1945	B-24H	8:00	Muhldorf, Germany	Low altitude. RR yard
11.	3/21/1945	B-24G	7:50	Neuburg, Germany	Me-262 base
12.	3/25/1945	B-24H	6:30	Prague, Czechoslovakia	Didn't get there
13.	4/6/1945	B-24H	7:25	Verona, Italy	
14.	4/9/1945	B-24H	5:45	Area Apple, Italy	Near Bologna
15.	4/10/1945	B-24H	5:30	Area Charlie, Italy	Near Bologna
16.	4/12/1945	B-24G	4:45	Nerviano, Italy	Got lost in clouds, target abandoned
17.	4/15/1945	B-24L	7:00	Area MA-9, Italy	Near Bologna
18.	4/16/1945	B-24L	6:30	Area MA-9, Italy	Near Bologna
19.	4/20/1945	B-24H	7:05	Ponte Gardena, Italy	

<b>Mission</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>A/C</b>	<b>Time</b>	<b>Target</b>	<b>Note</b>
20.	4/23/1945	B-24H	6:00	Padua, Italy	
21.	4/24/1945	B-24J	6:30	Bassone, Italy	Near Verona

Some of Dad's mission notes reveal a little more about what it was like to be one bomber out of hundreds to attack a target. For example, after returning to base on the third mission, to Vienna, he wrote "I lost several buddies over this target", and "It was a place we all longed to see after the war". He did go to Vienna with Mom about 40 years later. One of the people on their tour asked the guide why half the city was very old, and the other half looked brand new. Dad offered the answer that "someone" had bombed it during the war, so that part had to be rebuilt. He never told them that he was that someone.

For the Maribor mission he wrote "We thought that this was going to be a milk run, but it turned out different. I saw a B-24 go spinning down and I was almost scared to death." After the Jesenice mission, which was flown on March 1, 1945, his twenty third birthday, he wrote "It was the third alternate, and there was no flak. A no flak target is a good birthday present!"

Area Apple and Area Charlie were top secret. They were in support of the 8th and 5th Armies, who were driving the Germans out of Italy. The troops on the ground positioned signals to lead them in, and their drops had to be very precise, in order to avoid friendly fire accidents. The whole bomber group laid their loads right on top of the enemy, and as soon as the last bomb hit, the ground troops began to move forward. A few days later, they were back, this time in support of our 5th Army troops. After the bombing stopped, the Army moved in and took the city of Bologna from the enemy. That's a lot of effort to get a fried Bologna sandwich!

After the mission to Bassone, he wrote simply "And then it was over."  
Amen!

## **Post-War**

The war ended, and the crew flew a B-24M home, leaving Italy on June 29, 1945. The route was via Marrakesh, Morocco, Lajes, Azores, and Gander, Newfoundland, finally reaching Bradley Field, CT on July 4, 1945. The longest leg was the first, 11 hours and 22 minutes in his logbook. The next leg, to Lajes, Azores, was 7:40, then to Gander was 9:20, and finally 6:00 to Bradley Field. It took a little longer to make the crossing in a B-24 than it does in a jet airliner today!

Dad was waiting for his reenlistment papers, and the Army Air Corps, as the Air Force was known then, had lost them. They told him to go to Enid, OK and they would have new ones drawn up. Well, they shouldn't have poked the bear. He was, after all, one of those Stubborn Swaffords, and if they couldn't do a simple thing like not lose his file, well, he didn't need to be working there. He signed his discharge and returned to Spartanburg to finish his degree under the GI Bill.

Dad did join the Air Force Reserves, and eventually retired as a Lt. Colonel. He usually did his week of active duty each year at Myrtle Beach AFB, conveniently located near the beach. So, most years, we had a family vacation at the beach.

## **Photos**



Spoat, the aviator.



Dad flying a Stearman biplane.



Yes, at one time he had hair!



And he looks good in a dress uniform, too!



Young Lieutenant Swofford, trained and ready to fight.

Form ACA 578  
(Rev. 11-15-41)

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA  
DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE  
CIVIL AERONAUTICS ADMINISTRATION  
WASHINGTON

**EVIDENCE OF AERONAUTICAL KNOWLEDGE  
AND SKILL**

IMPORTANT—This notice should be retained and presented to a Civil Aeronautics Administration official.

Issued to WILLIAM GLENN SWOFFORD

Address 162 EAST PEARL ST.+ SPARTANBURG.

This is evidence that you have successfully accomplished the portion of the examination (flight) (written) (written and flight) (type, class and horsepower range) (as applicable)

PRIVATE PILOT'S Certificate

AIRPLANE SINGLE ENGINE LAND, 0-80 H.P.

NO CROSS COUNTRY (Type, class and horsepower range)

9-19-42  
(Date of examination)

16-17014-2

*W.G. Swofford*  
Civil Aeronautics Administration

(OVER)

His original private pilot's license.



Newlyweds! July 2, 1944, Pueblo, CO.



The crew. Back row,

, Dad, navigator, bombardier. The rest are gunners. Can you guess who manned the ball turret gun in the belly of the airplane?



Aboard the Richard J. Gatlin, "27 days in a life raft". Dad is second from right, in background.



Welcome to Tent City at San Giovanni Field, Cerignola, Italy.



Mom in 1944. Dad carried this photo while in Italy.



Dad's first cigar, courtesy of Mike Sofiak. "And then I was SICK".



During one of the 6 snows in the winter of 1944-45, Spoot is heavily armed with snowballs.



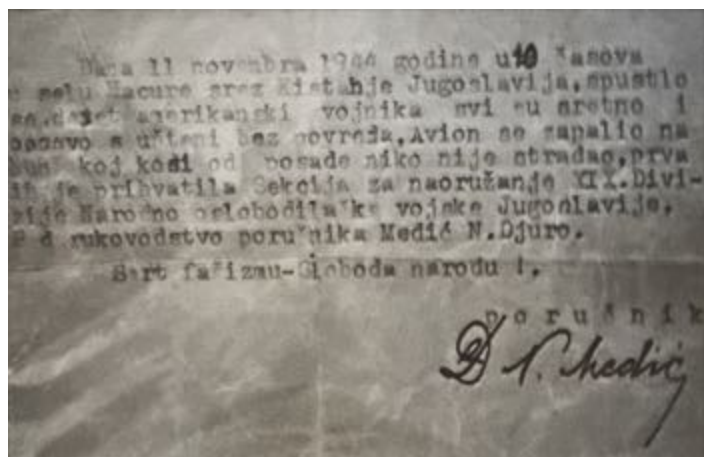
A B-24 being readied for the next mission, San Giovanni Field, Cerignola, Italy.



Harsh reality! One plane flies on without a scratch, while the plane next to it in the formation is shot down with anti-aircraft artillery.

CLASS OF SERVICE	WESTERN UNION	SYMBOLS
This is a full-rate Telegram or Cablegram unless the deferred character is indicated by a suitable symbol placed on preceding the address.	A. H. WILLIAMS PRESIDENT	DL = Day Letter NT = Night Telegram LC = Letter Cable SLT = Cable Night Letter Rip Radiogram
The filing time shown in the date line on telegrams and day letters is STANDARD TIME at point of origin. Those of receipt is STANDARD TIME at point of destination.		
17KS D 46 GVT 3 EXTRA		
WUX WASHINGTON DC VIA CAMPOBELLO SC NOV 24 1944		
MRS HELEN WALL SWOFFORD		
//1		
BOX 114 11 WILLOW ST ERWIN TENN		
THE SECRETARY OF WAR DESIRES ME TO EXPRESS HIS DEEP REGRETS		
THAT YOUR HUSBAND SECOND LIEUT WILLIAM G SWOFFORD HAS BEEN		
REPORTED MISSING IN ACTION SINCE ELEVEN NOVEMBER OVER YUGOSLAVIA		
IF FURTHER DETAILS OR OTHER INFORMATION ARE RECEIVED YOU WILL BE		
PROMPTLY NOTIFIED		
WITHELL ACTING THE ADJUTANT GENERAL		
11054		
THE COMPANY WILL APPRECIATE SUGGESTIONS FROM ITS PATRONS CONCERNING ITS SERVICE		

The telegram Mom received the day after Thanksgiving, 1944. Fortunately, Dad was already back at base.



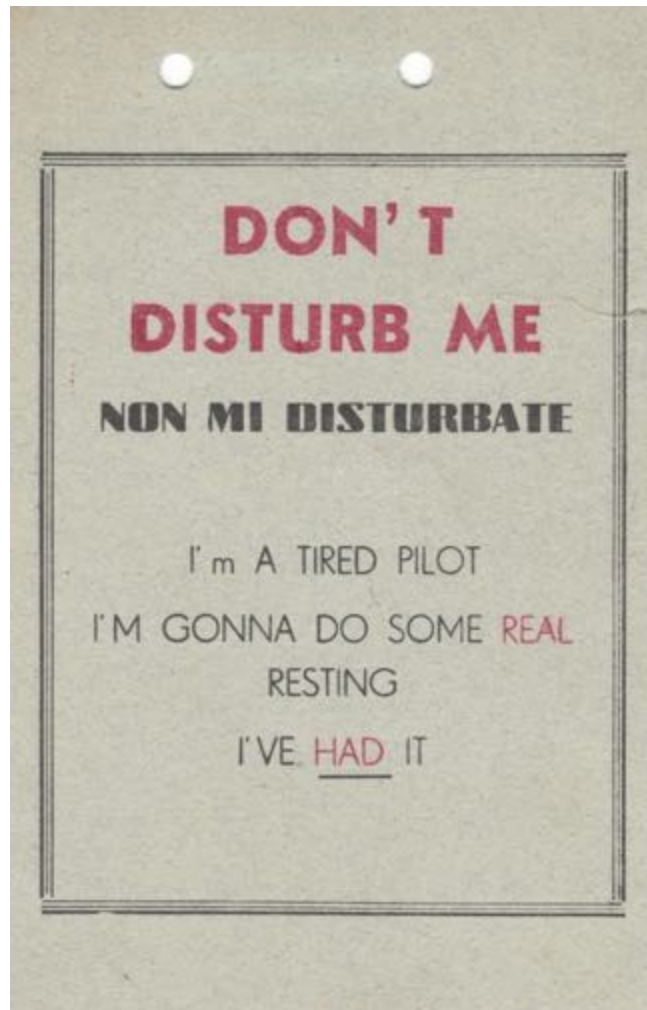
Dad had this note for 44 years, and had no idea what it said until we met Vlado's father at Oshkosh in 1988.



One of the postcards Dad sent to Mom to let her know where he had been.



The second postcard from Split.



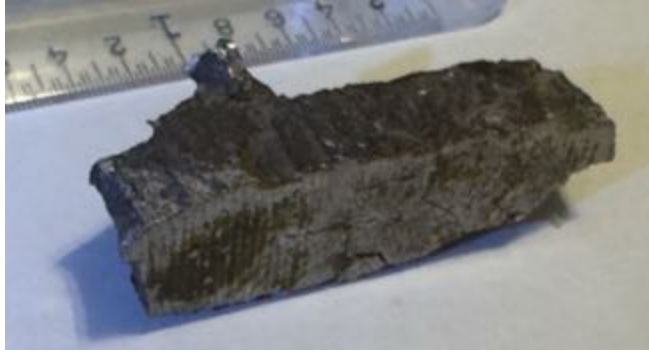
Do Not Disturb sign from the Hotel Quisanna on the Isle of Capri. "Even though we did put up the sign, we were disturbed."



Taken during a mission, this photo shows the stream of bombs as they were released from the plane in front of the photographer. If you look closely, you can see them all the way down.



Dad's slingshot, with 21 notches carved in it, one per mission. Well worn by yours truly.



The anti-aircraft artillery shell fragment Dad found by his foot.



Dad's brother Lee served in the Army in the South Pacific, 1944. That loaded Thompson machine gun he is carrying weighs nearly 20 pounds.



Last ride in a B-24, at an airshow in East Tennessee.



454<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group last reunion. Dad is far left, second row.

# Kid Stuff

***“Little children, let us not love with word or with tongue, but in deed and truth.” - 1 John 3:18***

I could say that I remember everything back to when I came home from the hospital, but I think you would call me out on that one. Truth is, my first memory was my one month checkup with Dr. Monroe. Okay, I can see you giving me the stink eye now, so on with our story, picking up somewhere after my first birthday or two.

## **Erwin**

We lived in a Victorian style house in Erwin, TN, a small town in northeast Tennessee, on a street that intersected the main street through town. In the fifties, rush hour was when 10 people left the parking lot at the railroad headquarters office building at the same time. The house had been divided into a duplex, with the second unit upstairs. Before I came on the scene, upstairs was occupied by Wayne and Mary Scott. For most of you, these names are meaningless. But if you have lived anywhere in or near East Tennessee, you would know them as the founders of Scott Farms in Unicoi, who grow the best strawberries on the planet. You must go there around the end of May and take home a gallon of berries. It is worth the trip, no matter where you are coming from.

The house was changed to remove the wall at the bottom of the steps, and voila, a strangely configured single family house was born. Like any little kid, I was curious about the upstairs, and would go up there to play. There

was a kitchen with a red linoleum floor, and no appliances. Two bedrooms were connected, so you had to go through one to get to the other. The bathroom was behind another room that nobody could figure out what to do with. And then there was the Army guy's room. Yes, you read that right, an Army guy lived in that room, but he was always gone to fight a war or something because I never saw him. I knew all this because the door had stenciled on it the word Private, and I had seen shows on TV that had Army people on them, and some of them were Privates. So I never went into that room. He wouldn't want a kid messing with his stuff. And then, of course one day, Mom needed something out of the storage room. Storage room??? I went with her, and she opened the Private door. Wow! A new place to play, and it smelled like mothballs. Cool! Myth dispelled.

My room was on the porch. Really. At some point, the end of the porch had been enclosed to make the room. The floor was the original porch floor, and the inside wall was the outside wall of the house, complete with siding. It was cold in the winter and warm in the summer. I had no complaints, because I had no other frame of reference. It was good enough for me. I was a happy kid. That was my first lesson in how to get along in the world. Be happy with whatcha got, and be willing to work with whatcha got. Good lesson to learn early. I remember running out of my room early in the morning yelling "Mommy, Mommy, it's a new day. And I want some breakfast!" And now you can tell I've never missed a breakfast since.

My sister is 8 years older than I am, and my brother 7. Bill didn't like playing with me, and had a buddy, more like partner in crime, named John Goforth. Together, they comprised the Deer's Club, the purpose of which I was never privy to. John's Dad worked at the railroad with my Dad. Bill and John pulled the same scam on me, over and over. We would play hide and seek. Bill would start counting and John and I would go hide. At least I hid. B & J would take off and rendezvous, and go to John's house, more blocks away than I was allowed to go. So next time, I counted and went looking for them. Same result. Never was able to defeat that trick.

I had limits, like all kids. And a tricycle, which began life as Mom's tricycle in the 1920s. I couldn't cross any streets on my tricycle. We lived in the middle of the block. At the bottom of the gentle hill was Main Street.

Across Main St. was the Little League baseball field. They had bleachers that backed up to the street, and were 3 rows high. I loved to watch them play. And sit on the top row. They had a little concession stand built into the 2 story cinder block tower with the announcer upstairs. Yes, an announcer who reported the game on the local radio station, and an announcer that called the game over a speaker on the field. Uptown! On the hot summer days, if I was given a nickel, I could buy a grape Fanta. Little League and a grape Fanta, on the top row. Ah, heaven! But what I couldn't do was to ride my trike across Main St., so one day I was cruising down the sidewalk and saw a game going on. I couldn't cross the street on my trike. It's not safe, you know. So I parked my trike on the corner by the street light pole, and walked across the street. Dinnertime came and Mom came looking for me. She found my trike at the bottom of the street and panicked. Finally, she calmed down and thought about where I would want to go, and saw the game in progress. She found me atop the bleachers with a grape Fanta in my hand. I didn't get spanked for that one, but I got new limits. No crossing the street unsupervised, by any means, including feet. This was my first experience with the concept of compliance with the letter of the law, but not the spirit.

We went to the Methodist Church. It was located on Elm Street, which intersected our street at the other end. It was on our side of Elm, so we could walk up the alley behind our house, alongside the church, and in the front door. Convenient, yes? We were regulars. I went to Sunday School, and learned Bible stories. This guy named Jesus got a bunch of fishermen and walked on dirt roads looking for something, I wasn't sure what, but it must have been big, because there was a whole book about it. Turns out, the story had a twist. Jesus was what everybody else was looking for. Boy, was that confusing. I'm sure if I keep studying the Bible, I'll understand it someday. But for now, I'm still a student. Will you join me?

When I lived in Savannah, GA as an adult, and you met someone for the first time, they asked you what you'd like to drink. When 2 men meet for the first time, they ask "What do you do?" In Erwin, when you met someone new, it was "Where do you go to church?" It was that kind of town. Across the street from the Methodist Church was the Presbyterian Church, and at the end of Main Street was the Baptist Church and the

Christian Church. Down Elm Street was the Lutheran Church, but nobody knew anybody that went there. If you were Catholic or Jewish, you were just out of luck. You'd have to drive all the way to Johnson City, 12 miles away. When I was in high school, we got an Air Force Junior ROTC class my senior year. Our commander was Colonel Brydges. He said he was Jewish, but he might have done that so that every kid's Mom wouldn't try to ask him to come to their church. He was a sly one, that Colonel, but he was one of the only teachers I visited whenever I came home from college. Colonel Brydges brought in the best guest speakers. One was Admiral Daniel V. Gallery. In WWII, he captured the German U-boat that had a German Enigma code machine that we used to win the war. And his two brothers were also admirals. By the way, that U-boat is on display at the Chicago Museum of Science and Technology.

Erwin had some unique history. I'll go ahead and tell you now, so that the ones that get hysterical about the way things were done in ye olde America can pitch your hissy fit and get it over with. In 1916, there was a circus visiting Kingsport. During the show, the big elephant, named Murderous Mary, reared up, and stomped her handler to death. Word was that Mary had done this before, so the good citizens of Kingsport decided to hold a trial right then and there. They got the judge, and the trial was on. Mary didn't put on much of a defense, so the conclusion was pretty predictable, guilty of murder, sentenced to death to be carried out immediately. So who's got a gun? They shot Mary with everything they had, and it just made her mad. So, eventually they came around to an idea. Best idea? I dunno. But an idea. The railroad yard in Erwin had a big crane. Why not hang the guilty party? They put Mary in a big truck and drove to Erwin, about 30 miles away. They put a cable around Mary's neck and hauled her up in the, uh, oops. Cable broke. They found a bigger cable, and tried again. Success! They hanged Murderous Mary in the railroad yard, and buried her right there, where she remains today. If I were an elephant, I might want to steer clear of Erwin.

A few years later, the legend says 1921, race relations were, you could say, a little one sided. One day, a black man raped a white woman. A town meeting was called. Not much was said, just "Any black person that is seen in town when the sun comes up tomorrow will get the same as this one."

After that, they tarred and feathered the guilty man and dragged him through town until he was dead. As far as I know, there are still no black people living in the town of Erwin. When I was in high school, there was a rule in the Tennessee Secondary School Athletic Association that said if a player is absent from school on the day of a game, he can't play in that game. Though by the 1970s Erwin was as welcoming to people of all races as you could want, many black players from surrounding counties laid out of school on gameday, because they were afraid to come to Erwin. The stigma of an event like that takes a long time to go away. People have memories like elephants. What, too soon?

My Mom's sister, Aunt Kitty, was a third grade teacher. The one you didn't want to get. Gun metal blue hair, and a ruler in her hand for whacking errant student's hands, she was an imposing figure. She lived in Hendersonville, NC with her invalid husband, White (everybody called him by his last name). One time Mom and I went over to see her. It was about a 75 mile drive, so we didn't do that very often. Aunt Kitty made a nice lunch for us. At the end of the meal, she said she had made a blueberry pie, and would we like a piece. Sure, I said, and make mine a big piece. Here's the thing. My Mom made wonderful blackberry cobbler, and this blueberry pie looked just like that. My expectations were set. I took a bite. It did not meet my expectations. I spat it out on the plate. You should have heard the torrent of words that Aunt Kitty unleashed on my Mother! I'll just say that apparently Mom had raised an uncouth little monster. Who knew? I didn't eat anything else containing blueberries for close to 50 years. But now, the trauma is in the past, and I actually like blueberries, and blueberry pie!

## **Marion**

When I was 4, a tragic thing happened, Dad got a promotion, and we were moving to Marion, NC. My world was turned upside down. At the same time, my Grandfather was promoted from Dad's new job to Roadmaster, in charge of track maintenance for the whole railroad, and he would be working out of the Erwin office. And so, they arrived at the solution, just swap houses, and neither pays rent to the other. Not bad.

We lived on Clay Street in Marion, a quiet street just two blocks from the high school, and connecting to State Street, a busy main drag. Going away from State, the street curves around and goes through a nice quiet neighborhood. Perfect place for kids to play. On the street behind us, lived another kid my age, Beau Norman. It didn't take long for the two of us to find each other. Hell on wheels? Not yet. I couldn't have a bike for a few more years.

But I did get an upgrade. My trike was my Mom's, and it was old, and small. I got to move up to Janie and Bill's trike. It was bigger, and had streamers coming out of the handlebars. But I still claimed both. Every year, Mom repainted an old metal outdoor chair, and whatever color she was painting it, I got to paint the little trike. Before it was over, it had been painted red, silver, blue, green, red, silver, lather, rinse, repeat. That was probably the only thing I ever enjoyed painting.

This house was two stories over a basement, brick, 1940s style, with a white picket fence out front. I still have a scar on my leg from trying to jump over that fence, and being defeated by the point on top of one of those pickets. The garage was in the basement, and was rarely used for the car, which stayed in the driveway up near the street. It was a '57 Chevy Belair, with fins, yellow with a white roof. What would you give to have one of those in your driveway today? We didn't know what a treasure we had. We thought it was just a car. What did we know.

I began kindergarten shortly after we moved. I learned to finger paint and all the other messy stuff kids do. My favorite, though, was musical chairs. As the biggest kid in the class, I could scrap and claw for a chair just like a defensive lineman. Too bad I never played football. I had the moves! I graduated from kindergarten at our Methodist Church not long before they moved to a brand new building, right across from the elementary school where I would go. They had a reunion of my kindergarten class in 2021, but I was just home from brain surgery, and in no shape to go. I later had visits from two of my classmates, Beau Norman and Nancy Walker, after 57 years. How cool was that?

Beau and I were like Patrick Mahomes and Travis Kelce, minus the talent and coordination. We specialized in playing WWII on the hillside between our houses, and in the woods across the street between Clay St. and the high school. We had an awesome playground. And guess what? We didn't play inside too much. I did like to listen to the NY Yankees play on the radio, with the game announced by Pee Wee Reese and Dizzy Dean. Roger Maris and Mickey Mantle were the big stars. After the game, I would go outside and throw a ball up in the air and catch it with my homemade paper catcher's mitt. Later on, I'd get my own leather baseball glove. And somewhere along the way, I taught Beau how to play the game of baseball.

Look ahead a couple years. It was my tenth birthday. What did I get for my birthday? A new first baseman's mitt, a new baseball, and a new bat. Great! What did we do at my party on Saturday afternoon? We played baseball, that's what. Well, as it turned out, all the guys played except me. We had gone over to the high school practice field. As the honoree, Dad, who was pitcher and umpire, and whose decisions were final, gave me the choice to pick the teams. I didn't recall this, but Beau told me recently that he was mad at me all these years for not picking him for my team. I had to apologize for that! It was a detail I forgot long ago. The part I remember was how come I didn't play. You see, I picked Jeff McIntosh for my team, one of the most athletic of our class. Only Jeff always played first base. But I had a new mitt and insisted on playing first base. My Dad, who was always considerate of the other guy over his own family, said Jeff could play first and I could go to right field. This was the one and so far only point in time when I chose to pitch a crying, screaming, hissy fit. Dad gave me "the stare", and just pointed to the bench, where I sat crying and otherwise misbehaving until the game was over, or canceled due to inclement Van. I wrecked my party for real.

We kids in the neighborhood played at sports in those days. I had a full football uniform, including cleats. No place to play, but I was prepared. My uniform sported number 24, in honor of my cousin Bill, who was a running back for Wilkes Central High School in North Wilkesboro, NC. His brother John was quarterback. Later, John Swofford was the long time Commissioner of the Atlantic Coast Conference. And Bill Swofford was

also known as the singer “Oliver”, who was best known for singing Good Morning Starshine.

When Janie and Bill (brother) were in high school, they were both in the band. During practice time, I liked to hang out with the band. I guess I was their groupie. In the winter, they had an orchestra, and competed with other bands in the state. Their best piece was Tchaikovsky’s 1812 Overture. They played that the best of any orchestra I’ve heard. They even recorded it on an LP album. Bill made me a CD with it a couple years ago. Still sounds pretty strong.

Let me tell you about a couple of inventors, who created the Frisbee. One day, Beau Norman and I had an idea. Now that usually resulted in something bad, but this was a brilliant idea. We went in our house and got all of Janie and Bill’s 45 RPM records, then took them outside. We were going to apply some advanced aerodynamic principles, and make them fly. We held each one and flung it with a flick of the wrist. They were going over the house! Awesome dude! We could even get them to curve. How fun! We went around back to pick them up and throw them back over the roof. That was when we found our new found invention mysteriously turned into a pile of broken black vinyl in the driveway. Back to the drawing board. But first a visit to my Dad, and the words “This is going to hurt me more than it hurts you.” And then hours were spent picking every little piece of black vinyl out of the gravel. And the lesson is, invention is 10 percent inspiration, and 90 percent mumbling under your breath while you clean up the mess.

## **Erwin, once more**

In 1965, Dad had big news. Grandpa was going to retire, and Dad was going to be promoted into his position. Like father, like son. But later on Dad made one thing perfectly clear to me. I was not, under any circumstance to follow in his footsteps. Okay. How about the flying part?

We moved back to Erwin. Grandparents were staying, so we had to find another house. Dad sold the house they were living in to my grandparents,

and that became party headquarters for the Swofford family, a party being defined as 2 or more Swoffords in the house, sitting around talking about all the aunts and uncles and cousins. Ah, memories. My favorite time was after dinner, when Grandpa worked the crossword puzzle from that day's Johnson City Press Chronicle. This was part of his education, even after he was retired. He puzzled out every clue, and if he got stumped on one, he would use his dictionary to find it. I enjoyed helping him with his puzzles, and I still love to do them myself.

Speaking of dinner, my Grandmother was the most fabulous country cook ever. It all started with rolling out the dough for her homemade biscuits, served with almost every meal. And they were the best biscuits I've ever had. She also liked to can fresh produce, like green beans and peaches. Remember that unused kitchen upstairs? Every flat surface was completely covered with Mason jars filled with good stuff. When making a meal, I was frequently dispatched upstairs to bring back a jar of something. It was a rare meal that didn't have 2 or 3 meats and 5 or more side dishes, biscuits, and dessert. She made the best cakes! Prune cake, apple sauce cake made from apples in the back yard, and pound cake with homemade caramel icing. She always put a big glob of caramel icing in the hole in the middle of the cake, just for me. Yum! For Christmas she made fruit cake, a couple months ahead of time. It was then sealed in a metal cake box, and every week, she opened it and sprinkled Captain Apple Jack brandy over it. That was the best fruit cake I ever ate. Sandy and I have the recipe, and made the cake once, and I must say, I think we did pretty well.

Sometimes when Mom and Dad would go out of town, I would go down and stay with Grandma and Grandpa. I always stayed in my original room, which Grandma called "the Van room". Years later, after they had both died, Dad sold the house, and the new owners restored the Van room to its original state, a little longer porch.

For the first year back in Erwin, we lived in a house rented from my Aunt Bert, Grandpa's sister. Then we bought a house on Valley Street. It was modern, a ranch style house. It backed up to a hill, and had an extra half lot on one side of the property. We bought the house from Willis and Alta

Edwards. They then bought the next lot up and built a house. Their 3 girls bracketed my age, so I had other kids nearby to do things with.

I went to Elm Street School, which was down a big hill, plus a half block. Not too far to walk, and only uphill in one direction. But when it snowed, and in those days, it snowed a lot, the steep climb proved to be too slippery. On those occasions, I took an alternate route through Dr. Hyder's back yard that had a more gentle slope.

It was a great time to be a kid. Teachers were teaching the content of the coursework. No political discussions, there was no word in the dictionary for "transgender". Kids were just kids then, with no pressure except to just get our homework done. I didn't know how good that was until I'm now seeing the results of the changes that have been made to our education system. Societal changes are not helping any either. I am so happy to have grown up when I did!

I loved spelling bees. I thought they were fun. And I liked to win, who doesn't? My main competitors were Mark Buchanan and Wade Franklin, both friends. I lost one to Mark on the word "restaurant", but I beat Wade with "daiquiri". Once we passed the age of spelling bees, I missed them. There is something unusual in my psyche. I like being tested. I can't explain it, but it goes all the way back to first grade in Marion. One day we were given a test, to write the numbers in sequence from 1 to 100. That was so easy, I finished way ahead of everybody else. So, I wrote them by 2s, then by 5s. And then turned the paper over and did it all again, counting down from 100 to 1. All just to have something to do until Mrs. Hemphill took up the papers. Later, at Auburn, while taking engineering classes, my study method was unconventional, to say the least. I never worked the problems assigned, never turned in homework assignments. I studied the theory. If I knew the theory on a test, I could answer theory questions, and figure out how to work the problems. The night before a test, I went flying. Just motoring around for 15 minutes or so in the quiet of the night was so peaceful and calming. And I got to know some of the campus police, who always came over to check out the guy "stealing" the airplane in the dark. Then I went back to the dorm and had a beer, maybe two, before bed. Next morning, a good breakfast, go over what we covered in the textbook (I

never took notes more than page numbers. If I was writing a note, I missed everything else he was saying. So notes had to stay in my head.), and then off to the test. I know it is weird, but it worked for me.

One day, in 8th grade at Elm Street School, a classmate named Mike Randolph, who was a little bit of a different thinker, came to school with a pipe bomb. Not to blow up the school, but to show us what he had been working on at home. Tom Sams, the principal, thought Mike should set it off in the street next to the school, and the upper classes should go outside to watch. Everybody was milling around in the grass by the street as Mike lit the fuse. I grabbed another boy and said “If this thing works, that pipe is going to become shrapnel.” So the two of us separated from the rest and lay down on the ground to watch. I think that we were all very fortunate that Mike’s pipe bomb was a dud. He never brought in a bomb 2.0. Thankful for that! Isn’t it amazing how much things have changed in 50+ years? Back then, making a pipe bomb was a science project, now it is an act of terrorism.

High school was a good experience. Our neighbor Alta Edwards was the typing teacher, so she was going where I was going every morning. Two of their girls, Catherine and Ellen, were in high school, so they rode too. I just went over every morning and got in the back seat of the car and waited on them. As a freshman, the vehicle was an old Willy’s Jeep. Interesting and fun ride. By the next year, the Jeep was replaced by a Ford Bronco, and sometimes we took their other car, a big Chrysler New Yorker. Alta kept bugging me to take typing. I finally did. It turns out that was probably the single best class I took in terms of being useful in my work. Thanks Alta! Sometimes it is the unexpected things that have the biggest impact in our lives. So don’t shy away from trying new things that are outside your comfort zone. You might like it.

## **Sports**

I was the team manager for the freshman high school football team at Unicoi County High School in Erwin. It was mostly fun, but the stadium was a mile or one and a half from the school. It was built during the Great

Depression as a government project to keep local men employed, and thus, it was constructed in the most manpower intensive way possible. Yep, it was carved out of the side of a prominent hill in town, known as Whitlow Hill, because Fred Whitlow, president of the local bank, lived smack on top of it. I think more than know that Fred's family donated the land for it. There were bleachers running up the side of the hill, and the opposite side of the field was flat, and provided space for parking team buses and some spectator cars. Slightly farther down the hill was the field house and locker rooms for the home and away teams. That building only had one door, so teams had to be nice when going to and from the field. My home away from home was on the second floor. That served as visitors lockers for varsity games, and home lockers for the freshmen. Our games were Thursdays, and the varsity played on Fridays, so that usually worked okay.

What didn't work okay was the day the varsity's practice uniforms didn't get back from Crystal Cleaners by practice on Monday. That's when I started learning about diplomacy, because I found myself square in the middle of a feud between the varsity and freshman head coaches. It went something like this: Varsity coach tells me to go upstairs and bring down the freshman game uniforms for the varsity to practice in. I could already start to visualize my head on a fencepost outside. This will not turn out good for anybody! So, I did as I was told, and handed them over to the varsity players to start suiting up. Meanwhile, the freshman head coach is already out on the field, a hundred yards away from the action, so I decided to retreat to stand next to him. Safety in numbers, you know. Soon, the varsity team streamed out onto the field to begin practice, wearing the freshly cleaned freshman game uniforms. A bazooka went off in my ear, at least that's what it sounded like. I was ordered to the head coach's office to tell him, actually that was more like TELL HIM, yes, that's it, that the varsity team was to surrender the uniforms to me. Uh huh. Can't wait for that. So I burst into the coach's office only to find him sitting on the well worn sofa with a nice looking lady sportswriter from the Johnson City paper. May as well have TWO reasons to get yelled at! Totally embarrassed by my social faux pas, I was ordered to close the door and knock politely this time. Done. I was allowed into the inner sanctum to deliver my message. By this point, I was pretty sure I didn't want to, but I'd gone that far, so why not? I politely asked if he would give the uniforms back, at Coach Terry's request. Not no,

but hell no. And that's the best I can clean that up to write here. Back to Coach Terry, I just said "He said no." When dispatched with another demand, I looked at my coach and said something on the order of "Would you mind having the next chat with him? Somehow, I think I've done everything I can on this issue." Naturally, I would be the one who had to stay until after midnight to do an emergency laundering job to get our uniforms ready for that week's game. When dealing with volatile coaches, you learn to pick your battles!

Later that year, the freshman team traveled down to Greeneville, TN, about 30 miles on the bus, to play Greeneville High School in an afternoon game. We had a college PE major volunteering as our defensive coordinator, Coach Gerald. Gerald had devised a 4-4 defense that he thought was practically impenetrable. It was put to the test that day. It was late in the third quarter, and things weren't going so well for our Blue Devils. Gerald sent in some fresh legs, and told them to run the new 4-4 defense. Next play, Greeneville's quarterback goes back to pass and is immediately surrounded by our defensive line, deep in the backfield. Coach Gerald shouts out to the team "Yeah, there's my 4-4 defense!" I was standing right next to him, so I heard it clearly. About that time, the quarterback slipped away, and ended up making around a 20 yard gain. Then the smart ass in me kicked in, and before I could stop it, the words just fell out. "Look, he got away! There's your four-four defense!" They say that if looks could kill, I'd be dead now, but I think Gerald had something much worse in mind for me that afternoon. He just pointed to the gate leading to the spectator stands and shouted "OUT!" I went. Out, that is. But I didn't go far. I leaned on the fence for a bit, before taking a seat in the first row. Then, in the fourth quarter, one of the players broke his leg, in the field of play, but right by the sideline. Coach Terry didn't want to waste a timeout, so he just walked over and asked which leg it was, and proceeded to drag the player off the field with his other leg. Then he started yelling for me. When he saw me sitting in the first row of stands, he flipped out. "Swofford, what are you doing out there?" I was tasked with running "like the wind" to a recreation center about a mile away, finding anyone in management, and not coming back until I'm dragging an ambulance. And that's just what I did! The ambulance got there almost before I did.

At the end of the season, I put an end to my football management days. Too many scuffles, being thrown into the shower, and left behind, locked in the second floor locker room when the team left for an away game. Basketball was a much more tame sport in the locker room, or so I thought.

I was a basketball manager for 3 years. Starting with my sophomore year, I was the official scorekeeper during the games at home, and away team scorekeeper for away games. I was good at it, and my book always agreed with the opponent's book at the end of the game. One of the things I did after every game was to take the numbers down to the railroad office and crunch all the statistics using their electronic calculator, which was pretty cool in 1974. Before each home game, I gave those statistics to Danny True, who broadcast the games for our local radio station. Danny always gave me a plug on the air for doing that for him. Too bad I never heard any of the games on the radio, because I was sort of busy at the time.

I became acquainted with one of the referees, Dale Ford. He recognized my last name and made the connection with Oliver, and it turned out he was related to Tennessee Ernie Ford. We called each other Ernie and Oliver. He was a really good ref. He also umpired baseball, which I had lost interest in. One of the guys on our team was a very confident guy named Eddie Whitson. Eddie was a guard and could hit those outside shots all day. After I graduated, Eddie got picked up by a minor league team as a pitcher, and Dale started umpiring full time in the minors. A few years after that I came home from work and turned on the TV. A World Series game was just starting and they introduced the players. To my surprise, Eddie Whitson was pitching for the Padres, and Dale Ford was umpire. Later on, after Eddie had been traded to the Yankees, he was on TV again. This time he got into a bar fight with manager Billy Martin and sent Billy to the hospital. That sounds like the Eddie I knew.

And speaking of fights, that's what ended my career as a basketball manager. In my junior year, one of the football players volunteered to be a basketball manager so that he could avoid taking PE in the off season. We had a center named Big Jim, a farmer's son, and 6 feet 6 inches tall. He wasn't real coordinated, but he could take up some space on defense. One day the football player, Doug, decided to play a joke on Big Jim. He cut

through the crotch of Jim's underwear during practice. Jim comes in and pulls them up to his armpits. He goes ballistic, screaming "Who did this?" Doug remained silent. Somebody suggested that the managers were in there during practice. I was going through the area picking up towels and jock straps to be laundered. The others in the room backed away as Big Jim homed in on me. He started pushing me back. "Was it you?", he asked over and over. No no no, I kept answering. I expected Doug to confess, but nothing. Then I expected one of the players, who I thought of as friends, to pull him back. Nope. I admit to throwing the first punch. It was getting out of hand and Big Jim was scary big and strong, and I thought maybe an uppercut to his jaw would shake him out of his rage. Nope, that didn't phase him. In an instant, I was getting the beat down of my life. His arms were like baseball bats. My glasses were smashed along with my face, then I was down on the floor with my hands over the back of my head. Somebody got our coach, Zane Whitson, and as soon as coach came in, it was over. I never gave Doug up, but he finally confessed. Coach drove me home. Together, Doug and Big Jim bought me new glasses. I took a couple days off, and on Monday morning I entered through the back door as usual. Jim was waiting for me. He put out his hand and we shook. He apologized and so did I. Jim and I were good. Doug did the same, and we were good. But I left the team that day because nobody on the rest of the team came to help. Not one of the managers, not one of the players.

When you get to the big fight, there's no more kid stuff.

## **Photos**



Is that a Grape Fanta behind your back?



Christmas morning, 1957.



Off to church with Bill and Janie.



Hanging out with Uncle White.



Brother Bill, late 1950s.



Pony? Sounded good when you first mentioned it. Now, not so much.



Van, with Nancy Walker as Joseph and Mary in a Christmas play, Marion, NC, early 1960s.



Birthday, Marion, NC, 1961, 6 years old.



So this is what a large cone looks like! Van and Janie in Marion, early-60s.



Dad, Van, Mom, Bill and Janie standing. Visiting Uncle Lee and his family, mid-60s.



Fossilized tree, McClure, VA. Grandpa, cousins Tim and Terry Brown, Van, circa 1966.



Elm Street School, eighth grade graduation, 1969. Van is second from left, second row from top.



Van gets diploma from principal Tom Sams with Mrs. Miller looking on.

# The Candy Machine

*“When I saw, I reflected upon it; I looked, and received instruction.” - Proverbs 24:32*

## **Wrestling or Candy?**

When we lived in Marion, NC, my very best friend was Beau Norman. Beau lived on the next block, down the hill behind our house. We were inseparable, and naturally, as kids between our 5th and 10th birthdays are wont to do, we accounted for a significant portion of the mischief that took place in our neighborhood.

Among other pursuits, Beau and I had a great fondness for wrestling. We loved to watch it on Saturday nights on the Charlotte, NC channel that we could get with an antenna. A wrestler named Johnny Weaver was our favorite, along with George Becker. Imagine our delight when we found out that Johnny Weaver and all the other wrestlers that we saw each week, were going to be wrestling in the high school gym that was only 2 blocks from our house. Holy smoke! We bought tickets right away, and had seats right by the ring.

We had the time of our lives watching them wrestle, and totally got into the matches. We'd even run up to the side of the ring and point out the bad guys to the referee when they were cheating, as bad guys always do. And then came the intermission. Did I mention that we were prone to mischief? Not on purpose, mind you, but it did seem to find us. And on that night, it came knocking during the intermission.

There was a candy machine in the lobby of the gym, just sitting there in the corner. It was the old fashioned kind of vending machine, purely mechanical. You put the coins in, they fell down into the coin box, registering the amount you had inserted on their way down, and then you pulled a knob under the candy bar you wanted and it would fall out, along with any change you were due. It was a very simple mechanism. What could go wrong? Well, nothing, until I heard Beau utter the words "Hey, you can pull the knob without putting any money in, and the candy comes out." Fantastic, says I. And that was the point where the two kids from Clay and Euclid Avenues emptied the candy machine, and still had the two dimes we came with for a snack.

Now, what do you do with that many Snickers and Hershey Bars? The answer is, you pull your shirt tail out, use it to make a pouch in front of you, fill it up, and walk very slowly, being careful not to let any of the booty fall out. We made it home, missing the second half of the evening's entertainment, and I dumped my jackpot onto the kitchen table just as proud as could be that I'd scored a Halloween sized haul of candy and it hadn't cost a dime. Naturally, the first words I heard were "Where did you get that?" After the explanation, I was introduced, once again, to the experience of having my Dad say those magic words, "This is going to hurt me more than it hurts you." You know what comes next, at least, if you were born before man walked on the moon.

Morning came, and apparently, I survived. I went to breakfast and was surprised to find my Dad still at home. After we ate, he told me we had a stop to make on the way to school. He drove me to the high school, which I wasn't due to attend for another 6 years. As we walked in the door and headed for the principal's office, he handed me \$1.75, which all the candy totaled up to, and told me I had to tell Mr. Elledge what I had done, and pay him for the candy. Which I did, and I'm sure he was doing all he could to keep from laughing. From my Dad, not even a smirk. And so ends the lesson. Or does it?

Fast forward about 25 years. I was working at Federal Express in Memphis, in the engineering building. I normally brought my lunch from home, and would walk down the hall to the break room to get a Diet Coke to have with

lunch, and go back to my desk. One day, as I was walking down the hall, I encountered one of my coworkers coming the other way. His shirt tail was pulled out, and he had what looked to be about 3 cases of soft drinks in his kangaroo pouch. I immediately knew what had happened. As he waddled past, he told me "Hey Van, the Coke machine is broken. It's giving free drinks. Just push the button, no money required." It didn't take more than a tenth of a second for me to turn on my heel and take the steps up two floors to the other break room in the building to buy my drink for lunch. I could not bear the thought of going to the CEO's office to pay him back for the drinks I took. Not a chance, once was enough for this old boy!

## Photos



Beau Norman and Van, 57 years later. Not much has changed except the color of our hair.

# Music

*“Praise Him with trumpet sound; Praise Him with harp and lyre“ - Psalms 150:3*

## **Violin**

You can't be the child of a violin teacher without having an urgent need to learn to play. And so when I was 5, I was given my very own violin. Mom gave me lessons for about two years, and I did pretty well. She had a group of students that had lessons on Saturday morning, the whole time we lived in Marion, NC. It was totally impossible for me to do anything inside the house and be quiet enough to not get yelled at, and when my friend Beau Norman was over, we were hell on wheels and got ejected quickly. So we played ball and listened to Dizzy Dean and Peewee Reese call the Yankees games on the radio. Consequently, I became more interested in baseball and football than violin, and I quit playing. I'm sure I would have been a good violinist had I continued to play. I never was any good at sports. Not whatsoever.

However, when it was time for one of her student group's recitals, Mom asked me to direct a couple of group songs. She got me a little tuxedo with tails, and a candy striped baton. All I needed was a little practice. They were playing a variety of tunes, with equally varied timing. It quickly became obvious that the only thing I'd be directing was songs written in 4/4 timing. I could play 3/4 and 6/8, but I wasn't coordinated enough to wave my baton to the beat. So, with a little bit of shuffling, we had a grouping of songs for me to direct and then take a deep bow and exit stage left. It worked! But I never did it again.

## **The Beatles**

February 9, 1964, a day that will live in awesomeness. Two days earlier, my sister Janie came home from Marion High School and told me there would be singing beetles on Ed Sullivan's show Sunday night. Singing beetles? Meh. I had seen the flea circus, Topo Gigio, and a myriad of other such acts. So, I didn't have high expectations. My goodness! How wrong could I be. The Beatles were instantly my favorite musical act ever, before or since. Surprisingly, Mom liked The Beatles, and her favorite song was Till There Was You. That was on the playlist at our wedding reception, just for Mom. Janie bought the first American Beatles album, Meet The Beatles, when it was released, and I still have and play it today. Even now, no matter what I'm doing, if I start playing The Beatles, it immediately puts me in a cheerful mood.

Immediately, I began to grow my hair out to The Beatles hair style. Prior to that, I had never had any other style than a crew cut, and didn't see a crew cut on my head again until the day I had brain surgery in 2021. I was allergic to everything, including my own hair, so the new Beatles cut came at a price. After holding a handkerchief over my nose through the process, I would still get all clogged up with my eyes swollen shut.

## **YMCA Boys Chorus**

After we moved back to Erwin in 1965, Mom and I were out shopping and ran into Helen Wattles, who was the 3rd grade teacher at Elm Street School, where I had started in 5th grade. She was also the leader and piano player for the YMCA Boys Chorus, and insisted that I join the group. So I did, and sang with the group for several years. We sang anytime somebody wanted to hear us, all over town at civic events, women's clubs, schools, etc. We were even on TV twice, on the Johnson City TV channel's noon news show.

One of the fun things we did didn't involve us singing. We went on a field trip to see a performance of the Vienna Boys' Choir in Knoxville. When we got to Knoxville, our first stop was a cafeteria-style restaurant for dinner. I think I had five dollars in my pocket, so naturally I chose steak for my entree. For 84 cents, I got a delicious sirloin steak. And it was rare, which opened up a whole new world for me, since Dad always grilled steaks and burgers until they were beyond well done. I haven't had a steak cooked more than medium since. We had a great time at the concert, even though we could only afford tickets in the very top of the nosebleed section. And then we got to stay out late, getting back to Erwin well after midnight.

I cannot leave this subject without mentioning the big Christmas show, at Elm Street School. As we waited in the hallway before filing in for the show, it was obvious to me that Scott Charles, who stood beside me in the back row, was ill. Green would be a better description. I suggested that he might want to sit this one out, but he didn't want to disappoint his parents, so on with the show. As the performance went on I had forgotten about Scott, and all was going well until we got to the big number, O Holy Night. We had twins in the group, Frank and Neal Hughes, who had beautiful voices, and stepped out in front for a solo to the song. Just as they reached the song's climax, with absolutely perfect timing, Scott projectile hurled and hit Neal in the back of his head. He finished the song, and the Hughes twins hastily exited stage left. Meanwhile, yours truly found that to be the funniest thing since the Three Stooges, and was unable to stop laughing hysterically. My Mom had a similar sense of humor, and required a poke in the ribs from my Dad to regain control. Mind you, it wasn't that Scott puked on Neal that was funny. In fact, that wasn't it at all. It was the impeccable timing, coming at the very climax of such a serious song, that had me in stitches. I was so embarrassed by it that for many years, I didn't want to hear that song at all, and would turn off the radio if it came on. But after my Mom died in 1987, things changed. Now when I hear O Holy Night, it reminds me not of the incident, but the connection with Mom and how we both saw the humor in it that night. O Holy Night is now one of my favorites. And Neal still talks to me.

Several years ago, I had the privilege of seeing C. C. Wynans perform O Holy Night with Vince Gill providing the music on his guitar. I never heard

such a beautiful song! It left me in tears. (Wink to Mom!)

## **Junior Band**

I left the Boys Chorus when I joined the junior band. Because I had asthma in those days, Mom and Dad wanted me to play a wind instrument. The cornet was selected for me. I would have picked the trumpet instead, but it wasn't my call. So I began to play. When it was time to have tryouts for positions, I couldn't bring myself to play one of the standard songs from the pink songbook. The Beatles had just released Yesterday, and I loved it. But I didn't have the sheet music. What to do? Easy. I sat on the back step with my portable record player and cornet, and played it over and over, and would pick out the notes, one at a time, and write them down. Of course, I was no whiz at musical notation, nor could I accurately reverse engineer the length of each note, and maybe the engineer was starting to show. I wrote columns of letters, with a + added for sharp, and a - for flat, and the timing was just in my head. After I played at the tryout, I was put in second seat. Our director, Jim Gladson, asked where I got the sheet music, and I told him I made it myself. Impressed, he asked to see it. He couldn't believe his eyes when he saw it! After that, I was his fair haired boy. He did all he could to help me advance.

And then fate intervened. I was walking down the hall at school one day. A friend who played trumpet, Perry Elliot, was talking to Tom Sams, our principal. As I passed by, Mr. Sams reached out and grabbed my arm firmly, and said "How about Swofford?", to which Perry replied "Sure." I had no clue what I had been volunteered for. Perry was the football manager, and he wanted to quit so he could spend more time playing trumpet. I was ready to quit band, because the pressure on my lips caused them to split open in the winter. A swap made in heaven! For my eighth grade year, I was football and basketball manager, and loved it, and continued as basketball manager for 3 years in high school. One of the perks of the job was I got to ride to practice with Mr. Sams. How is that fun? He drove a pristine sky blue convertible Jeepster, with the top down on sunny days. Way cool! And Perry? He became a high school band director.

## **Guitar and Violin**

I didn't play an instrument again until 1999, when I lived in Savannah, GA. Looking to do some things I always wanted to do but never had, I started taking guitar lessons from Judy Williams in the Savannah Folk Music Society. It didn't last long. My fingers are pretty crooked, and making all the chords just wasn't possible. Time to move on.

When we moved from Savannah to Brentwood, TN, Sandy gave me some violin lessons for Christmas, but Mom's violin needed new strings, and the bow needed new hair. I went to The Violin Shop in Nashville, and talked to Fred Carpenter. I was immediately impressed when Fred picked up the violin and said "This is an Eberle, nice." Then he picked up the bow Mom played with, a Wunderlich. He said it was worth \$1000! Wow! Mom had told me that one of her bows was worth more than the violin. And then he picked up her second bow, which I had never seen her play with, and said "Do you know what this is?" Yes, it's a Sartori. Uh huh. He took it to the back of the shop and did some quick research, then came back out and asked if he could remove the wire wrap above the handle. Sartori always signed his bows under the winding as well as along the shaft. Yep, there it was, so it was genuine. Fred offered me \$5,000 for the Sartori bow, and I accepted. Now you know why the car I had then was named Sartori. That paid off the car loan. In addition, Fred gave me the strings, and reaired the bow as well as made some needed repairs to the violin, all at no charge. Thank you Mom, for having a good head for business!

After a brief reprise of violin lessons, I have since stayed away from musical performance.

## **I Write the Songs, With a Little Help from My Friends**

In 2004, I had the extraordinary good fortune to sit down next to a guy I didn't know at a Bible study in our church. He turned out to be a songwriter named Ken Harrell. Over the next months we became friends, and I asked

him to help me with a project, to write and record a CD for my wife Sandy for Christmas. We did it, it was awful (my fault, not Ken's), but fun to make, and we don't talk about it any more. The friendship continued, and we still get together almost 20 years later and work on new song ideas.

Why songwriting, other than my friend is a songwriter? I certainly have very little input in the music part of it. But when I was in high school, I loved poetry and wanted to be a poet. So much, that for an entire year, I spoke only in iambic pentameter. As I spoke, I composed each sentence to be exactly 10 syllables long, with emphasis on alternating syllables. And nobody ever noticed! Finally, it was driving me mad, and after several months I was able to ditch the habit. Still, all these years later, I enjoy putting the words together.

Our favorite, and the song Ken put on his latest CD, and still sings whenever he performs, is This I Know, which is about a traveling evangelist who gets Alzheimer's and all he remembers is "Jesus Loves Me, This I Know." Another of my favorites is Just Like Ray, about a missionary for JAARS that was kidnapped and held captive by rebels in the jungle in Colombia, for 810 days. Ray emulated Apostle Paul throughout his struggle, and that's why I want to be just like Ray. One more, House of Sin, was inspired by the notion that churches are not houses for the righteous, but for the sinners. Welcome to the House of Sin, come on in!

Along the way, Ken and I wrote a couple songs with our friend Erin Johnston. Medals on the Wall was about a Marine's wife, who experienced losing her husband in a war. It really struck home because Erin had a friend who lost her husband in his last week in Afghanistan, just as Erin played the song for the first time at the Bluebird Cafe. On the lighter side, we wrote Don't Let the Door Hitcha Where the Good Lord Splitcha, obviously a breakup song.

## **Favorite Musicians**

My Mom, Helen Swofford

The Beatles, best ever!

Herb Alpert and the Tijuana Brass

Elton John, my first concert

Darius Rucker

Fleetwood Mac

Ken Harrell

James Fletcher on guitar and John Fletcher on drums

Itzak Perlman

## **Favorite Songs**

One Eyed One Horned Flying Purple People Eater, Sheb Wooley (note: I thought it was Purple Percolator, and ran through the house singing those lyrics. Okay, I was 3 at the time. A little slack please!)

Yesterday, The Beatles (Well, okay, everything they ever played)

Funeral for a Friend and Yellow Brick Road, Elton John

Mary Did You Know, Pentatonix

Call on God, Ken Harrell with AJ Masters and Phil Everly

You Restore My Soul, Ken Harrell

Hands of a Carpenter and Walking in Jerusalem, Fletcher

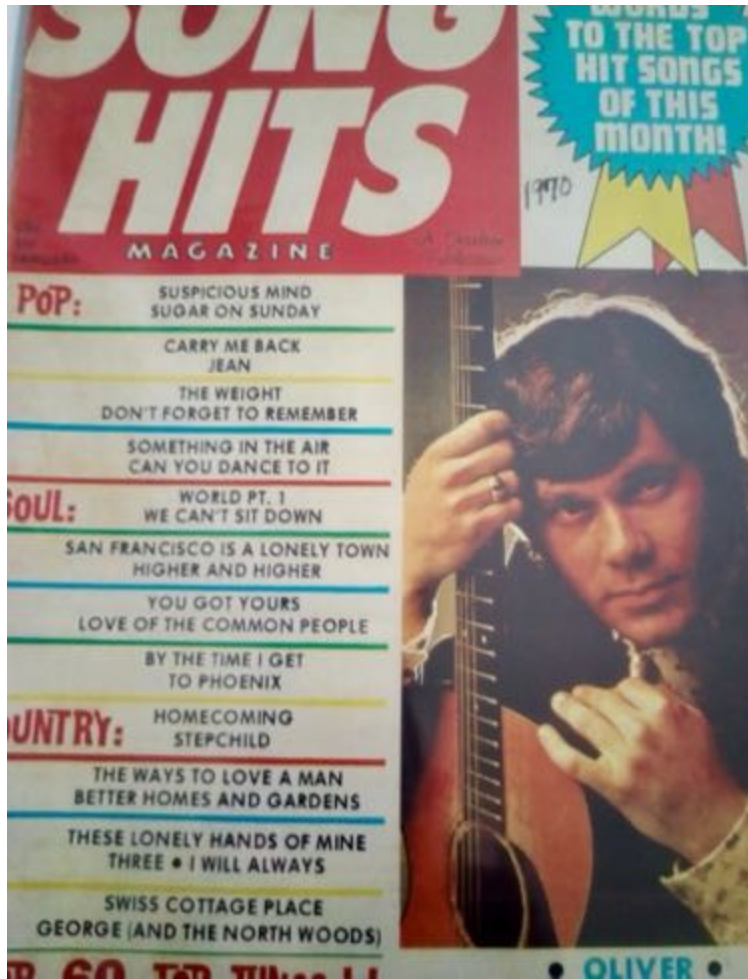
This, Darius Rucker

Ave Maria, Helen Swofford on her Eberle violin

## Photos



YMCA Boys Chorus, 1966. Van is back row, fourth from left. Scott Charles is three to the right of Van. Frank Hughes is second row, third from left, and Neal Hughes is front row, fourth from left.



Cousin Bill, also known as Oliver, on the cover of Song Hits Magazine in 1970, with his Pop hit "Jean".



Ken Harrell and Van in the studio, 2004

# The Audit

*“Let integrity and uprightness preserve me, for I wait for You.” - Psalms 25:21*

## The Set Up

In the late 1960s, the Clinchfield Railroad was leased to the Seaboard Coastline Railroad, based in Jacksonville, FL, for 99 years, essentially a merger. They installed their choice for the General Manager of the Clinchfield, a man named Thomas D. Moore, into the Erwin, TN general office of the Clinchfield. At that time, Dad was the General Track Supervisor, the new name for Roadmaster, the position Grandpa was in when he retired.

TD Moore was a self promoter extraordinaire. And he had a lust for the wealth of the original railroad barons. He had his own well appointed rail car, the railroad equivalent to a corporate jet. He had 2 friends that were also railroad general managers, Mr. Kendall and Mr. Rice, and together they bought a plot of land, in Virginia if I remember correctly, to be developed as their own private duck hunting lodge. They called it RiKeMo Lodge, and once it was completed, using railroad personnel and equipment, it opened with fanfare, operated by railroad people, of course. Most weekends, you could find the private rail cars of the 3 owners parked on the sidetrack by the facility. The way it worked was simple. Ducks were kept in cages and released on command. They would fly over the blind, the shooters would shoot, and chances were good they would bag a duck. Collect the limit, and a railroad chef would cook ‘em up. Few of the Clinchfield folks referred to

it by name. It was just the “Duck Farm”. A lot of railroad resources went into that place!

Around the same time, TD Moore, along with the chief engineer and head of sales, started a company called Holston Land Company. They started by buying land near the railroad that could be developed for industrial purposes, with a connection to the railroad of course. Then they began developing the properties, using a construction company in Birmingham, with kickbacks flowing back to the principals. They also engaged in smalltime theft, for example, selling leftover crossties pulled out when new track was laid, something the railroad had never done. Since they were using railroad people to handle these smaller jobs, people in the various departments would, from time to time, find a crisp new \$100 bill in their desk on Monday morning.

My Dad was one of those. At that time, he had moved from the track into the office in an administrative capacity. As such, he was aware of everything going on, and money going into and out of petty cash. When he would find money in his desk, he would always mail it to the Seaboard Coastline accounting office, simply marked “petty cash”. This went on for several years, amounting to a couple thousand dollars. He was careful to never mention these "anomalies" in conversation with the people in Jacksonville, but they noticed, all right, and never mentioned it to him either.

## **The Sting**

Then one Monday morning, Dad arrived at work as usual, only to find his office full of accountants, who closed the door once he was inside. They told him “Glenn, you’ve been sending us smoke signals for years, and we have been looking over the books and find some big discrepancies. We are here today to get the whole story, and audit everything in the company. We'd like to begin our interviews with you.”

The auditors swarmed the building, telling all the employees to drop what they were doing, step away from their desks, and stand by for interviews.

The audit took more than a week. Dad was interviewed extensively, and provided a good overall picture of what was going on.

In the end, the three at the center of it all, went to prison. TD Moore got the longest sentence, while the others got lengthy but lesser sentences. One was released early when his wife died, and he died soon after. I think the shame was what killed him. Same for the third guy. Both had been well respected in the community, as well as professionally. TD Moore died in prison.

After that, there was, of course, a management shakeup. The job of chief engineer was split into chief for signals and chief for maintenance of way. Dad became chief engineer for maintenance of way, once again managing track maintenance for the whole railroad. This was the position he retired from a few years later.

Dad's handling of that situation, by letting others quietly know that something fishy was going on, but not pointing any fingers, and simply being honest, was characteristic of his integrity, and something that I have tried to emulate.

Shortly after Dad retired, all management was moved to the Jacksonville office. Later, the Seaboard Coastline merged with the Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad, becoming the CSX Railroad, headquartered in Jacksonville. Today, all remnants of the Clinchfield Railroad are gone. It is all just a section of CSX track. Gone, but definitely not forgotten.

One thing that is left, because it wasn't owned by the railroad, is the Clinchfield Credit Union. The building is made to look like a train depot, and was designed by, who else, my Dad. Dad was still a member of the board of directors when he died in 1999. The credit union will then play a large role in meeting my wife, Sandy. So don't go away. That story is yet to come.

## **Photos**



Dad, Gary Tysinger, and a summer intern, hard at work.

# The Jobs (not Steve)

*“Now in a large house there are not only gold and silver vessels, but also vessels of wood and earthenware, and some to honor and some to dishonor.” - 2 Timothy 2:20*

## **Pushing Planes, Pumping Petrol**

My first job ever, other than mowing our yard at home for fifty cents, was with Appalachian Flying Service at Tri Cities Airport in East Tennessee. This was where I was learning to fly in 1972, and seemed like a great place to start my career in aviation. And I was right. My job as a lineman was to marshal in general aviation aircraft when they arrived, park them, tow them into the hangar if needed, fuel them, wash them, and take care of a myriad of other tasks around the hangar. Hard work, but lots of fun for a high school kid with 100 octane aviation gasoline running through my veins. I worked weekends with two other guys, Mike Thompson and Randy Miller. Both of them lived near the airport. I had a 30 minute drive to get there from Erwin, and didn't have my own car, so Mom and Dad were left without wheels all weekend.

Of course, the new guy got some of the dirtiest jobs, and that was okay. Cleaning the bathrooms every night was probably the job I liked least. One of the good tasks was fueling the mail planes, which departed with bags of "Air Mail" every night, and were magically home the next morning. There were two Beechcraft model 18s that were parked in a corner. These were twin engine airplanes first developed in the 1940s. They had conventional

landing gear, meaning there were two main landing gear under the wings, and a small, swiveling wheel in the far back under the tail. The nose stuck way up in the air! The engines were radial, with the cylinders arranged in a circle. Big and round! And finally, the airplane had two tails attached to the ends of the horizontal stabilizer. Beautiful airplanes! But they looked like they hadn't been washed since they were built. Those radial engines, Pratt & Whitney 450s, burned oil like there was no tomorrow, leaving the upper wing with a coating of black oil aft of the exhaust pipes. What a mess! The fueling process went something like this. Pull the fuel truck up across the front of the plane. Stand up a ladder in front of the wing. Climb the ladder with the fuel hose over your shoulder and lean forward until the nozzle is in position to fuel the front tank. Then after fueling that tank, climb onto the wing and fuel the rear tank. Sometimes if the wing was oily enough, there was no way you could stay on the wing. I slid off the back many times, then climbed the ladder to retrieve the hose. And repeat the process for the other wing. Now the real fun begins. They burned gallons of oil every night, so rather than refill the engine with oil from cans, we had a tank, and a bucket with a nozzle that held about 3 gallons. Fill the bucket, climb the ladder, stand on the wing, and pour oil into the engine filler tube until full. Refill the bucket if needed.

And here is where I went off the rails for the first time on a job. It took so long to fill the bucket with oil, that we had a bent nail stashed away, and stuck the nail into the mechanism to hold open the valve on the oil tank. That was fine until we had a new guy, and the boss asked me to show him the ropes. After starting the bucket filling, we went into the hangar for a little tour. Of course, I totally forgot about the oil, and my bucket runneth over! And not just a little bit, when we got back to it, there were several gallons of oil on the ground. Dave Blevins was the man who hired me, and was the operations manager. I got my first closed door chewing out in Dave's office that day. Fortunately, he didn't fire me. Unfortunately, I watched him throw that nail as far as it would go, and then I had the privilege of cleaning up all that oil.

My brief career at the airport came to an end one wintry Friday night. It was well below freezing, and snow was blowing sideways. It was a night that nobody wanted to go outside. Good news, in that kind of weather, there

weren't any arrivals or departures. Then the phone rang. A customer wanted to travel the next morning, so Mike and I were going to move his airplane to the front of the hangar. The hangar held about 40 airplanes of all sizes, from 2-seat trainers to the small jet belonging to Mason Dixon Trucking, and had massive doors at the front and back. The airplane we were looking for was a small twin engine, and naturally, it was right in the middle of the hangar. And if that wasn't enough, the tail was interlocked with an airplane that was in the back of the hangar. This is a big no-no in hangar stacking land, and was accomplished by a new guy during the week. The only way to free the airplane from the bad job of parking was to remove all the airplanes in the back, then remove all the airplanes in the front, to disentangle the two in the middle.

Meanwhile, with both doors open, the wind and snow and cold were free to whoosh through the place. So, we spent hours dragging millions of dollars worth of airplanes out into the weather to correct one guy's super big error. After getting almost all of them back inside and properly located, the owner of the flying service stopped by. And exploded when he saw the hangar open at both ends. After all, customers pay good money to keep their airplanes inside, away from this kind of weather. He was totally right! But our situation was that we couldn't comply with a customer's request without exposing all the airplanes to the elements. Rock and a hard place. A very cold hard place.

The end result was we took care of the customer, reloaded the planes in the hangar, placed properly, and nearly froze to death in the process. We were rewarded with a total ass chewing by the boss. I "resigned" the next morning.

## **I Prefer a Little Blue with My Orange**

Immediately after high school graduation, I headed off to Nashville to start my first summer job, before going to Auburn in the fall. The company was Horne and Boatright Chemical Company, located in Birmingham. What this company did was to spray railroad tracks to kill weeds and brush that grew up into the railroad's telephone lines. Something you might not be aware of

is that all the railroads, at that time, had their own telephone systems, independent of the commercial services. This came about because the original telegraph systems ran the wires along railroad tracks, since there were few roads at the time. Once telephones became popular, the road system had built up, so telephone wires were run along roads. The old telegraph wires were turned into in-house telephone systems for the railroads. For most of my summer job, I was on a train spraying trees and other broad leaf brush that grew up into those phone lines.

Why in the world did I pick this as a summer job? It goes back about 10 years before that. As one of his many duties, my Dad was responsible for overseeing the weed and brush eradication for the Clinchfield Railroad. He got to know Doug Boatright, one of the partners in Horne and Boatright, and over the years, Doug became a family friend. Months before I graduated from high school, Doug called and offered me a summer job, and the pay was \$1.80 per hour! I couldn't say no to that, so off I went.

The spray train was an interesting assembly. In the front, we had an engine, of course. Next came 4 tank cars, each holding 10,000 gallons of the chemical to be applied. Then we had one tank car that held 8,000 gallons of the concentrated chemical. Next, we had our spray car, and finally a caboose (remember those?).

So, what, pray tell, was the chemical we were spraying? I'm glad you asked! It's proper name was 24D-245T-LV. Our soldiers in Vietnam called it Agent Orange, because they got it in 55 gallon drums that were painted bright orange. For a long time, we've known that Agent Orange is a major carcinogen, and it hasn't been made or used in probably 40 years. But at the time, we didn't know any better, and I offer as evidence that we didn't know, two of the 3 guys that were working along side of me were Doug Boatright's son and nephew. I knew the man, and he wouldn't have exposed any of us to that danger if he had known.

