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The Time of My Life

By: Donald John Mikler

I was born “ in the country near Oviedo, Florida”, 27 December 1931. My father was Michael Mikler who was born in Cleveland, Ohio 23 July 1906. Grandfather Joseph Mikler had immigrated to the United States in 1904 and settled in Cleveland. He got a job in a barrel factory, earning \$1.25 a day. Six months later he sent for his wife in Czechoslovakia. They bought a house in Cleveland and Grandmother Mikler ("Bobka", Slovak slang for grandmother) had two more children, Joseph and Katherine. In 1912 they joined a group of Slovaks who had bought land in Florida, sold their house in Cleveland, and moved to Florida. My mother was Mathilda Lamos who was born in Bratislava, Czechoslovakia 24 February 1908. Her parents had immigrated to the USA in about 1912 and settled in Chicago, then tried farming in Wisconsin, then moved back to Chicago. Mother and Dad were married in Chicago 11 June 1929. After they married, they traveled to Slavia, Florida where dad's family lived. Slavia, a Slovak community of farmers, is located about four miles south of Oviedo. Oviedo is located about 15 miles northeast of Orlando. My mother's sister, Marie, accompanied the wedding party for the car trip back to Florida. Grandfather Mikler had a big Studebaker sedan. Must have been tight since grandfather, grandmother, dad, mom, dad's best man and brother Joe, and Marie, and probably "Big Joe", dad's cousin, rode in the car. The road was two-lane blacktop, in the 1920's, several decades before interstate highways. My mother's sister, Marie, said that mom and dad lived in grandfather Mikler's house for a while. That must have been interesting in that the house was small and crowded with a growing family. As of this writing, the house still stands on Mikler Road at the edge of Slavia. One of my cousins restored the house in the 90s. By 1929, dad had five younger brothers and four sisters living in the same house. After a short stay with the parents, dad rented a house in a sparsely populated subdivision in Goldenrod, about half-way between Orlando and Oviedo.

In about 1934 dad and his brothers built a "temporary" house in Slavia. It was situated about 150 feet from the state road that ran between Orlando and Oviedo. Our nearest neighbor was Stanko's Store, in Slavia, about a mile north of the house. Slavia was a "wide spot in the road" with maybe 50 residents and a church. My parents are buried in a cemetery adjacent to the Lutheran church there. A mile to the south was Jamestown, where only colored people lived in shacks. Mikler Road joins the state road at Jamestown. The Mikler's and another Slovak family, the Duda's settled and farmed on properties on Mikler Road. As of this writing, the roads are still in place but the farms have been over-run with housing developments.

The house was an ordinary wood frame rectangle and rather small with one bedroom, a living room, and kitchen. The inside walls were unfinished. The floors were ordinary wood planks/lumber and there was no carpet. There was no electricity and we had a hand operated pump for water in the kitchen. We bathed in a large wash-tub in the middle of the kitchen and the water was heated on the wood-burning kitchen stove. Of course there was no air-conditioning. An outhouse was close by behind the house. I don't remember the year, but before dad died electricity was installed in the house..

One of the earliest memories of my dad was of me riding on a large board, which he dragged around with a rope in order to level and smooth the ground around the house where he put in a large, plush lawn. The front yard went clear out to the two-lane blacktop road about 150 feet from the house. There were a couple of nice sized cedar-like shrubs at each end of the front porch that we kids used to jump into for kicks. There was a chinaberry tree in the backyard that we played and climbed in. It also had a swing.

By 1937 there were five of us children. Ruth was my older sister. Then it was me, Michael, Elaine, and Mathilda who was nick-named "Tilka".

Dad liked to hunt and fish and he had a pen for several bird-dogs. My brother Mike and I had the job of keeping the pen clean. This little job snuffed out any love of dogs for me for a long, long time.

We had no near-by neighbors. The terrain around the house was lightly wooded with tall yellow pines, scrub oak, palmetto and assorted brush, weeds, nettles, and sand-spurs. In the fall dad used to let me accompany him when he hunted and shot quail in the brush around and within a short distance of the house. It seemed like a long trek to me, a six or seven-year-old, but we probably didn't hike more than a mile on these hunting adventures. Dad always used his dogs on these excursions and when he came out of the house with his shotgun and shucked it a couple of times in front of them, they'd go bananas and start yelping with excitement. That was fun. Mother would cook the quail he shot and serve them with dumplings and gravy, like paprika, and we loved it.

When we were not in school or going to church we all ran around barefooted and shirtless. In the summertime, that is. After a while one's feet became tough and you could run through a bunch of sand-spurs without them bothering you. We all had good tans and were as brown as a berry. One time I was playing in the brush near the house and stepped on a snake when I was bare-footed. I think it was a harmless chicken-snake which looks like a rattle-snake, to a little kid. Since there were plenty of rattle-snakes around, and I assumed it was a rattler, I jumped about three feet into the air and I think I came down about five feet away. That was the last time a snake has ever touched my body and I can't stand them to this day.

Dad had a 1920s era Graham sedan. On occasion he drove us to Oviedo on Sunday afternoons and bought ice cream to take home. I was always worried that it would melt before we got home. He would, at times, swerve back and forth on the sparsely traveled two-lane road to make us laugh. Oviedo was a small town, probably three blocks long, with diagonal parking spaces. The few businesses and a post-office were located in one and two story buildings. One of them was a 1920-1930's style drugstore with marble counter and soda fountain. All kinds of goodies, and a place of wonder to a little kid.

Dad also built up a "Skeeter" that he drove and used at work as a pick-up truck on grandfather Mikler's farm. "Skeeter" was a local term. It was a little work-truck made up from an old Model T or Model A Ford. He built then up himself. The body from the firewall aft would be removed and a flatbed built of lumber would be installed; the front edge of the flatbed served as a seat. There was no backrest. Then the front end was painted black and it made for a nice little truck that would go ANYWHERE. The only time I ever heard dad raise his voice was when mother started it one morning and was grinding the gears in order to get it into reverse and he told her in no uncertain terms to cease and desist.

Some months before dad died, he bought a 1936 Plymouth sedan which mother drove until 1945 when it exhausted itself and mother couldn't afford the repair costs and it disappeared to I don't know where. During the 1930s America was suffering from an economic depression and things were tough all over the country. However, as I recall, I never heard the word "depression" mentioned or knew what it meant for that matter. To a little kid, things seemed pretty normal. We were well clothed, kept clean, had plenty to eat and any other necessities, and were happy as a family in Slavia.

I attended school in Oviedo and we rode a yellow school bus to and from. The school was a large red brick building and grades one through twelve were taught there. I don't remember much about school. I can't recall the first two grades at all. I do remember having to repeat the third grade. My teacher was Miss Eldridge Cone and I thought she was about the prettiest little thing I'd ever seen. She was probably all of 24 years of age and always nicely dressed and she wore saddle oxfords and smelled good. I was one of her "pets". I got to clean the blackboards and in the winter go out to the coal bin outdoors to get a bucket of coal for the stove in our classroom. I just loved that teacher and finally passed the third grade. I looked her up when I became a young adult and was working at my first paying job in Orlando. We were both thrilled to see each other and she was still a real "peach" to my appreciating view of the ladies. What a gal!

In addition to going to public school in Oviedo, we also attended Slovak school at the Lutheran church in Slavia three afternoons a week after regular school was out. We were instructed on the Bible, Ten Commandments, and Slovak grammar. I was not too thrilled about this situation but wish now that I'd paid better attention.

The church we attended was built before I was born. I believe it was built of lumber milled by a saw-mill owned and operated by members of the congregation. When my Mikler grandparents settled on the land around Slavia, the first thing they built was a saw-mill so that they could cut up the timber cleared from their land in order to build their houses. The church was about twenty-five or thirty feet long and about twenty feet wide. No water. No electricity. No air-conditioning. Quite stark but it served the people's purpose and it was very very important to them. We usually sat near the rear of the church. The church had an organ and the air for it was provided by a guy pumping on a handle attached at the side of the organ. My Uncle Steve was the pumper. He sat at the front of the church near the organ and when pumping would rock back and forth and I thought he was spastic. At the time I didn't know he was pumping air for the organ, which, obviously was not electric powered. There was a guy in the congregation who would periodically have an epileptic seizure and all manner of scuffling and confusion would ensue! Scared the crap out of me! Any-way, I thought that Uncle Steve's rocking and the epileptic thing were connected some-how, hence the "spastic" thinking. It would be some years before I got the organ/rocking thing sorted out. This may give you some idea of maybe why I don't remember the first two years of school. Slow?!

My Aunt Anne, dad's sister, married Ferdinand Duda in that little church. Even though the building was quite crude the folks really fixed it up with decorations when it came time for a wedding. The decorations included a walk-way from the unpaved drive-way to the church entry-way covered with white cloth. The cloth was the same stuff as the farmers used to shade young celery in seed-beds after seeding. I thought the cloth "side-walk" was pretty classy. And the bride got not a speck of sand on her pretty little wedding dress.

The congregation put on a yearly picnic in the summer-time, about a quarter mile out behind the church in a wooded area shaded by scrub-oak and pine trees. They had booths set up for fun and games. The booths were made up of the same cloth as described above. One of the games was "go in fishin'" where-by a kid would drop a hook over a wall, in the blind, and hope to "catch a fish". The attendant, out of sight behind the wall of the booth would tug on the line a time or two and attach a gift, and the kid would reel it in. Great fun and thrilled little kids. No-one ever came up empty handed! The men played soft-ball and pitched horse-shoes and I don't remember what else. I think they drank a little home-made wine too. One other event I remember is that they had a gallon jug full of dry beans and the kids could guess at how many beans were in the jug. Closest guess got FIFTY cents! My dad asked me for a number and we put it in. I wouldn't have known a dozen from ten or a hundred or a thousand for that matter, but my dad gave them a number and by god we won the fifty cents. That was really something. A big ole silver fifty-cent piece!

I've always loved airplanes and aviation. At about age seven I thought an aircraft in flight was mysterious and fascinating. I had no idea of what made an airplane capable of flight and supposed that they somehow traveled on an invisible highway in the sky, even though it may be invisible I knew there was a GOD and you couldn't see Him either.

When we lived in Slavia, I was thrilled to see airliners pass overhead daily - some heading north and others south. I know they were airliners because they were big, with two engines and were shiny. Upon reflection now, I conclude that the airliners were flying along navigational airways of the time, probably between Jacksonville and Orlando. When I got a little older, I ascertained that these airliners were Lockheed Loadstars and Douglas DC-3's. At the time, National Airlines was flying the Loadstars and Eastern Airlines was flying the DC-3s. These were the only two airlines serving Orlando at the time.

A few memories of this time period include remembering my dad reading the newspaper by lamplight and sitting in a rocking chair. Retrieving the newspaper from our mailbox at the side of the road out in front of the house and looking at the pictures on the front page while walking back to the house; like Howard Hughes flying around the world and setting a new record in 1938. Seeing a picture on the front page of Mussolini and his army invading somewhere. Reading my book on the ironing board next to mother ironing and me getting in some homework. That's the last homework I think I ever did in my entire life. Going to night softball games in Orlando where dad and his brothers played in a fast-pitch softball league. I remember him with a bandage around his head one time after he'd been smacked by a ball during a game and was quite concerned. Being taken to a rodeo in Orlando and visiting grandfather and grandmother Lamos in Orlando frequently. Of dad buying a shotgun and showing it proudly to Grandfather Lamos. Going to church every single time there was a service and especially the numerous services around Christmas time.

In early 1939 Dad took us all to the airport in Orlando. There was some sort of aerial demonstration to enjoy. I have two distinct memories of that day. The first was my wonder upon seeing this big shiny loud, single-engine US Army airplane taxi by blowing grass all over the place. It had a tandem canopy; there was a gunner in the back seat facing aft and the canopy was open. A machine gun was mounted at the back end of the rear cockpit. He had a tan colored cloth helmet on his head and goggles covered his eyes and he looked fierce as he held onto the machine-gun as the airplane taxied by. What a sight! Later in life, upon reflection, I figured that the airplane was probably an AT-6, the type of airplane I would fly in Air Force pilot training, 14 years hence. Too bad we can't foresee the future. It would have saved me a lot of worry and trepidation since that is the one thing I wanted in life: to be a military aviator. Note; While writing this book I was given a book entitled "Wings Over Florida" and it had a feature on "Orlando's Aerial Cavalcade" celebrated in January 1939, which covered the above event..

The second was of a parachute jumper descending onto the airport. We observed this from some distance away and you could see that he wore white clothing; a white cloth helmet on his head gleamed in the sun. I thought he must be some kind of a superman. I had no desire to do what he was doing but I did want to do what the pilot was doing in that brute of an airplane that had passed by earlier. It must have been that afternoon that I caught the flying bug forever.

In May 1939, when I was seven, my dad slipped and fell while working at a "wash-house" where celery was washed and boxed for shipment by rail. He broke a couple of ribs and drove to the hospital in Orlando. My brother and sisters were allowed to see him a day or so later and he seemed fine and happy to see us. We were happy and looked forward to seeing him home in a few days. Shortly he came down with pneumonia and died. It was a very sad time. Mother was absolutely devastated and cried and moaned for several days. He was buried in Slavia and the service was conducted at the new church which had only recently been completed. On the day of the funeral we were at grandfather Mikler's house and I remember him saying something to the effect that I was the man of the family now!! I didn't understand what to make of the remark and was a little puzzled to say the least. I did not comprehend the fact that dad had died.. It just didn't sink in. I'd never been around any-thing or any-one who had died. I had no idea of the future with-out him. The future was way out of the league of my little old seven-year-old head. I didn't know what to think. I was incapable of contemplation or anything of the sort. I don't remember thinking about anything. I did worry about mother and all the crying and all. She was thirty years old, had five of us little kids and was on her own. The times ahead would be very very different for sure. And they were!

Mother's brother, Uncle Gus, flew to Orlando from Chicago in an Eastern Airlines DC-3, to attend the funeral. Flying, especially in airliners was a big deal in 1939. After the funeral mother's dad took Gus to the airport to catch his flight back to Chicago. I was among those in the car and got a close-up view of the airliner. At that time, people were allowed onto the ramp and we were standing a little outboard of the wing watching the passengers go onboard. The twin-engine airplane seemed huge. It was shiny silver and glistened in the sun and had pretty red and blue markings with white trim on its nose, along the body and tail. What a beautiful sight! I don't recall thinking at the time of ever operating one of those big things someday but it was indeed, to a seven -year -old, one impressive sight forever etched in my memory. As it turns out, I did fly DC-3s twenty-five years later and was delighted for the opportunity to do so.

In the summer of 1940 mother's sister Aunt Marie, was at our house in Slavia. One afternoon a guy stopped at the house. Probably a young sport from the local area who wanted to visit with Aunt Marie in that she was a real knock-out. Even at a young age I thought Aunt Marie was very pretty. She was my favorite aunt and had a real nice and caring personality. Anyway, this guy found out I was interested in airplanes. We were sitting on the back porch steps and he told me about how an airplane was controlled in flight. He sat down and placed his feet straight out in front of himself and placed a stick, vertically, between his knees and proceeded to explain left and right "rudder" movements and how these things, along with fore, aft, and left and right movements of the stick, control an airplane in flight. I don't remember him mentioning anything about throttle/engine controls but I do remember the "stick" part. I thought that was kind of strange but fascinating, when compared to the controls of a car which I'd frequently observed first-hand. I was further hooked on flying and was sure I could do that and was ready to go. Nine years of dreaming about flying were to pass before I actually started to learn to aviate. During this same summer Mother decided to drive to Virginia to attend the christening of her sister Anna's new-born son Gerald. She took Aunt Marie, my sister Ruth and me along. We left Slavia at three in the morning and drove straight thru to Emporia. I remember resting my chin on the back of Mother's seat and staring at the speedometer, pegged at 60 MPH all day long..We arrived in Emporia , where Aunt Anna lived, about mid-night.What an an adventure. I remember sitting out a severe thunberstorm somewhere in Georgia; and Aunt Marie bought me a "big-little" book about Tailspin Tommy , a cartoon chacter of the times. Aunt Anna was married to John Kovak, a Lutheran minister and he had a Slovak/English congregation in Emporia. The Zalmon family were members of the church, one of whom Paul, would later marry Marie's and Mother's sister Helen. We returned, un-eventfully to Slavia in time for school.

Between school terms in 1941 mother packed us up and we moved to Orlando. We lived about a block from grandfather Lamos on Noble Street and I attended Delaney Elementary School. They only had grades 1 through 6. We used to roller skate to school along sidewalks and in the red -brick -paved streets where there were no sidewalks. Not too smooth for those metal-wheeled skates used at the time.

One day while playing basketball with a neighbor friend I heard the news over a near-by radio that the Japs bombed Pearl Harbor. It was December 7th, 1941 and I had no idea where Pearl Harbor was but the broadcast did mention that it was American and I went into the house and told mother what I'd heard. That evening we all gathered at grandfathers house and things were pretty grim and all the women were crying. A day later the president declared war and World War II was under way. I didn't really understand the significance of a "war" but there was no doubt in my young mind that whoever we were going to fight, they were bound to lose, no doubt about it.

During these times we used to go to the movies quite a bit. You could get into the Saturday morning show for a nickel, or an aluminum pan for the war effort in recycling. If there was a war movie on at one of the large non-kiddie theaters, I'd try to get mother to take us. My favorites were the movies about flying, like, "Ten Thousand Men Trained To Be Pilots". Lots of Stearmans and other neat airplanes. It was all quite real to me - helmets and goggles and open cockpits and all that good stuff. During the war my Aunt Helen got this "Flying Tiger" veteran, Col. Robert Scott, to autograph a book about his days with the Flying Tigers. He was stationed in Orlando, where Helen worked. The name of the book was "God Is My Co-pilot"

About the time the war broke out, my brother Mike and I started building model airplanes. You could buy your basic kiddie model of sticks and paper and plans for ten cents. We preferred the plush kits you could buy for a quarter. One Saturday night we stayed up all night and completed an entire P-51 Mustang, working together on different parts till it was covered and ready for paint. Then we got dressed and went to Sunday school. Ain't youth grand!

We lived on the south side of Orlando and the airport/air base was not very far away. We would ride our bikes out to the field and admire the warplanes through the fence. There was a lot of research and development flying going on in Orlando at the time and airplanes were coming and going all the time. I was very good at aircraft recognition and explained to whoever wanted to know, what type aircraft just passed by. As a matter of fact, a few years into the war, while visiting grandfathers house in Orlando, I saw the first jet-powered aircraft America produced in WW II, a Bell Aircraft P-59, hissing by overhead while we were swimming in a lake near grandfathers house, wondering where in the world the propeller was!! During this period I completed the fourth grade. I don't remember the teacher but I do vividly remember a cute little thing in my class named Jean Morrison. She was really pretty, but the thing that impressed me was that her daddy was a pilot and a Major in the Army Air Corp and she was brought to and picked up at school in a new Ford every day. I thought it would be neat to be an Army pilot.

In the spring of 1942 we moved to Tampa and mother got a job at Drew Field, an Army Air Corp base where she packed parachutes. At first we lived in a little rental in Palm River on the east side of Tampa Bay and out in the country. We went to school in Palm River. It was pretty small and the best memory I have of the place was the lunches that were served. They had a small dining room and the food was prepared by this big black woman. She was really jolly and friendly and the food scents and food served were just outstanding.

After a short spell in Palm River we moved to a large, two-story house on Twin Lakes way out north on Armenia Avenue, a mile past the end of the Tampa city bus line. We lived right next to a lake and had our own little private beach. Mike and I and the neighboring guys built our own "boats" out of sheet-metal bent around a board (stern) and a 2x4 bow, all waterproofed with melted tar. You paddled the thing with your hands. We were pretty proud of those things but you could get pretty tacky if you rubbed up against the tar on a hot day. We used to joust among ourselves and if you lost, your boat would go straight to the bottom and you had to swim ashore and retrieve it later with the use of a real boat, a neighbor's store-bought rowboat.

There were a zillion bullfrogs in that lake and at night, Mike and I would take a broom handle and flashlight and go "frogging". Grownups used a gig but we didn't know where to get one much less afford one, so we'd smack em with the broom handle and throw them in a bucket. They were easy to clean and mother would fry up the legs for us. They'd wiggle while they were being fried in the frying pan. Mother and I and Mike thought they were great but our sisters thought the whole deal was pretty yucky.

While we lived at Twin Lakes, the Army set up a large bivouac about two miles north of the house out in the scrub brush and woods. Frequently, groups of soldiers would march by the house, along the road, and take a break near the house. My little sisters, Tilka and Elaine would fix up pitchers of ice water and offer it to the troops. They must've thought that was pretty nifty since these little girls did it on their own and were only 6 or 7 years old. One day Mike made himself a shoeshine box and headed for the camp area. This was way below my dignity; I was not going to shine shoes like the little black boys downtown. However, when he showed up one evening with about a pound of nickels, dimes, and quarters in his pockets, so much that they bulged, I re-evaluated the situation and promptly put together my own first class shoe-shine box. You only needed one color, a brush and a shoeshine rag and you were in business. The soldiers treated us like little brothers, tipped heavily, and were very nice. We frequently got a ride home in a Jeep since we let on that we had two aunts living with us. Poor guys. They never saw Marie or Helen cause they were at work when we'd be brought home. But they tried and we got a ride. No hurt feelings. The troops used to let us eat in their dining tent and we thought eating out of a mess kit was pretty special. I'm sure they would have gladly traded places with us but what the hell, there was a war on.

Mother must have been earning a decent salary because for Christmas that year, Mike and I got "Cadillac" (Shakespeare) rod and reels. I mean for a couple of nine and ten year olds, this was pretty special. I treated mine like it was made of solid gold. Wow!

At Twin Lakes school I was in the fifth grade. My teacher was Miss Bailey. She had bright red-orange hair and bright rouged cheeks and red, red lipstick. She kind of liked me I guess because I never got whacked with her long wooden ruler. Some guys though, got whacked often, right on the back of the shoulder, zap zap! She didn't tolerate repeated mistakes. If a guy misbehaved she'd take him up to the front of the class, grab him by a back pocket and let him have it for eight or ten licks while he danced around in a circle. Seems like girls never got zapped.

After living at Twin Lakes a while, mother bought a little house on Saint Isabelle Street. It was about a mile east of Drew Field where mother worked. I went to school at Tampa Bay Elementary. The war was humming along and there was a lot of flying going on day and night. One morning we went to school and there was a crashed B-17 bomber about a hundred yards behind the schoolyard. It had some sort of problem immediately after takeoff and went in, not an uncommon problem around Tampa at that time. Between the two Army fields, MacDill and Drew, there were frequent mishaps. A saying at the time was, "One a day in Tampa Bay". After school we went over and checked out the wreckage. There were large pieces of broken-up aircraft components and junk all over the place. The one thing that got our attention was the amount broken Plexiglas lying around all over the place. Plexiglas was developed and widely used in World War II airplanes for windshields and such. Anyway, we found that you could carve the stuff, with difficulty, and made rings and bracelets out of it.

Mike and I and our buddies in the neighborhood used to dig "tunnels" in a field behind our house. Actually they were a ditch which we dug, about two feet deep and covered it with lumber we "borrowed" from a near-by building site. I guess the whole deal was generated as a result of the war movies we saw at the time. Any-way, inside the tunnels is where we got the idea to try out smoking cigarettes. Mother smoked Lucky Strikes and there were plenty of them around all the time. My sisters tried them out too. It would get pretty smokie in the tunnel and they'd get sick as a dog! So did we! We gave up smoking and I didn't smoke again until I was 20.

We used to dream about owning a horse. That would be the greatest! So one day this skinny nag was wandering through the neighborhood and Mike and I captured it. We rode it bare-back and we had no bridle and the horse went where-ever he pleased. He was so skinny that his ribs showed and his back-bone hurt your butt. A short time later the horses owner found him and took him away. That's probably just as well because we discovered that horses need to eat and there was no way in hell we could afford any kind of feed for a dumb horse. Our dreams of being horse-owners went away. How-ever, we did get a doggie. We named him "Banjo." Poor dog, we couldn't feed him properly either and he expired. We got some rabbits too. Couldn't feed them properly either so we gave them to a neighbor. Mike and I would go over and visit the rabbits. We were flabbergasted when they would mate. Right in front of us! So that's what causes babies. "Yeah", the neighbor said. From that time on, we never had any pets around again.

While we were living on St. Isabelle, Aunt Marie and Aunt Helen, mother's sisters, were living and working in Tampa. They had an apartment in Hyde Park . When my birthday came around in December, 1942, Aunt Marie gave me an airline ticket for my first airplane ride. The ticket was for a flight from Tampa to Orlando. During Christmas week Mother and Aunt Marie took me out to Peter O. Knight airport to get on the flight. Peter O. Knight was Tampa Municipal Airport at the time and was located on Davis Island, a couple of miles or so from downtown Tampa. There was a real neat art deco, 1930s style passenger terminal. Actually it was completed in 1938. It had a marble floor with a mosaic of Icarus or some Greek god in flight inlaid in the floor. I thought it was a pretty high-class place and it was humming with activity and a bit crowded. The airplane I was to fly on was a twin-engine Lockheed Lodestar flown by National Airlines. At that time only two airlines served Tampa, National with Lodestars and Eastern with Douglas DC-3s. After almost being bumped because of military priorities, (and crying a little bit because of disappointment) Aunt Marie got me on about dusk. There were single rows of seats on each side of the aisle and mine was toward the rear on the right side opposite and forward of the passenger entry door. There were about 18 or so seats on the airplane, maybe only 16, whatever. After settling into what I thought was a pretty plush seat they cranked it up and away we went. It was pretty quiet and muffled and smooth and not nearly as noisy as I'd expected. After a short taxi-out we took off. I really enjoyed and was thrilled at the feel and sights and sounds of the flight. It was getting dark and some 20 to 25 minutes after take-off we landed in Orlando and I was a bit disappointed about the brevity of the whole experience. You can't believe how completely satisfied and pleased, to the soles of my feet, that I felt about that flight. God bless Aunt Marie. Grandfather and grandmother picked me up at the airport and the next day we drove back to Tampa in his pre-war Plymouth and it took a little over three hours. What an adventure! I was forever grateful to Aunt Marie for this thrill. It has occurred to me that it must have cost her at least a weeks pay. As a token of appreciation, I've tried to repay her over the years with gifts to her on her birthdays and at Christmas time, but one can never repay another for such an enlightening experience. Ain't life grand!

While we were living on St. Isabelle mother bought a piano and I took lessons with my schoolteacher, Mrs. Marshall. I didn't practice much but before we ran out of money for lessons I could play a few tunes all the way through by reading the music. Mother also bought a record player and some classical records. I guess she wanted to instill an appreciation of classical music in us and we did play the records a lot.

We had the only telephone in the neighborhood and about once a week, on Saturday nights, Sgt. Roberts used to call and we'd have to run three or four doors down the street and get Mrs. Roberts to come to the phone to talk to her husband stationed somewhere out of state, God knows where. Our neighbor across the street was in the Marines but he never called through us. Our neighbor next door was an officer in the Air Corp. His name was Benny Golden and he was a University of Florida graduate of 1939 and knew our uncle Paul Mikler who was also a graduate of the same year. 'Twas a small world.

I started junior high school at Wilson and rode the bus back and forth to school. The bus passed by Inner Bay Golf course and we frequently saw German prisoners of war working on the course. This made one realize that there was a war going on! I had the feeling at the time that there was a lot of patriotism around and the people in general were enthusiastic about pitching in and doing what was necessary for the war effort. Commodities rationing was in effect and shoes, gasoline, sugar, and other items were rationed and people had "rationing" booklets. Mother was in pretty good shape because she had five of us children. When we went to visit our grandparents for the summer we always took along our coupons, especially the ones for sugar.

During the summers Mike and I went to Slavia and stayed with Bobka and Dedko, (nicknames for Grandmother and Grandfather in Slovak). We did light work around the farm throughout the summer and when it was time to go home they would buy us our school clothes for the coming school year. Uncle Paul and Uncle Andrew were off in the Army and Uncle Joe guided us in what he wanted us to do. It was a healthy experience for us. Good discipline and a lot of prayers in the evening and church and all that stuff served us well later on. Uncle Joe took us fishing on the Saint Johns River and we got to use the rods and reels that mother had given us. Aunt Betty took us swimming at a near-by lake. She was a good looking babe and we had a few thoughts about that fantastic body that she had. She had a record player and we liked to play her records. I think that was the first time I ever heard boogie woogie. I've liked it ever since.

During the war uncle Joe had about three or four full-time black men working for him on the farm. There was Jim Boston, and "Preacher" and "Buster". I don't remember the other names. We got along real well with these men. They had worked for our dad and liked him. They called me "mister Don" and called my brother "mister Mike". I admired those guys. Buster was probably in his 20s and built like a linebacker. His specialty was clearing land. Carving farmland out of a swamp. No power tools. He used a grub hoe, axe, and shovel, and fire. He was paid by the amount of land he cleared. I really thought he was someone special. And he was gentle and polite as a lamb. I liked Preacher too. He was rather oldish and had white whiskers and smoked a pipe. He brought his lunch which consisted of what was probably leftovers served in a cold tin plate. I admired Jim Boston too. He was probably in his 40s and seemed kind of wise to me. Wise in the sense of intelligence. Not a smart ass. I remember one time uncle Joe scolded me because I'd greeted Preacher BEFORE I greeted uncle Joe. I didn't understand. After all Preacher was working in a field and was positioned between me and where uncle Joe was standing. Uncle Joe reminded me that I should talk to him before talking to any of the blacks. They worked hard and were very polite. Uncle Joe used to go to their neighborhood to pick them up in the mornings and bring them to work. In the evenings he'd take them home. Most of these folks lived in a little black community a couple of miles from the farm called Jamestown. When we lived in Slavia mother had a maid from there who used to help her out with house cleaning and the laundry and ironing. Her name was Minerva..

Uncle Joe and the younger people referred to these guys as “niggers” but the older folks referred to them as “chedveny” which means “blacks” in Slovak. I don’t believe our kin-folks were prejudice. At the time, and at that place, that was just the way people referred to blacks. As a matter of fact our grandparents and uncles had an affection for their hired hands. They would give them used boots, shoes, and clothing. They would take the men on fishing excursions to the Saint Johns River on the 5th of July to celebrate the 4th of July! It may sound a little arrogant now but at the time that was a hell of a lot more than the run of the mill red-necks did for the black folks.

