

# FLYING THE NAVY'S FIRST JETS

(SIERRA HOTEL)



By  
Steven Craig Reynolds

As Told By  
Charles "Gil" Erb, Cdr. USN (Ret.)

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

---

---

PROLOGUE.....	1
CHAPTER 1: IN THE BEGINNING.....	3
CHAPTER 2: THE SKY IS CALLING.....	9
CHAPTER 3: CABBIE ADVENTURES AT THE MISSION RANCH.....	11
CHAPTER 4: ARMY DAYS AS A PRE-AVIATION CADET.....	15
CHAPTER 5: ALEXANDRE NYEFSKY YARASLOVICH SLATOFFOVOICH (SLATS).....	18
CHAPTER 6: THE RAT IN THE CAN.....	22
CHAPTER 7: BATHING BEAUTY BOBBY BROWN.....	24
CHAPTER 8: A HECTIC THREE WEEKS AND THEN SOME.....	27
CHAPTER 9: GETTING HIS WINGS.....	30
CHAPTER 10: JET TRAINING.....	36
CHAPTER 11: FIRST BORN.....	38
CHAPTER 12: A “NUGGET’S” FIRST NEAR-FATAL CARRIER EXPERIENCE.....	39
CHAPTER 13: INVERTED IN THE DARK.....	42
CHAPTER 14: OSCAR’S FEET.....	46
CHAPTER 15: WHAT AM I DOING HERE?.....	49
CHAPTER 16: COLLISION! COLLISION! COLLISION!.....	56
CHAPTER 17: THE WARRIOR’S HUMANITY.....	59
CHAPTER 18: SCOTT, THE ARCHITECT, IS BORN IN A HURRY.....	61
CHAPTER 19: THEY MADE THE VALLEY TREMBLE.....	64
CHAPTER 20: WHY MODERN AIRCRAFT CARRIERS HAVE ANGLED DECKS.....	68
CHAPTER 21: FLAT-HATTING OVER KOREA.....	71
CHAPTER 22: GIL AND BOBBY GET DEGREES.....	73

CHAPTER 23: HIGH WATER PANTS .....	77
PHOTOS .....	81
CHAPTER 24: YOUR AVERAGE LIFE SAVING JUDGMENT .....	91
CHAPTER 25: THE “ROMANCE” OF TEST PILOTING.....	95
CHAPTER 26: THE BREAKS OF NAVAL AIR .....	99
CHAPTER 27: A CDO’S WORST DUTY WEEKEND.....	106
CHAPTER 28: EXCITEMENT! EXCITEMENT! WE’RE MOVING TO FLORIDA!.....	112
CHAPTER 29: EXHILARATION.....	120
CHAPTER 30: SECOND LIEUTENANT HEMMINGWAY .....	123
CHAPTER 31: ALONE IN THE WATER .....	133
CHAPTER 32: GIL WRECKS DOCTOR’S PORSCHE; DOCTOR SAVES GIL’S LIFE .....	139
CHAPTER 33: LIFE AT THE NAVAL ACADEMY .....	144
CHAPTER 34: HOW ONE BECOMES A DEVELOPER .....	149
CHAPTER 35: THE BITCH KITTY .....	158
CHAPTER 36: FAREWELL, MY LOVE.....	167
CHAPTER 37: ONE MORE (HOPEFULLY LAST) NEAR MISS .....	171
AUTHOR’S NOTE .....	173

# PROLOGUE

---

The device to assist me in keeping the throttle forward was not there!

This is the point where I panicked. Here I was turning up at full power and nothing to keep my left arm from pulling off the power during acceleration. Being a young Navy pilot and relatively immortal I made an instantaneous decision to go through with the take-off. Not to mention there were a lot of shipmates watching and, like most young men, I'd rather suffer injury than look less than brave. Being panicked, and not showing it, is a young man's privilege.

I saluted the cat officer, the "OK to fire" signal. I now had three seconds to grab the stick, get my elbow in my stomach and, WHAM! Off we go. So I grabbed the stick and got my elbow in place and concentrated on pushing, as hard as I possibly could, on the throttle to keep it in the full power position. The catapult fired and the acceleration force was something I will never forget. I pushed so hard on the throttle that, to this day I swear I could have bent it in half.

To my dismay (as well as everyone on the flight deck, the bridge, and the observers on vultures' row) in concentrating on pushing the throttle forward, I also pushed the stick forward and when I went off the end of the flight deck the plane headed straight down to the blue ocean. Everyone on the ship knew I would hit the water. The crash alarm sounded, the ship went into an emergency full rudder turn to avoid hitting the airplane, and the rescue helo was on its way to pluck me out of the sea.

However, *I* didn't know I was going in the water, I only knew instantly that I was in a hell of a jam. When I realized my mistake I quickly pulled back on the stick with the adrenalized force of someone trying to save his own life. I got the nose as high as I could without stalling the plane. As I eased off a bit, the plane shuddered and scooted forward with the tailpipe dragging near the water. Fortunately there were no big waves. The sea was calm and they told me later that I churned up a white water trail for two miles.

Slowly the airplane gained speed and I was able to pick up a few feet of altitude by tenderly jockeying the stick back and forth. I finally got high enough to ease the nose over and accelerate to a life saving

flying speed.

I wasn't about to risk another cat shot without the rod, so I binged back to Moffett Field. Sure enough, I had been assigned a plane that wasn't configured for operations aboard ship.

This was Gil Erb's initiation into the world of flying jets off aircraft carriers. It was 1951. In this case, it was a F9F-2 Panther. He was one of the first. Planes with jet engines were new to the US Navy and nothing was done by computer; least of all a carrier landing. It was a beautiful morning and Gil and his squadron had just rendezvoused with the USS Princeton off the southern California coast. His first tail-hook landing in a jet had come off as well as could be expected for a rookie. That's when he got hooked up to the hydraulic catapult that took him from parked on the flight deck to 130 knots in about 4 seconds and almost into the water. The exciting career of this young Navy pilot was just beginning.