The spray car was a unique beast. It had started life as a plain old boxcar. Doors and platforms were added at each end to facilitate moving around the train. In the back end were two powerful automobile engines, to be used to pump the chemical out fire hoses. The primary engine was a Chrysler 440

Hemi, and man, could that thing put out some pressure! The other was smaller, and only used as a backup if the primary failed, which it never did. In the other end of the car was a diner booth, and space for us to throw our suitcases. Home sweet home!

The business end of this machine was on top, directly over the engines. We went up a ladder, and had a spacious, maybe 10x15 foot deck with a railing. Coming up from below were 2 firehoses, with nozzles that could literally put out a fire. Mounted on the railing was a throttle to control the engine.

What did we do with all that? We rolled down the track, with 1 of us manning the throttle, and 2 on the hoses, and the railroad representative keeping an eagle eye on things. When we came to an area that was growing up into the wires, we slowed to 8 MPH, shoved up the throttle, and unleashed 80 PSI of lethal tree killer out of both hoses. Our goal was to bend the tree over with the force of the water. We knew if you could do that, it was definitely dead. In fact, we backtracked through one area we had sprayed about 10 days earlier, and it was nothing but brown. Agent Orange might be harmful to humans, but it was downright deadly to broad leaf plants. And that created a problem.....

You see, we were working mostly in the south, and they grow tobacco in the south, and well, tobacco is a broad leaf plant, very broad. There are lots of tobacco patches near the railroad tracks, and you have to be darn careful not to spray them, or the company, and railroad, would be paying tens of thousands of dollars to farmers. Now you see why the railroad guy was with us on top of the car. One day, we were spraying under the lines and they went up a little hill. What we couldn't see was that there was a tobacco patch on the other side of the hill. Luckily we saw it just in time to shut down. On another occasion, we were met at the edge of a large tobacco farm by the farmer. No words were exchanged, none needed. He was sitting on the hood of his truck with a shotgun across his lap. We shut it down, and went below. He followed us to the other end of the field, and gave us a jaunty wave as we went on.

Doug always wanted his crews to eat well and have a decent place to stay at night. We had a lot of steaks for dinner, but the reality of being on the train

all day was that we usually had Beanie Weenies and Vienna Sausages for lunch, chased down with a warm Coke. Breakfast was good on those days when we had time, and on other days, please see the lunch menu for breakfast. And the decent places to stay? Well, they were good enough for me, but my Mom wouldn't have stayed at pretty much any of them.

We would spray each day until our 40,000 gallons of chemical were used up. Before going to dinner and the hotel, we would fill the tanks for the next day. That was an interesting exercise. We had a 20 gallon steel bucket that would fit in the top opening of the tank car. It had a spring loaded bottom that you opened by pulling a chain. We filled it with a hose that came out of the bottom of the tank car with the concentrated chemical. So, the routine was to stick the bucket in a tank car, fill it 10 times, emptying it as it got to the top, for a total of 200 gallons of concentrate in each car. Next, the railroad guys arranged for us to draw water from a fire hydrant in the railroad yard, and we filled each tank car to the top with water. The mixture was well stirred by the time 10,000 gallons of water was poured in through a fire hose.

Sometimes, the water pressure from the hydrant was so low that it took all night to fill them. Guess whose job it was to stay with the train and get them filled. Yep, me. Probably the lowest pressure we had was in the yard in Franklin, TN. I didn't get them filled until the other guys were coming back from the hotel in the morning. Then before we could get going, a warehouse caught on fire and the fire department showed up. The hydrants were on the opposite side of the tracks from the blaze, and they rolled hoses across in front of, and behind, our train, so we were stuck right where we were until the fire was out. That presented an excellent opportunity for me to crash in the caboose and get a couple hours of sleep. Life is such an adventure when we are young!

By the time the job was over, I had personally sprayed out over 1 million gallons of Agent Orange. Between the wind and the speed of the train, it seemed like most of that ended up on my clothes or in my mouth. And it was none too tasty! I kept one nice shirt and pair of pants in my suitcase, and the rest was for work. On my last day, before heading to the airport in Vincennes, IN to come home, I checked into a hotel for a hot shower and

change into my clean clothes. The stench of the chemicals coming from my suitcase was just too much. I went to the back of the hotel and threw the whole thing in their dumpster, then called a cab, went to the airport, and flew home.

I am somewhat surprised that after practically bathing in that stuff all day, every day, that in the ensuing 50 years, I have had no medical issues that can be traced back to it. I'm living a blessed life!

## **I've Been Working on the Railroad....Again**

After my freshman year at Auburn, they needed another guy on the surveying crew in the engineering department at the Clinchfield Railroad. My Dad recommended me. I got the job. Shh, don't tell the "fairness police", they don't really need to know. The chief engineer's son was working in engineering that summer, too.

The head of the crew was Bill Burton, a soft spoken country man. Now, Bill taught us a lesson about that. Just because a person is soft spoken, doesn't preclude them from being angry. In Bill's case, the angrier he got, the quieter he spoke. You really knew he was ready to take your head off when you could barely hear him speak, and had to lean in close to make out the words.

Next in our group was John Q. Treadway. He fancied himself..... well there you have it, nothing more to say. He was a very vocal Tennessee Vols fan, though he had never set foot in a college classroom. Whenever Bill wasn't around, John took charge. And yet, he turned out to be a hard worker when push came to shove, and a good guy.

My favorite, though, was Gary Chandler. Quiet, mild mannered, difficult to anger, and except for me, low man on the totem pole. Gary did anything he was asked to do. He became my friend.

Our job was to conduct any land surveying that needed to be done on the railroad. That basically meant 3 things. Traditional land surveying,

determining the boundaries of a piece of property and mapping it was the first, and the one we did the least. Running a track centerline, for example when a new spur line was going to be built to support a new customer, was the next. Finally, the one we did the most, was running cross sections for determining how much dirt would be needed for fill material in the new construction. Cross sections always meant I got to hone my machete skills, as well as my snake detection skills. That last one made me glad that I had a machete!

An example where we did all 3 was in Johnson City, TN, where a piece of land owned by the railroad was being sold to a food distributor, and a warehouse, with spur tracks running to both. The entire property would be cleared and graded at 2 levels for the two businesses. First task was the land survey. Bill and John operated the transit, while Gary marked corners with a nail and I manned the machete and the chain. Get this, the chain had no links. That was the name of a very accurate tape measure, made of a narrow but thick very long ribbon of steel. It had to be kept level and taut as it was stretched between the corners. Gary held the plumb bob for John to sight on with the transit, and Bill usually did the notes and mapping.

Once the land was surveyed and mapped, we went back and ran the track centerline. This was the easiest and most straightforward task.

Last, cross sections of the entire property were run to determine where and how much dirt would have to be moved to achieve the level plot of land needed to build the warehouses. Cross sections were done by going out perpendicular to the track centerline, with a tape measure to measure the horizontal distance from centerline, and a 12 foot tall fiberglass rod that was labeled in feet and inches. Gary would kneel on centerline and look through a scope with a built in level, while I held the rod vertical, with the bottom end placed on the ground. He would note the height and distance, then move to my location and repeat the process as I moved farther out. In this very labor intensive and time consuming manner, we were able to build a 3-dimensional picture of the land, from which we could compute pretty accurately the amount of fill dirt needed, or the amount that would need to be removed.

On one particular project for a spur track in Spartanburg, SC, I had the privilege of nearly chopping my leg off with the machete, and I was doing it on purpose! Here's how that came down. In the early summer, we spent a day surveying the centerline of the curving spur line, going to an as yet unbuilt warehouse. The vegetation was thick, about 5 feet high, and had some clover-like blooms. There were thousands of honey bees working the blooms. No worries. Honey bees are very docile, so they didn't mind sharing the space with me, even though I was hacking a wide swath through the bushes. They never bothered me, and I guess I must not have bothered them. Nice case of nature coexisting with man.

Later in the summer, we returned to do the cross sections. It was a miserably hot day. The blooms were gone. Should have clued me in, but I was focused on hacking lines perpendicular to the earlier one. I didn't pay any attention to the bees, since we had gotten along just fine on the first trip. When I felt the jab on my elbow, I assumed it was a thorn on a bush, and reached over to brush it away. That is when I noticed that it wasn't a thorn. It was a yellow jacket! And there were so many more on my jeans that instead of blue denim, I was looking at yellow and black, and they all had their stingers jammed into the fabric. At that point, I ran out of there screaming for help, all the while slapping the side of the machete on my legs trying to brush them off. By the time John and Gary came to my rescue, several had become entangled in my hair, and a bunch had flown up my pants legs and down my shirt. I have never so frantically beat, brushed, and tugged, and had others doing the same. There were literally hundreds of yellow jackets attacking me. And yet I survived. Wanna know how many times I was stung? Go ahead, guess. Okay I'll tell you. Exactly ONE. That's right. The one that got my attention was the only one that laid a stinger on me all day. Do you get the idea that maybe God had other plans for me that day? Yeah, me too.

One Friday afternoon, we were running cross sections for a new passing track on the side of a mountain in western NC. We were going to be late getting back to HQ in Erwin, so I was getting a little testy. That was back when I was young, impatient, and hadn't yet developed the professionalism to want to get the job done whatever it takes. Bill couldn't join us that day, so Gary Tysinger took his place. Gary T. was a civil engineer that worked

with my dad, and was a well known hard ass. He wasn't having any of my whining. The job would be finished, or we weren't leaving the mountain. And then it started raining. Hard. Now I was soaked and grumpy.

Remember when I told you about how the guy with the machete had to hack his way through the snaky brush and weeds, and that I was that guy? It turns out that this part of the mountains is very highly populated with rattlesnakes, copperheads, and in the wetter areas, water moccasins. Oh my! During a track building project my Dad supervised in that area a few years before, they killed or chased off over 120 snakes of those types. At one point late in the day, I was pretty far down the slope when I encountered fallen logs and brush so thick that I couldn't imagine there not being a nest of rattlers in there. And I would have to step over the logs, leaving my legs exposed before I could even see what was down there. Not me, dude! So I flat out refused to go any farther down the hill. Soon Gary T was yelling down at me. I yelled back, and finally told him how about if he took it from there. He came down, took one look at it, and said "I estimate that slope at 100 feet out and 25 feet down. Let's go home." Sometimes I still have nightmares about that snake infested mountain!

The rest of my summer was pretty uneventful. Do the job, learn some engineering, make some money for the upcoming school year. Nice!

## **Can't See the Forest for the Toilets**

It was 1976. I have absolutely no recollection of how I got connected with this job. It was with the US Forest Service, a part of the Department of Interior. What was this geeky engineer thinking?

The biggest part of the group was assigned to building logging roads deep in the mountains in western North Carolina. I was the only summer employee, and was assigned along with one other to maintenance of recreation areas. This entailed mowing grass, cleaning up around picnic tables, emptying trash cans, and the ever popular cleaning toilets. The toilets were of the outhouse variety, block buildings with toilet seats over concrete pits.

My first day on the job was the annual pumping out of the toilets. Fortunately, I didn't have to actively participate. That job fell on the operator of the "honey truck". I just had to take him around to all the toilets in Rock Creek Park, near Erwin, TN. I don't think my sense of smell has recovered yet.

For the most part, it was a ho-hum summer. I got to build some muscles when we spent 2 weeks putting fresh gravel around all the picnic areas in 3 parks. Naturally, the dump trucks couldn't get very close, so they dumped 11 tons of gravel in a central location, and the two of us had the privilege of hauling it to the picnic areas in wheelbarrows, and then spreading it. As I recall, we moved about 20 truckloads of gravel. Wish I still had those muscles today!

One day I had a temporary assignment to the road crew. We were all jammed in the back of the crew chief's pickup, which had a camper shell over it. No ventilation, and as we bumped our way up the mountain on the as-yet unimproved logging road, I took that opportunity to get rid of my breakfast. Luckily, I was sitting by the tailgate and was able to lean out of the truck. The rest of the day was great, and I moved a gazillion trees that the others cut down, but I was never asked to ride with them again.

Despite the less pleasant aspects of this job, I really enjoyed the summer out among the trees. And it paid for another year of flying. That was the best part!

## **Why Yes, I AM a Rocket Scientist**

The summer before my senior year at Auburn, I didn't really have plans, so I arranged to take a history class to get it out of the way, and picked up a job working with one of my professors, Dr. John Burkhalter, on a contract to analyze the aerodynamics of the tail fins on the US Army's Hawk missile. Using a mathematical technique called Gaussian quadrature I was given the task of writing a computer program to do the analysis. I spent all summer on that. And at the end of the project, I wrote a report documenting the

reason why that method did not work for this project (it couldn't handle the pressure singularity at the leading edge. TMI?). I think Doctor B knew that all along. No wonder government contracts can cost so much and deliver so little! On the other hand, it was a great learning experience, and refilled my bank account for the upcoming school year.

Years later, I was chatting with a restaurant owner whose business had dropped to just a few percent of normal due to a road construction project out front. One of the construction workers was eating dinner a few tables away. He took offense at our conversation, and spouted "You guys sure ain't no rocket scientists." My response was, "Well, actually...."

## Photos



Tug Driver, just one of my many skills!



Beech 18, same as the mail planes, only much cleaner.

# Rocket Cars and the Burning Bush

*“For wisdom will enter your heart and knowledge will be pleasant to your soul.” - Proverbs 2:10*

## **A Seed is Planted**

In the fall of 1973, I checked into Magnolia Dormitory at Auburn University to begin my freshman year. I had been away from home for my summer job with Doug Boatright's company, so the "away from home" aspect didn't weigh on me at all. But the first few hours were pretty lonely. It turned out I was the first to check in, so not only my hall, but the entire building was quiet as a church mouse.

And then as I walked down the hall again, the door was open at the other end of the hall, so I barged right in. I was greeted with the words "Hi. I'm Charlie and I am a normal heterosexual human being." Yeah, well, so am I, but that's not how people say hello where I'm from. "Hi, I'm Van, from the other end of the hall." He then introduced himself as Charlie Thomas. Now we're getting somewhere. Charlie explained that he was filling in the survey that we had to complete for the dorm administrator. There was a lot of psychological mumbo jumbo. You see, we were an experiment. The dorm administrator had a PhD in psychology, and wanted to find out if you separated a particular discipline of students into their own area of living space, would their grades, and general college experience be better, the same, or worse than the rest of the students, who were of mixed academic disciplines. We were collectively, the Engineering Division, occupying four floors in one leg of an L, and one floor at the top of the other leg. I was on that floor. Below us were 3 floors of temporary student government offices.

They would be there for a year, until the new student union building was completed, after which the second and third floors would join us. Most of the time, we coexisted peacefully, but for some reason, the student government liked things quiet, and of course, the engineers knew that nature abhors silence. They complained about us almost daily. That's how we knew we were doing it right!

So, with the awkward introduction suitably explained, Charlie and I spent the day having a good time getting to know each other, and, being the first ones there, as the rest of the guys on the hall trickled in throughout the day, they gravitated toward the increasingly loud gathering in Charlie's room. Eventually, we decided that a cookout in nearby Chewacla State Park would be a great way for the entire division to get acquainted. It turned out Charlie had done a stint in the US Army, and wasn't afraid to ask the higher ups for stuff, so he trotted off to the admin's office and explained how beneficial a "team building exercise" it would be if we could go on a cookout together. Pow! Just like that, we had all the food that 50 cheap freshmen engineers could eat. All we had to do was pick it up at the cafeteria and cook it. And so it was that we had the Great Get To Know You Cookout at Chewacla Park. We had a fine time, and surprisingly one of our geeky engineers arrived with a date! An engineer, and in less than one day on campus. And the most amazing thing was, they eventually got married and had long careers in the engineering world together. That was David Owen and Olivia. We never called him David after that night. You see, he was the spitting image of an Olympic swimmer named Mark Spitz, who was Michael Phelps before Michael Phelps was born. So from then on, it was Spitz and Olivia.

I won't try to introduce our entire rogue's gallery, being there were so many of us, but a few stand out. J.P. Martin, from Englewood, FL, was learning to play the guitar, and I spent many hours sitting on the steps coming up to our floor listening to him practice Led Zeppelin's "Stairway to Heaven". We remain friends to this day. Max von Shadow, a quirky mad scientist type, was a friend of J.P.'s from high school. I've long since forgotten his real last name, like many of the guys. There was Greg Hodges, son of an air traffic controller from Morrow, GA. He ended up with the nickname "Hooker". Don't ask why, because to tell the truth, I have absolutely no idea. Your

guess is as good as mine, I suppose. Greg's roommate is perhaps the most interesting subject of this story. Jim George was half Cheyenne Indian, from Graceville, FL, and as a physics major, our only resident that wasn't an engineering major. He didn't stay "Jim" for long, though. Due to his behavior much moreso than his heritage, and because we already had another Jim on the hall (J.P. Martin went by Jim at that time), Jim George became "Jungle", the de-facto leader of our rockets and explosives department. He was also a Navy ROTC student, and became a submarine commander after graduation, and making it up through the ranks, of course.

This brings us to the rather sensitive subject of the other Charlie. On that first night sitting around the campfire, when he introduced himself, we had a dilemma. How do we tell the two Charlies apart, other than actually looking at them? You see, it was easy to visually identify them, because one Charlie was white and the other was black. The other Charlie readily provided the solution. He said "Just call me Nigger Charlie". Even in 1973, that made some jaws drop! But since he was the one to suggest it, we all tried it out for that one night, and it just seemed right. So, for the next four years, within the dormitory, that's what we all called him, and nobody was offended or uncomfortable with it. Just try that today! Charlie was also in Navy ROTC, an excellent student, and one of the nicest guys in the Engineering Division.

And, of course, that leaves me. I have always been just Van. No nickname required.

In the coming weeks, we all settled down to the job we were there to do. That's right, we were on a quest to blow up the dorm, burn it to the ground, and then pour water over it, just for good measure. Led by Jungle, a handful of us on our hall got into the fun of building model rockets. Now, don't expect us to actually go out and buy model rocket kits and build them. No, we did it the old fashioned way. We bought model rocket *engines* and then got creative with what we did with them. At first, we'd make rocket tubes by rolling 3x5 index cards around the rocket engines, add some fins cut out of index cards, and make a cone for the top. Voila, in just a few minutes we had a rocket ready to go. We used a very sophisticated rocket launching system. One of us would hold the rocket at arm's length, and the builder

would stick a lighted match under the engine and hope it ignited before the match burnt out. Then whoosh, off it went in some random direction until it crashed, and we waited for the puff of smoke when it was exhausted. You might be thinking that would only be fun for about one afternoon, especially if we were creative engineer types, and you'd be right.

## **Phase 2 - Go Big!**

But what would be phase 2 of our rocketry attempts? Well, bigger engines of course. It only seems right. We were guys, after all. So the next thing we tried was to just jump to the biggest engine the hobby shop had in stock. Now, those would go off, screaming like a banshee, and if we did a good job positioning the fins, they'd go so far that we'd never find them again. That was the mark of a successful launch! Well, you know that little puff of smoke I mentioned that signaled the end of the rocket burn? That comes out of the other end of the engine, and is normally used to pop out a parachute for recovery, or ignite a second stage engine for a multi-stage rocket. We had no need of such sophistication. We decided it would be a good idea to use that puff to ignite the fuse on a firecracker. Very satisfying, indeed! The addition of munitions made for a lot of whooping and hollering amongst those of us out in the field, or sometimes parking lot if one was empty enough to use. The explosions near the dorm, however, drew the attention of "people in charge", who came out and gave us a stern talking to. But not before Jungle launched the piece de resistance, a big D-sized engine with a Cherry Bomb as the payload. We failed as engineers on that one, because the payload was just too much weight for the thrust. When the engine lit, it simply hovered right there, not going up, not going down. We scattered, because well, nobody wants to have a Cherry Bomb go off right in his face. That was the loudest boom I had heard since my brother and sister played the 1812 Overture in the Marion High School Band in 1962. Deafening.

So the rocketeers from our hall went back to the drawing board. It turned out we were all model builders in our youth, and had an assortment of cars and aircraft models that could be enhanced, yes that's a good word for it, enhanced with the addition of rocket engines. First up was a model Ford Mustang that Charlie's roommate, Bobby, had built. We put a small engine

in it and it went halfway down the hall. A bigger engine yielded better results, sending it careening off the walls until it met its demise with a crash and a cloud of little plastic parts. I had a 2 foot long model of one of the rocket cars that held the world speed record at Bonneville Salt Flats in California. It was big, and it was heavy. Perfect! We loaded it with a medium-sized engine and lit it. A loud whoosh expended all the rocket fuel, and as the engine went kaput, the car slowly rolled about 3 feet and came to a stop. After the laughter died down, Jungle came up with the solution, the biggest engine we had in the house, of course. J.P. Martin's room was the second one on the hall. He was watching from the safety of his room, with the door opened just enough for him to stick his head out. Jungle lit the rocket. We heard a whoosh, big one this time. J.P. slammed his door. The car had vanished! J.P. immediately opened the door and came out. His pants were on fire. That was a little too much thrust the second time around. By the time he could close the door just 8 inches, that car had covered the 10 feet to get to him, and hurtling through the gap, had hit his foot, and followed his leg upward, then over his shoulder and into the top of his closet, whereupon it was smashed to pieces. Now, my friends, is that a good time or what?

Later experiments were conducted in a parking lot on Sunday morning when there were no cars around. We fashioned guides that were attached under the cars, and they were put on a 50 foot long string, which was nailed to the pavement at each end. Of course, whenever a large engine was used, the guide promptly cut the string, and we had a rocket car to chase down. We finally gave up on the cars altogether once we had destroyed all the models that we had.

What to do next? Well, Jungle was studying submarines in ROTC, so a rocket powered sub was just crying out to be built. We stopped up the drain in the community shower, and created a pool of water about 8 inches deep, and ten by ten feet square. This was just a test, mind you. Bigger pools were in our future. Jungle lit the engine, holding the sub in a large tube with the other end submerged. The rest of our motley crew of rocketeers stood in the entry to the showers. With the usual whoosh, the sub flew through the tube, into the water, then right back out of the water, circled the room once at about eye level, and flew past our heads as we turned to escape. It moved

way faster than we ever could, and was out of the shower area before we could even begin to move. Yep, our man Jungle invented the rocket powered flying submarine! And in 1974. Who knew such technology existed?

## **We were way ahead of the Burning Man Festival**

One last adventure awaited. Jungle had made an X-15 model, and it was destined to fly. There was a window at the end of the hallway by the door to my room. It overlooked the building entrance four floors below. There was a construction site across the street for the new pharmacy building, so we guessed it would end up there. Jungle lit the big D-sized engine on the X-15. It left his hand in the usual way, with a whoosh. The model flew forward about 5 feet before turning straight down. It landed in a bush by the entrance to the building. The engine had a few more seconds to burn, during which time the bush was set on fire. Jungle grabbed a water-based fire extinguisher, as old as the building we lived in, and raced down the stairs. I followed closely, with the rest of the gang right behind. I stopped at the second floor, and went out the window and sat on the roof over the entrance to watch. One of the people from the Student Government followed me, a grad student from India that we had encountered a number of times in the past. As we watched the billowing smoke, and Jungle's futile efforts at firefighting with that old extinguisher, Azim pretty well summed it all up when he said "Eet was sooch a pretty boosh". And that was the end of our rogue model rocketry days.

And as for our grades and college experience? We never answered another survey, but most of our original residents graduated, and I would rate our experience as Dyn-O-Mite!

# War Eagle Flying Team

*“Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves“ - Philippians 2:3*

## The Early Days

While I was in high school, I learned to fly. And I read every aviation magazine available. In one of them, was the story of something called the National Intercollegiate Flying Association, NIFA. They consist of teams from colleges all over America who compete at both the regional and national level in precision flying events, such as precision landings on a line across the runway, cross country precision navigation, timing, and fuel consumption, and dropping a message on a target. There were also flight planning events, such as aircraft recognition, E-6B computer accuracy, instrument flight simulator flying, and aircraft preflight. All of that kind of appealed to me. Then I saw that Auburn had a team. That was one of my finalists for where I wanted to go to school. The team had the money stolen that they had raised to make the trip to nationals that year, so only one pilot, Bob Warner, was able to make the trip, and was featured in the article.

I ended up selecting Auburn. It really wasn't close, between Auburn, University of Tennessee, and Embry Riddle Aeronautical University. I wasted no time in seeking out the flying team. I discovered that it was a part of Auburn's chapter of Alpha Eta Rho professional aviation fraternity. So off I went to a meeting of AHP, as it's abbreviated. I arrived early, as I usually do, and the next guy to show was a sophomore named Al Shanks.

Al took me under his wing and from then on, I had a pal. He sponsored my membership, and when the time came, initiated me into the fraternity.

Al was a member of the flying team, too, so he helped me get to know the right people. And of course the now extremely famous Bob Warner was there. Bob, along with some of the more experienced pilots, like Eric Stroberg, Gerald Grady, Brian Allen, Dennis Wright, and Debby Clark, helped me transition from a pilot to a precision pilot.

Perhaps I should answer a burning question here. How could a bunch of mostly broke college students afford to compete in flying events? Answer, we couldn't. So we had to do fundraising pretty much all the time. No bake sales or car washes for us though. We had two other sources of funding.

First was Auburn home football games. We ran a shuttle from the airport to the stadium (and back after the games) using our own cars. We accepted donations, and most of our riders were very generous. We had a lot of repeat customers from year to year, and developed some friendships along the way.

Our other fundraiser was running one of the concession stands in the coliseum, for basketball games and concerts. We shared revenues with our parent organization, Alpha Eta Rho. Jack Kennedy, one of our advisors, had the connection with the athletic department, and as we proved our ability to operate the stand, and our cash revenues always matched the amount of products sold, we got moved to the most profitable stand of the four in the facility. It was a lot of work, but was rewarding in more ways than just the funding. Except for game halftimes and concert intermissions, we had a lot of slack time. So we got to see some great basketball, and lots of great music groups. One of my favorites was Jim Stafford. He wasn't one of the big acts, but he opened for a number of other groups. We would always go out by the railing during sound checks, and he would make up songs about "the people in the back".

We made enough money from our 2 fundraisers to pay our expenses to travel to, and compete in, the regional and national airmeets. Practice, however, was on our own dime.

## Competition Time!

My first competition was the 1975 southeast regional airmeet hosted by Florida Institute of Technology in Melbourne, FL. In the olden days, we called them airmeets. Today, they are called Safecons, for Safety and Evaluation Conference. I like airmeet better. Just sayin'. I only competed in aircraft recognition and computer accuracy in this one, and didn't finish in the top group, but I learned how to do it, and never went home without a trophy in one of those two events again. Unfortunately, Auburn didn't finish high enough to compete in the national airmeet. I didn't want that to happen again.

I began working on my piloting skills, especially power off and power on spot landings. I also worked on aircraft recognition by buying a copy of the 1976 Jane's All the World's Aircraft. I studied the thousands of airplanes in that book, reading it and quizzing myself on the pictures every night during the summer.

When school started, I campaigned for the flying team captain job, and was voted in. I was also voted in as vice president of Alpha Eta Rho. For the flying team, I began working on training pilots for the various events, having someone responsible for each event. If we wanted to actually win airmeets, we needed to get organized!

That fall, the southeast regional was hosted by Auburn. As team captain I had a lot of responsibility. In addition to the overall planning, I had the job of making the schedule, coordinating with the FAA, and briefing the pilots. The hard part of scheduling is working in the cross country navigation event. In that one, the pilot flies a triangle of 50-100 miles length, with a judge riding with them. Both people and airplanes have to be scheduled and coordinated with other events. After all the scheduling work, we woke up on Saturday morning, and the weather was, as we say in professional aviation circles, "stinko". We kept getting updates all day long, but the weather never lifted enough to fly. We did all the ground events, and had a nice awards banquet that night, only giving out the ground event trophies. I

won a trophy for computer accuracy and one for aircraft recognition. In the morning, the weather was much better, and our friendly FAA inspector gave us the okay to fly. We canceled the navigation event and flew both spot landing events as well as message drop. We had a quick briefing at the airport and went flying. We gave out the trophies on the airport ramp, and everybody climbed in their planes and went home. It was a valiant effort, but we finished in fourth place, behind Embry Riddle in Daytona. No trip to the nationals at Oklahoma State in the spring. Very disappointing!

My best friend at the time was John Regan. If you wanted one of us, just look for the other. We kept on practicing and developing training ideas for next year. Then one day about 2 weeks before nationals, I got a phone call from Hoyt Walkup, the team advisor for the Oklahoma State team. He was calling to invite Auburn to compete in the nationals, because Embry Riddle had disbanded their team. Wow! I was so shocked that I asked him to repeat it, which he did. With that, I had gone to my last class until we came home from Stillwater. I called John, and we got to work. We found out we could rent a Cessna 150 for the airmeet, so we borrowed our friend Steve Christensen's 150 to practice with. If we weren't at the airport, we were at John's apartment making the balsa containers for the message drop. John and I would be the only ones flying, and we would forego the navigation event. Haden Swift and Ellen King went with us. They dropped the messages and did a good job despite very little time to practice. John and I did all the ground events too.

We flew to Stillwater, OK in the school's Piper Navajo. Steve Carter, school transportation pilot, flew the Navajo, but he let us all take turns flying from the copilot seat. So really, we flew it and Steve made the landings. Gary Kately, our team advisor and Auburn airport manager was also with us.

The first order of business was the annual NIFA meeting, with team captains and advisors. One item of business was whether or not Auburn was eligible to compete. I was aghast! You mean after all that prep work we did and the expense of getting there, we might not get to compete? Yep. Hoyt Walkup backed me up when I told them our story. When they learned only two of us were flying, and we were not competing in the navigation event, and had each flown 20 hours in the same type airplane to practice, the

advisor for the University of Michigan pushed through the vote to let us compete. As soon as we were approved, John and I excused ourselves and bolted from the room and went to the airport to get checked out in the airplane. That was a rather perfunctory couple of landings, and we were good to go.

That night, we had ground events. I was told that I was tied with another contestant in aircraft recognition, so we had a tie breaker the next day. After battling for around 10 airplanes, I won the tie breaker on the Beechcraft model 76, which had not yet been put into production. That earned me second place in that event.

In the morning, it was go time. John and I flew in all 3 events that day. As I was tying down the airplane at the end of the day, I watched the sky. Green clouds were approaching, a sign of violent weather. As they passed overhead, I looked up. The bottom of the cloud began to roll, looking like a horizontal tornado. Well, actually that's what it was. It rolled for a minute or more, then began rotating to vertical. I thought a tornado was going to drop out of that cloud on my head, and take me to the Land of Oz, or wherever people go when they are lifted in the air and shredded. Luckily, it spun around briefly and rolled back up in the cloud. Thank you Lord!

The awards banquet that night was interrupted by a trip to the building's basement until a tornado passed us by. Word was, it was on the ground up to the airport property, and then lifted up until it passed the airport, before touching down again. The warning behind us, we went up and got our trophies, and heard our guest speaker, Gregory "Pappy" Boyington, the leader of the squadron of Marine pilots known as the Black Sheep in WWII. After the banquet, we partied with some pilots from University of North Dakota. Next day, we flew home, and everybody was hung over but Steve Carter and Gary Kitley. We learned a lot from this one, and put that knowledge to work for the next year.

**Killed it!**

In the fall of 1977, I was elected president of Alpha Eta Rho. John Regan was elected as my vice president. The group didn't want the same guy (me) to be over both organizations, so John became flying team captain, and I was his unofficial sidekick. This was my senior year, and I wanted to win our airmeets, and establish practices and procedures that would endure after I was gone.

We instituted a flying team practice every Sunday afternoon. And just to add a little excitement, I rewrote the Auburn fight song, turning it into the flying team fight song.

*War eagle fly down the field  
Land on the line with both of your wheels  
War eagle fearless and true  
Let's drop a bomb or two  
Go go go  
On cross country  
Find your checkpoints  
Hit your time  
Hit your fuel  
Come back and land  
Hey!  
War Eagle Flying Team  
The power of Dixie Land*

Now we are cooking with gas. In the summer, I had written a book on use of the E-6B flight computer, with a bias toward the types of problems we saw on the competition tests. Armed with that, I taught a short class every week on E-6B use. Different team members taught classes every week in their selected event, becoming more proficient in that event themselves. Our "big idea" was that the flying events could be won or lost with a gust of wind, but the ground events were all about skill and knowledge. If we could win nearly every position where we competed in ground events, we would amass so many points that we could win the airmeet, even if we had only a fair showing in the flying events.

That year, the University of South Alabama, new to the NIFA scene, was selected to host the regional airmeet. The only problem was, they had never competed before, and had few clues how to host the airmeet. Their advisor called ours, and I volunteered to be their airmeet consultant. I made several trips to Mobile where I met with the students and faculty that were tasked with hosting the event. We made a huge amount of progress in these meetings, and I felt confident they would do a good job.

The regional airmeet was in early spring of 1978. I went down to Mobile 2 days early to help with the last minute preparations. They had done a great job, and I didn't have a lot to do. The contest was held at Brookley Airport, a former military airport, where Continental Motors, a manufacturer of aircraft engines, was located. We stayed in the former visiting officers' quarters. Nice, and free, a college student's favorite words.

The rest of the team arrived on Friday afternoon, and we set about getting our game faces on. The ground events kicked off that night, with aircraft recognition and computer accuracy.

On Saturday, it was a potentially stormy day, with clouds above us, and a strong wind blowing. We were confident in our skills, and the conditions favored the most skilled. The landings were first. I had focused my practice on power on landings. I did well, but we had to wait until the banquet to see the results.

On the message drop, I flew both of our contestants, Haden Swift and Greg Rains. The wind was tricky, strong from the left up high and almost calm down low. Haden and Greg watched a few drops before we had to saddle up for our heats. They figured out the wind, and where they needed to drop. At this airmeet, they had set up two targets beside the taxiway, about 3,000 feet apart. So, both drops were on the same pass. The message containers were hollowed out balsa blocks, with a cork in the hole and a trailing ribbon. They were very light weight and had no ballistic flight path. As soon as they were dropped, they moved with the wind as they fell.

I took off with Haden, and flew the traffic pattern aggressively, turning final in a 90 degree bank, while descending to 200 feet above the ground. I

snapped the wings level as Haden opened her window and leaned out into the airflow, the message tight in her hand against the side of the airplane. Her left hand was on the instrument panel, thumb up, giving me guidance to move left or right. First message away! I slipped the airplane by stomping right rudder and lowering the left wing, so that she could look behind us to see where the first one went. Then we quickly lined up for the second drop. Again, she perfectly executed it. Close the window and climb to pattern altitude to prepare for the landing. I dropped Haden off and picked up Greg. Off we went for an almost identical run. The one difference? When Greg pulled his arm in, his flying team jacket sleeve was totally shredded from the airflow. We laughed hysterically all the way around the traffic pattern.

In the middle of Allison Reynolds' landing event, a vicious storm suddenly appeared and was moving across the field. The tower had to get everyone down safely, and in a hurry. The airplane in front of her was slow to get off the runway. The controller cleared Allison for any option. She couldn't go around, because by the time she could get around for another landing, the storm would cover the runway. She could try to make a low altitude turn to a crossing runway. Or the last option, which she chose. She flew just over top of the airplane on the runway, landed just past that airplane, and got it stopped before the end of the runway. The rain was coming down hard by the time she taxied in. That ended flying for the day. All that's left is the awards banquet.

Well, there's no way to downplay it. War Eagle Flying Team killed it. Four of our five contestants in computer accuracy were in the top five. I took home first place trophies for aircraft recognition, computer accuracy, and flight simulator, in the ground events, and power on landing in the flying events. Haden and Greg were on top in the message drop. Allison won Top Female Pilot, and I won Top Male Pilot. In addition, we won the safety award, in large part because of Allison's quick thinking and safe landing in an emergency situation. And as you might imagine, we went home with the team trophy.

The following morning, Harold Wood, the national executive director of NIFA, a man we all liked and respected, surprised me by asking me to fly him over to Bates Field, Mobile's airline airport, so that he could catch his

flight home. I had always enjoyed conversations with Harold, and was pleased that he had asked me to fly him.

The approach that John and I had developed had worked! Our hope was that we would be able to keep it going. The national airmeet was coming up in May. Let's see what happens there.

## **78 is not just a number on your turntable**

The nationals were held that year at Smyrna, TN, hosted by Middle Tennessee State University. This time, we had easily qualified with our decisive win at the regionals. There were two "big guns" in NIFA that were the teams to beat, Southern Illinois University and the University of North Dakota. They were in our crosshairs.

I flew up with Steve Conn in our American AA-1B Trainer. We only planned to use it for the navigation event, and rent a Cessna 150 for the rest. The team arrived and assembled.

That evening we had the usual first two events, aircraft recognition and computer accuracy. In an unexpected move, after aircraft recognition, the judge took the time to go back through the 50 slides of aircraft photos and give us the 3 pieces of information that we had to provide on the test, namely manufacturer, model number, and name. For example, Cessna 172 Skyhawk. As he went through the slides, I got more and more excited. After he showed the last slide, I let out a whoop. Perfect score! All the hours of practice had paid off. We're off to a good start.

Computer accuracy didn't go well for me. Tough test, and I didn't finish in the top five. But one of my proteges aced it and finished in first place.

At the nationals, we didn't have quite the opportunity to sweep ground events that we had at regionals, but two first places helped a lot.

Next morning, I drew first airplane in the first heat of power off landings. I had focused all my flying efforts on this event, and had a great technique

that put me near the line almost every time. My parents, along with Allison's, were there to watch, and they had made a spectator area near the target line. It was dead calm as I came in for the first of 3 landings. First one was practice, and the other two counted. Conditions were perfect. I touched down on the line, which was temporary and made of lime spread across the runway. Perfect! Next time around it seemed the same, but I touched down about 5 feet past the line. Go around for number three. Approach looks good till the end, and it wanted to float down the runway, a sign of a little tailwind. I put it down about 75 feet long. It was a firm landing, worthy of point deductions. Still, I thought it would be good for a top 10 finish. Power off landings are the more difficult of the two, and most contestants are disqualified for landing over 200 feet past the line, or 100 feet short. The tailwind was too high to continue, so they switched runway ends for the rest of the landings, but those of us that landed downwind did not get a Mulligan.

The day went well, but not super. I ran into the judge for aircraft recognition. I couldn't come out and ask him if I had won, so I asked if there were any ties in the top 5. Nope. Yay!!

Time for the awards banquet and scores. As the trophies were handed out one thing became quickly obvious. We were experiencing a parity, a level playing field where all 25 schools that competed were winning events or placing high. This was anybody's game. We anxiously awaited the grand finale, the team champions. It went to Southern Illinois. In second place was North Dakota. Third place was Auburn. Because of the quality competition from all 25 teams, point totals were low. UND was 9 behind SIU, and we were 1 behind UND. A single first place in a flying event, worth 10 points, would have turned it on its head. Good airmeet, satisfactory results. Auburn had never finished that well at regionals or nationals.

## **Once More Into the Breach**

A few weeks after nationals, I graduated, and went to work at Boeing. After a year, Jim Ward and I left the Lazy B Ranch and came to Auburn for an

MBA. The first thing I did was introduce him to Alpha Eta Rho and the flying team. While I wasn't the guy in charge, it was time to get to work.

Debbie Youngert was captain, and was receptive to my approach to preparation. That year, Auburn was hosting the regional event. This time I had no responsibilities in planning and execution of the airmeet. That meant I could spend my team time on training. And that paid off. I was fortunate enough to win several events, and took home the Top Pilot trophy. Auburn won the team trophy again.

Next spring, we were off to North Dakota for the nationals in Grand Forks, ND. We were prepped for the ground events like never before. My focus was computer accuracy. I even coached the others in the event on a problem that was taught in a book that required a different style of computer. I correctly guessed that if they used that type of problem on our test, they wouldn't understand it well enough to design their own problem, and would just copy one from that book. So we memorized the questions and answers, and one of them was on the test. Gotcha!

When the judges graded the computer accuracy tests, Allison was helping score the tests because she had been appointed to a student position with NIFA. After they were finished, one of the judges said "Hey, I have one with a perfect score!" Allison didn't bat an eye, "Van Swofford?" "Yes, how did you know?" I enjoyed receiving that trophy more than most.

The team did very well in ground events, and won the trophy for ground event champions. We finished in seventh place overall. We did our best and got a great result.

The NIFA and War Eagle Flying Team were so good to me, and good for me. I learned to lead, even if I wasn't the leader. I learned to work hard, and smart, and expect to see good results from that work. And I learned that even if you do everything right, you might just lose out to someone else who worked a little harder. Most of all, I met some wonderful people who have been great friends and aviation contacts.

**WAR EAGLE!!!**

## Photos



Leigh (Pinkston) Kelly, John Regan, Randy Kelly, Van, at Alpha Eta Rho initiation in 1976.



Van in vertigo chair at Columbus AFB, MS, 1976. This can throw you off so badly, that after being rotated very slowly with my ear down on the bar and eyes open, he stopped me and asked me to sit up and read the big clock on the wall. I thought he had turned the chair over! After about 30 seconds, I said "Looks like about 3:15".



Van, Allison (Reynolds) Ward, Steve Conn, 1978 NIFA nationals in Smyrna, Tennessee.



Harold Wood, NIFA Executive Director, and Van, at 1976 regionals in Auburn, Alabama.



Victorious! The whole team after 1977 regionals in Mobile, Alabama.



Jack Kennedy, Alan Lowrey, Van, and Tad Davis at 1978 nationals. I won aircraft recognition and Tad won computer accuracy.



Mom and Jack Kennedy at 1978 NIFA nationals, Smyrna, Tennessee.



Allison (Reynolds) Ward and parents, Gordon and Marilyn Reynolds, 1978 NIFA nationals.



Touchdown, just past the line, 1978 nationals in Smyrna, Tennessee.



Jim Ward and Van, 1980 nationals in Grand Forks, North Dakota, prior to winning computer accuracy and aircraft recognition.



Van with trophies at 1980 nationals in Grand Forks, ND. That is my pet tarantula, Arnold, on my shoulder. He was our team mascot for that airmeet.



All the trophies lose their shine, but the good friends and good times endure.



The Great M'GooRoo makes his first stealthy appearance at a weekend competition with Georgia Tech, at a neutral airport, LaGrange, Georgia, 1978. Gotta get a bigger bush!



Auburn graduation, June 1978. In front of me in line is Walt Rutledge, smartest man I know and father of the US Hypersonic Missile Program.

# My People

***“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” - Genesis 1:1***

In every life, there are people who teach, influence, encourage, direct, and provide an example to follow. I am pleased to have a number of these people who at various stages of my life, have chosen to be a part of my life. I have been blessed and enriched by each of these. This is by no means a complete list of those who have been important in my life, but is a good sample.

## **Aunt Kitty, Uncle White, and Johnnie**

Aunt Kitty, Catherine on her birth certificate, was my Mother's half sister, and was 15 years older than Mom. She and her husband White lived in Hendersonville, NC, about 75 miles from Erwin, and a little closer to Marion when we lived there. She was a third grade teacher in Hendersonville.

Uncle White was a salesman at a chemical company, as well as a former minor league baseball player. Like many athletes, he was accustomed to having his last name shouted at him, and so that's what everybody called him. By the time we became acquainted when I was very young, he walked with a cane. He had arthritis, the crippling kind, and his hands were already beginning to curl up. But he was a very kind man, and we made a connection early on. He liked to sneak up behind me and hook me around the neck with the top of his cane. That always sent me into uncontrollable laughing.

We always got together for Thanksgiving and Christmas. When we went to their house for Christmas, I couldn't understand how Santa Claus could find us, but he did.

After a few years, Uncle White was in a wheelchair. His hands were so gnarly from the arthritis, they were nearly useless. And he had developed a case of narcolepsy. It was pretty amusing for us kids to be talking to him, and he would fall asleep in mid-sentence. But the real fun was when he woke up 30 minutes later and finished the sentence, only to find that nobody was there except me. Then he'd laugh and say "I did it again, didn't I?"

Uncle White passed away by the time I was in high school. I loved that old crippled man. That was one family death that was hard on me.

A couple years later, Aunt Kitty married an old family friend named Johnnie Groome. Johnnie played golf, like Aunt Kitty, so that gave them something to do in retirement. Johnnie was a Cadillac salesman, and that was the only car he would drive. He was Italian, and a very good man. When we met, he looked at me and said "Van, just call me Johnnie." And that's how it was. Johnnie was Catholic, and when he died a few years later, I escorted Aunt Kitty through the service.

Aunt Kitty got really sick when she was about 80. I don't think they ever knew what it was, but she survived. I saw her in the hospital. She was down to 80 pounds and looked pitiful. She told Dad and me that she didn't want to live any longer. But she did.

She regained strength and was living a pretty normal life. She sold the house and moved into an assisted living facility. And then she got gangrene in one leg and they had to remove it. Once again she flourished for a while. Now bound to a wheelchair, her sight and hearing were slowly failing.

Then the dementia set in. Dad told me that once she told him a guy went galloping down the hall on a horse, and it was so noisy she couldn't sleep. After Dad died, Bill, Janie, and I tried to visit as much as we could.

One day, I stopped in to see her. She told me about the doctor that lived across the street from her room. Now, understand that her room was on the first floor, with the windowsill about 3 feet off the ground. Across from her was another wing of the building she lived in. Between was a nice courtyard, with a tree in the middle. While we were sitting, looking out the window, she said “There, did you see that? He lands his plane on the street! And he keeps it in his garage. Close the blinds! Hurry! He’s coming across the street with his ladder. He’ll put it up against my house and climb up and try to get in my window.” So I closed the blinds. A few minutes later, she said “Who keeps coming in here and closing my blinds? It’s too dark in here! Open the blinds!” She thought I had been killed in a plane crash, and that the person visiting was my son Van, who does not exist. As I started to leave, I bent over to kiss her cheek. She grabbed my face and planted a long kiss on my lips and said “You’re not nearly as good a kisser as your Dad!” I laughed all the way to the car. You just can’t get good entertainment like that every day.

Janie, Bill, and I decided to take her out for dinner for her 93rd birthday. She was frail, but we managed to help her into Bill’s car and took her to a steakhouse for dinner. As we were talking, she told us about a motorcycle group that came to a rally in town, and one of them came by their facility and gave anybody that wanted it, a ride on his motorcycle, and she went for a ride! We looked at each other and rolled our eyes. Later, back in her room, while digging through a drawer looking for something, she came across a photo and just handed it to me. There she was, on the back of a Harley, holding on to the driver, with a helmet that was as wide as her shoulders (remember Dark Helmet in the movie Spaceballs?), and a big smile on her face. That’s how I want to remember her. May you rest in peace Aunt Kitty.

## **Jack Kennedy**

Dr. John S. Kennedy was a professor in the Aviation Management Department at Auburn University, with his PhD in Physiology. Why? Well, he was interested in it at the time. He was a Penn State grad, and flew helicopters in Vietnam. He was all Army, and all Auburn. In a place where

people are just so proud of their doctorates, I never once heard him refer to himself as Doctor Kennedy. He was just Jack.

I didn't have any classes with Jack, because I was in the Aerospace Engineering program, but the library that served both programs was next to his office, and most of my friends were in the Aviation Management program, so we all hung out in the AM Library, and had lots of interaction with Jack. He was also an advisor to Alpha Eta Rho professional aviation fraternity. Jack and I hit it off right away. He was divorced, and lived in a small duplex near campus with a black Labrador named Sandy. Both during my undergrad days and my time as a graduate student, Jack was my go to guy for advice, both professional and personal. And beer. He was always up for a little talk, a ballgame on TV, and a beer. And all the while, Sandy (the dog) would put her chin on my knee and look up at me with those big eyes that said "pet me please", and so I did. Then after we parted, my eyes would swell shut because I was really allergic to Sandy.

After I went back to work after grad school, Jack remarried Joan, and when they retired, bought a house on the coast of Maine. I visited with them there twice before Jack passed away. My life is so much better for having known him.

## **Colonel Harold Decker**

Colonel Harold Decker was also an Aviation Management professor, and advisor to Alpha Eta Rho.

He flew P-38s in WWII, in North Africa. That is, until the Germans shot him down. There he was, standing in the desert sand with his parachute at his feet, when along came a Feisler Storch, the German equivalent to the American Cessna Bird Dog. It landed in the sand, having big tires so it could do that, then it stopped by him and the pilot stuck a machine gun out the door, inviting him to climb in. Invitations like that are not refused. He was taken to their fighter base, where he stayed a few days.

He spoke fluent German and got to know the pilots, and was invited to sit in the cockpit of a Messerschmitt Me-109. It was decided that he would be sent to a prisoner of war camp in Germany. He was picked up by a Junkers Ju-52 trimotor for the trip across the Med and Europe. Since he was such buddies with the pilots in that squadron, they let him fly the Junkers all the way to Germany!

His prison camp was the one where there was a massive escape, the story being told in the movie *The Great Escape*. Because he spoke fluent German, he became the radio man. They had smuggled in a radio that was made to fit in a cigarette carton. It had a battery that was the same size. The guys in the barracks practiced putting up the wire antenna and then taking it down and hiding it in seconds. They were never caught. Col. Decker did not escape with the others and continued his job until the end of the war.

When I was at Auburn, Col. Decker still had the radio and battery pack. Alpha Eta Rho had frequent parties at his house, and it only took one beer to get him telling stories. After the second beer, he'd say okay, get out the radio, and we'd string the antenna wire around the ceiling, using hooks he had put up for that purpose. Then he would connect the wires and turn it on. We heard broadcasts in I don't know how many different languages. That was a real privilege! His radio is now on display in the US Air Force Museum at Wright-Patterson AFB in Dayton, OH.

Col. Decker was the consummate gentleman fighter pilot, including the pencil thin mustache. It was a pleasure to have known him, and his wife Lura Ann.

## **War Eagle Flyers**

Steve Conn came to Auburn after being a Navy air traffic controller in Keflavik, Iceland. He enrolled in Aviation Management, and joined Alpha Eta Rho and the War Eagle Flying Team. Both groups very quickly assimilated new members, so we became fast friends.

One of the things the flying team did to raise money, was to meet airplanes that flew into the Auburn airport for football games, and if they needed a ride to the stadium, we would take them and bring them back, for donations. One day, Steve and I met a Piper Arrow, and the couple that got out of it were just joyful to be there. Then the wife told us that next year their daughter was coming to Auburn, and we needed to keep our eyes open for her. We did, and a year later, Haden Swift arrived at our first fraternity meeting, along with her new best friend at Auburn, Allison Reynolds.

Of all the people who were in Alpha Eta Rho and War Eagle Flying Team, these three have remained a part of my life until today, and beyond, I hope.

Steve and another friend, John Regan, joined me in buying our first airplane just before my senior year. It was a two seat American Trainer. Cheap to buy and operate, it was perfect for 3 broke college kids. I later worked with Steve for years at Gulfstream, traveled to Switzerland with him, went to airshows and Disney World with him many times, and he was a wonderful best man at my wedding to Sandy.

Allison is not only a friend, but also a pilot. She was Top Female Pilot at the 1977 Southeast Regional flying competition. When I returned to Auburn for graduate school with Jim Ward, Jim married her, and now whenever we see Jim, we see Allison. In Savannah, they were next door neighbors, and I worked with Jim for many years. It was a great honor to go to the ceremony when Allison was ordained as a minister, and to have her perform her first communion service as a minister.

Haden, I don't get to see so much now, but we keep in touch, especially during football season. She married Tim Tirey and they built a business in Houston, called BaseOps, which eventually was sold. They moved back to Haden's hometown, Monroeville, AL, and operated the local airport until Tim's recent passing. Haden has the same bubbly personality that her mother had in 1975.

I love all these people more than they will ever know, and I am so happy that they have chosen to be a big part of my life. Whiskey Delta Echo!

# Jim Ward

Before I begin to tell you how Jim and I connected, let me say this. Except for my wife Sandy, Jim Ward has been my lifelong best friend, partner in many things, roommate, next door neighbor, handyman, and brother in Christ. Now, let's start his story.

Jim and I started work at Boeing on the same day, though it was about a month before we met at a computer class that we were sent to at the Boeing plant in Renton, WA. Jim was in 747 Aerodynamics as I was, but he was in a group that supported military projects. They were located in a different area of the building from the rest of the aero staff.

Jim grew up in Willows, CA, and went to school at the University of California at Davis. When we met, we had an immediate chemistry, in that both of us had a love of flying light aircraft, and a knowledge of aviation. Right off the bat, we started flying together, and we fell into a routine of flying, and getting a pizza and pitcher of beer, before heading to our apartments. In our last months at Boeing, we substituted an evening with other pilot friends at the Jet Deck bar by the control tower in Everett, for the pizza.

I was training for my instrument rating, and when I was nearly ready for the check ride, it was Easter weekend. We decided to fly down to northern California on the coast to join Jim's family for the weekend. Getting there was sporty. We rented a Grumman Cheetah for the trip. Clouds were low, but the temperature in Washington was cold enough to pick up ice in the clouds, so we decided to duck under the clouds. That was no problem once we got to the coast, but to get there, we had to cross some mountains. I was flying the first leg, and the clouds were low as we weaved our way around mountains and across the range. I was too busy flying and dodging cumulo-granite clouds to read the map, so Jim read the map, and as we came around a mountain, he would point out which way to go around the next one. We made it to the coast, and from there on to Mendocino, CA, we flew over the water just offshore, and had a smooth trip. It was a wonderful weekend, and I not only enjoyed meeting his family, but came to be friends with his parents as we saw each other from time to time over many years. The trip

home was a little warmer, so we filed IFR for the last leg, and Jim got some instrument flying time.

We both saw that a huge company like Boeing wasn't where we wanted to be long term, so we left together and went to Auburn to get an MBA degree. We found an apartment in Auburn, and went to Erwin before classes began, to visit my parents. While we were there, Dad introduced Jim to the joy of driving a station wagon on the railroad tracks. Yes, you read that right. Dad's company car had what is known as "high rail gear", which are small railroad wheels that can be manually lowered to drive on the track. You just turn to line up with the track on a crossing, lower the wheels, and off you go. It is also important to know the train schedule! Very important!! We had an enjoyable drive on the rail, including going through several tunnels. Cool!

We both joined the flying team and competed in the regional airmeet, which was hosted by Auburn that year. Jim and I were looking for a way to sponsor one of the events anonymously. I was teaching meteorology, and we cooked up an idea, a devious idea, to play an elaborate practical joke on Haden and Allison. We "invented" a company named Debardeleban Meteorology Services, named for the obscure street that we lived on. Then we got cloud charts, made photos of meteorology instruments, and a picture of a futuristic airplane. We made a big poster with all this. Then we got our friend Lisa English to talk her future husband Scott Danneker into helping us out. Scott became our front man and spent the whole competition at the airport talking to anyone who would listen about the company's plans to develop the DMS-1 Cloud Snatcher, and offer to grab any cloud type you like and transport it to the sky of your choice and release it. Most everybody walked away shaking their heads, but Scott just polished his story every time. When it came time to hand out the trophy, Scott did it with aplomb. Only after it was all over did we clue Allison and Haden in that they were victims of the world's most nerdy practical joke. BTW, Scott went on to become the world's most sought after slow pilot. He became an airship / blimp test pilot, and did contract work all over the world.

Jim was getting close to Allison, who was engaged to an Army MP from Fort Benning. When we went down to Allison's parents' place in Florida for

spring break, Jim stayed behind a few days while Allison and her Mom went shopping for wedding stuff. As they entered a store, the clerk would ask if Jim was the groom. Allison would say no, and her Mom would say yes. They were married 6 months later.

Jim finished his MBA, and got a job in Aerodynamics at Gulfstream in Savannah. I left in the middle of the MBA program, having really been most interested in the flying team and partying, and spent 6 months at Arnold Engineering Development Center near Tullahoma, TN. When the company doing operations changed at the end of 1980, I got a job at Gulfstream, and the boys were back together again. In addition, Allison was there, and Steve Conn was working at Gulfstream also. It was a total Tigerfest!

Jim stayed the course at Gulfstream, retiring a few years ago. I was in and out at least 10 times as a contractor, with 2 stints at Federal Express, one at OMAC, and a number of vacations at the beach in the middle. Allison worked in Sales Engineering for a while before leaving aviation for good. Steve worked in Sales Engineering for a while and moved to the Engineering & Scientific Computing group after it was chartered under Jim's leadership. Later, Steve heard the siren song of Florida's gulf coast, where he is to this day.

When they were young, Jim and Allison's two children called Steve and me "Uncle Steve" and "Uncle Van". By the time they were 10 or 12, they figured out we weren't really related, and began calling us "Fake Uncle Steve" and "Fake Uncle Van". Real or fake, they are family to us.

Now, back to the 80s... I started out in the Completion Center as a group lead in interior mechanical installation, something I knew absolutely nothing about. 9 months later Charlie Coppi, VP of engineering, traded my group an engineer and an interior designer for me, and I moved to acoustics engineering, working with noise, both inside and outside the airplane. Jim started in aerodynamics, and stayed there. At this point, we were sitting a couple desks apart, and our collaboration was back in the groove.

These were early days for Gulfstream's engineering department, because before Allen Paulson bought the facility, it was just a factory, and all the engineering was done at Grumman's HQ in New York. So, as we worked on a project, we had to develop the tools we needed to accomplish the task. Up until Jim and I arrived on the scene, most of the guys were writing a new computer program for each project. Not good! Jim built the first reusable software, called AE001, for computing takeoff performance, and it is still in use today, 40+ years later. Later on, I contributed a graphics program named Magic, which was used until a few years ago, and a climb calculation program that is still in use. We made a good team, and brought some innovation into a situation where it was badly needed.

As time passed, Jim's management skills came into play, and he held several positions, including lead engineer, head of Publications, where he led the effort to computerize all Pubs work, head of Engineering and Scientific Computing, and head of Sales Engineering. In several of these positions, Jim was my boss, and a great one he was. In his last years at Gulfstream, Jim worked on cockpit design and avionics. It was my pleasure to go to Savannah for Jim's retirement party, and walk out the door with him for the last time.

Jim and Allison live in Indiana now, not far from their daughter and her family. We don't see each other as often as before, but we still get together whenever we can.

This family means the world to me. We all should have friends like the Wards! We love y'all!

## **Vlado Lench**

When I started work at Boeing, it took a little time to meet all the people in 747 aerodynamics, since it was divided into a half dozen smaller groups. The sales support guys were in the group to my right. In time, I met the Slavic-looking guy across the aisle from me. He was indeed born in Yugoslavia, but grew up in Chicago. Vladimir Lench was his name, but he went by Vlado.

It didn't take long to discover that Vlado was a pilot, and much more advanced than I was. Vlado's love was doing aerobatics, but the airplane he owned then was an ASW-20, a single seat, all composite material, high performance German sailplane. He loved powerless flight too! One day, I went out on a photo flight, flying formation with some of the guys from the Grumman flight school, and Jim Ward was taking the pictures. That was such a beautiful geographic location for photography, with 2 mountain ranges, Puget Sound, trees forever, and crisp, clear winter days. On this shoot, Vlado joined us in a Decathlon, a 2-seat aerobatic plane. He did a few maneuvers close to us, and then snuggled up in formation, inverted. That was fun!

I went flying one day with Vlado in a Great Lakes open cockpit biplane, a remake of a 1929 airplane, with a modern engine and electronics. We did aerobatics over Lake Sammamish, WA on a beautiful day, with the wind blowing through our hair. It's kinda fun looking at Mt. Rainier upside down, with the lake over our heads!

On another day, we went out to the same area in a Citabria, an enclosed high wing basic aerobatic trainer. He was teaching me the aileron roll maneuver. Line up the nose on Mt. Rainier, raise the nose, full aileron, relax back pressure so the nose is level when inverted, keep going until upright with the nose low, level out, and we're done. Repeat in the other direction. Pause, turn around to talk to Vlado who was seated behind me, then repeat. We did that a bunch of times before the physiology of flight caught up with me. Stirring the fluid in the inner ear with the rolls wasn't the problem. It was when I turned my head 90 degrees to that while the fluid is still in motion, that caused a severe case of vertigo. I looked out the windshield, and despite the wings being visually level, my body told me I was banked 30 degrees to the left. So I banked to the right, and it felt right but looked wrong. Time to go back and land. I was flying toward the airport in that state when Vlado said "You're flying Chinese", which is aviation-speak for "one wing low". My response was simple, "Your airplane." Vlado flew back and made the landing. I was leaning against the side of the plane the whole way.

Just before I left the company with Jim Ward, Vlado moved down to the Boeing Field facilities as an instructor for pilots flying Boeing airplanes. Later, he was spirited away by Frontier Airlines as a pilot. Since he had lots of time off, and was located in Chicago, he started managing the restaurant at his Dad's hotel in Chicago. As he described it to me, one Christmas he compared his airline paycheck with his bonus check from the hotel, and immediately resigned from the airline.

Vlado and his Dad became partners, and over time bought 5 hotels, 4 in Chicago and 1 in Nashville.

During that time, I was living in Savannah in 1983. Vlado had built a beautiful Pitts Special, a single seat biplane designed for unlimited aerobatics. Vlado flew the Pitts down and stayed overnight with me. I couldn't go for a ride in the Pitts, so I propped it off when he was leaving. Airplanes like this often forego the heavy weight of a battery in favor of more performance at a lighter weight. To start the engine, a person on the outside snaps the propeller down as he steps back out of the prop's arc. The Pitts had the biggest engine I ever propped at a little over 200 HP. As he predicted, it started easily on the first try. He made a high speed pass on his way to Florida. Sweet!

Then about 4 years later, I was living in Memphis while working at Federal Express. One Sunday evening, I was at Ken Hurley's house a couple blocks away, and as we were standing in the front yard chatting, I spotted a North American T-6, a World War II pilot trainer, flying circles over my apartment. That could only be one person - Vlado! We drove down to the Olive Branch, MS airport where I kept my airplane, and there was the T-6, parked on the ramp. As we entered the building, Vlado had his back to the door with the phone to his ear. "Van, why don't you pick up?", he was saying. I answered "Because I'm here." It turned out he and his Dad had bought a Holiday Inn, and the hotel's training school was in Olive Branch. We went for a ride in the T-6 that night, doing some aerobatic maneuvers with his airshow smoke system on. Now that was a fun surprise!

A few years later, I was back in Savannah, and Vlado had finally made the move to his favorite airplane, one that he had always wanted, a P-51

Mustang, World War II's most famous fighter. It was beautiful! Named "Moonbeam McSwine", it was actually a combat aircraft that Vlado researched and painted it as it was during the war. When the original pilot passed away in Louisiana, Vlado flew down and spread his ashes over the Mississippi River from the plane. When my Dad died in 1999, Vlado was going to spread his ashes over Roan Mountain, where Dad loved to go. The weather wasn't good to us that day. Vlado made it to Middle Tennessee, but couldn't find a hole in the clouds to get farther east, and had to turn around at Chattanooga and go home to Chicago.

We first saw Moonbeam McSwine at a Sun N Fun fly-in. Vlado took Jim Ward, Steve Conn, and me for rides. The jump seat behind the pilot is definitely not made for big guys. My knees were wedged against the back of Vlado's seat, so I couldn't scoot down any. When he closed the canopy, the slope in the back of it pressed my head down, so I was looking at my feet. Not very conducive to taking pictures! But I did manage to take a few. We had a nice flight and Vlado did some of the aerobatic maneuvers he did in his airshow routine. What a ride!!!

We met up at a lot of airshows. Vlado became the guy that all the P-51 pilots used to teach them to fly the Mustang, and also formation flying and reenactment flights at airshows. They all knew him. At one airshow, in the morning, the space where Moonbeam McSwine had been parked the day before was empty. One of the pilots was polishing the shiny aluminum of his Mustang. As I approached him to ask where Vlado was, he put down his sponge as if he was expecting the interruption. As he turned to face me, I recognized him as someone famous and familiar, but I couldn't think of who it was. As we talked, I looked around the airplane for a clue. His name was painted under the pilot's seat, "Frank". Not enough help. Frank told me that Vlado had gone to Kissimmee overnight and would be back later. All the while, I could sense that Frank was expecting something more from me. I left him to go back to polishing, and was clear at the other end of the show grounds when it hit me. Frank Borman, Apollo 8 astronaut and president of Eastern Airlines. He was, in a big way, one of the reasons I became an aerospace engineer. I went back to talk to him again. For the rest of the day, there were never less than about 50 people surrounding him.

The last time I saw Vlado was at the EAA Convention in Oshkosh, WI in 2005. Sandy was with me, and Vlado's tailwheel went flat. He was getting help from Jack Roush of racing car fame, who was there with 2 Mustangs. Well 4 actually, the other 2 being beautiful new Shelby Mustangs. They did a photoshoot with the Mustangs suitably draped with young bikini clad women. That was a first in the warbird area at Oshkosh, I would imagine.

The hotel business began to falter in the 2008 recession. Vlado ended up selling all 5 hotels, as well as his beloved P-51. A few years ago, he was flying a museum's Mustang in an airshow in Kansas. The show went fine, but the next morning he took the airport manager for a ride. They crashed while doing aerobatics near the airport. The NTSB never was able to determine a cause of the crash. All I can say is, my friend died doing what he loved to do. RIP Vlado!

## **Dacey Miller**

I met Dacey Miller in 1978 when I went to work at Boeing. She was a weight and balance engineer there, but I knew her from the flight school where I was flying. It turned out that Dacey ran the first flight school to use the American Yankee airplane, which was my favorite airplane to fly. As I got to know her, Dacey's story came out, usually over a beer at the Jet Deck, a bar adjacent to the control tower at Paine Field in Everett, WA. During World War II, Dacey Miller was a pilot, and offered her services to the Army Air Corps. They took her up on it, and pretty soon she was delivering airplanes from the factory to squadrons in Europe and the Pacific. Not just one manufacturer, but all of them. Not just one type, all of them. One trip she would fly a P-51 to Europe, and the next she would fly a B-24 to some island in the Pacific. This lady flew anything with wings to wherever they wanted it. Such stories she could tell. And though we never contested it, I'm sure she could have drunk me under the table. Cheers Dacey, gone but not forgotten!

## **Otto Koppen**

It was 1980. The summer was hot. I had just begun working at Arnold Engineering Development Center, the Air Force's wind tunnel facilities, near Tullahoma, TN. It was time for the American Yankee Association's annual fly-in convention, this year at Lake of the Ozarks, MO. With no time off, I set out on the road after work on Friday and drove through the night, arriving just in time to have breakfast with my friends. We had a new member, Otto Koppen, who had an interesting story. He was 80 years old and owned a beautiful, well equipped 2 seat Grumman Trainer. As we chatted, I learned that Otto had just gotten his instrument rating in his airplane, possibly the oldest pilot to ever accomplish that.