After some time living on St. Isabelle, mother had a nervous breakdown and things became a little un-glued. We moved into “the project”. It was a subsidized housing development of apartment buildings for families that needed help and or support. All of our neighbors were single parents and on the lower end of the economic scale. I didn’t feel like we were poor but there wasn’t a hell of a lot of spare change around. Our apartment was clean and comfortable and had adequate space for the six of us. Things were more or less normal as we saw it. We went to school and church and had what I thought was a pretty normal life. All my buddies in the project were in the same boat and some of them even had fathers. We had a playground in the immediate area and played baseball and football on playground “teams”. In fact one year my 110 Pound, Six-Man football team won the city championship in our division. We even had our picture in the Tampa Daily Times.

After we moved to the Project I transferred from Wilson to Memorial Junior High School. I went there three years. I was interested in sports but when I went out for football I about got my brains beat out and elected to drop the whole deal. I was just not big enough to survive but I really did like all the major sports. The quality of high school sports at the time was quite good. I became interested in college sports and followed the University of Florida. A lot of the Tampa players ended up playing for Florida.

About this time we began to appreciate the value of money and did stuff to earn some here and there. Mike and I worked on milk delivery trucks for Borden’s Milk. You went down to the distribution plant at three in the morning and hopped milk off the delivery truck throughout neighborhoods in our area. The pay was three dollars a morning. We could buy our own clothes and had some left over for other things like the movies and model airplanes. We also cut lawns for a dime apiece in the project. We could do one in about fifteen minutes with a mower provided for free from the Project office.

While we were living there, World War II ended and Mike and I took a bus to town. Downtown Tampa was absolute bedlam. Traffic did not move. We walked up and down Franklin Avenue, the main drag, and when we returned to the spot from which we departed the same cars were at the same intersections that they’d been in when we were there a half-hour before, honking their horns, drinking booze and back-firing their engines. We followed a couple of tipsy sailors walking along the sidewalk and would tap them on the shoulder and point at unsuspecting approaching women. They’d grab the girls we pointed at and plant a great big kiss on them right on the spot. We quit counting at about thirty. Two or three fainted dead away. We thought this was great sport.

At the end of our building lived a Mrs. Harris and her daughter Barbara, called "Bobbie". Her boyfriend was Second Lieutenant Donald Jerome Thompson, a pilot stationed at MacDill Field. He used to buzz our area in a Stearman that he rented from Peter O. Knight airport. When he came out to see Bobbie he rode the biggest motorcycle I ever saw. Lt. Thompson was called "Bugs" by everyone. He gave barefooted Mike and I a ride on that motorcycle out to the "apex" and back. The apex was about three miles out on Florida Avenue and we got up to about a hundred miles an hour. I was impressed! Needless to say, Bugs became my all-time hero, bar none. He was a little guy about five foot eight and a bundle of energy and always had something funny to say and he even talked to young boys about flying. He usually wore his uniform at this time; a dark green Army blouse with silver wings, Army "pink" pants and a billed cap with a "fifty mission crush", the epitome, in my eyes, of a fighter pilot, just what I wanted to be.

In the summer of 1947 we moved out of the Project. We were living in Hyde Park and had a neighbor who was a truck driver. He offered to take me along on a trip to Indiana. We delivered a semi-truck full of bananas to Indianapolis and then went to his sister's house in Kokomo. I got in touch with Uncle Gus in Chicago and he sent me \$10 and invited me to Chicago. I hopped on a Greyhound and went on up there. Uncle Gus worked for the weather bureau. His work included driving around the area with-in about 50 or 60 miles of Chicago and taking information from recording stations. I went along with him a couple of times. Being my first time away from home it was all a grand adventure. He also took me to see all of my relatives on mother's side of the family. There were a bunch of them and they all gave me money! These were great-aunts and uncles and they all had great things to say about mother and how much they liked her. It was interesting to visit them in their neighborhoods. They lived in the Slovak area of Chicago and everyone on the street spoke Slovak! This was quite unusual to me because in Florida nobody outside our family's home spoke anything but English. One night Uncle Gus and Aunt Ruth took me to see the Chicago White Sox play at Comenski Park. I was a sports nut and was thrilled to see a big league baseball game. Uncle Gus had been in the Navy with the back-up catcher of the White Sox., "Skeets" Dickey. He was the younger brother of Bill Dickey who played for the New York Yankees. After the game Mister Dickey gave me a baseball that had been autographed by several team-mates. Some of these guys were or became big time stars in the majors. Time flew by quickly and soon it was time to go home and back to school. I took a Grey Hound and was back in Tampa in about two days. Mother was living on Marlin Avenue and when school started I reported to Wilson Junior High to complete the last half of the ninth grade. By now I was a year and a half behind. By the time I finished high School I'd make it an even two!

On Marlin Avenue we lived in a bungalow behind the home of a Mr. and Mrs. Shanahan. They owned "The Sea Breeze" restaurant and bar which was out in east Tampa on the 22nd Street Causeway. She owned a couple of skunks and several German Shepherds. It was noisy with all the dogs barking at the slightest provocation, and it stunk a little. Her house that is. She used to feed the skunks Tom Collins mixed drinks. They'd get so drunk they'd keel over and pass out! She also drank quite a bit and was usually drunk. Poor woman was skinny and not very attractive to say the least. She told mother that she wanted to adopt Mike and I! Good grief! Needless to say, we didn't agree. Poor woman. I kind of felt sorry for her. She was probably a nice person before her drinking days started. I think she came from a respectable old Tampa family. After a short time we moved out of that joint.

After living in the project we moved here and there because of uneven resources and rent paying problems; Marlin Avenue, Newport Street, Parker Avenue, Edison, North B, and back to Marlin. In November of 1947 when we lived on Parker Street mother gave birth to Linda. What a shock that was! She didn't "show" and we didn't know she was going to have a baby until she came home from the hospital with her. All of us immediately fell in love with the baby and she became a regular part of our somewhat fragmented, everyone-for-themselves life style.

While in Junior High School at Wilson I got a job at Whaleys Grocery Store. Immediately after I'd saved a few dollars, Mike and I went out to Peter O. Knight airport for an airplane ride. We wanted Bugs to take us up and he did so in a Piper Super Cruiser that belonged to Len Herman at General School of Aviation. What a thrill that was. We sat there enjoying the ride and poked each other in the ribs with joy and excitement. By this time Bugs had been discharged from the Army and was an instructor working for Len Herman. Bugs also flew Len's AT-6 in local air shows and continued to be a guy that I admired and wanted to emulate.

During my junior high school years I also worked at a gas station in Hyde Park for a guy named Mel Winters. I kind of admired the guy because he had been a flight instructor during WWII. I joined the Civil Air Patrol and we had weekly meetings out at a hangar at Drew Field. They had an Army L-4 and Mel gave me my first two flying lessons in the thing. The lessons only lasted fifteen minutes. I loved it but the lessons stopped when Mel left town in the middle of the night a short time later. I never knew why he left in such a hurry. He came to our apartment and got Mike and I to help him pack-up to leave. I suppose there must have been some kind of conflict between him and the owner of the gas station he ran.

At the end of 1948, Mike was hanging around out at Peter O. Knight airport. He was never bashful about asking for a job and tried to get a job working for Len Herman but Len wouldn't hire him because Mike was too small. He told me about it and I gave it a try. I wasn't much bigger than Mike was but was big enough to be hired as a line-boy. That's a kid that pushes airplanes in and out of hangars and refuels airplanes and does anything else that needs to be done on the flight-line in the nature of flunky work. My pay was to be one hour of flying time per week and best of all, my instructor was to be the one and only Bugs Thompson. I was on cloud nine and felt that all my schoolmates in sports and other activities and jobs were nothing but kid stuff and inwardly I became pretty cocky and self-assured. Mother was very happy for me and I enjoyed sharing my joy with her. By this time I was attending Plant High School. I was not real crazy about school but figured if you were going to be in aviation you'd better at least complete high school. I took the run-of-the-mill courses that were required and also Junior ROTC. They issued you an Army uniform and you played soldier about three times a week. For ROTC we had Army veterans as instructors. I rather enjoyed ROTC and the experience paid off later after I joined the Air Force.

I took my first flight lesson with Bugs in February 1949. I was working for General School of Aviation and we had about five 1946 J-3 Cubs for primary training. We had a lot of students taking flight instruction under the G. I. Bill of Rights program. This was set up by Congress to help returning WWII veterans return to private life and get productive work and it was free. Free to the vets. Uncle Sam paid the costs and Mr. Herman made a very fine living. Needless to say I loved flying and Bugs was a very fine instructor. We would spend hours talking about flying and how maneuvers were to be done and why this or that happened. I loved learning and Bugs loved to teach. He had been an instructor in the Army but he still liked imparting his knowledge to eager students. After five lessons with Bugs and four hours and forty minutes of instruction with him he sent me up solo! Boy oh boy, you don't forget that and I felt great. When I soloed, I took off and landed on the grass between runways not two hundred yards from the spot I departed from on my first airplane ride, six years earlier. We carried on and did a lot of briefing all the time because when he wasn't busy with another student I'd bend his ear and talk, talk, talk flying. That is, he'd talk, I'd listen and believe me, when it came to flying, as opposed to school stuff, my mind was a real sponge. Too bad that wasn't to be at school where I was barely average (from lack of interest).

During this period it seems that almost every-one drank booze of one kind or another. And almost every-one smoked. Smoking and boozing were a routine part of our society and went on every-where all the time. There was no such thing as "No Smoking" areas in restaurants or any-where else. Most characters in movies had a cigarette in their hand all the time. It was considered kind of cool to have a weed hanging out of your mouth like Humphrey Bogart or some other movie star. Boozing was always a part of aviation. From the 1920s on. This was particularly true in WWII.

In my opinion it was a part of the "here today gone tomorrow" attitude of the time. Maybe people were fearful and just didn't give a dam about the future since they had no idea of what would happen and enjoyed the moment. Anyway, both Bugs and Len smoked cigars and both liked booze. When things were dull at the airport and nothing much going on in the afternoon Bugs would retreat to one of the cock-tail lounges near the airport for some refreshments. At the time there were about six large old resort hotels on Davis Island and they all had real neat air-conditioned cock-tail lounges. The beverage of choice for after-noon sippin was Millers Pale Ale. It was served very chilled and you drank the stuff using a frosted martini glass versus out of the bottle. Bugs was always buying. I didn't have a dime and maybe he just wanted company. And this is when I was introduced to booze. I liked it. I was eighteen and the bar-tenders never questioned my age. If you were old enough to walk into the lounge you were old enough to be served. In the evening after work Bugs drank bourbon. I didn't drink in the evenings at the time but I sure did later on.

It was fun working at the airport and I was out there seven days a week. On weekends I'd be out there getting the airplanes out shortly after daylight. Of course after I soloed I'd sneak a flight around the pattern with each airplane as I got them out of the hangar and parked them on the grass flight-line. At General we had several different types of aircraft. These were for the purpose of training students for a commercial pilots rating. We had a brand new PA-16 Piper Clipper, an Aronica Super Chief 31 BC, a Piper Stinson 108 Station-Wagon, a Fairchild PT-19, a Ryan ST-3, and an AT-6, and the J-3s mentioned above. During my time at General I flew the Clipper, Chief, Stinson, Ryan, and Cubs. One of our hangar customers had a Piper J-5 and he let me fly it an hour for each time I washed it. I must say, it got washed a lot. When I had about 33 hours flying time I flew the J-5 to Slavia to visit with Mike who was spending the summer there. I landed on a dirt road on Dedko's farm that had orange trees growing on both sides of it. One of my wealthy cousins, Johnny Duda was green with envy. Some years earlier when Mike and I spent summers on the farm, Johnny owned a horse and he acted like a little prince or something prancing around on that goddam horse, and would NOT let anyone touch, much less ride that stinking horse..So anyway, when he sat in my airplane the obvious envy just tickled the hell out of me. This little trip was a bit fool-hearty and nobody knew about it but Mike and I, but I still had more skill than brains and got away with it. Never told a soul at the airport about what I'd done. When I'd accumulated about forty-five hours, Len Herman gave me a check-ride and issued me a Private Pilots license October 13, 1949.

There was always a lot going on around the airport. There was another school called AirCo Aviation on the airport and it was owned by Dave Skelton. He bought his daughter Betty a Pitts Special. This was the first Pitts to fly the air-show circuit and she became quite famous during this period. Before the Pitts, she flew a modified Great Lakes Trainer in airshows all over the country.

In addition to my one-on-one instruction with Bugs I got in a lot of time that was not logged in my log book and it added up to a lot of free training. I'd go along in the back seat when another student was getting training. If he got tired or disgusted I might be offered the front seat and get in some free training. This happened quite a bit. When Bugs had an air-show date I sometime got to go along. He flew Len's AT-6 and put on one hell of an air-show which featured a snap-roll on take-off. So on these trips, like to Jacksonville for instance, I'd get a little stick time in the Six.

Of all the airplanes I flew at General the most fun was the Ryan ST-3. This was an Army surplus PT-22 Primary Trainer and in my opinion one of the best pure trainers we ever produced. Bugs did a very thorough job of checking me out in it and it stood me well for all the years I flew after that. The "stick-and-rudder" basics that he instilled in me stuck for life.

Len Herman loved to play poker and there was a quarter-limit game in the school office every day. When I had nothing else to do I would kibitz quietly over-looking the hand of my hero, Bugs. Of course everyone smoked and Bugs and Len smoked cigars. The pots could grow to fifteen or twenty dollars and things sometimes got pretty interesting and I was always tickled when Bugs won, which he usually did. Then he was more likely to buy lunch or beers. We had a secretary named "Specky", a real straight arrow and she neither smoked nor drank. Her real name was Mary Elizabeth Edwards. One Christmas Eve there was a party at the airport. All the instructors, students, mechanics, airplane owners and sundry others were there and every one of them got blitzed. Specky, Betty Skelton, and I, were the only ones on the airport who were sober. Never to mind, when the party ended about dark everyone got in their cars and drove off. I worked at the airport till June of 1950.

Mother had a dog track friend named Bill Lufkin who was a bricklayer. Mother used to like to go to the dog track. I think she had visions of big winnings. Bill worked in Florida in the wintertime and up in Michigan in the summer. He offered to take Mike and I along in 1950 so that we could earn some decent money. I think he had compassion for our family and wanted to help us out. When school was out we took off in his 48' Ford. We dropped Mike off in Columbus, Ohio, where mother had arranged for him to stay with her brother, Uncle Gus. Mike worked there and Bill and I pressed on to Pontiac where we boarded with a couple who were friends of his named Buzz and Birtie Carter. We had an apartment above their garage. Bill got me a job with an older gentleman named Mr. Zander who started me out at \$1.50 per hour as a helper. One morning while we were eating breakfast the news came over the radio that South Korea had been invaded by North Korea. This little bit of news and its effect were to have a significant influence on my future. While working for Mr. Zander I really got into outstanding physical shape, hauling materials for building chimneys and such up to the roof. Birtie was from Alabama and served outstanding meals all done up Southern style. I checked out in a Super Cruiser at the local airport and took the Carters for an airplane ride one Sunday.

One weekend I went to big air-show at Wayne County Airport in Detroit. Some F-86s put on a little air show. A little while later four of the pilots were walking down the flight-line in front of me, laughing and joking and having a grand old time and they really looked sharp in their blue flying suits. I told myself, that's exactly what I want to do and look like.

During Labor Day weekend we drove up to the upper peninsula of Michigan and visited with a friend of Buzz's. We stayed in a log cabin and the area was a real wilderness near Lake Superior. We dragged nets in the lake and netted a bunch of little fish and checked out the guy's wildlife traps. A short time later summer was over. I spent most of my savings on clothes for school. Mike came up from Columbus and we returned to Florida by Greyhound bus.

I went out to the old airport often just to be around Bugs and the other people I enjoyed but it didn't pay anything so I got a job at a gas station. It didn't pay much but it was better than nothing. At the time we lived on North 'B' Street. Shortly thereafter we got a house on Marlin again and stayed there till I went in the Air force. The Korean War was in full progress and it was on the news all the time.

I started my senior year at Plant High School in the fall of 1950. One day in class I noticed this cute little thing sitting next to the windows. That was where people sat who had done their homework. I was not among them but Thelma Roberts was. The teacher was a real flake and everyone pretty much put her on. One thing led to another and in no time I was smitten like you wouldn't believe. I worked in the lunchroom and got free meals for doing so. As soon as my work in the lunchroom was done I'd head for the parking lot where Thelma and her girl friend Harriet Symmes would be sitting in Harriet's car puffing cigarettes. We started seeing each other more and more and pretty soon we were going steady and I was sure enough in love. It was a lot of fun running around with Thelma, Harriet and their little circle of friends, Betty Jean Stallings, Shelia Nowatney, Jimmy Hicks, etc. Now and then we'd skip school and go to the beach or state park or whatever. Harriet and Jimmy had cars so we never lacked for transportation and did our own thing. We graduated in June of 1951. Afterward, everyone went to the beach, an old school custom. The girls rented a house and the guys rented a place nearby. We had a glorious time but the week was over with in no time and Thelma cried when we went home.

The summer following graduation we both got real jobs. She went to work for the Florida Citrus Exchange and I got lucky and was hired by Western Electric. My job was as a trainee working at the telephone exchange. Western did all of the wiring within exchanges for Southern Bell Telephone Company. I started at \$1.25 per hour and was shortly raised to one-fifty and promptly went out and bought a little 1948 English Ford. Thelma and I went all over the place in that little old car.

In the Spring of 1952 I noticed a little article on the front page of The Tampa Times. It stated that the Air Force was going to start up the Aviation Cadet program like they had during World War II. During the period after WWII one needed a college degree in order to get into the Air Forces' flying training program. The article further stated that if you enlisted in the Air Force as an Airman and could pass the physical and written tests that you could get into the pilot training program and get your pilot wings and a commission as a 2nd Lieutenant.

Conscription into the armed forces was in effect at the time because of Korea. I was about to get a draft notice to be drafted into the Army. So after finding out about the cadet stuff I went down and enlisted in the Air Force. A few days later I got a draft notice to report for an Army physical. Too late Army, I've already joined the Air Force.

In April, I quit my job with Western Electric and spent the rest of my days before entry into the Air Force flying with Bugs. By this time he had been hired by Winn-Lovette Grocery Company as their corporate pilot and was flying a D-18 Twin Beach. It was called the 'Dixie Darling' after a brand of bread that they sold in their grocery chain. We flew almost daily all over the south-east from Dothan, Alabama to Orlando and Miami and points in between carrying executives where-ever they needed to go. Often staying over-night in Miami or Jacksonville or where-ever. It was super training and the company honchos seemed pleased to know I was going into the Air Force and felt proud that I was flying with them. A year or so later after I had my wings and commission and flew with Bugs a time or two while on leave, they were really proud and told me so. I felt pretty good about that. They were a fine bunch of gentlemen and had I not been in the Air Force I'd liked to have worked for them.

About May 20, 1952 I bid farewell to the love of my life, Thelma, and mother and Thelma's parents and got on a train and headed for San Antonio, Texas to go through Air Force basic training. On the one hand it was a sad day because I loved Thelma and was going to miss her greatly; on the other, I couldn't help anticipating the unknown that lay ahead.

Four of us young guys going into the Air Force from Tampa were on the train. The Air Force provided first class tickets and also coupons to use in the dining car. It was a pretty classy train with berths made up for overnight sleeping etc. I think we were on that train about two days and two nights with a bit of a layover in New Orleans. We got to San Antonio in the afternoon and were met by an Air Force bus driver and delivered to a barracks at Lackland Air Force Base. We were housed in a wood-frame, two-story barracks that was probably built in World War II. The barracks were of the "open bay" type with about forty guys to the bay, assigned to bunk beds arranged in two long rows. You were also provided a footlocker and a wall rack for hanging up clothes. We had a three-stripe airman assigned as our "Tactical Instructor". He was our leader for the basic-training drill for twelve weeks. He was a pretty decent sort and treated us with a professional attitude and no idiot-treatment. After we'd been there a few days the TI asked our Flight if anyone wanted to try out for Pilot Training. About ten of us volunteered and were scheduled for testing.

The testing took three entire days and included basic IQ and academic testing along with co-ordination, eye-hand contact tests and general aviation aptitude testing, etc. I really aced the aviation part but had no idea how I'd done on the rest. The last phase of testing was a physical exam, which was pretty thorough, but I wasn't too concerned about it because I was in super shape and felt terrific. I got a little surprise when the doctor told me my blood pressure was high. He was a nice old guy and told me I was probably too excited and to return daily for a week. Sure enough in a day or two the blood pressure went down to normal and I passed the physical. In the future I decided that I wouldn't take any chances on blood-pressure tests and took the necessary steps to avoid re-testing. That is, I'd write in my blood pressure in the privacy of the men's room.

In the mean-time we did all this military stuff, marching everywhere you went, lots of exercising, rifle training and qualification and general academic classes etc. We kept the barracks spotless and were inspected frequently and sailed on through basic without a problem. We got off base now and then and went to San Antonio.

It was the middle of the summer and it was hot as hell and you'd be pretty well soaked in sweat buy the time the sun came up. We marched everywhere we went including the chow-hall. The food was pretty decent and we ate off of metal serving trays. The troops did their share of "KP," (kitchen police) that is, worked in the dining hall washing pots, pans, trays, tables, and floors. Since I was a "Squad-Leader" I was excused from this stuff. I'd had three years of high-school ROTC training and knew how to march and carry a rifle etc and had a jump on Joe Sixpack so was made a squad leader.

One day we were told about our pilot training tests and I was told that I hadn't made the grade. I was absolutely crushed and felt like shooting myself I was so disappointed. The next day I was told that there had been a mistake and that I'd passed! Needless to say I felt very, very relieved, and very happy. As it turned out, about three of us made it. The rest of those poor bastards were gonna have to spend their time (four years) as grunt-no-classes.

After twelve weeks of mickey-mouse we completed Basic and I was assigned to Reese Air Force Base, in Lubbock, Texas. The cadet program that I had gotten myself into was relatively new and there were a zillion guys jumping in. This resulted in a backlog of guys waiting for a pilot training class assignment; hence the assignment to Reese. I had received a personal "form" letter from the General in charge of Flying Training, Air Force, and was assured that the Air Force was happy to have me and that I would be assigned to a pilot training class in the near future.

At Reese we lived in WW II open-bay barracks and were assigned to the flight-line as "assistant crew chiefs". Reese was a multi-engine, advanced pilot training base and had T-6s and B-25s. I was assigned to the T-6 flight-line. There were so many guys like myself that we only worked six hours a day, from six in the morning till noon. The work consisted mainly of refueling the airplanes and wiping the considerable amount of oil off of the birds when they returned from a flight. They weren't about to issue us weenies a wrench for serious work on an airplane. It was kind of fun and I knew it wouldn't last long. I met quite a few guys that were in the same boat as I was and we became long-lasting friends with Emmett Weber, "Speedy" Moore, Dick Lee, Roman Lins and a few others.

I'd been at Reese a few weeks and the Labor Day weekend came along. Weber had just arrived at Reese and we decided to hitch-hike to Florida and pick up his car since one was not allowed to have his own car in basic. He contacted his mother and I called mother and Thelma. Weber's mother drove his car up to Tallahassee. We made the trip down without delay and all of us met in Tallahassee. What a neat deal to see my one-and-only after what we'd been through in the summer and to share the excitement of the future and going to pilot training, around which our lives twirled at the time. I had my terrific girl friend and was going to go to Air Force pilot training and be a jet pilot. What could be better! We drove straight through, back to Lubbock in time to go to work Monday morning.

One of the guys we ran around with was from California and wanted to go out there and pick up his car too. At the time one could make a deal with a car dealer and get a car to deliver to California from Texas at no expense. In fact they bought the gas and you had free transportation one-way. We got a 1952 Oldsmobile 98 and drove it to Los Angeles where we met his parents at the Brown Derby in Los Angeles. After a short lunch we got into his Chevy and drove back to Lubbock. Since I'd never been out west it was a real lark and we saw a lot of country and had a good time, even though we spent very little time outside the car. We got back to Reese in time to go to work the following Monday. Obviously we didn't consider the "what-ifs" at the time but had we been delayed because of car problems or whatever we could have been in deep kimshee with regard to going to any pilot training class because of being absent without leave. What the hell, we were invulnerable, right? Right!

Christmas came along in 1952 and Weber and I got in his '46 Ford Coupe and took off on leave to Florida. We drove straight through without stopping except to refuel and eat a bite. The first night was a real bitch because we'd been up all day. By the time we took off after working all day, I got the night shift driving as Weber took a nap. Pretty hard to stay awake but we muddled through. I got off in Tampa and Weber continued on to his parent's home in Miami.

I'd bought Thelma an engagement diamond from Zales Jewelry in Lubbock. It was half a carat and cost \$450. Took me a year to pay it off but it was a really nice ring. I presented it to her on her friend Harriet Symmes' front porch and she accepted it. We had a great old time on leave and all too soon Weber returned and we drove back to Lubbock. Enroute back we heard over the radio that hill-billy singer Hank Williams had died. He was a big hit in Lubbock at the time and all you heard at the local drive-in or on the radio at the time was Hank Williams and "Your Cheatin Heart" and "Jambalaya" and stuff. A few days after we got back to Reese there was a notice on the Squadron bulletin board that announced that orders were about to be published assigning pilot training class start-dates. Hot dam, we're on our way! A short time later we were on our way back to Lackland Air Force Base where the Air Force had established a Pre-Flight Training program. I drove down to Lackland with Weber. My first trip to the Base Exchange, I bought new brass for my Air Force hat and shirt collar. Cadets wore officer brass and I remember throwing away the airman's brass into the brush on the walk back to our new barracks. Preflight was under way at last.

Again, we lived in open-bay barracks, 40 or so guys to a bay but the buildings were new and modern compared to what I'd been living in until this time in the Air Force. Everywhere you went you marched in a neat military formation. We could march pretty good by now since all the guys were airmen previously and had been through Air Force Basic Training. When you weren't marching, you ran. Ran ran ran all the time, anytime you weren't in formation. And you had to holler like an idiot when you ran. They called it the "Tiger Program" and I realized later on that they wanted us to be aggressive. The theory was that aggression paid off in combat and the Korean War was in full progress and we'd be part of it in no time at all. History later proved that the aggressive guy had the upper hand in combat.

I thought Preflight was a little bit mickey-mouse but I guess it had its purpose although I didn't see where one couldn't get the same thing while in Primary or Basic pilot training. About the only academic stuff I recall was "Officers Responsibilities", kind of a couth course for us unwashables. We got off base a few times and 99% of the troops got pretty well blitzed so maybe there was a little more pressure on the guys than I'd imagined. After twelve weeks we were done and on our way to Primary Pilot Training where they would have real airplanes. At Preflight the only time you saw an airplane was when one flew overhead. We departed Lackland and Weber and I drove to Houston where I got on an Eastern Airlines Super Connie and flew to Tampa to see my girlfriend Thelma. We flew in or near thunderstorms, probably near, and I was in the lounge at the rear of the aircraft and I kid you not, you could see that sucker twist in rough air. You could see the full length of the airplane from the back end to the cockpit, and it twisted! The leave in Tampa was all too short and pretty soon I was on my way to Marana Air Base near Tucson, Arizona. The flight out there was on an American Airlines DC-6 and I left from Tampa's new terminal. The terminal was at the south boundary of the airport at what was formerly Drew Field, now Tampa International Airport.

I arrived in Tucson in April 1953. Tucson was a pretty neat place and I liked the desert straightaway. It was dry as dust and you could see forever in the clear dry air. I took a bus out to Marana Air Base, about twenty-some miles north of Tucson.

Marana was a civilian operated school for the Air Force. All the instructors were civilians. The dining hall was operated by civilians and the food was absolutely the best and the little old ladies that ran it treated us like we were their own little boys. You want ice cream for breakfast? Help yourself!

The only military people on base were a few non-pilot lieutenants who were our "tactical officers" and the military flight-check officers and a few officers who ran the dispensary. The cadets kind of ran things on a day-to-day basis as far as getting from one place to another etc. First the Upper Classmen and then us when we became upperclassmen. There was very little mickey-mouse since everyone was primarily interested in flying. It was down right hot at Marana in the summer and difficult to keep your uniform from wrinkling. All the upperclassmen cared about was the shine on your shoes and the shine on the bill of your hat. A piece of cake! Academics was a little more important since it bore directly with the flying game, and it was a lot more interesting than what we'd been fed in preflight. The only part I had a problem with was dead-reckoning and wind problems but Ebb Harris, a whiz, gave me a hand and I finally saw the light.

We hadn't been on base but a few days when we started flying at last. The flying program consisted of flying a Piper PA-18 for twenty hours and the North American T-6 for one hundred twenty hours. The theory was that the Piper time was meant to determine ones aptitude for flying. Only one guy washed out and one quit.

My instructor was Carl Anderson. He was a tall Mormon, very courteous and polite and a very fine instructor. When we started our first day of flight training we were required to fill out a brief biography and they wanted to know if you had any previous flight training. I had about 150 hours of flying time. Mr. Anderson noted this fact and never mentioned it again. I think he was pleased that one of his students could already fly. There were four of us assigned to each instructor. Besides me there was Jim Duffes, Mel Larsen, and Stanley Wiggins. My buddies had zero flying time and Mr. Anderson had his work cutout for himself. When I'd fly with him he would demonstrate what he wanted done and I could do it without a lot of yakking on his part in no time. Usually he'd take a coke along on our flights and just sit back there in the back seat and enjoy the break. Before I left Tampa, Bugs had told me to do exactly as instructed even though you had some flying training and already knew how to fly and that's exactly what I did. We were issued a little check-list for the Cub. It was printed on a little four by five card. Imagine! Any-way, I used it as told. We wore parachutes too! Seat-packs, your head almost touched the ceiling of that little Cub! It seemed pretty silly to me but I followed the herd and did what I was told, like Bugs said, and had no problems at all.

Every guy in my class was kind of like myself in that they really wanted to be there and had the same ambitions that I did. Even though most had never been in an airplane they did well and hardly anyone flunked out. We completed the course in Primary without scratching an airplane or killing anyone; which was rather noteworthy at the time. The high quality of our class was proven over the years in that those who stayed in the military did quite well with regard to longevity. The guys who got out of the Air Force when their commitments were completed did very well with the airlines and lived to retirement. Those who entered private business also did well. The deal at the time was that if you accepted pilot training you would stay in the Air Force for three years after being granted a commission.

Primary was a lot of fun and I couldn't believe they were paying us to do this but I finally accepted the fact. We only got about \$90 a month but all you had to pay for was getting your laundry done and for hair-cuts and that was dirt cheap. My buddies had cars so we had off-base transportation when we needed it and enjoyed running around Tucson and the local area. Admission to the movies on base was a quarter and we went almost every night. They made a lot of movies in the fifties. Cigarettes were a quarter, beer .15¢, drinks at the Club .25¢.