But that wasn't the part that became a longtime connection between us. Otto Koppen was also an aerospace engineer, or perhaps more correctly, aeronautical engineer. Because you see, he began his career in the 1920s! The stories he told me were amazing. He started out as a flight test engineer for the Army, riding in the front seat of a Curtiss JN-4D "Jenny", a WW-I era open cockpit biplane, doing very dangerous spin testing, among other tasks.

Next, he went to work for Henry Ford. Ford was building an early airliner, called the Ford Trimotor. At the time, most runways were still grass, and the Trimotor had a tail skid instead of a wheel. Otto's contribution was to design the tailwheel, so that the skid didn't tear up the new asphalt runways. Next, Ford wanted a technology demonstrator, and had Otto design a single seat, open cockpit, low wing, all metal airplane, with no wing struts, called the Ford Flivver. This was unheard of at that time. The airplane was built and stored in Otto's office. Whenever Henry Ford wanted to show it off, Otto and the mechanic would disassemble it and tow it to the airport on a trailer, and then reassemble it. The pilot was under strict orders to not fly it, just run down the runway and lift a few feet in the air, then settle back onto the runway. One day, the pilot decided that enough was enough, and flew the airplane around the traffic pattern and landed. Henry Ford was so enraged, that he fired the pilot, and the airplane never flew again. The plane resides in the Henry Ford Museum to this day.

The Flivver paved the way for Otto to become an airplane designer. In all, he designed 40 airplanes. And he learned to fly in an airplane he designed, the Fairchild 21. His last design, the Helio Courier may have been his best. This was designed in 1956, and is a high wing, 6 seat airplane, a taildragger. What makes it unique is that the wing was designed to allow the airplane to operate in and out of extremely short unimproved runways. This makes it a favorite of missionary pilots all over the world. Organizations like JAARS (Jungle Aviation and Radio Service), and MAF (Mission Aviation Fellowship), have made use of the Helio for many years. Otto stayed close with the pilots at JAARS right up until his death. He loved to drop by their headquarters in NC, and “visit my boys.” Before he passed, Otto donated his Grumman to JAARS.

Otto finally spent many years as head of the Aerospace Engineering Department at MIT. Among many other aviation notables, Otto taught Jimmy Doolittle.

Otto and I remained friends until his death in 1990. I miss the days of going flying together and then telling war stories over a beer. As Otto said, he had to drink beer to keep his pacemaker lubricated. He lived his life as a Jew, but gave his life to Jesus before his death. I celebrate that!

## **Dr. Denise Pav**

I met her for the first time at my Dad’s funeral. As soon as she spoke, I knew who she was. I escorted her to her seat, and there she whispered in my ear “Your Dad loved you best.” After the service, she found me and invited me to her house for dinner the next night. I accepted with pleasure.

Denise Pav was absolutely the most unlikely person in the world to be a close friend of my Dad’s. She was head of Cardiology at East Tennessee State University’s medical school. Dad was a retired railroad guy. Both were widowed. They both knew Fred Alsop, head of the Biology Department at ETSU. Fred had set up a trip for the local Tennessee Ornithological Society chapter to Ecuador and Galapagos Islands to see the unique birds and other wildlife. Dr. Pav joined the trip to visit the natives in

the Andes jungle to study their homegrown natural medicines. She and Dad met on the ship they chartered for the island excursion, and became friends. Back home in Tennessee, they continued their friendship with dinners together and accompanying each other to social events.

I went to her house near the ETSU campus. We had a nice dinner together, and then I stayed until 2 AM, while she alternately puffed on a cigarette and told me the most fascinating life story I have ever heard. I'll try to keep it brief, but here is the essence of it.

She was born in the 1920s in Prague, Czechoslovakia. Her father was a dentist, son of peasant farmers. Her mother was an entrepreneur, descended from the royal family in Hungary. As she grew up, she spent the first half of her summer breaks in the palace in Hungary, being treated as a princess, and taught all of the elegant things that princesses need to know. The second half of the summer, she lived on the farm with her grandparents. Her job was to prepare 3 meals a day for all the farmhands, and don't be a minute late! The summers were an education in themselves.

All that came to a halt when the Germans invaded her homeland. Her family looked Jewish to the Nazis, so they were continually harassed until the Russians drove the Germans out. That's when the real trouble started. The one thing worse than appearing to be Jewish to the Germans was to be wealthy when the communists took over. The family was forced out of their house, which became a communist party office building (and was returned to her in very bad condition shortly before we met). Her mother and father were sent to prison, and she never saw them again. By this time, she was finishing medical school, and one dark night, she escaped across the border into West Germany. However, in the chase, she was shot by the Czech border patrol, then ironically rescued by the Germans on the other side. After healing, she made her way to Canada.

Because she escaped before taking the tests to be board certified, she couldn't practice medicine, so she accepted a job with a research group. They were developing the machine that is used to pump blood, replacing your heart when heart or bypass surgery is being done. I appreciated their

work greatly when I had my quintuple bypass surgery in 2020! While there, Denise became board certified and began practicing in cardiology.

Soon, she had quite a reputation, and interviewed for a job at Harvard University, as head of the Cardiology Department in the medical school. She had 40 doctor / professors working for her. Years later, after her husband died, she was hired at ETSU in the same position, and stayed there until retirement. At one point, she interviewed for a position in Huntsville, AL. While there, she was invited to sit at the head table at a big local civic event. As she entered the room, she spotted the guest of honor, Werner von Braun, and immediately turned to her host and said in her still strong Czech accent "I will not go into ze same room vith zat Nazi." She turned and left, ending the interview.

Denise's son went to medical school. He called her to say that he was going to take out a \$100,000 student loan to pay for it. She told him that she would pay every penny of his schooling, with only 1 string attached. He had to sign an agreement with her, saying that he would never turn away a patient who couldn't pay. Pretty good parenting, huh?

We kept in touch for a few years after that, but I'm sure she passed away shortly after my last card from her. What an extraordinary life she led! Denise was a blessing to all who knew her.

## **John Miller**

Right after Gulfstream began honoring our agreement in 2000, Dempsey Birmingham at FlightSafety, the company that operated the training facilities at Gulfstream, invited me to install my software on their classroom computers. So I was in an empty classroom installing AFMatic, when a guy walked in. He was wearing a client name badge, and his name was John Miller from Ford Motor Company. We struck up a conversation, and he mentioned that he was familiar with my software. That kind of surprised me, since it was so new, with only the Air Force and one other customer on board. No matter. John was on his lunch break, and asked if I would still be there when his pilot recurrent class was over. Yep. I met him in his

classroom, and we talked until dinnertime, and continued over dinner nearby. It was very easy to become lifelong friends with John. Every 6 months when he had to come to town for recurrent training, we got together. He liked AFMatic so much, he told pilots about it wherever he went, becoming in essence my one and only product evangelist.

I knew that he also worked in some capacity at the Air Force's Air Mobility Command headquarters near St. Louis. As things moved along for my business, I was asked to make a presentation to the commander of Air Mobility Command, and his senior staff. My usual pitch was thorough, and ran about 30 minutes. A few days before the presentation, I got a call from Gulfstream. They were short on time, and I was canceled. Bummer! Since I knew John worked at AMC, I shot him an email and told him how disappointed I was. About an hour later, I got an email from his Air Force account. The name on it was MG John M. Miller. MG, that is Major General to us civvies. Wow, I never had a friend that was a two-star general before! In his email, John told me I was back on the schedule if I could do it in 15 minutes. Sure! I can handle that.

Presentation day arrived. The Air Force guys were at Gulfstream for a rollout ceremony for their newest airplane. I went up to the conference room to wait. The hallway began to buzz. There were several Gulfstream people in the room also waiting. The commander, a four-star, stepped through the door, and scanned the room. He saw me, the person he didn't know, and came straight to me, hand extended. "Hi, I'm Roger Morrison." All the others did the same till I got to John. I winked at him and said "Good afternoon, General Miller." Later, we both laughed at that moment.

When it was my turn, Bill Boisture, Gulfstream's president at that time, asked me if I could do my pitch in 3 minutes. "Yes sir!" says I. Before I spoke, I silently said "God give me the words", and opened my mouth and gave them the best 3 minute tour of AFMatic that I could muster. And they loved it! I must have answered questions for another 10 minutes. Even Bill Boisture complimented me.

For the next almost 20 years, John and I kept in touch. When Sandy and I were married, John would come to the house for dinner and to visit. During

football season, John would root for my Auburn Tigers, and I would root for his Michigan Wolverines. And then, a couple years ago, my emails went unanswered. No football cheers. I am sure that means that John has passed away. This year, I cheered on his beloved Wolverines all the way to the national championship. That night, I felt the warmth of his smile. John was a wonderful friend, and I truly miss him.

## **Tony Radcliffe**

I had a lot of customers with Tybee Jet. Most came and went without much fanfare. A few connected with me from time to time. A small number became friends. And then there was Tony.

SSgt Tony Radcliffe was a flight engineer on the Air Force's C-37A Gulfstreams. When we met, he was based at MacDill AFB in Tampa, FL. Sandy and I were invited to do a day-long training class in using AFMatic. The pilots and flight engineers for the 310 Airlift Squadron, flying 3 Gulfstream C-37As in support of 3 different commands, were some of the most professional, as well as kind, gracious, and friendly people operating airplanes that we have ever met. And Tony was one of the best of them.

Tony, as most were, was very keen to use AFMatic. Initially, Air Force rules only allowed them to use it as a reference, and they had to use another, approved method to compute their takeoff and landing performance. So Tony went on a crusade to get it approved. It took over 6 months, but with a lot of comparing hand calculations with AFMatic results, we finally achieved Air Force approval, which we maintained until I retired.

We did 4 or 5 training sessions at MacDill, and every one was a great experience for us, and I think for them as well. In addition to training them, they gave me great insights into their operations, which helped me make improvements to the software to make it more useful to them. Through all these years, our friendship with Tony just grew.

Then one day, he called and told me he had come back from a trip to Europe, and went to the doctor with some pain. That's when they

discovered the anal cancer. Before long, he worked his last day. I never heard Tony say a negative word, even though he was going through a miserable regimen of radiation and chemo therapy. Nothing worked. While in Florida for a fly-in, I visited with Tony, his wife Kristin, and son Ian. He never stopped smiling, even though I could see the pain in his eyes. Soon after, he was selected for a medical study at Vanderbilt in Nashville. He had one “good” day during his time in Nashville, so we met them for dinner at the Aquarium Restaurant at Opry Mills. That was the last time I saw Tony. Now, anytime I am in the mall in front of that restaurant, I think of Tony.

A few weeks later, I was pulling into the parking lot of our favorite restaurant in St. Augustine, when my phone rang. It was Tony. The pilots were having a little party at his house, and he slipped away to the bedroom to call me. “Hey Van, Tone. I’m just calling to say hi.” Even in his last days on earth, he couldn’t say goodbye. We had a long and beautiful conversation. He passed away about a week later.

I couldn’t make it to the memorial service at MacDill, but later they had his funeral at Arlington Cemetery in DC. I couldn’t stay away. All the people from MacDill met the night before in the hotel bar, atop the hotel with a 360 degree view of the city. We drank a lot of beers to Tony, and went to bed when the bar closed. Early next morning, Lee Icenhour, “Ice”, a former pilot at MacDill, had arranged to take Tony’s ashes to Arlington before the funeral, and invited me to go. There were 5 of us crammed into a “standard size” rental car, with Tony in a wooden box in the front seat. Armed with brief directions, a car full of pilots took off for the cemetery about 2 miles away. The directions only got us about 2 blocks. Street blocked for construction, so we made the next turn, onto a freeway. At morning rush hour. If you are old enough to remember the Keystone Kops or Three Stooges, you can picture the chaos that ensued. We did a U-turn across the median of the freeway, then turned down a side street. Before it was over, we had seen all five sides of the Pentagon. When we finally found the entrance to Arlington, more construction prevented us from turning left into the entrance. So we did what anybody would do. Turn right, cross the Potomac, and do a U-turn right in front of the Lincoln Memorial. Five minutes later, Tony had been delivered. His last ride was a good time for all. It has been a long time since I have laughed that hard.

The ceremony was another bit of excitement. The Air Force bus that was to take us to the grave site, couldn't be found, having gone to the wrong address. We got there by whatever means available. I took a cab with several others. At the cemetery, we just knocked on car windows in the caravan, and hitched rides. When my kind driver introduced himself, I found that we had corresponded by email for years. The ceremony itself was very much by the numbers. One of the squadron Gulfstreams from Andrews flew over during the ceremony. The bus arrived and took us back to the hotel. The rest is a blur. Change to a Hawaiian shirt to honor Tony, who loved the islands. Then meet at a bar/restaurant downtown for a private party sponsored by the squadron at MacDill, then off to another place in Alexandria for dinner sponsored by the 99 Airlift Squadron at Andrews, and those of us still standing walked to a karaoke bar up the street. I bailed at midnight and caught a cab back to the hotel for an early flight home the next morning. My friends, these guys know how to honor their own. It was a privilege to join them for an incredible 24 hours.

Tony, we love you my friend!

## **Ken Harrell**

We moved to Nashville in 2003 for Sandy's new job. After renting a house in Antioch for 10 months, we bought a house in Brentwood. All the while, we were going to church at Franklin Christian Church. I got to know Bob Manning, one of the ministers, and he asked me to join his class on the purpose driven life, and take over for him if he had to miss a session. I agreed, and on the first night, I arrived and sat down at the end of the row. A guy I hadn't met before came in and sat next to me. We had some time before the session started, so we got to know each other a bit.

His name is Ken Harrell. He is a father of 6 girls, grandfather, songwriter, singer, effective minister to those with addictions, ant farm salesman, goof, and one of my very best friends. I don't know just how we connected, being from such different lives, but the chemistry was there right from the beginning. We started meeting for lunch, then tried writing a song together.

I had an idea to create a CD of music for Sandy for Christmas, and he helped me get the songs done, then we went into Ken's office / studio with Greg Johnson (sound engineer), and recorded the CD while Sandy was gone on a business trip. The CD was a flop, let's face it, I can't sing. But it started a friendship and collaboration that has lasted almost 20 years, so far.

Ken lives in Eagleville, more than a stone's throw away. He has been so gracious all these years, and driven many miles, always coming to me. One of us gets an idea for a song, we mull it over for a while, and one day, sometimes years later, Ken comes through the door with his guitar, and we get to writing. Ken is the music, and together we work the lyrics. When we get together to write, a good time is had by both of us. Sometimes, he walks out as he came in, with nothing to show for it but a visit between great friends, and a few hours of laughs and stories. Sometimes, we get a little way into it and get stuck. Occasionally, the song practically writes itself. The words and music just flow.

On one such occasion, we were writing with a friend, Erin Johnston, working on a song about a Marine wife whose husband was killed in action. It all just came out as we worked on it, and within about an hour, it was done. That was one of our best, called "Medals on the Wall".

But it isn't all about songs. Years ago, Ken had some experience with a doctor overprescribing pain medication. As a result, for a while he was hooked on the drugs. But he saw what was happening and got off the meds. Since then, he has been actively ministering to addicts at Celebrate Recovery meetings all over the south. He teaches from the Bible, sings (including our song "This I Know"), and gives his testimony. I am proud of Ken for his tireless ministry to others.

What can I say? I love this man as a brother in Christ.

## **Bill Moody**

Bill Moody is the only friend in this story who I have never met in the flesh, yet. Or as my Dad once put it, we've howdied but we haven't shook.

Someday soon, that is going to change.

NEWS FLASH!!! Bill was in Nashville over the weekend recently, and was able to stop by the house and visit for an hour or so. And now, "we've shook". Yay!

When Sandy and I moved to Del Webb in Mount Juliet, TN, I was invited by a new neighbor, Myron Johnson, to join the Men's Bible Study. I participated in person for several years before the pandemic arrived. Our clubhouse was closed for about a year, and so we went online, using FreeConferenceCall. Surprisingly, in a community made up of mostly people in their 70s and 80s, we had almost 100% participation, and even grew in number.

Once the clubhouse reopened, the group began meeting in person again, with one change. We kept the online capability so that those who are unable to attend in person may still participate. Since I have had continuing health issues, I've stayed online from home. Bill Moody was the founder of our group, but had moved to Huntsville, AL, and rejoined the group online. One day before we got started, Bill noticed a programming book on the shelf behind me. That started a conversation that is still going. Every week, when our study is over, after everybody else has dropped the connection, Bill and I stay online for an hour to talk.

Except for our former minister, Michael Easley, I think Bill Moody is the most knowledgeable person I know when it comes to the Bible. Some in our group refer to him as "The Bible Answer Man", a title that he doesn't like, but it is pretty accurate. Bill was a computer guy from California, so while our backgrounds have been very different, we have arrived where we are with much in common.

It was conversations with Bill that led to me deciding to write this book. All along, I've sent him first drafts of stories, and taken his wise counsel in making revisions. Bill's encouragement has been an essential aid in keeping the pace in writing this. Thanks Bill!!!

## Photos



Aunt Kitty



Kitty and Johnnie



Jack Kennedy with a lobster he just pulled up. Dinner!



Lockheed P-38 Lightning, like the one that Colonel Decker flew, and had to bail out of.



Junkers Ju-52, like the one Colonel Decker flew across the Mediterranean, on his way to a POW camp in Germany.



Steve Conn on our 1994 trip to Switzerland. He is atop the Sphinx Observatory at Jungfrauoch, between the peaks of the Jungfrau and Monch mountains.



Haden (Swift) Tirey, at Gordon and Marilyn Reynolds' house on Lake Hatchineha, Florida, spring break in 1978. Haden had just earned her seaplane rating in this Citabria.



Allison (Reynolds) Ward on the dock at home on Wilmington Island,  
Savannah, Georgia, 2002



Vlado Lench and Jim Ward at Vlado's house in Seattle, Washington, 1978



With Jim Ward, flying to Mendocino, CA for Easter, carefully crossing  
Olympic Mountains.



Jim Ward and Van atop Roan Mountain, North Carolina, 1979. Or is that Elvis?



Jim, Trow, Lanelle, and Allison Ward, and Steve Conn, at Trow's graduation from US Air Force Academy, 2010



Jim's retirement day at Gulfstream. I had to be there to walk out with him, just like at Boeing all those years ago. There's nobody I enjoyed working with, and hanging out with, more than Jim.



Vlado Lench and the Pitts Special that he built in his basement in Seattle. Here, he stopped by to visit when I lived in Savannah, 1983. Photo at Ridgeland, SC airport.



Vlado Lench and Moonbeam McSwine, Sun-N-Fun, 1990s.



Vlado Lench going vertical in Moonbeam McSwine. "Check Six Adolf" indeed!



Ken Blackman, founder of American Yankee Association, Otto Koppen, Bev Hanson, AYA president at the time, and Dicey Miller, one of the best pilots I ever met, AYA convention, 1980.



Ford Trimotor, like the ones that Otto Koppen worked on at Ford.



Curtiss JN-4D "Jenny", like Otto Koppen first flight tested after World War One.



Helio Courier, Otto Koppen's last design. This is the first production airplane, made in 1956, and belonged to JAARS, who used it to fly bible translators in the jungles of South America.



Tony, Ian, and Kristin Radcliffe at Tony's graduation from Embree Riddle Aeronautical University, 2009, shortly before Tony's death. He was determined to finish, and Kristin was equally determined to help him cross the finish line.



Tony Radcliffe, after climbing Diamond Head, Honolulu, Hawaii. Cancer may have beat him, but Tony was the one dictating the terms. He never surrendered and never uttered a negative word.



Ken Harrell, singing, praising, teaching, and testifying for Jesus.

# Big Bird

*“For I know the plans that I have for you,' declares the Lord, 'plans for welfare and not for calamity, to give you a future and a hope.’“ - Jeremiah 29:11*

## **In the Office, the BIG Office**

During my last quarter at Auburn, it was time to find a job. Do you have any idea how many different career directions are possible for a new aerospace engineering graduate? It blows my mind. Even in 1978 when I graduated and the aerospace industry was just beginning to recover from an almost total collapse in 1970, the possibilities were seemingly endless. I wanted to work for an airplane manufacturer, and my interest was in aerodynamics. So I applied to Boeing, and the phone started ringing. I ended up being offered 2 jobs, one with the flight controls group for 707, 727, and 737 aircraft, which I declined, and the winner, 747 aerodynamic performance.

After graduation, I shipped all my worldly possessions, 8 boxes to be exact, by bus to my sister Janie, who lived in Tacoma, WA. I then jumped in my trusty 1970 Ford Maverick and headed west. I tried to do a little sightseeing along the way, but didn't hold up the trip. Points of interest along the way included Golden, CO (Coors Beer brewery and Colorado School of Mines), Rocky Mountain National Park, Grand Tetons, Yellowstone, and miles and miles of Montana.

I arrived in Tacoma, and started the search for an apartment in Everett, near the 747 factory. Done. Next buy furniture. That came from a one man shop in Raymond, WA. And now, it is time to start work.

Day one, I check in at the Boeing cafeteria in Seattle along with about a hundred other new hires. In a company of 60,000 employees, you don't get a lot of personal attention. Unbeknownst to me, among the mass of other new hires was a man who was destined to be my lifelong best friend, Jim Ward. Jim was assigned to the military support group in 747 aerodynamics, while I was in the certification group. We didn't meet for about a month, at a computer training class. We were both pilots and had extensive knowledge of general aviation airplanes, and the chemistry was there. Bam! Instant friends.

Next day, I began work in the office. I was greeted by my supervisor, Ardell Anderson, my lead engineer, Don Wilson, and the previous new guy, Mike Lechnar. Mike and I became fast friends as he showed me the ropes. We would go exploring around the plant during lunch hour once a week. And there was a lot to explore! The 747 production building is the largest building by volume in the world, and there were a myriad of assembly and subassembly areas, in addition to the final assembly line, which was totally awesome.

The 747 aero team was an amazing, and diverse, group. During the year I was there, I worked with engineers from India, China, Japan, and Israel, as well as a great bunch from the USA, mostly west coast. I was paired up with Agris Moruss, a Latvian who was a mountain climber, skier, and lady's man. At 37, he was the old man in the group. Agris was known as the "noise guy". His job was to provide aero support to the acoustics group, for certifying the 747 for noise levels. I was the noise guy in training, with the intention that I would take his place so that he could move into a different area.

This job proved to be my graduate school for the practice of engineering. Theory is great, but at some point, you have to make a product that people will want to buy. Boeing was the master of that, and I got to study in a room full of gurus. They taught me to pay attention to the small details. And,

most importantly, I learned how to recognize the difference between good data and bad data. If you know how to follow the steps to create a particular graph, for example, but you don't know how to validate the results of your work, I have some news for you, you aren't really an engineer.

The most useful technique in data validation is to graph everything. Not some things, not most things. Everything! At that time, 1978, that meant plotting the points by hand on graph paper, and then company policy required inking the drawing. All of them! We had engineering aides to do the inking, but I preferred to ink my own. It helped to have a Dad that was a master with engineering drawings, and hand inking them. Like father, like son! But I never did get as good as Dad with lettering on the drawings.

Once a graph was complete, the engineer had to check his work, and only when satisfied that it was complete and correct, it was signed and dated, and passed to another engineer, in my case Agris, to be completely checked and signed. At that point it was ready to go into whatever document it was destined for. Tedious, but this process produced accurate results.

When it came time to produce the flight manual for the pilots, Boeing had a separate group that did nothing but that. They were located at the Boeing plant in Renton, and whenever a new 747 flight manual was complete, our group went to Renton on a Saturday morning, and validated the flight manual graphs, one page at a time. The more experienced guys in the group had FAA approval to sign off on the data. They were known as Designated Engineering Representatives, or DERs. The way we accomplished our task was very regimented. Each AFM (airplane flight manual) page was put together with its computer inputs and outputs, along with any intermediate graphs, all in a neat package. These packages were stacked on a desk, and we each picked one up and went to work. First, every input to the computer run was checked, item by item, with a red check mark by each one. Then the computer output was checked, one number at a time, each with a nice red check by it after it was verified. Finally, the lines on the graph were checked to be sure they matched the output numbers. When the path from input to final AFM page was proven to be accurate, we signed the cover document certifying that we had checked it and found it to be correct. Then we handed the package to a DER, and he did it all over again, checking

about every other point. When he finished, he signed the cover document as approved, as well as the actual AFM page.

I'm sure this is way more detail than anybody needs to read. But I include it to illustrate the engineering rigor that I learned there, and how it shaped the way I approached my job from then until now. Throughout the 25 years that I operated my business, Tybee Jet, even though I was a one man show, I followed this same methodology as I converted AFM graphs into electronic data, resulting in a 6 foot tall bookcase filled with notebooks crammed full of page after page of data, with a red check mark by each number, signed and dated by yours truly. Lessons learned, lessons applied.

## **Flight Test - The Fun Stuff**

While all the office work laid the foundation for my engineering career, I was able to weasel my way into the realm of flight test for the first time. Let me tell you, there was nothing more satisfying for a pilot / engineer than zorching around the sky in the world's largest airplane (at that time). It all began when, in my second week with the company, I approached my lead engineer, Don Wilson, grabbed him by his tie, and said "Don, I wanna fly! Get me on a flight test airplane."

"Please." I mustn't leave that part out. Don laughed and said okay. Whew! That could have gone a whole different direction. In the short time I had been there, he already knew me well enough to expect that.

Within a couple weeks, I was sent to Boeing Field on my own for a test flight of RA-001, the first 747 built. When I walked into the flight test hangar, I was accosted by a mechanic asking why I was there. Flight test personnel had a stripe on their badges, and anyone without the stripe was persona non grata unless they had a purpose. This is a very good thing! Here's why.

In the process of certifying an airplane, flight test is obligated to assure that the airplane being tested is identical to the airplane to be built and sold, right down to the last nut, bolt, screw, and rivet. If you give non-test people open access to the airplane, it is real hard to guarantee compliance. In fact,

while working at another manufacturer with less security at the time, a mechanic was found one morning after spending his shift on an airplane making modifications to the plane. You can't maintain the absolute control necessary to assure compliance when mods can be made independently. So, I was quite happy to be questioned then, and a few more times later on.

The briefing before the flight was interesting in several ways. First, a stenographer was always present for pre- and post-flight briefings. If you were new, you had to give him your name and speak a little so he could connect your voice to your name, because he was not looking up if he was going to get every word and put a name to it. He told me he would have no problem recognizing my voice, because I was the only Tennessee hillbilly that had ever been in one of his briefings. I heard that a lot at Boeing, can't imagine why.... The briefings were very detailed, and covered every test point, and examined any potential safety issues. Briefing complete, we all knew our roles on the flight.

Next, I was handed a notepad and pen. Take any and all notes you think are pertinent, and **WRITE DOWN THE TIME!** If something goes bump, writing down the time is essential to finding the data after the flight. There was an onboard clock, called IRIG, that was the official time for data. And the pen? Required. No pencils allowed. If you made an error, strike through it, but leave it readable. After the flight all notes were collected and made part of the test record. Then a packet of all notes was given to each participant. Very, very rigorous process. And every time something was done, it was done in the exact same way. This is how you make experimental flight test safe, and get the results you want without having to go back and re-fly data points on another day. In our case with the 747, having to go back up to pick up a few test points we missed was hugely expensive. The airplane cost about \$50,000 to make a short flight. Again, I learned a lot from this, which molded my future in a very good way.

So, finally aboard the airplane for my first flight test. WOW, doesn't even begin to describe it. This is what 17 years of education was all about. This day's test was to try out a new design for the fairing at the point where the wing is joined to the fuselage, called the wing-body fairing. This was simply a new aerodynamic shape designed to reduce drag in cruising flight.

For an airplane of this size, fuel consumption is the major cost of operation. The holy grail for 747 aerodynamic design was to find a 1% reduction in drag, which resulted in a commensurate reduction in fuel burn.

To test this, we climbed to cruise altitude and flew up and down the west coast, collecting data when we were in smooth air, and twiddling thumbs in the rough air while searching for smooth air again. My job was in the cockpit, making notes on instrument readings of altitude, airspeed, power settings, and fuel flow, for each data point. This manual data collection was used to compare with the data collected by the data acquisition system, as a form of validation. Though it was a simple task, it afforded me the opportunity to meet the flight crew, test director, and data collection guys, who I would be working with pretty regularly over my time at Boeing.

My first impression was that the Boeing flight test group was extremely professional in all aspects of the operation, and the individuals on-board the airplane were not only skilled professionals, but great guys as well.

And there was a bonus to flying on the world's largest airplane. There was plenty of room for a fully stocked galley! The Boeing flight surgeon made sure that we had plenty of quality food for the flight. Coolers of juices and soft drinks, as well as breakfast foods, sandwiches, and bags of carrots and celery, were always on-board for each flight that originated at Boeing Field. When we were off-site, boxed lunches and a cooler of drinks were provided. Nice perk!

Speaking of the flight surgeon, everyone who participated in flight testing was required to have a flight physical, and carry a green ID card during testing. I had my physical at the Everett plant, and thought everything was okay. Then I got a call from the flight surgeon's office in Seattle saying only that he wanted to see me. Next day, I was in his office, and when I stood to shake his hand as he came in the room, he said "Well, you just passed the test." He told me that so many of the indicators from my blood test were so far off the chart that either I was dead, or the syringe was contaminated. Since I wasn't dead, they drew blood with a syringe from a different lot, and suddenly, I was alive and received my green card. It was official! I was approved to participate in any flight test. The euphoria wore off when one

of the guys in the office told me “You know what the physical is for don’t you? They need enough information to identify the bodies if there is a crash.” Sobering thought!

I began to develop a good working relationship with Rick Lentz, who was the guy manning the strip chart on the flights, making the decisions on when we had good data and could move on to the next data point, and had overall responsibility for data collection and quality. Also, with Paul Bennett, who was the company pilot on all the tests I flew on, as well as Earl Chester, “Chester the Tester” as he was known, who was the FAA test pilot and flew in the right seat. I was usually standing behind the two pilots, between the test director in the jumpseat on the left, and the flight engineer at his panel on the right. Surprisingly, nobody minded me standing there for takeoff and landing, so I did. Occasionally, we had as many as 6 people standing in the cockpit for takeoff and landing. Good thing there wasn’t anybody from the FAA onboard (wink wink).

## **Back to the Office**

Through most of the year I was at Boeing, or the Lazy-B Ranch as we called it, I was just a rookie engineer in the office, learning the role of Noise Guy, and going on the occasional test flight. Day to day, it was an office job, in at 7:45, out at 4:45. Our building housed about 1,200 engineers in 6 large rooms. We shared our room with the propulsion engineering group behind us, with a long row of bookcases between us. Initially, I was located just in front of the divider. To my left was Han Liang, a Chinese-American, who taught me a little about his homeland, and bits and pieces of the spoken language. Han and I always brought our lunch and ate together. One day, his phone rang. He listened, and hung up without speaking. Before he could explain, the phone rang again. If a Chinaman could turn white as a ghost, he did. He just said “Yes sir!”, and hung up. Then it rang a third time, and he had a long conversation, mostly listening. He explained, the first call said “This is the White House calling”, at which point he hung up, assuming it was a crank call. The next call was from T. Wilson, president of Boeing, who told him when his phone rang again, talk to the White House people. This was during Jimmy Carter’s presidency, and the president of China was

visiting the USA during a period of getting to know one another. They were going to tour the 747 plant, and Han was selected to be the Chinese president's translator and tour guide. What a great honor! I was impressed.

The guy that sat behind me in the propulsion group, had an interesting story. He was an older guy that had worked for Lloyd Stearman, building biplanes before World War II, when the company was bought by Boeing. He then went on to work on the B-17 and other projects up to the 747, from which he later retired. It was his story that made up my mind that one year at a huge company was all I wanted. When I saw him, I was looking at myself, 40 years older, sitting at the same green steel desk from the 60s, shuffling the same old paper, just with new numbers graphed on it. No thanks!

My supervisor that hired me was Ardell Anderson, who went back to the beginning of the 747 program. After I was there about 6 months, Ardell moved up into a sales VP position, and Don Wilson replaced him. A co-worker, Denny Whitmire, became my lead engineer. Denny was such a kind, soft spoken man, and he never even looked at me sideways. Don, on the other hand, had a really hard time with my tendency to finish my assignments quickly, and then become a social butterfly and make the rounds of our group when I would get bored. Head down, pen in hand was the expectation. Whenever he had seen enough of me goofing off, he'd come out of his office and ask me about my progress on a project. Every single time he did that, I handed him the completed project. It frustrated both of us, him because he couldn't find anything to yell at me for, and me because I was being underutilized and didn't have anything else to do but talk to the guys in the office, who were my only social life. Yet another reason to move on.

## **The Sims**

One of the guys in our group, Vlado Lenocho, transferred down to Boeing Field to the flight training group. That group included the classrooms as well as the flight simulators. On a beautiful spring Saturday, they had an open house for their employees' families. Vlado invited Jim Ward and me to come down for it. It turned out to be a big deal with a picnic lunch and

everything. The guy manning the check-in desk made it real clear that we were not invited to the party. But since we were friends of Vlado, and first to arrive, with a wink and nod, we were sent to the simulators to play until the families started to arrive, then we would be kicked out. That gave us enough time to fly 2 simulators, the 727, and 747. The 727 was pretty twitchy, but I managed to get it on the ground “safely”. Definitely not a good landing.

When we got to the 747 sim, there were a couple others trying their hand. I chatted with one, who was a former Marine fighter pilot. We ended up making a bet, loser buys the winner a Coke at the machine down the hall. The challenge? I, a kid fresh out of college with 200 hours of flying time in my logbook, will land the 747 sim and get it stopped using less runway than you, the fighter pilot with many hundreds of hours flying high performance jets. Challenge accepted. And just to make it interesting, we had the operator make the clouds come down to 200 feet above the ground. We had to make an instrument approach, and could only see the runway for the last 200 feet of the approach. He went first. He flew a good approach, but didn't have a good feel for the landing, and used up a lot of runway. I flew an okay approach, then broke out of the clouds a bit off center, and had to maneuver the huge plane back on line. Lined up, with not much room to spare, we crossed the runway end, with speed on target. I flared it out like a small airplane, like I had seen Paul Bennett fly the real thing. Touchdown was just past the runway numbers. Nose wheel down, throttles idle, brakes on, and thrust reversers out, all done as if I'd done it before, which I hadn't, but I had watched it a few times. The sim came to a stop just a few thousand feet down the runway. Very satisfying! And then we were booted out, but one of us was drinking an ice cold Coke, and it tasted like victory.

## **Big Sky**

The last major project I worked on was the certification of a new engine on the 747-200. The 747 was unique in its heyday in that it was available with engines from all 3 of the major airline engine makers, General Electric, Pratt & Whitney, and Rolls Royce. As the years passed, the thrust of one of these engines grew from around 40,000 pounds thrust to over 80,000, and

the inlet size grew from over 6 feet in diameter to 12 feet. When I was there, we were in the 55,000 to 60,000 pound range, and the airplane had a maximum takeoff weight of 833,000 pounds. On this test program, we would set an unofficial world record takeoff weight of over 852,000 pounds. It was unofficial because to set an official record, you have to exceed the old record by 3 percent, and we weren't at that level. Nevertheless, after the record was broken, beer was consumed. No kidding, trust me on this.

The location chosen for this series of tests was the former Glasgow Air Force Base in Glasgow, MT. This was the perfect location because we would have the runway all to ourselves, and it was 13,000 feet long! We would need every foot of it.

There were two major phases to the testing. First was performance, testing takeoff performance, as well as aerodynamic stalls. The other part of the test program was noise testing, for both takeoff and landing.

So, first up was takeoff performance, testing the takeoff runway required at the record weight, while failing an engine at the most critical point. This was done by pulling the fuel shutoff valve for one engine shortly before rotating and lifting off. The takeoff was followed by restarting the engine as we climbed to 10,000 feet. I got to fly on the record flight, mostly so I would have skin in the game, literally. After all, I computed the takeoff field length required, so who better to verify that the number really was 13,000 feet, and not 14,000.

It was an interesting, and exciting takeoff. Due to the potential danger for this takeoff, I was exiled to the passenger seats in the upper deck behind the cockpit. Still, I could observe the cockpit action through the open cockpit door.

The power came up on the 4 big Pratt & Whitney engines. Even with 240,000 pounds of thrust, there wasn't a big push in the back. We weighed 852,000 pounds, and it takes a lot of push to get all that rolling. The runway remaining markers started going by, slowly at first, then with increasing speed. Our rotation speed was to be 174 knots (200 mph). We got to around

3,000 feet remaining, and reached our engine cut speed. I saw the flight engineer move the fuel cutoff to off, and heard the #4 engine spool down. Another 1,000 feet went by in a blur, and the nose of the mighty plane rose. At about 1,000 feet remaining, I felt us liftoff, and we reached the required 35 feet height as we passed the end of the runway. Just like I planned it!

Then the real fun began. We restarted the fourth engine as we climbed to 10,000 feet. At that point we did 3 aerodynamic stalls, each of which resulted in the loss of about 2,000 feet of altitude. After the third stall, we climbed back up to 10,000 feet for the next series.

I should stop here and answer your question. What is a stall? Well, it is not a place in a stable where you keep your horse. And it also isn't when the engine quits. A stall is when the wing achieves the maximum amount of lift that it is capable of producing. Pulling back any farther on the controls will result in the nose of the plane falling and the airplane losing altitude. That's a simplistic description, but hopefully will be helpful.

So, what was so much fun about that? Well, the 747 stalls like an airplane weighing only 2,000 pounds, very gentle, and the nose drops, with an easy recovery. Remember, this airplane is 200 feet long, and as the wing hits maximum lift and the nose pitches over, the very front of the passenger cabin experiences zero-g, also known as weightlessness. At the tail, just the opposite, 2-g, where you weigh twice your normal weight.

My job during stall testing was to get printed data from the data acquisition system, and make a plot of the stall speeds versus the rate of deceleration. The goal was to capture a 1 knot per second entry deceleration. Once I had plotted the 3 points, my job was done until the next 3 stalls were done. What to do with myself during the stalls? First series, I went to the nose, and as the stall broke, I jumped straight up, and just floated there until the recovery started, when I was gently dropped to the floor on my feet. Next series, I went to the tail, as far back as I could go, and kneeled beside one of the many barrels filled with water to replace the weight of passengers and baggage. I could feel my weight doubling, and the skin on my face pulling down. But the cool thing about observing from the tail was watching how the airplane responded. An airplane is quite flexible, and the 747 is no

exception. As the turbulent air flowed over the wing as we neared the stall, both wings flapped up and down slowly, much like a big bird flying. At the stall point, the low pressure atop the wing caused the moisture in the air to condense, and a wisp of visible vapor formed over the wing. Astonishingly, the fuselage of this magnificent airplane bobbed left and right, and I lost sight of the nose of the airplane behind the staircase going up to the upper deck. Incredible!

When everything was checked off our list of test points, it was time to return to the airport. But, of course, there was a problem with that. We took off at 852,000 pounds, but our maximum landing weight was 666,000 pounds. Remember those water barrels that we used to simulate passengers and baggage? Why do you think we used water barrels instead of steel plates? Yes! You are correct. The water barrels were connected to a drain, with two large pipes opening under the belly of the airplane. When we were ready to land, we opened the drain and pumped the water out. That took about a half hour. What do you do when you have a half hour to kill flying around in a huge airplane with two streams of water flowing out of its belly? Our FAA pilot, Earl Chester, liked the idea of chasing cows across the Montana plains, and that is just what we did! Paul Bennett was flying, and yours truly was standing behind the pilots, reading the radar altimeter and airspeed to them. They were a little preoccupied looking outside. Why? We were flying 50 feet above the ground, at the maximum speed for that altitude of 358 knots, all while dumping 50,000 gallons of water. I don't know what the cows thought about it, but it is one of the most fun things I've ever done with my clothes on!

With our weight down to max landing weight, it was time to head back. This landing was a little unusual, in that we were doing a test of the engines and thrust reversers. Normally, after touching down, brakes, wing spoilers, and thrust reversers are deployed, and the reversers are stowed as we slow through 60 knots. On this test, no brakes were applied, and the reversers were used all the way till we stopped. The airplane came to a stop so close to the end of the runway that the cockpit was actually beyond the end! Turning off the runway required advancing throttles on the right side engines, steering the nosewheel 90 degrees left, and stomping on the left

main landing gear brake. Amazingly, the cockpit moved horizontally instead of forward! Cool. Never done that before or since.

Compared to the first series of performance tests, the noise testing was pretty tame. For takeoff noise, there was an array of microphones along the extended centerline of the runway, out to 21,325 feet from the end of the runway. Along the side of the flight path was another line of microphones to record the noise beside the flight path, called sideline noise. To test, we flew low down the runway at takeoff climb speed, known as V<sub>2</sub>, and at the end of the runway, advanced to takeoff power and climbed out. Recordings from all the microphones were later analyzed, and all of the results were combined to determine the takeoff and sideline noise levels for FAA certification.

For landing noise, we flew a long approach in landing configuration, trying to stay precisely on a 3 degree glideslope, to pass over the microphone at as close to 294 feet above ground as possible. Now, that is a 3-dimensional challenge! Paul Bennett was so good at hitting the magic number within 10 feet, that I bet him a beer that he couldn't get within 2 feet on the last run. Nothing like a little pressure! And I thoroughly enjoyed the free beer that night! I won't say how much he missed it by.

The 767 was in the design phase at that time, and they wanted us to do a little test for them, to determine some vibration characteristics on the engine pylon during a power on stall. Our previous stall testing took place with the engines at idle. This time, we kept power on #3, inboard on the right wing. As we approached the stall, the engine began swaying from left to right on the pylon, confirming their theory about what it would do. Unfortunately, the engine pylon struck the inboard leading edge flap. These flaps are extended during takeoff and landing, along with the trailing edge flaps, to increase lift. They are made by laminating a layer of honeycomb aluminum with multiple layers of a fiberglass-like composite fabric. When the pylon hit it, the layers began peeling off, one at a time, and departing the airplane. As we watched the drama unfold, I looked up to find our pilot standing next to me, checking out the damage. We landed immediately, and a temporary repair was made. We flew back to Seattle the next day at a reduced speed, and added a short excursion to the coast and back. Why? Because, if we

landed in Seattle before noon, 100 mechanics and support people would not get per diem for that day. We touched down at 12:07 as I recall. Happy support folks make for happy testing!

Because of the interruption, we had to return to Glasgow for 1 more day after the plane was fixed. We just took a skeleton crew, and instead of staying in town for the one night, we were able to use the former visiting officers quarters. I roomed with Rick Lentz. We had a great time together, especially when a strong thunderstorm rolled across the field. He was from Michigan, and I had spent the last 5 years in Alabama. The weather in Seattle was boringly mild, year round. We were both so excited to see weather with some gusto, that we were out in the rain doing a rain dance. It's odd the things that stick in your memory!

## **Data Collection**

Boeing's flight test data acquisition system in those days was a huge analog collection system called ADAMS, that then processed the data into digital format. There were multiple boxes of equipment, about chest high, feeding data to a computer operated by 2 engineers. They were running a program that processed specific data parameters for plotting in real time on a strip chart, looking much like an EKG output at your cardiologist's office. The "data guy" would monitor the strip chart and make the call on whether we had good data, or needed to reflly the data point.

One of the most interesting aspects of the system was how position on the runway was determined for takeoff and landing performance calculations. There was a video camera, called APACS, mounted looking out the first passenger window. The runway was surveyed, and the distance to each runway light beside the runway was measured. The camera recorded at high speed, and during post-flight data analysis, the engineer simply counted the runway lights from the beginning of the runway to know the airplane's position along the runway. Primitive, but effective!

# Say Goodnight Dick

After one year at Boeing, having started on the same day, Jim Ward and I walked out the gate together for the last time. While the year had some very good experiences, and some not so good, it served me well in learning the craft of aerodynamic performance engineering, and as such was the key to my future engineering skills. But the most important takeaway was my friendship with Jim Ward, which continues today.

## Photos



747-200, and our full test crew, Glasgow, MT, May 1979. Van is kneeling in second row near right end, wearing a light blue T-shirt and railroad engineer's hat.



Chasing cows. It is hard to see from the picture, but we are 50 feet above Montana grazing land, at a speed of 358 knots (412 MPH), with two drain pipes dumping water.



Another long approach during landing noise testing.



747-200 instrument panel. Electronics have simplified that in recent years.



Rick Lentz, data collector, with instrumentation engineers behind him.



Paul Bennett and Earl Chester, Boeing and FAA test pilots, respectively.



Agriss Moruss on an old truck we found beside the road.



Homeward bound after completion. You can see the patch on the leading edge flap just above the engine to the left. This was the part we broke in-flight.

# Travels with Mom

*“Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be prolonged in the land which the Lord your God gives you“ - Exodus 20:12*

## Myrtle Beach

Growing up, our family of five didn't exactly have a lot of extra money to go on vacations. My Dad had a solution. Since Mom loved the beach more than any other imaginable destination, and Dad was in the Air Force Reserves and needed to do his annual duty somewhere, Lieutenant Colonel William G. “Spot” Swofford was activated, and did his 2 week tour of duty at Myrtle Beach AFB, every summer. In the 1960s, MB AFB was a base for F-100 Super Sabers, and usually while we were there, one of them would grace us with a sonic boom from a high speed dash off the coast. These days, that kind of fun is frowned upon, okay, more like illegal.

So what did the rest of the family do while Dad was keeping the country safe? Beach, beach, and more beach, that's what. By the time we went home, I was unrecognizable, my tan was so dark.

And that was where I learned to love seafood. Mom was a wonderful country cook, and she always had a great dinner ready when Dad got home each evening. For lunch, we might have boiled shrimp, or she would cut them up and make shrimp salad sandwiches.

So there you have it. Beach vacations every year, courtesy of the red, white, and blue. It is good when you can get it!

## **Sometimes Point-B is Just Another Name for Point-A**

My Mom was the original white-knuckled flyer. When my sister, Janie, was a stewardess with United, we took annual trips to visit her, but Mom and Dad never took advantage of their passes except for that. I didn't know it at the time, but Mom was pretty well tranquilized just to board the big jets.

And then here I am in 1972 with a shiny new FAA approved private pilot's license, and a desire to take everybody I know for a ride. Of course, my first ride went to Dad. We flew to Erwin and circled the house. Mom came out and waved at us. We stayed at the legal altitude. No buzz jobs here.

Then it was Mom's turn. We drove to the airport, and I made a point to describe to her everything I was doing in the preflight inspection, taking my time and being thorough. I helped her up on the wing and into the seat. I noticed she was shaking a little. I did everything I could think of to make her feel comfortable. As we began our takeoff roll, I looked over and she had both fists clenched tight. We climbed up a few hundred feet, and I picked up the microphone and informed the tower that we would be staying in the traffic pattern for landing. And that's just what I did, as smoothly and gently as I could. We taxied in and shut down, and she still hadn't said a word since she sat down in the airplane. And then she smiled. She had felt obligated to go for a ride with me. Obligation completed, she could relax.

Five years later, and I flew home for Christmas in my first airplane, identical to the ones I learned to fly in. Once again, I was excited to take family and friends for a ride. And then it was Mom's turn, again. She smiled and said "Let's go flying." Yes ma'am, I know enthusiasm when I hear it. Like the first time, we made a single circuit of the traffic pattern and landed. This time, as we taxied in, she thanked me for the flight, and I thanked her for riding with me. Progress!

My Mom never rode in an airplane again.

## **The Battlefields**

In 1985, I had left the job with Federal Express, and was waiting on the phone call that would send me to Albany, GA to work for the Old Man's Airplane Company. My Mom was a card carrying member of the Daughters of the Confederacy, though it was an organization in name only by that point. I was named for a distant grandfather, John Van Buren High, who had fought in the War of Northern Aggression, pardon me, War Between the States, in the South Carolina 89th Regiment.

One day Mom called me and laid an idea on me. Let's take this downtime and go for a tour of the battlefields where my namesake fought. Great idea Mom! So I went to Erwin, and joined Mom and Dad in a journey up Interstate 81, where most of our battlefields were located.

We visited all the battlefields in Virginia, near Washington. First and Second Manassas, Fredricksburg, and Wilderness, were stops on our tour. Here's something you may not be aware of. If you go to the visitor center for any of these battlefields, you will find at least one park ranger who is an historical expert on that battle. He, or she, can teach you about the battle, hour by hour, and if you are interested in one particular regiment, they will unroll the hour-by-hour battle maps, and show you exactly where they were, all through the battle. Fascinating!

We made our way up to Gettysburg, heaven for a Civil War buff. I didn't have any credentials, but my interest in the war went back to my childhood. Mom had made this journey herself when she was a kid. One of the things she remembered was stopping at the edge of town and picking up a ranger who would drive your car, and take you on a personal guided tour of the battlefields. This service began right after the war. We were about to find out if it survived until 1985. The Gettysburg visitor center is around four score and seven, er, well, it's a lot bigger than the others. And right at the end of the counter was the sign for the ranger guided tour! We snagged a

ranger (for a very reasonable cost) and he drove us everywhere, beginning with the first day of the battle, when the fighting started as General Lee was leading his troops to some high ground for their encampment, when a handful of shoeless Tennesseans decided to see if they could get some shoes at a cobbler's shop they passed. As they broke off and reversed course through the woods, who should they bump into but General Grant's elite troops. Shoes or no shoes, a fight broke out. As word moved up the ranks, quickly all the troops reversed course and joined the battle. General Lee never made it to high ground, not that day, nor any other after that.

We saw the battlefield for the second day of fighting. And then we got to day three. Oh my goodness! There were Big Roundtop and Little Roundtop, where Lee's troops tried to outflank Grant's guys, and nearly pulled it off. Then the shooting started. It was said that the creek below ran red with Confederate blood. Bodies were piled on top of each other. And that wasn't even the main battle.

Grant's troops lined up on top of Cemetery Ridge. They had artillery. And shoes. Lee's troops were lined up at the bottom of the hillside, at the edge of the woods. They had very little in weaponry beyond the rifles they carried, with bayonets attached. One of Lee's generals, General Pickett, was impatient. He ordered his troops to charge! There was nothing between the two lines except for a wide, grassy field. Too wide! They could not get across the open field before being gunned down. Every one of them. A marker stands today at the "high water mark of the Confederacy". Pickett's Charge was a bloodbath, and not in the way General Pickett had intended. We dropped off our ranger at the visitor center after our incredible tour.

From there, it was downhill to east TN. Travel was special then, and especially enjoyable with my Mom and Dad. And of course not being able to see the future, I didn't know that this would be our last trip together. Ever. I'm glad it was a good one!!

## **Photos**



Mom and Van. It has to be after the flight because she's smiling! 1972

# The AYA

*“Then the cherubim lifted up their wings with the wheels beside them, and the glory of the God of Israel hovered over them.” - Ezekiel 11:22*

## **My Love Affair with Grumman's**

I learned to fly in an airplane manufactured by American Aviation in Cleveland, OH. The model I flew was the AA-1A Trainer. The first model was the AA-1 Yankee, which was designed by a guy named Jim Bede, a well known airplane designer from the 60s and 70s.

I absolutely loved flying these airplanes. They were faster than their competitors, burned less fuel, and were just plain fun. One of the best features was the responsiveness to the controls and the roll rate. In other words, it flew like a little fighter, and even had a plexiglass sliding canopy for entry and exit, and a magnificent view in every direction. In 1978, the product line was bought by Grumman, which renamed the company Grumman American.

Just before my senior year at Auburn, I bought an AA-1A with two partners who were on Auburn's flying team with me, Steve Conn and John Regan. It cost \$8,000, and was 4 years old, a baby in airplane years. Its tail number was N6267L. Most of our friends on the flying team called it "The Lima Bean", because on the radio the letter L is pronounced Lima, like the city in Peru. We totally enjoyed that airplane during the year we had it. John only flew it about 10 hours. It was a part of his pickup line: "How many guys do

you know that have a motorcycle, a sports car, and an airplane?” That was my friend John in a nutshell. Steve flew it about 50 hours. And I racked up the most with 80. It got around. I flew it home for Christmas, and Dad rode with me back to Auburn. Right after takeoff, we were in a blinding snowstorm, which we didn’t get out of till passing Gatlinburg. After that, it was a beautiful flight to Auburn. Steve flew it down to Winter Haven, FL for spring break and we flew it around some there. And Steve and I flew it up to MTSU for the national NIFA competition.

After I graduated, we were going to sell it, because none of us could afford to buy out the other two. I got a call a couple weeks after I left Auburn. It was Steve telling me it was sold. To the insurance company. Steve was at the airport getting ready to show it to a potential buyer. While he waited, a student pilot flew in and his engine quit. After a couple of bad decisions, he landed on the ramp and ended up on top of the Lima Bean. We got everything but our deductible back. The pilot’s insurance eventually covered the full value, but I don’t recall seeing my sixteen bucks. Not losing sleep over it.

I arrived in Everett, WA for my new job with Boeing, and needed something to fly. I knew a couple of salesmen at Grumman American in Savannah, and they told me to go see Ken Blackman at SkyTrek on the same airport as my job, Paine Field. Ken was the top selling dealer in the country, and he had about 15 airplanes to rent. I started working on my instrument rating, and got the rating before leaving after one year and going back to Auburn with Jim Ward. Ken was also the founder and president of the American Yankee Association, AYA, an organization for owners or pilots of these airplanes. Since we were flying out of Ken's operation, we had a chance to get to know most of the early members there. It looked like it would be a great fledgling organization to become involved in.

## **Singing the Blues**

The week before the '79 American Yankee Association fly-in was a busy one. Jim Ward and I were leaving our jobs with Boeing in

Everett, Washington and driving to the fly-in in Appleton, Wisconsin. There was the usual packing to do, loading the moving van, and so on. I wasn't too excited when I got a call from Bev Hanson, one of the pilots at Paine Field who had a Yankee. He had just had it painted and wanted some help in buffing it out and applying the finishing touches. The idea was to have it in prime condition to win a trophy at the AYA event. So, being a kind-hearted soul, I agreed to help, and conned my friend Jim Ward into coming as well.

The hangar where Bev was doing the work was on the other side of the airport from Skytrek, our usual hang-out, but we found it. It was after dinner, around dark. Ken Blackman was there, heading up the technical know-how branch of the operation. There was someone there with a buffer who did the buff job. Jim is pretty handy with tools, so he and Ken did much of the rest of the work. I was there to make the jokes and pass out the beer. As you can see, this was not one of the most organized efforts to ever take place. We didn't run out of beer, so I guess it wasn't all that poorly organized after all.

The buffing and shining, touches of paint here and there, some pin-stripes, and a bit of interior clean-up took till the wee hours of the morning. We were all a mess, but since most of my time was spent sitting on the cooler, I was the cleanest of the bunch. Bev needed his airplane moved to his T-hangar across the field, so I volunteered to taxi it over. We put the paint cans and other miscellaneous equipment into the trunk of my jade-green Ford Maverick, which Bev drove over.

I arrived at the T-hangars in time to see my beloved clunker bounce through a small ditch, cut in the pavement to allow the laying of

electrical wiring or something. Bev jumped out and waved me to a stop. We agreed that I'd taxi down to the other end of the row of T-hangars, and bring the airplane up to his hangar that way. By the time I got around there, Bev had driven to the hangar and started to empty out the trunk. That's when we all noticed that there was just a small leak. Okay, maybe more like a deluge. One of the paint cans, nearly full of sky-blue Alumigrip, had turned over when he hit the ditch, and the entire contents had emptied into the trunk, approximately over the left rear tire. The paint ran out onto the tire, which then painted a dotted line from the ditch to the door of Bev's hangar. I haven't been out there for a while, but the last time I was at Paine Field, the blue line marking the way to Bev's hangar was still there! And, of course, the last time I saw the Maverick, half the trunk was painted blue.

Bev went on to win all the trophies that were winnable in the two-place modified category. While we were at the fly-in, Bev tossed me the keys and sent me off on a flight to dogfight with Dave Wheeler, who was flying Maynard Crosby's "Cranberry Cannonball", the last Yankee built, which was at that time flying with a 150 HP Lycoming. Bev's Yankee performed beautifully with the 125 HP modified O-235 in the nose. As I recall, we indicated 140 MPH while climbing about 200 FPM. Sweet!

Jim and I joined the AYA at the convention. That was 1979. Little did I know that I would still be a part of this organization for the next 45 years.

## **Enter the Pocket Rocket**

In 1981, I bought the test airplane for the AA-1C T-Cat program from Gulfstream. I named it the Pocket Rocket, because of its diminutive size and better than expected performance for an airplane of that size and power.

This was my favorite airplane to fly in all my flying career. I didn't feel like I was getting into it so much as I was putting it on, like a warm jacket. When I thought of making a maneuver, the airplane just went, as if I was a bird commanding my wings and feathers to move. Sounds a little corny, but you pilots know what I'm saying. We all have one airplane in our logbook like that. This was mine.

I flew that airplane everywhere. Good weather and not so good. Within a year, I added avionics to make the airplane minimally IFR capable. Because of its small fuel tanks, it wasn't practical to fly serious IFR (Instrument Flight Rules, or as we sometimes call it, In the Friggin' Rain). At one time I even kept the airplane tied down on a 2000 foot long grass runway in the middle of a soy bean field! It was not a short field airplane, and numerous times I got it airborne by the end of the runway, but wasn't high enough to clear the soy beans, and climbed above them with my landing gear in the space above the entry road through the field. High pucker factor is what we called that runway on a hot day!

I met so many people at fly-ins that I attended flying the Pocket Rocket. Billy Crumpton invited me to an airport barbecue. A local man in Wilmington, NC insisted that I go home with him and have dinner with his wife and him when he learned that I was the only camper at our fly-in and had no ground transportation. A college student rescued Jim Cavanaugh and me at Oshkosh after our tents were blown away by a severe thunderstorm. She just walked up to the airport fence and asked the first person to walk by, Jim, if anybody needed someplace dry for the night. I met a very kind lady that operated a mom and pop hotel in London, Kentucky when I caught up to a cold front and had to land for the night. The AYA is about people, for sure, and not just the members, but all the others we meet along the way. I am thankful for the Pocket Rocket. Yes, for the transportation it provided, also for the destinations it took me to, but mostly for the people we met together.

I flew it until mid-1985, when I saw the need for more performance and sold it to Mason Sexton in Frankfurt, Kentucky, then moved up to a more capable Cessna 210. Despite not owning a Grumman, I kept up my membership, and went to the conventions every year for a long time.

## **Notice How Much Better You Can Hear Me Now?**

In '83 or so, formation flying was a big thing in the AYA, and having done a bit of it, I was asked to go along and give a few pointers to one of our directors, Chuck Pantera, as he learned some of the fundamentals. Now, Chuck is a man with a sense of humor, which is good because he is the brunt of a lot of "short guy" jokes at these gatherings. Just how good his sense of humor is became apparent before we were through flying on this day.

We were in his blue AA-1B, "Panther" by name, which had a 150 HP mod, giving it plenty of poop to haul two guys around and maintain position on the outside of turns in formation. All that power comes with a price, however. This was a LOUD airplane. After about a half hour of playing lead, it was our turn to fly wing. We were out over Lake Geneva, Wisconsin, "making turns in all directions" as the controllers would say, and Chuck was doing pretty well. Then all of a sudden, the engine quit. Just like that, no warning, no coughing, no sputtering. It was just gone, all at once. Naturally, the first thing I did was look around for a place to land, followed by a glance at the fuel gauge hiding behind my right leg. While I was doing this, it occurred to me that Chuck was just sitting there, doing nothing but keeping us pointed straight ahead and watching the airspeed dwindle. I was just beginning to wonder what Chuck was planning to do, when he turned to me and said in the silence, completely deadpan, "Notice how much better you can hear me now?", switched tanks, and flew us back to Lake Lawn where we refueled. You probably couldn't have understood the call on Unicom, we were laughing so hard.

## **My Friend Billy**

I've always said that the AYA is more about people than it is about airplanes. The airplanes are our common ground that brings us together. They fly us to the conventions, and provide the means to enjoy ourselves while we're there. But once we all get together, it's the people that are the AYA, and the airplanes sit out in the sun waiting patiently for our return.

It has now been 20 years since we laid to rest one of my favorite people in the AYA, and in the world for that matter, Billy Crumpton from New Albany, MS. He as much as anyone understood the "people-centric" view of the AYA. There was never a more cheerful attendee at our fly-ins. No one more willing to work to get the job done, whatever it was. No one more encouraging to others. No one more willing to make fun of himself in the course of entertaining whoever he was talking with. And no one who was happier with a plate of southern cooking in front of him, or better yet, ice cream.

At the AYA convention in 1986 at Ames, Iowa, Billy and I slipped off with a couple of others to find some ice cream after dinner one night. We found what we were looking for, and it was very good. So the next day we told others, and ended up going back to the same place that night with two van loads of AYAers. Every year since then, the ice cream social has grown, until now it is as much a part of the annual convention as the spot landing contest. Thank you Billy for saying "Hey Van, let's go get some ice cream"!

Billy died on December 1, 2005, in the crash of a Twin Comanche in which he was a passenger, during takeoff in Raymond, MS. He left behind his wife Peggy, two children and four grandchildren that he loved very much. For those of you who never met Billy, the best

way for me to describe him to you is to say “Andy Taylor of Mayberry”. That should give you a sense of the kind of man he was and how much he meant to his family, friends, church, and community. Rest in peace, old friend.

## **To The Toppermost!**

After serving two years as vice president, I was elected president of AYA in 1985 at the fly-in at Mackinac Island, MI. At the time, we had about 350 members. I served as president for two terms, at the end of which we had about 1,000 members, along with two international regions, Europe and Australia.

The next president, who was an executive at Ford, tightened up our organizational structure, and as past president, I carried out the task of rewriting our constitution and by-laws to better fit our new direction. Membership soared to 3,000, about the highest it ever got. Of course, the number of airplanes is dwindling, since they have been out of production since 1979, except for a brief attempt to bring them back in the 1990s.

Since my friend Ken Blackman passed away a couple years ago, I have been the longest continuous member, 45 years and counting. I was blessed to be honored at the 2003 AYA convention at St. Simons Island, GA, by being named as a Lifetime Member, joining a small number of people, whose contributions to the organization far outweigh my own. It has been my great pleasure to be associated with this organization, and these people, for all these years.

Recently, the AYA changed its name, to the Grumman Owners and Pilots Association, or GOPA for short. Okay, fine, that's what the members wanted and I'm okay with that. But it will always be the AYA to me.

I would like to honor a few of my AYA friends who have contributed so much over the years:

Ken Blackman  
Billy Crumpton  
Lauren Larson  
Liz Lane  
Stew and Karen Wilson  
Bob and Irene Arnold  
Guy Warner  
Chuck Pantera

## Photos



The Lima Bean met an untimely fate at the hands of a young pilot.



Enjoying the day at an AYA convention, 2003.



They made me a Lifetime Member in 2003, an undeserved honor. Presenting is Stew Wilson. Looking on are Bob and Irene Arnold, Walt Porter, Ken Blackman, David Fletcher, and Billy Crumpton.



Proud to show off the Red, White, and Blue!



Ken Blackman, Otto Koppen, Bev Hanson, and Dicey Miller. Lake of the Ozarks, 1980.



The Pocket Rocket at home in Reggie McDaniel's soy bean field, 1982.



The Pocket Rocket's new instrument panel, 1983.



The lonely camper at an AYA fly-in in Wilmington, NC, 1982.



Drying out at Oshkosh after the big thunderstorm.

# Planes, Trains, and Airboats?

*“Do not fear those who kill the body but are unable to kill the soul....“ -  
Matthew 10:28*

## **Trains**

You would think that growing up in a railroad family, that I would love trains. You would be right. Although my family tree was all about the tracks, I still loved the trains that ran on the tracks. At least mostly. I loved cabooses, and any time I could climb into one and go up to the cupola to look out, that was a great day. And if I could go for a ride, heaven. But at the other end of the train was the noisy, smelly, just plain scary diesel engine. Thousands of horsepower, generating lots of noise, and putting out billows of thick, black, acrid smoke. My Dad never said anything, but he was always pushing me to overcome my fears, and diesels were at the top of his list. His first effort was to take me into the heart of the beast. The Clinchfield Railroad had the 1950s era streamliners. Man, that was a pretty engine, and is still my favorite. Dad made some excuse about needing to see somebody at the diesel shop in Erwin, TN, where the headquarters was, and where we lived then. We approached an engine that was idling, and climbed up the front steps and opened the door. There was a narrow hallway running the length of the engine. The outside wall was to one side, and the exposed running diesel engine to the other side. We were, in essence, under the hood. Walking the length of the engine, I could not wait to open the door at the back end and make my escape. I was probably 4 years old, and this attempt to allay my fears was unsuccessful. But it was kind of interesting to see what made it go.

Around 3 years later, we lived in Marion, NC. I loved to go to Dad's office in the depot. This was before cell phones, way before. The way they got messages to the engineers of trains passing by went like this. They had a Y-shaped device made up of 3 wooden rods, each about 2 feet long, joined together with a metal bracket, to form a Y. The two ends at the top of the Y had slots cut in them. The paper message was tied with a string that made about a 5 foot diameter loop. The string was then slipped into the ends of the Y, with the message dangling below. To pass the message, the station master stood at the edge of the platform and held the Y at arm's length. As the train went by, the engineer put his arm out the window, pointed forward, and stuck his fist through the loop, pulling the string with the message off the Y and into the engine cab.

So, I think you've guessed where this is going. One day, as a train was approaching, Dad asked the station master if I could pass his message. And there I was, on the very edge of the platform, holding the Y as high as I could, watching a big scary diesel bearing down on me. Zoom! He went by and with just a tug on the Y, the message was gone! But I'm afraid my fear didn't go with it.

A couple years later, Dad upped his game. One Sunday afternoon, Dad told me he had to work on a piece of track near the depot on Monday, and wanted to scope out the project. There was a tunnel near the depot, and the track in question was on the other end of the tunnel. Now, I loved tunnels almost as much as cabooses. We walked through the tunnel, and halfway through, I saw a train enter the tunnel behind us. I started to run, but Dad stopped me, and walked me over to a little niche cut into the tunnel wall. He told me I'd be fine if I would just stand still. I expected him to step in with me, though there wasn't really room for 2. Just before the train arrived, he calmly stepped across the track and into a niche on the other side. Alone!!! I had to face this one on my own. As the train approached, the sound was deafening. I just knew with the engine passing inches in front of my face, I was going to get sucked out of my niche and under the wheels. Then as the engine passed, the acrid stench of diesel smoke filled every open space in the tunnel. Since the space around the train was only about 2 feet, or less, the dense smoke was compressed in a very small space. That required a decision, should I keep my fingers in my ears, or pinch my nose? Nose

wins! Once the 2 engines had gone by, it got a lot quieter, and less scary, so all I had to do was to keep still and wait it out. As the caboose went by, we stepped out onto the track and continued on our journey. Maybe I didn't lose my fear of engines that day, but I did come away knowing that I could face anything, and survive. This was one of those experiences that goes toward turning an 8 year old into a man. Thanks Dad!

Here's the secret to his impeccable timing, assuring that we would be in the middle of the tunnel as the train approached. The railroad had its own phone system. Phones had no dials, it was just an open line. Every morning at 6 AM, everybody that had a need to know the location of trains throughout the day, would pick up his phone and be on a companywide call with the chief dispatcher to go over the train schedule. If you would be on the track with a work crew, this was where you found out at what time, and for how long, you would have a safe track. And, if you were a sneaky Dad, you could find out when a train would be passing through a tunnel. Nuff said.

Throughout my youth, there were frequent visits to locations that the only way to get there was a walk on the railroad track. Think of it, both my father and grandfather had been responsible for maintaining every inch of the 275 miles of track on the Clinchfield Railroad. They knew all the interesting things to see along the way, as well as every restaurant that had decent food.

Sometimes, I'm sure we made for a very odd picture, walking down the track on a Saturday morning, Grandpa and Dad in the lead, an uncle or two, and then the kids trailing behind in order of age. Huh? Say that last part again? "In order of age". What is up with that? Easy. It is something we always called the "two-tie stride". If you have ever walked just a short distance on a track, you'll get it. Between the crossties, you have the gravel, known as ballast, that keeps the tracks from moving. The ballast doesn't come up even with the tops of the ties, unless you are lucky. So in order to keep from twisting an ankle, you need to step only on the crossties. A six foot tall adult male can make a step across two ties. This is the way Dad and Grandpa always walked, whether they were on the track or not. The smaller we kids were, the harder it was to walk on the track. The youngest could make it one tie at a time, but had to go slow. Older kids could make one tie

easily and were faster. By high school, a two-tie stride was possible, but not as fast as the pros. I'm sure not many can relate to a Saturday family outing on the railroad tracks. For us, it was just normal.

One of my favorite places to go was a wide spot in the road called McClure, VA. The construction of the track had opened a cut in the mountainside, revealing the ancient sea floor. I found many examples of fossilized sea floor vegetation in that location. Nearby was my favorite restaurant along the railroad, Old Shay Inn. They had an old steam locomotive out front, and good food inside.

## Planes

In July of 1969, the summer before I started high school, we flew to Denver to visit my sister Janie. She was a stewardess with United Airlines, so Mom and Dad were flying on passes. Bill and I had to pay. I don't know what a ticket to Denver cost back then, but I bet we're talking less than \$100 full fare. The plan was to visit for a few days and then take Janie's VW Beetle and load the 4 of us up and head up to Wyoming looking for jade. I was a rockhound then, and was planning to go to Colorado School of Mines and study geology.

Before we left on our rock hunting trip, on the morning of July 16, a remarkable event happened. Apollo 11 launched for its trip to the moon and back. Fabulous! Several days later, we drove the Bug while Janie went on a flight, and off to Wyoming we went. After passing through Casper, home to the Jackalope statue, we went toward the wide open country. The only place to spend the night was a "motel" in Jeffrey City. Actually, it was a half dozen little cabins behind a prospector's house. Ours didn't have a TV, so the owner invited us to his house to watch the moon landing live with his wife and him. What an event! Probably the biggest thing to happen to mankind in 2,000 years. After an evening of interesting conversation and a lot of cheering, we walked back to our cabin, looking up at the moon where 2 men were walking. Amazing! We also came away with some hints to where we could go to find a few pieces of jade. Very few, as it turned out. I ended the day hot, sweating, and dirty, with 3 small pieces of jade to show

for it. Next morning, we returned to Denver. That was my last rock hunting trip, ever.

It turned out, I was much more interested in the plane ride to Denver than I was in hanging out in the middle of nowhere scrounging for pebbles in the dirt. After that trip, I knew I didn't want to be a geologist, but I wasn't sure what part of aviation and space I wanted to work in.

A year later, and Janie had transferred to Seattle. Off we went for summer vacation, without Bill, who had graduated from Tennessee Tech and was married and working. This time, I really loved the flight, and bought a Flying Magazine in the LA airport terminal. Upon returning home, I read every word at least 39 times, until the cover fell off. Then I got a subscription and wore the covers off every month. Learning to fly was all I talked about. Finally, Dad told me that he didn't want to hear another word about flying. But, BUT, when I had saved enough money to pay for half of my flying lessons, he would pay for the other half. Deal!

For the next 2 years, I saved every penny I could. I mowed the yard for 50 cents. I had an allowance of \$8 a month for clothes, which went straight into the flying fund. I learned to wear clothes till they wore out during those two years. And then there were school lunches. They cost 35 cents in those days. I pocketed the money every morning, and, of course, never ate lunch. But that wasn't going to fly with my Mom, so every day, I went to the cafeteria and sat with my friends, so that I could memorize what was on their plates. When I got home every day, the first thing Mom asked me was what was for lunch. And I rattled off the full menu. She never found out where the money came from to pay for my lessons! There was an upside to skipping lunch every day. I weighed a full 100 pounds less than I do now.

One Sunday in May, 1972, as we sat down to Sunday dinner after church, I looked across the table at Dad and said "I have my half." I didn't have to explain. He looked up and said "After we finish lunch, I'll wash the dishes, and we'll go to the airport." And we did. I had my first lesson that day, and flew throughout the summer, obtaining my Private Pilot License in September, before the start of my senior year.

When I stopped flying many years later for medical reasons, I had over 900 hours in my logbook, numerous trophies from collegiate flying competitions, and had owned 3 different airplanes. Oh how I do miss flying!

## **The Airboat**

I know you are wondering, just what is the connection between an airboat and a guy who lives and breathes aviation? My tale's a long one, but I'll wag it anyway.

When I was at Auburn, one of the girls on our flying team, Allison Reynolds, invited a group of us to her parents' house near Winter Haven, FL, for spring break. The year before, I went down with 2 guys, and stayed in a hotel across the road from the Winter Haven airport. We spent a few days of the break in training at Jack Brown's Seaplane Base, and returned home with shiny new seaplane ratings. Allison was friends with the guys at Jack Brown's, and had a seaplane rating herself. She arranged to have 2 seaplanes and instructors fly over to her parents' place on Lake Hatchineha, so that others in our group could get their ratings, too, and several did, including Steve Conn and Haden Swift. So, what could be better than spring break on a lake, with seaplanes to fly, a little water skiing, and did I mention girls in bikinis? Yeah, that kind of followed from the skiing part. All I could think to say was "I'm in!"

Allison's parents, Gordon and Marilyn, grew up in the boat racing world, and Gordon's business was building airboats for the US Army to use in the Mekong Delta in the Vietnam war. These weren't the average airboats you see in shows like CSI Miami, with a flat bottomed aluminum hull and small aircraft engine providing power, and a seat for one. Think big ass fiberglass bass boat, with a 6 cylinder 300 HP aircraft engine at the rear, swinging a big 4-bladed wooden propeller. The driver's seat was 6 feet above the bottom, with a seat for 2 in front of that, and a little lower, both made of steel tubing. There was room beside and in front of the seats for a squad of soldiers. Tough. Big. Very fast. While down for spring break, Gordon took us for our first of many rides around the lake. The wildlife around this lake is spectacular. If you go out around dusk, you see many varieties of birds,

including hawks and bald eagles, as well as the requisite alligators in all sizes from 2 to 12 feet.

Roll the clock ahead a couple years. In nearby Lakeland, the Experimental Aircraft Association began having an annual spring fly-in convention called Sun-N-Fun. Jim Ward and I went down for spring break in 1980, and went to one of the first fly-ins. By the time Jim came back to Auburn a week later, he and Allison were engaged.

After we all ended up working at Gulfstream in Savannah, GA together, it just seemed right to go down for the fly-in every year. Always a different group went with us, with a few regulars, but we never missed. Jim took over duties as airboat pilot, and we always went for the ride on Friday night when we arrived, then spent the weekend at the fly-in, and back to Savannah on Monday morning.

It was on our boat ride in 1999 that trouble came calling. We had traveled several miles around the edge of the lake, and as darkness fell, we turned around. We were skimming along at maybe 30 MPH, and came around a corner. There was a stand of cypress trees to the right, and my mind quickly calculated that this wasn't going to work out. I barely had time to think "This is gonna hurt", as we were sliding sideways toward the first tree. If we had hit it sideways, I would have exited the boat post-haste, and completed the maneuver with my melon clobbered as if by a very large baseball bat. An intervention then occurred. A stump was in the water, and struck the aft side of the boat. Boat made a hard right turn. Boat contacted cypress tree directly on the bow and immediately came to a full stop. Van exited the boat and an instant later I found myself face down in 6 inches of water, 20 feet in front of the boat, with my mouth full of that gooey, stinky mud that is found in such places. Raise head, take breath, spit, spit, spit. Yuck! I had landed on my right foot, and then my upper body kept on going, and splat. I stood, and all the parts seemed to work. I shouted to Jack Scott, who had been seated next to me on the passenger seat. He answered, but sounded far away. The conversation was so strange, almost surreal, until I realized I still had the hearing protectors over my ears to protect from the roar of the unmuffled engine. Jim's son Trow had been standing in the bow, and had crumpled forward and banged his knee and bit through his lip.

Otherwise he was okay. Jim was out cold in the bottom of the boat. He had tumbled over the seat in front of him and landed on his head. This is when I said the stupidest words I ever uttered, with his shaken son sitting right in front of me. I turned to Jack and said “He looks dead to me.” Can you imagine? Jim came around pretty quick, and we decided to boat back across the lake to the house. Only one problem, the boat was stuck in the mud.

Did you see the movie Apocalypse Now? Remember the cook on the boat, named Chef? And when he walked into the jungle to gather truffles, he was chased back to the boat by a tiger? All the way he was yelling “Never get out of the boat”, over and over. Well, that was always my mantra on these excursions. After all, these were alligator infested waters. Yet here I was, knee deep in murky water, pushing the boat out of the mud with Jack. So, we got loose, jumped in, and off we went. Almost. Remember Jim? He was a little shaky, and unfortunately he was the only one among us that knew how to drive the boat, so I decided to stand next to him all the way back. The engine had been idling the whole time, so with a little throttle we were off. Soon, I thought we were in trouble. Jim asked me “Are those lights where we are going?” Luckily, it turned out he had just lost his glasses. Okay, not so bad.

We returned safely and docked. Then came the personal inventory. Jack didn't have a scratch on him. Trow had bruised and painful knees, and a bad cut on his lip, manageable. I thought my right ankle might be broken, and couldn't put any weight on it. I wasn't going to any airshow! Jim got the worst of it. Immediate problems were lost glasses and painful ribs. By morning, it was obvious we needed to go home, and we had Allison get appointments for the injured at our doctor. Jack drove us home, and we went straight to the doc. No broken bones! But I had major soft tissue damage, and needed a walker around the house for 7 weeks. A friend, Curtis Wilson, helped me connect my computer upstairs with my laptop downstairs so I could do some work. Jim ended up in the hospital with a collapsed lung, but recovered quickly.

The magnificent airboat? Not a scratch!

We revisited the scene of the crime the following year. The tree had a small chunk missing from the impact. Jack and I got a thorough lesson in the art of airboat piloting, which means, of course, that we never took the airboat out again. Gordon and Marilyn sold the house and boats, and moved to the coast for a well deserved retirement.

Jim and I have slightly different perspectives on the accident. He believes that if the stump wasn't there, we would have successfully negotiated the turn. My belief is that if not for the stump, we would have hit the tree broadside, and I would have gone splat, in other words, the stump saved my life. We'll never know who's right, and don't lose any sleep over our different opinion. I'm just glad nobody was hurt any worse than we were.

So why didn't we get a face full of tree? Physics! When the stump spun us around, the centrifugal force threw us out at an angle, even though the boat hit dead center on the bow. Physics is good!!!

## Photos



I loved riding in the motorcar with Dad. And he let me drive, too!



My favorite engine on the Clinchfield Railroad. But imagine being a kid and seeing that bearing down on you inside a tunnel. Scary stuff indeed!



Clinchfield Railroad engineering office party, 1955. Grandpa is lower right edge of picture. Dad is standing in the back to the right, with a tie and no jacket. Mom is in the second row center, with glasses.



Engineers at work! Dad is third from left, with a cigar in his hand. Now I know why I never wanted to wear a tie in the office. I inherited it!



Typical scene at a train wreck that Dad was responsible for cleaning up.



Uncle Roy and Van in background at Clinchfield Railroad golden spike ceremony, 1990s.



Royal Gorge Bridge, 1966. It is 956 feet above the Arkansas River. We drove across it, then parked, and Dad and I walked across and back. That didn't cure my fear of heights.



The seaplane I trained in for my seaplane rating, 1976.



The first airplane, in partnership with Steve Conn and John Regan, called the Lima Bean, at 1978 NIFA National Airmeet in Smyrna, TN.



My second airplane, a Grumman AA-1C, named the Pocket Rocket because it was small and fast. Hilton Head Island, 1982.



My last airplane, a Cessna 210E, with the landing gear in transit. Hilton Head Island, 1988.



We broke a world record in this 747, for the heaviest airplane to lift off the earth, at 852,000 pounds. Glasgow, MT, May, 1979



Gulfstream IV-SP test aircraft, Roswell, NM, October, 1992. The ultimate in comfort, at least when the interior is installed!



Curtis Wilson, Van, and Steve Conn at Sun-N-Fun fly-in, some year in April. Before it is over, we will have walked miles, and our feet will hurt and we will sweat. Glorious!!!! More please!



Jim Ward and Vlado Lench, with Moonbeam McSwine, Vlado's pristine P-51D.



Jim Ward, our usual airboat driver.



Van, on my first and only airboat driving lesson.



Jim, Jack, and Trow at Sun-N-Fun, a year after the airboat accident, none the worse for the wear.

# Gulfstream, the First Time

*“Do not work for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you, for on Him the Father, God, has set His seal.” - John 6:27*

## Completion Center

In 1980, I was working at Arnold Engineering Development Center, the US Air Force's wind tunnel facility, near Tullahoma, TN. The company I worked for, Arnold Research Organization, or ARO, had designed, built, and operated the facility for the last 30 years. The contract was up for renewal on October 1 that year, and the government decided to split it into 3 pieces, Propulsion Wind Tunnels (that was my group), Engine Test Facility, and Administration. Great. I had barely had time to get my secret clearance, when the apple cart might be getting upset. On October first, they announced the winners. CalSpan Laboratories, an offshoot of Cornell University's aerodynamic lab, won the PWT contract. ARO won the ETF contract, and Lockheed won the Admin contract. Not good for us! We expected to hear from CalSpan quickly, to let us know if we had jobs on January first or not. Crickets. It was six weeks before we heard anything from the new management team. By then, many of the engineers couldn't handle the risk of not having a job, and had found new jobs somewhere else. I was among those who bailed out.

My new job was at Gulfstream American in Savannah, GA. The Gulfstream III had just been FAA certified, and Gulfstream had built a completion

center to install avionics and interiors in the airplanes before delivering them to the customers. There was also a paint hangar to paint the exteriors. That was the area that they needed help most, so I became a group lead in the mechanical engineering group in the completion center. What we did was to design the installation of the custom interiors in new Gulfstream IIIs. On day one, I knew absolutely nothing about how to accomplish my assignment. They paired me up with another engineer for a few months to get the hang of it, but he wasn't a great teacher and I ended up knowing just enough to be dangerous. This is the job where I got chewed out more than all the other jobs put together. Good news! I had a "get out of jail free" card. More about that later.

After about five months of OJT, my boss, Russ Gregory, got me and we went into the completion center director's office and closed the door. I knew I was about to get fired, just not what for. And then they told me I was getting my own group, and the first guy I would be supervising was a new hire "rag head". Uh, Russ, what's a rag head? Iranian. Name is Hossein. Just graduated from Savannah State. Here's the thing. It was only a little over a year since the end of the hostage situation in the American embassy in Iran. Nobody wanted to work with an Iranian at that time. So they gave him to the new guy. I was just fine with that! Now I had my "group". Hossein was nervous, but a nice guy, so I set out to turn him into a draftsman, teaching him the standards that we used to make the drawings consistent. We were given a Gulfstream II that had belonged to the Venezuelan Air Force, to do a new interior in an older airplane. That was a good place for us to start. We soon discovered that Hossein would never be a draftsman. As hard as he tried, he just didn't get the hang of it. We needed a weights engineer to handle all the weight documentation for the airplanes we were working on, and he got the job. Hoss, as we have known him for 40 years, was perfectly suited to that job and has been doing it for 4 decades. Until I retired, I would run into Hoss from time to time. He still calls me Boss, and is one of the only old friends from Gulfstream that gets a hug, not a handshake, when we meet.

I was back without a group, and my next job was the first Gulfstream IIB, which was getting a new interior. Not my finest hour, but I muddled through. One funny moment came when a guy named Bean was putting in a

drain tube for the ice drawer in the galley. He asked me to measure for him to locate the place in the airplane's skin where the drain went. I put my finger in the middle of the correct panel. Then I said "Bean, when I move my finger, drill a hole there." Problem solved.

We had a Gulfstream II come in to have a liquor cabinet replaced in the cabin. Nothing difficult there, except they wanted to push a button and have the decanters rise up out of the cabinet, and go back down in the same way. The challenge was that the shelf had to rise ten inches, but there was only five inches of space under the shelf for the mechanism. There were many ideas for how to do it, some downright crazy. The final answer was to attach a flap motor from one of the little Grummans to the bottom of the shelf. Then very thin cables were run from the inside top of the cabinet through small holes in the shelf, to the screw jack on the flap motor. Push the button and the shelf pulls itself up. Bingo!

The next project was the interior for a new Gulfstream III, belonging to the president of the African nation of Gabon. I still didn't have a group, but I started work on it anyway. Interesting thing, the president's name was to be prominently displayed in gold on the cover for the radio rack, just across the entryway from the main entrance. I about fell out of my chair when I was told his name, El Bongo. No kidding! And that was what it said when it was delivered.

## **Acoustics**

Remember that get out of jail free card? Charlie Coppi, VP of Engineering had made a deal. If I didn't like it in the completion center, I could transfer to the Flight Sciences group. After 9 months, it was time to call it in. Mr. Coppi made the call. Two weeks later, nothing had happened. On that Saturday morning, Mr. Coppi paid a visit to my boss, and when he left, Russ told me to report to flight sciences on Monday morning. I had been traded for another engineer, a designer, and a third round draft pick. No wait, not that last part.

On Monday morning, I became an acoustics engineer, something I knew a lot more about. My new boss was Dave Hilton, one of my favorite bosses ever. Dave came to Gulfstream from NASA in Virginia. While there, he started working as a part time police officer in Virginia Beach. After coming to Gulfstream, Dave kept the police job. He drove to Virginia Beach after work every Friday night, worked two shifts on the streets of Virginia Beach, then drove back to Savannah on Sunday night. Most Mondays, Dave regaled us with his latest exploits on the streets of Virginia Beach, with most stories leading to a good laugh. We referred to Dave as Officer Friendly because nobody could envision him as being a gruff policeman that pulls you out of your car and slaps the cuffs on. He kept up that pace until he retired, 15 years later.

We had two responsibilities, interior noise and exterior noise. I was his only helper, so Dave and I quickly got comfortable with each other, and got down to business.

On the interior side, initially I spent a lot of time flying on customer airplanes, documenting the sound levels at each passenger seat. Then, a friend of Dave's worked for a company that made soundproofing materials, and offered to do a detailed sound intensity test on our company demonstrator, and design a new soundproofing package that would save weight and make the interior quieter.

We flew the demonstrator up to Indianapolis, where EAR, Dr. Curt Holmer's company, was located. That evening was spent with Curt's assistant, calibrating equipment. The next day we flew a big circle around the country while collecting the sound data that would define the new soundproofing design. When the project was complete, we had reduced the interior noise levels noticeably and cut the weight of soundproofing by 800 pounds, enough to carry 4 more passengers. That was significant! Imagine my dismay when Dave told me that the manager of the completion center shops took credit for the success, and was promoted to head up the whole completion center. Dave looked at me with a straight face and said "Here is your reward for your part in the project." Then he reached over and stuck a gold star on my company badge. We laughed about that for years.

That new soundproofing package was further developed over the years, reducing noise and weight, as well as installation man-hours, and is still in use today, over 40 years later. Not bad considering that EAR took on all the development costs.

The Gulfstream III was already certified, so we didn't have to get our hands dirty with exterior noise certification. However, the GIII and GII both were powered by the Rolls Royce Spey engine, a low bypass, very noisy jet engine. Our only option for existing airplanes was to develop an operational procedure to curtail noise. We called the project Quiet Flying. The team consisted of 4 engineers and one pilot. Ed Flinn, aerodynamics manager, and Dave Hilton, acoustics manager, took the lead. Jim Ward did the grunt work in aerodynamics, and I did the grunt work in acoustics. We hired a pilot / consultant, Paul Stevens, who was a retired GII pilot, to do our test flying and once we had the procedure approved, Paul became an evangelist and traveled the world teaching it to customer pilots. This turned out to be one of the most interesting and satisfying projects I ever had the privilege to work on. And the best part was that I got to do it with Jim Ward. The boys were back together, and we had problems to solve.

At that point, Gulfstream had limited computational capabilities, since the company had only split off from Grumman a couple of years before. The Gulfstream III had been designed by Grumman in Bethpage, Long Island, NY. Dave and I flew up to spend a week with the acoustics guys at Grumman. They could run the software to compute takeoff profiles with various configuration and power changes, and then use that as input to their noise programs and determine the noise footprint of the airplane flying that procedure. Having those final footprints on graph paper, hand drawn because the capability for the computer to produce that kind of graphics didn't exist yet, we headed back to Savannah.

Our research determined a best procedure, which was to takeoff with a reduced power setting, called FLEX, then after retracting the landing gear, retract wing flaps to 10 degrees and reduce power to a level that would result in level flight if one engine failed. This was determined to be insufficient power in the event of a failure, so we adjusted it to a slightly

higher level that guaranteed performance equal or better than the normal procedure.

Jim and I were given access to the GII flight simulator at the FlightSafety training facility. I flew and Jim manned the instructor panel. The idea was to validate the new procedure when inducing an engine failure at numerous conditions. We did this in the sim rather than an airplane so that if it didn't work, we didn't crash and burn, and generally ruin our day. Note that I did not have a multi-engine pilot rating, nor had I ever flown a Gulfstream aircraft or simulator. The idea was that if I could successfully fly the procedure, trained pilots would have no problem with it. We also had the ability to record the calculated performance, and we used that to check the simulator, which was badly off in performance and handling. We provided FlightSafety a copy of the necessary certification reports so that they could get it programmed to better match the airplane, as a favor to pay them back for letting us use it. Everybody won on that one. Jim failed an engine at various locations during takeoff, both at heavy and light weights. Everything worked as designed, and I didn't leave any smoking holes in the simulated runway. Ready to fly it in real life. That was when Paul Stevens took over in the cockpit. Soon, the procedure was tested and company pilots were comfortable with the procedure. It was time to gather some real test data to validate our noise predictions.

Dave, Ed, and I went to California for the exterior noise tests. We did our testing at John Wayne airport in Santa Ana. We had hired an engineering company, Bolt, Beranek, and Newman, that was well known for noise testing transport category airplanes. They set up their recording equipment at the appropriate locations. We borrowed a GII, and flew a series of takeoffs and landings over the course of two days, alternating between the normal, full power takeoff, and the new Quiet Flying procedure. Analysis of the data showed the procedure worked as expected, and noise levels were reduced to a level equal to the newer airplanes with quiet high bypass engines. Quite a success!

Paul went on his worldwide trip, training customer pilots to use Quiet Flying. Back in the office, I helped Jim to develop tabulated takeoff data for the Quiet Flying procedure, and create the noise part of the report. This was

a great project, and resulted in our customers being able to operate at a number of airports around the globe with stringent noise restrictions.

## **Aerodynamics, Now We're Getting Back to My Home Turf**

Shortly after the Quiet Flying project, I moved over to the aerodynamics group, where Jim and I collaborated on developing some of the essential performance software that was needed in order to break the dependence on Grumman.

Along the way, we did 2 big proposals for the Air Force. The first was for a new 2-seat trainer to replace the Cessna T-37. Our design was called the Peregrine, and featured two engines from Williams Research designed specifically for the Peregrine. In the course of creating that proposal, I had to work through Thanksgiving weekend, along with the rest of the performance guys. Ultimately, we lost the contract to Fairchild, who then invested millions into the project only to have it canceled. Good thing we didn't win that one!

About a year later, we were working on another Air Force contract for our Gulfstream III, to be used for executive transport. At least this time, there was no design work, just the proposal itself. Once again, Ed asked me to work through Thanksgiving, only this time I was the only one in the whole department. Oh well, I could use the extra pay.

We won that contract. Yay! The Air Force version of the GIII was called the C-20A. Over time, as the GIV, GV, and G550 were produced, the US military services bought them, resulting in a nice fleet of airplanes.

Right after contract award, we were to have a guest from USAF Air Mobility Command to have a look at how we handled takeoff and landing data. Ed was expecting a major on a Tuesday, and I was to show him the manuals and answer any questions he had. Normally, I dressed casually, but I was going to wear a suit for that. After lunch on Monday, Ann Baker,

secretary for our VP of engineering, showed up at my desk with a long skinny box in her hand and an ear to ear grin on her face. Ann knew how much I hated ties. She said “Mr. Flinn has a message for you. PUT IT ON.” About then my phone rang. It was Ed of course. The box contained a tie from the company store. He explained that the Air Force guy was a day early, so he bought me a tie. I immediately put it on, with every eye in the room watching, and went up to Ed’s office. A few minutes later, the Air Force guy showed up, a second lieutenant that was even lower in his chain of command than I was in mine. We got the preliminaries out of the way, and planned to spend the next day on the details.

The next morning, Ed’s words came to me “Wear a tie tomorrow.” He didn’t specify the tie that he bought me, so I put it back in the box and selected one of my own. During the year I was at Boeing, wide ties in bright colors were in style, but not any more. I picked a 4 inch wide, bright yellow tie with stripes that ranged from lime green to bright orange. I drove into work. Ed and I were always first to arrive in the morning. He came into our area and took one look at me and said “I deserved that.” He never said another word about it. The Air Force guy got a good laugh, and when I took him to lunch in the Gulfstream cafeteria, every eye in the place was following the glow of my tie. And laughing. How can something get that far out of style in such a short time? Years later, at Ed’s retirement party, Bill Shira, one of the performance engineers back then, told that story. I wish I had known, because I would have worn the tie!

Near the end of 3 years at Gulfstream, the Gulfstream IV was under preliminary development. A small group of engineers was selected to go to England to participate in wind tunnel testing of the new airplane. As the only engineer on our staff below management level that had experience working in wind tunnels, I anticipated being selected for the wind tunnel team. That didn’t happen. Instead, I was given a project to add metric scales to the graphs in the Gulfstream I flight manual, pretty much secretarial work. When I completed the GI metric scale project, I left Gulfstream for Federal Express where I began my career as a contract engineer. Ed Flinn told me that Gulfstream would never hire me as a contractor if I had worked there as a direct hire. In that moment, I was fine with that. Nevertheless, I

left the company on good terms with my bosses. But four years later, things changed. More about that later.

## Photos



Janie and Jim Peterson, with Katie and Erik, Tacoma, WA, early 1980s.



Mom and Van in Erwin, early 1980s.



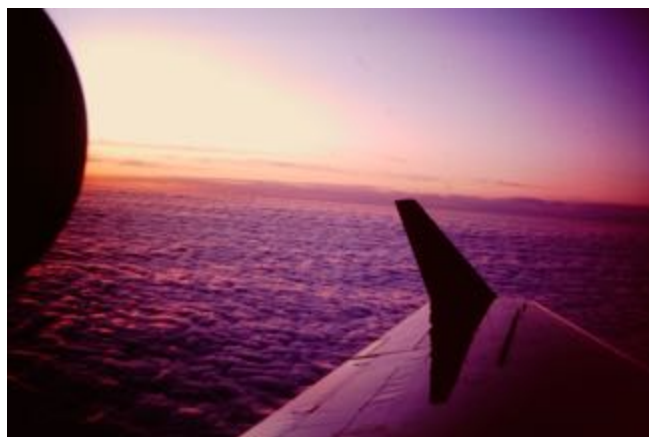
Ed Flinn, learning to fly in a Luscombe at age 17.



Van and Dr. Curt Holmer, performing sound intensity test in Gulfstream's demonstrator, 1982.



Taking a break during sound intensity test on Gulfstream's demonstrator, GIII S/N 875. This test led to the design of a new soundproofing package, which saved 800 pounds. Gold star for me!



Sunrise on the way home. Sweet!

# Repo Man

*“The wicked borrows and does not pay back, but the righteous is gracious and gives.” - Psalms 37:21*

## **A Door Closes, Another Opens**

When I first went to work at Gulfstream in 1981, they still had unsold inventory from their light aircraft line that was shut down at the end of the 1979 model year. There were over 50 Cheetahs (150 HP) and Tigers (180 HP) parked in the grass in front of the factory. It is not good to just leave light aircraft sitting for long periods, so they created a program to allow employees to fly them during lunch breaks. Good for the airplane, good for the employee.

As soon as I heard about this, I beat a path up to the light aircraft area in the administrative offices and signed up. I went on a checkout flight with Virgil Wolfe, one of the test pilots who had previously tested the light aircraft. Virgil could quickly discern my flying skills and deemed me good enough, so the rest of our flight included flying out to Tybee Island and enjoying the sights, then a low level dash back up the Savannah River to the city, and popping up to an appropriate altitude before calling approach control to sequence for landing. As you might guess, Virgil and I hit it off, and remained friends for many years until his death.

Thus armed with an official okey-dokey from Virgil, I was ready to start flying my lunchtime away, and then a guy named Red Stevens stepped in. He was an airplane dealer in Oklahoma, and made Gulfstream an offer for

the entire remaining inventory. Just like that, one Saturday there was a mass flight and they were gone.

By this time I had become friends with Daphne Burrows, who was the administrator for light aircraft. They still had many airplanes on the books that they had financed. Once in a while, somebody defaulted, and the airplane had to be repossessed. That's where I came in.

## **Boulder**

One of the administrators in the completion center that I worked with, Marvin Stodghill, came to me. There were 3 airplanes in Boulder, CO that were being repossessed. Would I like to go with him and fly one of them back? Duh. We left that Friday night on a flight to Denver. Next morning, we 3 intrepid aviators drove up to the Boulder airport and walked into the office of the flight school that had the airplanes. Boy were they surprised! Even though Daphne had been talking to them for weeks, and the day before had told them we would be there at 9:00 to fly the airplanes back to Savannah, they just didn't believe it. They had done nothing to prepare for this moment. None of the paperwork and log books for the planes had been provided. We grabbed the keys, did a quick preflight of our respective mounts, and immediately took off.

We didn't have any plan to fly home together, so we each went our own way. Marv and the other pilot went south along the eastern side of the Rockies for a little sightseeing. I headed east, deciding to spend Saturday night with my parents in Erwin, TN, before flying on to Savannah Sunday morning.

All went well. The airplane, a Cheetah, seemed to be well maintained. I had enough fuel to get to Hutchinson, KS, near Wichita, so I stopped there for fuel, lunch, and a weather briefing.

A cold front lay across my course, but it looked like I could climb over it. I blasted off, headed for the Greeneville, TN airport. I was able to climb over the cold front, barely. I had to get up to 11,500 feet altitude to be able to

weave my way between the blossoming thunderstorms. The front wasn't very wide, so getting across it didn't take long. Then it was clear skies the rest of the way. I didn't want to file IFR and fly through the clouds because the airplane I was flying was new to me and didn't have all the avionics required.

As I was passing Memphis, darkness fell. It was a beautiful clear night, but moonless. That's going to matter in a couple hours. The flight went smoothly in the dark across Tennessee. Flying at night is a unique experience. It is peaceful, and while there really isn't any difference, it just seems like it is quieter at night.

Then I arrived at Greeneville. The airport beacon was rotating, inviting me in. But the runway lights were off. Some airports have runway lights that can be controlled by the pilot, by clicking the microphone button 5 times rapidly on their communication frequency. I clicked away, to no avail. And that's when my self training kicked in.

Five years before, I was a student at Auburn, and had an airplane I bought with 2 partners, John Regan and Steve Conn. One night I was out flying, to relieve the stress of final exams, something I frequently did. It occurred to me that eventually if I kept flying at night, I would likely have to make a landing without runway lights. It could be an emergency landing on a road, or a landing at a small airport with no lights.

So I started flying over to the Tuskegee airport at night. They had pilot controllable lights, and the airport was surrounded by flat land, so there was nothing out there to hit. The first time, there was a full moon. No runway lights wasn't too big of a problem, because I could see most of the airport, and most importantly, the runway, just fine in the moonlight. Landings were smooth and on the numbers. The next time there was a half moon. A little more sporty. Knowing the runway direction and location relative to the beacon, I could easily find the runway, and the landings were good. Finally, a moonless night, pitch black. Knowing the airport layout was helpful, but not enough. I developed a technique of turning final a little high, then kicking the rudder left and right sweeping the landing light in the nose of the plane back and forth until the white paint of the runway centerline was

found. Then I could line up on it and make a normal landing. I practiced this in the dark over and over, not knowing if I would ever need it. I would!

Five years later, there I was, arriving at a familiar airport that was dark. In this case, there was a large hill not far off the approach end of the runway that I had to miss, so I planned on turning final extra high. The runway was 5,000 feet long, so I could land halfway down and still have plenty of room to stop. I made one pass just to find the hill with my landing light, and then the end of the runway. Armed with the key points and their relationship to the beacon, I flew the traffic pattern for the landing attempt. I turned final, sweeping left and right to find the runway. Found it, but my high approach put me too high. I needed to lose about 200 feet in a hurry. The maneuver to do that is called a forward slip. Step on the right rudder and lower the left wing, and you come down fast. Unfortunately, the slip pointed the landing light to the side, and I couldn't see the runway anymore. So, I slipped for 5 seconds, then swept the nose to the front, eyeballed the runway, then slipped again for 5 seconds. After a couple cycles, I was in position and made a normal landing with plenty of runway left. Training ALWAYS pays off! Never do anything for the first time in an emergency situation.

I used the pay phone outside the office, and my Dad picked me up an hour later. I had a nice, but short, visit with Mom and Dad, and blasted off in the morning for an easy flight across the Appalachian Mountains, and the flat land of South Carolina and Georgia, back home to Savannah.

This was a nice trip, with some good flying experience. And I didn't even have to buy the fuel! Such a deal. More please.

## **Saratoga Springs**

Labor day weekend was coming up. I was single, with nothing in particular planned. Then the phone rang. It was Daphne, asking if I could repo a Cheetah that weekend. Sure! My holiday weekend was now planned. The airplane was in Saratoga Springs, NY. I was to take the airlines to Albany, NY, and the plane's mechanic would pick me up there, and I would drop him off at Saratoga Springs and be on my way. Okay, but this was a holiday,

so I had an extra day to get back home. I called my Auburn friend, Jack Kennedy, who had bought a house on the Maine coast near the Canadian border. Yep, they could handle a guest on Saturday night. So the plan was to fly to the airport nearest Jack's house on Saturday, then leave Sunday morning and fly to Newport News, VA and spend the night, then on to Savannah on Monday.

The mechanic picked me up as planned and we chatted about the airplane on the short hop to Saratoga Springs. He was proud of that airplane that he maintained. That should have been a clue. I was accustomed to flying airplanes that were well known and well maintained. This Cheetah was about to teach me a thing or two about trusting airplanes you don't know.

I pulled the plane over to the gas pump and was filling the tanks, when the guy driving the jet fuel truck stopped by and mentioned that the pilots of the Hawker jet that he had just fueled had told him they used to fly the light airplanes at Gulfstream. All right, these were people I needed to meet. I walked over and met John Salamankas and his girlfriend, who was the copilot. When they were at Gulfstream and started dating, they were asked which one was going to transfer to a different department. Being pilots, there was no other department than flight operations. So they left the company and got jobs flying a Hawker for a family in New York. What good fortune meeting them there. Not long after, they broke up and John returned to Gulfstream. When I was a flight test engineer, John was one of my favorite pilots. Our friendship lasted for decades. The last time I saw him was in flight ops in 2014.

Gassed up and ready to go, I rolled out to the runup pad by the end of the runway, and there I found the first flaw in the airplane. The brakes weren't able to hold the airplane at takeoff power. Can't do a proper pre-takeoff engine check if you can't keep it still at full power. I had to compromise, and do the full power magneto check when I started the takeoff roll. Not optimal, but it did the trick. Up and away, I pointed the nose toward Maine. It was a beautiful day with a few puffy clouds along the way. I enjoyed the view crossing Vermont, New Hampshire, and finally Maine. Beautiful scenery all the way to the coast and up the coast. I passed a large array of tall antennae, which I later learned was the US Navy's very low frequency

communications facility for talking to submarines all across the Atlantic. Before I knew it, I had arrived at Machias Valley Airport in Machias, ME. Nobody there, it was a very small rural airport. While I waited for Jack, a local pilot happened by and showed me how to use the self-fueling pump, so by the time Jack arrived, I had it ready to go for the next morning.

Jack pulled up and we had a joyful reunion. It had been only 3 years, but there had been a lot of water under both of our bridges, and it was great to see him. Jack and his first and second wife Joan (they were divorced and remarried about 8 years later) lived in a unique house way out on the tip of Cape Split, near South Addison, ME. It was down a long dirt road, and where the cape narrowed, there was the house. It overlooked the outlet of a river and faced west, along the coastline. The cape was so narrow that the garage had to be across the road. And you had to look both ways before stepping out of the kitchen door, or you could find yourself as a neighbor's hood ornament. No fooling! I went in, and they gave me the grand tour. The house was built in the early 1900s as a summer cottage. The boathouse was built first and the owner lived there while he built the main house. At the time I was there, the boathouse was unused, but they later converted it into an apartment for their daughter Helen.

Inside the house, the first thing I noticed was that the kitchen wasn't very wide. Through the door, the living room was equally narrow. Next, I noticed exposed knob and tube electrical wiring running around the room up by the ceiling. Since it was a summer cottage, there was no insulation or inner walls. Just the outside walls and studs, with an unusual addition. Boards had been placed horizontally between the studs to make bookshelves. The original owner occupied his time by reading magazines, and he never threw them away! He just added another shelf when he needed it. Jack showed me a National Geographic from 1916. They were all there, along with hundreds of other magazines like Popular Mechanics and Reader's Digest. Upstairs were 6 rooms. One had been made into a bathroom. The others were bedrooms. Upstairs was wider than downstairs, the overhang forming a covered wraparound porch around 3 sides of the house. The rooms had no ceilings, just walls. They were all open to the roof. Hope I didn't snore!

Jack took me out in his boat. He had set some lobster traps around the bay. Just enough to pay his taxes in retirement, he said. We pulled a couple up, and like magic, we had fresh lobster for dinner, and Joan knew how to cook them!

After a chilly September night's sleep, I was off to the airport in the morning. We said goodbye, and I was soon airborne, on my way to Newport News. It was another glorious day for flying. I followed the coast until I was close to New York, and turned inland to avoid traffic into the Big Apple. All went well until I was approaching Newport News. Darkness fell just before I got there. I turned on the exterior lights. First the rotating beacon. There was no familiar pulsing red glow on the back of the propeller. Uh oh. Another fault to add to the list for the Gulfstream mechanic. Then the navigation lights. Green on the right wing, red on the left, white on the tail. Only the red light came on. I'm pretty much invisible, so I turn on the landing light. Nope. At that point I was a little worried about my contact with the tower controller. But it was a very quiet night, and he gave me the runway and cleared me to land. He probably didn't even look for me. Good enough. This time, I had runway lights but no lights on the airplane. No problem. I made an easy landing. Then the tower cleared me to taxi to the ramp. Sayonara, see ya later. I could see the lights across the field, now how to get there? I came upon an unlit taxiway that went straight to the ramp. Only one problem. In the darkness, and with nothing but a red navigation light on the left wingtip, I couldn't see enough to keep on the taxiway. Plan B to the rescue. The Cheetah has a sliding canopy. I opened it. I found that if I moved left until the wingtip was over the edge of the pavement, and I leaned outside, I could just see the edge of the pavement in the red glow of the light. Before long, I was parked, fueled and in a cab to the nearest hotel.

Monday morning came, and I had another glorious day to fly the last leg into Savannah. After landing I gave my friend, mechanic Les Miller, an 8.5x11 piece of paper full on both sides with squawks on the airplane. I learned my lesson. When flying an airplane that is previously unknown to me, check EVERYTHING before the first takeoff! Never trust the guy that couldn't afford to make the payments. He probably couldn't afford to maintain it either.

Thus ended my career as a repo man. It was fun while it lasted, but since the light aircraft line was in the past, there were no more airplanes to be repossessed. Back to being an engineer all the time. More adventures to come!

## Photos



This is my ride home from Boulder, Colorado, 1981. Did I mention free flying time?



Sunset from Jack Kennedy's porch, Labor Day weekend, 1981.

# Dancing With a French Broad

*“I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.” - Philippians 4:13*

## **There I Was....**

In the aviation world we know we're about to hear a tall tale when we hear the words "There I was, flat on my back". This story differs in two ways. First, every word of it is true. Second, there I was, flat on my side, peering through the pouring rain with one wing pointed towards a raging river all too close below, and the other touching the cloud above. One wall of a deep ravine was beneath the landing gear, and I could see the other wall above me through the canopy. I desperately needed to see the river clearly, to know if I was likely to live more than a few more seconds, but the rain obstructed my view.

Perhaps it would be good to pause and see how we got in this situation.

## **This Was Supposed to be a Vacation**

It was the spring of 1982, and I was planning to spend a week's vacation at the Experimental Aviation Association's spring fling in Lakeland, FL, called Sun N Fun. My airplane, a Grumman AA-1C, which I called the “Pocket Rocket” because of its size and speed, was going to be upgraded with electronics that would allow flight on instruments in the clouds, but at the time, it was visual flight only. The night before leaving, I was all packed, had the weather briefing, the plane was fueled and ready to go, and so was

I. It was nothing but clear skies ahead for the whole week. And then the phone rang. Ugh! I hate it when that happens.

My grandfather had died. In an instant, my joyful week amongst the airplanes in the searing sun in central Florida, had turned into an introspective journey to lay someone to rest that had been a part of my life from the very beginning. Next morning, I got the weather report for a flight from Savannah, GA to Greeneville, TN, crossing the highest part of the Appalachian Mountains near Asheville, NC. Grim is the only description that fits that forecast. From Asheville, across to the valley between Knoxville and Tri Cities, TN, the cloud ceiling and visibility decreased, and likelihood of rain increased. As I arrived over Asheville, ceiling was still at about 4,500 feet, and I had the expected fuel quantity to arrive in Greeneville with 45 minutes reserve or more.

## **I Know a Secret**

So, not perfect, but good enough. I pressed on. As the ceiling lowered, and the rain began, I still felt confident of being able to get across the mountains safely. And I knew a little secret. The French Broad River crossed the mountains right along my flight path. I learned as a young pilot at Tri Cities airport, about a pilot who had crashed in bad weather making the same flight path, and my instructor told me, "He should have known that by following the French Broad, he could have made it at 200 feet above the river, and never had to climb above 1,200 feet above sea level." The surrounding mountains include Mt. Mitchell, at 6,684 feet the highest peak east of the Rockies, so it was comforting to know there was a low altitude way across the mountains. As it turned out, I was going to need it!

Before long, I found myself about 500 feet above the ground, and river below. The rain began to pound on the windshield a little harder, but still, if it didn't get much worse, I felt I could make it through okay. What I didn't realize was that as the clouds came down, I was picking up an unexpected headwind. This is a good time for a sidebar about aviation weather forecasting. It is notoriously difficult to accurately forecast weather in mountainous terrain, especially at low altitudes. And so, I didn't expect the

headwind, nor the quick deterioration of the weather. Once I finally realized I wasn't making as much headway as expected, and checked my fuel supply, I didn't have enough fuel to turn around and go back to Asheville, the nearest airport with good weather. For the record, I get really nervous when my options start dwindling, and in this case, I didn't have any options. Onward we go.

Soon, I was down to 200 feet above the river. I kept one thing in mind all the time. If I looked down at the river, and the water wasn't going the same direction I was, I was dead. No easy way to soft pedal that. Why? That would mean I wasn't following the river, but had turned up a tributary, and was heading toward higher ground. Since the cloud was blocking my ability to climb, and see where I was going, it meant a quick and painful encounter with what in aviation is known as a Cumulo-Granite, or stuffed cloud. Not for me thanks.

After a while, my mind became rather numb. There was only one thing that I needed to think about. All the aviation training and experience were not terribly useful at this point. The one thing that mattered was, keep an eye on the river, don't wander to either side and hit something, and make really, really sure that the water kept going the same way I was. Okay, slightly more than one thing, but just barely.

Before long, I could see the valley widen ahead of me. Visibility was maybe a quarter mile through heavy rain. I began a right turn to follow the valley to the Greeneville airport, when suddenly an almost vertical wall of rock and trees appeared out of the rain in front of me. All I had time for was to react, and make a very hard left turn into a ravine. And there I was, flat on my side!

Once I leveled the wings, I could see I was in a very narrow ravine. It was raining so hard, I couldn't tell if the water below was with me or against me, so I scooted over as close as I dared to the wall on my right, to look down through the left side of the canopy. To my relief, I was still headed downstream. At that point, I noticed a railroad track alongside the river, and then a train came around the next curve just below me. I flashed him with my landing light, just to say hi as I went by.

Just a few minutes later, I broke out into the valley, for real this time. Hooray! The ceiling was about 500 feet in the valley, which seemed luxurious at that moment. But my fuel gauges both showed empty, so that good feeling didn't last. Greeneville didn't come up as quickly as expected, and I thought that maybe I had passed it. No way I was going to turn around and waste what little fuel I had by hunting for it. I was flying above a road that I knew, and it not only went by the Greeneville airport, but in about 20 miles, the Johnson City airport was also near it, so if I had missed Greeneville, the plan was to continue to Johnson City.

That was when the engine quit. Stopped dead. No sputters, just silence. I switched fuel tanks, and just before the propeller came to a stop, it started up again. I had the fuel mixture going to the engine as lean as I could get it (more air, less fuel), in order to conserve fuel. There was nothing left to do but hope there was enough in the second tank. That's when the engine quit again. I knew the score, and fuel was zero. The prop came to a complete stop, not something you want to see in flight. It got really quiet, except for the rain pounding on the windshield. By instinct alone, I went through the engine-out checklist. Fuel pump on, switch tanks (back to the other empty one), mixture rich. Mixture rich! That did it. The engine started with a roar. I knew there were only a few minutes, if that much, of fuel. I had to find someplace to land, and fast.

And what did my weary eyes see come out of the rain ahead? The most beautiful thing I ever saw from the air, runway 5-23 at Greeneville, TN! I made a quick call on Unicom (a non-controlled airport's radio frequency) and found that they were landing on runway 23, which would have required that I fly around the airport and land in the opposite direction. I was almost lined up on 5, so I made a quick call to announce I was on short final for runway 5, and didn't touch the engine controls until I was over the numbers at the end of the runway. The landing was long, but uneventful, unlike the flight. I pulled up to the fuel pump, and was standing in the pouring rain, fueling the airplane, when my Dad walked over and offered me his umbrella. "Nope Dad, I'm kind of enjoying standing here in the rain." The tanks took 22.7 gallons to fill. The usable fuel in that airplane is 22.0 gallons.

As in the story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego, I was delivered from the fire! I imagine if you were outside looking in, you might have seen Jesus in the seat beside me.

## Photos



The Pocket Rocket, seen here on a beautiful day for flying. Its excellent visibility from the cockpit, and extreme maneuverability, were key factors in the successful completion of this flight.

# Noise, Lawyers, and Something Impossible

*“For we have regard for what is honorable, not only in the sight of the Lord, but also in the sight of men.” - 2 Corinthians 8:21*

## **The Blizzard**

I was working at Federal Express in the winter of 1984-85. It started snowing unexpectedly one morning just after we started work. By 9:00, it was a full blown blizzard. When you work at Federal Express's sorting facility, this is bad news. Really bad. The operations guys immediately went out and started the engines of the company's fleet of deicing trucks. Their tanks were already full of deicing fluid, so they were ready to roll when the airplanes were ready to depart around midnight.

Our group, Operations Engineering, had responsibility for takeoff and landing performance data for the airplanes, and in operationally difficult situations, like a blizzard, our presence was needed to respond to requests for help. So we watched the rest of the engineering building and parking lot empty out at 10:00, leaving 5 of us in the building to take care of the fleet. No problem, because the phones never rang. At 1:00, our manager, Les Spengler, sent us home. My pickup was very light in the rear, and with a snowy hill to climb, I wanted more weight in the back. I used a trash can from my desk to scoop snow from the now empty parking lot into the bed of the truck. Last one out, so I turned out the lights.

I only had to turn one corner, but then it was up over a pretty easy hill to the traffic light on Lamar Drive, the main highway that crossed my 6 mile route home. Traffic was backed up to the bottom of the hill. There was a four wheel drive truck in the ditch, with 2 guys pushing and the driver spinning the tires, digging 4 muddy holes. Other cars were sliding all over the sheet of ice. Memphis isn't known for driving skills, and it showed. My truck was a straight shift, and I shifted into third gear, normally used for cruising, but on ice, the best choice. When I could move, I fed a little gas and released a little clutch in unison, and up the hill we went. Easy as pie when you know the trick.

Once I crested the hill I could see the mess in front of me. Traffic was moving so slowly through the intersection that frustrated drivers were refusing to stop when the light turned red, and it was several minutes until the crossing traffic butted in. It took over an hour for me to break through, then another half hour to get home.

## **The Letter**

I had another hour on the clock, which I wasn't of a mind to throw out with the snow, so, what could I work on at home? My boss, Les Spengler, had tasked me with writing a letter to the company's VP of Legal Affairs. May as well work on that. Doyle Cloud, the VP in question, had written a brief relating to Federal Express's noise footprint, which was becoming more and more critical given that all of our airport operations were at night, and our fleet was growing fast. Nearly every technical point in the brief was wrong, and Les wanted his only engineer with aircraft noise experience (me) to set him straight before the brief went anywhere. Yeah, right, contract guy writes letter to legal VP and says he is an idiot. Nothing good can come from this, can it? Okay, where to start?

I wrote him a very nice letter and pointed out his errors, then ran it by Les and sent it once we got back in the office the next day. A couple days later, I got a call from Doyle Cloud, asking me to visit his office, which I did. And I was welcomed by Doyle and his team with open arms. This airport noise

thing was getting ugly, especially at our home base in Memphis, and these guys needed some serious technical support. I volunteered to help. Doyle later told me he had never in his career been dressed down so politely and eloquently as I had done in that letter. “My pleasure,” says I.

## **Lawyers, Lawyers, Everywhere**

I was paired up with Julie Ellis, the lawyer that was taking lead on noise issues. Doyle, Julie, and sometimes the Senior VP of Legal, hauled me to meetings with FAA, McDonnell Douglas (DC-10), Boeing (727), Memphis Airport Commission, and airport community (those were the most difficult). We accomplished much!

I even found myself in the parking lot of an elementary school one Sunday morning with my engineer friend Ken Hurley, recording noise levels for the fleet departure. Half were making normal takeoffs, and half were using an experimental noise reduction technique that was based in part on the Gulfstream Quiet Flying procedure. Unfortunately, management chose Easter Sunday for the test, and that school was across the street from a church that was having an outdoor sunrise service. Every airplane that flew over went with a little prayer from me that it would not be overly disruptive.

That school was in the midst of a community named Southaven, which was just south of the parallel north-south runways that were most often used for our night operations. Along the west side of the runways was Whitehaven, and to the east was Oakhaven. Collectively, I named them “Noisehaven”, where all of our noise complaints originated.

We worked closely with the airport commission and FAA in developing an airport noise study, and plan, based on Federal Aviation Regulation 150.

This was turning into a major part of my job, and I was actually enjoying working with the lawyers, once we got each other educated in some of the basics of our respective areas of expertise.

## The Impossible Dream

One thing that came out of the airport noise study was that our 727s were creating most of the noise. An obvious solution would be to replace them all. But airlines are loathe to send an airplane that will still fly to the scrapyard, and these were operating under grandfathered rules, and couldn't be sold to another operator. Other possibilities would be to modify existing engines to reduce noise to a level that would comply with the new rules. Expensive and risky. That leaves replacing the engines with a more modern design that is inherently quieter. That was the route that the project engineer chose. As we will see, this was a bad choice.

About 7 years before that time, Boeing went through the same exercise. The first thing is the engine itself. Quieter engines have large fans in the front, and that won't fit in the 727's center engine location. That means you have to replace 3 engines with 2, and close up the hole in the middle. So, just find the engine with 50% more thrust than the old one, and put 2 of those on the back and we're done, right? Well, that's what the project manager thought, but he was wrong. Here's the math (I'll do it for you). FAA rules require that you have to be able to continue a takeoff if one engine fails. The 727's engines each produce 16,000 pounds of thrust. If 1 fails, you have 32,000 pounds of thrust left to continue the takeoff. But if we install 2 engines having 24,000 pounds thrust each, when 1 fails, we are left with only 24,000, which is 8,000 short of what is needed. So, in order to make it work, you need each engine to be twice as big, not 150%. An engine that big is too heavy to install two on the back. So, they have to move under the wing, which requires a different wing shape and taller landing gear. The end result of Boeing's redesign replaced the 727, and was exactly what Federal Express needed. It is called the 757.

But despite much bellyaching from Ken Hurley and me, it was run up the flagpole with engines that were only 24,000 pounds thrust. The VP of engineering didn't know it wouldn't work. I asked my boss to intercede, to no avail.

About that time, Les told me there was going to be a layoff of contract people, and I was probably going to be cut. I got in touch with Doyle in

legal and asked him if legal could pick up my contract so I could work for them exclusively. He didn't think they could justify more than 50% of my time.

So, I gave Les a 2 week notice that I was leaving. He wasn't happy, but they had been waffling about my staying or going daily for several weeks, so I made the decision for them.

But I didn't want to leave the engine mod program in the shape it was in. So I talked it over with Julie Ellis in legal and she suggested that I write a letter to Fred Smith, our president and CEO, with all the technical details, and leave it with her, and she would send it up her chain of command after I was gone. All of which I did.

Talking to Ken Hurley months later, I learned what transpired. The legal VPs decided my letter should be approved by my boss, Les Spengler, before going to Fred Smith. Les dropped it in his trashcan, and that was that. The project was finally closed when they brought in a vendor to talk about building the engine nacelles. He asked Federal's VP of engineering what engine they were planning to use. When he heard which one, his response was "You do know that's impossible, don't you?"

# The Old Man's Airplane Company

*“A wise man will hear and increase in learning, and a man of understanding will acquire wise counsel.”  
- Proverbs 1:5*

## **Exactly What is an OMAC?**

After I left Fed Ex, “Federal” in company lingo, for the first time in 1985, it was time to look for the next opportunity. The job shop that I worked for was working on a contract with an upstart small airplane manufacturer to supply all the engineers and draftsmen for their first project. “I’m in” says I. It was going to take a little while to develop, so I did a few fun things during the down time. One was to go to the big Experimental Aviation Association convention in Oshkosh, WI. While there, I got in touch with the job shop, and everything was set. As soon as I could get to Albany, GA, I had a job. Zoom! I got my butt down to Albany as soon as I could. The company’s name was “Old Man’s Airplane Company”, or OMAC for short. Really, no kidding. It was located on the Albany airport in the facility that had previously manufactured the Rockwell line of single engine airplanes, as well as the Thrush Commander crop dusters. A company called Ayers bought the Thrush line and was still making them in the back half of the plant. In the acreage in front of the plant was a grove of pecan trees, leased out to a local farmer.

OMAC was originated by the guy that owned the company that made the wet vacuum cleaners that you rent in grocery stores. He was looking for a corporate airplane, and when he was told how much the smallest Learjet

cost, he thought it would be more economical to hire some people and design and build his own airplane. Yeah, about that. There is a saying in the airplane business that goes like this. How do you make a small fortune in the airplane business? Start with a large fortune, of course. A proof of concept airplane was designed and built. It was super ugly, didn't perform well, and had a habit of hitting the rear mounted propeller on the runway on landing. That's where we came in. The object of the exercise was to design, build, fly, and manufacture a totally new airplane, of the same general configuration, but having solved all the design problems of the OMAC 1. Enter the OMAC Laser 300, so named because of its intended top speed, 300 mph.

## **Starting From Scratch, Just Like Baking a Cake!**

I arrived for day 1, wearing a suit and ready to get going. I met with Billy Vardaman, VP of engineering. His first comment? "Thanks for wearing the suit, but don't do it again. Dress cool and casual. We don't have budget to cool a bunch of guys in coats and ties." I'm already starting to like the place. When I met my boss, Wyatt Ingram, I immediately noticed he was a recent college grad, and head of Aerodynamics, Propulsion, and Flight Test. That's a lot of responsibility for a guy with such a short resume. But it is what it is. I was the aerodynamics group. Yep, just me. We also had a flight controls engineer, weights, loads and dynamics, and a couple stress and structures guys. We were located in one of two large office spaces, along with the accounting department's two ladies, and a couple of secretaries. The other room housed all of the draftsmen who were designing and drawing all of the airplane's structural and systems components. Nobody in our office smoked. Everybody in the other office smoked. Sometimes, by mid afternoon, a cloud would form starting about 4 feet above the floor, just high enough to be in clean air sitting at a desk, but when you stood up, chimney city. There was no escaping it.

When I met with Wyatt on that first day, I asked about what data we had to work with. He pointed me to a scale 3-view drawing on the wall, and handed me a small stack of paper, which included a printout of power and fuel flow data for the Pratt & Whitney of Canada PT-6 turboprop engine,

and a single graph of propeller efficiency from Hartzell Propeller. That was it! And what did they want me to do for them? Provide all aerodynamic performance parameters for the entire flight envelope, for takeoff, climb, cruise, descent, and landing. And oh, by the way, the top speed of the airplane is 300 mph. Make it happen. I love a good challenge!

So Wyatt, what tools do we have to work this problem? Answer: Do you have a calculator? Just kidding. Engineering computing, shared with accounting, consisted of 2, not just 1 mind you, but 2 original IBM PCs, with Intel 8088 processors running at 4.77 kHz. Blazing fast, eh? One of them actually had a 10 MB hard disk, while the other had a single 360 kb 5.25 inch floppy drive. For programming languages, there was the built-in BASIC interpreter, and MS-FORTRAN 1.0 on a floppy disk. The included Edlin line by line text editor was the only way to edit code, which was saved on a floppy disk. So, the process of development was stick in the code disk, use Edlin to edit, save, swap to compiler floppy, run compiler, swap to the code floppy, compile program, quit compiler, run program, find bug, repeat. Long and tedious process, to be sure. Patience wins the day.

I put my head down and got to work. First job was to develop lift and drag estimates manually, and estimate the major performance parameters. Billy didn't like the results of the analysis I did, because I showed the max speed to be 275 mph, 25 short of the goal. I found myself in Billy's office on a Sunday afternoon, going through the analysis number by number, explaining and defending my methodology. The only step he could argue with was one that had to be totally estimated, so his guess was as good as mine. I went with his. That added 2 mph to the max speed. Good enough for this first trip through wild-ass-guess-land.

Next task was to develop software to do more detailed analysis based on the lift and drag estimates, engine data, and propeller efficiency. I very much enjoyed this tedious process. Prior to this job, all of my computer work was done with mainframe computers, and I never really liked that very much. But this introduction to "personal" computers was received with enthusiasm.

The software development proceeded well, first with creation of data storage tables, then using those tables to create the calculations necessary for takeoff, landing, climb, descent, and cruise calculations, as well as determining the maximum range and how range varies with the payload on-board the airplane. As the project wore on, several other engineers tapped me for programming help. An example is Dorsey Dodgen, our weights engineer. Dorsey was a long time Lockheed engineer, and his responsibility was to track the weight of each component from each structural drawing, where it was located in the airplane in 3 dimensions, and sum up all of that for total weight, and the 3-axis rotational moments, which are needed by the flight controls guy to design the controls to be adequate. Even at that early stage of my computing career, this just cried out for a database, plus calculations. A database we didn't have, so a comma separated text file, one line per item, was constructed using, you guessed it, Edlin. But here is the thing about Dorsey. As he first began using the program, since my desk was right by the computer table, I watched him work with it. I was totally astounded by what I saw. For each key that he needed to press, he would wave his finger over the keyboard and home in on the key, circling like a buzzard before finally descending for the kill. This process took minutes for him to type in even a few data points. I reworked the program several times in order to make it "Dorsey-proof". After the OMAC job was over, we kept in touch, and I would send him software I was working on and he would try it out and send me feedback on the user interface and how easy or difficult it was for him to understand and use. My thinking was, if Dorsey could figure it out, any pilot should have no trouble with it. In this way, Dorsey made me a much better programmer. Thanks Dorsey!

## **The Big Going Away Party**

The head of the stress group, Bill Buckley, sat next to me. Bill, the loads guy, and I were the only ones in engineering to regularly bring our lunches. We'd eat, then take a walk, circling out our front door, out to the road, through the pecan trees, and back in through the Ayers production line, into our as yet unused production area, and into the office. Naturally, we solved all the world's problems on these walks, and had a few pecans for dessert along the way. One day, they were working on adding a little tailwheel to

protect against those accidental prop strikes if the pilot gets the nose too high on takeoff or landing. Billy, the engineering VP, was having a hard time grasping the concept of how the calculations were done, and what the forces and rotational moments were. The back and forth was getting heated. The three of them walked out into the hangar and continued. They found a short 2x4 and dropped it multiple times at an angle to illustrate what happens when the airplane touches down on that tailwheel. Thunk-doink, as the end hit and the rest of the board rotated to hit the floor. Thunk-doink, a little yelling, thunk-doink, more yelling from the other side. The sound of footsteps on the concrete hangar floor. Silence. Thunk-doink, thunk-doink, yelling at a higher level. What was I doing? Hey, this was the funniest thing I ever heard, even beyond the projectile puking in the boys chorus concert in 6th grade. When they finally came back in, it was all I could do to keep a straight face. Buckley, who looked just like Sgt. Carter from Gomer Pyle USMC, just looked at me and winked. Hysterics all over again.

Our president, Corky Meyer, was an interesting guy. He had been president of Grumman American, which made the Grumman Gulfstream II in Savannah, before it was bought by Allen Paulson in 1978, at which time Allen took over as president and Corky went on to other things, eventually landing at OMAC. I enjoyed chats with Corky, especially about his time at Grumman, and mine at the same place under the new management. Corky was ousted after I had been there for a few months, and I only saw him after that when he came in for board meetings. More on that later.

An interesting guy we worked with was a stress engineer named Heime. As you might guess, Heime was German. It turned out he had fought for the Germans in World War II. We had all heard war stories from our American parents, now here was an opportunity to hear some from the other side. I think Heime was either the unluckiest soldier in the war, or the luckiest, you decide. At the beginning of the war, they sent him to Norway, and he got shot. After recovering, he went to France. He was shot again. Finally, after healing, he was sent to the Russian Front, where, you guessed it, he was shot again. He managed to spend the rest of the war on administrative duty. When he talked about his military service, his eyes lit up like a true believer. I bet in his past, Heime had been a card carrying Nazi party member.

One Friday afternoon, just as we were leaving for the day, Billy came running out of his office and called us to an all hands meeting. Right there, right then. Not a good sign. He told us he was on the phone with our job shop, negotiating payments, and we should take the whole weekend off (we worked 6 days a week normally), then come back Monday morning and he would tell us who was laid off and who got to stay. Then he ran back in his office and closed the door. Now, we had a weekly standing assembly at a local bar that we called “the big going away party”, because with a group of over 60 contract workers it was almost certain that any given Friday was somebody’s last day. On that night, even the non-drinkers went to the party. My boss, Wyatt, told me to go on home to Tennessee, and not come back until Tuesday. He was pretty sure I was staying, so he called me Monday morning and confirmed that. When I went back to the office Tuesday morning, it was weird. All of the draftsmen were gone. All 9 of the engineers stayed. I saw the handwriting on the wall, and started preparations to move on.

## **Nuts!**

Meanwhile, this airplane had problems. Serious problems. For example, it was quite heavy, yet its maximum takeoff weight started out at only 6,400 pounds. By contrast a twin engine Beechcraft Baron carries 6 passengers and weighs the same. The OMAC Laser 300, on the other hand, was intended to carry 10 passengers and baggage, and go over 1,000 miles using a kerosene guzzling turboprop engine. 6,400 pounds ain’t even close to enough weight for the airplane, fuel, and payload, and that was clear to me on my first day on the job. Eventually, the takeoff weight was increased to 7,200, still far too low. Another problem was fuel distribution and storage in the airplane. Because the airplane configuration was what is known as a canard, with the wing in back and the horizontal tail in front, the center of gravity, or balance point was not located on the wing. Big problem! Normal designs have the CG located on the wing. This is convenient because you want the CG to move little or none as fuel is burned. That works great. But with the canard design, the wing is far back on the fuselage, and if you put the fuel tanks in the wing, as the fuel is burned, the CG moves forward. A

lot! This has all kinds of implications, especially regarding control of the airplane. In other words, you just can't put the fuel in the wing. If not there, then where? The designers settled on running the tanks along the fuselage, in long tubes running down both sides above the windows. Fuel was then pumped from both tanks into a header tank located behind the cabin, where it then flowed to the engine, just behind that. What this meant was that the cabin was virtually surrounded by fuel. Sort of okay on a good day, but have a crash, then don't expect to see survivors. And that configuration is virtually guaranteed to be very sensitive to fuel shifting and moving the CG, as well as the placement of those 10 people crammed inside. This was just a plain bad design right from the start.

I was making my last day the day of a board meeting. Glad I didn't leave earlier! It was entertaining. The night before, I went to the mall just to get out and walk some, and I ran into none other than Corky Meyer, who was still on the board. We had a nice chat, and then he asked me, "What do you think is the single biggest technical problem the airplane has?" "Easy. It is way overweight. To make it work, either take out 4 seats, raise max takeoff weight, or reduce the desired max range." He agreed, and we parted.

Next morning, the fun, and fireworks, began. The board members arrived. I accompanied the CEO's secretary to pick up one board member. My job on this small mission was to schlepp his baggage and keep my mouth shut. What the heck, it was my last day and I wasn't doing anything productive anyway. Actually, I really felt sorry for these board members. Not only did they invest their time and expertise in directing the path of the company, but they had all invested millions in an effort to bring a bad airplane design to market, and I was 99.99% sure they weren't going to see a nickel of that money again. Today was the day they were going to figure that out themselves. After a few minutes of pleasantries, the board retired to the conference room behind a closed door. I had prepared the presentation for the performance side of things. I wasn't allowed to show the true situation. The figures were based on a "what if" scenario of structural changes that were all mythical at that point. But Corky knew the truth. Pretty soon we could hear raised voices, and that went on until a visitor entered the building and was taken immediately into the meeting. County Sheriff, serving court papers to the board. It seems OMAC hadn't been paying their

bills around town. Naughty, naughty! After the sheriff left, more fireworks ensued. Eventually they all came out, and I had a minute with Corky. He was back in charge, and major changes were coming. I congratulated him, and made my exit, satisfied that I had done my best to get the truth out there, and let the higher ups take it from there.