We had a real nice Cadet club and a new swimming pool was completed shortly after we got to Marana. We lived in one-story, motel-like buildings. The cadets were assigned two-to-a-room, partitions separated the rooms but it was a nice improvement over what we'd previously had.

Flying the Piper was a piece of cake and when I got to the T-6 it was a little more of a hand-full but it came easy and I loved doing aerobatics in it. I'd fly it an hour-and-a-half and log an hour. The Air Force got even though when some of my buddies would fly forty-five minutes and log an hour. The time went by in a flash. I passed all my check-rides without a problem and we were done with Primary. Looking back on Primary, I believe the instrument training left a lot to be desired. They didn't teach the technicalities of why this or that happened and how to do it. There are "control" instruments and "performance" instruments. At the time these things were not covered. Years later these things would become standard topics in teaching instrument flying. In the mean-time we muddled through and when we left Primary we could keep the airplane right-side-up in a turn or two without spinning in and I guess that was progress at the time.

Some of the week-end highlights were a few trips to Los Angeles with Marv Whiteman, Ebb Harris, and Neil Graff. Marv's father was rather wealthy and he would send his personal airplane to Tucson from Los Angeles so Marv could fly it on the week-ends. It was a new Beechcraft Bonanza, a real little Cadillac. We used it a few times to fly to LA. Spend the night at Marv's dad's place at Whiteman Airpark and fly down to Balboa the next day to water-ski, then back to Tucson Sunday afternoon.

Marve's dad also provided Marv with a credit card so if we ever ran out of money we could always rely on Marv for a small loan. On our last trip out to LA Marv's dad gave him a Cessna 170. So we left the Bonanza in LA and flew the Cessna back to Tucson. It was so slow we had to land along side the road on the way back to buy beer from a tavern. Ah yes, the life of a cadet was really tough. It was HOT in that Cessna and a guy could get thirsty over the desert!

Marana was a ball. The highlights I remember most were the very fine food and the great flying. In October the fun was over and I headed for Foster Air Force Base in Victoria, Texas and single-engine-jet training in the T-33 versus multi-engine school and the B-25. I had my choice of bases and picked Foster because it would be closer to Tampa come Christmas-time. Later I found out that was a big miscalculation. I could have gone to Williams. Everyone who went to Willy went on to Nellis, THE Fighter School. If you went to Nellis you were a fighter pilot forever. But, I didn't know that at the time. Probably saved my life. I'd probably have gotten to Tampa one way or another anyway.

At Foster I joined up with Weber again. He'd gone to Primary at Goodfellow up in San Angelo, Texas. We lived in new barracks that were two-story and had two guys assigned to a room. As opposed to Primary, Foster was all military, including the chow-hall. The Air Force cooking didn't hold a candle to the fine food we had at Marana. Foster was called a Basic Pilot Training base and we were to fly North American T-28s and the Lockheed T-33

Basic was even better than Primary with regard to mickey-mouse, The upper-classmen didn't bug you at all. Everyone acted and felt like it wouldn't be long till you were an officer and the bullshit was not all that important. After all, getting your wings and commission was getting closer and closer and who needed the hassle. I was beginning to feel like an officer even a month or two before graduation. Felt good!

The T-28 was a real little "Cadillac". Smooth, and felt powerful. Somewhat heavier than a T-6 but a lot lighter on the controls and it had tricycle landing gear which meant no more "S" taxiing like in the blind T-6. It had an 800 HP engine and you could get it up to 350 knots indicated, even if you were a bit past the "red-line." On my first solo in it I went over 350. I just had to tell somebody so I told mother in a letter.

My instructor was First Lieutenant Bill Connor, a University of Tennessee graduate. He was a pretty decent sort and by this time, the job for him was to just check us out in the airplane. We knew how to fly after all. The instrument training got a little more complex. With regard to instruments, these guys weren't any better at teaching instrument flying than the instructors in Primary. All they would say was "speed up your cross-check" but wouldn't give you a clue as to why this or that would happen and why. They didn't know either. Any way, in spite of this wonderful leadership and "instruction" you learned how to make an instrument approach and get the cotton-picking airplane on the run-way in one piece.

Our first formation flying was in the T-28. On the first formation ride I was amazed at how much everything moved around in the cock-pit. Stick and rudders moving back and forth and fore and aft as was the throttle. It looked to me like a guy "killing snakes" or something with the stick. I hadn't realized previously that to fly formation you couldn't just pick a power setting and expect to stay right there up with your leader. Small adjustments in control forces and power settings were continually required if you're gonna stick with your leader, which is paramount.

We got 60 hours in the T-28. This included the basics plus formation flying, follow-the-leader aerobatics (trail formation) and instrument approach training including "aural null", ADF, radio-range, VOR, ILS, and GCA (Ground Controlled Approach) stuff. At the time the Air Force was touting itself as the "all-weather, all jet" air force.

One of my early flight commanders, a WWII veteran, later told me that us weenies could fly better on instruments than he could when he was flying combat overseas during the war. So maybe the training was better than I thought. At least we got to do it on a routine basis. We completed the T-28 phase in December and took off in Weber's Ford again for Christmas leave in Florida and a reunion with my sweetie pie, Thelma. I loved that girl and couldn't wait to see her again! While I was home on leave I took several trips with Bugs in the Twin Beech and the old owners were proud of me. Felt good. Maybe they hoped their own boys could do the same.

We returned to Foster and on January 7, 1954, I got my first flight in a Lockheed T-33 jet. It weighed about 13,600 pounds when loaded with fuel and had a 4600-pound-thrust Allison jet engine. I was 22 years old and thought I had the world by the gonads. The T-Bird carried 813 gallons of JP-4 jet fuel. It really was not all that large but I thought at the time that the T-Bird was a real big brute.

Up until this time I'd flown with a baseball cap on my head, or an "overseas" cap. Now we wore a jet helmet! Boy we thought that was shit-hot. We used to wear a helmet in our quarters in the evenings so as to get accustomed to it. You also wore an oxygen mask. It was hooked up and hooked in place from engine start to engine shutdown. It had a "hot" microphone and transmitted continuously on "inter-phone" the whole time it was hooked up; you could always hear the other guy, or yourself if solo, breathing. It was "hot" so that you didn't have to push a mike button in order to talk over the inter-phone. It took a little getting used to, hence the barracks wear. I guess maybe the Air Force put in a hot mike so the instructor could tell if his student was hyperventilating. This probably happened with some students but not with yours truly for sure.

I absolutely loved that T-33 and the idea of flying jets. In 1954 the only guys in the world flying jets were in the military and there weren't all that many jet pilots around and you felt kind of special. It was a great feeling and did wonders for your ego.

When you put that helmet on and cranked up that engine it was SMOOTH and quiet and you could hear this low rumble and whine. You felt no vibration what-so-ever like the prop jobs. And the smell of burning JP-4, like kerosene, smelled terrific and got in your blood. A great feeling. And when you closed the canopy things got even quieter and about all you could hear was your own breathing. Talking in the mike or over the radio was calm and soft like talking over the phone in your house. No background noise. It was clean and air-conditioned. Really felt neat!

The T-Bird didn't have nose-wheel steering and you steered the thing with differential braking in order to turn the nose wheel. You had to be careful and not over-steer. One of my classmates did about three 360s on his way to the runway one day and was sent back to the ramp by the Tower and told to try it again another time after a little more dual instruction. He was a bit embarrassed to say the least. He was my roommate and I didn't dare tease him about it either. He had a short fuse on this subject. He ended up going to bombers.

Prior to your normal take-off the routine called for a check of all instruments at 100% power. When all checked normal you released the brakes and away you went. Full power didn't exactly slam you into your seat but it did get you under-way smartly. It lumbered along and gathered speed and you lifted off around 120 or 130 knots and it felt a little heavy till you got the flaps up and started climbing at about 230 or so. It was super smooth with hydraulic boosted controls and at first you had to concentrate so as not to over control, especially the ailerons. When you got up to cruise speed it was very smooth and light on the controls. And when you burned the fuel out of the tip-tanks (230 gal each), it was a really fun airplane to do aerobatics in. After about six hours of dual instruction my instructor sent me out SOLO. Now you gotta understand, the name of the game in the flying racket is that one must appear cool, calm, and collected at all times, especially in front of one's contemporaries. On your first solo the drill was that after engine start and taxi-out to the active runway and prior to takeoff, they wanted you to come to a stop on the runway. Then you ran the engine up to 100% and transmitted all the engine instrument readings to Mobile Control. The instructor was in Mobile. In order to sound cool and nonchalant I'd written all the readings and what they were supposed to read on a card so that I could read it out over the radio without missing anything and to sound calm and cool. So I ran up to 100% and checked a few gauges and read out the spiel as listed on my card. At full power and holding the brakes my knees were shaking so bad I thought I'd be unable to keep the brakes on. I even counted to ten out loud, but not transmitting over the radio, before I made my report over the radio. My voice sounded calm, you can hear yourself when you transmit, and they cleared me for take-off. At last I was able to release the brakes and my knees quit shaking immediately. So I rumbled off down the runway and made an uneventful take-off. I get the gear and flaps up and am accelerating to climb speed. About 120 seconds have passed since brake release and this bright red light right in front on my nose lights up like a cop-car beacon and I about have a heart-attack.

With-in a millisecon I realize it's the fuselage tank low-fuel level warning light. During my recitation before take-off I'd failed to turn on ALL the fuel tank boost-pumps hence, I was only burning out of the fuselage tank and when the fuel there-in got down to about 60 gallons the light came on. All of the toggle switches for the boost pumps were located just above the throttle and there was a bar lever below the switches that allowed you to "gang-load" all six boost pumps at once. I hit that gang-load switch so hard, in my excitement, that I thought I was going to knock it off the cockpit wall. All the boost pumps worked as advertised and the super huge red light went out within seconds. I climbed on up to altitude and did some lazy eights and chandelles and went on in to land after about an hour and twenty minutes and made an uneventful landing. I felt just like the guy described in the ode "Initial Checkout" written by an instructor who I later became friends with in the 91st Fighter Squadron at Bentwaters, England.

The Lockheed Aircraft Corporation T-33 was a fine little airplane. It was developed from the F-80, which was one of America's first operational jet fighters. About all they did was stretch it enough to put in an additional seat. It had an Allison, J-33-A-35 centrifugal-flow jet engine that produced 4,600 of thrust. It weighed a tad over 13,000 pounds when fully loaded with fuel. Total fuel was 813 gallons and it would last about two-and-one-half hours at altitude. Not long but it was fun. At altitude you could cruise at about 350 Knots. It was a good little cross-country airplane because it was so reliable, all you had to do was refuel it and go! It was also fun to do aerobatics in and unlike some jets, you could safely spin the airplane. We only spun it after major maintenance on test flights, routine spins were not authorized, but you could do them safely, even if they were a little unusual, like the nose coming nearly up to the horizon during rotation, and recovery was completely different from prop jobs. All in all I really liked the airplane. As it turned out, I picked up the seventh from the last T-33 manufactured from Palmdale, California and delivered it to Offutt AFB, Nebraska, about late 1960 or early 1961.

We flew the T-33 for seventy hours in Basic. The flying was easy for me and we completed Basic and received our Wings and Commission 14 April 1954. Upon completion of basic I had logged 273 hours of Air Force flying time. This time included flying the Cub, T-6, T-28, and the T-33. I felt very comfortable and confident in flying the T-Bird and when my instructor asked me where I wanted to go for Advanced, I told him, FIGHTERS. In the middle of April I departed Foster with my friend Emmett Weber and we went to San Antonio where Emmett wanted to buy a new car before we were to report to Laughlin AFB, Del Rio, Texas for "Advanced" training.

Several weeks before graduating, new car dealers and uniform sales representatives showed up at our base and made a pitch for their products. One of them referred to us as "fire can Dans" ?! I ordered a suit and two dress uniforms from one of the tailor-made suit people but had no intention of buying a new car. However, when I accompanied Weber to a new car dealer, I weakened. The salesman treated us to lunch where-upon he ordered Martinis before a nice steak-dinner and a little wine. By the time Weber picked out a color for his new Chevrolet and completed the deal I decided I'd like one just like Weber's. But I wanted a blue and white one vs the aqua and white that Weber had ordered. When it came to financing, the guy told us to go down the street and open a checking account with the Bank of Fort Sam Houston. They catered to the military, especially to young new officers. We did so and returned to the dealership where we agreed to sign 24 checks made out to the dealer for \$124 each, dated in consecutive months. Talk about fish! Our cars were soon prepared and ready and we took off for Del Rio. That little 1954 Chevrolet, Bell-Aire four-door with a straight-six and power-glide automatic transmission was a sweet little car and I kept it until 1958. The bank? All went well for the term of the checks and I still have an account with them.

Advanced pilot training at the time consisted of Phase One and Phase Two gunnery for the guys that were going to continue on to fighters. The bomber, tanker, transport, and helicopters guys went to different training bases.

Phase One consisted of flying the T-33 for forty hours. We flew high and low angle bombing and strafing missions, skip-bombing, and air-to-air gunnery shooting at a target towed by another T-3. Each instructor had four students. My instructor was First Lieutenant Leo Origer, a Korean veteran recently returned from Korea. Our call sign was "Draugh". As in "draugh four beers". All the call-signs in the squadron were bar-talk words like Whiskey, Martini, etc.

Leo always led a flight of four. One of his students "sand-bagged" in the back seat of his T-Bird and the other three flew formation on Leo. The students took turns sand-bagging. We flew every day but not on week-ends. It was a lot of fun flying around and legally buzzing all over the place and shooting the guns on the gunnery ranges. Air to air gunnery was a bit of a challenge during this period. We students had a hell of a time trying to figure out how in hell to fly the air to air pattern without running in to each other, but we muddled through and didn't hit shit, with the guns that is. The time flew by quickly and we were on our way to Phase Two.

The week-end before we departed Del Rio there was a hell of a storm with lots of rain and the bridge to Villa Acuna, across the river from Del Rio, washed out. A bunch of guys visiting bars over there had to move on to their next base without their cars, and go retrieve them at a later date. I didn't have to do that but I thought the whole deal was pretty funny. Some of the guys went on to Phoenix and it was a real hassle for them to go back to Del Rio and retrieve their stupid cars, parked at some bar in Mexico!

Phase Two was at Luke AFB, near Phoenix, Arizona. We flew the Republic Aircraft Corp. F-84-E "Thunder-jet" aka the "Hog". The course called for 40 hours of gunnery training. I went through Luke in June and July 1954. We flew two or three missions a day and were done by noon. We flew mornings because it was so hot. When you got down from a flight, even the first of the day, the only dry article of clothing on your body was the collar of your flying suit. The performance of the "Hog" left a lot to be desired to say the least because it was so under-powered. The airplane weighed around twenty-some thousand pounds with a full load of fuel and ammo and was powered by an Allison J-35-A7 axial-flow engine that had a thrust of 4,900 pounds. All the birds at Luke were rather worn out, having spent the prime of their careers in Europe or the Far East. I seem to remember that climbing up to a measly 20,000 feet took about twenty minutes! It was a good flying airplane and a very stable platform for shooting gunnery. I liked the idea of flying a single place fighter; it was new to me and a lot of fun. I didn't experience any of the knee-knocking on the first flight as I did on the T-Bird first solo flight.

All of the instructors at Luke were, for the most part, veterans of the war in Korea and were real tigers. Aggressive and a challenge for us weenies to keep up with. The attrition rate to fatalities was about one every two weeks or so. The way they treated you, you were a pilot after all, and if you could keep up with them and not kill yourself, did wonders for your confidence and in no time you thought you were completely indestructible and could whip anyone in the worlds ass, no doubt. Just what they wanted for combat. Even though the Korean war was over, the Air Force expected its fighter-pilots to be "tigers". We always had an instructor that led a flight of four. Most of the time you had your assigned instructor, mine was 1st Lt Levinger and our call-sign was "Yankee", a little more macho than "Dawgy", back at Basic. The instructor led the same three students all the time, I flew with Kermit Wiess and Roman Lins and we became lifelong friends.

During my stay at Luke we lost a few guys that flew into the desert and bought the farm. We also lost our flight-commander, Capt. Goldberg who crashed somewhere back east in an F-84F that he had picked up at the factory for delivery to Luke. These things didn't bother me much , I kind of felt like, too bad what the hell, poor bastard flew into the ground, shouldn't do that, I ain't!!!

The instructors at Luke got through to us on how to fly the air-to-air gunnery pattern and it was really fun after you understood what the hell was going on and how to do it. We even hit the rag enough to qualify, although I must say you didn't need all that many hits to qualify...15%??! I don't remember but it wasn't much and I did.

We flew low-level most of the time when we were doing ground gunnery. On some flights, while returning to Luke from the range at Gila Bend, we'd go over to the Grand Canyon. The instructor would put us in trail, (follow the leader) and take the flight down to the river at the bottom of the canyon at four hundred knots. Hell of a view.

About the middle of my tour at Luke, my brother Mike showed up at Luke. He was in the Army and was en-route to Korea. He had reported to New York but when he got there he was told that he wasn't going to Germany but was being reassigned to Korea. He hopped on a bus, met a sweet little thing and diverted to Phoenix. He conned me in to loaning him my car so the two of them could drive up to Seattle together. Being a dumb-ass I loaned him the car and they were off. He managed to burn a hole in the front seat but other-wise the car was in good shape when I picked it up in Seattle.

About the middle of July, 1954 we completed the course and headed for future assignments in the real Air Force. I was assigned to Turner AFB, Georgia and the 508th Strategic Fighter Wing, 466th Strategic Fighter Squadron.

I left Luke with Bill Gugin, a classmate who was from Portland, Oregon. We drove up there to his parent's home and I stayed a day or so. One day we drove over to the Pacific coast. I remember we drove a long way at one point beside a very extensive area of burned out forest, miles and miles. After a short visit I caught an airliner to Seattle and called the place where Mike had put my car in storage. When I got there it was all washed and clean and ready to go. I threw my stuff in the car and headed for Portland. In Portland I picked up my foot-locker at Bill's parents and headed off to the east along the Colombia River and points east toward Florida. I was on a 30-day leave and was anxious to see Thelma.

It was a nice trip, before inter-state highways were built. The highlights that I remember most vividly were a view to the west while climbing an incline into Pendleton, Oregon, you could see forever. I drove day and night, stopping now and then for a little sleep in the car. I always stopped in the direction I was going so as not to be turned around and confused as to which way to go when I woke up. The drive through the Rocky Mountains was all at night so I no doubt missed a lot of great views. I went through Colorado Springs during day-time and thought that it was a real neat little town. The rest of the trip to Tampa was kind of boring. After driving three or four days I got to Tampa and saw my sweetie-pie. We went to the beach and stuff and had a good old time. I think Thelma was a little disappointed when I told her I wasn't quite ready to get married yet. She loved me and I knew it to the bottom of my shoes so I was one lucky lieutenant. Soon I was off to my new life in a real Air Force fighter squadron.

I signed in at Turner Air Force Base, Albany, Georgia in September 1954. Turner was a Strategic Air Command base with two Wings of F-84Gs. The 31st and 508th Strategic Fighter Wings. I was in the 508th. The Wing Commander was Col. Cy Wilson, he looked like a little bantam rooster; He was a short and grumpy old bastard who was not fond of Second Lieutenants. When introduced at the club one night shortly after we got there he didn't shake our hands and said "yeah, I met em". The 31st Wing Commander was Col. Dave Schilling, a high-scoring ace of World War II. He was a real gentleman and even spoke to second lieutenants. All of the commanders and a lot of other supervisory guys had been in World War II. We had an Air Division on the field commanded by Brig. Gen Thayer Olds. He had been some kind of honcho in England. Us young guys thought of him as an old grandmother. There were WWII Aces all over the place; Colonel Gerald Johnson, Major Billy G. Edens, and I don't know who else. A lot of them had been German prisoners of war and were blood brothers..

One morning just before New Years I had parked my car near the flight line and was walking to my squadron with a couple of buddies. We were yakkin and jokin and lolly-gaggin like lieutenants do. We entered the personnel gate where Billy Edens was checking everybody's flight line security badge. Why, I don't know. Anyway, he was all down-in-the-mouth and very serious and didn't particularly care for our cavalier manners. When we got to the squadron we heard that Col Cy Wilson had been killed the evening prior in an attempted dead-stick landing onto a highway in Mississippi. He had engine failure and was going to save the airplane so investigators could determine what was causing frequent failures at that time. Edens and Wilson were friends and fellow POWs. No wonder he was down-in-the-mouth but still, we had no way of knowing what had happened the night before and I felt kind of bad about the way we were probably perceived...

When the F84F came along the Air Force experienced a lot of losses due to systems and engine problems. It was just part of doing business at the time. The WWII attitude that "you gotta expect losses" still prevailed. Ten years later on when I was in bombers, if there was an accident every pilot flying that bomber, B-47, would be required to read the accident report telling you what happened and what the cause was. This was not the case in 1954. We knew there were a lot of 84Fs being lost but we weren't told much about causes. In fact, some of the senior lieutenants and young captains who were Korean vets etc just plain old got out of the service rather than fly that thing. Me, I didn't know any better and was glad to be there. Accidents happened to other guys, not me...

We had quite a group of guys from my class assigned to Turner and it was like old home week when I got there. Roman Lins, Weber, Jim Duffes, Harry Wiggins, Bob Stone, Leo Thorsness, Kermit Wiess, Dean Chambers, Mike Rabith, and some I don't remember now.

I was assigned to the 466th Strategic Fighter Squadron. The commander was Major "Pudge" Wynn, A WWII veteran, former POW with Edens and Wilson among others who had flown with the RAF early in the war. He was a nice old guy and kind of tolerant of weenie lieutenants. He'd go home for lunch usually, have a few drinks along with lunch and come back to the squadron and take a nice nap on a big old leather couch we had at the squadron. He was a good old guy, he smoked cigarettes using a cigarette holder. When you flew his wing you worked a little harder cause he was not the worlds smoothest leader and had little consideration of his wingmen.

For the most part the guys above the rank of first lieutenant were WWII and Korean War veterans. I admired these guys and respected them.

When I got to the 466th we were flying Republic F-84Gs. It was a good old airplane and had a little more power than the E-model and had in-flight-refueling capability. These birds were well maintained and were not worn out like what we 'd flown back at Luke.

After WWII SAC was equipped with fighter aircraft for the purpose of providing bomber-escort. A hang-on position carried over from WWII. By 1954 the mission had changed and the fighters assigned to SAC were given the mission of nuclear delivery. The plan for the birds at Turner was to deploy to England in the event of war. The Wing would deploy non-stop from Turner to the UK with air-refueling support, load up a weapon and stand-by to do their thing. By the winter of '54 the 508th had demonstrated that they could get to the UK as planned. They'd flown the trip on two different occasions. The 31st had done the same, but their area of Operations was out in the Pacific.

Belonging to a squadron after eighteen months in the Training Command and Cadets was really neat. If you weren't scheduled for some kind of class or other training or on the morning flying schedule you were left alone to do whatever you felt like, with-in reason. So the drill was to go to the Officers Club with the old heads and drink coffee. What a deal. Some of my eager-beaver married contemporaries sought "additional duties" and didn't participate in the coffee routine. They were eager to score points. I didn't give a crap about making "points" and the farthest thing from my mind was the future and worrying about promotion already. All I wanted to do was fly, fly, fly, and have a good time. I did have an "additional duty" but it was so important I don't remember what it was but it didn't get in the way of enjoying the part of being a fighter pilot and a second lieutenant.

We stoged along in the squadron routine, going to gunnery down at Elgin, attending special weapons training, attending survival school in the Georgia swamps, shooting the pistol and the routine military mickey-mouse. And about every few weeks I 'd drive down to Tampa and see my sweetie-pie and party at the beach or take her out to the Officers Club at MacDill or some cocktail lounge around town.

In January, 1955, Weber, Stone, Wiggins, and I went out to survival school at Stead AFB, Reno, Nevada. They took us out there in a C-119 and we stopped to refuel at Davis-Monthan AFB at Tucson. I remember seeing, from the air, acres and acres of WWII P-51 and P-47 fighters tipped up on their noses, stacked like sardine-cans awaiting the smelter and being turned into aluminum ingots. What a pity, all those wonderful old birds being melted down to dumb pieces of metal.

We checked in at Stead and were quartered in tents that had wooden floors and a pot-belly stove. About six guys to a tent. We had a week of classroom survival training by former WWII and Korean War POWs and then a week or so out in the boon-docks "survival" training. We'd trek from one location to the next designated point, put up a teepee made of parachute and survive. Just before the trek portion started, we had about 12" of snow! I'd never even seen snow before. What a deal! To navigate on foot you had to wear snowshoes. Me and Weber and the rest were from the south and the snow-shoes were a pain in the ass. Weber was always stepping on his own feet and cussing at me, thinking I was the one stepping on his feet. Hell, I'd be ten feet behind him, trekking, always at night from one point to the next. The trek was in Squaw Valley. In 1955 it was a beautiful, untouched, wilderness. It got below zero at night but we had no problem staying warm in our teepees. Our food rations were minimal but I never did get really hungry. The skinny guys, like Stone and Wiggins were always starving. I ate lots of snow. After about five days of this trekking bullshit, they picked us up in big old Army trucks and took us to a spot about five miles east of Stead. We turned in all our gear and were told to "escape and evade" back to Stead. They had a mile-long line of air cops between us and Stead. If you got caught they put you in a "prison Camp," took off your clothes and hosed you down with water. I was not about to be "captured". Neither was my partner, Emmett Weber. Being rid of our backpacks we were light and unencumbered so we took off in a slow trot out toward the outer flank of the "aggressors". Hell, they never got close. We could hear their loud mouthing at times but out-flanked them and were back at the finish line at Base Ops at Stead in an hour or so. If you weren't caught, you were done. So Weber and I went to the chow-hall, had a bite to eat, cleaned up and headed for Reno. We stayed up all night and had a good old time and returned to Stead in time to catch the airplane back to Turner. The skinny guys, Stone and Wiggins, were caught and went through the POW bullshit. Upon release they went to the chow-hall and pigged-out to the extent that they were sick all the way back to Turner. Years later, during the Vietnam war, Stone was shot down while flying F-105s. Wounded seriously, he managed to evade the bad guys and was picked up by a rescue helicopter. His wounds resulted in a silver plate in one leg but he made a full recovery and ended his career as the wing commander of a C-130 outfit. He retired as a colonel. He's one of the eager beavers mentioned above, so who's the dummy stupid?

About the first part of 1955 we began to get delivery of our long anticipated F-84Fs. The "F" replaced the "G". Confusing. Earlier on the Air Force thought they'd up-grade the F84E by sweeping the wing and other modifications and would call it the F-84F. In the meantime, the "G" was obtained because it had in-flight-refueling capability. The E/F mod got a little complicated and in the end it was completely redesigned and took longer than expected to get into the field. But it stayed an F-84F. It should have been re-designated to F-85 or whatever. Some of the old heads in the squadron were not too thrilled to get the "F". Even before we got them the airplane had developed a bad reputation, bad hydraulic systems/controls, under-powered, etc. Some of them were downright afraid of it to the extent that the wing commander tried to "sell" it to the troops with pep talks at Pilot Meetings telling us what a fine machine it was. All this crud didn't effect me in the least. I couldn't wait to get my hands on one. We had Pilot Meetings every Friday and all manner of stuff was briefed. In the end, we had a lot of guys get out of the Air Force rather than stay in and fly the "F."

In February 1955 I got my first flight in the "F" and I loved it straight-away. A nice, brand new airplane, the fastest in the world at the time. What more could a dumb second lieutenant ask for. One weekend while visiting Thelma, I went out to the airport at Peter-O-Knight, and saw my old toss, Len Herman. He asked me what I was flying and I showed him a picture of the F-84F and he was tickled shitless and bragged to anyone who would listen that I had learned to fly at HIS school. Made me feel kinda good. The sumbitch had never been that appreciative when I'd been under his employ during my high-school working days at the airport!

At Turner we had six squadrons of "Super-Hogs", that's what the troops called the F-84F. The earlier F-84s were called "Hogs". All 84s were not exactly overpowered and used a lot of runway on take-off thus the term "hog[s]". The reliability of the "F" soon began to evidence it-self. Unreliability, that is. The base was losing about two birds a month for one reason or another. Still, I loved the airplane and couldn't wait for the next flight. One weekend four of us were going on a cross-country to Las Vegas. We got to the middle of Alabama and my friend Weber had partial hydraulic failure and we aborted the trip and returned to Turner. On a short final he had other problems and wiped the main gear out on landing. He walked away unhurt but a little embarrassed at not having made a better landing, even though at the time of landing, he was a passenger – (controls locked).

One morning Major Wynn and the guy who signed me off as qualified in the "G", were making a high-speed, low-level pass in front of the squadron building and the guy rolled over and went straight in. That was the first "smoldering hole" I'd ever seen. I was impressed with the violence of the whole thing but otherwise not really bothered by it. I figured I ain't gonna do THAT! There were fatalities all the time during these times and were treated as being part of the game. About this time, the top graduate from my cadet class, Glen Bucholtz, landed short in an F-94C, at a different base than mine, and was killed. Dick Bexten, another classmate bought the farm when he augered in while trying to drop a fuel tank that wouldn't feed.

A few days after Christmas 1954 Col Wilson was returning to Turner from Bergstrom AFB and had a flame-out over Mississippi and tried to dead-stick his airplane onto a highway in order to save the airplane so investigators could determine what was causing all our engine failures. His plan was to belly in but he hit short of the road and was fatally injured as the airplane broke apart when it made contact with the ground.

Our new Wing Commander was Col. Gerald Johnson, a WWII fighter ace, and fellow POW with Cy Wilson and Billy Edens.. He would later have a direct bearing on my Air Force career. In the next five years or so, twelve or fifteen guys I knew well, bought the farm, and I quit keeping track. In the spring of 1955 my squadron got a request for volunteers to go to Europe to the 81st Fighter Wing. I heard that the 81st had F-86s and I really wanted to fly that airplane. Ever eager to go some place I'd never been, I applied and departed Turner in June 1955.

I signed out of Turner and went home to Tampa on leave. One day Tilka, a younger sister, and I took one of Len Herman's Cubs over to Orlando. We buzzed Uncle Joe out on the farm in Slavia and dropped him a note, asking that we be picked up at the Orlando airport. Shortly Aunt Ethel, Uncle Joe's wife, met us at the airport. She had a bunch of my little cousins with her and I took them up, two at a time, and buzzed the farm and Uncle Joe. They all had a good old time waving to people they could see on the ground, uncles, aunts, etc. Later on we drove out to the farm and had a nice visit with Bobka and Dedko , (grandmother and grandfather Mikler). That was the last time I saw Bobka; she died a few years later while we were in England. She was a sweet little lady. She made under-shorts for Mike and I out of flour sacks when we were little squirts. Made them by hand with needle and thread, nice fitting, had one button.

I saw Thelma every opportune moment back in Tampa but all too soon my leave was up and I left for New York in my Chevy. Sadly, I left her in tears. What a dummy I was for not marrying her on the spot and taking her with me. To this day I can't say why I didn't.

In 1955 if you were going over-seas the drill in the Air Force was that you checked into a staging base for processing. I checked in at Manhattan Beach Air Station, New York, not too far from the big city. What a hassle! Roman Lins was in this gaggle with me. In a few days the process was done and we were bused to McGuire Air Force Base, New Jersey. Before we left we took our cars to some dock for shipment to the UK. Driving in New York City was a real eye-opener for both of us but we made in without dinging our cars. The trip to England was on an Air Force C-118/DC-6 Military Air Transport Service, four-engine, prop airliner. It was a very long flight with a refueling stop in Newfoundland then on to Prestwick, Scotland. That was the end of the flight for people that were going to be stationed in England. Why they couldn't take us to London I don't know.

Roman and I and another guy from Turner, Mike Rabith, caught a train to London. It was pretty much an all-night train trip and when we got to London we were hungry. I 'd always thought train station food was pretty good. Maybe in the States that was so but in London all we could find early in the morning at the train station snack-bar was cucumber sandwiches! Imagine, sliced cold cucumber on stale white bread. What the hell, we were starving and gulped them down and looked for the train to Woodbridge, a town near our new base. We managed to muddle through and eventually ended up at our new base, Royal Air Force Station Bentwaters. Roman and I were assigned to a Bachelor Officers Quarters quonset hut that provided lodging for two guys. Although left over from WWII, they were adequate. They had a big bedroom, living room, kitchen, and bathroom, and were heated with a pot-bellied stove that burned fuel-oil.

I had assumed that England would be pretty much like America.. after all we did speak the same language and we did win the war together. Wrong! In general, housing, roads, and all manner of services were at least ten years or more behind the States. The first day I checked into the squadron I was baffled to see the janitors haul out the "honey buckets" from the latrine every morning. Right through our lounge where we were drinking coffee and maybe eating an egg sandwich. We had our own snack-bar in the squadron lounge; we hired an elderly gentleman to do the cooking. He was a nice old guy and everyone treated "Pop", Mr. Howard, like a grandfather. To keep the snack-bar going financially, each squadron member paid up \$25 when you checked in. Upon departure a few years later you'd get your money back. Worked out fine.

The buildings we lived in, worked in, and the Officers Club were all in the quonset hut style. Some large and others small. I thought it was pretty neat, being left over from the BIG WAR. When us new weenies checked in we were treated like real people and it was a given that you were a fighter-pilot. What a refreshing thing after the SAC treatment at Turner. On our first day of clearing -in we were taken into the wing commanders office and he gave us a warm reception.

Colonel Ivan W. McElroy was the CO of the 81st Fighter-Bomber Wing. He had white hair, combed straight back and a neat white mustache. He gave us a friendly little talk and told us all his squadron commanders were "good horses" and that we were welcome and would be treated well. He had an Austin Healy roadster sports car and spent lunches at the Club gambling in a card game called Bujack or something. We saw him around a lot and he was a kick to know. He even flew the F-84 with us down at our squadron once in a while. He retired some years later as a two-star and Donny and I visited him where he lived on Lake Austin in Texas in 1972. By that time he'd grown a beard and looked, for all the world, like Kentucky Fried Chickens' Colonel Sanders! I think he probably delighted in people thinking that.

I was assigned to the 91st Fighter-Bomber Squadron, as was my friend Roman Lins. Our CO was Lt.Col. Sanford K. Moats, a WWII ace in England. A short time after I got there, he was reassigned to the States. He eventually retired as a three-star and was vice-commander of Tactical Air Command. Moats was replaced by a young LtCol Harry H. Mooreland. He was in his early 30's when he came to the squadron. Kind of young for a squadron commander at the time.

My flight commander was Captain Jack L. Bowman. He was a fine leader and took good care of his eager beavers. The squadron had about 26 pilots assigned and there was no one in that squadron that I didn't like. It was a neat "club" and we did a lot of things together, obviously flying, but drinking and partying and going TDY, etc. I really loved being in that squadron .

The mission of the 81st and all the other fighter-bomber units in Europe was nuclear delivery to targets on the Continent in the event of war. The "Cold War" was well established by the middle of the 1950s and there seemed to be a crisis going on somewhere all the time. I never thought, deep down in my mind that the "Gong" would go off, but I may have been naive. During my tour in the 91st we went on serious "alert" once where-by we loaded nuclear weapons on all our airplanes. It was during the Hungarian revolution in November, 1956. Before that we stood "alert" on a stand-by basis, that is, you were on the scheduling board in the event of emergency but you weren't out at the squadron, you were called out from home by telephone. After November things changed and we were put in a more ready posture by having guys on alert at the squadron at all times.

This alert posture was maintained for years until the Cold War ended in the early 1990s. That's one hell of a lot of time, money, and energy expended in the name of peace but it paid off by God, it did pay off. I never dreamed I'd see the day, but I did, even though I'd done my thing and been retired for almost twenty years by the time the Cold War ended.

The name of the game in the 91st was to maintain proficiency in the airplane and its mission. Namely, bombing. The mission profile called for you to takeoff from Bentwaters, climb to 35,000 or so and cross the North Sea, coast-in in northern Germany, descend to 50 feet and proceed to your target, mine was in Poland, at 500 knots, To deliver the weapon you'd do a half-loop releasing the weapon as you passed through vertical flight, then roll out and descend at full throttle and get the hell out of there. The mission called for you to plug a tanker in order to get enough fuel to return to England. I did not have any faith that a tanker would be where he was supposed to be in the event of hostilities, what with absolute mass confusion all over the skies of Europe. So my plan, as every other guys plan in the squadron, was to fly west till the engine flamed out and then punch out, probably at about Holland. Or land at a friendly airfield if there was one available. What a dumb way to make a living and I loved it!

The flying was a lot of fun. You flew training missions all over the UK and Western Europe. We went to Nouasseur Air Base, Casablanca, Morocco a couple of times a year in order to take advantage of the good weather for bombing and gunnery training. During my tour we also went to Tripoli, Lybia one time. Both places provided great weather and it was a delight to fly in clear, warm weather every day. We got in to town in Casablanca a few times and it was interesting to see the contrasts in what we were accustomed to. One week-end several of us took a little trip down to Marrakech , Morocco. Four guys in a little English Ford. It was a pretty exotic place, including snake charmers in the city square. There was a little town near the base at Nouasseur called Beerchid. It was on the initial approach to the traffic pattern at Nouasseur and when you passed over it you called the tower and told them your position in entering the pattern and all the guys took great delight in calling in that they were over Bear Shit, saying it clearly and resolutely, causing a smile for anyone hearing the transmission. It was an absolute no no to use profanity on the radio and this gave great, defiant pleasure to the one transmitting.

In December 1955 the squadron was TDY at Nouasseur. We were down there to re-qualify in gunnery and bombing. It was fun-flying time. The missions were short and you flew about three times a day. The bombing range was about a hundred miles away. You could take off, fly down there and drop two bombs and return in about thirty minutes. After take-off you'd leave the power up at 98%. This would give you about 500 knots. As you proceeded to the range you'd let the airplane climb up to 20,000 feet. Upon arrival you'd roll in and make a high -angle dive-bomb run. Upon release you'd leave the power up and enter the low -level pattern for an over-the-shoulder release and then head back to the base. Since we were dropping for score, we only dropped a "first bomb" in each type bomb run. There were a jillion sheep in this part of the world and it was fun to come up on them at 500 knots and see them scatter to hell and back. If you were leading the flight you'd never see this. But if you were flying number two on your leader you'd be off to the side and back about a quarter mile and had a good view of the scatter. Sometimes you could see the sheep herders shake his fist at you as you passed by. One time one of our guys was forced to eject down there in the sheep country and the Arabs gave him a hard time and scuffed him up a bit.

After I got all my "squares" filled I went on leave and headed for Tampa to see my sweetie pie and try to get her to marry me. I got a "hop" on a C-124 that was going back to the States. A "hop" is space-available transportation and is free for service people. We went to the Azore Islands and spent the night. The next morning we took off for Bermuda, 14 hours away. The aircraft commander told me there were bunks set up back in the cargo area and after take-off I went back there and got ready to climb into one in order to sleep away the long hours of the trip. During climb-out it was bumpy and raining like hell and kind of dark. As I was climbing into bed we got hit by lightening! It sounded like a cannon going off and there was a hell of a flash like a dozen flash-bulbs going off at once. You talk about something getting your attention! I didn't know what the hell had happened since I'd never been hit by lightning. Flying jets you climbed through the clouds quickly and didn't stay around long enough for lightening to hit you. Although it is possible, I never experienced it. Anyway, a few minutes later a crew-member came back and told us what had happened and we proceeded to Bermuda without further Incident.

I checked into the BOQ and called base-ops and asked if there was anything going west to the States. I was dragging around a foot-locker and a couple of suit-cases and it was hot. And wouldn't you know, they said "yeah, come on down". So I dragged all that stuff back to base-ops and got on a C-54 headed for Charleston. I was surprised to see that the pilots were a couple of second lieutenants! And no navigator! I thought what the hell, this thing must be easy to fly and how could you miss the States which was not all that far away. We got to Charleston early in the morning and I headed for the commercial terminal and hopped an Eastern Airlines DC-6 to Tampa. The trip had cost me only the fare from Charleston to Tampa.

I was really happy to see Thelma again. She looked and felt like a million! I asked her to marry me and she said no. Well what the hell, I wasn't going to let that answer slow me down. I mean, I had marriage on my mind! I was obsessed with marrying her. I think she sensed what my life in England had been and was getting even. Can't blame her, but boy was I miserable. She let me dangle a few days and eventually said yes. We got our blood test and a marriage license and all that stuff and were married at a Lutheran church on Dale -Mabry Avenue on the afternoon of December 26, 1955. In the 50s the laws required a blood test prior to marriage. Just think what an outrage that would cause today! When she decided to marry me we got her pass-port on order. The plan was to pick it up at the American Counsel Office when we got to New York.

We had a nice little wedding mostly attended by family and a few friends .We spent our first night at the beach in St. Pete and departed for New York by train the next day. We had to get on back to England because I was running out of leave time. We had tried to book an airliner but they were full-up so we booked passage on the USS America. The train trip to New York took 24 hours. It was a bit of a drag because we couldn't get a sleeper.

We spent a couple of fun days in New York and saw the usual tourist sights. The Empire State Building, Statue of Liberty etc. Being Christmas season Rockerfeller Plaza was very pretty and lit up. We took in a pro hockey game at Madison Square Garden and ate at Jack Dempsey's steak house. Even met the old boy who greeted all of his customers in person. I loved sports and enjoyed meeting a very famous fighter from the golden era of boxing. One of the more interesting things we experienced was a subway ride across Manhatten at rush hour when we went to get Thelma's passport. Just as I thought that there was absolutely no way they could get any more people on the train we stopped at the next stop. On-loading passengers shoved and pushed their way aboard to the extent that we became separated. It was so crowded that our holding hands were suspended between crammed bodies! Imagine putting up with that on a daily basis!

A day or so before New Years, 1955 we got aboard the America. That was a really classy way to travel. We had a nice state-room in cabin class. The food was very very good. Cigarettes were about a dime a pack. The booze was about the same. I had a beautiful wife and life could not be any better! We had a pretty smooth crossing and after about five days we arrived at Cork, Ireland. Stayed on the ship and in a few hours departed for France. A similar short stay in LeHarve and we proceeded to South Hampton, England.

From South Hampton we took a train to London. Compared to American trains the ones in England were a bit grimy to say the least. Thelma wouldn't sit on a seat until she covered it with a raincoat! We stayed in London a day or two, saw a few sites and then caught a train to East Suffolk where my base was.

We got off in Woodbridge, which was about five miles from Bentwaters. We got a room at the Bull Hotel. It had been in operation a century or two at least. The room was quite large with a high ceiling. There was no such thing as central-heating in this part of England and the heater in our room put out about as much heat as a zippo lighter! The bathroom was at the end of the hall and heated about as effectively as our room. England was experiencing the “coldest weather of the century.” When I went back to duties at the squadron Thelma stayed in bed covered with all the covers that were available.

After a short stay at the Bull we got an apartment in Aldeburgh, another little town near the base. It was at the East Suffolk Hotel, right on the beach of the North Sea. We had four rooms, all on one side of a hallway. The living room was on the sea, then came the kitchen, a bedroom and bathroom. We never used the living room. It was so cold in there that Thelma used it for a refrigerator. She could make jello in that room. And the bacon got so stiff you could hardly pull it apart!

We kept looking for a more suitable apartment and found one up the hill. It was an up-stairs apartment above the landlord. It had a couple of bedrooms, bath, living room and kitchen. There was a fireplace in every room except the bathroom. That was the English version of central heating. All of us Americans in England supplemented the heating of our quarters with paraffin heaters. Paraffin smells like kerosene and the heaters made things bearable even if you did need to wear a sweater all day long. The address of this apartment was “Clivia”, Fawcett Road. The blokes didn’t use street numbers. “Blokes” is the term we Americans used to refer to the English natives. Each house had a name. The landlord had a bicycle that he rode to work every day. He also had a car that was used on Sundays only. It was a little tiny thing and looked like what you saw Mickey Mouse driving in the comics. The garage for it was not much bigger. The car was pulled by hand out of the garage when it was to be driven because it was too small to allow one to get in or out from inside the garage. Basically it was a big dog-house. We had a big American car, bigger than the garage, I thought this was pretty funny. Also, the landlord was a big, tall, fat guy and when he used the car it was like seeing a cartoon at the movies.

In 1956 we didn’t have TV in England in American homes. I think the English had it but we weren’t interested and you couldn’t use an American set because it was not compatible with the English system. So, having no children and no interest in local radio or TV, we went to the movies a lot. There was one theater in Aldeburgh. There was one at the base also. Thelma and I went to the movies about every time there was a change in pictures. In the 50s there were a lot of good movies showing all the time. We always made sure we went to the early show. Smoking was allowed in their theaters and even to us smokers the atmosphere in there was so bad by the time of the second showing that we couldn’t hack it.

In November, 1956 the Russians were putting the Hungarians down in Budapest where the natives were attempting to go independent and were raising hell in a revolution. Things got a little warm and we went on "alert". On a Sunday morning during this period Thelma told me "we gotta go". She was having labor pangs and we headed for the American Air Force Hospital at Wimpole Park, Arrington, Cambridgeshire. It was about a two-hour drive and we made it before anything serious happened. We got her checked in and I went over to the Officers Club to wait things out. Some hours later she gave birth to our little boy Donny and I was one thrilled lieutenant!

Back at Bentwaters the troops were on serious alert, with nuclear weapons loaded on all our airplanes, and I had to get back to the base. Sadly, I returned to Bentwaters. I'm sure Thelma felt completely abandoned to say the least. A few days later I returned to the hospital and picked up my newly made family and we returned to Aldeburgh. We were still on alert so Thelma was left to cope with the new baby. She did a hell of a fine job and never once bitched about anything. What a little tiger! A short time later the crisis in Hungary passed and things got back to normal. Thelma kind of had her hands full with the new addition but she did a great job and was a great mother. I was super proud of our new little boy and would tell anyone who would listen, all the great little things MY boy was doing and how great he was. It got to the point that the wives in the squadron would about turn and run when I'd see them at the club; they'd say "oh oh here comes Mikler". Actually I think they got a kick out of my enthusiasm, especially the older ladies like Norene Bowman, my flight commanders wife. Golly, she must have been all of thirty-something at the time!

After living on Fawcet Road a while we found a cottage that became available. It was a nice little house, built in the English manner. It was on the edge of Aldeburgh on Lieston Road. It had solid masonry walls and a fire-place for heat. However, we used the old reliable paraffin heaters. We used to keep Donny's room nice and warm. This made the walls sweat to the extent that water would puddle on the floor. There were several guys from the squadron who lived in Aldeburgh and we used to car-pool back and forth to the base.

I was not too keen on keeping the grass cut around the house. In the back yard it got about a foot high before I whacked it down. It was enclosed by a fence and not readily apparent to the neighbors; however, when I went to cut it down, I had a little cheering section of neighbors encouraging me on! One thing the British do well is keep up their yards and "gardens".

We went TDY to Nouasseur a couple of times a year. Morocco had long been a French colony. During the few years we were going there in the 50s the French were kicked out and in 1958 the government of Morocco invited the United States to remove their ass from Morocco so we never went back. In the early 1950s we had built three big, nice bases in thier wonderful country. One at Sidi Slimane, one at Ben Guire, and Nouasseur. SAC sat on alert at these bases with B-47s and we used the bases for training. The French ran the place till this time and when the Arabs kicked them out, we were out too. So Uncle Sam went up and made a deal with Franco in Spain and we built three bases there, Zaragoza, Moron, and Torrejon. One time LtCol Mooreland and I refueled at Torrejon on the way back to England from Nouasseur; it was under construction at the time. Little did I know at the time that I would be stationed there nine years later.

We were enjoying our life in the squadron and England in general. There was always something going on at the Officers Club what with going away parties every time one of the guys rotated back to the States and all. Thelma played bridge with the gals in the squadron and we went to London from time to time and enjoyed the big city. There were a million things to do in London and it would take a lifetime to see it all.

In May, 1956 Thelma and I took a three week leave and toured the Continent. We took the Chevy from East Suffolk to Amsterdam, Holland. The ferry ride was a little rocky and Thelma stayed in the ladies room the entire way across the English Channel. From Amsterdam we drove down to Cologne. A large part of the city had been leveled during WWII bombing raids and was still not repaired. Seems the Germans by-passed most of the damaged area and just rebuilt around it. We went on down to Munich and Garmisch. Tried out some skiing at the Zutzeplitz and then went on down to Innsbruck in Austria. The drive through the mountains in Switzerland was a little spooky in that we were always in the clouds and couldn't see more than about 50 feet and it made you feel like you were on the edge of a cliff most of the time. We went to an air-show Zurich and then proceeded on down to Torino, Italy. We didn't have time to go further south so we headed west and drove over to Monaco then Nice and Cannes, France. Being from Florida we weren't that impressed with the beaches of France. Thelma was a little bit pregnant and didn't feel all that great so we didn't do that much in Paris. The thing I remember most about Paris is the screwed up drivers and traffic. I couldn't believe it. I wanted to see the WWII D-Day Invasion area so we headed north and I dragged Thelma around the trenches and beaches of Normandy where American and allied troops landed June 6, 1944. There was some debris and wreckage around and the trenches were overgrown with weeds. The beaches were wide and clean and somewhat remote and quiet. There had been very little development along the coast since the war had ended. I enjoyed the drive through France and the food. Anywhere you ate the food was really fine. We finally ended up at Calais and took a ferry to Dover. The sea was a little calmer going home and Thelma could enjoy the short ride across the Channel to England. It was a pretty neat trip but the fact that we didn't have all that much cash was a little bothersome.

In the early part of 1957 the squadron moved to RAF Station Woodbridge, about four miles from Bentwaters. The runway at Bentwaters was to be extended and it would take about a year. We moved the entire operation over there and worked out of 20-man tents. The tent had wood floors but other-wise things were pretty primitive. The runway at Woodbridge was 10,000 feet long. It was built during WWII as an emergency crash base for our crippled airplanes returning from the continent and missions to Germany etc.

About the middle of the year the contractors had completed the building of American style housing units at Woodbridge and Bentwaters. They were all duplexes with two or three bedroom. We were assigned a unit at Woodbridge and were very happy to move in. Everything was brand new, including the furniture. Best of all we had central-heating. We kept the temperature up to what we were accustomed to. However, when we hired this elderly couple to baby sit they thought it was "frightfully warm" and shed their coats and sweaters. Usual garb for a bloke at home included wearing a sweater at all times. And a coat perhaps.

As Donny got older Thelma got the hang of things and we had a great old time. In the spring of 1958 we had a chance to go to Buchel Air Base, Germany for three months. I was an instructor in the F-84 and the Air Force loaned out a few of us to the German Air Force in order to check-out the Germans in their brand new F-84F's that they were getting in their newly reestablished air force. We drove the Chevy to Cochem, Germany, a neat little tourist town on the Mosel River about 40 miles south-west of Koblenz. Buchel was about 10 miles to the west of town. We rented an apartment above a plumbing shop that was owned by a nice old German who was married to an Italian lady. We had a great old time there and couldn't get out of the building without being stopped and offered wine by the landlord and his wife. We'd yak away in English and they'd yak away in German and Italian with much hand gesturing and no one having any idea of what was said but having a grand old time. I was drawing USAF and German Air Force TDY money, thus making about a thousand dollars a month. Super pay for the times. Thelma and I hardly ever ate at the apartment. Cochem, being a tourist town, had a lot of nice places to eat so we ate out every night. Wine was about three cents a glass, CocaCola was expensive, it cost a quarter! You could buy a little Hummell figurine for four Marks. At the time that was one dollar American!

Emmett Weber was TDY at Hahn Air Base while we were TDY at Cochem. He had flown his wife Eunice over at his own expense and we visited often and it was good to see old friends. He was flying F-100s and was in the 31st Fighter Wing on TDY from Albany, Georgia, I'd call him on the phone and arrange to join-up with him and his flight now and then. When I'd have a flight of Germans and he'd have a flight of 100s. I wouldn't tell my Germans and they'd get real excited when Weber would pull up along side my flight of four in his flight of four F-100s. What a kick..

The Germans celebrated all religious holidays and we seldom worked an entire week and had a lot of three-day week-ends so Thelma and I, and Donny, would take off and see the sights around that part of Germany every week-end. Tough duty! In no time our tour was up and we returned to England. A "worlds fair" was going on in Brussels so we stopped by there on the way home. It was quite an extravaganza compared to all the old, historic stuff we'd seen around the continent. It was a fun tour, especially being able to have Thelma and Donny with me. The Germans I flew with were all veterans of World War II who had been recalled into the new German Air Force, and were our new and welcome allies. They treated us very well and seemed to appreciate our efforts in getting them up to speed in the modern equipment at hand. They did a good job and caught on quickly. A lot of them had jet-time in WWII and were very highly experienced fighter-pilots. It was interesting to me how well we got along with them. It was as if we had never been former enemies at all. I was a WWII buff and enjoyed the old photographs they'd bring out and show me of the WWII days and their airplanes and stuff of the times. All in all it was a great experience and I loved it.

One day at the end of my tour at Buchel I received word of my new assignment back in the States, we were due to rotate in July. I was going to go to Photo-Radar Intelligence school! Damn, I was disappointed. We returned to England in time to rotate to the States on schedule. Enroute we stopped by Brussels and took in the Worlds Fair that was in progress. It was pretty impressive but the thing I remember best is Donny enjoying his first CocaCola! When Thelma handed him the bottle with a straw in it he knew exactly how to make that straw work and suck in the cola!

My squadron commander asked me if I wanted to extend my tour in England for a year. We were getting F-101s that summer and it would have been a blast but we'd had enough of Europe and it was time to show off the baby to grandmother and so we turned down the extension. In July we took a train to Liverpool and caught a Super-Connie back to New Jersey and our great tour in the 81st Fighter Wing was over and I would, sadly, never fly a fighter again.

On the way to the States we stopped at Gander, Newfoundland to refuel and then flew on into McGuire AFB in New Jersey. When we got there it was hot as hell and Donny got a heat rash during our hundred-yard trek to the terminal! I rounded up the Chevy and we headed for Tampa and a 30-day leave at Thelma's mothers house in Hyde Park. Enroute to Tampa we stopped at the Pentagon and I talked to a Lt Col in Officers Assignments. He listened to my request for an assignment to fighters but told me there were none to be had in the whole United States Air Force! The Air Force had just cut out five fighter wings and there were no assignments available for fighters. I didn't believe the sumbitch but as a lieutenant there wasn't a heck of a lot I could do about it, not knowing anybody with clout etc, so we swallowed hard and pressed on. What the hell.

We had a nice leave and I managed to talk myself, and Thelma, into buying a new car. We bought a new 1958 Chevy, Biscane, green and white. We needed a new car like a hole in the head, but what the hell, I was kinda stupid..the old 54' only had 70,000 miles on it but I thought it was about worn out.. Grandma and Pop were pleased with their new grandson but soon we were on our way to Wichita Falls, Texas, Sheppard Air Force Base and intelligence school for six months.

We rented a house on the south side of town and got on the list for on-base quarters. The place needed a good cleaning. Chicken bones under the kitchen sink etc. so we got it up to our standards but never really got rid of all the mice. One night in bed I scratched Thelma's foot, unintentionally, with one of my toe-nails, and she jumped straight up out of the bed like a rocket, thinking there was a mouse in the bed. I couldn't blame her in that we'd earlier spotted one climbing up the bedroom window drapes. Such is life for an Air Force wife. After a few months we moved on-base. The weather in Texas was hot as hell and we soon bought an air-conditioner for the car. In 1958 air-conditioners were not standard installations on new cars. We went out to eat now and then and Thelma discovered Mexican food cooked up in the Tex-Mex manner. Mexican food was not universally available as it is today and she really took a liking to it. Especially all the cheesy stuff.

I went to class from six in the morning to noon. The base had about six T-33s, some Gooney Birds, and some T-28s for the students who were pilots to fly and to maintain currency and for flying pay purposes. It was pretty neat, you could fly all you wanted to. Just call up Operations in the morning and tell them you wanted an airplane in the afternoon and you had it. I used to offer my non-pilot class-mates a ride in the T-33 but no one ever accepted. I thought that was interesting. Never did figure out why a ground-pounder would turn down a flight in a nice, air-conditioned jet.

The course I took was in Photo Interpretation and was very interesting but I still wished I'd gone to a fighter unit instead of a non-flying job. Even though I could still fly regularly and maintain proficiency there ain't nothing like being in a fighter squadron.

In January, Thelma had a little baby girl at the base hospital. Thelma's mother had come out for the occasion and was there to greet Marcy Lee. Marcy was a beautiful little doll. And I say this with-out prejudice, the nurses told me so! Mother and daughter were fine and I was tickled pink for Donny to have a baby sister. In due course, I completed the training and we got orders to be assigned to Offutt Air Force Base in Omaha, Nebraska. Talk about going from one garden spot to another ?! In May we left Texas and went on leave to Tampa and, as usual, stayed at Thelma's mother's house.

About the middle of summer we checked in to our new assignment to the 544th Reconnaissance Technical Group. After living off base a week or two we moved into 81 Travis Drive, on base. It was an eight-plex and we lived in an end unit that had an upstairs with a couple of bed-rooms and down-stairs with a living room, dining area and a kitchen. We were happy to be living on-base and it was less expensive then living in town. As it turned out, it was convenient in the winter when we were up to our ass in snow.

I got a local area cheek-out in the T-Bird and it was like old home week in that a couple of guys from the old 91st were instructors at Base Operations. It was fun to run into Don Hood and Jim Cash again. Don had been our neighbor at Woodbridge. Sad to say, he flew into a mountain and killed himself in Vietnam many years later and left his wife with six children.

The 544th was located in the basement/under-ground, in a vault, inside of Headquarters, Strategic Air Command. The mission was to provide support to the SAC staff. During this period we had tons of people in the unit. So many that they had to split the workforce in half. I worked there on eight-hour shifts, in the mornings or afternoons. That left a lot of time for flying and I got my fair share. My commander used to "volunteer" me to go pick up or deliver staff weenies at bases here and there . . . it was his way of getting in brownie points with his superiors . . . I didn't really mind and it was fun to carry those "old ladies" around and pull a bunch of Gs when you got the chance, cause they were all former bomber pilots and I 'd really roll thier socks down every time I got the chance to pull a lot of Gs, like descending quickly and close to the destination and on pitch-out for landing. Oh my how some of those old pussies hated to pull Gs! Back in the office things were very interesting. This was 1959 and we had the U-2s flying over Russia taking pictures. We were the first to see what was in the pictures. Our government got one hell of a lot of really outstanding intelligence from those pictures; horizon to horizon, for hundreds and hundreds of miles and clear as a bell. Being on the inside it was interesting to me how you could tell how the politicians and Congress were at times completely in the dark as to what was going on behind the Iron Curtain. In order to get funding the intelligence community would tell congress that there was a "missile gap" between us and the USSR. And that the gap was us not having any and the USSR having a bunch. (Of bombers or missiles, take your pick). We got the funding in due course and started the Atlas ICBM program. In reality the Russians didn't have shit but we got our missiles and the old Cold War pressed on.. What a job! And you couldn't tell anyone outside the office what you were doing or knew. Not even your wife. Everything was super-secret, Above Top Secret .It would have been interesting to stay in the intelligence field but all I cared about at the time was being in a fighter unit.

In May 1960 Bob and Jean Russ were visiting us. They had just returned to the States from Bentwaters and were enroute to a new assignment in F-101s at Oxnard, California. Thelma was about to have a baby. One evening she had pains and I drove her to the base hospital. I think I may have scared her because, by the time we got there the pains went away. It was only a five-minute drive at most. After a few enjoyable days visiting, Bob and Jean went on their way. He was eventually promoted to four-stars and was the commanding general of Tactical Air Command when he retired. Shortly after retirement he died unexpectedly of cancer.

A few days later Thelma's pains returned and she delivered a fine little boy without any problems. Grandma had come out for the occasion and was at the house when we brought Rex Michael home. He was a calm little guy and a pleasure to have. And a good looking and healthy little boy, as had been his big brother and sister. Being the third time down the baby-road, he was a lot less anxiety for Thelma too. All three of our children were, in my opinion, very pretty little kids and took after their mother, in that they were pretty calm and didn't squall all the time. However the three of them kept Thelma very busy to say the least, and the daily routine kept her weight down to about 110 pounds at most!

Omaha, and/or Offutt, was not an especially fun place to live. We went on picnics and to the 0-Club pool in the summertime but the dam flies would about drive you nuts. It was a pretty uneventful time as far as doing "things". The home-life was calm and I really did love having a pretty little wife those three little children.

While at the 544th I was promoted to captain. My boss, a Lieutenant Colonel non-pilot commented to me one day, "you sumbitch, you're making more money than I am." I thought to my-self eat your heart out, you ground pounding flake.