After I left, Corky rebuilt the company and they got the prototype Laser 300 built, and began the flight test program. The new director of engineering let me know that the early testing showed a close match with my predicted performance. Top speed was found to be 282 mph. Not too bad for estimating based on the sketchy data that I had. I came away satisfied with the experience and the job I had done.

I left behind my college friend Al Shanks, who had been hired as head of production, and was responsible for building the production tooling, and getting the prototype built. The company spent every last dollar they had. Al and Corky were the only ones left, and worked on with nothing more than the promise of back pay if the company could get some more venture capital. The money never came, and the airplane now sits in a hidden hangar in Arizona gathering dust and still being sought by creditors.

In a final irony, it turns out the only money OMAC ever made came from leasing the pecan trees on the property to a local farmer. To this I say “Nuts!”

## **In Memoriam**

My young boss, Wyatt Ingram, had left the company after marrying the CEO's secretary. Wyatt was flying a borrowed Beechcraft King Air with his wife, and encountered weather that the airplane couldn't handle, and crashed, killing both of them. He was a good guy and would have been a good engineer with some more experience.

Billy Vardaman had chest pains one day and went to the ER. They couldn't find anything wrong and sent him home with instructions to take it easy. That is what he was doing when he had a fatal heart attack.

Somewhere along the way, Dorsey Dodgen passed away. In addition to our collaboration on software development, where I wrote it and he broke it, we had some adventures. At lunch, we got in the habit of going for a ride in the country around Albany once a week. This was always an adventure when Dorsey drove. He had a cigar in one hand and the steering wheel in the other, and he wasn't paying any attention to either one. One day after we had both left OMAC, he called me up and said he had some gamecocks he needed to move from Atlanta to Elizabethton, TN, and could I fly them up there in my Cessna 210? Yep. I picked him up and we hauled a dozen fighting chickens to Tennessee. Fun times. I miss you Dorsey!

## Photos



Yes, it is possible to analyze aerodynamic performance characteristics from a 3-view drawing!



OMAC Laser 300. Imagine seeing that coming at you!



That big flat thing on top of the cabin is the fuel tank. Crazy, right?



Looks almost nice from this angle. Nah, it doesn't have a "good side".

# Failure to Perform

*“For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead.” - James 2:26*

## **Drama In The Air**

It was 1985, after I left OMAC. While I was deciding what came next, I went back to Auburn and rented an apartment and spent most of my time hanging out at the airport, and experimenting with software development on my new AT&T PC 6300. It had an 8MHz 8086 processor, a color display, and a whopping 20 MB hard disk. I had probably \$5,000 invested in it. Computers are so much more powerful now, and cost just a fraction. Now is better.

I kept in touch with friends at OMAC, and one day I decided to fly over to Albany in my Cessna 210 for lunch with a couple of them. It was a fairly short flight, less than an hour. It was a nice day to get out and have lunch with friends.

I tuned the radio to Albany tower and listened to the radio traffic. It was a normal day at Albany, a few airplanes coming and going, but not a lot. Albany did not have a radar approach control, something that would soon make a big difference in someone's life.

As I was getting closer to Albany, I heard a young woman's voice on the radio. She identified herself as a student pilot, and I started paying attention. She was on a solo cross country flight to Albany, and was over an airport

and wanted to know if it was Albany. Red lights and loud horns were going off in my head at this point.

She read the runway numbers of the airport she was over. The controller had no idea what airport it was, just that it wasn't Albany. I had old tech with me, a paper copy of the FAA Airport Facility Directory for that region. I started flipping pages, looking up all the airports in the area. I quickly found her. She was passing over the Cordele, GA airport.

By this time, the tower controller had shoed everybody off the frequency so that he could focus on handling this situation. He was pretty aggressive about it, and when I had the answer, instead of just blurting it out, I let him intimidate me into staying off the frequency. Surely he would figure it out soon. What I wanted to do was to call the pilot and ask how much fuel she had on board. Usually, pilots don't want to admit they are lost, and so they don't ask for help until they are low on fuel and time is running out.

The controller didn't ask her fuel status. He had her change frequency to the flight service station. They are able to triangulate between two stations and the airplane to find her location. This took about five minutes, and when she came back on frequency, she was found, and just about 10 miles from Albany.

By that time, I was on downwind leg for landing. I made a quick call announcing who and where I was, and got an equally brief "Four niner zero two uniform, cleared to land." I landed, and since OMAC was just off the runway, I turned off the runway and into their ramp without a radio call.

## **The Rest of the Story**

I went to lunch with my friends, and before I left for home, I told them the story of the drama in the air on my way in, and asked them to call me if they heard anything about it on the news, thinking that would never happen.

I flew back to Auburn after lunch, and spent the rest of the day messing with my new computer. The next morning, the phone rang. "Van, this is

Everett. I saw that story on the news. She ran out of gas a couple miles short of Albany, and landed successfully in a plowed field. Her instructor came down and flew it out of the field. No damage, nobody hurt.” Instead of feeling relief, I was devastated. I could have solved both the lost problem and the fuel problem just by telling her what airport she was over, and suggesting she land there and get some fuel. It turned out okay, but could have ended in disaster.

This incident still haunts me, almost 40 years later. I could have prevented it from happening just by making one radio call, but I allowed myself to be intimidated by an aggressive, and possibly inexperienced controller, and just trusted him to figure it out and save the day.

“See something, say something”, it’s not just about terrorists.

## Photos



My Cessna 210E, shown here over Hilton Head Island, SC.

# Travels With Dad

*“Then you will walk in your way securely and your foot will not stumble.” - Proverbs 3:23*

## **The Grand Tour**

In October, 1987, my Mom died very suddenly. She didn't feel well and lay down on the bed for a bit, then had a heart attack and died on the spot. It was a shock to the whole family, but in the big scheme of things, it was a blessing that she didn't have a long debilitating illness. It just came too soon. She was 62.

The next summer, I was planning my vacation, with a week at the Oshkosh EAA convention, world's largest airshow. Then I was going on to North Hampton, NH to the American Yankee Association convention. I wanted to spend some time with Dad, so I asked him to come along. He had a request, to go to the tip of Nova Scotia, and go on a 3 hour tour on a small boat to see an island named Bird Island, which had who knows how many different species of sea birds. Okay, and since we will be going that way, I added a stop at my Auburn friends Jack and Joan Kennedy's house in Maine. So off we went on a 3 week junket. I just wish we had an airplane, because we put 3,000 miles on the car. But then, that gave us plenty of time to hang out together.

First stop, Kenosha, WI. There was a big fly-in of T-6 WWII trainers that Dad flew in the war, and I wanted him to see them. First thing in the morning we went out to the airport, and there were close to 100 of them. We wandered around and looked at them, and then they all cranked up and flew

en masse to Oshkosh. It was pretty cool, watching them all take off, one after the other. I could see that Dad was getting a bit emotional. Wait till you see what's coming up, Pop!

Next, we moved on to Oshkosh. I always stayed at Lawrence University in Appleton. They open the dorms for convention goers, since the students are gone for the summer. Good, cheap, basic room to sleep in for a few days.

We had a great time at Oshkosh, and looked at every airplane on the field. I had recently sold my Cessna 210, and was still a member of the Cessna Pilots Association, so we could find refuge from the unusual heat under the umbrellas over the tables they had set up in front of their tent. My friend Vlado was there with his P-51, and he brought his Dad with him. That year, the EAA arranged for British Airways to bring a Concord SST to the show, and Vlado bought his Dad a ticket for a 30 minute ride on it. Wow, how cool is that? They flew it every day. One day I was in one of the hundreds of Porta-Potties near the flightline when the Concord took off. Those engines put out a LOT of thrust, and make a LOT of noise. When he pushed the throttles up less than 1,000 feet away, I had to cover my ears. Then the ground shook like Jello. I was a little concerned that the ground would open up and swallow me and the Porta-Potty in one gulp. Then in a flash, he was gone and all was well again. Can you say impressive? That it was.

My Dad and Vlado's Dad had a good time together. His Dad lived in Yugoslavia during WWII, and that was where Dad's B-24 crashed after being sabotaged. They shared a lot of interesting stories, and he was able to translate a note that the resistance leader who got Dad's crew out of Yugoslavia gave him. It was typed in Slavic and Dad had no idea what it said for over 40 years! You should have seen his eyes light up when he finally knew what it said.

After Oshkosh, we hit the road and arrived in North Hampton, NH for the AYA fly-in. Dad met my AYA friends for the first time, and we hung out with Billy and Peggy Crumpton, from New Albany, MS. Billy and I had started what quickly became a tradition at the convention each year - the ice cream social. This was the third year, and it was growing in popularity. A good time was had by all, of course. I borrowed Billy's Cheetah for the spot

landing event. Not a winner, but I hadn't flown one in a few years, and hadn't practiced. But it was fun!

We headed up the coast to Jack Kennedy's house on the Maine coast. Jack and Joan had renovated. The wiring was modern. The porch was enclosed to create a dining room. There was insulation, but he built an outer wall with the insulation so that the studs and bookshelves with 60 years of magazines could stay. Upstairs, all the rooms had ceilings and insulation. Jack took us for a boat ride, and we brought home lobsters for dinner. Excellent!

Next morning, we were off to Canada. We started by crossing the border and island hopping by ferry up through the Bay of Fundy, where they have the largest tide change in the world, about 18 feet. Tide was out, so we had to go down a very long ramp to get to the ferry. We stopped for the night in Amherst, NS, a quaint little Victorian town. The houses were well maintained, and painted a variety of colors. These people were not bashful about painting a house purple with pink trim. All tastefully done, of course. Many had beautiful flowers planted out front. Next day, another change of venue, to a bed and breakfast run by the people that did the boat trip, in Big Bras d'Or, NS. We had a nice room, but no A/C, and it was a hot summer there, too. We were directed to a diner where we had a lobster roll for dinner. In that part of the world, lobster is like chicken is down here, you can get it for every meal if you want it.

The next morning, as we boarded the boat, I couldn't help but think about the similarities with Gilligan's Island. We were going on a 3 hour tour. We had a skipper and his first mate (his daughter). In the short time we were together, I couldn't discern who the other characters might be. I might have been the professor. No movie stars, though. It was warm when we left the dock. As we neared the island, all eyes were on the rocky monolith that was Bird Island. Hundreds of different sea birds were flying everywhere. My Dad was in heaven, looking through his binoculars and calling out each species when he saw it. We did a circuit of this enormous rock in the ocean, and while I am not a bird watcher, it was still fascinating to see all these different birds living together in nests made in holes in the rock. Of course, everyone's favorites were the Puffins. Some of them would come down and

land in the water by the boat and just bob around looking at us looking at them. After we circled the island and turned inbound to our port, we kicked it in gear and cruised back home. As it happened, the wind had shifted and we were getting a strong breeze from the ocean. A strong cold breeze. As hot as it would be for our whole trip, I never dreamed I would need a jacket. I was wishing for a parka by the time we docked. And then, we were warm again, safe and sound on the ground.

And with that, all of our destinations were behind us, with nothing left but the drive home. We decided to drive across the Trans-Canada highway. This was a well maintained two lane highway, with a wide space paved to the sides. The polite way to drive was to keep an eye on the rearview mirror, and when a car comes up behind, slide over to the outside lane and let them pass. We had a pleasant drive, and spent the night in Quebec City. Not speaking French, and the locals not speaking English, we just got a quick dinner and went to bed. Next morning we were off again. After passing by Montreal, we turned south and quickly crossed the border and started down Interstate 81, on which we sailed all the way home to east Tennessee. After spending the night with Dad, I made the last 7 hour trip to Savannah. Home again!

This trip was so successful that we started planning another trip for 1989. But, as we often do, Plan B was called upon and boy was our destination a surprise! Now listen and I'll tell you a tale, Tovarich...

## **Back in the USSR**

As you saw above, Dad was a bird watcher, or "birder" in the lingo. He was an active member of the Tennessee Ornithological Society, and went on trips with the local chapter to Ecuador and the Galapagos Islands, Belize, Costa Rica, and other bird havens. He was an expert on the local area birds and geography, and frequently led nature tours on Roan Mountain, Unaka Mountain, and other local bird watching spots. But he had never been to New Zealand. Fred Alsop, head of ETSU's biology department and a member of their TOS chapter, was the guy that set up the trips. Dad asked him to plan one for New Zealand for 1989, and he did. Dad and I signed up,

and with very little coaxing, my Auburn friend Steve Conn signed up to join us. And that was all. Nobody else wanted to go.

It was only a few days after I got the cancellation news that I received a brochure from the Auburn Alumni Association for a trip to the USSR. “Pathways of Peter the Great” it was called, and included a list of interesting locations to visit. This was the time of Glasnost and Perestroika, openness and reform, and this was one of the first such tours to go to the country. For all of the out of the way locations, it would be the first time Americans had walked the streets since 1917. Who wouldn’t want to go on that trip? Well, Steve for one. That was okay. I told Dad about it and he was in. So off we went on a fascinating adventure into the “evil empire”.

This was a trip that required some planning. We needed visas to enter the country, and updated passports. I ordered a Russian language course, but it didn’t arrive until a week before we left, so I only had time to work through a couple lessons and learn a few words. Load up on film, get some cash, almost ready. I also bought a Russian language Bible that I planned to give to someone if the situation presented itself. My last item was to tell my management at Gulfstream where I was going.

I was sent to the front office for a security briefing. I didn’t have any government security clearances at that time, so this was just a basic briefing. There were about 15 people in the briefing, traveling to various countries. Then John Sanford, the CEO at the time, came in and sat down next to me. Allen Paulson was being pushed out, and was Chairman of the Board then. Allen had an idea, born of ego, that if he could bring US and Soviet businesses together, he could win the Nobel Peace Prize. The security officer conducting the briefing had opening remarks, and then said “I understand one of you is going to the USSR. Who is it?” I raised my hand, and as soon as he continued, John Sanford leaned over and asked me why I was going. I immediately understood implications of the question, since Mr. Paulson’s aspirations were well known to everybody. I looked John in the eye and said “Vacation.” Totally the truth, but I’ll bet he ran that around in his head for a month, wondering what Allen Paulson was up to. Sometimes it’s fun to mess with management.

After a long trip through Atlanta and Frankfurt, Germany, we arrived at Moscow's Sheremetyevo airport, dead tired. My first impression of the Soviet Union was that they can't pay their electric bill. It was around 6 PM on June 4 when we entered the terminal building. The lights were off, and the only way we could see where we were going was the light coming in the windows overlooking the airport. The only people I saw were the passengers from our flight, which consisted of the 250 people in our group, and the KGB border guards that lined the hall, positioned about 15 feet apart. Our walk took us down an escalator that was not moving, into a basement room with maybe four immigration booths. The lines moved very slowly. Dad was in front of me, and a nice lady from the University of Tennessee group was behind me. The routine was you step up to the desk and hand the agent your passport. He opens it, looks at your picture, looks at your face, looks at the mirror over your head to see your backside, then repeats the process several times, and then looks toward the customs section, then picks up his phone and holds it to his ear. The phone didn't ring, nor did he dial. Just another stalling maneuver. In America, the process is about efficiency. In a socialist country, it is about control. It took about 3 minutes of this per person on average. When it was my turn, I was scrutinized for over 5 minutes. I stood there like a statue. A statue that was beginning to sweat, but still, I didn't lose my cool. Eventually, he handed me my passport and pushed the button to open the door. I was officially in the Soviet Union, in a dingy basement lit by a few naked light bulbs. Just like in the movies, right before the KGB puts a bullet in your head. A comforting beginning to our trip!

We picked up our bags, loaded them on a metro-style bus, and were on our way to the hotel. Fran Purvis, the lady from UT, told me she admired the way I kept my cool going through immigration. Me too, actually. And it wouldn't be the last time a cool head would be needed. Not by a long shot.

The bus ride to the hotel was long and pleasant. Our first impression of Moscow was that it was gray, dingy, and overgrown with grass and weeds. And it smelled of a mixture of industrial smoke and car exhaust. Dad and I were near the front of the bus. He was what some would call a neat freak when it came to maintaining what you had. Our Russian guide noticed his disdain, and picked up her mic to give us an unending monolog on positive

aspects of everything along the way to our hotel. I found this to be somewhat amusing, and an early insight into the Russian thought process.

The Cosmos Hotel was our home in Moscow. A very modern design, it was built in 1968, and was used as headquarters for the 1980 Summer Olympics. I don't think it had been cleaned since then. We were greeted by cigarette butts, lots of them, outside the front door. This was one of a handful of Intourist hotels in the city. They were operated, along with all tourism, by the Soviet Intourist agency, and were the only hotels foreigners were permitted in.

Across the street was a park, devoted to celebrating the Soviet space program. The centerpiece was a rocket, 100 feet in the air, its pedestal the smoke plume of its exhaust, all in bronze. That was definitely an attention getter. In contrast were the Babushkas (grandmothers) on the sidewalks, sweeping them with stick brooms.

After arrival, we went up to our room, taking the stairs. Elevators were very slow, and we were on a lower floor. There was a chair at the landing of each floor, unoccupied. In days before perestroika, I'm sure there would have been someone there, checking room keys to ensure no one went to a floor they didn't belong on. The room was your standard hotel room, same as anywhere. One difference was immediately apparent. There was no air conditioning, something we discovered everywhere we went in the country. The windows opened. It helped a little, but the acrid smell of Moscow smog was overwhelming. We closed them back.

All of our meals in Moscow were in the hotel's dining room. We were told by our tour director that the water and ice in the pitchers on the dining room tables were safe, but not to drink any other water in the country that didn't come out of a bottle. We found that the bottled water everywhere was mineral water with a heavy dose of carbonation. Not really to my taste, but useful for brushing my teeth. They did have soft drinks, Fanta was most popular, but also Pepsi and 7-up. After some experimentation, I settled on Pepsi to drink and 7-up for brushing teeth.

The meals were excellent. There was one unique thing that stood out to me. Each table had several bowls of beautiful, fresh cherries. In the time we were in Moscow, we saw many lines of people on the streets, buying various items of food for their dinner that night. Some lines wrapped around the block. Outside the dining room window was such a line. The vendor was selling cherries. It didn't curb my enthusiasm for the cherries on the table, but I felt a little guilty about every one.

It was around 11 PM when we headed up for bed. It was still full daylight outside. We were very far north, and like Alaska, this was a land of midnight sun. I closed the dusty curtains to shut out as much light as possible, although we were so tired it probably didn't matter.

Next day, we had a nice breakfast, then boarded the bus to see the sights. One of the first things I noticed was that most of the many cars on the roads were Ladas, a brand that is made by Fiat. Every car had a first aid kit in the rear window. These cars apparently didn't do well in the 80+ degree heat, because we regularly passed one on the side of the road with its hood up.

Our first stop was Krasnaya Ploshchad, or Red Square in our native tongue. The square is naturally fairly large, large enough for military parades, big ones, and is bordered on three sides by the Kremlin, St. Basil's Cathedral, and GUM, at the time the world's largest department store. St. Basil's and the Kremlin both overlook the Moskva River. Just a few days before we left home, protesting Chinese students had overtaken Tiananmen Square in Beijing, and ultimately were gunned down. The Soviets were having the first meeting of their democratically elected congress, and did not want a similar occurrence, so the square was closed. And they were serious about it. Police were positioned near all the places where people gathered, and politely ushered you back onto the sidewalk if you stepped into the square, as my Dad did while taking a photo of the cathedral.

We went inside St. Basil's, more properly known as The Cathedral of Vasily the Blessed. Rather than a large sanctuary, the cathedral had a small open area on the ground floor, and then many small chapels on multiple floors, beneath the colorful onion domes. They are as colorful inside as out! The chapel walls were full of something we came to know very well on this trip,

icons. Not the kind you click with a computer mouse, but pictures of biblical figures, primarily Jesus and Mary, with real gold halos around their heads. The cathedral was built of brick between 1554 and 1560, during the reign of Ivan the Terrible. You may have seen pictures of the Kremlin from the side facing the river, with white buildings topped by nine gold onion domes. This is the Cathedral of the Annunciation, built between 1484 and 1489 by Ivan the Great. Boy, those Ivans knew how to build some beautiful cathedrals!

Back to the bus, and to the hotel for lunch. There is a lot of food at lunch because this is the Russian way, biggest meal in the middle of the day. This was always a heavy meal, wherever we were.

One observation I made was that as we left the colors of Red Square, the city turned a constant gray everywhere else. The people didn't live in houses, but in high rise apartments. Our guides told us there were no elevators, and the lower levels were highly prized. Between the buildings was something that looked like a big grill or smoker. We were told it was a type of still, where a traditional drink called kvas was made, from stale rye bread, sourdough starter, and honey. Like many things in this country, the still and the drink are shared. As was the drinking glass, which was replaced inverted after use, and pressing down sprayed water up into it to clean it. Yeah, I agree, paper cups for me!

Another observation was that the grocery stores were empty. Empty shelves, nobody there, lights off. Everybody picked up what they needed for a meal from street vendors, who would use an abacus to add up the total. What a time consuming way to have to grocery shop!

Our afternoon stop was the Novodevichy Convent. This was a beautiful building, set alongside the Moskva River. I am at a loss to describe it. And we were unable to go inside, as there was construction underway, something that we encountered a lot. The grounds beside the slow moving river were very peaceful. A look at the gravestones in the cemetery revealed some familiar names, including Dostoyevski, the famous author, and Nikita Khrushchev, former Soviet Premier.

You may be getting tired of my use of the word “beautiful” at this point. Well, I’m not. Despite our impression of this country as gray and dreary, and in some aspects it is, this is not at all a true picture of old Russia. Note the distinction. Socialism has changed the nature of the society to one where everyone is suspicious of everyone else, including friends and family. But at the time of our visit, there was new hope. Openness and renewal were on everyone’s minds. We saw it in the hotel lobby, where there was a TV that was showing their new congress, meeting openly for the first time in their history. Russians were not permitted inside the hotel unless they were employees, but some were continually sneaking in the front door and watching the TV with smiles on their faces, until an employee spotted them and shooed them out the door. It was the best possible time for us to visit! You might even say it was a beautiful time!

We had a welcome party that night. It was lavish. There were red and black caviar, Russian vodka, oranges from Cuba with a distinctly different taste than American oranges, and chicken Kiev. After drinking Russian vodka, I have never bought any other. Stolichnaya is my brand, and I’m sticking to it. We all had a good time getting to know one another. There was one single lady who, when she learned my Mom had died, was real chummy with Dad. He was pretty stoic when she sat with us for a couple meals. She finally found another single, older guy with the University of Wisconsin group. Before the trip was over, they announced their engagement. Dad dodged a bullet there!

Next morning, we boarded our buses for a visit to the Armory, a museum inside the Kremlin. Let me stop here for a brief explanation. Most Americans, myself included before this trip, think of the Kremlin as the Soviet, now Russian, equivalent to our White House. It is much more than that. The word Kremlin means fortress. It has huge, pretty, brick walls surrounding a palace, along with several museums and most of the major government buildings, including the equivalent to our Capitol and Pentagon. Now when I hear “Kremlin”, I think it is more equivalent to “Washington”.

The Armory was amazing! This is literally where the Russians store the crown jewels. I don’t know how many silver Bible covers I saw, all inlaid

with untold millions of dollars worth of jewels. There were rubies, emeralds, sapphires, and others as big as my thumbnail. There was one room full of Faberge eggs. I'll let the reader google those. It is a very interesting story! Finally, we saw the carriage room. These were the carriages that were used to carry the Czars for their coronations. They were ornate, with jewels encrusting them. Nice ride!

During our daily adventures, from time to time, we would be approached by young men who wanted to sell or barter, usually for a pair of jeans, or whatever souvenirs they had. I bought some pins, including some showing Lenin and the Soviet hammer and sickle, as well as some depicting city buildings, and a t-shirt advertising Leningrad. Our Intourist guides cautioned us against this, but everybody ended up buying something on the black market. It was the ones that wanted to exchange money on the street that you had to watch out for. One couple fell prey to them, and returned to the bus with a handful of worthless Yugoslavian money.

As for the feeling we were always being surrounded by police or KGB uniformed officers, not at all. They were both present pretty much everywhere. I never saw a gun the entire time we were there. And I felt safe anywhere we went, even when we went exploring away from the group. Again, this was the perfect time to visit.

I had a little time available and went to the money exchange in the hotel. Most things were sold in US dollars, but the hotel stores used Russian rubles. I stood in line, and when it was my turn, I presented a fifty dollar bill to the cashier. To my surprise, she started yelling at me in Russian, pushing the bill back at me. I pushed it right back at her. This resulted in a visit from the supervisor, who joined the cashier in yelling at me in Russian. I took the bill back, and gave them a different one. It was accepted without comment, and I was the proud owner of a pile of rubles and kopeks. I looked at the cause of the disturbance. Looked okay to me, until I noticed that some bored person had taken a black pen and carefully colored in Grant's hair. When I returned home, I took that bill to my bank and asked the cashier to make change, which she did without a second glance. Interesting, very interesting.

Next up, a ride on the subway! It was not the ride that was of interest, but the stations. Not all of the Metro stations were special, but we stopped at 3 of them. They were elaborately decorated, like the Kremlin palace, with marble floors and many statues. One statue of Lenin had bundles of fresh flowers lying around its base. These subway stations were used as shelters during WWII when the Germans were bombarding Moscow.

Before returning to our hotel, we stopped at the gift shop (beriozka) in the Hotel Rossiya, the largest hotel in the world at that time, with 3,600 rooms. Located near the Kremlin, it was used by many people doing business with the Kremlin. In the store, I bought several matryoshka dolls. Their process for purchasing is very different from ours. The clerks didn't speak English but I managed a "gde", the word for where, and was pointed in the right direction. Basically the way it works is the clerk gives you the tag from the item, which you then take to the cashier and pay, then take the receipt back to the clerk to pick up your item. Oddly untrusting, but it conforms to the socialist way of control over efficiency.

After dinner, a treat! We were taken to the Moscow Circus. This circus is in an arena style building, with seating all around going up twenty rows or more. It is, by necessity, a one ring circus, and that's a good thing. You wouldn't want to miss a thing. Most of the acts you've seen if you went to a Barnum and Bailey circus, but they were done with Russian style and aplomb. There was an intermission, and while the building was buzzing with conversation, one of our Auburn group saw a friend on the other side and let out a very loud "War Eagle" to get his attention. The building fell completely silent. Point taken. In the Soviet Union, people have been conditioned to blend into the background and not stand out. After a good 30 seconds of total silence, life went on.

Another day, another adventure. We are on our way to Leningrad, by a super fast train. Unlike train travel I've experienced, there is a train station for each destination. We depart the Leningrad station and arrive in Leningrad at the Moscow station. This train normally runs at night, and on a different day. But we have a charter train all to ourselves. The train is neat and clean, and bless my soul, it is air conditioned! What a nice surprise. However, once we get going, we find the air conditioning caused a problem.

The windows fogged up, keeping us from seeing the countryside going by. What little we did see looked like abject poverty. The 400 mile trip was made quickly, in about 5 hours. At times we were going over 100 mph, as evidenced by the digital speedometer in our car.

The bathroom facilities brought a good bit of amusement. The toilet was basically a pipe that flared out at the top. The bottom end was open to the track below. There was a pair of metal platforms for your feet, so that you could squat over the pipe. The guys had no problems, but one of our group had brought her college age daughter on the trip. When she excused herself from the conversation, we all awaited her return, just to see the expression on her face. No disappointments there! It was one of the best laughs on the trip.

On our arrival in Leningrad, we got on our buses for a ride to the docks on the Neva River. The river cruise boat was freshly painted with English language signs. There was a band on the dock playing music for us. They accompanied us on the cruise, too. Our crew spoke no English, but each and every one of them did his or her best to take care of us, and by the time we left the boat, there were some friendships developed.

Our cabin was closet sized. The beds folded down from the walls. There were two singles on opposite walls. The walking space between them was tiny. We had a big window overlooking the walkway on the side of the boat, with a good view of the river. If the cabin was tiny, the bathroom was itty bitty. It was like our two piece half bath, a toilet facing a sink. Where's the shower? A close examination revealed that the faucet on the sink had a ring attached. Pull up, and it is on a hose. Hang it on the hook above and you have your shower head. The entire floor was the shower basin, with a drain in the middle. Just remember not to go in there in your socks after getting a shower!

In the morning, we board buses again to begin our day of touring Leningrad. The city is situated on 101 islands on canals in the Neva River. There are 350 bridges connecting it all, many of which are draw bridges. Those are opened at night to allow barges easy access to resupply the city.

Leningrad is hundreds of years old, and began life as St. Petersburg, a name that has been restored today.

Our morning tour is mostly on the bus. After lunch on the boat, we are back in the city to pay a visit to the Hermitage. Not Andrew Jackson's home near Nashville, but Catherine the Great's Winter Palace. A beautiful building, it is one of many palaces on the river and canals. Except for Peter the Great's palace, this is the largest one. However, we are not here to see rooms of fancy figurines and furniture from 300 years ago. Nope. This is the second largest art collection in the world my friends, surpassed only by the Louvre in Paris. And it made me want to cry. It was still hot in Leningrad, and with no air conditioning, they simply opened the windows. I saw Rembrandts and even a da Vinci, hanging on a wooden partition, sitting right next to an open window with nothing protecting them from the smog that hovered in the stagnant air. As for the Picassos, maybe a little smog would do them some good. The art itself was marvelous, and I'm sure I saw some paintings the likes of which I will never see again. For me, this was one of the highlights of the trip.

Dinner was good as usual. We are making friends among our Auburn group as well as several from the Tennessee and Florida contingents. At 11:00 PM, in broad daylight, we pushed off and began cruising up the Neva River toward Lake Ladoga, largest lake in Europe. We will cross the lake and continue up the Svir River to Lake Onega, second largest lake in Europe.

Morning comes. Except for the numbers on my watch, it is impossible to tell the difference between night and day. Once, during the night, I woke up and thought it was really dark, but when I opened the curtain, I saw concrete, not darkness. We were going through a lock in the river, and were at the lower level. Tricked again! I never saw darkness while we were in the Soviet Union.

We continued cruising all day, enroute to Petrozavodsk, on the shore of Lake Onega in the Karelian Autonomous Republic. Karelia is the northernmost republic in the western USSR, and lies along the border with Finland. Petrozavodsk, which means Peter's factories, is their largest city, and is known for its steel mills, with iron being abundant in that area.

There were four lectures during our day of cruising which were held in the lounge as well as being broadcast to the cabins and the rear deck, which we found to be a nice place to gather and enjoy the cruise. Temperatures were noticeably cooler on the water, even a bit chilly in the morning and evening. But we were missing one thing. Beer. The guys tending the bar just shook their heads when any of us asked for it. Someone finally paid our tour director a visit. It seems we had a problem with translation. Oh, they had beer, and lots of it. But they didn't know the word beer, and we didn't know the word pivo. Once that was straightened out, we all had an enjoyable cruise.

Once again, the food was very good on the boat. One thing I can comment on. We had cucumbers with every meal while we were in the country, breakfast, lunch, and dinner. And we had boiled eggs every morning. They were put in two baskets, one labeled hard boiled, and the other soft boiled. The first morning I took one from the soft boiled basket. When I cracked it, it was raw. So I went back and got a hard boiled egg. It was also raw. I didn't take any more eggs on the boat.

We had borscht, beet soup. It was better than I expected. The best piece of meat on the whole trip was beef tongue, served for dinner one night on the boat. Meals were always heavy, the Russian style. They are not much on salads, vegan food, organic, all that stuff. Meat and potatoes pretty well describes it. And bread. Always good homemade bread.

Petrozavodsk was a city of about a quarter million people. Our local guide was a young man named Anatoli who spoke excellent English, and was very open about living there. Much of their food was rationed. If they owned a car, the law required that it be kept in a garage on the outskirts of the city. We saw very few cars being driven there. We asked Anatoli what he liked least about living there. He mentioned the inability to travel, either within the USSR, or outside the country, the hypocrisy of bureaucrats, the inability to read foreign magazines like Time and Newsweek. Our alumni association rep, Sheila Eckman, had the latest Time with the story of the Chinese student revolt, which she was very happy to give to Anatoli. I was walking through the town, and spotted a music store, and asked Anatoli to

help me select an LP album that would be representative of Russian music. After playing excerpts of several that sounded like opera, we settled on an album of balalaika music. I still have it today!

On the walk back to the bus, we passed a kindergarten. There were 4 or 5 of us, chatting quietly as we walked. We stopped to watch the children play in the yard for a moment. No no no! The teacher ran out the door and looked at us as if we were demons, then rushed the children inside and closed the door. Well, we were the first Americans to walk their streets in 72 years. I guess to them, we *were* demons.

That night, there was a bit of a party, with music by our boat's band. During the show, they asked a young man with the Florida group to join them on guitar. He had been hanging out with them. After playing several of their songs, very sedate type music, he asked if they knew "Back in the USSR" by the Beatles. Of course, they said. He lit a fire with that guitar, was all over the stage, rocking like you've only seen with a serious rock band. I think he wore the band out. We loved it!

We cruised through the night to Kizhi Island, located in the northern end of Lake Onega. We were there to see two churches, one 275 years old, and the other 225. They have the characteristic onion domes. What makes these churches special is their remote location, and construction. The buildings are made of simple pine logs, brought in by small boats. The onion domes were made of aspen shingles. There were no nails used in the buildings. Amazing! People still go to church there, boating in from other nearby islands, when the lake is not frozen. We were told that the lake thawed out a week before our arrival, in early June.

The interiors were nondescript wooden structures. The walls were covered with the usual icons, which despite the remote location, were wired for security.

After a little hike around the island, we came upon a house. This house had a barn attached, and the barn could be entered from the house. Winters are so brutal here that they don't go outside for several months, making it essential to have inside barn access. The interior was a single large room.

Around the walls were long benches. The kitchen was along the back wall. Attached was a single bedroom where the oldest family members slept. The other 9 in the family slept on the benches. And never went outside for months? I'm sorry, there's no way I could survive that for even a single winter. Yet, they lived this way, year after year. That says a lot about Russian hardiness and patience. They are different from us, but in many ways the same. Those who live in the populated cities share very much the same hopes and dreams that we do.

Back on the boat, we set off for Valaam Island, in the middle of Lake Ladoga. Another afternoon and night of cruising gets us there.

Valaam was beautiful. The centerpoint was an old Russian Orthodox monastery, originally built around 1400. The current structure was built in 1782, and is quite impressive, having not one but two walls protecting it. It was being restored, and the people living on the island and their families were the ones restoring it. It is hard to find workers who will endure the harsh weather there, so they are few in number, but dedicated to the task. We enjoyed the walk around the island, and went back to our boat. Next stop Leningrad.

We docked just after breakfast, and boarded our buses for a visit to the Peter and Paul Fortress. This formidable fortress sat on the Neva River across from the Hermitage. It was a popular place for sunbathers by the river, soaking up the hot sun.

We went inside. There is a cathedral and a prison. We went into the cathedral. It was very ornate. Much of it was fake. I knocked on one of the marble columns. It was made of wood, hollow on the inside, and carefully painted to resemble marble. I suspect the Soviet leaders robbed it and used the real marble in their homes. In the cathedral were the tombs of Peter the Great and Catherine the Great, as well as other Czars.

Next stop was St. Isaac's Cathedral in downtown Leningrad. This is one of the largest domed buildings in the world. The columns surrounding the building weigh 40 tons each. They are scarred from the bombardment by the Nazis in WWII. Leningrad was under siege for over 1000 days, and

thousands starved to death. Those who survived did so by caravans driving down the Neva River in winter. They never surrendered, and never gave up.

Four of us were a few minutes overdue getting back to the bus. Our local guide was always admonishing us with “old Russian sayings” that speak to the needs of the collective over the needs of the one. As I boarded the bus, I thought I would try out a few Russian words. I told her “We have an old American saying, *luschi posna, chem nikagda.*” Which means “better late than never”. She gave me a stern look, then smiled. The bus driver was cracking up. None of the Americans had a clue what was going on. I sat down and chuckled to myself.

I was in for another surprise when we got back to the boat. As we got off the bus for a short walk along the river to the boat, I walked around behind some large bushes to get a nice view of the river. A man appeared out of nowhere and approached me. He was clearly a WWII veteran, wearing the customary worn out blue blazer with his battle ribbons and medals displayed proudly on his chest. He put out his hand and I shook it. He was speaking Russian at a fast rate. I tried to get him to go to the bus with me so that our guide could translate for us, but he didn't want to be seen by anyone official. I spoke to him and said I was happy to meet such a decorated veteran. Both of our words were lost in the ether, but I think in the end, we communicated just fine.

Our afternoon trip was to Petrodvorets, Peter's Palace. And what a palace it was. Rooms gilded with gold trim, ballrooms, you name it, this palace had it. As we neared the end of the tour, we were hustled out the back door. The puzzlement didn't last long. Exiting behind us were the entire US Joint Chiefs of Staff, along with their Soviet counterparts. The tour was a part of the first ever meeting of the top military brass from both sides. Our group surrounded them and we all chatted for a few minutes, and shook hands. I was able to shake hands with the Soviet Chairman of the Joint Chiefs. What a surprise!

That incident brought out another characteristic of people living under the oppressive Soviet socialist system. Before we went inside for our tour, the grounds were teeming with Russian locals, with their families, getting some

sun, having a picnic, just enjoying the day. The instant the generals walked out the back door, the American tourists rushed the group. I looked around, and there wasn't a Russian civilian in sight. Not even a picnic basket left behind.

I looked to see just who was left hanging around. There were maybe a dozen guys in suits milling around, each one carrying a briefcase. Overhead, I spotted two helicopters keeping a respectful distance, but close enough to get there in a hurry.

After the excitement, we were able to enjoy the massive grounds, with reflecting pools stretching out from the palace to the Baltic Sea. Peter had good taste! And lots of money.

Next morning, it is time to head west. We will fly to East Berlin, bus to our hotel in West Berlin, and spend the next day in Berlin before going home.

The Leningrad airline terminal was something like I had never seen before. It was one large rectangular room, divided lengthwise in half by a wall that was maybe 15 feet high. At one end of the room, joining the two halves, was the baggage x-ray. We got in a line and slowly were processed out of the country. As my suitcase came out of the machine, the KGB border guard politely asked me to open it, and asked if he could look inside. Let me tell you, that wasn't virtual sweat that popped up on my head! It was nice to visit, but I wanted OUT of this country. He very carefully unfolded clothes, then folded them back. Everybody in line knew everything in my suitcase. Finally, I had rolled up a pair of jeans. He carefully unrolled them on the conveyor belt, and when he got to the belt and big brass buckle, he held it up and showed the x-ray operator. They both nodded and laughed, and then he rolled my jeans back up and thanked me politely, and I was on my way.

The other half of the building was the waiting room. We waited. Eventually, several buses pulled up on the ramp. We boarded the buses and they drove us out to our airplane, an Air Inter Ilyushin IL-62. This was the East German national airline. After we settled in, I waited for the flight attendants to give the safety briefing. They took their seats and we never saw them again. As we took the active runway for takeoff, the pilot

announced “We go now.” And with that, we were on our way to Berlin. Or were we?

We were given an expected landing time. I noticed we were flying a holding pattern well beyond our landing time. A few minutes later, we were told we were diverting to Leipzig. All of this is on a beautiful clear day, so it wasn't a weather issue. We flew to Leipzig, and then turned around and went back to Berlin, and landed at Tegel Airport in East Berlin. I learned the next day that another IL-62 had crashed at Tegel, and they didn't want us to see it, so we flew around until they could put the fire out and cover the wreckage. Control, control, control!

While the lines were slow, we entered another socialist country with little fanfare. We boarded our buses, and headed for the hotel. We stopped at the checkpoint and held up our passports as the guard passed through the bus. The East German driver was replaced by a West German driver, and away we went. Unbelievably, as we went through the wall, the colors changed from gray, dirty, dreary, and depressing, to beautiful well maintained houses, painted in colors, with flowers planted in front, and a Mercedes in the driveway. It was like being in a real version of the Wizard of Oz! Astounding!

We were quickly at our hotel, the Hotel Steigenberger. They had our room keys ready for us along with orange juice and coffee. When we arrived in our rooms, our luggage was waiting for us. Our alumni association rep, Sheila Eckman, arranged for the Auburn group to have dinner at a nearby restaurant. Our waiter spoke no English. We were getting used to that. We had a wonderful German meal. The waiter brought Sheila the bill, and she put her Auburn credit card on it. Our waiter went ballistic! He was running around saying something about nothing but snow in the front window. We finally figured out he was saying there were no credit card emblems in the front window. They wouldn't take Sheila's card, so we all had to come up with as many German Marks as we could. Since we had just arrived, some had not exchanged money yet. Finally, they agreed to accept travelers checks for the remainder of the bill, and we were able to leave without having to wash dishes.

Dad and I spent the next day on our own exploring the Kurfurstendamm, or K'damm in local lingo. This is a busy street with many shops and restaurants, street performers, and a large bombed out church left over from WWII, as a reminder of their past. After lunch, I had a nap while Dad went over all of our trip info just to have something to do. I was beat! This was two weeks of go go go, and the wind had left my sails. Next day we flew a short hop to Frankfurt on British Airways, and then Lufthansa to Atlanta.

So, final thoughts. Was this the trip of a lifetime? Almost! The Israel trip described later takes the top honor. But this trip was a close second. The main takeaway for me was the culture and the people. Almost everyone we met was delightful. They are basically very much like us. But the culture and history are so very different. It is something we will have to work on as neighbors. After all, except for Canada and Mexico, who both touch our borders, Russia is our closest neighbor. Just over 2 miles separate Big and Little Diomed Islands, and 64 miles separate our mainland.

## Lucerne

In 1990, Dad's sister and her husband, Evelyn and Ted Brown, were planning to go to Switzerland with a group from Chicago, where they lived. They asked Dad to go, and he asked me. So off to Switzerland we went. We met the group in Chicago, and boarded our SwissAir flight to Zurich. From Zurich, we took a train to Lucerne. This would be our home base for day trips to other places.

Our hotel was the Johanniter, just up the street from the train station. It was a quaint, older hotel, and had an elevator that could hold 2. Our room was on the top floor, which meant that the ceilings and walls were somewhat compromised by the steeply sloping roof. First observation upon looking out the windows, all of the apartments had roll-down metal covers for the windows, presumably to protect from snow and ice. Second, our windows were odd. They tilted in from the top for ventilation, and also opened out, more like a door.

I'll say it right up front, I love Switzerland, and Lucerne is my favorite city in the world.

From the mountain views, to the Chapel Bridge, quaint shops and restaurants, superb transportation museum, and cobblestone streets, what's not to like about this city? Near as I can tell, nothing at all.

I don't have an itinerary for this trip, so I'll just hit the highlights. I think the best place to start is the 800 pound gorilla in the room. Yes, I mean Mount Pilatus, the 7,000 foot peak that overlooks Lucerne. There are two ways to reach the summit, (well 3 but I didn't bring my ice axe), cable car and cog railway. We decided to take the cog railway. Good choice for a family with a railroad background! The tracks came up the other side of the mountain, so we took a metro bus to the station. This was said to be the steepest cog railway in the world, and I didn't doubt it. The seats were on large steps because of the incline. No flat floor here! The ride was good, and slow, so we got a great view of the surrounding mountains. At the summit, we had beautiful views of the area. Nothing else to do at the top, so we went back down on the cog train. On another visit in 1992 with a friend, we rode the cable car to the top. That is a two step ride. You start out in little cars, like a ski lift, going up the slope through the woods, then change to a traditional multi-person stand up car for the final section. Another great way to get to the top!

Next on the must see list is the Chapel Bridge, or Kapellbrücke in German, an historic wooden covered footbridge across the Reuss River in Lucerne. Having a length of 672 feet, there is a water tower (Wasserturm) in the middle. The bridge was originally built around 1360. The part that really makes it special is the 158 triangular shaped paintings that were placed in the peak of the roof that you could enjoy while walking across the bridge. They were painted in the 17th century, and depict historical events in Lucerne. The bridge had a major fire in 1993, and destroyed most of the paintings. They were able to restore only 30 of them. Such a shame! They were so beautiful! On this trip and my subsequent two visits to Lucerne, I always made sure that wherever I was going, I crossed the Chapel Bridge to get there.

One day we made an excursion to Bern, the capital of Switzerland. We traveled by train, passing through Interlaken, a town between two lakes, tucked into the mountains. With rail connections to the east and west, it is a convenient place to make a home base, which is what I did on a future trip with Steve Conn. And it is a charming town.

We arrived in Bern. If you go, you must stop by the outskirts of the city to visit the Bern Bears. The bear is the city symbol and they have had bears since the 1500s. In 2009, they built a large park to house the bears and provide for recreation.

Walking around the old city on the hill, it is easy to see why it is a banking capital as well as center of government. There were banks everywhere! And speaking of government, Switzerland is the oldest democracy in the world, having existed for over 700 years!

As with our other destinations, the food was excellent, and the people were friendly and helpful.

Our last excursion was a bus trip to Lugano, on the border with Italy, and located on beautiful Lake Lugano. It is a great town to visit. This is the Italian speaking part of the country, and of course, the food is Italian. I picked up a good topographical map because the Lugano airport has a challenging takeoff path, and the map would be helpful in assisting Gulfstream customer pilots with takeoff planning. I used it many times!

The road to Lugano passed the Pilatus Aircraft factory in Staans. While not significant to most readers, you might recognize it as Goldfinger's Swiss factory from the James Bond movie Goldfinger. For me, the connection is that they build airplanes that are used for mission aviation by my favorite charity, JAARS.

In Lugano, which is located by a beautiful lake, there is a small mountain, Mount Bre. A friend and I rode the funicular up Mount Bre, for the wonderful views from the top. The funicular is an interesting contraption. It looks like you are simply riding a railroad car up a track that goes straight up the mountain, being pulled by a cable. Simple, until you get to the mid-

point of the climb. There, the track splits, into an up track and a down track, essentially a normal railroad passing track. Then it becomes clear how this thing works. For coming down the mountain straight toward us is another funicular car, also attached to the cable. As we get to the passing track, our car goes to the right, while the one coming down takes the other track. We pass safely, and then return to the single track and continue to the top. That was an interesting experience!

A local attraction in Lucerne is the Swiss Transportation Museum. I love this place! They have planes, trains, and automobiles. Big ones! There is a Convaair 880, the fastest airliner for its time, and the size of a 707. There are many train cars and engines, including cog trains that climb mountains. My favorite part of the museum is the model train set. It is huge! There is a mountain, and trains run all around it, up and down, through tunnels and towns. It is fascinating to watch.

The trip home was uneventful, except for a minor scare in the Zurich airport. We were going through security, and 3 of us were through, and stopped to wait for Dad. They asked him to put his camera case through the x-ray. He refused, wanting them to hand search it so that his film didn't get ruined. Good concept in America, but in Europe, those guys are serious. So there he is, arguing with a guy that had a machine gun hanging from his shoulder. I wanted to yell at him "Don't argue with guys with machine guns Dad!" Eventually, he complied, didn't get shot, and when he got home, all the film was fine.

I returned to Switzerland with other people twice more in the next 4 years and enjoyed every minute. My favorite food was raclette, a dish made with Emmentaler cheese in a special oven, with sweet pickles and pearl onions on the side. My favorite mountain is the Matterhorn in southern Switzerland. And favorite train ride is Lucerne to Lugano, with a tunnel you enter and exit 3 times while climbing a mountain in circles. No, wait. The cog train that goes through the Eiger and Jungfrau mountains is maybe more favorite. It stops twice to allow taking in the views through large windows in the tunnel walls. Check out the movie, The Eiger Sanction for spectacular views.

Switzerland. You gotta go!

## Photos



North American AT-6 Texan. This is the type of airplane that Dad flew in advanced training during World War Two. We saw about 100 of them at the AT-6 fly-in in Kenosha, Wisconsin, July, 1988.



Vlado's Dad, Van's Dad, Van, Vlado, Oshkosh 1988.



Van, Dad, Joan and Jack Kennedy, at their house on Cape Split, Maine, August, 1988.



Jack Kennedy hauling in a lobster trap, Cape Split, Maine, August, 1988.



Jack Kennedy, Dad, and Buddy, Jack's Black Labrador, rowing in from the lobster boat.

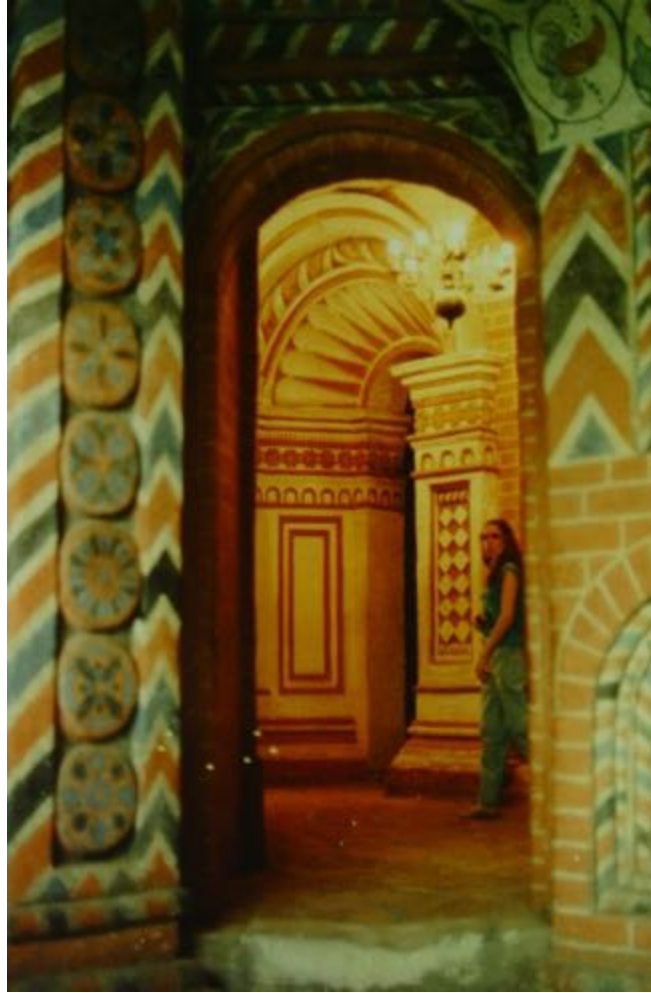
*The following photos of our trip to the USSR in 1989 are all courtesy of Sheila Eckman, who was the Auburn University Alumni Association representative on our trip. It seems as though I lost my pictures during our last move 8 years ago.*



Mike Eckman, Van, Dad, at our opening night cocktail party at the Cosmos Hotel in Moscow.



The nine gold domes of the Cathedral of the Annunciation, within the Kremlin walls, Moscow. Built between 1484 and 1489 by Ivan the Great.



The labyrinth of small rooms and passages within The Cathedral of Vasily the Blessed, more commonly known as St. Basil's Cathedral, on one end of Red Square in Moscow. It was built between 1554 and 1560 by Ivan the Terrible.



One of the balancing acts at the Moscow Circus, a single ring circus.



Babushkas, or grandmothers, enjoying a warm afternoon on a Moscow park bench.



Two men fishing in the Neva River in Leningrad, with the spire of Peter and Paul Fortress in the background, which was the first building in St. Petersburg, housing a cathedral, jail, military base, burial ground, and museums.



Windmill and church on Kizhi Island, Karelian Republic, USSR.



Sheila Eckman, Mike Eckman, Dad, and another Auburn couple having a meal in Berlin on the way home.



Dad, Aunt Evelyn and Uncle Ted Brown, Mt. Pilatus, Lucerne, Switzerland,  
1990.



Chapel Bridge, under reconstruction after the fire, Lucerne, Switzerland,  
1994.



Cog train, through tunnel in Eiger and Monch mountains, to Jungfrauoch, Switzerland, 1994.



The Matterhorn, my favorite mountain in all the world, Zermatt, Switzerland, 1994.

# Gulfstream, Again!

*“Therefore I retract, and I repent in dust and ashes.” - Job 42:6*

## **Old Airplanes and Vegemite Sandwiches**

Four years after leaving Gulfstream, I was working at Federal Express for the second time. I realized within the first month that it wasn't ever going to be the right fit for me. But there was one saving grace. Ken Hurley and I had started working on the earliest prototype of the program that would eventually become AFMatic, and that was pretty exciting. So, the weekend job was great, but the day job, not so much. It was just too much of a bookkeeping job to keep my interest, even though it was all about airplanes. That was where my head was when I took off for a week and went to the EAA airshow in Oshkosh, WI.

When I returned from Oshkosh, I called Jim Ward at Gulfstream over my lunch hour just to chat and tell him about some of the new airplanes I had seen, and people I saw that he knew. After we had talked for a few minutes, he said Ed Flinn was passing by and wanted to say hi. As usual, Ed got to the point quickly. I was forgiven for leaving 4 years before, and he needed my help. It was even okay for me to come back as a contractor. I asked when he needed me, and he said Monday. I told him I wouldn't leave without giving them a two week notice, and he reluctantly agreed. I never even asked him what the pay rate was. As soon as I hung up the phone, I went into my boss's office, and gave him two weeks notice. And that, my friends, is just how things work in the contract engineering business. One phone call with the right person, and we're out of here.

I arrived back at Gulfstream to start my new job, another Gulfstream I project, only this one was a real technical challenge. I'll skip the details, but the bottom line was that the obstacle clearance data had to be completely updated using a newer calculation method. Right up my alley! The first hurdle was locating the basic data for the GI. This airplane was originally certified in 1957, thirty years prior to my project. And to make matters worse, it was a Grumman product, designed and manufactured in Bethpage, NY. Supposedly, all engineering data for the GI and GII had been transferred to Savannah, but where to find it was a mystery. So, my first job was to make a list of everything I needed, and keep searching till everything was checked off. I gathered it all into one big black three ring binder, and titled it "The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Gulfstream I". Now, 37 years later, and as far as I know, it is still the definitive data source for the GI.

I launched into the project. There were a lot of graphs in the flight manual that needed replacing, so this was going to take a while. One part of a certification project is the requirement to work with our certification group, who coordinated everything with the FAA. After much back and forth with those guys, and having most of the graphics work complete, the project was canceled. That's the airplane biz!

After that, I was just one of the guys for the next two years. I shared a cubicle with Bob Mills, an Australian with a PhD in Computational Fluid Dynamics. Bob was our orifice expert. No kidding. If you needed to put an air inlet, or outlet, on the airplane, Bob had the tools to design it in such a way that it didn't cause any extra drag on the airframe. A few years later, Bob was the leader of a group of CFD guys, designing the whole airplane. But when I sat with him, Bob was a congenial Aussie, with whom I swapped cultural experiences. However, I never did sample the Vegemite. Nope. Wasn't gonna do it.

## **Of Cool Stuff and Pink Slips**

As the contract guy in the group, that made me the mercenary. Like a fire extinguisher, my job was to put out fires, and I was sometimes called on to

do things that the other engineers couldn't. Not that they weren't capable, but some projects required full engagement, and the others all had families. For example, in the late 80s, Allen Paulson, our CEO, got the idea that there was a market for the sale of Gulfstream IVs to Saddam Hussein's government in Iraq. Yeah, no kidding. Ed was set to fly over with the demonstrator and our salesman for that part of the world, Steve Fuller. The lead time to prepare the technical proposal and produce 50 color copies was less than a week. Ed asked me how many people I needed to help me. I told him that if I had 2 helpers, we could do it in 2 weeks. If I had 1 helper, we could finish in 10 days. And if he would just keep everybody away so I could focus, I promised to finish by the deadline. He got a panicked look in his eye, but he agreed. This was before color printers and copiers were on every desk. Our means of producing color graphics at the time was a pen plotter. We had 3 of them, all of which I commandeered, along with all of the spare pens in the supply cabinet. The presentation was 68 pages long, and to meet the deadline, the plotters had to run through the night. With careful color selection, I could get one set of pens to go that long before running dry. Finally, I had all of the copies bound and boxed, sitting in Ed's office a day early. He made the trip and met with Saddam's sons. Needless to say, the company dodged a bullet when the sales trip failed to generate any new business.

My cubicle was right outside the door to Ed's office. It was a pretty normal thing for him to just yell for me when he needed something. One day he had a customer from the Middle East in his office. I could overhear the conversation, and everything was fine until the customer demanded some proprietary technical data and Ed politely declined to provide it. The customer got angry and the argument escalated quickly. Now I am not a small guy, and if someone doesn't know me, I might even be a little intimidating. So I just got up and stuck my head in the door and said "Hi Ed. I'm back from running that errand for you. I'll be right out here if you need me." The customer got the message and immediately calmed down.

At that point we didn't have the tabulated data for the GIV completed, so pilots were still required to use the 50 pages of graphs to plan their flights. One day as I had a completed draft, but it wasn't approved, an imposing gentleman appeared at my desk. He was Clarence Beverly, Bill Cosby's

pilot and bodyguard. Clarence had just completed training for the GIV, and was still having trouble with the graphs. Ed was out of the office that day, so we went into Ed's office and spread out the flight manual on his conference table. I spent the afternoon teaching Clarence how to compute takeoff and landing performance using what we called "the stubby pencil method". Graphs, a scratchpad, a pencil, and a calculator were all that we needed. After we were finished, Clarence had his head wrapped around it. Then before he left, I gave him a preliminary copy of the tabulated data, and I was his new best friend. After that, whenever Clarence was in town for recurrent training, he would stop by my desk and visit.

Companies periodically go insane, and they hire outside consultants to come in and analyze how they do things, and then they change everything so that the operating methods are completely different. So, you guessed it, Gulfstream hired these guys to evaluate the business processes of the engineering department and make changes. Ugh. Everybody was interviewed, except me. Expected. I was the contract guy, remember? I didn't count. One of our engineers was selected as the liaison to the consultants. When the project was complete, he got one of the management positions that were recommended in the final report. Paul was a friend who lived near me, and I used to go to his house for dinner sometimes. He started getting stressed from the management job, and usually about once a week, because he and I were the first to come in every morning, I would go in his office and close the door, and then suggest that he just vent. And that he did! Paul really wanted to go back to just being an engineer. I listened with a sympathetic ear.

We had a customer with an early GIV. They complained that it burned too much fuel. The engineer that was assigned the project to find out what was going on with their fuel consumption was a young Greek engineer. He wasn't really talented when it came to engineering, and was not making any headway on it. My frustrated boss called me into his office. He asked if I would take over the project. Sure, no problem. And would I tell the other engineer, and use the project to mentor him. Um, no, Paul, I won't do that. Taking over the project was a management task. And mentoring a young engineer is something you ask a direct hire employee to do. As a contract engineer, my job was to effectively and efficiently sit at my desk and get

technical work done. When I reminded him of that, a pretty red-faced angry argument ensued. He eventually conceded and I went back to my desk to wait for him to do his management thing and hand off the project to me.

That one was interesting. We had in-flight data from the customer, and it was slightly off, but well within the guaranteed performance level. We set up a flight test and manually collected the pertinent data. I wrote a program for my laptop to graph the data and show if we were within the guaranteed 2% of predicted. The line on the screen showed that the airplane was off by about 1.5%. Within requirements. Still they complained. One of the test pilots rode in the jumpseat with them on a multiple leg trip to Tokyo. When he got back and gave me the data he collected, it showed the same thing at cruise. But when I looked at what happened between the start of descent and landing, the answer jumped off the page. The way they calculated the descent was to assume you descend to the end of the runway and land. There was no allowance in their calculation to account for an instrument landing. Or even just flying a normal traffic pattern. Jet airplanes burn much more fuel at low altitudes, especially when the landing gear is down. When they adjusted their method to include the low altitude part, the calculations matched the airplane exactly. Project complete. Happy customer.

No gold stars for me this time. We had a staff meeting a couple weeks later, and during the meeting I made a snarky remark, trying to get a laugh. An hour later Paul called me into his office and fired me, for having a bad attitude. This was the guy that vented to me weekly about how much he hated his job. They marked my file REHIRABLE, so I looked at it as an opportunity to spend some time at my condo in Surfside Beach, SC. Unfortunately, soon after my untimely departure from Gulfstream, a very strong hurricane named Hugo formed in the Atlantic, and came ashore not many miles south of the condo. The first six months of my “vacation” were spent at my Dad’s house in Erwin. I got back in the condo at the beach in May. I spent my days working on my software, and was making excellent progress. Then in October, my phone rang, and Ed Flinn was on the line.....

## **Photos**



My condo at Surfers Beach, SC, 3 months after Hurricane Hugo, November 1989. After I moved back in the following May, I got a lot of work done on what would become AFMatic. Then the phone rang, and it was Ed....

# Some GIFTS Just Keep On Giving

*“Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord, rather than for men.” - Colossians 3:23*

## **Just Crunching Numbers**

Ed Flinn called in October, 1990. Shortly after my exit from the company 12 months prior to that, Gulfstream had a big layoff. One of the first to accept the voluntary exit package was the boss who fired me, Paul. Ed apologized for letting Paul talk him into sending me packing. Okay, fine, let's start anew. This time I didn't have to give a notice, so I just packed a suitcase and made the four hour drive to Savannah from my beachside condo in Surfside Beach, SC. I started the next day, and stopped by to see Diane “the badge lady” in security. She had figured that I was going to be coming and going frequently, so instead of throwing my badge away when I left the company, she just stuck it in her drawer. I walked through her door and she opened her drawer and handed me my badge.

I spent the next year crunching numbers, doing whatever was needed, as usual. Along the way, I wrote a graphics program called Magic that was used for many years in the performance group. As I came and went over the next 7 years, I maintained Magic. Later, when I was building the data for AFMatic, I used the Magic input data as my source for data from the graphs to be sure my calculations matched the flight manual.

## **The Project**

Then in late 1991, I was called into a meeting, hosted by Jim Ward with his Engineering-Scientific Computing (ESC) group. We had a guest, a consultant named Stu Law, who was an electrical engineer that had spent many years with NASA in Houston. We all knew Stu from previous projects, and were interested to see what he was proposing. It was a whopper. I'll try to avoid getting too technical, but here is the gist of it. Data acquisition systems, and especially flight test data acquisition systems, store their data much like what you see when looking at a spreadsheet. Let's say we have a column for speed, one for altitude, one for engine power setting, etc. The rows will be instants in time. There may be a row for each second, tenth of a second, hundredth, whatever is selected. But two things are rigid, the time increment will always be the same from one row to the next, and every column will have a data point for each row. Nice and neat and easy to understand - it is just like a spreadsheet. We refer to this as synchronous data, also sometimes called framed data.

Stu proposed something that made us say "Are you nuts?" followed by "Why not?". He proposed that we treat each piece of data from whatever the source, as a separate entity, which would be stored on magnetic tape in a simple stream. We refer to this as asynchronous data. The idea was that each packet of data, which we named an "LTD", would have a 4-character label for the name of the data, for example pressure altitude might be labeled PALT, the time the data was acquired, and finally, the value of the data. What made this approach such a radical improvement is that some data doesn't need to be collected very frequently, for example when the pilot's microphone button is depressed. Once per second would be fine for that. Other things, like speed and altitude, could be recorded 10 or 20 times per second. But the real outliers are what makes this so good. During some tests, it is necessary to collect pressure data from various locations on the wing as often as 5,000 or more times per second. Imagine recording that data, along with pilot microphone switch position, 5,000 times per second. What a waste of data storage!

Well, the project got a green light, was funded, and we started with a team of 3, Bill King who handled acquiring the data from a myriad of onboard sensors, Jack Scott who handled the data once it was acquired, and directed the data to the tape recorder and to two onboard computers that displayed

data to engineers in flight, and me, who was responsible for the onboard displays and communications between the displays and the data acquisition system. Bill King was soon replaced by Jay Rowland, who took the design to a whole new level. Curtis Wilson joined us to handle databases and electronics related stuff, with Larry Vincent keeping us all on the right track. And the amazing part of it is, none of us had worked with real-time data acquisition before, and once we got the bugs out of it, this was probably the best, and smallest, flight test data acquisition system in the industry at that time.

This system was given the name GIFTS, Gulfstream Integrated Flight Test System. My portion was known as FTE, for Flight Test Engineer, the guy who would be operating the system and monitoring the data.

Each of our portions of the project had a large number of constraints that we had to create solutions for. For my part, I was working with a Toshiba laptop, with an Intel 80386 processor, 640 KB of memory, and running the MS-DOS operating system. The screen was too slow to handle some of the graphics, so I had to learn how to program in assembly language to speed up the graphics. Not to mention that I had to learn the C programming language to do the project. After we could collect, store, and display the data came the next challenge. We had to read the data from the tape, create graphical printed output for the engineers to analyze, and build software to analyze the data and determine all the information that the FAA would need to certify the airplane. Jay had the task of extracting the data from the tape and building the analytical tools. I learned yet another programming language, Postscript, and processed the data stream that Jay's extraction tools fed me, and printed out beautiful 11x17 pages of strip chart data. Sometimes a single line might have more than 10,000 data points, and feeding that to a Postscript printer took a lot of time. By doing very detailed optimizations in the Postscript programming, I was able to get the print time of even the most complex page down to under 30 seconds. Most printed with only a couple seconds of processing. Between the FTE program, and the program to print the output, I consider this some of my best work.

An interesting thing happened around the halfway point of this project. The company got a new Chief Financial Officer. She had never worked for an

aircraft company before, and came to us from General Electric. IT departments are generally found in the CFO's chain of command. One of the first things she did was to gather up any department in the company that had anything to do with computers, and stick them into the IT department. Boom! We came to work on one Monday morning and were summoned to the IT conference room for an all hands IT department meeting. Huh? That was when we found out that we worked for IT, not engineering. What a joke that was! The IT department suddenly had more aerodynamic engineers than the engineering department! Our jaws were hanging slack. Fortunately, it only lasted a day. Our VP of engineering, Charlie Coppi, was the greatest guy I ever worked for, and he quickly rectified the situation. However, the end result was that ESC was taken over by IT, to the detriment of the groups that they served, and those of us working on GIFTS were transferred to flight test. That's where we were working, and what we were working on, so that made a lot of sense. Of course, this wasn't the end of it. The CFO was really chapped that there was a group of guys somewhere in the company that was operating, even building, computer systems, and we weren't under her control. One day at lunch, I was the only one in our trailer, and the president of the company at the time walked through the door. I assumed he was there at the behest of the CFO, who he had brought in from GE. He asked me some questions about what we did, and whether I thought we should be attached to Flight Test or IT. I explained to him that while all of these boxes we worked with were sold to us as "computers", we had turned them into "specialized flight test equipment", and they only looked like computers now. Our mission was totally flight test related, and computers were just an incidental part of our processes. Apparently he liked what he heard, because we were never troubled by this issue again.