In the 544th we worked in a vault. It was about half the size of a football field and little work areas were divided with portable partitions. We had a lot of work to do and had a lot of people. Too many to all work at one time so we worked in shifts. I worked from noon to eight in the evening. Since I had a lot of free time I decided to fix up a little Model "A" Ford I'd bought for \$350. Offutt had a very well equipped auto hobby shop that I used. I painted the thing sky blue, replaced the roof with airplane fabric and painted it silver. Thelma made seat covers using blue and white striped terry-cloth, and we re-did the door panels in dark blue vinyl. It was really a cute little car and would go anywhere. It was especially good on snow and ice. When I took the family anywhere in it Rex would fall asleep in about sixty seconds. It kind of made a clucking noise and I guess that just lulled him to sleep. This was another of the cars we've owned over the years that we should have kept. But how could you do that as an Air Force type tramping around the world from one base to another.. Shouldda, wouldda, couldda, story of my life.

Eventually I talked my boss into letting me go and I got a job in Base Flight as an instructor in the T-33 branch of the Standardization/Evaluation Board. Our job in Stan/Eval was to check out Hq SAC people in the T-bird and give them instrument and proficiency check rides. We flew twice a day and I got all the flying I wanted.

I was coming up on being a rated pilot for seven years. The deal back then was that you must have 2000 hours flying time by the seven-year point. I was cutting it close, so I checked out in the T-29 as a co-pilot in order to have more opportunity to gain flying time. If you didn't have the flying time at seven years, you were likely to be grounded. The T-29 was a twin-engine prop job and on almost any flight you could get maybe four hours or more. We used to fly general officers around the country, so the time built up quickly. SAC had a policy which required an Instructor Pilot to fly with general offices any time they wished to fly the T-33. So, in addition to flying daily around the local area on check-rides, we had the opportunity to go on long trips out of the local area, usually to Riverside, California, or Vandenberg AFB, etc. Flying generals around was pretty slick. When you taxied in at a base, the base commander and a whole covey of horse-holders would meet the airplane. I could get refueled and file a flight plan and we'd be on our way in twenty minutes! One time I took Major General Wells, the SAC Inspector General, out to Sacramento after a B-52 had run out of fuel and the crew bailed out and the airplane crashed. Now that was an absolute no-no in those days. Nobody but no-body ever wanted the SAC IG on their base for any reason. In that he ran the Operational Readiness Inspection program. Commanders were fired on the spot if their wing flunked an ORI. The IG was greatly respected, "feared" would be a better term. So anyway, the B-52 Wing Commander and his five or eight colonels met the airplane. I was in the back seat filling out the forms. This colonel sidled up on the wing and told me meekly that if I needed anything, to please let him know. General Wells told me he wouldn't need the airplane for three or four days and that if I wanted to fly it elsewhere to go ahead. So I went down to Oxnard and visited Bob Russ for a day or so and then returned to Sacramento. The B-52 had had serious problems with a run-away heat situation and their command post "leaders" had caused the problem to escalate to an uncontrollable state and the airplane was lost after it ran out of fuel and the crew bailed out. To worsen the situation a fireman was killed while the fire department was responding to the accident scene. So, General Wells, who was known as "Sun-Down Wells" fired the whole goddam staff. When we departed for Offutt there was a whole new staff at Base Ops to wish us farewell. SAC was a dammed serious business at the time and flunking an ORI or loosing airplanes was hazardous to ones career whether one was a crew- member or commander.

I flew my 2000th hour on the seventh anniversary of getting my wings and was made a "senior pilot" right on schedule. In the early sixties, the cold war was well entrenched. What we were doing with our forces, ie SAC on alert and ready, things were pretty quiet, considering the times. Flying at Stan Eval did not seem to offer much of a future. I felt like I was in a rut and wanted to do something that at least made me feel that I was moving up in my career.

One day I was giving my old wing commander, Col. Jerry Johnson a check ride and he asked me what I wanted to do with my future. He was Chief of Personnel for SAC and I told him that I wanted to go back to fighters. He said he couldn't do that for me but if I wanted to go anywhere in SAC, to any flying unit, he'd send me anywhere I picked, and to think it over and let him know.

I had 2000 hours of flying time; 90% was in single-engine jets. If I went to B-52s I'd have to be a copilot, however the jet time I had was sufficient to qualify me for B-47s as an Aircraft Commander. No way was I gonna be a CO-PILOT! As far as flying an airplane I was in top form and figured I could fly ANYTHING, even if it had a whole bunch of engines. In flying the T-29 I found that I enjoyed flying big airplanes as well as single engine jets. There was no way SAC was going let me out of the command. I just wanted a flying job that would enhance a career, to at least twenty years. I talked it over with Thelma and asked her if she'd like to go to Orlando. She said sure.

I called Colonel Johnston's office. I guess he'd told his weenies to take care of Mikler if he called. I told them I wanted to go to B-47s at Orlando, McCoy Air Force Base. They did their thing and we got orders to go to McConnell AFB in Wichita, Kansas where I'd get checked out in the B-47 and then on to McCoy. So in May of 1961 we packed up and moved to Kansas.

The B-47 course at McConnell was set up to train weenies out of flying school to be co-pilots, and to up-grade guys with sufficient flying experience to aircraft commanders. We had about four weeks of ground school and a couple of weeks of simulator training, and a couple months flying. I must say, the flying was interesting to say the least. You had a co-pilot, a navigator, and a whole lot of airplane compared to flying single-engine and doing everything yourself and unencumbered with a crowd. Flying the airplane was a piece of cake but the missions were crammed full and you didn't have a chance to just go out and have fun chasing around clouds and buzzing and having fun. It was all work. These guys were all serious and there was no place for fun at all.

During the ground-school phase I met Howard Kravitz, a recent pilot training graduate. He seemed like a tiger and appreciated my background so we took a liking to each other and I picked him to be my co-pilot. I was assigned a young guy out of Nav School for my navigator and we sailed through the course with flying colors and aced the final check-ride.

While flying out of McConnell, we lived in Derby, a little town south of Wichita. Thelma took great care of the kids and we did the things you do with a busy young family. One time we bought a side of beef, it being a good deal and all. That strained our "budget" and we ate a hell of a lot beef. The kids would ask, "what's for supper" and Thelma would tell them, "steak" and they'd complain, "not again"! Such is the life of an Air Force captain. One day Donny and I were building a model airplane "together" in the garage. He disappeared, and I thought he went to where Thelma was. She figured he was with me, in the garage, and we thought nothing of it. After a while he walked into the garage. He was eating a candy bar. Had one in each hand and others were stuffed in his pockets. I was really taken aback. The little squirt told me he'd been to the store! The store was two or three blocks down the street. He'd walked down there and done what we usually let him do, pick out what he wanted. We were thankful to have him back without incident. It was a potentially hazardous trip he'd taken on his own after-all! He was all of live years old!! We were relieved and got a little chuckle out of the whole deal.

One day Colonel Johnston's weenies back at SAC called me and said McCoy was going to be closed and the Colonel wanted to know where we wanted to go. Hey, the Colonel was as good as his word! I wanted a warm weather climate, so I told them we'd like to go to Tucson. I liked the desert and enjoyed it during my training days at Marana, which was just up the road from Tucson. I thought Thelma would like it too. So we got orders to the 303rd Bomb Wing and departed Derby and went to Tampa on leave about a week before Christmas, 1961.

We had a pleasant leave at Thelma 's mother's house in Hyde Park. We went to the usual family Christmas picnic. It was an unusually cold day and the children about turned blue eating out there at the picnic grounds. In no time at all the leave was over and we headed for Tucson and our new life in a Bomb Wing.

We had a nice trip and Thelma and the children looked terrific. I was happy as a clam and looking forward to living in desert country again. We lived in the Visiting Officers Quarters a week or two until we could secure permanent housing. Tucson was developing like crazy and a lot of new homes were being built all over the place. We found a development near the base and bought a four-bedroom cinder-block house built on a slab that had a "swamp" cooler for cooling.

I checked in to my new squadron and, like in fighters, filled out the pre-flying paper-work, took a physical and all the necessary bull-shit, and told the Ops guys I was ready for a local check-out and ready to proceed to combat-ready status. Well, the guy looked at me like I was some kind of a nut. He said, "son just go on hone, and when we're ready we'll call you". My, my, this sure was going to be different than fighters! So I went home. I came to learn that SAC wanted you to run your crew and do your thing for the mission. By this time they'd learned that the crews didn't want to put up with a bunch of unnecessary bullshit, and if you weren't flying or on alert, or doing something necessary, they didn't expect you to even be on base. OK. So, having just moved in to a new house that needed to have a yard put in, I went home and planted a lawn and dinked around the house.

A couple of months went by and I finally got on the flying schedule. We flew some local training missions and I took a check-ride and was declared "combat ready". I got a couple of young lieutenants for a crew and soon we were sitting on alert like all the other crews. We had about twelve birds on alert at Davis-Monthan and twelve or so in Alaska. My first alert tour in Alaska was at Eilson AFB in Fairbanks. The tour was for thirty days. You were on alert four days and off three days. Pretty boring. The other crews were a little older than what we had in fighters. The aircraft commanders were mostly Majors and Lieutenant Colonels. The old guys were not very friendly so I didn't speak to them very much. They didn't especially care for former fighter pilots and we damn well didn't think much of the old ladies either.

The alert business in SAC was serious. We were frequently tested on all phases of the mission, the weapon, and positive control procedures. We were definitely ready to go should the "gong" go off. All of our targets were in the far-eastern part of the USSR. The mission would be long and required in-flight refueling a time or two and recovery at one of our bases in the Pacific. I never felt many of the guys would ever make it all the way back but thank goodness we never had to launch.

On home-alert back at Tucson we pulled alert either four or five days. Then you had an equal number of days off. So if you weren't flying a training mission or filling other training squares at the base, like flying the simulator or shooting the pistol or what-ever, you had a lot of free time. Most of the classroom training was accomplished while you were on alert.

The birds on alert were loaded with nuclear weapons that had a yield in the mega-ton range. The birds were chuck full of fuel and were equipped with about eighteen Jet Assist Take Off rocket units that were fired on the take-off roll. The B-47 weighed about 205,000 pounds for an emergency war order "EWO" mission. I figured if we were ever lunched, there would be a bird or two that wouldn't make it. Everything had to work as advertised, throughout the take-off and initial departure, until you got that big bastard up and the airspeed above 200 and increasing.

After a while the drill became routine. Since the children were pre-school age we went on a lot of picnics and such. Most of the time we went during the week and had these picnic areas to ourselves. Thelma and the children became accustomed to the desert climate and we thoroughly enjoyed living in Arizona. In the summer of 1962 we went on leave to San Diego and Los Angeles. Near Tucson, on the way home, we got stopped by a cop near Tucson for some minor infraction and while yakking to the cop he told me one of our birds had recently crashed. I hadn't seen a newspaper in days and was not aware of the accident. As it turned out I'd been on alert with that particular crew up at Eilson a few weeks earlier. They had a real know-it-all big mouth navigator. The crew all had spot promotions and were a rank or so ahead of the rest of us. "Spot promotions" were a carrot that SAC used to keep the troops motivated. These promotions were awarded to the very finest and experienced crews. Supposedly! Well, as it turned out, this crew with their hot-shot navigator, flew right into the goddam ground on a night low-level route when the hot-shot navigator had the aircraft descend at the wrong point and splashed their ass all over a corn field in southern Idaho. So much for "the very finest

Time was passing. Donny started the first grade. He had attended kinder-garden in Derby. One day on alert, one of our Aircraft Commanders told me he had a Cessna 195 and offered to check me out in it. He said it needed to be flown and that I could fly it for the price of gas and oil. I took Thelma and the children up in it a few times. One day Thelma told me she was scared of little airplanes and to just go ahead with-out her so I took a teen-age neighbor girl along to help tend the children..

I showed Donny how to keep the wings level by looking out at the bottoms of the wings. He stood on the floor and steered the airplane like you would a ship. The instruments were at his eye-level. Pretty soon he discovered the artificial horizon/attitude gyro. He moved his head from side-to-side like he was looking at the bottom of the wings, as I'd told him. Even though he moved his head, his eye-balls were firmly fixed on the artificial horizon and was using the instrument to maintain wings-level. What a sharp little kid I thought. Even though I was enthusiastic about flying my children never got the flyin' bug.

The flying in SAC was all business. Not a hell of a lot of fun but "work". You were always pressed to the limit getting the "squares", requirements for training, accomplished. On every training mission you did all the things that you would do on an actual mission. Flying long low-level missions, and the in-flight refueling stuff was kind of fun and you really got to see a lot of the western United States up close and personal, at 500 feet and 420 knots, just like a magic carpet. I'd had this one guy, a major for a navigator. He was a pleasant type but couldn't bomb for sour apples, flung "bombs" all over the west. Finally the wing commander had had enough and grounded the guy, very unpleasant business. For bombing we used the radar set exclusively. The navigator ran the thing. We could bomb in any weather, day or night, but it was up to the Nav to get you to the release point, the pilot just followed the instrument indications provided through the Bomb/Nav system. The navigator I had just really got all shook up as we neared the target. The pressure was always on to hit the bloody target. If you didn't they couldn't use you and the navigator was intimately aware of this possibility. I did my thing to get us to the target, like refueling and staying on course and getting there on time, but couldn't drop the bomb for him. So the guy was grounded and I got another navigator who turned out to be super and was a pleasure to fly with after flying with a marginal guy.

The one hairy time we had at Tucson was the Cuban missile crisis in them fall of 1962. All 72 of our airplanes were loaded and ready to go. Our birds were or alert at home and in Alaska and dispersed at different bases in the west. I told Thelma that if she saw the whole fleet launch all at once to stick the children in the car and head out for open country away, far away from the base. She said "the hell with it, you can't run, and I'll stay right here". The prez did his thing with the Russians and in several days the crisis was over. That was about as close to nuclear disaster that we ever came to in my entire career.

About the middle of 1963 I took Thelma and the children to Mexico for a picnic. We were out in the middle of no-where and going down a long down-hill straight-away about 80 MPH and I decided to let the engine wind up and clear itself out. Well it certainly did clear it-self out until we heard a loud bang and it died a sudden death. It was about seven in the morning and we were several miles east of Ajo, Arizona. It would be a while till things opened up for business. I had some beer in a cooler and had a few. The children were worried about what we were gonna do. Not to worry! After a while we got a tow to the Ford dealer's place in Ajo. We got an estimate on repairing the Chevy engine. \$500. There was a neat looking '63 Mercury sitting there and I told the guy I'd like to try it out. I loved it. We traded in the Chevy and drove the Mercury to our picnic and then back home to Tucson. Another of my brilliant moves.

One time on alert a couple of us were shooting the breeze about fishing and one of the guys mentioned how good the fishing was in Guaymas, Mexico. It's only about a four-hour drive from Tucson so we packed up and drove down there for some fishing and swimming at the beach etc. On the way down we stopped for gas. I was towing a boat and Marcy had a little over-night bag in the boat. The bag had her little dolls and dresses and such in it. Some goddam Mexican lifted the bag, probably as we departed. I hope he liked little dolls! The SOB! Donny and I went fishing with a local guide. We fished in two or three hundred foot deep water only a few miles off-shore. We were catching gruper and it was all a full-grown man could do to reel one up so Donny didn't get any gruper. On the way in we trolled for dolphin and I rigged him up with a surf-pole and a Mitchell 300 salt-water, open-faced reel that was easy to use. We trolled through some fish and one nailed Donny's bait. He was really thrilled and squealed in delight and had no trouble reeling in the fish. That particular day we ended up with a wheel-barrow full of fish. A young Mexican boy cleaned the fish and we took it home and froze it. A gruper is about the ugliest fish in the ocean but the meat is white, firm, and delicious.

In April of 1964 my bomb wing was closed down and the birds went to the bone yard. A few that were equipped with special jamming gear went to other wings that would stay active a short time longer. The B-47 era was over and the B-52s and missiles were taking over the mission of deterrence.

We were all gathered in the theater where the wing commander announced our assignments. The crews of the wing were being scattered all over SAC. I was assigned to Base Headquarters as Base Director of Safety! The Base supported a missile wing and later a wing of F-4s moved in for the purpose of checking out new guys in the F-4 which was coming on line. We also had a Wing of U-2s on base by this time.

For flying, us weenies on the base staff were provided with the Goonie Bird, C-47, for flying proficiency. After flying above 30,000 feet for eleven years, it was kind of fun to stooge around at a thousand feet or so, low and slow. We flew weekly "courier" missions to Vandenberg AFB in California and to a base at Roswell, New Mexico and other bases in the southwest. The C-47 was a fine old airplane with a long and distinguished record. I kind of had a soft spot in my heart for it dating back to when I was eight or nine years old, and I appreciated the chance to fly the old girl.

I didn't know jack-shit about "safety". SAC was supposed to send me off to safety school but I volunteered for overseas duty after getting in to safety and they cancelled the school. I bumbled around in the safety office for a year or so and finally got orders for an assignment in Spain. Before the safety tour was done I learned a lot about the aircraft accident investigation phase of the business when a couple of guys in the Bone Yard wiped out a helicopter and I was put on the accident investigation board to investigate and report the mishap.

Quite an education to say the least. After a year or so I also figured out what was required, and how, to run a safety program. This wasn't written down anywhere and no one would tell you "here's how to run a safety program". In the end it was a piece of cake and I learned that I could do it, spending no more than an hour or so a day, specifically to safety/office matters. This left a lot of time to spare and I could go fly airplanes.

In the early 60s most young families had only one car. There were millions of good used cars on the market and they were cheap. The guys in my wing and other friends were buying a second car so their wives could have the family car to use as she wished. I bought an eight year old Ford and drove it to work and Thelma had the Mercury to her-self. It was pretty neat cause you could leave your work stuff in the car and nobody bothered it and the wife had the independence of her own wheels. Worked out great. After driving the Ford a while I decided I needed a sports car. One of the guys at work had an old Jaguar. It was pretty spiffy, an XK-120, about 10 or 12 years old. I checked the local papers and found a 1957 XK-150 up in Phoenix. I took Donny with me on a Saturday morning and we started up the road to buy the thing. The night before I'd pulled a muscle in my back and it proceeded to produce more and more pain so we returned home where I could lay down and relieve the pain. Well, it took about ten days for the pain to go away but eventually we made it up to Phoenix and bought the Jag. It cost \$1800. It was a fixed-head coupe, had chrome spoke wheels and was clean as a pin. It was white and had a red interior with leather seats. The exhaust system was custom and if you really stomped on the gas the engine made a great noise and it really sounded terrific. The kids used to tell me to "make it sound like a tiger daddy." Lots of fun! Donny and Marcy sat in the back seats. The seats were tiny and I can't imagine why the factory even bothered but they were just right for a couple of tiny children. Rex sat between Thelma and I on the padded leather console and held on to the gear-shift lever in front of him. Of course in those times, seat-belts were not standard equipment and no-one thought anything of it! Prior to our departure for Spain my brother Mike said he wanted to buy the Jag so a friend and I drove it out to LA and flew back to Tucson on Continental Airlines. That Jag was one of the greatest cars I've ever owned and I wish I'd put it up on blocks and saved it for the future. Such is the nature of hindsight. At the time I thought it was a sharp car but I never realized it was a real classic.

Thelma and I were excited about a tour in Spain. There were a zillion houses for sale in Tucson. We finally got rid of the house by trading in our equity for some lieutenants cabin-cruiser and sharing the closing costs! So once again we packed up the children and headed for Florida and 50 days leave at Thelma's mother's house in Tampa.

We hauled that cabin-cruiser all the way across the country. It was 22 feet long and made of wood. We put it in a marina on Tampa Bay and I had to spend a few dollars to get it running properly. We used it quite a bit and had a good time with it even though I had to have repairs to the motor quite often. One day we were out in the bay and I noted a thunder-bumper developing a few miles to the west and we headed for the marina. We had a quartering tail-wind and following seas. Tooling along fat dumb and happy we hit a wave or something or a hell of a gust of wind or a combination of the two, and the boat did a 90 degree turn within the length of the boat which knocked me and everyone else down and scared the hell out of me. We were going wide-open and I decided to slow down. We ambled on in to the marina without further incident. That's how cocky fathers sometimes hurt their family. But, I learned something and the lesson was firmly stuck in my hair-brain!

When we left for Spain I turned the boat over to my brother-in-laws, Billy Whitlock and Ken Belliveau. They agreed to take care of the boat and keep it in order while we were away. Well, as it turned out, Billy got drunk out of his mind one time and SOLD the dam boat and used the proceeds to fly out to California to visit my brother Mike. He was still drunk when he got there! So much for brother-in-laws. When we got back from Spain ole Billy never mentioned the boat deal and I didn't either. What would have been the point, the guy was barely making a living and besides, I had other things on my mind.

After a great leave in Tampa we drove up to McGuire Air Force Base in New Jersey. We stopped by Washington DC and did the tourist stuff on the way. Emmett Weber was flying for Allegheny Airlines and lived near McGiure so I called him and we had a nice visit with him and Eunice and their two boys. A few days later we reported to McGuire to catch our plane to Madrid.

The going over-seas drill had changed radically since I went over-seas in 1955! When the arrival time came along we simply drove to the terminal, turned the car over to a transfer agent and reported to the passenger desk. An hour or so later we boarded a Boeing 707 and departed late in the evening. One hell of a lot less hassle than the earlier days of over-seas departures. The flight was only about six or seven hours and we arrived at Torrejon Air Base, near Madrid, in early morning sunshine. We checked into the Visiting Officers Quarters to await further transport to Sevilla, our new place of residence for our assignment to Moron Air Base, about twenty-five miles east of Sevilla.

The first night at Torrejon I ran in to Larry Booth at the Officers Club. He had been our neighbor when I was in high-school and I always liked the guy. At that time he was a major stationed at MacDill and always had encouraging words for me when he learned that I was going into the Air Force and wanted to go to pilot training. It's a crazy world. He had been a B-17 pilot in WWII in England. I always admired those guys. I had run across Larry now and again as I was going through pilot training and during my tour at Turner.

Now, years later he's a Lieutenant Colonel and I'm a Captain. As it turned out I would later be stationed at Torrejon, be an Instructor Pilot and Chief of Standardization, and be giving my hero his annual instrument check-ride! Anyway, after our visit at the Club that night I returned to our room. It was about mid-night and Thelma and the children were wide awake and sitting in the middle of the bed eating crackers! Jet lag!

We enjoyed our lay-over at Torrejon. The children especially liked the slot machines at the Club. Just put some money in and pull the handle and out would come a pocket full of money. Nothing to it! We finally boarded a C-54 and proceeded to Moron. Thelma was not very impressed with the 54. It was a little rattley, un-pressurized, no air-conditioning, and hot as hell. It was about the middle of August and Spain is hot in August! During the flight I met the chief pilot of Moron and a few of the guys I would be flying with. They seemed to be pleased that they'd have an experienced "new guy" flying with them. I must say, I had as good or a better flying back-ground then any on them.

Upon arrival at Moron we were transported to our new quarters near Sevilla. The American housing area was on the edge of Sevilla and was named Santa Clara .The area kind of reminded me of southern California. Hot and dry and lots of pretty flowers and lawns and such. Our quarters were built of thick stucco walls. Although there was no air-conditioning they were pretty comfortable since there was a lot of shade around the place. Our place had about four bed-rooms , big living room and dining room with tile floors, quite comfortable. The only drawback was the plumbing. The Spanish didn't use a water trap system like we have in America and there tended to be a slight scent in the air till you got used to it.

Santa Clara was about twenty-five miles from Moron and the Air Force had contracted with the locals to provide bus service to and from the base. It was very inexpensive and comfortable. The buses were big grey-hound-like touring buses and they were always right on time and picked you up and dropped you off right in front of your house. The trip home in the late afternoon departed from the Officers Club and you had time for a gin n'tonic or two, plus you could take one with you since you weren't driving. Also, on the morning trip you could take a short nap enroute to the base.

We settled in quickly and the people in our Wing were quite gracious and nice. Within a few weeks we got our car delivered. It was a 1963 Mercury and quite large compared to Spanish cars. Naturally the yollies thought you were a rich Americano. Americans in Spain called the Spaniards "yollies", short for Espanonies..It was fun to have and lucky for us the Air Force subsidized the price of gas. I really liked southern Spain. There was just something about it. The people, the sights, the smells. I'd seem the movie "Blood and Sand" in the early 50's and I really fell for the bull-fight scene and attended the bull fights often. Thelma didn't care for them but I used to take Donny a lot.

We would both wear a coat and tie, as was expected and encouraged by the Air Force. I don't believe Donny ever had the urge to become a bull-fighter but I think he really enjoyed going to the "bull races", as we came to refer to them, with old dad. After the bull fights there was always a little visit to the local bar where munchies were served. The bull-ring in Sevilla is the prettiest ring in Spain in my opinion. Really a neat scene. I always encouraged the children to try new stuff, food-wise, even if it looked strange. In Spain you could take kiddies to the bar. Bars were a place for gathering and they didn't have these silly-ass rules about little kiddies being excluded. As a matter of fact, the children were surprised when we got kicked out of a bar while waiting to get the car washed when we got back to the States .The area around Sevilla was very interesting and we did a lot of tourist stuff visiting historical places and such. Of particular interest to all of us was how old and how long things had stood. You could walk the same streets that the people of Columbus's time had walked! You could visit places that the Romans had built.

Mealtime hours, especially in the evening, were a bit different than what we were accustomed to. We'd go in a place to eat supper at 8:00pm and we'd be the lone ranger. The waiters weren't even in yet! So about 9:00 a waiter would show up and you could order. I think the children enjoyed that. They could stay up later.

One of the highlights of our tour in Seville was the annual fair that takes place during the weeks before and after Easter. Holy week, "Samana Santa," is the week before and then the fair goes on for another week after that. Kind of a carnival atmosphere like an old time country fair. People up to all hours of the night and lots of noise and music going on. And carnival rides etc. And bull fights for ten days in a row. A real fun time.

My job at Moron was Base Director of Safety. I had a Spaniard working for me in the ground safety area. He was a nice old gentleman but kind of useless. I had a neat American secretary and a couple of senior NCO's. They did all the work and I avoided the office by flying a lot. We had Douglas C-54s. They were WWII vintage airplanes and had four R-2000 Pratt and Whitney radial engines. Cruised at 180 and very reliable. A good stable airplane in the weather and easy to fly. It didn't have any sophisticated systems and you could go anywhere because you didn't need any ground support. All you needed was gas and about 3,000 feet of runway. I really liked that airplane..

After I'd been there a few days I got my check-out in the airplane. The troops were going to Copenhagen via London. I got in the left seat and flew it to London, made the landing, and Bill Stockwell signed me off as qualified. The third pilot on board got off to stay in London and we were on our own. I felt very comfortable in the airplane and in a week or so was upgraded to Instructor Pilot. We flew two "courier" missions a week. We went from Moron down to Rota, at Cadiz, then up to Torrejon, then up to Zaragoza and back to Torrejon. Stayed there till about four in the afternoon and then back to Moron via Rota. About five and a half hours flying time. Sure beat working in the old office. Besides the courier I flew a lot of local flights checking out other people and giving check-rides and flying various trips around Europe.

For one reason or another we went all over the continent. Lots of week-ends we went on cross countries taking SAC people on so-called R&R. Rest and Recuperation that is. From what, I don't know. R&R?! In peacetime?! Canary Islands, Copenhagen, London, Pizza, Athens, Wiesbaden, you name it. Really good flyin'.

The mission of the Wing at Moron was to provide in-flight refueling support to airborne alert B-52s that were flying "Chrome-Dome" missions out of the States. They carried four nuclear weapons and flew a route from the States, non-stop, over Spain and then a pattern over the Mediterranean Sea, back over Spain, and then back to their base in the States. We'd refuel them over northern Spain in the evening and then over southern Spain the next morning when they were west-bound heading back home. This went on every day of the year. We were in a cold war with Russia and these bombers could depart this route and strike Russian targets from any point of their Chrome-Dome route should it ever become necessary in the event of war by anyone ever stupid enough to start one. During this time period we also had a slew of missiles on alert back in the States. Needless to say, we had enough weapons to destroy the world should a nuclear war ever emerge. Sounds insane now. And it was. But the situation became normalized and you got used to it and didn't think much of it. At least that's the way I looked at it.

So here we were, enjoying life in Spain; fat, dumb, and happy! On 17 January 1966 I was flying the “courier” and about mid-morning, landed at Zaragoza, up north of Madrid. At the time we had three bases in Spain, Moron, Torrejon, and Zaragoza. All had the same mission. Anyway, I walk in to Base Ops and the clerk told me to call my command post back at Moron. So I call and the guy said, “get your ass back down here we’ve had a mid-air with a tanker and a 52”. Holy shit! I’m the base director of safety and chief advisor to the aircraft accident board and 500 miles away. We got our stuff together and returned to Moron via Torrejon. The shit had hit the fan by the time we got back. Our people at Moron responded to the scene of the accident a couple hundred miles away at Palomares, Spain, near the south-east coast. We had a couple of Huey helicopters and they got down there and scarfed up three of the bombs that had floated down by parachute and landed in farm fields around Palamares. The fourth one landed at sea and would be recovered about six weeks later after much difficulty in location. Seven dead crewmembers had been recovered by the locals and turned over to our people for transfer to the States.

The accident was the result of a gross screw-up by the pilots of the B-52. There were three pilots on board. A captain was the aircraft commander, a second lieutenant was the co-pilot. The third pilot was a major, command post weenie, who had been the captain's aircraft commander when the captain was a weenie second lieutenant. Others on board the bomber were a bomb-nav officer, a navigator, and the gunner. Crew procedures, specified in a publication called *The Tactical Doctrine* stated that primary crew-members will be in their crew position during “critical phases of flight”. That means take-off, refueling in flight, bombing, instrument approaches, etc. etc. Since the major had been the captain's aircraft-commander in previous years there was a bit of “good old boy” attitude between the two and when the major asked the captain if he could do the refueling, the captain gave in. Mistake number one. Disaster was in progress.

As the refueling was about to take place the major screwed up from the time the B-52 was a half-mile aft of the tanker, prior to refueling, until he hit the ground in his parachute after the mid-air collision! Procedures called for the bomber to proceed to about 50 to 100 feet behind the tanker, stop closure, stabilize, re-trim, and establish an observation position. After all was squared away the bomber was to proceed into the refueling position and take on fuel. None of this good stuff happened. The major sails in with the throttles at idle, slides under the tanker, gets too close to the belly of the tanker, pushes over and the top of the bomber hits the bottom of the tanker and everything becomes unglued.

Procedures also called for either the bomber or the tanker to call for a “break-away” at any time if things were not going exactly as planned. In a break-away, the bomber brings throttles to idle and establishes a positive rate of descent. The tanker goes to 100% power and establishes a positive rate of climb. No problem. Well, the major did nothing right, the captain didn't either. Why the captain let things go to hell without taking over was never explained.

When the bomber pushed over, a main longeron in its upper fuselage fractured when the airplane contacted the tankers boom operators pod at the aft section of the tankers belly. The accident board members actually found a 12-15" piece of the broken longeron. It kind of reminded me of a piece of railroad railing, a pretty husky piece of metal to say the least..The board was assisted by Boeing Airplane Co engineers and they could identify any part of a B52 just by looking at it. One was Larry Little and the other was a Mr Blackburn. When this happened the B-52s back was broken, the tail was ineffective and began to separate as the B-52 pitched up and the wings snapped off. The tops of the wings scraped against each other and left scrape marks there-at, fell tumbling to the ground and landed right-side-up in soft ground, burying the engine pods to where the wings were flush to ground. Tremendous g-forces caused the four nuclear weapons (bombs) to break from their shackles, and they flew through the closed bomb-bay doors. Bomb parachute lanyards, secured to the aircraft structure, activated parachute opening devices as the bombs cleared the airplane. The bombs floated to earth by parachute, three landing on farms and one at sea. Parachutes were deployed on nuclear weapons to provide safe- separation from the bomber at detonation. The tail broke off from the fuselage just aft of the aft main landing gear, the brake chute deployed and the tail floated to the ground. The rudder and horizontal stabilizer basically undamaged..

As this collision and break-up were taking place with-in a few seconds at 400 miles an hour, numerous small to moderate explosions are taking place as a result of fracturing/colliding metal. These explosions ignite the 30,000 gallons of fuel flying through the air resulting in a huge fire-ball. The airplanes break up into about six or eight big pieces of junk and fall to earth. They all land in a lightly populated area of farms. Some of the junk lands very close to a school, some 50 feet away, but no one on the ground was injured.

Immediately after the initial impact, the navigator of the B-52 ejected. In doing so, this resulted in his going through the fire-ball. As a result he was moderately burned about the neck and arms. The major and captain ejected shortly after the collision. The captain broke an arm as he cleared the airplane. The gunner never made it out of the airplane. The bomb-nav never got clear of his seat after ejecting and was killed upon impact with the ground. The second lieutenant, sitting on a jump-seat during this fiasco, was trapped in the tumbling cockpit/forward fuselage because of g-forces. Somehow the g-forces reversed and he was thrown clear of the wreckage and deployed his chute when he fell through 18,000 feet .

The morning after the crash, I and the rest of the accident investigation board showed up at Polamares. The board did its thing at the scene and after about a week we moved the board to Torrejon. A good sized force of Air Force people stayed in the area and cleaned up the mess. The main product of the farming was tomatoes. Even though there was NO nuclear contamination the Air Force bought up the harvest of the entire county, and the top-soil, put it in drums and shipped it to Georgia!

Dropping unarmed nuclear weapons on friendly foreign countries was a definite no-no. During the evening of the day of the accident, the leader of Spain, General Francisco Franco, told the Americans in no uncertain terms that there would be no more Chrome-Dome over Spain, effective immediately. So at that moment we had no mission in Spain. The tanker force was reduced. We consolidated the SAC force in Spain and moved to Torrejon . The mission became the task of providing air- refueling support to U.S. Air Force Europe.

Back at Palomeres things were pretty exciting since it was taking some time to find the fourth weapon, which had landed in the water. We had more help down there then we could stand. We had a real dip-shit two star general down there running the show. And Headquarters SAC had their nose in everything and sent over a bunch of high-powered advisors that just got in the way. Finally, about six weeks after the accident someone decided to listen to a poor local fisherman who had witnessed the mid-air and noted where the bomb had entered the water. Shortly there-after the weapon was located in pretty deep water and subsequently recovered by a US Navy “research ship”. A photo of the weapon was published the next day in all the Spanish papers. It was undamaged. Another ship supporting the operation was the USS Mizar. It’s a strange world; I would meet this ship again years later while unloading explosives from it at Indian Island, Washington, where I’d taken a job as an Explosives Safety specialist in 1980!

A few weeks after the accident the aircraft accident investigation board completed our report. Crew error was the cause. Really a stupid accident. A separate “collateral” board found the same. That board had authority to punish people for screw-ups. The major and captain were fined and the major’s promotion to lieutenant-colonel was withheld and he retired as a major.

I no sooner got back home to Seville and a C-124, four-engine transport, supporting the clean-up at Palomeres, crashed in the mountains east of Moron. The airplane belonged to Military Air Transport Service so I was not involved in the investigation. It took off at night and the weather was lousy. They were in the soup and not paying attention. Strong winds caused them to be farther off course then they thought they were and they hit Spains highest mountain about 800 feet below its peak. Needless to say, all five or six guys on board were killed instantly. The crash site was snowed -in and could not be reached on foot or with vehicles.

Later on in May when the snow melted I was put in charge of a team sent in to recover the remains. Lousy job. All I did was carry the money to pay for local helpers. Our flight surgeon and his team recovered one arm and about eighty pounds of greasy stuff they called body parts. The airplane had hit in a ridge or horizontal crack and upon impact everything squirted out to the left and right; airplane in little tiny pieces, parts, engines, and people. There was very little damage to the mountain. You could not tell that the junk on the side of that mountain had been an airplane. One of the crew-members had evidently won a nickel jackpot at one of the service clubs prior to the accident because there were nickels all over the side of that mountain that we came across on our trek up to the crash site! We completed our job in a day or two and returned to Moron.

About May of 1966 SAC in Spain was reduced to a "Strategic Wing" stationed at Torrejon and U.S. Air Force Europe, took over Moron. The guy who had been president of the accident investigation board for the B-52 accident had been appointed commander of the new wing. He liked the way I'd handled the job as advisor to the board at Palomares and wanted me to be his safety weenie. I didn't have much choice and was appointed the Director of Safety for the 98th Strategic Wing. The mission was to provide air-refueling support to U.S. Air Force, Europe. I moved up to Torrejon and stayed in the Bachelor Officers Quarters until June when the children got out of school.

I checked out in the Base Flight C-54 and in a short time was appointed Chief of Standardization, C-54 Branch. This was kind of screwy since I belonged to SAC and base flight belonged to USAFE but it worked out well. My wing commander liked the idea that one of his guys was chief of stan-eval for a USAFE operation. In this job one of the duties was to be the pilot for the two-star general in charge of 16th Air Force who operated out of Torrejon.

When school was out in June I went down and picked up Thelma and the children. We were assigned quarters at Royal Oaks, an American style housing area on the north-east edge of Madrid. It was pretty neat. Our quarters were an up-stairs four bedroom unit in a four-plex. Each unit had its own private entrance/exit and we had a lot of space. We had a nice trip up from Seville. We had a cat that the children drug around and sneaked into the hotel at night, even though the Spanish could care less when we spent one night at Cordova. When we drove through the edge of Madrid, in a kind of grungy neighborhood, I picked out a ratty looking place and pulled up out front and told the family "welcome to your new home". They couldn't believe this joint was their new home. After a few seconds I told them I was only kidding and proceeded on to Royal Oaks. After a while they thought that was pretty funny.

The job at Torrejon was a piece of cake. I had a real fine NCO and kind of let him run the show on a day to day basis and did a lot of flying and stayed the hell out of that office as much as I could. I knew what the job was all about and what you had to do to get good marks on yearly higher headquarters inspections. We got things organized and it took maybe three hours a week to really keep up with the office stuff. After my first year in "safety" I never got less than an "outstanding" on any inspection I ever had, anywhere.

Shortly after we got to Torrejon I pinned on my Major leaves. I'd come out on the major's list the previous November. Some of the guys eligible were not promoted and were invited to leave the Air Force. I ran across two of them several years later and both were flying for the airlines. Had I not been promoted I'd probably ended up doing the same. So it goes. Fate is the hunter!

As an instructor pilot in the C-54 I got to meet Colonel Jim Swindal. He was President Kennedy's pilot on Air Force One. He had been assigned to Torrejon and was the Military Airlift Command detachment commander. They asked him what airplane he wanted to fly. The ops people told him they needed C-54 pilots and he said fine he'd fly the 54. So I checked him out in the 54. He'd flown Air Force One, a Boeing 707. He'd flown 54's earlier in his career and the check-out was pretty much a formality. He was a real gentleman and it was a pleasure to know him and to fly with a real "old pro." He wore a PT-109 tie clip that the former president had given him. It's interesting the people you run across as you wonder your way through life. I brushed up against more than a few through-out the years. Not that it means a hell of a lot.

As the head of the C-54 Branch , I had the job of being the personal pilot for the Commander of 16th Air Force. He was a two-star based at Torrejon. At first we had a nice old guy named Donovan. He'd come aboard and give you a pleasant greeting and then go back and sit in his comfortable compartment and enjoy the trip with his wife and a couple of martinis, a meal, and wine. Later on during my tour we got this real ass-hole, a one-star, I forget his name. He always insisted on flying the airplane. He couldn't fly for sour apples but you had to put up with him and not let him hurt somebody. We were going in to a field out in the middle of Spain one day where he was the guest of some Spanish generals on a hunting trip. On down-wind leg he asked for the gear to be lowered. We were way over gear -down speed and I told him so. He said "I said gear down" so I said "yes sir" and threw out the goddam gear hoping we'd tare off the gear doors but they stayed in place. So, here we come down final and I know the dumb bastard is gonna land short. No problem, it's smooth, hard, and flat and covered with six-foot weeds. And I don't say a word. Sure enough he lands about 300 feet short of the run-way and we collect a big bunch of weeds in the landing gear and wheels. We taxi to our parking place. He's in the left seat and the Spanish generals can see who the pilot is. Old knob-nuts. I told the flight-engineer and crew chief not to touch the weeds and let the world see what a wonderful pilot we had! After the generals and hunting party left the flight-line we cleared away the weeds and flew home. Another little story about this guy. He prided him-self on his wonderful physical condition and would always greet you by punching you in the belly. Mine was pretty firm and I think he was a little disappointed that I made nothing of it. I was always in the cock-pit way before any general ever got aboard; naturally! So when I knew he'd be flying with me I'd cinch up his seat belt to the shortest position. So it would fit a 90-pound weakling. He'd get in the seat and go to put his belt on. Knowing I'd pre-positioned the airplane he'd know I was the last guy in that seat. He'd go to put the lap belt on and it would be way too short. As he let out the belt he'd give me a dirty look and I'd just smile back at him. See what you gotta put up with in the military! What a kick in the ass. His name just returned to my memory. It was Bailey. But he was still an ass-hole.

We enjoyed living in Madrid. By 1966 all of our children were in school and attended the American school in Royal Oaks. My duty schedule was more or less stable, eight to five, five days a week. Now and then I'd be gone over the week-end on a trip up to Germany or England, Turkey or Greece or where-ever. We did the tourist thing and visited a lot of historical sites around Madrid. The Air Force commissary was on the edge of Madrid and we went there on most Saturdays to buy groceries. While Thelma shopped the children and I would wait for her at a near-by bar. The bars all had their little specialties with regard to snacks and I encouraged the children to try out some of these goodies. Some were a little strange appearing to an American kid but they'd give it a go and were introduced to such things as fried squid, snails, and other assorted Spanish snack food. Air Force policy called for us to dress properly if we were in the city, so I usually wore a coat and tie. When Donny went to bull-fights with me, he'd wear a coat and tie too. I took him to a lot of bull-fights, he seemed to like the whole scene. Marcy and Rex didn't go. I thought they were a little too young and besides they'd be bored and restless so they stayed home with mom or dinked around town with mom while Donny and I went to the fights. Sometimes, like when they'd run the bulls through town before a fight, I'd take the whole family.

I had an 8mm movie-camera that we'd bought back in Tucson and took a lot of footage of the places we visited and of course the children and Thelma. Here some thirty years later it is difficult to enjoy these movies in that one can hardly find the parts, like projection bulbs, to keep a projector operational.

Madrid was a great place to live and had more things to see than we had time for. The churches, museums, and ancient restaurants that were in operation when Columbus discovered America. And the parts of town that were really old. All the towns in Spain had their old sections and were very interesting. We also visited the historical towns near Madrid. Like Segovia, Toledo, and Cuenca, the oldest town in Spain. One summer we went to the beach at Benidorm which is on the east coast near Valencia. During the winter this town's population is around ten thousand. In summer it swells to forty thousand and the beaches are cram-jammed but everyone had a good time. We took the family cat and she was a pain in the butt since we were staying in a hotel on about the eighth floor or so. You can imagine!

One summer Aunt Marie flew over from Orlando and we had a nice time with her and took her around the area visiting places of interest. She also took an extended tour with a group on a tour bus around Spain. I believe this trip was a high-light of her life and years later she'd always remind me of the great time she had visiting us in Spain. She has always been a favorite of mine and I think the children felt this way too.

I encouraged the boys to play organized sports. Donny played Little League in Sevilla and really seemed to enjoy it. However, in Madrid, he had an eager-beaver coach who took the fun out of the game. Rex was not exactly over-joyed in the Pee-Wee program either. When I gave Donny an out he was much relieved and I asked him to bring me his uniform and I'd turn it in for him. It was heartening to see the relief on his pretty little face. In future I did not put pressure on them again. To play sports that is. I love Spanish guitar music and tried learning it but was not very good. When we lived in Sevilla I bought Donny a guitar and got lessons for him. I think he did enjoy that. We got him a teacher in Madrid and had a nice time with him. He'd come out to the house once a week. After Donny's lesson the teacher would hang around the house a while, have a spot of wine, and play Flamenco for us. A pretty nice treat. His name was Vicente and he was a real gentleman.

By the summer of 1968 the war in Vietnam was heating up and Air Force put out the word that every pilot in the Air Force would be required to put in a tour in Vietnam before they'd send anyone back for a second tour. They asked what type aircraft you wanted to fly or preferred. I figured I was comfortable in four-engine stuff and had seen C-130s around Europe and had actually checked out the cockpit of one at Torrejon. So I put in my paper-work for 130s. When we got our orders for rotation back to the States I was assigned to the 313th Tactical Airlift Wing at Ching Chang Kuan, Tiawan, with a temporary delay of three months at Sewart AFB , Tennessee in order to attend the training program and check-out in the 130.

In July of 1968 the Air Force packed up our house-hold goods We had accumulated a lot of "stuff", baskets, paintings, wrought iron, wood carvings and such. A few days before departure we moved out to the BOQ at Torrejon and processed for rotation. The children enjoyed hanging around the Officers Club and playing the slot machines. They thought, "what a deal, just put in a coin and pull the handle and you get all this money"! I don't remember if any of them got cleaned out or not. Seems like they did pretty well and didn't taste the bitter effects of loosing their stake. After a few days we went down to Base Ops and got on a Pan American 707 and flew back to McGuire Air Force Base, New Jersey and started a month-long leave. I picked up the Merc, went back to McGuire and picked up the family and we drove on down to Tampa to Thelma's mothers house.

We had a nice time in Tampa. Went to the beach and Cape Kennedy and such. In the meantime we were looking for a house to buy and finally settled on a nice tri-level in north-west Tampa on Rosewood Avenue. I think we paid about twenty-five thousand for it. My dear brother-in-law Billy had gotten drunk and sold MY boat! What the hell. What was one to do? I ended up doing nothing. I guess he felt bad about it but we never even discussed it. We had a nice time for a month or so and got settled in the house just before I had to leave for Sewart. Thelma's pop had died while we were in Spain and her mother gave me his 1956 Chevrolet. It was in beautiful condition and I drove it to my new assignment.

When my leave was over I took off for Tennessee and checked into Sewart AFB. I was not too excited about staying in a noisy BOQ so me and a guy I met and liked, George Sullivan, a former fighter-pilot, rented a trailer-house in near-by Smyrna. We had several weeks of class-room training and then several weeks of simulator. You only went to school a half a day so it was a pretty loose schedule. Airline tickets were pretty cheap and I got home several times on week-ends while attending the course. It was a well managed course and when we finally got to the flying portion it was a lot of fun and I really liked the airplane. It had a nice amount of power and was a kitty-cat to fly. I had never been in "airlift" before and the mission was pretty interesting. Flying into short sod fields, dropping paratroopers, and army stuff. And flying low-level navigational training routes. Toward the end of December I took my check-ride, was qualified as a C-130 Aircraft Commander, cleared the base, and headed for Tampa and a few weeks of leave.

It was nice to be home with Thelma and the children. We had a nice Christmas but all too soon it was time to leave for Taiwan. In early January, 1969, Thelma and the children took me out to Tampa International. It was sad to be leaving and I was doing OK emotionally until I saw Rex shed a tear and curl his lip and that kind of got to me and I guess we all choked up together. I got on a 707 for the long trip to my new assignment. I was wearing civilian clothes and the civilian population didn't give a shit about military people, so when the guy next to me on the airplane asked where I was bound and I told him I was in the Air Force and headed for south-east Asia, it kind of cooled the conversation down and I didn't have to yak about trivia for the rest of the trip. I changed planes at Minneapolis where it was icy and down to about zero outdoors. No problem since you never even went outside at these modern terminals. I then proceeded to Seattle, got transportation to McChord Air Force Base and checked in for the next leg of the trip. They checked my records and noted that I needed some kind of immunization so I got the shot and soon got on an airplane headed for the far-east. We flew to Guam where the airplane was refueled and then took off for Taipei. All this flying was on civilian contract Boeing 707's. The only little glitch I recall is that at Guam the pilot really stood up on the brakes and had the airplane stopped about halfway down the runway. It was dark and he was probably not familiar with the field. The runway is uphill for the first half and then downhill the other half and you can't see this when you touch down, hence the braking. When he touched down it looks like he thought he was gonna run out of runway and really got on the brakes hard. Anyway, after refueling we proceeded to Taipei. It was still dark and we were put up for the night. The next morning we went out to the airport and got on a C-130 from my new Wing and were flown down to Chiang Chang Kuan Air Base, which is located in about the middle of Taiwan. Not very far, less than an hours flying time. It had been a long trip and I had jet-lag. I got a room at the BOQ and slept for twenty-four hours.

Ching Chang Kuan was commonly referred to as “CCK”. It was a relatively new base and had excellent facilities. It was named in honor of the son of the premier of Taiwan, Chiang Kai -Shek. The base had been built by an American contractor. The first thing they built was a nice building for the contractors’ management team and senior supervisors. The building included about a dozen separate bedrooms and had showers etc at the end of the hall. There was a lounge at the other end. House-boys were assigned to clean and make-up the rooms. I managed to wrangle one of these rooms from the BOQ office instead of accepting a room in the regular BOQs that were crowded and noisy. Also, the building was out near the end of the runway adjacent to the base golf course, about a mile or two from the rest of the base facilities. Pretty nifty quarters if you had to be overseas by yourself.

I was assigned to the Wing as a Flying Safety Officer. There were two of us assigned as such. The other guy was Dick Peters. He was at CCK on a two or three year assignment and had his wife and kid over there with him. This was kind of a queer arrangement. Some of the Wing staff and squadron commanders and other assorted supervisory people were assigned as such and it kind of bugged the shit out of the 90% of us who weren’t included in this arrangement. My assignment, and that of most, was for a tour of fourteen months, unaccompanied. In a way I wasn’t too upset because I did not care at all for the far-east or anything about this place that actually skunk. Downtown, in any of the cities or towns actually smelled so bad that you didn’t want to smoke! That’s pretty bad for a cigarette smoker.

The Wing had three squadrons of C-130Es. For flying purposes I was assigned to the 50th Tactical Airlift Squadron. The other two were the 776th and 345th Tactical Airlift Squadrons. During the late 60s the congress had put a ceiling on how many American military people could be stationed inside Vietnam. That is, “in Country”. So the Department of Defense stationed three wings of 130s outside of Vietnam, One at Clark Air Base in the Philippines, one at Naha Air Base at Okinawa, and us at CCK, thereby, we did not count as a part of the Americans stationed in country. When we flew in country we were always on Temporary Duty and did not count toward the ceiling set by congress. This was a pretty good deal for us because when you were TDY you were paid per diem. So this whole deal was like the rest of the times during this period of Johnston and MacNamara; smoke and mirrors bullshit.

The Wing had a lot of good people. The plan at the time was for every pilot in the Air Force to have a tour in the war zone before any had to go back for a second tour. As such, we had a lot of senior guys who hadn’t been at the squadron level in years. Lots of lieutenant colonels and majors in their late 30s or early 40s. These guys did a real fine job even though their asses might be dragging at the end of a 14-hour day and lots of landings at strange little places all over South Vietnam. I liked the guys down at the flight-line who were doing the job.

The guys at the wing level were different. The whole character of airlift people was strange to me and I didn’t care for it. To me “airlift” is a support function and I’d mostly been in the tactical area when I’d been in fighters or bombers; the “shooters”.

As such the support stuff was rather second rate. The first time I met my new boss he told me I needed a haircut! I had side-burns growing down to the lobes of my ears as was the style at the time. What a chicken-shit goddam attitude. So I got a hair-cut. And trimmed the old side-burns.

The mission of the wing was to provide airlift support for the American Commander in Vietnam. It also included airlift support to the commander of Pacific Air Force. That meant airlift throughout the western Pacific. In addition to doing a full-time mission in country, we flew everywhere to and from Korea, Japan, Okinawa, the Philippines, Thailand, and Burma, and other places I never got to.

The airplanes we flew were in very good condition and well maintained. The C-130 seemed to have a personality of its own. The more you flew one the better it held up. And they got a lot of rough handling. The run -of -the- mill mission for a day in country included about eight to fifteen landings/takeoffs from short, primitive fields to modern airfields with fine long runways. The 130 had a decent amount of power, great anti-skid brakes and of course reverse thrust props. You could get a heavy 130 stopped in about 1500 feet. While I was there we were restricted to fields that had at least 3000 feet of runway, so you can see that we had quite a safe pad to work with. The large airfields like Ton Son Nhut, Tuy Hoa, Cam Rahn Bay, Phu Cat, Da Nang, etc. were equal to the best fields in the States with long runways and instrument landing navigational aids such as TACAN and ILS, etc. The medium sized fields like Nha Trang, Pleiku, Qui Nhon, Phan Rang, Hue, and many others had paved runways but not much in the way of instrument landing facilities. Other fields throughout South Vietnam that we operated in and out of were bare bones and much shorter. The short runways were built of aluminum honeycomb planking that had anti-skid grit on the surface. These planks were large and could be interconnected so as to enhance quick construction. Most of the time there was not much attention paid to providing for lateral clear zones. Many times you would land at places where the Army had choppers or other stuff within a hundred feet or less from the side of the runway.

Most of the airfields we flew into had snack-bars that had been built by the enterprising Americans stationed there-at. They always had much better food than was provided at the military dining hall. To say the least! I believe the American military cooks in Vietnam must have had a hard-on against everybody! The food they served was THE worst. Might not have been their fault but I don't think they tried very hard. The only time I ate at a military facility was breakfast, which is pretty hard to screw up. So, if you were flying all day, you'd try to fit in your meals at one of these snack-bars.

Since we were flying all kinds of supplies, from artillery shells to oranges, mail, and groceries, it was easy to appropriate five or ten steaks from the large "connex" containers we hauled out to the boon-docks for our troops in the field. A connex container measured about ten feet square and fit right into the pallet-locking mechanism of the cargo compartment and they were insulated so you could transport frozen stuff. We'd take steak back to the Officers Club at the end of the day and barbecue them on the out-door grill.

The food at the club was OK but they didn't have much variation in choice, certainly not steak! Sometimes they didn't have any food at all so you'd end up with a steak in one hand and a drink in the other and that would be dinner.

The sleeping quarters for officers were really outstanding. We stayed in an American style air-conditioned building. As an aircraft commander I could choose an up-stairs room where it was less noisy. I did think about my brethren in the field that were not so fortunate but what the hell could I do about it. This was at Cam Rahn Bay. On my first TDY in country we were flying out of Tuy Hoa and stayed in sleeping quarters we called "the dog kennels". In these kennels we had four guys to a room sleeping in bunk beds. The space was so small that only one guy at a time could get dressed or move about. The shower facilities were at the end of the "hall". I really didn't mind the inconvenience since I knew I would be leaving in a matter of days. For the troops in country, they probably made themselves a decent place to stay since they were stuck in Vietnam for a year.

Our C-130 flying in country was strictly in South Vietnam. The only people flying north of the DMZ were the fighters and B-52s. We were paid "combat pay" when in country. Actually, for us weenies living in Taiwan, the "war zone" started at some radio beacon on an island a hundred or so miles east of Vietnam. I don't remember the name of it. You could get combat pay for just flying from CCK, to the island, and back to CCK!

There was a real shooting war in-country and a lot of Americans were in a very real combat situation and getting shot at and wounded and killed and for sure were in harms way. To say the least! But I gotta tell you, flying a C-130 and doing our little mission in South Vietnam was like flying in an exercise back at Fort Campbell in the States. The year I was in and out of country, 1969 and a few months of 1970, was fairly quiet and did not involve any major ass-kicking events such as Tet in 1968 and other tough battles earlier in the war. There was a war going on for sure and it was close at hand for many. You constantly heard over the radios all sorts of continuous chatter about "artillery fire" in this sector or other, Army guys in choppers yaking at each other, etc. Now and then you'd hear a fighter guy after he got hit and was bailing out and you would hear the rescue guys going in and doing their thing. As a matter of fact, this happened one afternoon when I was between Tuy Hoa and Da Nang, going to Da Nang. An F-100 driver called a "may-day", stated his position and punched out. We listened to the radio traffic during part of the recovery. By the time we got back to Tuy Hoa a couple hours later, the 100 driver was in the O-Club and drunk as a skunk! There were Vietcong all over the place in the south and they never were rooted out, obviously, and they would shoot at your sweet ass if you got down low out in the boon docks. But, if you flew the mission as taught back in training, the chances of getting hit or shot down, were almost nil. Landing in the war zone called for a high, steep approach, and stay in close to the airfield. You could keep the airplane within a quarter mile of the field in a nice tight approach. If you did this every time you'd be in good shape. Your chances of getting hit with small arms fire were minimized. I said the bad guys were all over the place. For example, one day I was five miles out on an approach to Da Nang and there was an air strike by four F-100s going on between me and the run-way. So we went around and landed in the opposite direction.

The air traffic at the large fields like Da Nang , Bien Hoa, Tan Son Nhut, and Cam Rahn Bay and a few others was unbelievable during daylight hours when every one was up and doing their thing. You could not get a word in edge-wise! Some of these fields had published procedures where-by you'd enter the pattern as specified and never say a word. On a short final, the tower would give you clearance to land or go around. And there were emergencies going on all over the place. Guys short on fuel, systems out, you name it. There was one hell of a lot of stuff going on every day, day in day out. And now and then some young Army chopper guy going into a major field for the first time and blocking all traffic on the radio for minutes at a time and just really screwing up things something awful.

During my tour with the 313th we only lost one airplane in country. One of our guys aborted an approach into a small field out in the boonies. When he went around he stayed down at about a thousand feet above the ground and the Viet Cong shot the crap out of the airplane with small arms fire. There were lots and lots of holes in the wings. So anyway, he elects to land at the field come hell or high water. The 130 had a "wet wing", that is the skin of the wing was the surface of the fuel tanks. So, when the guy lands he uses max braking and full reverse power. Fuel draining from the numerous bullet holes entered the intakes of the engines and then the ventilation system and associated ducting. Within seconds the whole airplane was on fire. They got it stopped, egressed, and the airplane burned to the ground. No one was hurt.

We had another bird at Quan Loi, out in the boonies, hit by VC mortar fire while the airplane was being off-loaded. A round or two hit near the airplane and the shrapnel made a couple hundred holes in the nose, fuselage , and wings but the crew got the airplane into the air and back to Cam Rahn Bay, where we staged out of. It was eventually repaired and was named "The Quan Loi Qween!"

There were numerous screw-ups by our pilots in country. You can't believe how many ways there are to ding an airplane. Landing a couple hundred feet short and dragging security fence and barb-wire onto the runway. Taxi too close to a building and strike same with a wing tip. Get off the taxi line at a small field on a dark and rainy night and strike a guard tower with a wing tip. A guy landed while the airplane was in a bank and an outboard prop struck the runway and five or ten inches of prop tip break away creating a clipped prop! The guy didn't know the prop had struck the ground until after landing and shutting down and doing a post-flight inspection. These and others I can't remember were all "reportable incidents" and, according to Air Force regulations had to be investigated and reported. And the investigators were flying safety officers. So, myself and Dick Peters were kept busy. We would take turns doing this chore and about half the time we were investigating some ding some where or other.

Our wing lost two airplanes and crews to major aircraft accidents. On a rainy Friday night one of our birds was returning to CCK and the weather was below minimums, ragged 100 foot ceiling or less and quarter mile visibility with fog and rain. The wing executive officer was in the left seat. He didn't fly all that much and was not as proficient as the run-of-the-mill line pilot.

There was an instructor pilot in the right seat. The instructor pilot was to go on emergency leave the next morning and this prospect no doubt effected their decision to attempt a landing at CCK. Landing in these conditions was not at all uncommon and the crew elected to make an approach and landing. We had excellent navigational aids at CCK. An Instrument Landing System and also Ground Controlled Approach and TACAN. On final approach the airplane contacted the ground smartly, about 1200 feet short of the runway. They announced over the radio that they were "going around". So they pushed the power up to 100% and initiated a go-around. However, the airplane was coming apart as a result of landing short on brush-covered soft ground. The terrain at thier touch-down point sloped gently upward on the left side of the center-line. They had landed so hard that the wings drooped downward to the extent that the left wing-tip contacted the ground and parts started coming off the airplane. A wing-tip light was found not ten feet away from the contact point. The right wing escaped damage at this point because the terrain on that side of the center-line fell away, down hill. When the wings drooped down, the left outboard prop contacted the ground and the engine was torn away. As this was going on, the left wing was disintegrating and the left inboard engine was coming unglued as was the inboard portion of the wing and the airplane started a roll to the left. The airplane continued onward toward the runway. The cockpit instrument panel at this point must have looked like a heavily lighted christmas tree with all sorts of red and amber lights flashing and warning horns blaring, and no doubt, incongruous comments of the crew, like "oh shit what the fuck is going on here"! In the meantime, all the fuel in the left wing was flying through the air in vapor form, and was ignited buy sparks emitted from fracturing metal, resulting in a huge fire-ball. The airplane rolled over on its back and slid toward the approach end of the runway, engulfed in flame. It came to a stop about 200 feet from the end of the run-way and continued to burn until extinguished by emergency fire-fighters. One load-master walked out of the wreckage, laid down in the grass and died. The rest of the crew had already perished. What a goddam mess! An accident investigation board was immediately convened and in about three weeks a report was submitted to higher headquarters. Naturally the conclusion was "operator error". What a goddam waste! You could probably chalk this ding up to "get homeitis" !