## **Let's Fly It!**

Finally, after the better part of a year of development, the system was installed on a Gulfstream IV, which was about to be tested for upgraded wheels and brakes, followed by a whole brake system design change. GIFTS was fully functional, but still had some bugs in the system, and we had other features to add for upcoming tests, so it remained a work in progress. As such, since I had developed the control and monitoring portion

of the system, FTE, and I was an aero performance engineer, which is what we were testing, it was decided that I would be the data collection engineer during the two test programs.

Our first program, known as ASC 190, was an aircraft service change designed to change out the wheels, tires, and brakes on the main landing gear with new and improved replacements, as well as a small increase in maximum takeoff weight. The biggest part of the test program was spent on takeoff performance (accelerate to most critical point and either continue takeoff or abort and stop), and landing performance (descend to touchdown with a descent rate no higher than 10 feet per second, and once on the ground, apply maximum braking until stopped).

We had 2 computer workstations set up, one in the front right side of the cabin for the test conductor, and the other in the back left side for the data guy (that's me). When I say cabin, I mean bare to the skin of the airplane. There was no interior in the airplane, and no paint on the outside. When we were up at cruising altitude, the temperature outside was -56 degrees centigrade. Touching the skin from the inside was not much warmer. The cabin heating system worked, but with no insulation, was only marginally helpful. But, since most of our work was around the airport, that wasn't a problem.

Our seats were pilot seats, covered with lamb's wool, and adorned with a 5-point harness to make sure we stayed in place, no matter what. The problem was, the rack that was built to hold my laptop was located too close to the seat and had a structural bar going across where my legs needed to be. This meant that for the duration of the 2 test programs, about 6 months, every time we made a stop on the runway (hundreds of them), when the brakes were applied with gusto, my knees got a new bruise. They were purple for the entirety of both programs! No big deal, but a bit of a pain. To finish off the equipment list was a headset plugged into the airplane's intercom system on the right side of the cabin, with a 100 foot long cord so that I could walk around the airplane if need be.

The first part of testing was company only, for the purpose of learning how the new equipment performed, and making adjustments, primarily to the

anti-skid system, in order to achieve best performance and operation. Once the final configuration was established, the FAA joined us, in the form of a copilot and flight test engineer to observe from the jumpseat.

Company testing happened in Savannah, but certification testing moved to Roswell, NM, where many people believe a UFO crashed and was studied. In fact, we were located in Hangar 84, where the action supposedly took place. During the month or so that we were there, we had no visitations by aliens, no UFO sightings, not even visits from Trekkies looking for souvenirs. The only thing out of the ordinary was a very ordinary skunk that apparently made his home in some dark corner of the hangar. First one to arrive each morning at 4 AM turned on all the lights and opened the hangar door a few feet, and then went out and waited. In a couple minutes, here would come the skunk waddling out the door to spend his day in the great outdoors. After that, the place was all ours.

We all (except pilots) arrived by 4:00 every morning, 7 days a week until we were finished. We headed back to the hotel when the mechanics were finished getting the airplane ready for the next morning. That could be 7 PM, or 11, but usually 8 to 9. Pick up something for dinner on the way to the hotel, then sleep and start with a 3:00 wake up call again. Tiring? You could say that.

We weren't allowed to fly experimental aircraft at night, so flying started at official sunrise. Like, exactly then. We would be on the runway, ready for takeoff, and when the tower called out official sunrise, we advanced the throttles and rushed down the runway for the first test point. Why? Because we couldn't test runway performance if the wind speed was more than 10 knots (11.5 mph). Out west, we hit the wind limit by 10 AM almost every day, so we had to get as much done as possible before we had to call it a day. Then the rest of the day was spent in analyzing data and maintaining the airplane.

So, what did we do on the flights? Since we were testing brakes, we might do a series of aborted takeoffs at different weights. After each maximum performance stop (slam on the brakes with as much pressure on the brake pedals as the pilot can muster, automatic wing lift spoilers pop up to add

drag, but no thrust reversers), we would pull off on a taxiway and have our mechanics take a quick look at the landing gear to make sure we hadn't broken anything. With their approval, we took the runway again and got airborne as quickly as possible. Why? The brakes get very, very hot, and must be cooled down to air temperature before the next test point. We did that by flying around the Roswell area with the landing gear extended. It took about 15 minutes each time. And what did we do in the meantime? We talked till we had covered every possible subject, and then I found that 10 minutes was a nice nap, and with the endless repetition, I got really good at catching a little nap right after takeoff, and waking up just in time to check the brake temperatures and tell our pilot, Gary Freeman, to head back for the next test point. Crazy long hours create crazy solutions for catching a nap whenever possible.

Our pilot, Gary Freeman, also known by his flight test call sign as Test52, is an interesting guy. Gary was an instructor in the US Navy's test pilot school, and as such, had flown almost every military jet fighter in the world, including those being flown by our allies, as well as our enemies. I trusted Gary's flying skills to get us out of any unexpected situation. Best stick and rudder guy I've ever flown with. Our FAA pilot, on the other hand, intentionally flew like an average everyday pilot, and wore heavy boots to be sure he didn't develop too good of a feel for the brakes. It worked! He could definitely be heavy and jerky on the brakes. More on that later.

So, day after day of endless rejected takeoffs, landings, and flying around cooling the brakes, until the mechanic who was operating our portable weather station called out 10 knots of wind. At that point, usually around 10 AM, we were done flying for the day.

Once we were back in the hangar office, it was time to extract the data from the tape we had recorded in the air, and analyze the data to determine the key performance parameters. Luckily, we brought a small team of performance engineers to do all that. I spent the rest of the day fixing software bugs and adding new features to the FTE program. And when things got boring, I would nod off at my desk for a few minutes. Don't get me wrong, the work was fun, exciting, and interesting. But the hours were brutal. We all agreed that we would all be there when the first guy had to be

there, and we would all stay until the last item was completed to be ready for the next test. That left some time for thumb twiddling for most of us.

We did a few things out of the ordinary. One test was to ascertain that the fuse plugs in the wheels would melt at the proper temperature. So, what's a fuse plug, you ask? More properly called a fusible plug, these are plugs that are located in the rim of the wheel. In the event of a really high energy stop, the brakes will heat up to a very high temperature. The heat gets transferred to the air in the tire, which causes an immediate increase in tire pressure. Add enough energy and bang, the tire explodes and sends large heavy chunks of rubber everywhere. So, for safety, there are holes in the wheel rim that have these metal fuse plugs blocking the hole. At the designed high temperature, the metal in the fuse plug melts, releasing the air from the tire before it can reach a dangerous pressure.

To perform the test, we did a high energy stop and immediately taxied back to the hangar. Everybody else left the airplane, for safety. Two mechanics crawled under the wing and attached temperature leads to the wheels before they heated up too high. Everybody then ducked behind the hangar doors for protection from an exploding tire. I monitored the temperatures until they rose to the melting point of the fuse plugs, at which point the air exited all four main landing gear tires with a whoosh. After that, the airplane was safe to approach, and I could shut it all down and call it a day. Did I mention the fire department? They were on hand to put out the blaze if things went awry. The test was completed as designed, and we passed. Of course, that also led to the demise of 4 main landing gear tires, destroyed by the weight of the airplane on the rims. All in a day's work.

Speaking of destroyed tires, in the course of our testing with maximum braking on every stop, as well as a few hard landings while aggressively pursuing the perfect 10 feet per second descent rate at touchdown, we blew some tires, leaving a stream of pieces of rubber on the runway. In the old tradition of fighter pilots keeping score of their kills by painting a symbol on the airplane beneath the pilot's window, our mechanics painted a blown tire for each one. They added up!

This test program took place during the 1992 World Series, and the Atlanta Braves were in the series. Since we had a few fans among our crew, we also painted a tomahawk on the plane. And just because we liked it, a shark's bared teeth were painted on the radome in the nose of the plane. We got away with all that because the airplane was as yet unpainted, and we were away from home, where no management could walk by and see it. Better to ask forgiveness than permission, right?

After a month in Roswell, testing was complete, and we took a day off and had a pool party at the hotel, and of course, our mechanics made sure that everybody on the team went for a swim. For those of us who weren't planning on a swim, we got dunked clothes and all. It was a fun time, and a chance for all of us to let off a little steam, one way or another.

After the day off, we made our way home by various means. I flew home on airlines, accompanied by the brake engineer from Dunlop, Mario. Once home, we set out to write all the reports necessary to achieve certification. And then, on to the next project, the certification of the Gulfstream IV-SP.

## **New Brake System**

The GIV-SP differed from the original GIV in just a few aspects. First, structural changes allowed the frames that wrapped the airplane inside the skin to be reduced by 1 inch, meaning that the already generous 6 foot high cabin became 6'1". However, that change didn't require flight testing, so our efforts were focused on the brake system changes. The wheels, tires, and brakes were thoroughly tested during the ASC-190 testing previously documented. The big change was to replace the existing digital "brake-by-wire" braking system with an old fashioned analog system. Why in the world would we want to do that? The digital brake system had a 7 year history of being jerky, to the extent of sometimes spilling the drinks back in executive-land. This is not a good thing, and despite the fact that our test conductor on the ASC-190 project, Greg Hammerstein, had worked the bugs out of the digital anti-skid system controller during the previous test program, management made the decision to go old-tech. So we went back to having brake lines with high pressure hydraulic fluid running all the way

from the brake pedals in the cockpit, through the new analog anti-skid system, and on to the brakes. This enormous change meant that our development test program was extensive. In fact, the basic, untested system was installed in the airplane, and then we flew an iterative format: design changes, modify the airplane, flight test, analyze data, begin again. Because there was fluid in long runs of tubing, as brake pressure was applied, vibrations occurred which caused the brakes to chatter (grab and release repeatedly) rapidly, resulting in one or more blown tires. The fix was to add length to the brake lines, which caused the waveform of the vibration to end right at the end of the line. That killed the vibration. It took some time to trim the lines perfectly, but the system worked well when it was done. Greg did the honors tweaking the anti-skid system to make it smooth.

## **Did You Say "Fire"?**

Our marathon days of testing, analysis, redesign, maintenance, and daily hangar meetings with management to explain why the airplane wasn't ready to deliver to customers yet, were not without their humorous moments.

For example, one day, as we completed a heavy weight, high performance aborted takeoff, we taxied off the runway to have the landing gear inspected by our mechanics before getting airborne to cool the brakes. Now, there is something you must understand about flight test people. We enjoyed the work and didn't think of it as a job that was dangerous, in fact, never giving that aspect of it a second thought. Except for one thing, fire. Because fire is the one thing that you just can't escape, especially if it occurs in-flight. And on this particular airplane, there was a tiny fuel leak, just a few drips every now and then really. But the leak was just above the left main landing gear, which tended to get very hot every time we stopped the airplane. Did I mention that my seat was directly above said left main landing gear? While the possibility of one of those

drips resulting in a fire was quite remote, it was always way in the back of my mind.

As we came to a stop by the mechanics, their lead guy, Buddy, plugged in his headset to the intercom through an audio jack located in the nose landing gear well. Just as his microphone became active, I heard the end of a word his partner was yelling. "IRE!" was what I heard. I didn't know what the first letter of that word was, but I chose to err on the side of caution, and assume it was "F". I had my five point harness, and headset, off in an instant, and covered the distance to the front door in record time. Pull the handle to depressurize the door seal, then pop the door open and let the stairs deploy, and as soon as they touched the ground, I was down the stairs and standing next to Buddy. "Did you say 'FIRE'?", I yelled to be heard over the engines. "No, TIRE", he replied with a smile. For a long time after that, the pilots called me "Flash", all in good fun of course.

On another occasion during this period, the pilot, who shall remain nameless to protect the innocent, as well as the guilty, made a small mistake when taking the runway after our landing gear check. You see, with the runway configuration in Savannah, we made our test run on Runway 9, heading eastward, then pulled off on the taxiway and had the landing gear check, then pulled out onto Runway 18, headed south, and took off to cool the brakes. But on this day, a tired pilot turned left onto Runway 36, which at that point only had maybe 2,500 feet remaining. The power came up, and off we went. Then we all realized what just happened at the same time. But there was no collective gasp over the intercom. Nope, the copilot, who normally called out the speeds as they were attained, "V1, Rotate, V2", simply said "Now would be good" as we reached the end of the pavement.

Who says people in "high pressure" jobs can't have fun?

## **Roswell, Again!**

Finally! We were ready to bring the FAA on board. This was mid-March in 1993. A freak storm was making its way across the country, with high winds, snow across the south, rain in the north. Even when the sky was clear, the wind was howling. It became known as the No Name Storm, and it couldn't have come at a worse time. We were planning to test locally in Savannah and Brunswick, GA, but the winds were too high. So our intrepid pilot for this test, John O'Meara, searched all over the country and found calm winds at one airport, Topeka, KS. We had packed a go bag, so we loaded up the plane with crew and mechanics, as well as the FAA pilot and flight test engineer and 4 spare tires in the baggage compartment. The wind recorded next to the hangar with our portable weather station was 70 knots. As I recall, at takeoff we had an official 50 knot wind reported by the tower. With that much wind blowing everywhere, including high altitude, it was not a pleasant flight.

When we arrived at Topeka, sure enough, winds were as advertised. Expecting an easy landing, the FAA pilot made the landing to get used to the feel of the new brake system. And that's when he discovered that brake pressure was not linear with brake pedal deflection. In other words, press the pedals a little, get a little braking. Press some more and all of a sudden you get max braking. Yowie! When he did that, the resulting jolt sent one of our spare tires rolling out of the baggage compartment down the middle of the aisle, headed for the cockpit. Remember when I said that my seat was on the left, and the intercom was on the right, and I had a 100 foot long cord to my headset? Well, the tire caught my headset cord and away it went. Luckily, that slowed the tire, and one of the mechanics caught it. Unluckily, my head was connected to the end of that cord, and tried to go along for the ride. I was immobile, restrained by the 5-point harness. All I could do was to finally pull the headset off and let it go. Crisis over.

We went inside and borrowed the airport van and went out for a quick lunch before we started testing. By the time we got back, winds at Topeka were about 50 knots. No testing for us there. Another search across the country showed Roswell, NM had the lowest winds, so off to Roswell we went.

Arriving in Roswell, winds were low and we managed to get a little testing done before calling it a day. Next morning, we flew until about 9 AM, when the winds picked up dramatically, ending our testing for the day. We made one more landing, on the crosswind runway, in order to establish a new Maximum Demonstrated Crosswind. While not limiting, the MDC provides a guideline for pilots to know how much is too much. On that day we successfully landed with a 28 knot crosswind. Amazing! Now back to Savannah.

Finally back in Savannah, we continued testing on the long runway, doing anti-skid inoperative landings. With the original digital system, it was tuned well enough that the wheels wouldn't lock up and blow tires until at least 1500 PSI of brake pressure, so we set the procedure for a no anti-skid landing to press the brake pedals until you see 1000 PSI on the gauge, and not go above that. With the new system, however, wheels locked up at much lower pressure, and tires blew. We tried several methods to combat that issue, one of which was to use the parking brake to manually control brake pressure with the hope that the hand brake would apply pressure evenly across all four wheels.

We were to do this test on a Saturday morning. John O'Meara was flying and I was in back to collect data. I think we went without a test conductor, since this was a simple test, accelerate down the runway to 100 knots, cut power, and apply brakes using the hand brake, not to exceed 600 PSI on the gauge.

We waited on the ramp for a half hour, and our copilot never showed up. Since the regulations only require the pilot to be rated to fly the airplane, I turned the data system on and went up front with my commercial pilot license in hand. I asked John, "Is this all you need?" "Yep. Sit down." So, copilot for the day. Woo hoo! We taxied out, checked the brakes on the long taxiway, did the takeoff checklist, and rolled out onto runway 9. My job was

to hold the control yoke in place, full nose down and no aileron. And to keep my feet away from the rudder/brake pedals. John had the throttle, and the tiller to steer the nosewheel at low speeds when the rudder didn't have enough air blowing over it to be effective. John pushed the throttles up, and we accelerated very quickly to 100. John chopped the power and pulled the hand brake. I shifted my attention to the brake pressure gauge, and called out the pressure as it changed. "100, 200, 300, 400, 500, abort." We blew all 4 main gear tires in one instant. All we could do was release the brake and coast to a stop. How about that, I'm copilot on a Gulfstream for all of maybe 20 seconds, and we blow 4 tires. That's probably some sort of record. The big problem with blowing tires is that we left a stream of rubber chunks on the runway. This is known as FOD, or foreign object damage. That's what happens when you takeoff or land on a runway contaminated with junk. What does the airport do? They close the runway, and send a guy out in a truck to find all the FOD and pick it up. Once the runway has been cleared, operations can resume. We left the airplane with the mechanics and hitched a ride back to Gulfstream with another mechanic. Test results? Failure, back to the drawing board. Ultimately, we got the system working well enough for the FAA to give it their official okey-dokey.

We had just a couple tests to go. One was to taxi a long distance, using the brakes to stop periodically and get some energy in them, then go back and park it in the hangar and close the hangar door. The object is to show that you can put energy into the brakes, and the brakes will then cool without any help from the wind, and not blow the fuse plugs. Once again, I got to watch the data as the brakes cooled, sitting in an empty airplane in a dark hangar. No problem, test successful. This was our last test requiring data collection, so it was back to the office for me. And that was the last test where I was ever a part of the crew. John O'Meara, who was also Chief Experimental Test Pilot, came on the airplane while I was monitoring the brake temperatures, and thanked me for all the long hours and the diligent way I did my job. That meant a lot to me. I don't think anybody else ever did that in my years at Gulfstream.

One more test, and I was just an observer. This is the big bad hairy test that is always saved for last. Why? Well, you can burn up the airplane, that's why. The object is to abort a takeoff at max takeoff weight, brake heavily to

put more than the maximum amount of energy in the brakes, then pull off onto a taxiway and abandon ship. We had the airport fire truck and as the airplane zoomed by with brakes smoking, the fire crew pulled out and gave chase, with all the observers following closely. What is the point of all this? The airplane must be able to make a max brake energy stop, and survive for at least 15 minutes to allow time for the fire truck to arrive. So, we chased it down and waited until the fuse plugs released the air in the tires, after which we all gathered around and watched the tires begin to burn. It was almost surreal, watching our airplane in the process of destroying itself while we could do nothing, just standing in a group along with our FAA test pilot who was holding the stopwatch. After an agonizing 15 minutes, the airplane was still intact except for damage to the landing gear. Frank gave his approval, test complete, and we passed. The fire truck opened up on the landing gear, which cooled everything down fast, and quenched the flaming tires. And so ended my active flight testing career. Everything after this was an office job.

## **Gulfstream V**

When the GV program started up in 1995, I was not going to be a flight test engineer, but stayed with our data group to help with software development and maintenance, as well as providing post-test data to the FTEs. As a consequence of our system design of GIFTS, a duplicate system on the ground could receive a stream of data from the airplane via telemetry, and record the stream and display it on our desktop computers, as though we were on the airplane. Cool, or what? For the first flight, I actually sat at my desk and watched the same screen I would have if I was on the airplane.

The rest of the test program went as planned. My job was pretty mundane. I worked on software, and when the alarm went off, I found the requested data tape and loaded it into one of our HP mini-computers, so that the FTEs could extract the desired data and analyze it. The alarm was a very old original Macintosh computer that had no particular purpose any more. We recorded the hotline phone ringtone from the movie In Like Flint, and triggered that sound whenever a tape request came in. Who says geeks can't have fun?

## **FDR, No Not That One**

Now, roll the calendar forward to 2002. I had started my company, Tybee Jet, in 1997, and was still living in Savannah. The Gulfstream 550, an upgrade to the GV, was almost ready for first flight. During a safety review before testing began, Ted Mendenhall, former chief pilot and then VP of Safety, noted that the avionics vendor, Honeywell, was not going to have their system programmed to send critical data to the flight data recorder (FDR), the so called black box that is always orange to make it easier to find. That was unacceptable to Ted, because Gulfstream's assigned test area was 150-250 miles offshore, and the GIFTS system was not hardened to survive a crash. How to keep the schedule, and write data to the FDR? Call Van! I received a call from Ted, asking if it would be possible to stream data from GIFTS to another PC on the airplane, and then send that stream to the FDR properly formatted. Of course! Can you do it in 28 days? Yes indeed. And that's just what we did, except it was ready to go in 21 days. I worked closely with my friend Curtis Wilson, who was a genius with the electrical hardware. Together, we put the physical and software components together, and had a system that could write the full data stream to the FDR. Another happy customer, and a job that I am proud of. But I should have charged them way more than what I did.

## **FTE Revisited**

In 2004, we had moved to Brentwood, TN. Curtis called to tell me that the new FTE computers they bought for the airplanes weren't capable of running MS-DOS, and therefore the FTE software was dead if they couldn't rewrite it for Windows. Van to the rescue again. We contracted for a Windows version of FTE and started right away. Since the MS-DOS version was written in Microsoft C, I thought I would be able to reuse significant portions of the code if I wrote it in Microsoft C++ for Windows. After fighting with the peculiarities of Microsoft's compiler for a couple months, I got permission from Gulfstream to use Delphi instead, which is

the language I have used for 25 years at Tybee Jet. In two days I was as far along with the job as I was in two months with C++. Wow! I knew I was on the right track then. I don't recall just how long the project took, but I think that in just a few months, Gulfstream had a working test version to try on the airplane. A month or two of bug fixing and feature additions later, and it was a done deal.

My desire is always to deliver software that is solid, does what it is supposed to do, and isn't so troublesome that my phone rings off the hook with tech support calls. After the initial development cycle, thankfully, I never got any support calls from my buddies in flight test, all the way until GIFTS was put out to pasture.

GIFTS is gone now. It was replaced by a manager that never did understand how valuable a tool it was. The new system is an off the shelf system, that produces framed data, and requires support from the manufacturer to make even the smallest change to the system. I know GIFTS was expensive, as custom, in-house systems always are, and difficult to maintain and expand as programmers with detailed knowledge came and went over time. But, with the number of new airplane models that the company is producing seemingly exploding, a flexible, well known, programmable in-house system would surely seem to be a better choice. I'm just glad that I don't have responsibility for those decisions.

R.I.P. GIFTS! I'm glad I knew you.

## **Photos**



Our test aircraft, Gulfstream IV, S/N 1183, outside Hangar 84, Roswell, NM, October 1992.



Smile and the whole world smiles with you!



The view from my workstation. GIFTS is in the rack on the left, up front.



The FTE program in action. My workstation in back of the airplane.



Changing a tire, just one of the many services, okay, the main service provided by our mechanics.



Jack Scott (foreground) and Bill King, GIFTS development, Roswell, NM, October 1992.



Ed Flinn at his retirement party at the Savannah Yacht Club, Savannah, GA.



Reunited. Van, Larry and Darlene Vincent, Greg and Heidi Hammerstein,  
Brentwood, TN, December 2009.



Sunset, Roswell, NM, October 1992.

# Life Lesson - Good Guys and Bad Guys

***“Woe to those who call evil good, and good evil; who substitute darkness for light and light for darkness; who substitute bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter.” - Isaiah 5:20***

I must admit to having a lifelong fascination with the difference between good guys and bad guys. From the time I was watching Gene Autry, Roy Rogers, and Sky King on Saturday mornings, along with wrestling and even the first Super Bowl, I noticed that there were involved in every story, a good guy and a bad guy. Fascinating discovery for a little kid! There had to be more to it than just good guys wore white hats and bad guys wore black hats. Didn't there?

So, all my life, I have kept my eyes open for good guy / bad guy situations. But it turns out, there is a lot of gray between the white and black hats. Here's an example. During my college years, my brother and his family lived in New Orleans, about a 10 hour drive from Auburn. I visited a lot, especially during Mardi Gras. Duh, who wouldn't, right? When I went downtown to the French Quarter, I liked to park on the other side of the Quarter, where traffic was lighter and I could always get a spot in the same block. The problem was, it could be a little dicey walking through the residential parts of the Quarter, especially after dark. My way of handling that was to always dress down, way down. During graduate school, I went to Mardi Gras with my friend Jim Ward, and as we were walking towards Bourbon Street, I noticed a mother and her young daughter about a half

block ahead of us. She heard our footsteps, turned around, took one look at us, and dragged her daughter across the street. While we knew we were good guys, she thought we were bad guys. And of course, that proved our concept for our personal safety: If others thought we were bad guys, they'd steer clear, and we'd have no problems.

Once again, I was cast in the role of bad guy, all the while knowing I was a good guy. The tour group that I was in when visiting the USSR in 1989 stopped in the city of Petrozavodsk, which is Russian for Peter's Factory, a city based on the iron and steel industry. We were literally the first group of westerners to walk the streets of that city since 1917. As we were walking toward our bus, we passed a kindergarten, and the children were playing outside in a fenced yard. We stopped for a moment, talking about how much people are the same no matter where they live, when their teacher came flying out of the door, rushed the children inside, and gave us the most serious stink eye that I've ever seen, as though she expected us to snatch the kids and boil them in a pot for dinner. Good guys? Bad guys? You decide.

I've done a fair amount of travel, sometimes to places where some really evil things have transpired. The USSR is at the top of the list, followed closely by Germany, Israel, and of course, Tuscaloosa. War Eagle, y'all! In all of these places, I paid particular attention to the people I met, and tried to understand how people much like them could carry out such horrendous acts against others. And in every case, I have failed to make a determination. In all of those places, Moscow, Leningrad, Berlin, Jerusalem, and yes, even Tuscaloosa, I have found the people to be delightful, welcoming, peace loving, just as normal as you and I.

For example, in Leningrad, after getting off our tour bus, I walked around a large planter that had enough vegetation to shield me from view of the bus, in order to get a look at the beautiful Neva River. No sooner had I paused to look, but an old man, in his 70s I would guess, approached me. He was wearing an old, tattered blazer, with his Soviet World War II military combat ribbons pinned to it. He began speaking to me in Russian. I couldn't understand him, and he couldn't understand me. He was totally non-menacing. I can make a guess that he was trying to tell me that he was glad that Americans were able to visit his homeland again. When I tried to get

him to come with me around the bushes so that our tour guide could translate for us, he disappeared as quickly as he had appeared.

What can be made of all this? There is only one possible conclusion, and I state it with all the conviction of my heart. The difference between the good guys and the bad guys is this: Good guys are always named "us", and bad guys are always named "them". Each of us has a darkness inside, that when the right circumstances present themselves, can be unleashed in a terrible way. It is only through trust and faith in God that we can keep true to the good guy in us, and never let the bad guy get loose. And we absolutely **MUST** stop wasting life in focusing on the things that we disagree on, and focus instead on those things that can bring us together.

# How About a Little Adventure?

*“Therefore if you have been raised up with Christ, keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.” - Colossians 3:1*

## The List

In the fall of 1999, I was 44 years old. It had been a particularly difficult year. In the spring, I injured my right ankle in an airboat accident in Florida, and spent 7 weeks with my leg propped up. My neighbor Allison Ward picked up my mail and groceries, and once a week Curtis Wilson would come by and help with any computer issues I was having, and take me out to our local Applebees for dinner. In July, as I was pretty well healed, my Dad died. Shortly after the funeral, a different part of Gulfstream decided they didn't like me running a business that made money from selling software that contained their data, and threatened me with legal action if I didn't stop selling or advertising my software. I was stuck! With a year like that, it is easy to see how I could go down into a hole of depression. This was my “mid-life crisis”, I guess.

How do you fix something like that? I had no idea how to make that psychological adjustment, but I thought of one thing to try. I put a 3x5 index card on the table by my recliner. There were 3 columns on it. First was things I knew I needed to do. Next was things I always wanted to do, but never got around to. Last was things I was willing to try once to see if I liked them. Every time I sat down, I picked up the list and looked at it. Sometimes I added a new item to the list.

So, what was on the list? In the need to do column were things like visit my doctor for a good check up, go to the YMCA and get a membership, and start working out.

Always wanted to do? Climb a mountain. I had a lifelong fear of heights, and love of mountains. Why not conquer both of them at once? Next was learn to play guitar.

For willing to try once, top of the list was take dancing lessons. Is that not far out there for a geek engineer? That one came about after a trip to Tacoma, WA for my niece Katie's wedding. I spent the weekend hanging out with a friend who worked at Boeing then, Heidi Hendrickson. At the wedding reception, we danced some, and she said in all seriousness, "Maybe you should take some dancing lessons." After a lot of back and forth, it made the list.

And then, the reckoning. One day, I proclaimed the list complete. And occasionally after that, I would pick up the list and get up the courage to go and do one item. One by one, the list gained checkmarks by all the items.

I got into the groove with working out 5 days a week. Started seeing my doctor regularly, started taking guitar lessons from Judy Williams from the Savannah Folk Music Society. Then one day, I called the climbing school at Mt. Hood in Oregon, and scheduled a climb. And finally, one day I gathered the courage to call the dance school and schedule their introductory lessons. Wow! I was keeping busy, and doing things that were way out of my comfort zone. And what was my absolute favorite from all the list? Dancing!

## **May I Have This Dance?**

Boy, what a day it was when I looked at the list and picked up my phone and called the Southland Dance Studio in Savannah. My friends Larry and Darlene Vincent had taken lessons there, and recommended them. In a couple minutes, I was on the schedule for my first lesson. On the appointed

day, I showed up, even a couple minutes early, steeled up my nerve, actually got out of my truck, and the door was locked. Huh? I waited for almost the entire hour, then gave up and went home. As I came through the front door, the phone was ringing. My instructor, Dianne, was so apologetic. She had thought I was scheduled for the next hour and went out for some last minute Christmas shopping. She was pretty surprised that I agreed to come back and try again. To be honest, so was I! Against my protests, she comped the introductory 4 lessons. I appreciated her integrity. First lesson went well, I suppose because it was very basic. Dianne was about 5'2" and I was surprised that we could dance together so easily, since I was more than a foot taller. She and her husband Robin owned the studio, and they had one more part-time dance instructor.

Every Thursday night they hosted a free dance party for all the students to come and mingle and practice on each other. It was one thing to dance with Dianne, but random women that I knew were way more advanced than I was? I dunno about that. Vince and Darlene agreed to go with me for the first party. It was a little difficult to get in the swing of things, but once we got going, we had a great time, and the party was over before I knew it.

I kept dancing, and advancing fairly well. The Thursday night parties quickly became my favorite activity of the week. This item from the list was a keeper!

We had a couple that danced with us, along with her 87 year old mother, Missy. She was so frail I was always afraid I'd break her in half, and was very careful with her. One night Missy arrived in her new car. After the dance, I was still inside the studio, chatting with Rob and Dianne, when we heard a horrible crash and ran outside. The studio was at the end of a strip mall, and Missy had jumped the curb, crossed the sidewalk, and crashed through the front window of the business next door. By the time we got there, she had it in reverse, idling backwards. Everybody was yelling instructions to her, but she was frozen. The car was moving very slowly, so rather than add to the noise level, I walked around to her window, which was rolled down, and calmly reached in and pushed the gearshift out of reverse into neutral. The windshield wipers were going fast, slinging broken glass everywhere, so I turned them off, and then since I couldn't reach

them, I gently asked her to turn off the car and hand me the keys. She did, and it was all over. I gave the keys to her son-in-law. The police paid us a visit, and Missy ultimately surrendered her driver's license after a hearing. Interesting times at the dance studio!

I continued dancing, and when Sandy and I decided to get married later in 2000, she started dancing too. We slowed down Clint Black's "When I Said I Do" to waltz speed, and practiced the dance for weeks before the wedding. That was our first dance at the reception. Thanks to Darlene for suggesting it, and Dianne for the choreography.

We both enjoyed dancing at Rob and Dianne's studio. Unfortunately, we never found a studio anywhere near to theirs after moving to Nashville, so the dance shoes have been gathering dust for years. We miss dancing, and the people we met there.

## **Because It's There**

I wasn't able to make my originally scheduled climb of Mt. Hood in Oregon, but I did reschedule it for 2002. And the best part of that was, my brother decided to climb with me.

In May of 2002, we met up at Portland airport. Bill's wife Lynn came with him, but had other plans while we were on the mountain. She dropped us off at Timberline Lodge, a beautiful building, built by the CPT during the depression. We had a nice dinner and met another climber in our group. The next morning, we met Aaron, our lead climber and instructor. He inventoried the clothing and equipment we were responsible for bringing, then outfitted us with the specialty climbing gear, like boots, gaiters, crampons, harnesses, helmets, and ice axes. Once equipped, we headed out to the lower slopes to learn the climbing, and falling, techniques we would use on our summit attempt the next morning. We learned how to use the short rope technique for both going up and down, the plunge step for descent, a scary thing when the slope is about a 45 degree angle going down. Our last lessons centered on the ice axe. On this mountain, its only use was in fall protection. Going up, it was plunged deep in the snow, and

the top used as a handle for stability. And if you do fall? We practiced falling feet first, face down and up, and head first, face down and up. The trick was always to plant the point of the top of the axe in the snow and use that to pivot around to feet first, face down, and then put weight on it and dig in with your knees, feet in the air (crampons will catch and cause you to tumble if your toes touch the snow) and slow to a stop, hopefully. The last technique, head first, face up, gave rise to a little contest among the nine clients on this climb. Whoever took the longest distance to stop his slide would have to carry any of the poop collection bags that were used, off the mountain the next day. Now there is an incentive! My turn, I flipped onto my back head first, started sliding, slammed the axe into the snow by my knee, and immediately pivoted around, coming to a stop quickly. My brother Bill, usually more nimble than I am, had trouble spinning around and went almost all the way to the bottom of the hill before getting stopped. Fortunately, nobody needed the bags on the climb, so he didn't have to haul any of them down in his pack.

We had an early dinner and early to bed. We had to be in the climber's locker room, suited up and ready to go by 3 AM. My goodness that's early! As soon as we had all our equipment packed, we were picked up by a snow cat. This was basically an enclosed truck with bench seats on both sides in the rear, and bulldozer tracks on the outside. The snow cat took us up to the top of the ski slope, and dropped us off at an elevation of about 8,000 feet. The summit was just over 11,000 feet, so we had to climb 3,000 feet, and descend 5,000 to get back to the lodge. I had spent the ride in the snow cat in prayer. Asking first that I could overcome my fear of heights, second that my knees wouldn't be painful on the descent, and third that the bright light reflecting off the snow wouldn't blind me, because I have problems with sensitivity to bright light.

The super early start is known as an "Alpine Start", as it is the norm for climbing in the Alps. But why? The object is to arrive at the summit shortly after sunrise, but not so that we could get sunrise photos at the summit. Overnight on snow covered mountains, the surface of the snow freezes into a crust. We could work with that thin icy layer. However, once the sun hits the side of the mountain, the snow begins to melt, making the mountain

slushy and slick, with safe footing for the descent nearly impossible. The early bird really does catch the worm in mountaineering!

We started the climb, and could see a few headlamps already ahead of us up on the mountain. At our first stop, the guys who planned to ski down dropped off their skis. Our next stop was at the bergschrund, a crevasse where the top of the glacier pulls away from the rock wall of the mountain. At that time, the bergschrund was only about 2 feet wide and we could safely step over it. Here is where we put our crampons on, as well as the harness and helmet, which we wore to protect against ice and rocks blowing off the top. We roped up, 5 on one rope team and 4 on the other, with a guide in lead on each rope. As we began the final 500 feet of our climb, we looked up to see the climbers above us, and offset 20 feet to the left, while our second rope team offset to the left of us. Why? In the event one or more climbers above were to fall, we don't want them to crash into us and take us down the mountain with them.

Going up is easy. On the steep (45 degree angle) slope, the lead on the rope team kicks through the crust with the front crampon points, then steps up. His weight crushes the snow, compacting it into a nice step. Each of the rest of the team simply steps in the leader's premade steps, and up we go, climbing a staircase. Easy, right? Easy except for the aerobic part! Soon, I was sucking wind and called for a break. Aaron was just ahead of me, and when we stopped he looked down at me and said "If you stop, you have to turn around and look at the scenery." I did! What a beautiful sight! And most importantly, looking back down our trail of steps, it didn't bother me a bit, no fear! God provides!! We continued in this fashion, going up 5 to 10 steps, pausing briefly to catch our breaths, then moving higher. Near the summit were two large rock outcroppings, known as "The Pearly Gates", with snow and ice blowing off them both. Our path took us between them. Just before we got there, Aaron told us that was our last stop. We needed to get above the rocks quickly to minimize the chance for getting clobbered by a chunk of ice, or worse, a rock from above. We pushed hard. My lungs were about to explode when all of a sudden, we were above the rocks and on the summit. We made it!

We dropped our packs, then Aaron told us to push our ice axes into the snow in a line about 10 feet back from the edge on the north side of the summit (we came up the south side). Why? It was an almost 3,000 foot vertical drop, and the wind blows snow from the top toward that edge, forming what is known as a cornice. A cornice is like a snow bridge, sticking out horizontally. Like a helicopter, there is no visible means of support, and more than one climber has made the mistake of walking out on a cornice, and plunging to his death. Not on this climb! We had a line, and didn't cross it. Aaron checked our gear and found my crampons were loose, so he fixed that. We had about 15 minutes on the summit to enjoy the view. I used that opportunity to call Sandy from the summit. It had to be a short call because I couldn't hold the phone with my glove on, and the wind chill was well below zero. The view was magnificent! The sun was fully above the horizon, and the sky was a beautiful blue.

The time to descend came far too quickly. We roped up again for the descent. Here is where the short rope technique becomes interesting. You've probably seen pictures or movies of climbers with about 20 feet of rope lying on the snow between them. That is the long rope technique. With long rope, the idea is that if a climber falls, it gives time for the others to drop to the snow and dig in with their ice axe and knees hoping to stop the slide of the fallen climber when the slack goes out of the rope. This usually doesn't work, and the climbers are plucked off the mountain one by one, as the jerk on the line increases with the added weight of each additional climber. With short rope, there are about 9 feet of rope between climbers, and the idea is to keep the rope taut, and when you see the climber below you begin to fall, shout "Stop!" and pull it tight to prevent the climber from falling. So, you could say long rope is about recovery, and short rope is about prevention. I vote for short because it saved me from falling.

We were at the top, roped up and ready to go. When the guy in front takes his first step, we are all committed, all the way to the bottom. Here's why. Coming up, you are never committed to take a step. You can stop mid-step if you need to. That's why very few climbing accidents happen on the way up. Going down, that first step out into space causes your weight to shift to the downhill foot BEFORE you can determine that you can safely put that

foot down. And with five guys on the rope, from that first step, everyone charges down the mountain as a single unit.

I got to the edge, stuck my foot into the air, leaned forward, and away I went. We accelerated to an unbelievable speed, powered by gravity. Then it happened. I plunged my foot down toward the snow, and the crampon didn't break through the crust! My foot just flopped down onto the surface. The hard plastic climbing boot was forcing my leg to rotate with it, and with all my weight on that foot, I was headed face first down the hill. And then Aaron yanked on the rope and stood me straight up, pronto. Crisis averted, thanks to the short rope technique. It hardly slowed our descent, and in a second we were back to full speed. We arrived at the bergschrund in a fraction of the time it took to climb from there to the top. We got off the rope and stowed our crampons in our packs. Easier going from here. When we arrived at the next stop, we continued individually from then on. A couple guys brought skis and skied down. While my knees were doing well, I still am very slow going down, whether it is a big mountain or a hike in the Smokies. Bill went on ahead at his own speed, and I got back to home base about 30 minutes behind the first guy. We got showers, picked up our luggage, and Lynn was waiting outside to whisk us away to Portland. I took a nice long nap at our hotel.

And so ended my technical climbing career. Bill and I were planning to climb Mt. Rainier two years later, but one day in May of 2003 put an end to that. On the same day, there were fatal climbing accidents on both Mt. Hood and Mt. Rainier. On Mt. Hood, they made some serious mistakes. There had been rain the day before, and the snow wasn't crusted over, it was iced over. Kicking a hole wasn't reliable. The mountain was unsafe and should not have had climbers on it that day. But they went anyway. There were two rope teams, and one was directly below the other. Mistake #2. Lastly, they were using the long rope technique. When the first guy fell, the rest of his team fell too. And that rope team slid right through the team below them, sending them all hurtling toward the bergschrund. That year, it had opened up much wider than when we were there. Most of the 8 climbers went into the crevasse. Injuries were severe, and one died. It required two military rescue helicopters to get them off the mountain, and one of those crashed on the mountain. Fortunately no one was injured in the

crash, even though the chopper rolled quite a distance down the slope. The climbers on Mt. Rainier were climbing in conditions that were well beyond their skills and experience, and were caught overnight on the mountain in a storm. Two of three died. Sandy wasn't happy seeing this on the news, fatal accidents on the mountain I had climbed a year before, and on the one planned for the next year. So, I agreed to end my technical climbing, but continue with mountain hikes. We summited Mt. Elbert, Colorado's highest peak, later that summer. It was a heck of a hike, but just a hike. Bill went on to climb Mt. Rainier as planned the next year, and continued with hikes to high points in various states.

## **The Long and Winding Road**

In 2004, Sandy told me about the Music City Marathon and Half Marathon. There is a group called Team In Training, a component of the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society, and they train people to walk or run either of the two races, full or half marathon, in exchange for raising funds for research. We went to the introductory meeting. Sandy turned to me and said "You and Bill just hiked Clingman's Dome in the Smokies, and that was 17 miles. Don't you think the half marathon would be too easy?" Challenge accepted. I signed up for the full marathon, 26.2 miles, and Sandy signed up for the half, 13.1 miles.

Training started in November for the race at the end of April. We had a good coach, Martha Freeman, who was coaching those of us who were walking. We started with 2 miles on our first Saturday morning training walk, and slowly increased the distance week after week. I was also walking on the treadmill 3 days a week for an hour. By January, I reached the half marathon point of 13.1 miles in training, and kept on going. Two weeks before the event, we did our longest training walk, about 23 miles. Brother Bill was training on his own in Huntsville, to do the marathon with me.

Race day! We parked by the stadium, and were bussed to the starting line near the Parthenon. Wow! What excitement. My race number was over 32,000, based on expected completion time. Yep, we had about 35,000 in

the race that year. The starter released us in groups of 1,000, a minute apart. That means that the fastest runners in the half marathon were more than halfway to the finish before we started. Finally, we got the starter gun. Bang! And we were off. The first couple blocks were downhill, so we jogged to the first turn. Then the long walk began in earnest. The great thing about the Music City Marathon was that they had bands located at every mile marker. Cool! Music was playing all the way through the course. My goal was to average 4 mph over the 26.2 mile course. But I had two other governing goals. Regardless of whether I made the 4 mph goal, I wanted to cross the finish line in under 7 hours, and under no circumstance was I going to finish last.

At about the 15 mile point, I just ran out of gas. Whoosh, the infamous wall appeared and I hit it. I got some of my mojo back as we continued, but I never made it back to full speed. No way I'd make 4 mph now. Bill hit the wall in the last mile or so. He had encouraged me to keep going, and I did the same for him. When we made the last turn, the finish line was about a quarter mile ahead. I said "Let's go! Sprint to the finish!" Like two dogs on a hot day, running with their tongues hanging out, we ran in slow motion for the finish. We crossed the line together, in 6:56:35. We made it in under 7 hours, and there were a bunch of people behind us. Goals met. We collected our medals, said goodbye to Martha, and went home to crash.

The next year, I signed up to be a mentor, sort of a coach's assistant, for the half marathon walk. I was battling a case of plantar fasciitis left over from after the marathon the year before, so I only trained up to the 3 mile walk, and after that drove the sweeper car, driving the route to help anybody needing anything.

The next year, I did the half marathon without being part of Team In Training, however, I did my training walks with Martha's group. It was a struggle. I was on too high of a dose of a beta blocker, and the fastest I could move was about 3 mph. After one walk, everybody was back but me, so Martha came looking for me. We had a good chat about how beta blockers work, and she agreed that was what was slowing me down. Finally, we were ready for the race. Bang! The half marathon was much easier, as expected. However, I was still pushing against a drug that was

pushing back. Push a little, heart rate goes up, drug tries to prevent it from going up, muscles don't get the oxygen they need, and you slow back down. Do this enough times and the body simply exhausts itself from fighting the battle. That's where I was at the finish line. Totally exhausted. Martha came over and hugged me, and said she was proud of me for finishing under the difficulty of dealing with the beta blocker, and that she didn't know anybody else that would have stuck it out like that. That meant a lot to me, especially in that moment. That's how I do things, though. Not the fastest, not the best, not the flashiest, but the most persistent survivor? Yep. Never give up, and don't cross the finish line under a yellow flag!

The following year, I did my last event with Team In Training, as a mentor again. This time no health or medication issues, and I was just one minute behind my goal of 4 mph for the 13.1 miles. Close but not quite, and it will just have to do. I enjoyed the years I spent walking and talking with all the nice people in Team In Training, and I'm grateful for all my friends and family who gave so generously to help the Leukemia victims. Y'all are special!

As I age, and deal with a number of medical issues, the face of adventure looks a lot different. Sometimes a trip to the grocery store is an adventure. I'll take it! Life is very, very good.

## **Photos**



Dancing with Darlene Vincent, Savannah, GA, 2000.



"He wore tan shoes with pink shoelaces, a polka dot vest and man oh man, he wore tan shoes with pink shoelaces, a big Panama with a purple hat band!" 1950s dance at Southland Dance Studio.



There I was, flat on my back.... Skiing in Breckenridge, Colorado, February 2000. Well, maybe skiing is not the right word...



Gearing up for the last 500 feet on Mt. Hood, Oregon, May 2002.



The stream of climbers is headed for the gap in the rocks, called the Pearly Gates. Mt. Hood, 2002.



Looking down on our route coming up. Mt. Hood, Oregon, May 2002. The team summiting now was using the long rope technique.



Bill and Van, on the summit of Mt. Hood, Oregon, May 2002.

# Sandy, Love of My Life

*“But now faith, hope, love, abide these three; but the greatest of these is love.” - 1 Corinthians 13:13*

## **The Summer of Love (not 1967)**

The year is 1999, and my sister Janie and friend Steve Conn were visiting for July 4th. We went out for lunch on the third, and when we got back, I had 6 messages on my answering machine (remember those?). As I started playing them back, it was obvious something was very wrong. I had 4 messages from my brother Bill, and 2 from my Dad's next door neighbor in Erwin, TN. All of them were the same. “Van, call me as soon as you get this.” I turned to Janie and said “I bet Dad is dead.” Steve went out by the pool to give us some privacy, and we called Bill. Yep, that was what happened. I called Dad's neighbor Shelton Thompson, and got more details. He said that he saw 2 newspapers on Dad's front porch, and the car was in the carport. That would never happen, because Dad always picked up the paper and read it while he had coffee in the morning. Shelton went over and looked in windows until he found Dad on the bathroom floor. He called police and together they went into the house. Because there were 2 newspapers, we know he died on July 2, which was the day he and Mom were married in 1944. Fitting. Now here's the thing. Had my Dad not died then, I never would have met Sandy.

I'll slip in a little tale about my Uncle Roy, Dad's younger brother. He lived in Erwin, and knew almost everyone in town. So when there was a funeral, he was there. And every single time that I was there, he walked up to the casket, took one look inside, and said, “He sure looks natural, don't he?”

When Janie and I got to Erwin, Bill was already there, and we went to the funeral home together. Uncle Roy would meet us there later. Getting out of the car, I bet Bill five bucks that Uncle Roy would say it. He wouldn't take the bet. We went in and I sat down next to Dad for a few quiet moments. I heard Uncle Roy come in. It took no time at all for him to say "Your Dad sure looks natural, don't he?" I about fell out of my chair laughing.

After the funeral, Bill, Janie, and I began the task of wrapping up his estate. That was easier said than done, because he had accounts all over town, and the challenge was in finding accounts we didn't know to look for. Dad was a director of the Clinchfield Credit Union in Erwin, so we met with the CEO, Sandy Lingerfelt, and used Dad's account there as a dumping place for everything we pulled out of other accounts. The process took months, but we eventually got it done.

Along the way, Sandy Lingerfelt kept telling me she had a friend that I should meet. And I kept telling her that I didn't need a girlfriend in the Tri Cities, a 7 hour drive from my home in Savannah, GA. She persisted, and one day asked me if it would be okay for her friend to email me. In a moment of weakness, I said okay. So then she went to work on Sandy, telling her that I was expecting to hear from her. And that began several weeks of email exchanges, culminating in meeting for the first time at Sandy Lingerfelt's house on Cinco de Mayo, 2000. We ended up playing dominoes until 1 AM. That went well! Next day, I was getting ready to head back to Savannah when Sandy called. We had lunch together, and I didn't get away until 3:00.

## **If I Get Down on One Knee, I'll Drown**

From then until our wedding on September 30, one of us was on the road every weekend. Sandy lived in Bristol, just up the road from the Bristol Speedway. I got used to seeing the unique colored lighting under the grandstands at 1 or 2 in the morning as I drove back to Erwin to catch a little sleep. Weekends in Bristol soon became 4 days long. I had dancing lessons on Tuesday afternoons, so I wanted to get back for that.

I asked her to marry me knee deep in the Atlantic Ocean on the beach at Tybee Island, GA on June 27, and the wedding was planned for September, making this a true May-September romance.

My sister Janie had Mom's engagement ring. I asked her if I could have it, and she knew what I was up to. We took the diamond from Mom's ring and used it in the center of a new ring. We wanted Sandy Lingerfelt to be the first to know, so we had dinner with her at the Peerless Steak House in Johnson City, TN. When Sandy sat down at the table sporting the new ring, Sandy L flipped out.

So, what was Sandy doing at the time? Ironically, Sandy's Dad died about a month after mine. She had just completed her MBA degree, and was working 3 jobs, one for the university, one keeping books for a day care at her church, and she was also selling real estate. As it turned out, there was nothing keeping her from moving to Savannah after the wedding.

The wedding was marvelous. It was held at Avoca Christian Church in Bristol, right across the street from Sandy's condo. The minister, Bob Robinson, had been Sandy's minister as a little girl. When she was 5, she liked Bob so much that she asked him to marry her. He was already married, so he said no. And then, years later, she asked him to marry her again, only this time, she wanted him to perform the ceremony for us. Second time was the charm. He said yes.

My family was there, as well as my friends from Savannah. Sandy's family and friends were mostly local, and they all came. It was a fun time before it even got started. Steve Conn was my best man, and Lisa Gilreath was Sandy's matron of honor. As all the wedding party arrived, we got a surprise. Sandy's brother Mickey, and our minister Bob, were both wearing sky blue tuxes, and Bob was also rocking a pink cummerbund! And that is just how all of our wedding photos were made. Mickey switched to black for the ceremony, but Bob didn't. Every wedding has its unique characteristics! For Christmas, we went to the tux rental store and bought the sky blue tux for Mickey. He still wears it from time to time.

The reception was held in the family center behind the church. With an amazing spread of food, good music, and lots of friends and family there, it was a really fun night. The only negative was that Tennessee was playing LSU that night, and we didn't think to put a TV in the corner, so some friends left early. Sandy and I danced to Clint Black's "When I Said I Do". A local dentist made the cakes, his side business. Both were beautiful, and the groom's cake was made in the shape of a Gulfstream, with pictures of us in the pilots' seats. That was a cool surprise!

We were both exhausted and starving when we got to the hotel room that Sandy Lingerfelt had gotten for us. Fortunately, they had sent us on our way with a goody bag from the reception.

Next morning, we were off to Lake Tahoe for our honeymoon. We had a wonderful relaxing time there. Upon returning to Bristol, we had some guys with a truck pick up Sandy's stuff and take it to Savannah, then they took some of mine back to Bristol to put in her condo. And at that point, we were married and moved into the house I was renting in Savannah. Jim and Allison Ward were our next door neighbors, so it was good that she could start out with friends close by.

On our first visit to her condo in Bristol, just weeks after the wedding, I thought I had killed my bride. Scary thought! When we walked through the front door, I took suitcases upstairs. When I came down, and circled through the kitchen, I looked out into the living room and all I saw was one of my old swivel rockers tipped over, and two legs sticking up in the air. It was at that moment that I understood the real meaning of the term "dead silence", because that is what I heard. She finally spoke after I ran to her. That chair was very unstable and would tip over easily. I knew how to sit in it safely, after many years of practice, but I hadn't had a chance to inform Sandy, which she had just learned on her own. I suggested that any future falls be accompanied by lots of screaming. At least then I would know she was still alive.

After a period of adjusting to the new location, which included a lot of walks on the beach together followed by a burger at the Sugar Shack, Sandy found a job with a small company that did ship inspections, managing their

accounts. Later, she went to work for the City of Savannah in the Budget Department. Her primary responsibility was for the Fire Department. That is something you have to get your hands a little dirty to understand. And that included zorching through town with the Fire Chief, lights and sirens, answering a fire call. After getting comfortable with the job, the phone rang....

The caller was Bruce Fahnstock, CEO of Volunteer Corporate Credit Union (VolCorp), located in Nashville. He wanted Sandy to head up his Marketing Department. We came up for talks with Bruce, then we went home and made the decision to accept the offer, and we were off on a new adventure in Nashville. My business was portable. All I needed was a phone, internet, and FedEx service.

Sandy went to work on her first day and discovered she had signed up to head up marketing AND operations. That Bruce was a sly one. She handled it with aplomb, and made her way up to Senior Vice President before retiring in May, 2020.

Unfortunately, retirement hasn't been quite as expected due to all of my health issues. But I can tell you this my friends, if you are having health issues, there is nobody on the planet I would rather have in my corner than Sandy. I love you Darling!

## **Photos**



Sandy's Dad, Billy Keplinger, with a B-29 that he serviced in the Pacific during World War II.



Sandy's parents, Billy and Peggy Keplinger.



Sandy's older brother Mickey keeps a watchful eye on her.



And a beautiful butterfly is revealed!



Sandy had to jump into a rowboat from this balloon during the balloon festival in Kingsport, TN, learning that there is indeed no such thing as a free ride in a balloon.



Sandy and that dancing guy from the fifties, by the marsh in Savannah.



The big day, September 30, 2000.



"The Guys", Jamie, Jim, Bob, Steve (best man), Van, Bill, Mickey, Vince.



Peggy's 80<sup>th</sup> birthday. Van, Sandy, Mickey, Karen, and the guest of honor (seated).



Yep, she's a Swofford now!



My Dad told me, "Son, by the time I could afford a sports car, I wasn't a sport any more." We were just making sure that didn't happen to us, and enjoyed the Zoomer until we were no longer sports.



Mom told me to stay away from fast women, but she omitted the "in race cars" part. Sandy, going for a ride at the Nashville Superspeedway, April, 2015.



Do not mess with my girl! FBI shooting range, 2014.



Sandy hired a Dolly impersonator for a work event, and she made Sandy up like Dolly. When Sandy walked into the party, nobody recognized her, even her boss! Gotta love her!

# Travels With Sandy

*“Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her.” - Ephesians 5:25*

## **To There and Back**

For Sandy's first birthday after we were married, I wanted to take her flying. That was going to be hard to do, because I hadn't flown for 12 years. As it often happens, I met somebody that was just what I needed. Sandy and I were looking for a house on Wilmington Island in Savannah, GA, and while touring an open house, I met a flight instructor, named David Peach. So, I called him and scheduled an airplane checkout along with a biennial flight review. Surprisingly, David was satisfied after only 2 flights! Also, I visited the local Aviation Medical Examiner, which despite the name, is not a coroner for pilots, but an FAA approved doctor who gives preflight physical exams.

It felt good to be “official” again. Next, I scheduled the airplane and talked to Sandy's boss. I can be sneaky when I wanna be.

Her birthday came, and with assurances that she wasn't going to get fired for being late, we headed toward some secret location where her present awaited. As we were passing the non-airline side of the airport, I turned down an obscure street and pulled into a parking lot. I retrieved my flight case from the trunk, and we went inside. In just a few minutes, I had signed

out the airplane, inspected it, loaded up my bride and myself, and started the engine. So far, so good.

We taxied out, and were cleared for takeoff. It felt so good to shove the throttle in and pull back on the yoke and lift off into the air again, with no flight instructor by my side. Freedom! And I was sharing it with my wife, who trusted me not to kill her! Little did I know that would be the last time I would do that in this lifetime.

We flew that Cessna Skyhawk down the coast to St. Simons Island. Since the purpose of the flight was the flight itself, we didn't land, just circled the island and flew back to Savannah. I'm not sure who got a bigger present, Sandy or me.

Less than a month later, aviation changed forever. An event labeled only with three numbers, 911, shocked the world. I didn't fly again for many years, and then only with an instructor by my side.

A year later, and as they often do, Sandy had another birthday coming up. And that resulted in 2 more calls, one to David Peach, the flight instructor, and the other to Sandy's boss. This time, she figured out where we were going, but not her birthday present! She asked if I was flying her somewhere. Nope. Who is flying us, is it someone I know? Yep. Followed by a long list of people she had met in the last year who could fly, with a nope after each name.

When we pulled into the parking lot, I opened the trunk. My flight case wasn't there. Just one brand new pilot's logbook, and the name in the front was Sandy Swofford. "You're going to need this." And as we walked inside, a little light bulb went off. This time, Sandy was doing the flying, with David by her side, and me just a lump in the back seat. What a good time we had! She flew us out to Tybee Island. Sandra Bullock had bought 3 houses that were then turned into a compound, and Sandy circled them, getting a nice view. When our hour was up, we sadly returned to the airport. And equally sadly, that is still the only hour in her logbook.

# Hawaii

2005 was our fifth anniversary. To celebrate, we planned a trip to Hawaii. We had a planeload of miles on Delta, and we used those to move our position in life to a few feet in front of all the great unwashed in back. It is good to be king! Okay, we got wider seats and a little more leg room. The glamor is gone from flying folks, unless you own your own corporate jet. Which I highly recommend, because that's how I've made my living for about 40 years. But if you aren't Taylor Swift, a wider seat and a little more leg room will have to do. Atlanta direct Honolulu was over in a flash. Okay, it doesn't matter where your seat is, a long flight is a long flight.

We were greeted with a lei and a bus ride to our hotel, the Sheraton on Waikiki Beach. We had a suite on a high floor, with views east and west from two balconies. I don't know how we lucked into that, but it was super nice. Thank you to Barb at Southern Cross Travel!

The next morning, after a good breakfast, we were off on a tour of military locations on the island. Of course, first up was Pearl Harbor and the Arizona memorial. That was quite a moving memorial. And looking down into the water, you see the whole ship, and oil is still leaking out of it.

Next up, was Schofield Barracks. Not a lot to see there. We just drove around the periphery of the base. It was away from the city of Honolulu, and that area had the most beautiful, and bountiful flowers that we saw on the trip.

We went to the big military cemetery, where the soldiers were buried after the Japanese Navy attacked Pearl Harbor. It is located on a hill high above Honolulu, with an extraordinary view of the city and ocean below.

After that, we visited the headquarters of the Commander in Chief of the Pacific, CINCPAC. We got a surprise when the commander himself came out of the building, walking to his nearby home for lunch, and on an impulse, came over and boarded our bus. He gave us an impromptu talk on what they do there to protect our country. He was very amiable, and

answered a few questions before resuming his quest for lunch. That was a real treat for us.

The next day, we made the short flight to Maui, where we would stay for the rest of our time in Hawaii. Maui is a treasure trove for the explorer, because the western 90% of the island is very dry. To the east of the volcano, it is very wet, with lush vegetation. But first, to our hotel.

We stayed at the Westin, on the western end of the island, not too far from the town of Lahaina. Our room was nice, overlooked the hotel's several pools, and had a beautiful view of the islands of Molokai and Lanai. Is this heaven, or what?

Our first adventure was a ride to the top of the volcano, Haleakala, at an elevation of 10,023 feet. Did I mention that we made the climb up the road before dawn? There is a reason for that. Upon disembarking from our old but functional Ford Econoline van, our little group was given raincoats, and we approached the rim of the volcano's cone. You may ask why we needed raincoats to watch the sun come up over the rim of a volcano. It turns out that the extremely high humidity on the east side of the island, coupled with the low temperature near the summit of the volcano, resulted in the formation of a cloud that moved with the strong easterly wind, over the eastern rim, down into the volcano, and up the western side, exiting approximately, no, precisely, in our faces. I never saw it rain up before or since. That was quite a sight! Despite having the raincoats, we got soaked. But it was totally worth it to see the sun come up on top of the volcano. But wait, there's more!

This adventure has more to it than the sunrise, and upward rainstorm. We were going to ride bicycles down the mountain, about 12 miles of switchbacks to the bottom. Sandy decided that the road looked a bit too challenging, so she rode in the van, bringing up the rear of our convoy. And we were off! It was a raucously fun ride down. We were told that we **MUST** remain on our side of the centerline, because there was insufficient visibility around the sharp curves to get back over if a car came around the curve. Amen to that, brother! All of a sudden, they came from behind the rocks and zowie, there was a grille and headlights zooming by. I was tail end

Charlie, just ahead of the van. Van and van, all in a row... Anyway, it became fairly difficult for me to stay in my lane on the sharp curves. When we stopped at a small meadow about halfway down I found out why. I went flying by the rest of the group and yelled "No brakes!" to our leader as I passed him. I was running out of ideas when a steep bank to my right presented itself. I departed the road to the right, rolled partway up the bank, and came to a stop, just like the runaway truck lanes you see on the interstate driving down a mountain. No harm, no foul. The leader adjusted my brakes and I was okay the rest of the ride. We took photos with our bikes in the meadow and continued down. At the bottom, we continued the ride to a nearby restaurant for a wonderful, and well deserved breakfast. After that, we headed back to the hotel for a little sunshine and swimming at one of the pools.

Our next adventure was airborne. On the recommendation of our friend from MacDill AFB, Tony Radcliffe, we went for a sightseeing flight with Blue Hawaiian Helicopters. Having spent many hours flying and being flown in fixed wing airplanes, it was a totally different experience for me. We were in an Aerospatiale EC-130 Eco Star helicopter, a derivative of the A-350 AStar, created to add seats for the tourism operators. The pilot was front left, a passenger in the copilot seat, and four of us in the rear, with a theater-like view over the front seats, through the massive plexiglass windshield. The motion was foreign to me. Up, sideways, nose down while accelerating, not normal for me. We rose as we flew toward the volcano, to 11,000 feet, for a pass over the volcano top. Interesting view! We immediately began a steep descent around the south side of Haleakala. Then he caught me by surprise, while still descending, turning toward the mountain into what is known in aviation as a box canyon, which has an entrance, but no exit. In an airplane, you usually leave a box canyon in a box. See what I did there? My heart went up into my throat for an instant, until I realized that he was smoothly leveling out and slowing to a hover. And there we were, looking at a magnificent waterfall, a thousand feet tall, rolling down the volcanic rock. Beautiful! And we had a bird's eye view. That was good flying, smoothly combining leveling off with decelerating to a hover. I complimented him after we landed. The rest of the flight was rather mundane, crossing the plain of the central island, back to the airport.

Sandy and I decided to take the Hana highway around the north side of the volcano through the lush tropical vegetation to the town of Hana on the east side of the island. We took a lunch by recommendation. Good that we did. We never made it to Hana. It was so beautiful, and there were so many places along the road to stop and enjoy the experience. We finally decided to turn back, to get to a dinner engagement with new friends we met at the hotel.

My favorite thing about our trip was dinner and a show in Lahaina, which was a pretty little town on the dry west coast of Maui. Full of charm, Lahaina was just a nice town with many shops to browse. We spent the evening at Walter and Annabelle's. Annabelle was the ghost that inhabited the building. Walter was a magician whose schtick was centered on the Andy Griffith Show, in Mayberry, NC. He was very entertaining, and nobody had a bad time. At the end of the show he asked what states people were from. Then he said he knew the capitals of all 50 states. We shouted out "Tennessee", and his response was immediate, "Capital T". "West Virginia", "Capital W, Capital V". The man sure knows his geography, and Andy Griffith Show. It saddened me to recently see the entire town burned to the ground. I imagine a few more ghosts will join Annabelle as the town is rebuilt. RIP Lahaina.

What a nice trip to celebrate our fifth anniversary! It's easy to see how Hawaii is so many people's favorite vacation. Just like us!

## **Ramstein AB**

In 2006, word of my software product, AFMatic, had spread through the Air Force Gulfstream pilots, and though it was in use at a number of bases, the guys at Ramstein AB in Germany were ready to get serious, and asked me to come over for a training class like I had done at MacDill AFB in Tampa, FL. So we began to plan a trip to Germany. But wait...

I had done the Country Music Marathon the year before, and had some chest pain along the way. A stress test showed nothing wrong, so life went on. The spring of 2006, I was helping another group train for the race, and

the angina was back. My new cardiologist, who incidentally is still my heart doc all these years later, did another stress test, then called me to come back for a heart catheterization. That didn't sound good, and I feared the trip to Ramstein wouldn't happen. Well, the heart cath was okay. It showed blockages in peripheral arteries but nothing big. In fact, it didn't reach the point where action was required for 14 more years. But this isn't a story about my heart, it's a story about going to Ramstein. I will not disappoint you, so here we go. Well maybe...

We had all the arrangements made. One of the flight engineers was going to pick up our rental car, and meet us at the airport in Frankfurt, then drive us to our hotel near the base, and take us out to dinner. Sandy and I arrived at the Nashville airport for our Continental flight to Newark and then to Frankfurt. We checked our bags and went to the gate. As time ticked away, I noticed that we were still the only passengers at the gate. It became obvious that everybody else knew something we didn't. I approached the desk, and the boarding agent totally ignored me until my patience ran out, and then he had no choice but to deal with me. "Didn't they call you? Your flight has been cancelled." "We're connecting to Frankfurt. How will you get us there?" He huffed, and he puffed, and he totally failed. You can't get there from here today was his final answer. We had our luggage returned and went home to regroup. We were able to get the same flights for the next day. But we had planned a day off after arrival before our training class, and now the show must go on. After a frantic call to Jared, our contact at Ramstein, our new schedule was set, and the two weary non-travelers turned in for the night.

Without further ado, the flights went as scheduled the next day, and on the following afternoon, after crossing the Atlantic at night, we arrived in Frankfurt. We breezed through all the stuff that was guarded by guys with machine guns, and met Jared on the other side. The drive was a pleasure. He drove us to our hotel, more on that later. We checked in and dropped our stuff, then Jared drove us to his house nearby. We picked up Jared's German Shepherd, Gracie, and walked a block to a Bierhaus. Jared was clearly a regular, and everybody loved Gracie, including the owners who had treats close by for an appreciative dog. Gracie lay down by our table, and was as

quiet as can be for the next four hours. Dinner is a whole evening adventure in Germany!

We finally said goodnight to our hosts, and Jared took us back to the hotel. He would pick us up in the morning and take us through the gate at Ramstein. We went to bed, hoping for good sleep, because our day of training was just hours away. NO SUCH LUCK. I was wired up from the trip, and just a little pressure from the presentation to come. Sandy had the additional problem of having had a Coke Lite (Diet Coke, German-style) at dinner, and the caffeine kept her up half the night. Needless to say, we weren't at our best when the alarm went off about 3 days too early. But we were up for the challenge, and prepared for the training session.