We continued to have run-of-the-mill emergencies which required reporting. These included engine/prop failures, hydraulic and electrical systems failures etc. It all took time to investigate and report, so we were kept kind of busy and flew when we had time. We had about 75 airplanes and they were scattered all over the western Pacific and in SEA flying at all times of the day and night, seven days a week.

The second major accident we had while I was at CCK occurred at Tainan, a base down at the south end of Taiwan. A young captain and his crew were getting an annual check-ride. Besides the check pilot there were other evaluators on board in order to administer a check to the entire crew. Basically a double crew was on the airplane. The check-ride was uneventful until they started some landings at Tainan. During a touch -and -go the left out-board engine failed as the airplane was "on the go". During the emergency shut-down drill the prop would not feather because of internal failure of the prop dome.

The “minimum control speed,” for a failed out-board engine, with a prop that was not feathered, was about 98 to 102 knots indicated airspeed. The crew declared an emergency and the plan was to stay in the pattern and land immediately. They managed to climb up to around 800 to 1000 feet. On down-wind the airplane descended a few hundred feet and then leveled off. This happened several times until they were on base leg and down to a hundred or two hundred feet above the ground.

They were obviously having trouble with directional control. They were descending to pick up airspeed in order to maintain control, then leveling off, and the airspeed would bleed off. Had they got the speed above “minimum control speed” and held it, there would have been less of a problem in controlling the airplane. They would then have to maintain this speed until touch-down. This situation had occurred previously and when handled in this manner, the airplane, with an outboard shut-down and the prop un-feathered, was landed safely. In flight, when a prop is un-feathered, it is in flat pitch, and will just wind-mill. This condition creates one hell of a lot of drag since, essentially, you have a four bladed speed-brake out there twirling in the wind. One blade on a C-130 prop is about the size of a very large closet door, so you can appreciate the drag caused by four flat blades out there on an out-board engine.

The terrain around the field at Tainan was flat as a table and covered with rice paddies. At the time of this incident the fields were dry. The large fields of paddies consisted of long straight rows of shallow furrows. Tall Australia Pines that were used as wind-breaks, grew along the high-way that traversed the area near the airfield.

Considering the fix the pilots had gotten themselves into, their last chance of survival was to chop the power and land in the rice paddies. The landing gear was already down and I am certain that they could have walked away with minimal injury from a minimally damaged 130. They could probably have taxied the dam thing back to the airfield! Historically, the C-130 had not experienced severe prop problems. The pilot’s handbook did not cover, in much detail, un-feathered props and minimum control speeds. The airplane had a very good reputation, and was indeed, a very safe and reliable machine. I believe that pilots may not have given much attention to minimum control speeds because the problem of maintaining control in a 130 under almost any condition was just not an area of concern. For normal operations, that is!

By the time this airplane was on base leg the pilots had, for reasons never determined, allowed the airplane to get down to a hundred feet or so, and, with low airspeed. At the point where they should have turned onto final approach, they did not do so. At this point they were approaching a highway lined with tall pines and telephone poles. Power was applied to 100% on the three good engines. Airspeed was below minimum control speed. The nose rose, and at the same time, the airplane rolled over and dove into the ground inverted at a seventy degree angle. Upon contact with the ground the airplane exploded and burned. The fire was so severe, and damage so extensive, that one could not determine, from observation, that the wreckage in that rice paddy, had been an airplane.

It was evening time and I was at the bar at CCK when I was notified. I proceeded immediately to my quarters and grabbed some personal stuff and headed for base ops where an airplane was being readied to take-off for Tainan. The squadron commander and a few others and I were flown down to Tainan and proceeded out to the accident scene. It was a pretty grim scene to say the least and I stayed way the hell away from the smoldering hole until all the dead crew members were recovered and removed. As a flying safety officer I was responsible for getting out the immediate initial report and would be the "advisor" to the accident investigation board. A board was convened and in about three weeks we published our findings and recommendations. The cause was pilot error. The narrative above was determined from the investigation. We addressed the area of prop/engine problems and minimum control speeds and expanded in more detail the instructions for handling same in the pilots handbook. A change was subsequently published. After that, I never heard of a C-130 incident that resulted from similar circumstances.

We stayed busy in the Wing Safety office. Although the mission of the wing was to fly support in Vietnam we were still expected to comply with pertinent directives. The saying at the time was that you "can't throw away your hat and develop a go-to-hell attitude" just because you were in Southeast Asia. We still had Operational Readiness Inspections and had to comply with regulations just as if you were in the States. So I was fairly busy. As a wing weenie I was assigned to one of the squadrons for flying purposes and could pick the trips I wanted. I flew a lot of interesting trips and got into places from Korea to Rangoon. About mid-way through my tour I caught a ride back to Florida on a 130 that was due for major over-haul. I wanna tell ya, the Pacific Ocean is one hell of a big ocean. It was about 24 flying hours from Taiwan to Sacramento, then another ten hours or so to St. Pete. Even though we had a bunch of pilots on the airplane, the powers to be would not allow a straight-through flight, so we had to spend a night at Midway. That was pretty interesting. A beautiful beach and you could watch the Gooney Birds do their silly thing. Midway is a very pretty island and I was glad to visit a place that had been involved in a significant event in World War II.

I had a great leave in Tampa and Thelma had done a really first class job in creating a home. I was fortunate to get a leave. Those poor bastards in-country didn't have it so nice. All too soon the leave was up and Thelma took me over to St. Pete and I got on a 130 for the long trip back to CCK. On the way back we spent a night at Wake Island; again, a significant historical site of WW II.

Just after I got to CCK, I had bought a new Datsun. The dealer said he'd buy it back at the same price when I was ready to return to the States. I also bought an air-conditioner and a refrigerator to use and then sell back. Stereo systems and Seiko watches were a bargain too. Thelma sent me an advertisement depicting a coffee and end tables she liked, so I had some made. They were made of solid teakwood and turned out quite well. I also had a sewing table made. I was allowed to send 2000 pounds of "hold" baggage back to the States, so I managed to send back my share of goodies. More "stuff," some that you may need and some you could certainly get along without!

In addition to the twenty-four or so airplanes we kept in-country in Vietnam, we rotated about a dozen airplanes into Bangkok, Thailand. The mission there was to go into every American base in Thailand at least once or twice a day. There were no bad guys around and the flying was uneventful. We flew out of the commercial airport in Bangkok and stayed at a hotel downtown called the Chow Piow, or something like that. What a “war”!

Compared to a lot of Americans in SEA, the C-130 people had it pretty easy. I felt we were doing our share and everyone involved was gung-ho and eager to support our troops through-out the theater. It was gratifying to haul in mail and good food and assorted stuff that was necessary for their well-being. I especially enjoyed flying guys right out of the war zone and back to, say, Okinawa; their war was over. Another gratifying mission was flying med-evac missions where we picked up wounded soldiers from a MASH-like unit in the boonies, and took them to a first-class hospital. In many instances these guys were back in Japan or the States with-in 24 to 48 hours!

And so it went. The political implications of the whole deal at the time was of no concern to me in the least. I didn't shoot any guns and was not involved in any hairy combat situations. As a wing weenie, I didn't fly in the war zone all that much. I preferred to be a buck-ass line pilot but the powers-to-be stuck my ass in a wing headquarters slot. And so it was. I should hope every guy in the military had the same situation, but then, who would fight? The thing is, as in every war, there are people involved in terrifying situation and others who never are and others who are bored to tears. So it goes. Fate is the hunter.

One thing I want to gripe about the tour in SEA is the proposition of awards and decorations. When I got to the Wing at CCK one of the offices you had to “clear” was the awards and decorations officer. He told me you got an air medal for flying x-number of missions in country. That if you didn't get a Distinguished Flying Cross during your tour, to put yourself in for one describing your “best mission!” That right there turned me off. What the hell does it mean, to wear an award if it's that cheap. We had load-masters put themselves in for and were awarded DFCs! Now tell me, what distinguished flying did a frigging load-master ever do on a 130! I must say, I did get an air medal; I flew the prescribed number of missions. Big deal. I did kind of like the color of the thing on my uniform but never considered it worthy of much. So, to me, Air Force decorations, for the most part, don't mean shit in the air-lift business.

My last trip out of CCK was in March 1970. We took some colonel/attaches house-hold goods from Bangkok to Rangoon, Burma. The most significant thing I remember about Rangoon was the very quiet and almost empty air terminal and the climb-out after take-off and seeing the huge temple in Rangoon that appeared to be gold-plated! We got back to CCK late in the evening and it was dark as hell and rainy and foggy and above and below minimums and I had one engine shut-down because of generator failure. On a short final we were sent around because of a KC-135 emergency right behind us. One engine out in a 130 is absolutely no problem so I went around and let the 135, who had a bigger problem, in with-out arguing with the tower.

We landed a few minutes later when it was just above minimums. It was raining hard and we had the old wind-shield wipers flapping and, I must say, the landing was super. And thus, my flying tour in SEA was over. A few days later I flew home to Tampa and Thelma and the children and started a nice 30-day leave.

We had an enjoyable leave. The children were no longer babies and had matured a lot since 1968 and Spain. We bought a new Buick and went to the beach and stuff and had a nice time. Soon the leave was over and I put my stuff in our 63' Mercury and headed for Kansas. The children were still in school and I stuck Thelma with selling the house. They'd come along later.

I got to Forbes in the spring of 1970 and checked in to the BOQ. After a week or so I was assigned a house in government quarters. It was a pretty decent place and only a mile or so from my office. I unpacked the house-hold goods I'd shipped from CCK. Stereo, coffee table and end tables. A sewing table, brass lamps, brass tabletop and stand, and assorted "stuff". And then went down to Sears and bought a king-size bed and appropriate bedding. Thelma and the children would be along after school was out in Tampa. And the sweet darlin' had to sell the house too. What a tiger, she could do anything! That's the way I thought of her, she could do anything, and do it well.

My new assignment was to the 314th Tactical Airlift Wing, Forbes Air Force Base, Topeka, Kansas. I was not at all thrilled about this assignment to say the least. All I ever wanted was to be assigned as a buck-ass pilot at the squadron level. This was not to be. The Air Force was short of qualified flying safety officers and that was that. My boss, the wing chief of safety was thrilled to have me. As it turned out, I could understand that, since I did my job and his too! He gave me super "officer effectiveness reports" but as a reserve commissioned officer it was too late and I would never be considered for lieutenant colonel. I didn't really care. I felt fortunate that I could retire as a major. That's a lot more than I ever expected back when I was in high-school or as a second lieutenant! Maybe I should have tried harder, but I was happy just to be able to fly airplanes, and even get paid to do so!

In the spring of 1970 the war in Vietnam was really bugging a good part of the American public and particularly the young people. There were riots going on at colleges all over the country. I had been out of the country, in Spain and SEA for the major part of the time between 1965 and 1970. I hadn't seen all the anti-war stuff on TV and didn't really care what the hippies thought of the war. The draft dodgers and flag burners didn't get any of my sympathy either. Anyway, a significant amount of our flying at Forbes involved transporting US Army troops from their bases to riot involved campuses all over the US. Sometimes our crews would be scheduled for a two-day trip and would be extended out for ten days or so. Didn't even have a chance to do their laundry!

During the time I was at Forbes our wing belonged to Tactical Air Command. After I retired the Air Force made a big switch and assigned all the transports in the Air Force to Military Airlift Command. Being under TAC our mission was purely “tactical”. About all we trained for was the support of US Army war fighting activities. We dropped paratroopers and army stuff and participated in army exercises. If you had to fly the tactical airlift mission, it was fun flyin’. The wing staff, of which I was a part, included a lot of good officers and it was a pleasure to work with them. The mission was a piece of cake and we had a real fine wing commander. Our mission also included deployments to England and support for USAF Europe. That was a lot of fun because you got to fly all over Europe and visit a lot of neat places. I enjoyed a tour to Mildenhall, England where we staged out of during these deployments. I got a chance to visit Moron and Torrejon, where we’d lived several years earlier. During one of these deployments Thelma caught pneumonia and, unknown to me, dam near died. I was heart-sick when I learned she’d been sick and I was in Europe having a jolly old time. If she’d notified my boss I could have been home with-in 24 hours.

After I’d been at Forbes a while, our wing commander moved on to greener pastures. Then we got a guy named Claude Turner who was not much of a pilot and had a background in the Air University business. He had visions of being a general officer and was one pain in the ass to work for. I do believe he was a little schizophrenic, if there is such a condition. He would have staff meetings that started at four in the afternoon and go on till mid-night haranguing the staff about what color he wanted his briefing slides to be! Thankfully, I did not have to attend these meetings, in that my boss did, but they about drove him crazy. One time he told the Base Ops Officer that he wanted all the venetian-blinds at base ops to be set at precisely the same angle. Turner and his wife did not get on well and he would roam the base at all hours of the night in his staff car. One night he entered base ops and phoned the base ops officer at two in the morning and told him to “get his goddam ass down here right now”! Well, the poor guy got out of bed, dressed, and reported to the colonel at base ops and asked him what he could do for him. Turner told him what he had directed about the venetian-blinds and that they were not set as he had directed and to get his ass in gear and set those goddam blinds right now! The base ops guy said “yesser”, saluted, and set about setting all the blinds at the desired angle! And went home mumbling to him-self!

We had a lot of “fast burners” in the wing, especially our squadron commanders. That is, guys that were young for their rank and moving along in rank faster than their contemporaries. He nit-picked these guys and hollered at them and bugged them and embarrassed them and about drove them to distraction. He drove our director of operations, a young colonel, into early retirement. It just was not worth the harassment Turner was throwing at them. Two squadron commanders also retired early.

As Turner's tenure continued the crews began to feel his wrath and unreasonable bullshit. One time a crew declared "crew rest" when they ran out of crew duty time in Las Vegas. There was a reg in effect that stated you could be on flying duty, fourteen hours a day, only. The crew ran into this situation and so stated to our command post. Turner heard about it and had the command post gin up a mission and a spare crew and to get their ass out to Vegas and pick up the crew and their airplane and return to Forbes. "By god I'm not gonna pay per-diem to a crew screwing off in Las Vegas " he said! This sort of "leadership" continued and the entire wing's morale went to hell. We had a lot of good people throughout the wing and we didn't need this guy to do the mission. We'd done a super job before he ever got there and had no trouble passing any type of higher headquarters inspections.

During the winter of 1970-71 we had a severe ice-storm pass through Kansas. The entire state was covered with an inch of ice and it persisted for over a week. The farmers in the state asked the Air Force for help in feeding their stranded cattle. We sent about six airplanes to the local airport in Hayes. Myself and a couple of other Wing officers were put in charge. It was bitterly cold and one could scarcely walk or drive on the ice. This was a non-problem for operating a C-130. You could taxi the airplane safely by using reverse/forward thrust on the out-board props for steering. Trying to turn with nose-wheel steering was useless since it was so slick that the nose-wheel would just skid and be completely ineffective. The local farmers co-op had a huge supply of hay at the airport and we proceeded to haul bales of the stuff to stranded cattle all over the area. The co-op would tell us where they wanted it and we'd go out and drop it there. The terrain out there in Kansas is flat as a table and there are hardly any trees. We'd fly over the cattle at about fifty or a hundred feet and the load-masters would dump the hay out when directed. Even though trees were quite scarce we had a crew dam near run into one; the pilot pulled up just in time and managed to miss the main part of the tree but the upper branches scratched and scraped the belly of the airplane! After several days, temperatures warmed, and we terminated the operation.

A few weeks after the hay-drop we started having strange electrical problems with the birds which had been involved. The mice in the hay had found a new home and were feasting on aircraft wiring insulation. The airplanes were fumigated, wiring repaired, and the problem went away.

In the spring of '72 we had a no-notice Operational Readiness Inspection. The troops flew the prescribed missions but managed to flunk in enough areas that the ORI was a bust. I always suspected that the crews flunked on purpose. That is a pretty strong statement! I believe that they decided individually, and with-out saying a word to anyone, that they were going to get rid of that dip-shit wing commander one way or another. I never heard any conversations, down at the squadron level or anywhere else, to confirm or deny this suspicion. At any rate, Air Force policy at the time was that, if a wing flunked an ORI, the first corrective action taken by higher headquarters was to fire the wing commander. The young aircraft commanders and everyone else was well aware of this policy. All one would have to do is land a few feet short on an assault landing, which was an ORI test event. If too many guys landed short the wing would fail.

To land a few feet short required only a little squeeze on the throttles just before touch-down. What ever my speculations may be, our young flyers flunked the flying portion of the ORI and the wing commander was fired the next day. As for my own little part in the ORI, we passed with flying colors, but that didn't matter with regard to the overall grade. Several days later, we got a new wing commander and the morale of the troops improved considerably and everyone was happy. The games people play! Needless to say, a wing commander who flunks an ORI never ever gets promoted and poor old Claude Turner had to retire as a colonel. Ain't that a shame. Yeah.

While we were at Forbes, Donny talked me in to building a little ten-foot runabout. We built it in the basement of our house. I don't remember where we got the plans but it turned out to be a cute little boat. Naturally I had to go out and buy a new table saw. We, I that is, built it in the basement. We had a freezer down there and when we fiber-glassed it the food in the freezer was all contaminated and tasted like polyester resin! After completion we had to maneuver it through a vertical roll in order to get it upstairs and out of the house. We painted it red, white, and blue, and bought a twenty horse Mercury out-board for it. We also had to get a trailer. We took it on picnics and it would go like hell. One day I managed to snap-roll the thing. Lost my sun-glasses but other-wise no harm was done. We drug that boat around for several years and finally sold it to some guy in Belleville after I went to work there in 1973. I think he may have wanted it for a flower-pot!

I was thirty-nine years old when we got to Forbes and Thelma was thirty-seven. She was in great shape and looked terrific and pretty soon we were expecting a new arrival. We referred to him as PJ. After a few months she had a miscarriage. I took her to the base hospital, dropped her off, and went down to the flight-line and took an annual instrument check-ride. What a cold thing to do! At the time I thought having a miscarriage was the same as beginning a period. How ignorant can you be! Pilots don't know shit even though they think they know everything. I feel crummy about that deal to this day.

I had this boss that did his share of boozing. I must say, I did my share too. One night he came over to the house and we got a little blitzed. I think we ran out of gin, so he went out to his car and brought in a bottle of wine. We had some wine. After a short time he was standing behind me and was getting ready to leave. I turned to say something to him. When I viewed him he looked exactly like a six-foot tall rat, fully clothed in a blue Air Force uniform! Eyes, ears, whiskers, teeth, and everything. He was really scary looking! And real! I thought to myself that holy shit I'd never been this drunk in my life! Eventually it dawned on me that the son-of-a-bitch had fed me some LSD. He never mentioned it and I didn't either since it was quite some time before I realized what he had done. He was always reading this psychological crud, and there was a lot of dope around at the time, and I would guess that he wanted to see what would happen. How disgusting! There are scum-balls everywhere, even in the Air Force. Speaking of dope. It was wide-spread throughout our society at the time and would get worse. I was scared to death of dope and could not stand the smell of marijuana. I consumed gin and that was good enough for me. I could trust it, for better or worse, but I did not care to even try dope, of any kind, and I never have.

I planned to retire in May of 1972. As a matter of fact, I had no choice. Air Force policy stated that if you were not a "Regular" officer you had to retire at 20 years if you were a major. I believe this was a stupid policy. The Air Force position was that they wanted to keep a "young flying corp". As far as I was concerned, I was at the very top of my flying proficiency, in my prime, couldn't be any better and the Air Force says adios. I could have flown transports another TWENTY years and would not have had to screw around establishing a second career..Go figure.. A few months before retirement I sent out a pile of resumes looking for a flying job. I got two responses. One was from Houston Airlines. The guy said "the pay was nothing to write to mom about". I asked him what the starting pay was and he said "a hundred dollars a week"! I'll say, it ain't nothin' to write mom about. The other offer was from an outfit in Iowa that was looking for a pilot to fly an armor-plated T-28 in thunderstorm research. I wasn't all that hungry and I turned that down too. Pretty slim pickins. There were a jillion young pilots around as a result of Vietnam and the flying jobs were scarce and didn't pay for sour apples.

May came up and I was ready to bail out. The Air Force had been a good job and I sure did enjoy the flying part. I joined up in 1952 to take advantage of the aviation cadet opportunity. I dearly wanted those silver wings and gold bars but deep down I wanted a job that paid a decent wage and that's how I always thought of the Air Force. I had no college and I thought the pay for a high-school boy was respectable. I also liked the idea of being an officer. Deep down in my heart, I am a bit of a snob. Even when I was very young and we didn't have a pot to pee in I had a superiority attitude and always thought I was as good or better than anyone else I knew. I did not want any pomp or phony back-slapping retirement ceremony or the usual commendation medal and we quietly got our retirement papers in the on-base mail distribution system. The retirement certificate was accompanied by a letter of appreciation from the Air Force chief of staff, General John Ryan, an old SAC weenie. Big deal. We had no close friends and the only guy I said good-bye to was Warren Foss, the new wing commander. We had been in the same fighter squadron back at Bentwaters in the 50s. The movers packed our stuff and shipped it to storage in Tampa. May 31, 1972 we departed the Air Force. I was forty years old and looking forward to who knows what.

Thelma took Marcy and Rex in the Buick and more or less headed for Tampa. Donny and I took the Merc and headed south. We visited Penny Pendleton in Austin, Texas. I scanned the classifieds in the paper but didn't see much in my line of work and we moseyed on down to Tampa. What the hell, I didn't want to live in Texas anyway! I didn't have a plan of attack with regard to work. I knew you could get unemployment pay while you looked for work. You could do this for six months! We got an apartment in Tampa and the boys and I went fishing almost every day. With our retirement pay and unemployment we got by reasonably well.

The children started school and I figured I'd better get my can in gear and find some work. The Tampa news-papers were running advertisements looking for lease-operators. That is, people who could buy a semi-tractor and trailer and go to work hauling construction sand from sand -pits in the middle of the state to a cement-block plant in St Petersburg. I checked out the whole operation; lease operators, trucks, the money involved, payment, etc. I rode with an operator one day to see first-hand what the run-of-the-mill operation was all about. It all looked pretty good to me so I went down to the local Mack dealer in Tampa and bought a brand new Mack tractor and a twenty-five yard dump trailer.

The whole deal cost twenty-eight thousand dollars. I figured if I could fly an airplane, I could dam well handle a semi -truck as well as any joker out there in the system. Probably better since I would read the book on my new equipment and get in some serious practice out in the boonies before going out on the high-way. Your average red-neck driver doesn't read anything since he knows it all!

So, I read the book on my new toy, and got in some practice driving in isolated areas where I couldn't hurt anyone. I got the required license, and a few days later signed an agreement with a guy who had a good reputation, and went to work. I made four round trips per day between St. Pete and Polk County. The sand I was hauling was from a sand-pit north of Lakeland. You would pull in there and a huge front-end loader would dump about twenty-five yards of sand into your trailer in about five minutes. Then you'd haul the stuff back to St. Pete. The loader would always fill up your trailer with the maximum weight allowed, which was 72,600 pounds gross. The rig I had was easily capable of pulling this load at the legal speed limit which was 70 miles per hour. That Mack was quite a piece of machinery! The guy I signed up with did all the paper work and paid promptly every Friday. My plan was to drive the rig a couple of months and then hire a couple of professional drivers and let them do the driving and I'd collect the profits and pay off the truck loan. I drove that sucker about six weeks and I had never been so bored in my entire life. I went past Tampa International Airport eight times a day. All I could think of was my buddies, who were flying with the airlines, and here I was stooging around in a stupid truck! My idea of hiring a couple of pros was good and it would have been profitable. However, I had not anticipated the shortage of professionals. I got a lot of responses to my search for drivers but they were all duds. Cowboys who would only end up ruining my equipment and piddling away any profits. So I sold the whole shooting match and looked for something else to do.

I thought I'd like to learn how to build boats. I got a job with Gulfstar Yachts Inc. They manufactured large boats constructed mainly of fiberglass. The production manager liked my back-ground and had me involved in all kinds of different jobs. I learned a lot about the whole process of manufacturing large boats but the pay was lousy and there was no future for a worker-bee at Gulfstar, so I departed. I went to work for a small company in the construction business. That was boring too. I decided, what the hell, I'll go fly charter for "Junior" Mattway. We were friends back in our high-school days and he was a fixed-base-operator at St. Pete/Clearwater Airport. He had a Lear-jet and a whole bunch of other assorted airplanes he used for charter work. One of his guys checked me out in a new Bonanza and I was ready to go. It was a nice clean job but it didn't pay for sour apples. I looked around for a full-time flying job with some company that had an airplane. It was 1972 and there were many many guys who would fly for peanuts. Eckerd Drugs had a brand new Lear-jet and they paid their pilot about what an Air Force captain was earning! Which was lousy. Besides that, he was on alert twenty-four hours per day, 365 days per year! I had spent my fair share of time on "alert" in the Air Force and I dam well wasn't going to be on alert in civilian life! So one day it dawned on me that I'd better get serious and get myself a job that would provide a decent living for our family and settle down and get the children through high-school.

While flying for Mattway I inquired about "Bugs" Thompson. He knew " Bugs" back when we were in high-school and I was working at Peter O Knight airport and "Bugs" was my flight instructor. When I was enroute to Spain, the boys and I had visited "Bugs" at the Brooksville Airport where he had a small flying operation. Junior told me that "Bugs" had been killed right there on St Pete-Clearwater Airport in November 1971. He was in the right seat of a Beech Baron, light twin, with a dentist in the left seat as pilot in command. "Bugs" wife Bobbie and the dentists teen-aged son, were in the back seat. They were going to take a night training flight up to Jacksonville, have dinner and return to St. Pete. The dentist made the take-off. The airplane became airborne, accelerated, started a climb, then the climb angle increased to vertical, the airplane stalled, did a wing-over back toward the runway, dove toward the ground picking up airspeed, and, as it got close to the ground, leveled out and commenced to repeat the same maneuver. This time, as they neared the runway, the nose never rose and the airplane flew into the ground at 300+ MPH, broke up and burned killing everyone on board. Investigators determined that the pilot took off with the controls locked!! "Bugs" had a blood-alcohol level of .170. He and Bobbie had flown into St. Pete a few hours earlier from Brooksville in his Piper Colt. I'd seen him many times high on booze, always humorous, he didn't slur in speech or stagger in walking. Obviously, when clear thinking was necessary, the ole booze he dearly loved, killed him. Adios "Bugs", I loved you but you finally got nailed because of the booze/flying combination... Fate is the hunter...

I liked Tampa and would like to have stayed. I think Thelma liked it too. Our mothers lived there and we had a few friends. It was nice to be in familiar surroundings. Donny was going to the same high-school that Thelma and I had gone to. Same with Marcy in junior high. But Rex was being bussed to a raunchy ghetto school across town and we didn't care for that at all! We lived in an apartment. That was to be a temporary condition until we could buy a house. I could not find a job in Tampa that paid a decent wage and finally decided to look for a job in the career field that I was good at and had the potential for a second career, regardless of location.

It had been less than a year since I'd retired and I still knew several people in the Air Force who had civil-service jobs in the "safety" business. I'd had about ten years experience managing ground, explosives, nuclear, and flying safety programs, and knew the business inside out. One of the guys I'd known for years was Ed Brown who worked for Military Airlift Command at Scott AFB in Illinois. I gave him a call and asked him what was available. He told me that the base safety office at Scott was looking for a civilian safety guy and to give them a call. I called them and they said they were interested and to come in for an interview. A good job in the mid-west looked better to me than a so-so job in Tampa. I talked it over with Thelma and she agreed. I drove out to Scott and had an interview with Pete MacPherson, a lieutenant colonel who was the base director of safety. He liked my back-ground in the safety area. We got along well right off the bat and he hired me. I was hired as a GS-9. The potential for moving up to a GS-12 was very promising. It was the summer of 1973. I'd had enough of spinning my wheels. I had never expected to work in government at the time I retired but here we were and I was glad to have the job.

One evening I went out to the O Club to eat. As I was walking back to my table someone grabbed me on the leg. To my great surprise it was Leo Thorsness. We had been class-mates in cadets and also stationed together at Turner as 2/Lts. He was at Scott for surgery to correct knee injuries experienced in Hanoi, Viet Nam, after punching out of an F105 and put in a POW camp. He invited Thelma and I to his retirement service a few weeks hence. It was interesting seeing these general officers, who attended the service, salute Leo's Medal Of Honor when they greeted him at the reviewing stand. He received the medal for actions taken during a mission a few days before his capture, when he shot down a Mig, who was trying to shoot a friend as he parachuted to the ground.

I took a room in the Bachelor Officer Quarters at Scott, started work, and began looking for a house. I checked out the area and looked at several houses and finally bought a house on Highwood Lane in Belleville, Illinois, about ten or fifteen miles from Scott. It had about sixteen hundred square feet on the street level and a "walk-out basement. There were three bed-rooms on the main level and a large bed-room with a bath in the basement. We had a large lot at the end of the street and there were some woods adjacent to the large back-yard. The property across the street was wooded and vacant.

During the summer Thelma got stuck with the move. Being the "can-do" tiger she'd always been, she packed up the children and made the move to Belleville. Donny had totaled the Merc earlier that year, in a mishap that was not really his fault, and we'd helped him buy his hearts desire, a '68 GTO. He packed Thelma, Marcy, and Rex into that thing and drove up to Belleville. I'd made arrangements for our house-holds goods to be moved from storage to our new house and pretty soon we were settled in our new nest.

The work at Scott was low key and I had a good boss. He was kind of a sour old goat and was a retired Air Force major, non-flying type, but I liked him. Shortly after I got to Scott I ran across Leo Thorsness at the O-club. He was a class-mate from pilot training days. We'd also been stationed at Turner together. He'd been shot down in North Vietnam while flying 105s and was a recently released POW. He had injured his knee when he bailed out over there and was at Scott for treatment. After the knee was fixed he retired. One day at work I got an invitation from a four-star general, the commander of MAC, inviting Thelma and I to Leo's retirement ceremony. I assume the generals office had gotten a list of people from Leo as to whom he would like to invite. Anyway, it was amusing to see four-star generals and down, saluting Leo as the ceremony began. A month or two earlier President Nixon had decorated Leo with the Congressional Medal of Honor, an award saluted by any member of the military, regardless of rank. The general awarded him several other medals and a flight of F-105s topped things off with a high-speed fly-by. After the ceremony we got a little chuckle about all the medals he'd been awarded etc. Lord knows, he deserved them all, and I take my hat off to a real live warrior!

Ever since I'd built that little run-about in Topeka I'd wanted to build a sailboat. I'd learned quite a bit about fiberglass work while working at Gulfstar. I wanted a wood boat covered in glass so as to minimize maintenance. I couldn't decide whether to build a conventional mono-hull or multi-hull. One weekend we went out to a lake in the local area and I rented a Hobie-cat. I was amazed at the performance and liked the speed in particular. That settled it! I'd been checking out available building plans and settled on an Australian design. It was a twenty-four foot trimaran and was called a "Bucaneer." I could build it in our basement. To supplement my pay I was taking GI -Bill college courses at night. I also took a flying course to get an instructors rating. I didn't get enough credits to get any degree or rating, but I did collect the dollars for going to school, and that was, after-all, the plan. Soon I ordered the plans and started building our boat. I can't explain why I wanted a 24-foot sailboat. Maybe it was some kind of hidden desire to get away from it all. I don't have the foggiest idea of where one might go in a twenty-four foot boat, but I also had ideas in the back of my mind of building a forty-footer some day. You could go anywhere in a forty-footer! The idea of "getting away from it all" must have been some kind of middle-aged thing. I cared dearly for my sweet wife and children, and had a pretty strong hunch that she could care less about sailing off into the sun-set! The children would probably think that was a neat idea. Maybe it was just a desire to build something. I like to create stuff. So, I went out and bought some ply-wood and lumber and started building. The children were busy in their own little world and I soon found my-self in a one-man project. Which was fine.

The boat, which we dubbed "Bushwhacker," was a simple design, and the construction of it was easy. Working out at Scott helped too. We had a wing of DC-9s out there and I knew a lot of people in the maintenance shops. They threw away all sorts of stuff that I could use in building the boat. So I intercepted what I could use and took it home. When they found that I was building a boat, they volunteered all kinds of goodies. It was illegal in the Air Force for maintenance people to rat-hole used parts. The Air Force didn't want these used parts fixing their airplanes.

That is, used nuts and bolts and other material like steel cable etc. I'd ask them if they had any old "stuff" laying around. They'd deny that they had any such thing! After they found I was not out to "get" them for having a stash, they'd show me and give me anything that was in their illegal little rat-hole. All maintenance guys had their own little rat-holes, legal or not!

After I'd been in the base safety office about a year, an opening became available at Headquarters Air Rescue Service. Rescue was just across the street from where I was working and the Ground/Explosives Safety Manager slot was open so I applied for it and was hired. It was a move up to the GS-11 level. The boss was a fine gentleman and the rest of the people in the office were first class. Colonel John V. Allison, my boss, was about my age and had been a second lieutenant at Turner in the 1950s when I'd been stationed there in the 508th Strategic Fighter Wing. The GS-11 slot I took at Rescue was a "stepping stone" to higher positions. So one day I told Allison that if he wanted to keep the position filled on a long term basis he should up-grade the position to a GS-12. He agreed and in a few weeks I was a GS-12. The pay was good but the job got to be a very very boring. We traveled to subordinate units providing "staff assistance" visits. The units were Air National Guard or Air Force Reserve and this meant we visited them on week-ends when they were doing their thing. After a while this traveling got a little old and I was becoming a little restless.

In the meantime, I completed the boat, built a trailer, and transported all the parts to Rend Lake, some 80 miles from our house. Don, Rex, and Marcy helped me assemble the thing and we launched it! It was exciting to sail a boat that you'd built with your own hands. The performance was all I'd expected. The thing would move along in almost no wind. When there was a bit of a breeze or light wind, it would go like hell. When summer ended, we disassembled it and took it back to the house. The following spring we got a spot at a marina at Lake Carlyle, which was only about 35 miles from our house. It was nice to have a spot at the marina and we enjoyed sailing on week-ends and in the evenings sometimes on long summer-time days.

I built the boat in strict accordance with the plans, which were adequate, however, when it came to the rigging, that is, installing the mast etc, the instructions merely stated "install rigging". I'd ordered a mast from some sailboat supply outfit. I'd asked them to send me a mast that they thought would be adequate for my boat and that's what I installed. One fine Saturday morning there was a pretty stiff breeze blowing. Donny and his friend Frank, and I got under way. They were stretched out on the netting installed between the main hull and the out-riggers. We were flying along, fat, dumb, and happy, and there was about a two-foot wake behind the boat. I think I could easily have been pulling a couple of water-skiers! We were yakking about how great that sucker was performing when all of a sudden there was a loud bang, more like an explosion, and the mast crashed to the deck barely missing Donny and Frank! I thought oh shit that air force scrounged cabling and swedging on the stays/shrouds had failed. It hadn't. The mast had sustained a compression fracture about six feet above the cabin. We limped back to the marina and I was relieved that I hadn't hurt those guys!

After the incident I talked to an experienced sailor who was also an engineer at Douglas Aircraft in St. Louis, and he told me what I needed in the way of a proper mast. I bought a replacement that had a wall-thickness much heavier than the original and we never had any further mast problems.

One day in 1976 I was talking to a friend at work whom I hadn't seen for some time. I asked him where he'd been and he said he'd had an operation to fix the circulation in his legs. The medics had opened up an artery and he felt great. Thelma had the same problem. Bad circulation in her legs. She could hardly navigate the stairs to our basement unless she rested half-way down. I told her about Archie at work and what he said. It kind of dawned on us that the same situation may be true in her case. So she went to the doctors out at Scott and told them what she thought the problem was. They said "yeah sure". They did some tests and sure enough the problem was as she said. Surgery was scheduled and performed. A blood clot developed in her thigh and required immediate correction. It took several weeks for her to get to the point where they could try again. On the second try the surgery was completed. The operation was pretty drastic and recovery rather uncomfortable. We observed the 4th of July Bicentennial celebration, from the hospital. The Base put on a big fire-works show but the view from the hospital was not all that great. We finally got to take her home and she recovered after spending a lot of time in bed. The whole deal wiped out the summer of '76 for her. Regrettably, all that hassle did not help very much and the circulation problem persisted but was better than before. But not by much.

About this time I began thinking about airplanes again. They had not been on my mind much since we moved to Scott. I found a P-51 for sale by a guy in Columbia. It was a real jewel and he wanted 60K for it. That quite exceeded my bank balance and I forgot about it. Too bad. Several years later a P-51 in flyable condition would be worth a million! Story of my life! "Coulda, woulda, shoulda"!

Things were going along pretty well. The children had their friends and were around our house a lot. Our family was a little different from their friends in that we had a mom and dad at home. We heard more than a few comments along these lines. Things were generally organized and stable at our house. A lot of the youngsters at the time didn't live with both parents and divorce was rampant in our society. I'm afraid things haven't changed much! Time marched on. Donny and Marcy graduated from high-school. Rex was still in school. I was getting bored with my job and often wondered "what the hell am I doing HERE?" One day, Travis Wofford, whom I'd met and become friendly with at work asked me if I was interested in buying into a boat manufacturing business in Washington state. I was ready for a change. The job at Scott paid well but was not at all satisfying. I did not in the least care for the Mid-West. I told the family we may be moving. Thanksgiving weekend, 1977, Travis and I flew out to Chehalis, Washington and checked out the boat business. We decided to buy it. We took on two partners, Lloyd Bingham and Chuck Hungerford. In January of 1978 I quit my job at Rescue. My boss, Colonel Jack Allison, was very disappointed but wished me well.

The only car we had was the 70' Buick. I figured we would need a van in the boat business so I went out and bought a new Dodge maxi-van. Donny and I packed it full, hooked up the boat and headed for Washington. The lady tiger took over once again and put the house up for sale. Even though it was January the roads were clear of snow. We had to replace a wheel bearing on the trailer as we were passing through the Denver area. Other-wise the trip was uneventful. After several days we reached Chehalis and checked in at Jetster Boats Inc, the little boat manufacturing outfit that we'd bought.

The four of us met and decided to keep the name "Jetster". We decided who was going to do what with regard to running the company. Travis was to be the president and run the business. Lloyd would be the purchasing agent. Chuck would be running sales and I would be the production manager. We also decided on what we would pay our-selves. It was pretty generous. We operated out of a building that had ten-thousand square feet. It was quite adequate for what we were doing. The molds for building fiberglass boats were in good shape. We would build 16' outboards and or jets, 18' jet ski-boats and 19' jet family cruisers. We offered the boats with any color or colors that the dealers wanted. Usually they were of three colors. A basic boat color with two metal-flake trim colors. We had a very fine gel-coater, "painter" that is, and the boats were really sharp looking. We also had very fine laminators. We had one guy who was a very skilled assembler and put him in charge of other assemblers. We turned out five or eight boats a week and sold them to dealers in Washington and Oregon. After we got going good we took on a guy who wanted us to build commercial fishing boats. These were from 28' to 43' in length. We did only the fiberglass fabrication. That is, we built the hull, deck, fish-box etc and assembled the basic boat and then it was delivered to the customer for engine installation and final finish.

Donny was part of the operation and was my best worker. He learned fast and got to the point where he could assemble a sport boat in one day. We had a few run ins. Heck, all I wanted was for him to be perfect! He was a great employee and I only wished all the other worker-bees were as good.

After Donny and I had been in Chehalis a couple of months Marcy came out to Washington. She was in pretty sad shape. Her mind was messed up something awful. She stayed in the apartment all day long and spent her time crying and worrying about the past. I couldn't figure out what the problem was. I listened to her for hours but could provide no words to calm her down. Finally I took her to Madigan Army Hospital and she saw a shrink who gave her some pills which she promptly threw away. In the meantime we moved to a little cottage on the water in Olympia.

In the summer of 1978 Donny and Marcy drove the van back to Belleville and retrieved the out-riggers for the "Bushwhacker". We were unable to haul them with the main hull when we first drove out to Chehalis. We put the boat together and moored it behind our place on Budd Inlet.

After we'd been in Chehalis a while Jetster began to hurt for space. We found more room in Grand Mound and leased several buildings from Al Conwell. This gave us plenty of room and we pressed on. About this time it became apparent that our sales guy was not very effective and he dropped out and sought work else-where. He fancied himself as a super-salesman but in reality never produced squat. I was very pleased with our product and would have been proud to own any of them. The jets and out-boards were really sharp looking and of very high quality. The jet boats were powered with either 454 cubic inch Chevrolet or 460 cubic inch Ford V-8 engines. We used Berkley or Jacuzzi jet-drives and they would go about seventy miles an hour. Really fun boats to drive! There was only one problem. You could run through seventy or eighty gallons of gas on a day of zipping around on the water!

I liked the boat manufacturing part of the business. It was gratifying to see our final product and it was fun. I soon found that the building of the boats was the easy part. Managing the people was not that easy. They bitched about raises and when was the next break. There was a lot of pot around and I suspect most of the employees used the stuff although I would not tolerate it on the job. You gotta remember, you don't get the cream of the crop when it comes to fiberglass manufacturing. You gotta be a little dumb to do this kind of work. It's a little nasty for the worker-bee what with laminating and grinding the stuff, and itchy conditions for the guy doing the work. And, the jokers did all sorts of crud to get in trouble after working hours. DWIs, you name it. Then they'd get put in jail and beg me to get them out on a "work release". They got to be a pain in the ass to say the least and the fun part of my job was beginning to be a drag.

In the middle of 1978 the price of gasoline was going up and out of sight. People were not accustomed to paying the high prices. By the end of the year the orders for gas guzzling jet boats vanished! Our back-orders for jet boats went to zero! The orders for fishing boats were also decreasing.

In January of '79 Thelma sold the house in Belleville and she and Rex and our dog "Benji" drove out to Olympia. Before they arrived Marcy had found us a rental house on Arbutus Street in Olympia. It was great to have the family together again. After we'd been in the house on Arbutus a couple of months we had to move because the owners were returning to Olympia and wanted their house back. We found a nice big tri-level in Lacey and leased the place. In the meantime the business at Jetster was getting to the point where it would not support the three of us owners. Travis and Lloyd had the personal assets to continue. I didn't, so I departed and sought other work. Later on they bought me out and I at least had my initial investment back.

The previous summer Donny, myself, and Travis went to an air-show at Everett. Mark Sorrell was one of the performers and was flying a cabin bi-plane that he and his family had built. It was called a "Hiper-Bipe" and they were manufacturing kits for the home-built market. They had a little grass airstrip and hangar at Tenino which was only a few miles from Jetster. Since I was looking for work I thought I'd go over there and see what was going on. I met Mark, his father, and brother. I told them of my back-ground in fiberglass work. As it happened, they were in need of molds for their Hiper-bipe kits. They needed molds for making the cowling, wheel-pants, and a tail-wheel fairing. I told them I could build the molds they needed and we made a deal. Mr. Sorrell was a fine, elderly gentleman, and a serious Christian. Just before I left that day he asked me quietly why I had come by. I told him I was looking for work. He said, "you know, I prayed this morning, that someone who could make the molds we need, would be provided". And his prayers were answered. God bless him. I must confess, I felt no spiritual pull to Tenino that day.

One morning while I was working at Sorrell's a guy flew in to their air-strip in a spiffy little all-metal, low wing sport plane. He was a friend of Mark's and was in the home-builders kit business. His name was Richard VanGrundsman and as of this writing he is one of the biggest kit manufacturers in the world. He had been out that morning gathering performance data on his new airplane and I remembered thinking that he had a real winner. After a few weeks I completed the molds and the Sorrell's were very pleased and paid me off with one-hundred dollar bills. They didn't believe in checks or written contracts in that they'd been sued by some doctor who had, because of his own stupidity, run out of fuel in a Hiper-Bipe and crashed. Because of our ridiculous liability laws the Sorrell's went out of the airplane business a few years after I met them.

By this time we had a house full in Lacey. Rex had gone back to Belleville and collected his girl-friend Shelly and brought her home. Donny was working for Travis and Marcy was working at a bank. We had Shelley's little mutt and Benji too. Later we found out that her little doggie was loaded with fleas and we had to have the house fumigated! I decided to go look for work in my old stand-by, the safety business. The Navy had all sorts of bases around the area so I went to the federal building in Seattle to see what I could scrounge up. I found an open "safety" job at Keyport, Washington, where-ever the hell that was! I looked it up on the map and it looked pretty attractive what with all the water around and being on Puget Sound.

I went to the personnel office at Keyport and put in my paperwork for a job as a safety specialist. The place was called Naval Undersea Warfare Engineering Station Keyport and they built torpedoes. I was way over-qualified and the safety manager, Fran Galles, hired me on the spot. It was the fall of 1979. He said I'd have to go to work at Indian Island if I took the job. I wondered, where the hell is Indian Island. I looked it up on a map and it was an even better location than Keyport! Lots of water and a sparsely populated area at the north end of Puget Sound and it looked like a good place to fish and enjoy our boat. The other safety weenies in the Keyport safety office wanted no part of the job at Indian Island. I was glad to have it. A few years later, after we got the place shaped up, everyone in the safety office at Keyport, wanted MY job at Indian Island!

The first month or two at the new job I worked out of the safety office at Keyport and my supervisor, Harold Nance and I would commute up to Indian Island for the day. That made for a hell of a lot of miles per day. Lacey to Indian Island and back! In January, 1980, I rented a trailer in Hadlock, a little pueblo three miles from my office at Indian Island. That trailer got smaller and smaller every day so I rented an apartment. Marcy was in the doldrums back in Lacey so we had her move up to Hadlock. We made do in Hadlock and in June leased a house in Port Ludlow. It was about nine miles from my office at work. We had our household goods packed up and shipped at Navy expense and Thelma and Rex moved up to 21 Rainier Lane in Port Ludlow.

The Navy had purchased Indian Island in 1940 in order to establish an ammunition depot. World War II was on the horizon and they needed a place in the boon-docks for receiving, storing, and issuing ammunition and ordnance to our war ships. An ammunition handling pier and one hundred storage magazines were built. As were administrative buildings, production buildings, living quarters, numerous support buildings, and service roads. Old photographs and documents show that the place was a real “going concern” during the war. After the war, operations were reduced to a trickle. Things picked up again in the early 1950s when the Korean war was on. After that little fray was over the mission was reduced to a small under-water mine operation. In the late 1970s the Navy was being equipped with Trident class nuclear submarines capable of launching numerous ballistic missiles. These subs were to be based at Bangor, located on the Hood Canal, not far from Keyport. Prior to all this, Bangor had been a small ammunition storage base. With the move of the Tridents to Bangor the Navy spent millions on upgrading the entire facility and made it into a full-blown submarine base. The expansion included the building of nuclear storage and support facilities. Conventional ammunition, that is, old fashioned bombs and bullets, were transferred to Indian Island. A new ammunition handling pier, production buildings, and associated support buildings were built at Indian Island and it again became a major player in the handling of ammunition and explosives on the west coast of the United States.

The staff at the Keyport Safety Office managed the safety program in an adversarial manner and the worker bee’s didn’t appreciate that at all. The safety people were pushy and rather arrogant. Always oh so correct and condescending. I was not accustomed to this sort of approach. I liked to work one on one with the supervisors and working guys. The Navy spelled out every little detail of what was to be, with regard to safety, in a directive about two inches thick. I went through the book and picked out every item that was mandatory. Every item that was referred to as “shall” or “will”. I did the same thing in the Air Force and it worked out well. If we could implement the “shalls” and “wills” we would have a safety program and would not have to re-invent the wheel on our own. I set about, with the co-operation of the supervisors, in implementing the program and getting the supervisors on my side. Eventually they understood that I was not out to get them. After about a year everyone was on the same page and we had a great relationship. I liked the people I worked with and I believe they appreciated me.

We had a great attitude and the worker bees had an attitude of “look at us, we do it right every time”. We got all of our facilities up to speed and nailed down routine operating procedures and reduced our screw-ups to a minimum. We also got a reputation for excellence from our customers. The commanders of ships we loaded and unloaded at the pier enjoyed coming to Indian Island because of the courteous, efficient, safe and proper manner in which we did the job.

The operation at Indian Island was examined every year by higher headquarters inspectors. Besides Navy inspectors we also had people from the Department of Defense and, on occasion, OSHA weenies

The ratings we received from all these inspectors was never less than “satisfactory” my first year or two, and then, “outstanding” for the rest of my career. It got to the point that the inspectors liked to come to Indian Island because they knew we had our stuff completely together and that they would not have anything to “write up”. This was a great situation and my immediate big bosses appreciated it. I usually got a nice incentive award at the end of each year in the form of cash. Usually a check for six or eight hundred dollars, which they gave me around Christmas-time. Just as important to me was the fact that the bosses I had through the years hardly ever came to Indian Island and stayed the hell out of our hair. They knew they had nothing to worry about with regard to the safety program at Indian Island.

I had an excellent situation at the Island. If one must work, I figured I had the best safety job in the Navy! After I’d been there a year or two the other “safety” people in the office at Keyport began asking when I was planning to retire since they wanted MY job! In the early 90s the Navy reshuffled things on the west coast. The operation at the Island came under the control of Naval Weapons Station Seal Beach. This was better than Keyport. Seal Beach was 1200 miles from the Island and I didn’t see my boss once a year. We were essentially on our own. The managers at Keyport were out of the picture and we were rid of those characters at last. No love lost!

When Thelma and Rex came up to Port Ludlow, we lived in a leased house on Rainier Lane. I put the “Bushwhacker” together and got a spot for it at the marina. As always, it was a lot of fun to sail. Thelma didn’t particularly care for boating and didn’t go out much. Benji sure loved it though. One day Rex and Donny were sailing around in the bay. Benji and I were on the dock, fishing. When the boys approached the dock, Benji recognized them. She really loved those guys and wanted to go to them. So she stepped off the dock in order, I assume, to trot out to where they were! Poor dog! I reckon she didn’t know she couldn’t walk on water. She paddled back to the dock and I drug her out of the water. The boys docked and she seemed to enjoy herself in the company of her favorites. It wasn’t long until Don and Rex moved out on their own and sailing the boat by myself was not much fun so I put it up for sale. A guy in Proser, Washington bought it over the phone. He paid me twenty-five hundred dollars and a one-year-old Yamaha motorcycle. Nice piece of machinery. I don’t care for those things, so I sold it too.

Not too much time went by till one day I come home and there’s a brand new nineteen foot run-about on its trailer, in the driveway! A surprise from Donny! Al Conwell, down at Jetster, was still building boats and Donny got it from him for “costs”. It had been built as a boat for show at boat shows and was a first class run-about. Perfect for fishing in the waters around the Sound. I bought a new eighty-five horse Evinrude outboard motor and we had a great fishing boat for the family. Benji and I fished quite a bit and we enjoyed the boys going with us when they could get home for a day or two. In the eighties, fishing went from poor to worse and I eventually sold that boat too.

Marcy was having head problems and it finally dawned on us that she was suffering from depression. I'll tell you. Having a child sick and feeling yourself helpless is one lousy feeling. After going through some trauma and a frustrating period Marcy's condition was recognized and she was put on effective medication and she began to experience a life of her own. She found a perfect apartment in Port Townsend and moved in and became happy at last.

When we got up to Port Ludlow I got the flying bug back. I got my medical updated and took a flight review and was legal to fly again. In the spring of 87' I got the urge to buy an airplane. Thelma didn't object too much and I found a Piper "Clipper" for sale in Ellensburg, Washington. I'd flown a brand new "Clipper" when I was a teen-ager back in Tampa working for Len Herman. The airplane always had a special appeal to me so Thelma, Benji, and I drove over to take a look. I liked it and we bought it. It was in good condition but had an ugly paint job. The registration number was N-5800-K and Thelma said, "you aren't going to call the airplane Nookie are you"! What a gal! Good idea! The wind was blowing so hard that Benji could hardly stand up. Needless to say, we couldn't fly either so we went home and returned the following week. I checked myself out in the thing, refueled it, and took it to Port Townsend. Just like many years earlier, I felt like a built-in part of the airplane. With-in a few weeks I had a hangar for it and proceeded to paint it a decent color. I picked a tan color with red trim, like the original back in 1949. Everywhere I flew I took Benji along. She sat in the back seat with her tongue hanging out and just seemed to enjoy the whole thing.

By this time frame, we were living in Port Hadlock because the house we were leasing was being repossessed and the bank wanted it vacated. So we rented a little duplex near the library. We had a little six or eight -year -old boy living next door. His name was Josh and Thelma and I just loved that little kid. He was over at our place all the time. I didn't want him to call me "Don" or "Mister". His mother and I decided he could call me "Maje", (as in page) short for Major. I'd take him "fishing" in the boat and all he was interested in was chasing sea-gulls and ducks like I'd shown him. When he went along we'd go through fifteen or twenty gallons of gas chasing sea-gulls all over the place between Port Ludlow and Port Townsend. I don't think I ever caught a fish when Josh was along. I also took him flying with me. I usually broke the golden rule, i.e. have any youngster potty before you leave! Sure enough, we'd get fifteen minutes away from the airport and he'd say, "Maje, I gotta pee" and we'd have to buzz back to the airport as quickly as possible and shut down and get him on the ground and let the little squirt tinkle! What a lark!

When Travis and Lloyd bought me out we had a little cash, so I bought a building lot in Port Ludlow. It was the early 80s. At the time I didn't know if we'd retire in the area or not, but I thought a home in Port Ludlow would have a better re-sale value than a house else-where in the local area. We couldn't build right away because of a building moratorium. The sewage treatment plant had to be up-graded. By 1987 I was really getting itchy to get out of the apartment in Hadlock and build us a house. The moratorium had been lifted. I brow-beat Thelma about building a house and she finally said "go ahead and do what you wanna do". That's what she always said! I found some house plans that I really liked and bought them. Thelma was ambivalent but I was determined to press on. I could see no reason to pay some contractor good money to do something I thought I could do my-self, so I became my own contractor. As it turned out it was a piece of cake.

There were a few frustrations during the building of the house but over-all it turned out OK and I think we saved our-selves a lot of money. We did a lot of the light work like installing the trim and doors. Thelma helped me with installing the cabinets and counter-tops and vanities etc. Rex helped us paint the place. I installed the wood-burning stove. The wall-to-wall carpeting topped things off and we moved into 31 Fleet Drive in May of 1988. We'd been married 33 years and I finally felt like this was IT. No more moves. Maybe, one at most after I retired.

During Christmas time in 1988 our good dog Benji went to dog heaven. Don and Marcy, and Rex and his family were all home for Christmas. Benji was getting on in years and was not as frisky as she had been in her youth. After every-one went to bed Christmas night Benji walked back to Rex's room, laid down in the hall-way and passed away. I think Rex was always her favorite. It was a sad situation. Every-one shed some tears and we buried her in the shade of a tree at the side of our house. She was one fine dog and we all missed her good company and companionship. I don't think I want another dog again

The routine at work continued and was not all that exciting, which is the way you want it in the "safety" business. The 1980s kind of all ran together and none of the years really stood out as they did in our Air Force career when the moves from one assignment to another registered in that the moves were a significant change in your life. The dates we moved from one place to another always kind of stuck in my mind. We had never lived anywhere more than three years. As of this writing we've been in the same neighbor-hood for over twenty years and in the same house for over thirteen.

In 1991 the doctors at Madigan Army Hospital told Thelma that she had cancer. They figured out a treatment plan but I felt like I was in a fog and just could not accept the potential for disaster. I had a complete case of denial. They treated Thelma and the treatment was brutal. She was cured. My actions during her treatment would indicate that I was the worlds worst sympathizer. She didn't complain about anything and asked for nothing. I always knew she was one tough customer and could handle anything. She got well in spite of my less than glorious emotional reactions during her illness. God bless her sweet little ole soul!

I had always wanted to go to the air races in Reno. Finally in the early 80s Donny and I packed up the van and went. The annual "National Championship Air Races" at Reno began in 1962 or 63 after a long absence of big airplane racing dating back to 1949. In about 1949 there was a crash at the Cleveland Air Races which resulted in the death of a lady when Bill Odham lost control of his P-51 and it wiped him out and also killed a lady when he flew through her house! The population around Cleveland had expanded greatly since the early 30s and air racing there was forever cancelled. The air races had been going on there since the early 30s. When I was working at Peter O. Knight I'd always wanted to go but couldn't afford it.

For an airplane buff the Reno races are pure airplane heaven. The airplanes that race in the “un-limited” class are all World War II left-overs with big engines and the sound they make is fantastic and not available anywhere else in the world. These airplanes are the remains of the last propeller driven military fighter aircraft built in the entire world. Too bad that their numbers are decreasing as the years go by. Any-way, we’d go to the races from time to time and have been eight times. While I was working at Indian Island I was tasked to inspect the Mine Detachment at Hawthorne, Nevada, one of the remote units that was attached to Keyport. The Navy would pay me per diem for the inspection and I’d couple in a leave and we could go to Reno and let the Navy pay for part of our trip. After I retired we were on our own. Thelma and I went in 2001. We left home the day after September 11. I thought the mourning would be over by the following week-end and that the races would go on as scheduled. I couldn’t have been more wrong. The Friday before the races were to start, the whole deal was cancelled and we went back home. As a consolation we went by the museum in McMinville, Oregon and saw the “Spruce Goose”, the largest airplane ever built. The airplane was the brain-child of Howard Hughes and Henry Kaiser during WWII. It is a sea-plane so the space required for take-off and landing is un-limited. It was supposed to carry around 500 troops. Never did. Made one flight to show congressmen that it could fly and was then placed into storage by Hughes never to be flown again. It is one impressive machine and the technology to build it, and indeed the prop driven airplanes of WWII is, in my opinion, something to behold!

By the early 90s I’d been wearing glasses for about thirty years. I hate the dam things. The eye doctor told me I had cataracts. By this time a corrective action had been established and I had surgery to correct the situation. They fixed one eye and a couple months later fixed the other. I must say, it was absolutely painless, quick, and very effective and I threw away my “distant vision” glasses. I still need “cheaters” for reading and up-close vision but I can handle that. That operation procedure is the best thing to come along since sliced bread. Ain’t technology grand!

I’m about out of relevant stuff to say about my wanderings through life. If indeed ANY of the above is relevant! How-ever, one of the things that happened in my life-time that I thought would never happen is that the goddam “cold war” ended. Except for the short period that we were between real jobs in the Air Force and then with the Navy, I’d spent my whole working life “fighting” the cold war.

On Christmas day 1991 the new Russia raised their flag and the old Soviet Union was no more. A new era began. It had been a long road to hoe. Volumes could be written on the “cold war”..I’ll leave it to the historians and let them screw it up. There are still bad asses around the world and now we have the war on terror. When will all this bad stuff ever end? This century maybe.

I retired from my job at Indian Island in the summer of 1995. I had developed an “enlarged aorta” which was discovered when the medics were keeping an eye on my kidneys. All of this as a result of a flight physical I took about 1990. Anyway, by this time the medics figured the aorta had enlarged into an aneurysm and decided to correct it. In July I went to Medigan Army Medical Center and had surgery and they fixed the thing by putting in a tube made of modern material. So far so good. Haven’t had any problems since.

Retirement is easy to get accustomed to. The one nice thing I like is that you don't have to get up out of bed so early in the morning. No schedules to adhere to. Just do what-ever you dam well please. Between the Air Force and work with the Navy, and now social security the retirement pay is sufficient to support our needs and wants.

Nowadays I spend a lot of time out at the airport. Jerry Thuotte, one of our local area aviators is establishing an aviation museum at Jefferson County International Airport, that's the local airpatch, and I volunteer more than a little time in helping in the restoration of airplanes that will be placed in the museum. I enjoy being around the people and airplanes involved in the whole deal. Our home is holding up well and I tried to make our yard a low maintenance installation so there isn't a lot of work around the house. Who needs it! A standing joke between Thelma and I is that "when my ship finally comes sailing in, I'll be out at the airport"!

When I was a lot younger I never thought about "tomorrow", much less the future and retirement. The days were long and the years too short.. While in the Air Force I didn't have a hell of a lot of control over assignments etc and we just "went with the flow" and treated moves as an adventure. Things worked out pretty well. Since our Air Force days I always went where the work was. That worked out pretty well too. In the end I believe providence had a hand in our settling down in the great north-west and our current address. The boys found a couple of outstanding women to marry and Marcy couldn't be in a better situation for her needs. I love and appreciate my home, it's much more than I ever imagined possible in my youth. And finally, I don't know how I got so lucky so early in getting my darlin' Thelma for a wife and lifetime soul mate..

I am now seventy! I can't believe it. The years fly by like a shooting star across the universe. In early youth the weeks and days seemed to stand still, especially in the summer. Later on when doing the things you love the time just flew by! And it still does today. So the name of the game is, enjoy the moment. Praise The Lord.

DJM. 02 20 2002