Jared picked us up in the morning and drove us the 15 miles or so to the base, took us into the guard house and got us properly credentialed, and then we drove around the runway to their operations building. Painted 1940s military green inside and out, ops was well, as expected. We met all the people we would be training over a continental breakfast. We had all the European-based military Gulfstream pilots on hand. The pilots for the C-37A assigned to NATO in Belgium drove over for the session. The Army had one crew from their Gulfstream III, and the Air Force had 3 C-37As with their pilots at Ramstein. Big crowd! We all got acquainted, and launched into the presentation. I'm always more at ease presenting something like that if I can find a way to make it a little interactive, so in preparation, I made some good guesses about problematic airports. When I asked them for suggestions, I wasn't disappointed, and whipped out the right slides, and we worked some takeoff problems together. To say it went well is an understatement. I was elated, and completely exhausted. We both slept like a rock that night.

Next day was for relaxing. Let's talk about our hotel and its location. Our home away from home, selected at Jared's recommendation, was built like a small castle, sitting on a high hill overlooking Ramstein in the distance. Our room was in a turret of the castle, up a winding stairway. It was especially nice at night to look out our window at all the activity and lights at the base. The gardens were pretty and the views expansive. Our car, a Skoda, was very nice and spacious, and thankfully had a great built-in GPS. After

exploring our castle (after all a man's home is his castle), we went exploring in the countryside. After driving for a while, we decided on Kaiserslautern as our target. A medium sized city, Kaiserslautern is just east of Ramstein. We parked and spent some time walking around the city center before heading back to meet Jared again for dinner.

On our last day, Sandy had talked to the base travel agency and arranged for us to join a bus tour of the Rhine area, which included a ride on a river cruise boat. Up early again, we met the bus on time and were off on a new adventure. Our first stop was a wine shop, where we were invited to taste some of their wines. Next, we went to two castles overlooking the Rhine, where we were able to tour the castles and imagine ourselves living in medieval times. Then we boarded the riverboat for a wonderful cruise down the Rhine, where we saw more castles on the banks of the river, as well as large vineyards. After disembarking, we went to another wine tasting, this one with wines from the Johannesburg region. I always wondered why my favorite wine, a Johannesburg Riesling, was from South Africa. Duh! This Jo'burg was in Germany, and all the wines I tasted from there were great. It soon was time to head back to our hotel and prepare for our trip home.

Next morning, we said goodbye to our castle away from home, and took the Autobahn back to Frankfurt. Much like our interstate, of course, since Eisenhower borrowed the design from the Germans, the Autobahn had almost no traffic on it except for around the cities. Away from the cities, there was no speed limit. Though I did drive at close to 100 mph, I didn't feel the need to push it further. We arrived at the airport and dropped our car off in the garage. Then things began to sound familiar when we checked in for our flight home. Inbound flight delayed, outbound flight really seriously delayed. Like the old saying, if you have time to spare, go by Continental. We eventually departed, and were just hoping to make any connecting flight out of Newark. Luck was with us, and we piled into our seats for the last leg. Then after pushing back, we were informed that due to weather, we would be delayed at least an hour. Notice that? That weather didn't surprise anyone after pushback. But if they loaded and pushed back on time, it counted as an on-time departure, no matter when we actually took off. Silly airline tricks, make exhausted travelers into ticking time bombs. Fortunately, we made it to Nashville before the fuse ran out.

And so ends another excellent adventure, courtesy of the red, white, and blue!

## Las Vegas

From time to time, with Sandy's job at VolCorp, she would need to travel to a work related conference. We always took the opportunity and went a few days early. Sometimes I would stay while she went to the conference, and other times I would return home. For the Las Vegas trip, I stayed.

We flew in, picked up our rental car, and drove it to Caesar's Palace. Okay, that took 2 minutes. Now for the rest of the story. We had a nice room high up in one of the towers. I was in the middle of the project of rewriting the FTE program for Gulfstream, and had taken my laptop to work on it while she was at her conference.

We enjoyed visiting some of the casinos on the strip, and trying out the restaurants. An excursion out to Henderson and Hoover Dam proved to be fascinating, especially learning about the dam's construction in the visitor's center.

Back at Caesar's Palace, we found it to be almost a city within a building, and spent the rest of the trip there. Sandy went to her conference, and I worked on software in the room, and took long breaks to watch the gaming tables in action, the most interesting of which, to me anyway, was the roulette wheel.

This was a fairly short trip, so we headed for the airport to fly home. Our flight was delayed, and while we waited, I learned something new about my wife. She will make a new friend anywhere, anytime, in this case, waiting on a flight. We became friends with a couple from Nashville, and did things with them for years, until they moved out of state.

## Utah

One of my favorite vacations with Sandy was to Utah. We flew into Las Vegas, and then hit the road. Our first stop was Bryce Canyon. It is an amazing, beautiful place! You view the canyon from above, and there are a few locations along the rim where trails go down into the canyon. We hiked one of the trails one day and had an enchanting walk through the canyon floor. Bryce was at a high elevation, and was nice and cool.

They also offer horseback rides through the woods to the north canyon rim for a nice view from a different perspective. The ride was torture for me. My horse was named Bodacious. He was aptly named. He wanted to go almost anywhere except where the horse in front of him was going. I'm a real horseman, I tell you. That was the second time I was on a horse, and the first time it was called a "horsey". There are photos, and my facial expression was the same both times. You may freely interpret it as saying "Get me off of this thing!"

We went on a sightseeing flight in a Cessna 206. The pilot flew it well, but didn't say a word the whole flight. Not much of a tour guide. It was fun, though.

Next, we headed down to Zion Canyon, an equally beautiful canyon sculpted by water. This canyon was different. At a lower elevation, the temperature got up to 108 during the day. Don't let 'em fool you, dry heat is just as hot as humid heat! We stayed in a cabin at the lodge, and spent mid-days in our cabin reading, and explored in the morning and evening. This time the trails went up to the rim. We did some hiking, but mostly enjoyed the views from the bottom. They were awesome! All too soon, it was time to head back to Las Vegas and fly home.

## Maine

Another of Sandy's work trips took us to Maine. We flew into Portland and began a fabulous trip. After seeing a railroad museum in Portland, we went

up the coast to our main goal, or Maine Goal if you'll pardon the pun, Bar Harbor.

We had reservations at a nice bed and breakfast. Set on a quiet street, it was the perfect place to sit on the porch and read, which I did. The book was "747", by Joe Sutter, the man behind the plane. It is a deep dive into the origins of the design and construction of what was then the world's largest airplane. Highly recommended! So there you go, a book review inside a travelog, inside a biography. Bar Harbor was a delight, and we even went for a ride on a lobster boat for a little history of the lobster trade. As usual, Sandy befriended two ladies who helped to make our stay more enjoyable, but we didn't go home with them, as we did in Las Vegas. It was pouring rain as we bid Bar Harbor adieu, and headed back down the coast to, where else, Freeport, home of L. L. Bean.

My goodness, the store is pretty much the whole town. And I was amazed to find out it had only closed two days in its storied history, JFK's funeral, and L. L. Bean's funeral, if I recall correctly. The next morning, on impulse, we decided to visit a tourist trap called "The Desert of Maine". Sounds just crazy enough to be fun, huh? Well, it turned out to be far more interesting than I expected. This is the short version. Google it if you want a fuller story. There was a farmer, in the 1800s, and he wanted to farm this large parcel of land. Others told him it wasn't productive but he went ahead with it. It became less and less viable, and soon, the soil was slowly replaced by sand. And today, it is totally sand. Forty acres of sand, give or take. Who knew?

After thoroughly exploring the desert, we once again headed south to Kennebunkport, home of the 41st President of the US of A, George HW Bush. This was where Sandy's conference was to be held. I stayed one night, and came home the next day, but not before I walked around and snapped some pictures.

## **Seattle**

Sandy had a conference come up in Washington, so we packed our bags and headed northwest to some familiar territory for me. We set our home base in a hotel in the northern part of the city, near the Space Needle. And naturally, that was our first stop, all the way to the top. Then we rode the monorail downtown, and went to the famous Fish Market. Wow, they have a lot of fish there! And flowers, too. We had a very nice lunch there, and then were ready for our next stop. Back at the hotel, we retrieved the rental car, and headed to the Seattle Museum of Flight, just down the street from the Boeing Flight Test hangar where I used to go testing. The museum is fantastic. If you are an aviation history buff, this is your must-go destination in Seattle. But wait, there's more, much more. Walk across the street to the outdoor display, and you will find the first 707 used as Air Force One, and the first 747, "RA-001", also known as the City of Everett. That was one of the 747s that I flew in during testing, prompting me to ask Sandy if a plane I tested was in a museum, should I be? No need to answer.

We made an ill-fated journey to Mount Rainier. Everything was fine until we started up the road to the Paradise Visitor Center. It began to rain. I didn't notice that nobody else was on the road up with us. Clueless, we continued upward. Paradise is at 5,400 feet elevation, and the 30 mile drive up from the park's Nisqually entrance gives lots of opportunity to experience the natural splendor of this huge mountain and its environs. Unless it is raining. Hard. We were thrilled to arrive at Paradise, having come all the way from Seattle without a bathroom break. Thrilled, that is, until we saw that the old visitor center was being demolished with a new one under construction. We had to laugh. So we got out, took each other's picture in the maelstrom, then I saw how fast I could drive back down to reach the restrooms. Success!

Our next destination was Snowqualmie Pass, and the hotel where Sandy's conference was. I dropped her off, and left for Seattle, and my flight home. Another great adventure together!

## **Portland**

The last of our business/personal trips together was to a meeting in Portland, OR. We flew out and went to our hotel near the airport. The meeting was being held just down the street, so Sandy could walk after I returned home. We went exploring in downtown. The highlight for me was the rose garden, with many different varieties, most of which were blooming. On another day, we paid a visit to Mount St. Helens with similar results to our previous visit to Mt. Rainier. It poured! Fortunately the visitor center was open and we could gaze out at zero visibility rain falling. Mountain? I don't see no stinkin' mountain.

Our last outing was to Multnomah Falls, along the Columbia River east of Portland, beside Interstate 80. This is a famous waterfall, used in many TV shows and movies, though rarely named, and often located "somewhere else". Parking is between east and westbound lanes of the interstate, and a short walk gets you there. It is a two level fall, with a high pool and a low one, and a bridge across at the upper pool that is easily accessible by a short path. If you watch TV, you've seen this waterfall before!

Back to the hotel. We had a Sunday brunch at an awesome restaurant on the river, behind the airport. It was a seafood buffet like none other. I'd like to go back there!

And off to the airport for me! Another great outing brought to you by the fine folks at Swofford Adventures.

## **Photos**



Van, Sandy, Vlado, and Moonbeam McSwine, Oshkosh, Wisconsin, 2002.



Vlado changing the tailwheel on his P-51. Oshkosh, 2002.



White Knight and Spaceship One, Oshkosh, 2002.



Biking down Mt. Haleakala, Maui, Hawaii, 2005.



It is raining UP from within the crater, Mt. Haleakala, Maui, Hawaii, 2005.



Van, Sandy, Jared, and Gracie, the world's best behaved German Shepherd, near Ramstein AB, Germany, 2006.



Space Campers, U.S. Space and Rocket Center, Huntsville, Alabama, 2008.



Sandy and Van ready for launch! Space Camp, 2008.



Doing the "Moon Walk Ballet", Space Camp, 2008.



Jeremy (our camp director), and Van enjoy a 3g spin in the centrifuge, Space Camp, 2008.



We enjoyed every float at the Tournament of Roses Parade, January 1, 2010.



Visiting with the Wards in Savannah, Georgia, June, 2010.



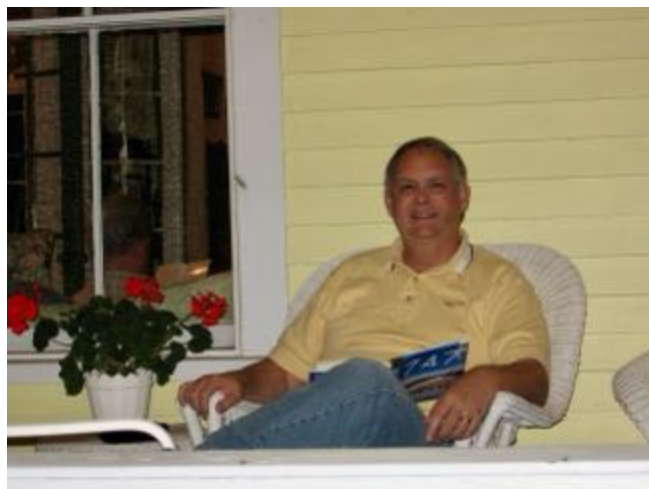
Sandy and Van at Bryce Canyon, Utah, 2011. It is 75 degrees!



Sandy and Van at Zion National Park, Utah, 2011. It is 108 degrees!



And they gave me a horse named Bodacious. I'm not feeling the love!  
Bryce Canyon, Utah, 2011.



A relaxing time to read the 747 story. Bar Harbor, Maine, 2007.



Showing us how it's done. Lobster boat, Bar Harbor, Maine, 2007.



Sandy and Van in the Desert of Maine, 2007.



Sandy, with Haden and Tim Tirey, Auburn homecoming, 2007.



A couple of dinosaurs. Seattle Museum of Flight, 2008.



Van and Sandy at Snowqualmie Falls, Washington, 2008.



Sunset from Mackinac Island, Michigan, September, 2015.



Sandy at Multnomah Falls, Oregon, October, 2015.



Balloon Glow, Alabama Jubilee Balloon Festival, Decatur, Alabama, 2017.



At the other end of the travel spectrum, Sandy enjoys the comfort of a Gulfstream 550. Don't get too comfortable Darling, we have to give this one back.

# Tybee Jet

*“Yet those who wait for the Lord will gain new strength; they will mount up with wings like eagles, they will run and not get tired, they will walk and not become weary“ - Isaiah 40:31*

## **We Had a Market, With No Way to Deliver Our Product**

This is a long story, very long. Not the story itself, but the amount of calendar pages that have been turned since the beginning.

In 1984, I was working at Federal Express. In those days engineering was in a building that spanned the space between 2 hangars at the Memphis airport. The sorting hub was just steps across the pavement. There was a cafeteria in the hub where I ate lunch often, and in the dining room was a scrolling sign that showed company news, including the package count from the previous night. At that time, a new record was set at 300,000 packages right before Christmas. To add perspective, my badge number was just below 10,000.

My job was to keep the Airport Performance Manual for the 727s updated. This manual was used by pilots and dispatchers to determine all of the takeoff and landing information for each flight leg. For example, for a takeoff at Nashville on runway 31, the pilot can look down the page for that runway, find the temperature, and read all of the takeoff speeds and the

maximum takeoff weight. That is a handy tool! The alternative at that time was to work through about 50 pages of graphs to determine those numbers. And that is just what Gulfstream corporate jet pilots had to do. Along with one of my coworkers, Ken Hurley, we began to scheme as to how we could provide this service to corporate aviation. The big problem, of course, was that the airline flew to specific airports, and a limited number of them. So it was possible to publish the information in a book. But a corporate jet might travel to any airport in the world on any given day. There is no way you can publish a book with performance for more than 10,000 airports. There had to be another solution.

Our next idea was to provide a service, where the pilot could call us with the particulars of a trip, and we could produce the same type of output the airlines use, and fax the pages to the pilot. This could work, but would be very manpower intense. There still must be a better way.

That is where we left it when I left Federal the next year, and spent a year working at OMAC, and a half year living in Auburn. During that time, through no choice of my own, I had to learn to do software development on a PC. I am talking about the original 4.77 MHz IBM PC, equipped with a single floppy drive. Learning to work within the limits of the PC was not only essential for my future in software development, but it was fun! When I left OMAC and moved to Auburn between jobs, I took my Cessna 210 and got in some flying with friends there. I also bought an AT&T PC 6300. Not only was it super fast, with an 8 MHz 8086 processor, but it had a 20MB hard disk, an \$800 option. Zippety doo dah! I spent those months at Auburn learning. I bought every language compiler that I thought might be useful, MS FORTRAN, MS Pascal, MS Quick Basic, and Borland Pascal. All of these were very early versions, and as such had some quirks. For my purposes, I wanted a language that had the ability to do user interfaces, and graphics. FORTRAN and MS Pascal were quickly left behind. Quick Basic was very easy to work with, but Borland Pascal had so much more potential, and was the language I settled on. After many upgrades, the current incarnation is called Delphi, and that is my language of choice today, 40+ years later.

In 1987, I returned to Federal Express. Ken and I immediately began looking at a radical idea. Small format laptop computers were just hitting the market. What if we give the pilot the computer with the software running on it. Then, he could input all the particulars for a flight, and the computer could give him precise numbers for everything he needed. But none of those early laptops had a decent screen. Most were black and gray LCDs, with no backlighting, and very limited screen size.

Then one day Ken borrowed a Zenith Z-183 laptop from his neighbor. It had a nice (for its time) LCD screen that was blue and white, backlit, and could hold a full screen of text. The clincher was, we took it into an internal bathroom at Ken's house, and when we turned the lights off, we could read the screen! I bought one the next day to use in software development.

## **Now We Have a Target! Let's Get To Work!**

Now that we knew how to deliver the product, we began working in earnest every night and weekend on developing a prototype. Ken only programmed in FORTRAN 66. He worked on the calculation code, while I worked on the user interface, and converted Ken's code to Borland Pascal, then integrated it with the user interface. We made good progress, and quickly reached the point of trying the first calculation. We entered the needed inputs and hit the go button. A minute and a half later, we got the results. Correct, but what took so long? The answer was that we were reading all the airplane flight manual data from tables in a text file. So the first optimization was to move the data tables to data statements that would be compiled into the program. Next calculation, 10 seconds, and correct answer again. Woo hoo!

After 9 months at Federal, I called Jim Ward at Gulfstream just to chat, and my old boss, Ed Flinn, was standing nearby and joined the call. Ed told me that he and his bosses had lifted their ban on former direct employees returning to work as contract employees, and he needed me to come back. As soon as I hung up the phone, I went into my manager's office and gave 2 weeks notice.

Back in Savannah, I continued working with Ken long distance, on completing and refining our prototype. Two years later, in 1989, Gulfstream fired me. That stung, but I had bought a condo in Surfside Beach, SC and began to move all my belongings to a storage locker near the condo. The day I was going to move into the condo, preparations were being made for hurricane Hugo, which would come ashore the next afternoon. So I loaded up my pickup with computer and enough summer clothes to hang out a few days at my Dad's house in Erwin, and left early in the morning for Erwin. Little did I know..... Hugo was a terribly destructive hurricane, and did massive damage to properties all along the beach. It hit in September. By Thanksgiving, it was getting a bit cool in the mountains, so I went down to the condo to get some warmer clothes. The beach road was still under martial law, so I checked in with the guard and went down to the condo. Our pool was only 1 of 3 in town that survived, only because the first wave filled it with sand. All the rest were floated out of the sand and broken up. The building had swayed back and forth, which pushed the bricks out near the top. The condo itself was perfect. I grabbed some warmer clothes and headed back to Erwin. I stayed with Dad for 8 months, finally able to move back to the beach in May.

Repairs weren't complete, but I had a home again, and continued to work on the software. I had gotten a lot done in Erwin, but this was a much better setup, My computer table overlooked the beach, 2 stories below. And people were coming back for the summer, so I wasn't alone on a lonely beach. Breaks were great. Two steps and I was catching some rays on the balcony, sipping a cold beer. Longer breaks included a walk on the beach. The long, intense programming sessions paid off. By the end of summer, we had working, complete software, ready to show to people. We picked up a third partner, Clark Liddell, who worked with Ken at Federal. Then we incorporated as Jet Performance Corporation.

In the summer of 1990, Ken got us an audience with the President and Vice Presidents at Jeppesen in Denver. Jeppesen provides charting and other flight planning services for pilots all over the world. Our software would have been a perfect addition to their product line. They were suitably impressed, but there was just one problem. The concept of software as a more convenient way to do a manual task had not yet taken hold. Their VP

of marketing said the only way to sell it would be that it improves safety, and to do that, you have to imply that your customers are not operating safely already. That ended our one and only sales meeting. We ended up closing the business, and going our separate ways, each taking a copy of the source code that we could use any way we liked.

## **Watch Closely as I Pull a Tablecloth Out from Under the Fine China**

I got called back to Gulfstream in October. The guy that fired me left the company shortly after, and Ed Flinn wanted me back. For the next 7 years, I worked at Gulfstream, coming and going as the projects required. I was hired at least 10 times. I've lost count. Diane "the badge lady" in security just kept my badge in her desk because she knew I'd be back in a few months whenever I left. During those 7 years, I kept working on the software, finding things that worked and things that needed improvement. My last year at Gulfstream, 1997, I was working in the marketing department, providing technical support to the salesmen. One day, Jim Ward called me and said he had been in a meeting where the contract requirements for the new C-37A for the US Air Force were discussed. They were troubled by 6 words, "Gulfstream will provide computerized TOLD data." TOLD stands for takeoff and landing data. Jim told them that I had been working on that for years (13 to be exact), and I could demo it for them the next day. Nothing like a little pressure! So I did a demo, and on a handshake I left Gulfstream for the last time and formed Tybee Jet Corporation. The first C-37A was delivered the next July, and it came with a copy of AFMatic (automatic airplane flight manual) installed on their laptop.

Meanwhile, I got a civilian GV customer. I thought I was making progress, and the future looked bright. Then I got a letter from Gulfstream's legal department telling me to stop selling software. Ugh! I was shutdown all through 1999. A completely different part of the company than the one where the handshake agreement was made had decided they didn't like the

idea that I was selling a product that included their airplane flight manual (AFM) data, even though the data were made public when they submitted the AFM to the FAA for approval. Finally, in October, Ed Flinn intervened on my behalf and set up an informal meeting with Don Mayer, one of the top lawyers at Gulfstream, and an old friend from my early days with the company in the early 80s. Over a beer at one of the hotels downtown, Don and I hashed out the basics of an agreement. In essence, I asked him what I had to do to continue my business working with Gulfstream, and he told me.

During a series of day-long meetings after Christmas, with Don and an engineer representing Gulfstream, and my lawyer and me on our side of the table, at last, on the afternoon of Dec. 31, 1999, we had an agreement, signed by Mark Burns from Gulfstream, who is currently serving as President of the company. The agreement was heavily slanted in Gulfstream's favor, and contained some concessions to Tybee Jet. As we walked out of the meeting, Don told me that he considered any negotiation a success when all parties were equally unhappy. And we were. Mark Burns told me "Congratulations Van, you just became a wealthy man." It seemed like a great way to end the year.

When I woke up the next day, it had all fallen apart. Despite the legalese and signatures on paper, nothing happened. Why? Don Mayer retired after our meeting. The engineer that was involved left the company for a new job that day. And Mark Burns was promoted to VP, and moved to a different department. Nobody at Gulfstream who had an interest in our partnership was available to follow through.

## **The Ups and Downs Are Making Me Sick**

Five months later, I got a call from David Craig, director of publications at Gulfstream. He was stepping up as the guy who would be my connection within the company. David and I worked together for the next 13 years. In the lean early years, David was kind enough to let us have 75% of the revenues, instead of the 50% specified in the contract. Publications handled sales and shipping, Tybee Jet handled software and data. One hitch in the

finances was that I was buying worldwide airport data from Jeppesen, at a whopping \$36,000 per year. In 2003, the US military made their airport data available to all, for FREE! It didn't take me long to make the change. That saved the company!

The next 7 years we were blessed with actual profits! The high water mark for Tybee Jet was 2008. While the rest of the country was in recession, we had our best year.

Meanwhile I kept adding features to the program. The biggest was called JetMiser, which helped pilots adjust their fuel purchases to pay the least amount for the total cost on a multiple stop trip. In the aviation industry, that is known as fuel tankering. By using JetMiser, pilots reported to me that in some cases they saved over \$3,000 on a single trip.

In 2010, a terrible thing happened. Apple released the iPad. Gulfstream kept telling me not to worry about it. They were sticking with Windows for their software. I bought one and began looking at the possibility of rewriting AFMatic for the iPad. There were no development tools available except for Apple's Xcode. As time went by, other flight planning software began showing up on the iPad, and when Jeppesen's charts launched, the iPad became the de facto pilot's computer. At that point, the clock was ticking.

The approach I wanted to take was to maintain the program for Windows and iOS, with the same source code. But my programming language, Delphi, was not available for iOS, so I was stuck. Then in 2012, a friend from the Delphi newsgroup, Joanna Carter, from Southport, UK, near Liverpool, offered to consult and help me at least get a prototype program working on the iPad. So, we began working together in the fall of 2012. At that time, Delphi had their first try at compiling for iOS. It was pretty crude, but if we did the user interface with Xcode, we could pass input and output to code written in Delphi for the calculations. We made good progress with this approach.

In early 2014, I took an iPad to Gulfstream, and demonstrated AFMatic for iOS to Pubs, which was then headed up by Bill Colleran. They were so impressed with the demo that as we were breaking up, Bill quietly told me

“We need to own this.” And with those words, we began the most miserable year in Tybee Jet’s history. As we proceeded with negotiations, more and more people got involved. There was Publications, who would be selling and supporting the app. Flight Operations jumped in. They wanted to control the user interface. By June, I was invited to a meeting where I was shown how the user interface would work, and it was nothing like our app. In fact, it looked like Windows, because the guy designing it had never used an iPad. Then Marketing got involved. They had a spec for how all apps developed by Gulfstream should look, and that was nothing like what we had, or what Flight Ops had proposed. Finally, the IT department jumped in, wanting to control the project. And their first demand was that the programming tool to be used was called AppCelerator, which would require a complete rewrite of the program in JavaScript. You gotta be kidding me! This had gotten way out of hand.

Meanwhile, the negotiations were stalled. I was asked for a proposal, which I provided. The response was simply no. No counter proposal. Then they asked for another proposal, and once provided, the answer was no again. This went on until August when I asked for a meeting to discuss it. I met with Bill Colleran and his boss, my old friend from flight test, Greg Hammerstein. I was exhausted from all the drama, and just walked in and asked them what they wanted, and said okay. We agreed on the terms, which heavily favored Gulfstream, as usual, and I drove back to Nashville. After all that, I was never contacted by the legal department to finalize the agreement.

## **The Road Less Traveled**

In September, Flight Ops developed a spec for the user interface, and wanted to present it to Joanna and me. Instead of flying her to Savannah, two guys from Flight Ops and I flew to Manchester, UK, and Joanna drove over and joined us. All went well until 5 minutes into Dave Green’s presentation. Okay, maybe 2 minutes. The user interface was pure Windows, and nothing adhered to Apple’s rules for design and operation. Joanna was very set in the ways of developing for Apple operating systems. Stubborn would be a better word. We worked together well, and had some

push and pull discussions along the way. But on that day, we spent 3 hours in the morning arguing over how the interface should or shouldn't look and operate. We broke for lunch, and when we returned, Dave told us he couldn't work with Joanna, and had phoned Gulfstream and the deal was off. So, I got a seat on the first plane available the next morning, and came home.

We had one more meeting in November to discuss how I could help them develop the calculation and data storage code for an app of their design. The result of that was a letter from Bill Colleran, received on Christmas Eve, saying that Gulfstream would no longer need my services on *their* iPad app, and furthermore, since they would be selling their own software, they would no longer sell AFMatic. I was cut loose to sell it on my own. Merry Christmas!

Gulfstream did bring their iPad performance software to market. It was not well received by the customers, and I believe it was withdrawn.

Sales of AFMatic dropped off sharply after that, and while I was now able to keep 100% of the revenues, total revenue began a long slide. I couldn't afford to keep Joanna on the payroll, so work on the iPad software ended. And of course, since then, Delphi has constantly improved support for iOS, Mac, Android, and Windows to the point that now, I could write software that runs on all of those operating systems with few or even no code changes. Wow! Too bad that I finally retired on Dec. 31, 2023, and closed the business. A 25 year run for a small business run by a guy that never wanted to be an entrepreneur, isn't bad, I suppose.

Was Tybee Jet profitable? No, far from it. I would have made more money, with less risk, just by sitting at a desk and doing what somebody else told me to do. But the satisfaction of being creative, and seeing people using and appreciating the innovations I came up with, was the real blessing. The people I met along the way really made it special.

While Tybee Jet operated for over 25 years, there were another 13 years of dedicated after hours development that came before that. Looking back on

the road we traveled, I am quite satisfied that this was the road I should have traveled, and wouldn't change a thing.

**Bette Davis** said it well - *“To fulfill a dream, to be allowed to sweat over lonely labor, to be given the chance to create, is the meat and potatoes of life.”*

## Photos



Tybee Jet world headquarters, also known as Van's desk, 2013.



Little Bit likes to hang out with the CEO. Or is that the janitor? I forget.



Dempsey Birmingham (white shirt) in Gulfstream simulator. Dempsey was Director of Training at FlightSafety International in Savannah, and helped us immensely in introducing AFMatic to the customers.



Our booth at the Gulfstream Operators Conference in Savannah. Many thanks to Gulfstream Publications for offering us this space at no cost for a number of years.



C-20As ready to go! Ramstein AB, Germany, 2006.

# Let's Go Nuclear!

*And I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse” - Genesis 12:3*

## **Shhh....I Would Have Done This Job for Free**

It was 2003. Sandy had just started her new job as VP of Marketing and Operations at VolCorp in Nashville. I was still in Savannah, watching the movers load the truck with all our furniture. My cell phone rang, and it was Pat Connor from Gulfstream's performance engineering group. He had just left a meeting with the Israeli Air Force. They were scheduled to take delivery of 5 Gulfstream Vs, and 2 Gulfstream 550s, specially configured for several different electronic warfare missions. The GVs were SEMA, Special Electronic Missions Aircraft, to be used for offensive missions against enemies. The G550s were CAEW, Conformal Airborne Early Warning, to be used to fly continuously over Israel, monitoring electronic signals and aircraft operations over neighboring countries. What did they want from me? They needed a flight planning tool that could be used without any network connections that could be intercepted. My software, AFMatic, already had the necessary takeoff and landing calculations. I just needed to add the capability to compute the flight plan portion, including the ability to loiter over a point on the map, and determine when they needed to return to their base given the amount of fuel onboard. Sounds easy enough. Let's do it!

We spent a couple months negotiating. The “detail spec” for this project was a single piece of paper that Pat had made notes on. From that, I had to estimate the number of manhours required to develop the software, and give

them a fixed price estimate. Note this, I am an engineer. If I wanted to be a businessman, I would have gone a different direction in school. Once the bid had been accepted, I began working with the program manager on the project. And that is where the wheels began to come off the wagon.

In a reasonably short time, given the complexity of the problem, I was able to put together the functioning software, allowing them to do the entire planning calculations within AFMatic, and satisfying the spec as defined by Pat's notes. We presented the first draft of the program to the IAF, to give it a test and note any changes that were needed. After about a month, I received a 50+ page document from the IAF documenting all the changes they demanded. A one page spec, and a 50+ page document on how the program fell short! This naturally resulted in another month of negotiations to define which changes were within the scope of the project, and which weren't. Those determined to be within scope, I had the pleasure of completing at no additional charge. What began as a 10-12 month project, ended up taking 3 years. They got a really good deal!

So, how did they use the airplanes? The most publicly known mission for SEMA was the destruction of a nuclear reactor that was being built in Syria. Israel couldn't allow a nuclear power to spring up next door. Their solution was to bomb it before it was completed. But they didn't have any stealth fighters, so how could they slip in and out undetected? That's where SEMA came in. The electronics on board have the capability to hack into enemy radar systems, and spoof them into showing empty skies, even though a flight of heavily armed F-16s was inbound to the target. They got in, bombed the reactor into a pile of rubble, and were back at base in Israel before anybody knew what had happened. Neat, huh?

Despite the difficulties with this project, and getting paid for maybe one third of the time put into it, this is my blessing for Israel, and I am blessed to have been even a small part of this effort.

## **Photos**



Israeli Air Force CAEW (foreground) and SEMA (background) - photo courtesy Gulfstream Aerospace



SEMA is a highly modified Gulfstream V, flown by the Israeli Air Force as an offensive weapon - photo courtesy Gulfstream Aerospace

# Life Lesson - The Big Lie

***“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God” - Matthew 5:9***

It has been said many times that the first casualty of war is truth. I've been around for a lot of wars, and have been fortunate enough to never be called upon to fight in one of them. It is amazingly easy to take on the mantle of Monday morning quarterback, and pontificate on what should or should not have been done. After all, I am a human, and that's what we humans do. However, I will stick to one very narrow subject here, the words "If we don't defeat them over there, they will be coming for us next."

How many times have those words been spoken? At least as many times as there has been a major war since World War II. In that conflict, it was true! Hitler intended to conquer the entire world, right from the beginning. General Eisenhower was well aware of those intentions, and carried the belief that one war was no different than another in principle, right into his presidency.

And there we come to the Korean War. Though it was before my time, my studies of American history reveal that it was believed that if we didn't defeat North Korea and China on the Korean Peninsula, that we would be fighting them on the shores of America. We didn't win that war, and have been holding on to a tenuous truce for 70 years. No invasion yet.

Then there was Vietnam. The more we got sucked into that war, the more it was justified by those words, "If we don't defeat the Commies in Vietnam, they'll be coming here next." We lost that war, and barely were able to evacuate all the Americans before Saigon fell. Still waiting on that invasion.

How about the Middle East, a place that was quite peaceful until America put the Shah of Iran into office. It was such a nice place to visit that my next door neighbor, Jim Horner, who was an economics professor, and taught and traveled throughout Europe and the Middle East during the summer months, says that his favorite places to visit were there, and cites a particular chance meeting with strangers in Damascus, as evidence of the kind and hospitable people there.

We went to war in Iraq and Afghanistan. I guess you could say we won in Iraq, Saddam Hussein was killed after all, but it doesn't seem to have changed anything. What were we told when that one started? You guessed it, weapons of mass destruction, gotta wipe 'em out and get rid of Hussein, or they'll be coming for us. Ho hum, not so far.

And Afghanistan? After 20 years and at least hundreds of billions of dollars invested, we ran out of Kabul with our tail between our legs, and even were asking the Taliban to help secure our retreat! Of course, we left \$80 billion worth of weapons behind to help our enemy there. And have they come after us here? Nope.

I'm not done! Let's look at Ukraine. Briefly please. You don't want to look too closely, or you might find some really disturbing stuff. On day one of the Russian invasion, we were told that we had to do anything necessary, for as long as it takes, or Russia would attack the NATO countries next, and sweep through Europe like a bottle of Miralax. This war is still going on within Ukraine's border. Why? The Russians are nowhere near as strong and well equipped as we believed. If they can't defeat Ukraine, whose country is now almost a wasteland, how do you suppose they can defeat the combined armies and air forces of the NATO nations? Coming for us? Don't be silly.

And now I am sad to say that I heard those words from the mouth of Israel's Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, after about a month of fighting with Hamas. "If we don't defeat Iran and its proxies now, they will be coming for all of you." While I agree that evil must be defeated wherever it is

encountered, I can't say that I believe they will be coming for anybody if we don't defeat them.

So there you have it, THE BIG LIE. It is repeated for the purpose of instilling fear into peace loving people who are living in freedom, in order to secure our approval, and funding, of a never ending number of wars. Please don't believe the lie. Please look for ways to find agreement and peace among us all.

# Cats

*“The mind of the prudent acquires knowledge, and the ear of the wise seeks knowledge.” - Proverbs 18:15*

## **"Because They Are There", Seems Too Obvious**

We were recently invited to dinner at our friends, Mike and Shelly Brown's house. They had two schnauzers and a cat that roamed the covered patio as we whiled the hours away eating and telling stories. The dogs hung out with their masters, and the cat ignored us all for a couple hours, before strolling over and letting Sandy and me pet her on the floor. Then, quite unexpectedly, she jumped up in my lap, and stood there several minutes getting the royal treatment, to the dismay of her owners. They suggested that this was an extraordinary event, and that when some guests stay for days, they have no idea where the cat was hiding. I just said two words, “cat whisperer”, and offered as explanation that maybe it was because I had experimented on cats for many years. Now, before I start getting hate mail from the animal activists, let me be very clear. No cats were injured in these experiments. But I learned a lot about them through a little bit of experimentation.

For example, when I worked at Boeing and lived in Everett, WA, my sister lived in Tacoma, about 75 miles away, and she had a mature cat named Gretchen. I spent a lot of weekends at their house, which meant I had a ready laboratory for my diabolical studies. First on my list was to determine if she knew her name, or if she just responded to certain sounds. As she was

lying there facing away from me, I began trying different parts of her name. “Gre, gre, gre, gre”, says I. Eventually, she looked around and gave me the stink eye. “En, en, en, en”. Same result. “Tch”. It only took one, and she jumped up and ran over to me. Similarly, “Gretch” and “tchen” worked, as well as “Gretchen”. So, as far as she was concerned, her name was “Tch”. So, what happens if I wrap that sound in some different sounds? I tried “kitchen”, with no response. Same with “charcoal” and “stitch”. Very interesting.

Now for something a bit more sophisticated. She responds to sounds, but does she understand the meaning of words? I stood across the room behind her. I said “Go away” in that kind, inviting voice you use when talking to a baby. She got up and ran to me. Well, run is a strong word. Gretchen weighed about 15 pounds, so it was more like a fast waddle. Later, I tried saying “Come here” in a gruff voice. She ran out of the room. After repeating several times, including with a neighbor’s Collie, I concluded that tone of voice had much more meaning than any specific words you might use. And then there was Pepper, a friend’s poodle. No matter your tone of voice, if you said the word “bath”, Pepper would bare his teeth and start growling. There’s always an exception to every rule, right?

I got an early start with cats. My sister Janie got her first one after we moved to Marion, NC in 1959. She was a pretty tabby named Kiwi, and I was terribly allergic to her, as well as around 100 other substances, including my own hair. More cats came and went, through birth or acquisition. I survived them all, and when Janie grew up and left the house in 1966, there were no more pets in the house, and my allergies improved quite a bit. I am still allergic to some cats, mostly long haired ones.

For close to 10 years, I rented the house next door to Jim and Allison Ward. One day, they went out for dinner at a nearby seafood restaurant by a tidal creek. As usual, there were several cats hanging out by the back door. The kids were petting one, and a cook came out and suggested they take it home with them, so they did. They named him Prince. Prince was pretty cool for a stray. There was a basketball goal over the door of my garage, and I would go out and shoot hoops. Sometimes Prince would climb up on the garage roof and sit on the peak looking straight down at the hoop, and just sit there

and watch me. My office was in an upstairs bedroom, and just outside the window was a dead palm tree. All that was there was the tree trunk. All of the palm fronds were gone. One day as I was working at the computer, I noticed motion with my peripheral vision, and turned to see what it was. As you might have already guessed, it was Prince sitting on top of the tree, looking through the window at me. I thought we might need help to get him down, but after a few minutes, he climbed down on his own.

Around that time one of our neighbors, who was afraid of snakes, brought about 10 cats home and turned them loose. He fed them, but that was all, so they each found a place in the neighborhood to hang out. One liked spending his days in the sun on my floating dock. Hmmm, I think this calls for a little experiment. Cats don't like water, right? And the floating dock was 12-15 feet away from dry land at high tide. So, if I sneak down there when the cat is asleep, and jump on the metal gangway, which is very noisy, the cat will have 2 ways to escape. Run past me and up the gangway, not likely. Or jump in the water and swim. The day arrived. I could see him sleeping on the dock at high tide. I crept out the long walkway to the dock, slipped over to the gangway, and jumped on it, as noisily as I could. Huh, you know what that cat did? In a fraction of a second, he went from motionless sleep to a missile streaking through the air, and landing on solid ground. Unexpected result! I never knew a cat could jump that far, or wake and react that fast. Very educational.

When I met Sandy, the first time I visited her condo, her cat came down the steps to see who was interrupting her nap. At every step, there was a "thump". What's up with that? Her tail was broken and banged down on each step. She was a mostly black tabby, and the tail was solid black. It looked like the crank on an old Ford Model-T, and that was her name, Crank. Crank had adopted Sandy at her condo in Bristol, TN. She came around every day when Sandy came home from work. Sandy invited her in and fed her. She learned later that her next door neighbor was feeding her as well as someone a couple streets away. But Crank actually belonged to another family! And they were moving away. So Sandy, never afraid of asking, told them that Crank had a food dish at her condo, and could she have her? And just like that, the adoption process was complete.

I must say that Crank was possibly the world's best cat. She was friendly toward everybody, including visiting little children that tried to ride her. As she got older and sometimes needed to take a pill, she resisted, but never bit or scratched. The vet changed her to a compounded gel that we had to rub into a shaved place on her belly. Every morning I would say "Crank, let's go get your medicine", and she would follow me into the kitchen and sit by my left foot and wait for me to get the medicine on my finger. Then I would pick her up with my left hand behind her front legs and she would happily dangle while I rubbed it into her skin. When I put her down, she got a treat. One day, she sat down by my right foot. I looked at her and said "Crank, you know where you're supposed to be." She got up and moved to my left side.

Purely by accident, we discovered that she knew and responded to the whistled tune that opened the old Andy Griffith Show. As the show came on one night, I was just whistling along with it, and Crank started running to me. She climbed up on the back of the sofa and came over my shoulder and stuck her nose right in front of my lips, like she was looking for where the sound was coming from. After that, any time we wanted her to come, we just whistled that tune. Crank didn't respond to any other tune, and paid no attention to it when it played on TV.

While we lived in Savannah, there was a pool out back, and a screened porch outside the sliding glass door. Every year, we were visited by turkey vultures as they passed through on migration. Two of them were sitting by the pool one day. Crank sat next to the door and checked out the wildlife out back. She made a strange sound whenever she saw birds, and this time, she was adamant. She wanted out! So I quietly slid the door open enough for her to slip out. She was in stealth mode, and slowly crept the 50 feet to the vultures. When she got within pouncing range, the butt wiggle began. And then both of the turkey vultures turned their heads and just looked at her. She froze, and then began slowly backing up one step at a time, until she reached a safe distance, then turned and ran as fast as she could straight at the glass door. I opened it and she ran in and skidded to a stop by the fireplace as I closed the door. I don't know when I've laughed so hard!

Crank was one of a kind. We still miss her today.

Our next cat was a loaner. Friends Jared and Jennifer Robbins were an Army family, and Jared got a 2 year assignment to Australia. Rather than deal with all the customs process to take pets into the country, they farmed out their menagerie. We got Chloe, a mature, all white, very skittish cat. It took time for Chloe to warm up to us, but after a few weeks, she decided it was safe to sit in my lap and watch TV in the evening. And when I took my insulin shot at bedtime, she always wanted to jump up on my leg while I sat in the kitchen. But when company came, Chloe was in our closet. Although she was a very different cat, we enjoyed having Chloe with us for a while.

In September, 2010, not long after the big Nashville flood, on the way home from church, Sandy said "Can we go by the animal shelter and look at the cats?" And so we did. We went home with a Japanese Bobtail, with a twitchy little 2 inch tail. Weighing only 8 pounds, it was easy to pick Little Bit as her name. In short order we discovered that any small object dropped on the floor became a hockey puck for her, and she would go flying through the living room pushing her hockey puck along. Maybe we should have named her Gretzky.

It was quickly apparent that we had to shut the bedroom door at night. On that first night, our new curious explorer kept us wide awake by climbing on all the furniture and knocking jewelry and other small objects to the floor for use as hockey pucks. Reluctantly, I closed the door. Our last thoughts before falling asleep were of what we might find in the morning. Sun's up, I open the door and check out the house. Nothing. She had just found a place to sleep, and had not bothered anything in the house. Success! For the last 14 years, we have turned the rest of the house over to Little Bit, and she has done nothing worse than cover the chair she likes to sleep in with black hair. We can live with that!

While we lived in Brentwood, she liked to hang out with me. She would lie on the arm of my recliner and hang her head over the end of the chair arm, and go to sleep. She also liked to sleep on the couch, facing the back cushion, with her face stuck between the cushions.

One night, I heard the sound of a ball bouncing down the steps and up against the bedroom wall. I got up and looked. It was a tennis ball we had given her to play with. How did she get it upstairs? That remained a mystery for several years. Sometimes, we would hear the ball bounce down, and then within a minute, it would come down again. Anytime I ran out to try to catch her in the act, she was just sitting there innocently looking at me. After several years of this cat and mouse game, I was working at my desk near the top of the stairs, when I noticed something moving and turned to look. It was Little Bit with the tennis ball in her mouth! She dropped it and looked at me as if to say “Darn, I’ve been caught.” Mystery solved! Once we moved to Mount Juliet, Little Bit decided that the fun had gone out of rolling the ball down the steps, and never did it again.

One evening, while watching TV, we discovered that Little Bit is a pilot! I guess we should have named her Amelia. Our living room in Brentwood was open for 2 stories, and the short wall at the top of the stairs was about 13 feet above the living room floor. I saw something out of my peripheral vision and turned to look. What I saw was a flyin’ singin’ writin’ weirdo freak. No, sorry, wrong song. I saw a flying cat, and it wasn’t a Grumman Tiger. It was Little Bit! And her glide ratio was 0:1, straight down for the non-pilots. She hit the floor and her 4 legs just went out to the sides, and her chest took the force of the landing. She immediately jumped up and ran to the bedroom and under the bed. That was exciting! She never has been very nimble, and falls off of things fairly frequently. This time she jumped up on the wall and skidded off the other side. When we got to her, Sandy coaxed her out, and she was breathing like she had the wind knocked out of her. Nothing broken. No harm done. As pilots, we know that any landing you can walk away from is a good one. Nice job Little Bit! You have now soloed.

With all of my medical issues, I take a ridiculous amount of pharmaceuticals. For convenience, I put them into a divided pillbox every week. One day, I was filling the box and dropped a pill, which promptly rolled under the fridge. Little Bit walked over and lay down on her side and with her head upside down, she looked for the pill. Then she took her paw and kept working it until she got it out. But she wasn’t finished. She sat up and swatted the pill like a hockey puck, and it rolled over and stopped right

in front of me! Thank you, Little Bit! Since then, every week when we refill our pillboxes, Little Bit is right there keeping an eye on things, and finds any pill we drop, but never attempts to eat them. What a hidden talent!

Little Bit is about 17 years old as I write this. She weighs around 7 pounds, and runs up and down the steps at about 90 mph, and takes a turn around the upstairs. We call it “chasing a ghost”. Whatever it is called, I take it as an indication she has a lot more years of experimentation to go. Update: I was wrong. Underneath the exterior combination of a kitten and Evel Knievel, Little Bit was hiding some major kidney and liver disease. Her last day with us was August 30, 2025. RIP, little girl!

On March 3, 2026, a new face (and 4 feet) came to live with us. We went to pick her up in Oak Ridge. Her name is Lexi, named for Lexi Hull, a basketball player for the WNBA Indiana Fever. Let the experimenting begin!

## Photos



Van and Crank, the world's best cat, ever!



Chloe, our loaner cat for a year. She was afraid of everything, except Van.



Theresa Ward and Prince.



Little Bit, up close and personal.



Little Bit, gone but never forgotten.



Little Bit checking out all the action out front.



Sandy and Lexi, first evening together, March 3, 2026.

# Sliced and Diced!

***“Call to me and I will answer you...” - Jeremiah  
33:3***

In my youth, I was invincible. Aren't we all? Any illness I got passed and nothing threatened any major systems. Once I made it to 45 to 50, stuff started going wrong. Diabetes. Two shoulder surgeries, carpal tunnel surgery in both hands, physical therapy all over the place. Getting old was starting to look like maybe more of a challenge than I thought it would be.

Sandy's minister while attending ETSU, Tommy Oaks, did a sermon that sticks in my mind like glue. The subject was "Today", and the gist of it was that today is the day that the Lord has made, and we should rejoice and be glad in it. Live like this might be our last day on earth. Instead, we insist on spending all day and half the night at the office, secure in the knowledge that when we retire, we will have endless time for travel and long walks on the beach. And then when we get there, we find that we are barely able to walk to the water's edge, and are certainly not going for a five-miler in the sand. Here's some news, while that was an example from Tommy's sermon, it has already come to pass for me!

When we lived in Savannah, the house was on a peninsula surrounded by salt marsh. In the mud exposed at low tide there lived hundreds of tiny crabs. This house had a pool in back, and the crabs loved to scurry across the yard and jump or fall into the pool. On some summer days, I scooped out 30 - 50 of the critters, and flipped them toward the marsh. One day, I picked out of the pool a crab that amazed me. He only had 1 leg, and 1 claw. I put him down in the grass, and he began his awkward push-pull

journey to the marsh. I was impressed! This tiny crab was still living his life, even though he was just one claw away from extinction. My admiration for this little creature has inspired me to hang in there through a whole lot of health issues. And I still have all my arms and legs!

## **Round One**

In 2009, I was going to have lunch with Sandy one day. It was about a 30 minute drive from our home in Brentwood to her office near the Nashville airport. As I pulled into the parking lot, my stomach felt odd, and hurt. She got in the car and I asked if it was okay if I didn't eat anything. Okay, she said and off we went. For about a half block. A stabbing pain cut through me, all the way to my back. Can I take you back, I asked. Okay. I did a U-turn and dropped her off, then hurried home. I went to bed and was miserable. I didn't know it, but she was about 10 minutes behind me. Every man should have a wife like Sandy! She gathered me up and took me to our doctor. The diagnosis was "probably gall bladder". Next stop, ultrasound. The operator called the doctor after the test, and told me to head to the CT scan room. After the scan, the verdict was in, my gall bladder had to come out. We visited the surgeon, it was scheduled, and when the day arrived, out it came. I woke up and felt pretty good. They sent me home, and I spent the afternoon with no pain. Shucks, this ain't nuthin'. Then I went to bed that night. The CO2 that was used to inflate my belly during the procedure had made its way into my bloodstream and settled in my shoulders. More misery than with the bad gall bladder. It was a lot like the bends, what divers get if they come up too quickly and nitrogen collects in their joints. Not pleasant! I paced the floor, tried sleeping on my back, then left, then right. No help. More pacing. The pain vanished as quickly as it came at around 10 AM. Recovery after that was easy. The biggest issue was my liver learning how to do the job of the gall bladder. At that point, about a year later, all was well. However, this was just an introduction. There was more to come, much more.

## **Round Two**

In 2012, I went to my endocrinologist for a normal scheduled visit. He was going to draw blood to test several things and I asked him to do a PSA, since I hadn't had one in a while.

The next day, my phone rang. I said hello, and then I heard these terrible words, "This is Dr. Pappagiannis..." The only time a doctor calls is to either set up a tee time for your weekly golf game, or when he has really bad news. I don't play golf, so I braced for the news. My PSA was over 7. He had already made me an appointment with a urologist. What I didn't know yet was that he was a urological oncologist.

He did a biopsy on my prostate. That sounds simple enough, but what it really means is he shoves a big stick up your butt, and then fires 12 darts with barbs on the tips, like a fish hook, through your intestines into your prostate, and pulls them back to collect tissue samples. Um, yeah, you're not doing that to me but once, dude. My phone rang a few days later. Nurse. Oh good, can't be too bad. "Mr. Swofford, you have cancer", were the first words out of her mouth. Not the best way to get that news. Doc wanted to see me. Tomorrow morning, or in 2 weeks when he got back from a conference. Duh. We were in his office at 8 the next morning. Options, radiation or removal. I asked what time that day he could get that cancerous thing out of me. This was September. Surgery was scheduled for November. Live with it.

I don't know if you have ever been diagnosed with cancer, so I can't say that my experience is what someone else could expect, but here is how it went for me. I just sat and stared at my computer screen. No work got done for a week or two. Then we went to church on a Saturday night. Our minister opened by saying that when we greeted each other that night, we would say our names and add "God has been good to me this week." Are you kidding me? I gotta say that? I almost ran out of the building. I envisioned bolts of lightning striking me, pillars of salt, all that stuff. Still, I waited to see how it went. Then it was time. I stood and turned to a young lady behind me and said it, "I'm Van and God has been good to me this week." There, I said it. And you know, now that I said it out loud, I kinda believed it a little. I tried it again, and believed it a bit more. One more time

and I was confident that it was true. Sandy told me that a man told her that God had saved his life this week. I replied “He saved mine too.” And from that moment on, I had no fear. God had revealed a serious problem that needed to be fixed, that I wouldn’t otherwise have known. I started looking at it as a period of unpleasantness, followed by everything being okay. IGBOK (It’s gonna be okay)! Attitude is almost everything! Trusting God takes care of the rest.

The day arrived. I was prepped and sent to the OR. The surgery was being done robotically, and being an engineer I asked “Can I watch?” An instant later by my timing, four hours on the clock, I woke up in recovery. I was stark naked. I’m pretty sure I didn’t go in that way. The nurse explained that midway through, my body temp shot through the roof, and that was the quickest way to cool me down. Okay, she has a gown on me now. I feel awful. Seriously. Not a good thing! Sandy comes in and I look at her and say “Hi, I’m Van, and I’m cancer free.” It has been 12 years, and my PSA is still zero.

I went to my room, and the next misery was switching beds, which I was invited to do with no assistance, pretty much how they did things in that hospital. Any move generated extreme pain in my abs. And of course, those are the muscles you use for things like sitting up, rolling over, and pretty much anything else.

I was so dry. I asked for water. Nope! I had to go without for 24 hours because “results are better”. Okay. Next, they wanted me to get up and walk around the floor I was on. Are you kidding me??? No kidding, sir. Every time I got up to walk, which was every hour, I could have screamed. Maybe I did. I walked all night, every hour. Sandy went with me. I had a catheter and a bag of urine, along with a hanger with an IV. Every time I walked though, I went more circuits. Finally, one of the nurses said as we walked by, that 29 circuits was a mile. 23 was my max before going home.

The whole first 24 hours were miserable. The nurse finally talked to the resident on duty, and brought me some morphine for the pain. She shot it into my IV line, and left the room. She came back 15 minutes later, and I

asked her when it was supposed to kick in. She said “Remember when I shot it into your IV? Then.”

Sandy slept in the chair that night. Next day, I was no better. The resident gave me a shot of Tordal for inflammation. In just a few minutes, I was ready to get up and dance. Such an improvement! My fast was over and they gave me some pureed oatmeal. Delicious! Lunch was pureed split pea soup. Another winner! And a sip of Sandy’s Diet Coke was very nearly the best tasting thing I ever put in my mouth. Things are looking up.

After 2 nights, I was doing pretty well, and it was time to go home. I walked a lot around the house. I think that was the magic in my recovery. I was down for just over a week, then I worked in my home office about 10 hours the next week, then 20, and back to normal schedule after that. I ran into a friend while getting some blood drawn. His brother, about my age, had the same surgery a year before, and had still not returned to work. He was amazed at my quick recovery. I was pretty happy about it myself. Invincible? Maybe, maybe not.

## **Round Three**

I had been having issues with angina since 2005, but it didn’t really become problematic until we moved from Brentwood to Mount Juliet, into a very nice retirement community. We have walking trails for miles, as well as a clubhouse with a well equipped gym. I was really looking forward to making frequent use of both. 7 years later and I still haven’t used either.

As time passed, my cardiologist kept close tabs on my condition. I had multiple stress tests, and every so often a heart catheterization. He kept telling me the clogged arteries were out in the periphery and not severe enough to take action. Things changed in 2020.

I had another heart cath in January, and he said “It’s time.” Sandy and I met with Dr. Brian Wilcox, and in February, I had bypass surgery at St. Thomas Midtown Hospital for 3 blockages. Before it was over, he did 5 bypasses.

He also found something suspicious on my lungs and took a sample for a biopsy, which turned out negative, but remained a mystery.

Bing! Wide awake in ICU, with a pipe down my throat. It was difficult to assess the situation until they removed the tube about a half hour later. In the meantime, they brought Sandy in. I had no other way to communicate with her, so I winked, and she knew I was okay.

Once all the hubbub was over, pipe out and nurse out of the room, I could give myself a good look. They had taken two veins from my left leg, one from my right. Beneath each leg incision was a tube and bag to collect drainage. Moving on up, there was a catheter and bag to collect urine. Then there were 3 bags collecting drainage in my belly. Then the enormous long main incision in my chest, glued shut. On the underside of my left wrist was a big yellow plastic thing, with multiple IV lines attached. And there was an IV line in my neck. Virtually every one of these locations was bruised. I was purple from neck to ankle. Where the defibrillator pads were taped to my chest and back were red and raw. It took over a month for that to clear up. I must have had a reaction to the adhesive. But you know, I felt pretty good overall, and had no pain.

I was in ICU for about 24 hours. They took exceptionally good care of me there. The room was so small, my feet were literally up against the glass door, so Sandy had to sit in a chair in the corner behind me, making it hard to carry on a conversation.

Next day, I was moved to a room on the cardiac floor. Let me ask you this. Are you lonely, feeling like you're all by yourself in the world of 7 billion people? If you answered yes, I recommend you have heart surgery. Beginning at 4:00 in the morning, there is a constant parade of nurses, nurse assistants, doctors, phlebotomists, and I've probably left out a few. You will not be lonely.

The next morning, at 4:00, a nurse rolled in a scale and got me out of bed. I weighed 18 pounds more than I did at home the morning of my surgery. That can't be right! I've had almost nothing to eat. Surely I've lost weight. She brings a different scale an hour later. Plus 16. How can that be? Dr.

Wilcox shows up around 6:30 every morning with at least one of his three PAs. I ask him where the weight came from. "Oh, we poured about 4 gallons of fluids into you during the procedure. It's some of that." Dr. Wilcox and his PAs were totally awesome. I was there a total of 4 days, and sent home to recover. I was doing great. One issue I had was that it was hard to breathe if I laid back too far, so I slept in my recliner. Sort of. If you call it sleep. That was the other problem, I couldn't sleep. I tried every chair we had. I piled cushions on the sofa. Nothing worked.

My childhood friend Neal Hughes had a single bypass with a valve repair the day after my surgery, so we were texting back and forth all the time comparing our experiences and trying to help each other solve problems. It was good having a friend walking the same path, even if we didn't solve any of each other's problems, though I do want to credit Neal with the idea to take Benadryl at night to help me sleep. I went from 1 to 4 hours with that tip.

Soon, I started having difficulty breathing. A call to one of the PAs landed me back in the imaging section. I had a urinary tract infection. Not major, but they wanted to keep me overnight. The breathing problem? My chest was filling with fluid, most likely because I was having atrial fibrillation. When they restarted my heart after the surgery, it only came up to 40 beats per minute so they stopped it and restarted it successfully. However, it was popping into and out of afib. My immediate problem though was fluid in my chest, so I was introduced to a procedure called a thoracentesis. It is a simple thing. I drape myself over a bedside table, and the doctor injects some numbing stuff, and then says "You'll feel a little pinch now." That sounds a little bit like when my Dad used to say "This is going to hurt me more than it hurts you." Then kapow! I was sure he had just fired a speargun into my back. Yowee, I'd never felt anything like that before. Immediately after that, the fluid began to flow into a bucket. Just before it ended, Dr. Friday told me that I could choose to stop there and leave just a little fluid, or drain the last drop, which would send me into uncontrollable coughing for about 15 minutes. The coughing presented a problem. First, it was very painful along the break in my sternum. Second, it endangered the bone structure and incision. For that reason, after the surgery I had been given a bright red heart-shaped pillow to carry with me everywhere, and

hug it tight if I coughed. I had the pillow, and I said “Drain it all.” I never had a chance to thank Dr. Friday. I immediately began coughing uncontrollably. I didn’t time it, but it seemed a lot longer than 15 minutes. I stayed overnight and went home the next day.

A month went by, and except for breathing and sleeping issues, I was doing well. And then the covid-19 pandemic arrived in Nashville. Nobody knew what it was, how to protect ourselves, how to cure it. It was a mystery at that point. Everything had been locked down, and everyone was working from home. That was when I had to go to see one of the PAs in Dr. Wilcox’s office. My feet and ankles were so swollen with fluid from the afib that I had no shoes that fit, and had to wear my slippers. My chest was full of fluid again, so they sent me back to the hospital. But because of the lockdown, when the nurse and I got off the elevator at the fifth floor to enter the hospital, Sandy had to go down to the garage and drive home. She was devastated, and I was none too happy either. I ended up being there 4 days, and Sandy couldn’t even enter the hospital.

Fortunately, my room was on the fifth floor, directly over the hospital entrance. I had a nice view of downtown Nashville, including the capitol building, and all the tall buildings. Unfortunately, except for construction cranes, there was nothing moving. All day and all night, nothing was moving on Church Street, which ran next to the hospital. That’s one of the main drags through the city. I sat by the window at rush hour and watched the traffic light go through its cycles, green, yellow, red, over and over. No cars passed by. I counted the cranes over and over, day and night. Because they were being used, sometimes they were pointed straight at me, so I couldn’t see them. They had lights so I could see them at night. Thirteen. That was the largest number I could see. Today, the growth is so insane, I bet there are 50 or more. Sometimes I watched Guy’s Grocery Games on the Food Network at 3:00 in the morning, or a football game from 10 years ago. It is like some kind of crazy that fills your head when you only sleep an hour or two a day.

I had an IV pumping me up with Torsemide, a diuretic, to try to get rid of some of the fluid. I peed so much that they gave me two jugs to pee in, and sometimes they didn’t empty them fast enough, so I would dump one in the

toilet. Yeah, I lived for counting cranes and peeing in a jug while on my back in bed. Exciting, yes?

On day 2, it was time for another thoracentesis. This time, we were draining both sides. Oh joy! I braced for the speargun on the left. It was much easier. I was carrying on a conversation with Dr. Friday. He had gone to the University of North Carolina, where my cousin John Swofford had been a quarterback, then athletic director, and at that time was commissioner of the Atlantic Coast Conference. The conversation made it all easier. He shot me on the right side next, and it didn't hurt much at all. I asked him about that and he said that the ultrasound showed him the gap between the ribs, but he couldn't see the nerve that ran between them. So it was a crapshoot if it was painless, or a big jolt. No coughing this time. Great!

Back upstairs. Next day, it was time to get my heart back in rhythm. This would be done by a cardioversion. They put me to sleep, ran a scope down my throat to look at my heart to be sure everything was okay, then used the paddles to jolt my heart back into the correct rhythm. Good times, sorry I slept through it.

Back in crane central, I had a day to kill before I went home. I was really bored by this time, so I had to come up with something to occupy the time. I like music. I decided that I would ask every person that came in the room to sing for me. Nurses, assistants, lab techs, doctors, and PAs. Nobody was exempt. Dr. Wilcox was off, and he had a new surgeon right out of med school take his place. She just looked at me like I was from Mars. I wasn't, I was from Nashville. Most just said no, some ignored me. Finally, at 11:35 PM, coming in just under the wire, my night nurse's assistant sang her high school fight song. A winner!

I went home! Sandy and I were both happy to be reunited. Due to covid, the cardio rehab center at Vanderbilt Wilson County was closed, and didn't reopen until early June. I started rehab, and was really doing well. Each day, I weighed in, had a quick EKG, then did 15 minutes each on the treadmill, hand bike, and a seated stair stepper. I was doing great and advancing in how fast I could go.

One more lung filling with fluid. Will it ever end? This time, I go in on a Friday. I was going to make a joke with Dr. Friday, since the other two times were on other days of the week, but alas, this time I had a different doctor. As always, when he was ready to spear me, he said “A little pinch now”. A few seconds later, I told him to go ahead. He told me to look at the bucket, which was filling with the usual partly clear, partly red liquid. Wow! That one totally missed the nerve. With that, he walked out the door, and a few minutes later, so did I.

After the surgery, Sandy found a big lump in my leg. The surgeon’s PA thought it was no big deal, as did my cardiologist. Then one day I woke up, and the lump was fire engine red! I went to rehab, and the nurse sent me home, with instructions to go to a clinic or ER and get it looked at. This lump was on my right leg, on my inner thigh. The diagnosis was that “it”, whatever it was, was infected, and antibiotics were prescribed. By the time I got home, the lump erupted. Definitely infected. The drugs seemed to help, but 3 days later, I woke up and my entire leg was red. Not good! ER time, at our nearby Summit Hospital ER. They wanted to admit me, and since this was a small thing, we went ahead and went into Summit. That was my first ambulance ride. I was there for a week. Poked, prodded, blood drawn until there just weren’t any good veins left. I had ultrasounds and fluid drawn from the thing. At the end of a week, they couldn’t decide if it was a hematoma, a cyst, or an infection. So they sent me home with antibiotics.

While sitting at home, hoping it gets better, our cleaning lady, Linda Flint, who has been helping us for many years and is more family than hired help, came to clean. She was also working part time at a dermatologist’s office. She walked in, took one look at my leg, and said “Go see your dermatologist. We see stuff like this all the time.” So I did. He walked in the room, looked at my legs, and asked when my heart surgery had been. Then he said the lump had come from my lymphatic system freaking out when they took the vein out in that leg, and would be easy to fix. He prescribed a warm bath for 10 minutes every day, and add a quarter cup of bleach to the water. Sounds crazy, but I did it. The lump shrunk in size by half with the first bath. I went back to him a month later and he told me to do it another 2 weeks and I was done. I did it, and it went away forever.

By November, I had completed cardio rehab, and my heart surgery was finally behind me. Woo hoo!!!

## Round Four

I was doing really well in early 2021. Recovery from the heart surgery was pretty much complete. We had avoided getting covid-19 up to that point. We anxiously awaited our turn to receive the new vaccine. In early March, I got the Pfizer vaccine first shot at Vanderbilt University Medical Center. About that time, I started having headaches. Not terrible, but persistent. And if I coughed, it felt like the top of my head had exploded. Then 3 weeks later, I got the second shot. The severity of the headaches increased dramatically. Sandy needed to visit her Mom in Johnson City, so I went with her. By then, the headaches kept me from sleeping at night. I was miserable. We drove home on Easter Sunday. That night, at 4 AM, I was still awake, and I woke Sandy up and told her it was time to go to the ER.

As it turned out, that might have saved my life. The ER did a CT scan of my head and quickly determined that I had a brain bleed. I had never heard of that before, but since then, I have heard of a number of others who had them. Most did not survive. I told them to please send me to St. Thomas Midtown, and I was soon whisked away on my second ambulance ride. They took me directly to the Neurological ICU, where I received the most incredibly great care I could imagine.

My blood pressure had gone through the roof. They call it the silent killer, and I can see why now. I never felt it. They started me on powerful blood pressure medications. The nurse was getting ready to give me an injection. I asked her what it was. "Hydralazine". In college, I had to take a class on rocket propulsion. One of the fuels used is called Hydrazine. Yep, you guessed it. In my somewhat fuzzy brain, I thought she was about to shoot me up with rocket fuel. "No way! If you put that Hydrazine in me, it will react with the oxygen in my blood and I'll burn to a crisp!" "This is Hydralazine, not Hydrazine. It's safe." "Oh. Well, in that case, go ahead."

The nurses were great. After I had been there a few days, I had one on each shift that signed up to take care of me, except on their days off, of course. I had Erin during the day, and Miji at night. They both were blessings! In addition, Sandy met a chaplain, named Jess, that visited with me frequently. She too was a blessing, praying with me during each visit.

Here is an observation for you. Do you know why it is called ICU? The wall and door are glass. If you are on the outside, I see you! The ICU was a square, with rooms around the outside, and the nurses' station in the middle. TV was just not interesting to me, so I never turned it on, preferring instead to sleep, think, or watch people go by. One day, a somewhat heavy black woman in scrubs was walking around the square, looking like someone taking a shortcut on her way home from work. She wasn't looking in the rooms as she passed them, until she got to mine. I smiled and said hi as she passed. She did the same. Then a couple minutes later, she came back and stood in the doorway. "I prayed for you", she said. "Thank you so much", from me. And then she stood there and prayed a beautiful prayer before she left. She never came through ICU again while I was there. Did you read the book "The Shack"? I am pretty sure that I met Papa that day.

I remember none of this. Sandy tells me that one day, I was asleep and Erin came in with pills for me. They gently tried to wake me up. No luck. So they got a little more aggressive. Then they were yelling at me, and slapping my face. Every now and then I would come around a little bit, say "Why are y'all yelling at me?", and then my eyes would roll back in my head and I was gone. They gave up. It turns out they were giving me a drug to prevent seizures, and the dosage was too high. They cut it back and that problem was gone.

I was constantly being asked what my pain level was. Initially, I told them "8, and on my scale, 10 is when you pour gasoline on me and set me on fire." In other words, it hurts a LOT. But if I can still form thoughts and speak them, it isn't a 10. They gave me pain medications. That brought it down to a 4. Sandy figured out that they were thinking that was manageable, no surgery needed. Not good.

I had so many doctors, from various disciplines that I couldn't keep up with them all. So I just answered their questions and when they were happy, they left. The neurosurgeon, Dr. LeBow, was a problem. I wanted him to just do the surgery and get it over with. Not yet. I couldn't get an answer as to why. They kept me in ICU for 10 days, and when my blood pressure stabilized at a safe level, I was moved to a regular room. After 4 days there, Dr. LeBow was going to send me home. My incredible wife went into action. First, she found the chairman of the board of the hospital, and called him. She asked him to exert pressure from above. Then she had a conversation with Dr. LeBow's PA. She asked her if Dr. LeBow would send his wife home in my condition. Message received. I had surgery at 3 that afternoon.

All of a sudden I opened my eyes, and there was dim lighting around me. A nurse told me that I was in recovery and doing fine. I knew I had had brain surgery, but unlike previous surgeries where I remember everything up to the time I went out, I didn't remember a thing for a day or two before that. I still don't. I just lay there thinking this time was different. I didn't know if I could make it through something like that again. My brain had no place else to go, so I began saying God's name over and over, out loud. I AM, I AM, I AM, for hours I guess. They had a shift change, and finally took me up to ICU again. Due to shift change, they had forgotten to call Sandy, who had been waiting for hours. Miji went and brought her back. I was pretty agitated for the rest of the night. I kept saying God's name over and over. Every so often, I'd stop and ask Sandy to text a friend and ask them to repeat God's name with me. First my prayer warrior friend Ken Harrell, then Allison Ward, friend and minister, and finally my friend Neal Hughes. By the time I got to Neal, it was after midnight. I had no concept of time that day, since my mind started its day sometime in late afternoon. I was so wired up, Sandy asked them to give me something to calm me down. It worked, and I fell asleep. She went home at 2 AM, after a very long, difficult day.

No headache! That was the first thing I noticed the next morning. Then I checked out my head. They had removed the tape wrapping it. The first thing I noticed was all my hair was gone. When Dr. LeBow paid me a visit, he laughed when he said the crewcut was for Sandy. At first he had just cut off what he needed in front, but it looked so bad, he cut it all. Next, I

noticed the two drain tubes sticking up out of my head. My first thought was of My Favorite Martian, a TV show from the 60s. I laughed too!

From the time I arrived until I went home, every morning, at about 5:00, Miji would bring another nurse and roll me down to the CT scanner on the second floor. Then they would lift me over to the scanner bed, where my head was scanned. Then back to the bed and a ride back home in ICU. When they were sure I was okay, they moved me to a regular room for a couple days before I got to go home. I really missed Erin and Miji!

The last thing they did was remove the drain tubes. The PA did it. She said that when she pulled the tube out, she had to immediately put staples in, to keep air from getting inside my skull. I told her that whatever she did, don't send me home as an airhead! The tubes came out easily, and then it was time for the staples. She said I would feel a little sting. After 4 staples were put in my head, she asked how it felt. "Bee sting", I said. "What kind of bee?" "Hornet!" Well, all righty then. I had a total of 24 staples in my head, and 4 holes. Two of them had man hole covers under the skin, held on with titanium screws. So now, if someone says I have a screw loose, I'll have to check and get back to them.

I got to go home after two and a half weeks, mostly in the ICU. On the way home we stopped at a nearby medical supply store and picked up a walker. As it turned out much more than just my brain was affected. I had to go to physical therapy just to gain enough strength to get up out of a chair and walk.

The first night at home, I learned about another effect. Sandy and I were talking to our friends Carl and Charlotte Soderquist on speaker phone. I was in a chair holding the phone between us, and Sandy was on the couch. We talked for a while and I handed her the phone. In about 5 seconds I was asleep. The next day, our next door neighbor, Jim Horner, came over to chat. We talked maybe a half hour, and with no warning, I dropped off to sleep. Sandy apologized for me. I was totally out. Even months later, on Christmas Eve we went to breakfast at Cracker Barrel with neighbors, Dave and Nancy Hodny. Every seat in the house was filled, and they were all talking. Normally, we just ignore the rest and home in on the important

conversation. But in those early days, even 8 months later, my brain was trying to listen to everything before deciding what to filter out. It was exhausting to be in a crowd. I exited the restaurant early, and it took me two days to feel normal. That got better with time, but even now, I get tired when around a crowd of people talking.

They sent me home with prescriptions for a bucket full of drugs, most for blood pressure. Of course, since the brain bleed was fixed, I didn't need most of it. But which drugs should be eliminated? Which continue with lower doses? Which should stay the same? Here is where it pays to have the best cardiologist's nurse practitioner on the planet, Amy Ervin. For about 4 months after I got home, we saw Amy every 2 weeks, and she called me every week, as we reduced the dosage one pill at a time to find the proper dosage for all. I never took my blood pressure so many times! But it worked, and we found the right combination for morning, noon, and night.

In October of that year, I let my pulmonologist's recommendation to get the covid-19 booster override my better judgment. At that point I was doing well recovering. I hadn't had a single headache since the surgery. Within a week, the headaches were back. That was when I began to suspect that the vaccine was the cause, either directly or indirectly, of both the headaches and brain bleed. I have no desire to bear the expense of the testing that would be required to prove or disprove my theory. But thanks to my friend Bill Moody, I have a ton of information to help me understand the details. Finally, two years after the booster, the top of my head has quit reacting when I cough, and the headaches are GONE!

Physically, all this triggered a case of spinal stenosis, which required physical therapy to get past. Now, I still have limits on how much I can walk, or sit in an uncomfortable chair. I closed my business and retired because I couldn't sit in my desk chair long enough to do much work, and my concentration level is much lower. And besides, I'm 69, so I guess it was time anyway.

Okay Father, I'm ready for your next "One More Thing."

Alright Van, since you asked for it, here ya go....

## Photos



Proof of Life! Trust me, I'm really smiling. Honest!

# Be Bold!

*"On the day I called, You answered me; You made me bold with strength in my soul." - Psalms 138:3*

## **In the year 2024**

I was doing pretty well, getting stronger every day, and then 2024 happened. I thought 2021 was tough, with the brain bleed, but that was easy compared to 2024. Let's have a look.

## **What the heck is a Watchman?**

The first time I heard of a Watchman, I thought it must be a Sony portable video player. I was only off by about everything. It turns out to be a tiny little umbrella, smaller than the ones in your drink at the beach. My electro physiologist, or electrician, wanted to put one of them in my heart. IN MY HEART. Did you notice that "in" part? Yeah, me too. Our hearts have this little pocket up in the left atrium that has a tendency to generate blood clots that break loose and travel to our brains, causing strokes. The Watchman is inserted through a vein in your leg, and is guided all the way into the heart, and into the pocket. At that point, if everything is perfect, the umbrella is opened and disconnected from the insertion wire. In time, the heart grows around the Watchman, and completely closes off the pocket. Such a deal!

I was scheduled to have a Watchman installed inside my heart in January 2024, but had to reschedule for a month later because we had 8 inches of snow, and all elective procedures were canceled at the last minute.

Coming up on go time, 2 days ahead, Sandy had the worst headache she has ever had, and it didn't go away, even after sleeping all night. Next morning, day before my procedure, she said the magic words, "Let's go", and we were at our local ER in 5 minutes. They have been very good to us, accurately diagnosing everything from a severe cut to a brain bleed. The first thing they did was to take a swab of her nose. Fifteen minutes later, the results were in. Sandy had covid-19. We had both avoided that for 4 years while taking no precautions, other than the original vaccine.

Back at home, I got on the phone, rescheduling things. I took care of Sandy all day, and slept in my recliner that night. When dawn broke the next morning I had some news for her. I had it too.

Neither of us had a bad case. It was like a moderate case of the flu. A lot of coughing, some sinus drainage, fever, and loss of taste for most things. We could both taste dill pickle slices on a burger, but nothing else. Fries and ketchup, dry and wet respectively. This part was to be one of the last symptoms to clear up.

A month later, it was time to go once more, and everything was good, so off we went to St. Thomas. My show time was 7:30, with the procedure at 9:30. They were not super busy, so all the prep work went really fast. Ken Harrell came to sit with Sandy while I was otherwise occupied.

One of the nurses was looking at my chart and noticed all the stuff you just read about. She asked me how I could be so cheerful after all I had been through. Well, she asked the right guy! The answer is simple. When I was young, I was taught to lay my burdens at Jesus' feet. And so I did. But like most humans, right after I said amen, I picked them back up and held them tight as I walked away. But now I'm older and more mature in my faith. After I say amen, I walk away with empty hands, my trust completely in God to deal with the burdens.

In no time, I was in the OR and on the table. My nurse anesthetist said he was going to give me a little sedative. Instantly, my arms and legs were like

rubber. “Larry, you gave me a roofie.” “Yes I did.” “Goodnight everybody.” Short conversation, that one.

I woke up back in the prep area, and was soon joined by Sandy and Ken. We had a good time chatting, and the time passed pretty quickly. I had to lay flat and keep my right leg still for almost 4 hours, to make sure the vein didn't spring a leak. No problem! Home we went.

Other than the result of my spinal stenosis flaring up for a few days because I had to lie flat for so long, recovery was pretty mild.

Now, I am either the Bionic Man or Fred Sanford, king of the junkyard. Whether junk or treasure, my body is heading for that six million dollar expense.

Now, what's the next, next thing?

Well, that didn't take long. Within a month, I needed a heart catheterization. Dr. Fleet did the job and found that one of my 5 grafted bypasses was clogged with calcium. A stent could be put in, but not that day. Ten days later, I was in the cath lab again. The procedure took over 2 hours. Dr. Whitfield, Dr. Fleet's partner did the work. He used something called a ShockWave to break up the blockage, and balloon angioplasty to clean out the debris. Everything went well, but it was complicated, so it took a long time. He put in two stents. I stayed overnight to be sure the artery in my leg didn't open up again. It didn't, and I was home in time for lunch.

## **Tidying Up Loose Ends**

After the stents, I was sent back to cardiac rehab for another 36 sessions, 3 a week for 3 months. Joan and Lindsey welcomed me back as a repeat offender. I'm still pedaling, getting stronger each week.

All the shock to my lymphatic system has resulted in a strong case of lymphedema, so everything below my knee is severely swollen. And in a surprise move, all of a sudden, I started retaining fluids all over, gaining 20

pounds in just a few weeks. A big increase in my diuretic has resulted in the excess leaving in the usual way, many trips a day to the bathroom. But I'll take it, because my chest was filling with fluid, and I was having a hard time breathing. Trade one misery for another...

And now let's add insult to injury. My blood test showed that I am anemic. So, now I see a hematologist at Tennessee Oncology. I'm low on iron, and have had 3 infusions of iron. Now, whatever I eat tastes like I am licking a railroad track. Don't ask me how I know that! I had a great young nurse named Logan for all 3 infusions, so the 3 hour sessions all passed without problems. We like that! When I first saw the doctor, out of nowhere he asked me if I had been craving ice. I hadn't crunched any ice for probably 50 years. Until about a month before that, when inexplicably I started eating the ice out of every drink I drank. Our fridge couldn't keep up with making ice for Sandy and me. And I was afraid of breaking a tooth, so just a few days before he asked me that question, I bought a little ice maker that produces small soft ice nuggets.

## **Like a Roomba, Stuck in a corner**

The swelling became extreme in the summer. I was doing cardiac rehab, with Joan and Lindsay at Vanderbilt Wilson County Hospital. Joan was very strict about watching for signs of trouble, and when my weight quickly rose by more than 10 pounds, that warranted a call to my cardiologist. He passed me on to a heart failure doctor, and this is where the fun begins.

He put me on a strict low sodium diet, and restricted my liquid intake. This was hard to achieve as an overnight big lifestyle change, but we were getting it done most days. It helps to have an app on my phone with a food database that can manage the numbers. Any time I picked up any weight, my diuretic was increased, a couple times beyond the "max dosage" for a few days. The swelling began to recede and I lost about 20 pounds.

Then the phone rang. My hematologist told me that my kidney function had changed rapidly, for the worse, and I should drink more, or risk renal failure.

In the meantime, my blood pressure had dropped to dangerously low numbers, like 99/45 for example. I went back to my cardiologist, and he adjusted my BP meds, which brought my BP back up to a low, but reasonable level. And then two days before Thanksgiving, I stood up, was somewhat disoriented, took a few steps, and fell over backwards. Like a redwood tree, I went down and landed on my right shoulder blade. Didn't hit my head, thanks to all my spine being fused together, and no apparent damage. Sandy called the fire department and a couple guys came and helped me up. Okay, one time event. Let's forget it and move on.

Two days later and it was Thanksgiving. I was walking to the table for dinner, and the exact same thing happened, only this time I landed on my left shoulder blade. Another visit from firemen brought the event to a conclusion. Now it is obvious something serious is going on.

By Sunday, Sandy was insisting that I go to the ER, and we should get EMS to come to the house and get me. I didn't have the mojo to argue, so that's what we did. The ER decided that I needed to be admitted, so after six hours there, I was on my way for a second ambulance ride, to St. Thomas Midtown.

## **Hmm... I've been here before**

First labs showed I was in renal failure. Great. But I was in good spirits and didn't feel too bad. I was able to get up and move about the room on my own. As usual, I made friends with the nurses and techs. On the third day, one of the nurses, Sarah, spent her entire shift trying to get answers to what was going on. And then on the fourth day, everything changed. I was restricted to the bed, which was the beginning of a very bad day.

I don't know what changed medically, but I was rushed down to the ICU, and a bunch of people went to work on me. For some reason unknown to me, I began to fight against them. They put a full oxygen mask on me and I ripped it off probably a dozen times. I don't even know after the fact what else they were doing. The only person I recognized was my pulmonologist

standing by the door. It was comforting to see someone I knew and trusted amidst the chaos, but he had a shocked look on his face, and I didn't know if it was because of my behavior, or what they were doing to me. At any rate, that is all I remember from that day.

During the night, I ripped the mask off several times, and each time, the nurse was there almost immediately to put it back. Sometimes, I was quite belligerent and it was a struggle to put it back on me. I have no idea why, that is just not my nature. This went on for three nights, and finally I was rewarded with a switch to a nasal cannula. Yay!!!

## **Don't eat it!**

The food was on the strict low sodium diet, in other words, dry cardboard, with meat and vegetables that didn't even smell good. Many trays I rejected after one look, or smell. Some had a little fruit that I ate. Basically, though, I wasn't eating anything for two weeks. Sandy brought a few bananas, and I ate one every day. Finally, near the end of my stay, I got a visit from a nutritionist asking about what I would eat. We developed a good relationship, and made several iterations until I was eating most of the meals. In the end, I arrived home weighing about 25 pounds less.

## **What's the big idea?**

I woke up the morning after the big whatever it was, feeling pretty good and mostly back to my usual good spirits. Sandy slept on a couch in the ICU for 5 nights, so she was there when I woke up early in the morning. I couldn't talk with the mask on. How to wake her up? I started clapping! That did the trick. I asked her if it was Thursday. No darling, it is Saturday. That can't be! But it was. She asked if I wanted my friend Ken Harrell to visit. Yes!! We had a great time. In all, Ken visited with me 4 times, and brought his guitar and sang some of my favorite songs. After each visit, I felt a significant improvement, both physically and mentally.

One day in the ICU, I reached a point where I was no longer looking at the nurses as adversaries and went back to making friends. At the same time, I realized that there were literally hundreds of people praying for me. The hardest part was behind me, so I thought I should let them know that they could stop. And then that voice deep within, perhaps the Holy Spirit, said no. Never tell anyone to stop praying. Give them someone else to pray for! But how? BE BOLD! I didn't know what I was doing, or where this was going, but I had some bold in me, and I wasn't going to waste it.

My nurse that day was Caroline. Young, skilled and able to solve problems as they came up, and very kind. In a word, exceptional. At the end of her shift, I asked if we could talk. I told her what I saw in her, and told her what I was up to. I asked if I could pray for her, and afterward, I asked if she would be bold with me. She said yes, so I asked her to come back the next day and bring another nurse with her. Unfortunately, I was moved back to a regular room the next day. I can only hope that the seed I planted with her will grow.

In my new digs, I began asking my nurses and techs at the end of their shifts, how I could be praying for them. After a couple days, it became easier to be bold. Eventually, nurses were stopping by my room at the end of their shifts, and a young woman who was doing housekeeping asked Sandy and me for marital advice. We made sure our answers included Jesus, of course. Then I had to be bold again, and send the nurses' prayer requests to my network of prayer warriors. I hope the nurses and techs at the hospital will be blessed by all the prayers.

## **When all else fails, test everything**

It started with blood draws. Lots of them. As it turns out, I am what is known as a "hard stick". My veins, when you can find one, are deep and elusive. Many nurses tried to hit a vein, and most called the phlebotomists to come and find a vein the old fashioned way, with an ultrasound. By the time I left the hospital, my hands and arms were mostly purple. That's my favorite color, but I'd rather wear it than be it.

Then there was a CT scan to make sure I didn't get a brain bleed from the two falls. No big deal.

While in the ICU, they sent me down for an echocardiogram. Normally this would be no problem, but breathing was so difficult, I kept asking if we were almost done. An eternity later, it was over.

They wanted to do a heart cath to see if I had a heart attack during the day of chaos, but my kidneys hadn't recovered enough for the dye they use. So, step one was to be an MRI to see my heart in detail, and then do a heart cath later when my kidneys were better. It took two days to get me into the MRI. Then the fun began.

This was unlike any MRI I had seen before. The platform I lay on was on wheels, and I was loaded outside the room with the machine. The camera was laid on my chest, like the lead protector when the dentist takes x-rays of your teeth. Into the machine I went. I am not claustrophobic, so it doesn't bother me to be in such a small space. The test included many segments where I had to blow out the air in my lungs and stop breathing for a period of time. It is much easier to hold your breath with full lungs than with empty! The test went on forever! Then half way through, I was injected with the stuff that rapidly raises your heart rate, and for a couple minutes, testing continued while I gasped for air, and then I was injected with the stuff that counteracts the first injection. A few minutes later, they injected dye and continued. When it was finally over, I had been in the machine for over 2 hours. The operator asked if I had any questions. "Just one. Was that a scientific test, or a psychological test?" The answer left my question hanging, so I assume it was at least partially psychological. To what end? I dunno.

## **Hurry up and wait**

The day after the MRI, the doctor gave me the results, nothing indicating heart damage, so I could go home. Except Sandy and I had agreed that I would stay for a few days in rehab, since she was having orthopedic problems and was unable to help me when I got home. That was on a

Friday. Now just wait on insurance to approve the rehab and we're good to go. The following Wednesday, as I continued to twiddle my thumbs, Sandy decided it was time to poke the bear, and called my insurance company. They looked, and had no record of the request for rehab. She called our patient advocate and closed the loop. Next morning, we were told that insurance did not approve rehab, but did approve a skilled nursing facility. And by the end of the day, I was checking into the facility in Lebanon. Once again, Sandy as patient advocate gets results!

## **Life at “the home”**

After checking in, I arrived at my room, and met my roommate, Billy. He looked to be in his late 70s or early 80s. I was unable to communicate with him, because he was nearly deaf and not very interactive, so I let it go after hello. Billy never left his bed or had a visitor in the five days I was there. Just a parade of staff through the day and night to change his briefs. At random times, day or night, Billy would break out into song, very loud, and with gusto, until he reached the end of the words he remembered, when he would trail off and mumble a bit before giving up on it. It was an interesting few days!

My purpose in being there was physical therapy and occupational therapy. Unfortunately, that meant a 30 minute session, or less, of each every day. Can you say “impatience”? Yes, I was impatient. I had waited, in bed, for almost a week just to get approved for this, and now I’m lying in bed 23 hours a day, waiting for an hour of therapy.

The therapy was easy, and I progressed rapidly. I could do everything they threw at me, and more. At one point, a therapist asked me why I was there, and I told her I was beginning to ask the same question.

Finally, everybody was brought into agreement, and I was released to go home on Christmas Eve. Sandy and I were so exhausted from 3 weeks of this ordeal that Christmas came and went with little fanfare. And life goes on.

But wait, there's more. My primary care physician wanted me to come in for a visit a couple days after I got home. She had blood drawn for labs. At the end of the day, my phone rang. It was one of the other doctors in the practice. My potassium level was so high that it was a tenth of a point below the point where they would put me back in the hospital to get my potassium level back down. So, how did it get that high? Well, it might have something to do with all the potassium pills I was given in the hospital, to replace the potassium I lost because of the diuretic I was on. Go figure. A week later, potassium was down almost halfway to normal. Nice way to start the new year!

## **The Big Grin**

The two months following my hospital stay were hectic. I was seeing my cardiologist and heart failure doctor, once a week for a while. My lab work would show extremely high potassium one week, and very low the next. We changed medications so fast that the pharmacy was filling stuff that had just been prescribed a month ago, but was already replaced by something else. Then we finally found the right balance of drugs and lifestyle. The numbers settled down. I found that I felt as good as I did before all this started five years ago with the bypass surgery.

And then, the day after my birthday, the one where I turned 70 years old, I had an echocardiogram. Immediately after it, I went down the hall to Dr. Deshazo's office, my heart failure doctor. We had to wait a while, so that he could read the data. Sandy and I were expecting to hear that my heart was deteriorating further, and wondered what life changing restrictions we would have next. After about thirty minutes, Dr. Deshazo knocked on the door and came in. He looked like someone had just told him a really good joke, grinning from ear to ear. I was a bit confused until he spoke.

"Your heart is.....normal. I don't need to see you again for six months." Holy guacamole! It seemed unbelievable. Two months before, I was laid up in the hospital for almost a month because my heart's lower chambers were stiff, and not pumping anywhere near what they should have. And now, normal. NORMAL!!!!

How could that happen? In our opinion, only one way. Prayer! And lots of it. I had friends praying, my friends had friends praying, and when you added them all up, there were hundreds. It may seem unreal, but it all comes down to this: God hears prayers. God answers prayers. For many years, my favorite bible verse has been Jeremiah 33:3, "Call to Me and I will answer you..." How powerful are those words? God, the CEO of the universe, is giving us His cell phone number, and telling us that He will answer our call, anytime day or night. Wow! Time and time again, God has made good on this promise, but never so powerfully as this time.

And now, I'm the one grinning from ear to ear!

BTW, February 26, 2025 would have been my Mom's 100<sup>th</sup> birthday.

## **Photos**



I surrender. I'll wear the #\*\$%&% mask.

# The Hospital Train

***“Be still, and know that I am God...” - Psalms  
46:10***

## **Let's Go on Vacation!**

It's mid-2025, my health issues are under control, or at least visibly stable, and we are way past due for a vacation. At the same time, we have wanted to get together with Jim and Allison Ward for a long time. Here's an idea - let's go somewhere with the Wards! But where? Sandy had a bucket list place, Mount Rushmore. Okay, all in agreement, select a date, September 2. And so it was. Jim & Allison flew into Rapid City, and Sandy and I drove. We were planning to be the wheels, and drop Jim & Allison off in Indiana on our way home. And in-between we would have a week together having a good time.

As we were making our way up to Rapid City, my phone rang. Heart electrician, not a good sign. My pacemaker had called them to report that my heart was operating in afib. Very bad. But when I told the nurse we were on vacation to South Dakota, she just told me to call if I needed anything, so I figured it would be okay to keep going. I've been retired for a while now, and I guess my figuring skills have a little rust on them.

On the evening of the second, we arrived on schedule, and met the Wards in the hotel lobby. We made plans for the next day, to ride the 1880s train from Hill City to Keystone and back, and then drive up to Keystone and spend the afternoon doing the tourist thing.

## **Best Laid Plans**

The morning of September third dawned. We went down to the dining room and had a nice breakfast, then off we went for a delightful ride on the 1880s excursion train. It was a wonderful morning. We arrived back in Hill City around noon, and sat under the roof at the train depot and ate the lunch that Sandy and Allison brought. All the while, it got more and more difficult for me to walk the hundred yards or so to the men's room. Next, we were going to drive to Keystone, where we would have plenty of time to explore. I asked if they would mind taking me back to the hotel, because I wasn't feeling well. Nope! There has to be a hospital around here somewhere. I was outvoted 3 to 1. Off to the ER we went. I don't even remember going inside. My next memory is waking up in the ICU around September 10, a week later. But I did vaguely recall one of the nurses. Where from? I don't know, but all I knew was his name, Thaddeus.

## **Awake! And Very Puzzled**

I'm awake and taking stock of myself and my surroundings. I'm in a hospital room, and while I can't see out the window behind me, I knew I was on a train. A hospital train! There is a pipe going into my mouth and down my throat. Not really comfortable, but necessary, I suppose. And my hands are restrained by my sides. Communication is kind of difficult. Obviously, I can't talk, and I also can't write or even point at things. Heck, even scratching my nose is impossible. At least, at first. One of the nurses and I (and Sandy, too) connected. Somehow, she knew I wasn't a rule breaker, but I'd bend a rule just a little if it got the job done. She figured out 1 thing right away. I wasn't going to reach up and yank the tube out if my hands were free for a minute. So she gave me a long popsicle stick, and I laid it within reach on the table by my bed. If I held it by the end, I had just enough slack in the restraints that I could reach up and scratch my nose with the other end. Progress. In general, though, communication was very difficult, so lots of questions went unasked, like, if I'm on a hospital train, how come I never felt it move? And if it was mobile, did Sandy and Jim and Allison have to get new hotel rooms every night to follow the train?

Curious, but not so curious that I was going to expend energy to try and communicate these questions and others to the three of them.

Finally, the day came when I got the tube out and went on a full oxygen mask. The respiratory therapist gave me brief instructions. Makes sense. Don't give me time to think about it. Take a deep breath, and when I pull it out, cough your head off. That was the gist of it. Maybe that was all of it. She grabbed that pipe with two hands and pulled, and it felt like you were pulling a live snake out of my throat. I don't know what that stuff was that came up, but I'm pretty sure it didn't originate on this planet! I couldn't get it out of my mouth, and bam, there was the full oxygen mask glued to my face. Good news on two fronts. The restraints came off and I could do anything I wanted to do with my hands. I pointed at things a lot, tried writing in a little notebook that Sandy bought, but you couldn't read my writing it was so bad, and I didn't have my glasses on, so I was essentially blind as a bat. Then she came up with notebook 2.0, a page with all the letters of the alphabet on it. I could spell out anything just by pointing to the correct letters in sequence. Progress!

I figured my questions about the hospital train might be taken as a little goofy, and I didn't want to live in the old folks home for the demented. I asked Jim Ward while everyone else was out of the room. "Jim, how come the hospital train doesn't seem to be moving?" "And where do y'all go after you leave me, do you have to get another hotel room down the line?" My friend Jim and I have been through more adventures together than seems reasonable. He'll give me the straight scoop. "Van, what is a hospital train?", he asks while looking at me like I just dropped in from Mars. I explained as best I could under the circumstances. Again, "There is no train. You are in a regular hospital, in the ICU on the fifth floor." Wow! Let that soak in for a minute. I thought I'd been riding around all over the West, on a train that didn't exist. Where are Jim West and Artemus Gordon when you need them? Mystery solved, I'd say that's progress of a sort.

**Breathe in, Breathe out**

Once I was on the full oxygen mask, the deal was this. The oxygen percentage would be slowly decreased throughout the day shift. Then, when the day shift started the next day, if the data collected through the night indicated that I was breathing well, the full mask would be replaced with a nasal cannula. In the early afternoon, Sandy noticed that my breathing was not rhythmic, and I wasn't getting a good lungful of air. So she pulled a chair over and sat with one hand over my heart, and then we locked eyes. In perfect rhythm, she began, "Breathe in, breathe out". Over and over and over. For hours. By the time she left for the night, if I focussed on breathing, I could maintain the rhythm. Sandy saved me!

All through the night, I prayed, and I concentrated on breathing. I occupied my mind by examining the ceiling in minute detail. By morning I could tell you how many times in a minute the light on the smoke detector flashed, 20, with a double flash every minute; which lights had dead bugs in them; and more, like how many breaths it took to get to the morning shift change, 10,800. The one thing I did not do, was drift off to sleep. Shift change! The respiratory therapist swooped in, took a cursory look at the data, and removed the mask. Wow!! Nice! By the time Sandy arrived, I had been using the nasal cannula for about an hour. No issues. And I could talk, too. What a great day, and what a great God we have as our Father!

One day on the cannula, and I was on my way to a regular room. It was a room built for two beds, but it was just me, so it was like having a suite. Cool! Once again, the nurses and other staff were nothing short of exceptional. Good progress, very good!

## **Still Bold**

And speaking of nurses and other staff, as soon as I was able to communicate, I began to ask everyone who came in the room how I could be praying for them, and passing those prayer requests to my awesome network of prayer warriors. What a diverse group of people, and prayer needs. I thought it was interesting when someone would tell me "Oh, nothing, I'm good." It didn't take more than a minute of conversation to discern at least 2 or 3 prayer needs. I'm beginning to get a little better at

being bold! But to be honest, I would rather not get all my practice in the hospital.

There were several pregnant ladies, including one that was expecting twins, and several trying to balance a full time job with school, including a phlebotomist that was in graduate school for bio engineering. All prayed up!

## **Sometimes You Just Have To Put On A Little Show**

Between the insurance company and the administration, 4 or 5 days went by while trying to get me into their rehab program. Insurance denied the claim, so we were going to have to pay for it ourselves. But after 2 days, they still couldn't figure out exactly how much that would cost, and how many days I would need to be in rehab. I wanted to come home in a really bad way.

Sandy and I were working the network to try and find a general aviation means of getting home, anything from a Cessna 210 to a corporate jet. Despite working in the corporate aviation industry for 40 years, I wasn't able to find anybody we could hitch a ride with. Sandy talked to lots of charter operators, costing anywhere from about \$12,000 to \$32,000 for the flight home. The upper end of that was for a medically equipped jet with a nurse included. I was getting frustrated with the process!

One morning, I'd had enough of the uncertainty. When PT arrived expecting to get me out of bed, and maybe walk 10 or 15 feet to a chair in the room, I told them to open the door to the room. And out I went, shuffling along pushing my standard issue walker, with a PT person trailing behind, pushing a chair on wheels just in case. I kept going, all the way around the nurse's station, and back into my room, around 100 feet in total. Only then did I take them up on the offer of the chair. I was still sitting in the chair when John, our patient advocate, came rushing in. "This changes everything!", he said. What might that be, says I. He had met the PT people in the hallway, and they gave him their report for the morning visit. "If you can do that again tomorrow, and add some to it, you can probably be

released. How did you make such a big improvement in one day?" My answer to that was "Sometimes you just have to put on a little show." The next day's show took me down the hall and around a different nurse's station, then back up and around our nurse's station, maybe 200 to 250 feet. Good enough! The next morning, I was on my way to our hotel. Fifteen days, half of which I have absolutely no recollection of. Nice vacation! And I didn't even get to see Mount Rushmore. It will have to wait until another lifetime. Been there, done, well, not THAT, that's for sure. I will have to say, if you are going to get laid up in a hospital while on vacation, Monument Health in Rapid City, SD is a great choice! But once is enough for me.

## **The Long and Winding Concourse**

Since I was given the okay to fly home, but not to sit for 3 days of driving, we had to do a little shuffle. Jim and Allison drove our car to Indiana, and later drove it to Mount Juliet so that it was in the garage when we got home.

We got tickets on Delta for the flight home. First class, just so I could board first and drop into a seat in the first row and ride. That worked out pretty well. The part that didn't work out so well was that our first leg from Rapid City to Minneapolis was over two hours late, which meant that we would miss the flight to Nashville.

We got off the plane in Minneapolis, and the wheel chair was there for me, as planned. However, the walker that we checked at the gate wasn't on the airplane. So I was on my own walking into the restroom, looking like a drunken sailor, grasping at anything sticking out for balance. Not cool!

As it turned out, the flight to Nashville was also more than two hours late, so we were able to complete the trip. Yay! The bad news was, the gate for that one was a train ride plus about a mile long concourse away. My wheel chair driver was fast. The only way Sandy could keep up with us was she took the moving sidewalk segments that we couldn't. She got there when we did, but it was a real workout.

We got to Nashville after midnight. They had also set up a wheel chair for Sandy. In the big empty terminal at that hour, what would be more natural than a wheel chair race! We made it to baggage claim in a flash, laughing all the way. That was a good way to end the trip. Our wonderful neighbors, Amy and Myron Johnson, picked us up, and we were home by 1:30 AM.

It definitely wasn't the vacation we had planned, but it still had its moments. I vote for a stay-cation next time. Maybe I can dig out an old Viewmaster (remember those?), and see our destination in 3-D right in our own living room. Yep, that sounds about right.

## Photos



Arriving in the great state of South Dakota on September 1, 2025.



Yet another ICU photo. Awake, but not aware.

# Life Lesson - It's the Journey, Silly

***“And behold, two of them were going that very day to a village named Emmaus, which was about seven miles from Jerusalem” - Luke 24:13***

I spent way too many years at my first job, school. It wasn't enough to call it quits after 12, so I went for the bonus package of 5 years of engineering school. You know, on the whole I enjoyed all 17 years, and I put my heart and soul into it.

And then the worst day of my life happened. On June 6, 1978, I walked across the stage in the Auburn Coliseum, and out the door with a shiny new bachelor's degree in aerospace engineering. That was such a great culmination of all that focused work. And yet, I felt empty. Definitely not the joy that I expected to have on that day.

I drove over to the dormitory where I had lived for most of the last 5 years to pick up the last of my stuff. Everybody else was already gone. The halls echoed with the emptiness. Gone forever were all the good times with the other guys, from our beginning there in 1973, a bunch of freshmen on our first night away from home, to the last night, high-fiving and celebrating. It was not a happy feeling, letting go.

I soon realized that what was missing was a goal. I had one goal for 17 years, and suddenly, it had been achieved. There was nothing ahead of me now except life, and hopefully some as yet unknown future goals. I struggled with that for years, which may explain, at least in part, my tendency to change jobs frequently, and sometimes on the strength of a simple phone call.

Years later, in 1999, I made a trip from Savannah to Tacoma, WA for my niece Katie's wedding. I took the opportunity to spend the weekend visiting with a friend that I had worked with at Gulfstream, Heidi Hendrickson. She was working at Boeing, in the same plant that I had years before, and surprisingly, Don Wilson, my old boss, was her boss. She sneaked me into the plant after hours for a quick tour of the new engineering facilities.

Then we headed north to visit with Jon and Dodie Taylor, who we had both worked with in Savannah. They had retired to Friday Harbor, an island in Puget Sound. To get there, we had to take the ferry from Anacortes. We arrived early and bought our tickets, and since it was a beautiful Friday evening, we retired to a nearby bar to have a drink on the deck overlooking the water. Before we knew it, it was time for the ferry! We scrambled back, and found the parking lot was now full. Oh no! I took the luggage up the ramp while Heidi took the car to the overflow lot. By the time she got back, the ferry was long gone. She asked me "Why didn't you get on the ferry?" I didn't have an answer.

We sped over to the local airport. They flew folks to the islands in Cessna 206s, and one pilot was just getting ready to head home to Friday Harbor. We hitched a ride, and got there before the ferry! We had a great visit with Jon and Dodie, and took the ferry back the next day. As we were driving to Tacoma for the rehearsal dinner, a light bulb went off. I turned to Heidi and said "I can answer your question now. I didn't get on the ferry because it isn't about the destination, it's about the journey."

Since I realized that, I began living life a little differently. Letting go of the destination and enjoying the moments as we pass through them, no matter what each moment holds, brings with it a contentment that is hard to describe. You must find it and experience it for yourself.

Focus on the destination, and you miss the journey. Focus on the journey, and the destination takes care of itself.

# Revelation

*“Then he showed me a river of the water of life, clear as crystal, coming from the throne of God and of the Lamb” - Revelation 22:1*

## **To Israel**

In 2016, our minister, Michael Easley, was leading another of his annual trips to Israel. These trips were so popular that they usually filled up before they were officially announced. Sandy was in Michael’s office and mentioned that we would like to go on his next trip. He told her it was already full, but he might add a second bus if enough wanted to go. The second bus quickly filled, and we were on it.

The big day came. Michael and his family were going a day early. He had back problems and wanted the extra day to recover from the long flight. Sandy and I joined them for the same reason. It was nice because in that extra day, as well as the flight over, we had an opportunity to get to know each other better.

We flew into Tel Aviv, and were met at the gate by a representative from our travel company, who whisked us away down an elevator and a hallway leading out of the terminal building. We got into two cars and were driven around to a door that led into immigration control. While hundreds of people stood in line to go through passport control, we were shown to a booth on the end which was reserved for flight crews. Whoosh! We were through and headed for baggage claim. We picked up our bags, and once

inside the customs area, were directed to bypass the line, and out a door to a waiting small bus. In mere minutes after deplaning, we were off airport property and headed to our hotel in Netanya. Sandy and I had a suite that overlooked the Mediterranean Sea. What a view! This was going to be one sweet day of R&R! I'm sure the cost of that special service was not cheap, but when Michael tells you he "knows a guy", just say yes. It's worth it!

Here we were in a foreign land with a very different culture and customs, yet from our first minutes there, we felt more at home than in many big cities in America. This was something that carried through everywhere we went. Israel feels like home because it IS home.

We had a nice relaxing day. There were several guys operating parasails from a grassy area across from the hotel. The wind coming ashore and blowing up the 50 foot cliff along the shore was adequate to provide all the lift needed to keep two people airborne indefinitely in one parasail. They offered rides for \$50, and most of Michael's family went for rides. It was fun to watch!

The rest of our group arrived in the afternoon and got settled in. The next morning we began our tour of the Holy Land!

Our first stop was Caesarea, an ancient port city on the Med. What an interesting place! We sat in the huge amphitheater where Apostle Paul had spoken on the stage. Then there was a Roman toilet with running water, the hippodrome where chariot races happened, the remains of Herod's palace, with a huge pool on the shore, and the Roman aqueduct that supplied fresh water to the city.

Next, we went to Mount Carmel, which had a marvelous view of the Jezreel Valley. It was a beautiful clear day and we could easily see Megiddo, and imagine all the armies of the world spread out across the valley, as the Bible tells us will happen in the end times. Currently, there is an Israeli Air Force base in the middle of the valley, with manned fighters in open shelters, needed because of the close proximity of their enemies. Below us on the mountain was the place where Elijah defeated Baal's army.

We had one more stop for the day, Mount Arbel. The mountain itself had no significance, but once we hiked up the slope to the top, we had a magnificent view of the Sea of Galilee, and the surrounding terrain where two thirds of Jesus' ministry took place. How awesome!

We ended the day by driving around the north shore of Galilee, past Magdala and Capernaum, and crossed the Jordan River, before arriving at our hotel in Ramot, on the eastern shore of Galilee. Prior to the 1967 war, Ramot and everything else in the Golan Heights was a part of Syria.

## **“It’s All About the Water!”**

Our hotel was wonderful, and easily my favorite hotel from the trip. Our room was down a long hallway from the lobby, but it was worth the walk. There was a large balcony overlooking the Sea of Galilee, and the view at night was spectacular. The lights of Tiberias across the water twinkled in a way I had never seen before or since. Beautiful! We were surrounded by mango trees. The Israelis live in a compact space, and there is very little land that sits idle. Mango trees, bananas, date palms, and olive trees, among others, could be found almost everywhere. There was something growing on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee, and it was covered with netting and white mesh. We asked our guide David Tal about it, and it was bananas. They had found that it took 40% less water to grow them if they were covered, and produced the same fruit. Interestingly, though they were grown in abundance in Israel, I never saw a banana served on the bountiful buffets that we enjoyed at every hotel on the trip.

We went to bed that night, and still not completely adjusted to the new time zone, at 3 AM my eyes popped open and I was wide awake. I went out on the balcony and sat for a while, looking out at the water and twinkling lights, and imagining Jesus and the twelve roaming that tiny strip of land across the way, doing things that are still read and talked about today, 2000 years later.

What better place than beside the Sea of Galilee to spend some time in prayer with the Lord? This time, I was feeling a bit less selfish than usual,

and so this was my prayer: “Lord, do you have anything you want to say to me?” Usually, when God talks to me, it is like watching a pond with still water, and a single drop falls from a tree. It makes no sound, and if you aren’t watching at the exact time it falls, the ripples die away, and you never know it was there. God talks to me that way, less words for me to hear, more feeling His message drop into my heart and spread. Not this time! I no more than got the words out, till He responded, loudly, in my head. There was no mistaking the source of the words, nor was the message unclear. What did God say to me? Something very curious! ***“It’s all about the water.”*** Yep, that was my message from God. In the morning, as we were boarding our bus, I chatted with Michael about it. Before I could ask him, he says to me “So, what do you think that means?” I spent the rest of our trip looking for the answer to that question.

Our morning began with a boat ride across the sea to Magdala. This was a great experience, in an open air, covered motor boat. It took us probably 90 minutes to make the crossing. Imagine how long and difficult the crossing was when the disciples had to row the boat! On the way, our captain sang several of our traditional hymns in Hebrew. That was an unexpected treat. I decided against emulating Jesus, so I stayed in the boat. But it would be impossible not to spend some time reflecting on the history of the Sea of Galilee, and the role it played in the ministry of Jesus. It’s all about the water, right?

Upon docking, we visited a chapel dedicated to the women of the Bible, and a 2,000 year old fishing boat that had been found underwater near there. We had lunch, and were served fish that had been caught in the Sea of Galilee, recently, I might add.

I picked up a couple rocks from the water’s edge. Could Jesus or the twelve have stepped on them in the course of their daily lives? Not likely. Given the volume of tourist traffic, thousands in a day, most of which reached into the water for a souvenir rock or two, I suspect those 3 rocks had been in the water since being dumped by a truck the night before. But they came from the SEA OF GALILEE. It wasn’t really about the rock you know. It’s all about the water!

We visited Capernaum, and Peter's house where Jesus lived during part of his ministry. Michael taught us in the synagogue where Jesus taught many times. Wow!

We also visited the location where Jesus gave the sermon on the mount. At this point, I have to comment on the description of some things in Israel. The Sea of Galilee, for example, is a freshwater lake. A big lake, but still a lake. The mount from which the sermon on the beatitudes was given would be called a hill with a gentle slope here in Tennessee. Our guide, David Tal, told us, a little tongue in cheek, that Israel is special, and therefore everything gets a free upgrade. I accept and respect that explanation.

Now it is time for a word about our meals on this trip. We had breakfast and dinner at the hotel, wherever we were staying. The food was Israeli-style, which I guess is a superset of the Mediterranean style. I never took a bite that I didn't like. Since it was always a buffet, it was easy to get all we wanted, or more. And yet, when we got home, we had both lost 7 pounds. I like the Israeli cuisine!

Next up, Nazareth. Jesus' home town, now a large Palestinian city, didn't have much to show. But a village has been built that illustrates what life was like when Jesus lived there. That was a fascinating tour, with demonstrations of how the people lived. Did you know that carpenters worked with rock almost as much as with wood? There are far fewer trees in Israel than in some surrounding countries. Houses were mostly made of stacked rock.

From there we went to Megiddo. We climbed to the top of Tel Megiddo. A tel is a hill, but not just any hill. Whenever a city was conquered, it was reduced to rubble, just a big pile of rocks. Unlike Americans, who can't wait to bring in the bulldozers, the ancient Jews simply leveled the pile and built a new city on top. Tel Megiddo is 27 layers tall, as of the time of our trip. More may have been uncovered since.

We visited the Greek and Roman ruins at Beit She'an (also known as Beth Shan). Before it was discovered, it was completely buried, with a bus station on top. The columns and Roman baths were incredible. Nearby is

the tel, and somewhere in the rubble is the Old Testament city where the Philistines hung the bodies of Saul and his son on the wall for all to see (ref. 1 Samuel 31).

We finished the day with baptisms in the Jordan River for those who had not been baptized. It was a very moving ceremony, as it should be. After all, it's all about the water, huh?

Back to the hotel and dinner. Yum! It was Shabbat, so we had a more limited menu, since those things that couldn't be stored for a day couldn't be made fresh, and certain foods were off the list. We also had no servers. Another interesting difference is the elevators. On Shabbat, the elevators run automatically, stopping at every floor, so that the strict orthodox can use them without pushing any buttons.

In the morning we traveled north, with a stop at Chorazin. Jesus taught in the synagogue there. The Moses Seat was found intact, and taken to a museum. A replica was in its place and several people had their pictures made in it.

On to Dan, the city that Abraham passed through on his journey to his destiny. The northernmost city in ancient times as well as today, the tribe of Dan came here and built idols and worshipped their own version of God. Not a good thing y'all!

We took a hike up the Dan River, one of the three tributaries that come together to form the Jordan River. Note: these would be big creeks back home. Free upgrade! That took us to the border with Lebanon. We found fences, a mine field (They are serious about that line on a map!), and a guy herding cattle. We also saw a surveillance tower, with various sensors including sound recording. The Israelis know how to protect a border. We could learn much from them. Across the fence were villages on the hillsides. David told us that it is these villages, and others like them, that launch rockets by the hundreds against Israeli civilian targets, the only kind of target in the north of Israel.

We stopped off in Caesarea Philippi. It had many temples for Greek gods, and was a hotbed of pagan worship. When Jesus and the disciples visited there, Peter acknowledged Jesus as “the Christ, the Son of the living God.” The Banias River, one of the 3 tributaries of the Jordan River, comes up out of the ground here, though it originates on Mount Hermon.

On our way to our next stop, as we gained elevation at the foot of Mount Hermon, we passed Nimrod Fortress. This was a Crusader structure from around the 1200s. The snow on top of Mount Hermon stays year round, which answers the question “Was there snow in Israel when Jesus was born?” Yes Margaret, there was, even if the birth happened in July. The snow melting from Mount Hermon’s summit, of course, is the source of all the water in the Jordan River, and thus all the water in the Sea of Galilee. It’s all about the water, don’t you think? See a pattern starting to form? Yeah, me too.

Our last stop of the day was on the Golan Heights at a small park that paid tribute to the 1973 Yom Kippur war, which was mostly fought in a valley called the Valley of Tears. The park overlooked the Syrian border. We saw the same fence and minefield as on the Lebanon border. The town across the border was deserted. This was during the Syrian civil war. As David was teaching us about the military history of modern Israel, fighting broke out in the city across the way. Some pretty large caliber ammo was being fired. This town was about a mile from us. It felt a little creepy, sitting on a hillside listening to a battle taking place nearby, almost as if I was eavesdropping on a private conversation. I was asked if I thought we should be taking cover. No worries. If they start shooting across the fence, that’s what those F-16s that were at the ready on the Air Force base were for. They could be there within 3 minutes of receiving a phone call. Nope, I wasn’t worried. A Syrian would have to be nuts to shoot across that fence. A couple years later, I read that some ISIS forces sneaked across the border in the night and captured a small UN outpost near where we were, planning to launch an attack from there. Those F-16s wasted no time in taking care of that threat.

David told us a bit about the modern Israeli Defense Force. Everyone is obligated to serve for 2 years when they turn 18, after which they go into

the reserves. The job of those full time soldiers, 18-20 years old, is simply to hold the status quo for 48 hours. That is how long it takes to call up the reserves and deploy all the tanks. After that, they are a full strength fighting machine. We saw some small fields off the side of the road and asked David about them. They were rallying points where the tanks were brought and unloaded from flatbed trucks, and the soldiers would come there and assemble the force. On the way back to our hotel, we passed a tank platoon maneuvering on the Golan Heights. Practice makes perfect.

Speaking of the Golan Heights, do you know the story of how Israel was able to take this piece of critical high ground from the Syrians in only one day during the 6 day war in 1967? Israel had a spy in the Syrian high command. He didn't have a position where he was privy to closely held military secrets, but he was patient, and observant. The soldiers that manned all the offensive enclaves on the Golan Heights had their families with them. It was very hot in the summer, and he managed to convince the higher ups to let him arrange to plant eucalyptus trees at each of these locations to provide shade for the children's playgrounds. That gave them all they needed. He had the locations of all of those facilities, and the pilots who attacked them had a target to aim for. You see, eucalyptus trees are not indigenous to that area, and were an easy target to find.

One key thing to note about their defense system. They need to win quickly, because most of the adult men and women are in the reserves. Any country's economy will grind to a halt if the workforce suddenly takes a month or more off, all at the same time.

Next day was a change of hotel. On our way to the Dead Sea, we changed buses for a side trip into Judea and Samaria, often called the West Bank. To go to that area, we had to change buses to one that had shatterproof glass in the windows and was hardened in other, unspecified ways. Once the change was made, we were on our way to Shiloh. This is where the tabernacle remained for 369 years after Moses brought the people to the promised land. We could even stand in the approximate location where the Ark of the Covenant stood for all those years. Amazing! It really brought the Old Testament to life, seeing all these places where it all took place.

We went to the Psagot Winery, just a few hills away from Jerusalem. We had a tour and wine tasting. Delicious!

We then changed back to our original buses, drove down to the Dead Sea, and checked into a beautiful modern high rise hotel, on the shore of the Dead Sea. The view from our balcony on the ninth floor was incredible. The southern half of the Dead Sea was all visible, as well as the land on the other side, which was in Jordan.

All along the Jordan River, on both the Israel side and the Jordan side, were vast areas that were irrigated with a unique system of Israeli design that is very efficient at delivering water to the plant without losing much to evaporation. They grew dates, olives, almonds, bananas, mangos, and a few other fruits that thrive in the arid climate. Irrigation, yep, it's all about the water! By the way, this is the fulfillment of a prophecy found in Ezekiel 36. Yes, we do live in biblical times!

David told us an interesting story from his days in the IDF. For a period of time, he was with the border guards. At the southern end of the Dead Sea are two mineral salts processing plants, one on the Israeli side, and the other on the Jordanian side. The Jordanian plant was built by the Israelis, and when the Jordanians had a maintenance problem, they would phone the guys on the other side. And when a phone call was insufficient, a Major who was in charge of the border guards in that sector was called. He had the key to the gate in the fence between the plants, and would open it to allow a technician to slip quietly into Jordan, and fix the problem. Officially, the two countries didn't cooperate. Unofficially, well, if nobody finds out, they sort of help each other out. How did David know? Major David Tal was the guy with the key!

## **Masada! Never Again!**

Next day, we went to Masada. At first glance, Masada is just another mesa in a desert setting. But oh, how wrong that first impression is. There are two ways to the top, climb a steep path, or ride a cable car. We took the cable car.

Our guide, David, spent a couple hours giving us the low down on Masada history. And what a history! Herod built a multi-level palace on the north end of the mesa, stepping down from the top, and included a pool. He intended for this to be his hideout if the Romans turned against him, and designed it to be self sufficient for 5 years. To do that, there were large food storage buildings made of what else? Stacked rock blocks. But how do you get enough water up on top of a mesa in an arid location? That was the interesting part. During the rainy season in the higher ground to the northwest, there was a huge amount of runoff and flooding. They cut channels in the valleys to direct the water to the mesa, then cut channels in the mesa itself to bring the water to a pool near the bottom. Then, like an assembly line they had mules with water jugs that were trained to walk without a handler up a trail to the top, where the jugs were dumped into huge cisterns, and the mules sent back down on their own. All of the infrastructure is still there today. And as you have read before, clearly it is all about the water!

Approximately 70 AD, the Romans had decided the Jews were too problematic, and began to drive them out and replace them with Philistines. They destroyed the temple in Jerusalem and either enslaved or drove out the Jews. Because of its strategic location, a group of almost 1,000 Jews made a last stand on Masada. They were able to live for 3 years on top, using the supplies that were there.

During that time, the Romans set up a camp behind the mesa, and began building a ramp and a siege tower which would be rolled up the ramp when completed. The Jews on top did not attempt to harm the workers below, because they were fellow Jews, enslaved by the Romans. Finally, the ramp was complete, and the siege tower was rolled to the top. The Romans would be able to breach the top wall, and kill or capture all the Jewish families hiding out on top.

After the tower was in place, nothing happened. The Romans decided to go down and take the night off, then come back in the morning to do their dirty work. On top, the men gathered in the synagogue. They decided that they would not surrender and would not be slaves. Like some cults in modern

times, this meant that they would kill their families, and then the leader would kill the other men. In that way, only one would bear the sin of suicide. When morning came, the Romans were met by almost 1,000 bodies. The only survivors were two women and their children who were hiding in an empty cistern. If not for those two women, who told their story to Flavius Josephus, who chronicled it, we would have no idea of the lives and deaths of the people there.

The ramp is still there today, as are the ruins of the synagogue. Sitting in the very seats where the men planned their demise was a little eerie. But it was in that synagogue that I felt God's presence more than any other place in Israel.

David told us of a military ritual conducted by the Israeli Defense Force. When he finished his training, there was a ceremony at night on top of Masada. The new soldiers climbed the trail to the top, with full packs and weapons, lit by torches they carried. The ceremony was concluded with the soldiers repeating their battle cry, "Masada! Never again!"

Near Masada, along the shore of the Dead Sea, is the lowest elevation of an airport on earth, 1,240 feet below sea level, the Bar Yehuda airport. There is nothing to see, it is just a runway sitting between the highway and Dead Sea. I have now been to both the lowest airport in the world, and the highest in America (Leadville, CO at 9,934 feet). Just a fun fact.

## **Ein Gedi**

Ein Gedi is one of those rare places in an arid land where water is found in abundance, also known as an oasis. On the trail beside the flowing water, we saw many caves in the opposite cliff. It was in one of these caves that future King David was hiding from King Saul, who was planning to kill David, when none other than Saul himself came inside to relieve himself. David could have killed Saul, but instead sneaked up behind him and cut a piece of fabric from his robe. Later, when the inevitable confrontation happened, David showed Saul the fabric from Saul's robe as evidence that he loved Saul and wished him no harm. David later became king.

It was locations like this, and the history attached to them, that greatly increased my interest in the Old Testament. I went to Israel to walk in the footsteps of Jesus, and came away with a greater appreciation of the part of the Bible that took place before Jesus came.

We checked out of the hotel in the morning. The biggest laugh I got on the trip came in the line at the front desk. Dave Ramsey, the financial guru, and his family, were with us on the trip, and Dave was in line behind me. The employees at this hotel exhibited a certain air of aloofness, and didn't seem to speak English. The guy using the buffer on the beautiful marble floors was going back and forth. He finally crossed our line, where Dave was standing. Dave, being all about customer service, didn't budge. The buffer guy waved Dave aside. Then Dave, speaking loudly because the buffer guy didn't speak English, said while making large circling gestures with his arms, "Go around. Customer", and pointed to himself. I was sure I was going to lose it...

## **Qumran**

We visited Qumran, where the Dead Sea Scrolls were found in a cave. The people who lived here (Essenes) were manually copying the early scriptures. When a mistake was made, their beliefs prevented them from just throwing that one away. If it was scripture, it was holy. So the scrolls that were found were these scriptures that had some small mistake in the copying, and were stored in a dry cave, surviving for over 20 centuries. Amazing!

On our way uphill to Jerusalem we stopped in the wilderness, where Jesus spent 40 days, being tempted by satan. Such desolate hills! Interestingly, all the hills we could see had what looked like paths, crisscrossing, all the way from bottom to top. The patterns were unique, and mesmerizing to study. David told us that these paths were made by millennia of goats and sheep being herded across these hills.

# Jerusalem!

The approach to Jerusalem was uphill, and pretty desolate. We went through a tunnel as David was giving us some history. He completed his carefully rehearsed and timed history lesson with the words “Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to Jerusalem!”, at which time our bus burst out of the tunnel, with the gold Dome of the Rock below, and the entire old city of Jerusalem spread out before us. It is humbling to think of all the world history that took place, and continues to take place, in this, the most important city in the world. We left our bus behind on the top of the Mount of Olives. After Michael taught us, we walked down the hill, in the footsteps of Jesus, to the Garden of Gethsemane. Walking through the garden, we could almost feel the tension in the air the night Jesus was betrayed.

On our way down the hill, we passed the Russian Orthodox Church. I noticed one corner of the building was topped by a curious assembly. The top of the wall was covered with broken glass. Then there were pointed spikes along the top, and that was topped with barbed wire. What was it that was behind all of this? A wooden cross. Could it be that these represented the things that Jesus faced on his final day? A crown of thorns, scourging, and a spear in the side while he hung on the cross, releasing a stream of living water.

We went to the City of David, predecessor of Jerusalem, and went inside to the entrance to Hezekiah’s Tunnel. This tunnel was chiseled out of solid rock to connect the springs outside the walls surrounding Jerusalem to the Pool of Siloam, because the spring could be captured by an enemy during a siege, cutting the city off from its water supply. Workers started from each end and met in the middle. That, my friends, is an engineering marvel, the likes of which I have never seen. The path of the tunnel curves underneath Mt. Zion in a big S, and slopes downhill to keep the water flowing. It is about 700 yards long, with only a 2 foot joggle in the middle where the diggers met.

So down the stairs we went and into the tunnel entrance. At this point, the tunnel was over 6 feet high, and the water was above our knees. As we walked through the tunnel, which was about as wide as our shoulders, the

ceiling dropped to between 4 and 5 feet, causing this 6'3" hillbilly to bonk his head on the rock. That began about 450 yards of misery. Walking bent over like that uses an incredible amount of energy. Since I take a beta blocker, which prevents my heart rate from going too high, and the high energy squat-walking requires a high heart rate to feed oxygen to muscles, I was quickly reaching a point that simply can't be sustained. Luckily, we came to the joggle, and it was tall enough for me to stand up straight and take a break. Heartbeat down, time to bend over and charge ahead. Boy was I happy when we popped out into a 7 foot high ceiling for the remaining hundred yards. Michael taught us as we sat by the Pool of Siloam, and we went on to our hotel, the David Citadel Hotel. Did I mention that Hezekiah's Tunnel is all about the water? I bet you had already figured that out.

Dinner was the magnificent spread of a buffet that we had become accustomed to in Israel. I drank copious amounts of water, because the temperatures were climbing and a lot of sweat was generated walking through the tunnel.

We went up to our room for the night. My heart was still running a little rough after the battle between beta blocker and oxygen consumption, and didn't settle down for several hours. Between the dehydration and heart issue, my dinner decided to exit the way it entered. Of course, I had taken my insulin based on the carbs I had for dinner, and now those carbs were no longer present. My blood sugar fell dramatically to a dangerous level. Having no quick source of carbs available, Sandy went to the front desk to get me a Coke. None available at midnight! They sent her a block away to a little store, where she found what I needed. Midnight on the streets of Jerusalem? Brave lady! My hero!! Note to those with any medical condition: when you travel, and especially internationally, be sure to take anything you may need with you, no matter how non-essential you think it might be. Expect the unexpected. We decided to take the next day off to recuperate, before our final day in Israel.

On our last day, we began in a tunnel beneath the wailing wall. Construction used stone blocks 25 feet long. That totally amazes me! We then emerged from the tunnel, and visited the wall itself. I joined the other

men at the wall, praying for friends who were enduring life struggles, and leaving their names on small notes jammed into cracks in the wall. This was a very moving experience.

We walked up the Via Dolorosa (Way of the Cross) to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. While walking, I played the song “Walking in Jerusalem Just Like John” sung by Fletcher, a local Nashville band. Way cool!

In the afternoon, we went to the Garden Tomb, a possible location of the crucifixion and burial of Jesus. The skull referenced in the Bible (Golgotha, Place of the Skull) appears quite clearly. The bottom half has been filled in and serves as a bus station now. We had communion while there, and returned to our hotel.

The final dinner was at the American Colony. Early next morning, we said goodbye and flew home. At least our bodies did.

My mind and heart remained in Israel. For months after the trip, all I could think of was Israel. It is a journey that every Christian should make. When you come home, you will be changed. A part of you will remain in Israel, and a part of Israel will remain in you.

So, what does it mean, “It’s all about the water”? Throughout Israel’s history, water has been the most important substance. In modern times, the Sea of Galilee provides fresh water to all of Israel and part of Jordan. One of modern Israel’s most important innovations is their irrigation methodology, which has revolutionized the growing of almost every kind of fruit and nut in that part of the world. The Sea of Galilee is thus the most valuable body of water in the world. Without it, Israel perishes.

Many of the miracles that Jesus performed related to water. For example, he turned water to wine, and walked on water. Jesus told us He was Living Water. It really is all about the water!

## **Photos**



David Tal, our Israeli guide, and Michael Easley, our minister who did a wonderful job of coordinating everything for the trip. Michael had taken many groups to Israel, so he had lots of practice! We are on top of Mt. Arbel, overlooking the Sea of Galilee.



Michael Easley and his daughter Jesse. Michael's wife and two daughters with their husbands accompanied him.



Synagogue in Capernaum, a fishing village by the Sea of Galilee. This is where Peter lived, and Jesus stayed with Peter and taught in this synagogue.



A small chapel by the Sea of Galilee, dedicated to Mark, chapter 4. Jesus slept through the tempest, and when awakened, first calmed the storm, and

then asked the disciples why they were afraid, didn't they have faith? A powerful lesson in trust!



View down the slope from the location of the sermon on the mount.



Van and Sandy by the Sea of Galilee. The hills in the distance are the Golan Heights.



Away in a manger..... Yes, a manger was a trough for the animals, normally carved from solid rock.



Ruins of Beit She'an. The tel in the background holds the palace where King Saul's body was hung on the wall for all to see.



Michael and the group he baptized in the Jordan River, at Yardenit.



The Dan River, a tributary of the Jordan River.



City in Lebanon across the border from Dan. Hezbollah fires missiles from this and other communities along the border, into Israel, aimed at civilian targets.



Banias River at Caesarea Philippi, one of three tributaries of the Jordan River. It was here that Jesus revealed his identity as the Messiah to his disciples.



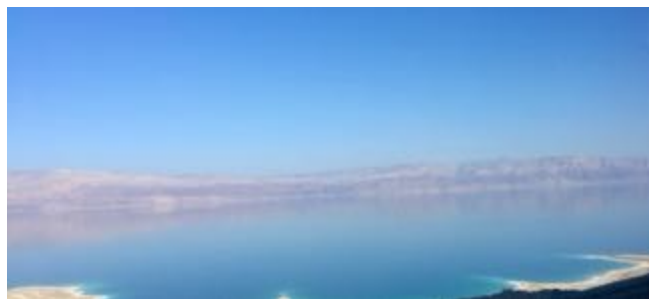
A deserted Syrian city just across the border. It was here that we heard gunshots as warring factions fought. This is the Valley of Tears in the Golan Heights where the Yom Kippur War of 1973 was fought.



Guard post as we enter Judea and Samaria, also known as the West Bank. We had to switch to a bus with shatterproof glass and other security features for this part of our journey.



Shiloh. In this location, the Tabernacle and Ark of the Covenant resided for 369 years.



The Dead Sea, at 1412 feet below sea level, the lowest place on earth, but full of minerals. The opposite side is Jordan, and somewhere along the eastern shore are the as yet undiscovered ruins of Sodom and Gomorrah.



David Tal, teaching us the history of Masada. We are in the synagogue, where the tragic end of the story plays out. "Masada, never again!"



Model of Masada water collection system. Rainwater is collected in the channels to the right, and flows down to two pools on Masada. From there, donkeys carry it to the top in big jugs, to be finally stored in cisterns.



Our group atop Masada.



Michael teaching at Ein Gedi, an oasis with many caves, where David hid from King Saul.



One of the caves at Qumran where the Dead Sea Scrolls were found.



The wilderness, where Jesus spent 40 days and was tempted by Satan.



Jerusalem!



David Tal and Sandy on the Mount of Olives.



Cemetery on the Mount of Olives. Israelis place a rock on the tomb instead of flowers.



Atop the Russian Orthodox Church on the Mount of Olives. A crown of thorns, scourging to cut the skin, and a spear in the side to release a stream of living water, all awaited Jesus on the cross.



Sandy at the Garden of Gethsemane.



Sandy in Hezekiah's tunnel. The ceiling came down to 4 feet high for most of the 700 yards.



Prayers at the Western Wall, Jerusalem.



And now you know why "It's all about the water"!

# Omega

***“So do not worry about tomorrow; for tomorrow will care for itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.” - Matthew 6:34***

I saved this for last for a reason. It was the last piece of advice that I received in college, and definitely the best.

One of my Aerospace Engineering professors, Richard Sforzini, taught classes in propulsion, jet engines and rockets primarily. We were required to take his basic propulsion class, but I was more interested in aerodynamics, so that was the only class of his that I took. And we weren't really friends, as I was with several other professors. But we had a cordial relationship, greeting each other when we passed in the hall for example.

During my last week of classes before graduation, I was walking down the hall in front of his office, and met him coming the other way. After the greeting, he wanted to chat, so we had a nice conversation in the hall. And that ended with him telling me this: “After you graduate and you have a little money coming in, you might think ‘If I only had a sports car, I would be happy.’ And you buy the sports car, and you find you aren't happy. So you think ‘If I had a wife, then I would be happy’, and you get married, and you aren't happy. So then you think ‘If we had some children, that would make me happy.’ And you still are not happy.”

Then he said “Van, don't chase happy. Let it come to you. Do the things you love to do, and happy will find you.” And with that, we shook hands and wished each other well, and I never saw him again.

I have found his advice to be true, and now I am passing it on to you, along with my best wishes for a very happy life.

Now, don't be a stranger!

## Photos



War Eagle!!!



It isn't just in the cartoons! I caught this boot from a dock in Grand Isle, LA in 1978. No fish were biting because of an approaching hurricane. This was my only catch.



Sunrise over Tybee Island, GA, 1982. Photo by Jim Ward, photo plane flown by Ed Flinn.

THE END