Gil was one of the pilots to fly the Navy's first training jet (F-80 Shooting Star); first carrier jet (F9F-2 Panther); first supersonic carrier jet (F9F-6 Cougar); and first MACH 2 carrier jet (A3J Vigilante). He served as a fighter/bomber pilot in Korea and went on to become a test pilot for the Navy. His story is filled with adventure, romance, humor and danger. He has had more than his share of near-death experiences but seems to have had more lives than an alley cat.

The composite of Gil Erb's and his fellow Navy pilots' experiences is what taught the Navy how to become the mightiest and most capable Naval Air Force in the world. Gil and his peers flew these monster machines before there were computers. They weren't all famous but they should be. It's their adventures and mishaps that served as the lessons learned to constantly improve the tactics, technology and policies of the Navy. They were there when the human equation was vastly more important than the computer algorithm.

In the following chapters we will attempt to record Gil's adventurous life for ourselves and future generations.

Wait 'til you read the chapter where Gil, at night on instruments, with no visibility, ends up flying down Main Street in a small town in California. He looks at the movie marquee, which catches his eye as he is going by, and realizes for the first time that he's inverted. The marquee is upside down!

# CHAPTER 1

## IN THE BEGINNING

---

Charles Gilbert “Gil” Erb came into the world on October 29, 1926 in the Santa Cruz, California city hospital. He was an intelligent and precocious child unafraid to take a risk whether physical or life altering. Gil’s formative years were spent moving back and forth between California and Utah where he skipped a couple of grades which ended up making him always the youngest in his classes and therefore not quite as attractive to the older set as he wanted to be. This catalyst only served to make him try that much harder to “make the grade”. The loss of his father at an early age forced a certain self reliance and independence that he carried through his life.

Gil’s father, Charles Meredith Erb, was born about 1888 and raised in Harrisville, Pennsylvania. His first wife was a lady named Ada and with her he had two sons, Carl and Ralph. Gil doesn’t know why, but for some reason his father left Ada and the two boys in Pennsylvania and moved to Texas. It could possibly have been for financial reasons as the depression had hit earlier and harder in some regions of the country. The half-brothers were approximately five years older than him. He met them once when they came to see their father in Salt Lake City. It was the only time he ever met them and he remembers it as a pleasant enough visit.

When “Charlie”, Gil’s father, came to Texas he worked at whatever he could but somehow managed to never really work for anyone else. He had some mechanical savvy and was also somewhat of an entrepreneur. At one time he was charged with keeping the engine in tune on the first automobile to go over 100 mph. This car was driven by none other than the famous Barney Oldfield.

Charlie, working as an independent wildcatter, learned how to drill deep wells for oil. This is where he learned the trade that turned out to be his last, and most economically rewarding, entrepreneurial venture.

Charlie ended up in Utah around 1922 where he met but, apparently never married, Novella Turnbow, Gil’s mother. Since Charlie had never divorced Ada, Gil is sure either he’s a bastard child or his Dad was a bigamist. It was Novella’s practice to save every picture and document having to do with the family’s life. No marriage certificate could ever be found.

Charlie and Novella moved to Seacliff Park, California, near Santa Cruz, in 1923 where they teamed up with Bert and Blanche Wible. Bert had inherited twenty acres of artichoke fields and, since Bert was a fair carpenter but terrible farmer, the two relatively young entrepreneurs decided to build houses on this land. The

first two houses were built next door to each other, one for the Erbs and one for the Wibles. Evidently they did a good job on these houses as it led the bank to loan the young men enough money to build more. Charlie and Bert were now developers.

While the houses were being developed, so was Gil.

Gil remembered the Seacliff Park area as follows:

The artichoke bushes featured bright purple blossoms surrounded by vicious fiber spikes. The symmetry of each plant, together with its regimental layout, gave the impression of a cemetery for green aliens. These “cemeteries” were located off the California coast near a beach settlement called Seacliff Park. Seacliff boasted a three-mile stretch of pure white linen sand backed by a one hundred-foot high cliff. This made it the most secluded and desirable beach between Santa Cruz and Monterey. The view from the sea rivaled the white cliffs of Dover, topped with purple blooms.

Gil was about five years old when the following took place.

There was an old hermit named Paul living in a cave down by one end of the beach. He had been there longer than any of the locals and was considered quite mad. He built a platform in front of his cave and subsisted on artichokes he could filch and seafood he could catch. Gil thought the hermit was probably “healthy in body if not in mind.” Old Paul also owned a shotgun and would bring it out when the weekend beachgoers would get too close to his digs. The sheriff would then come around and admonish him but no single incident ever took on a serious tone. After Charlie and Bert’s housing development was well underway word got to them that the hermit was planning on firebombing the development for the intrusion on his privacy. Charlie and Bert called the sheriff who, with his deputy, headed to old Paul’s end of the beach. Gil tells the story this way,

Sheriff Trafton and his deputy, Dick Rountree, crept cautiously up the path to Paul’s platform. Paul was ready with his shotgun in one hand and a thirty-eight in the other. Paul fired first. I was digging for sand crabs and had six or seven captured in a saltwater pool when we heard the shots. My mom and I looked up the cliff and saw several men running up the steep path to the hermits cave. When the dust settled, Paul had six bullet holes in his body and was covered with blood. He was quite dead. The sheriff had blood gushing out of his chest and died within minutes. The deputy had a bullet hole through his neck and would die on the way to the hospital. On his platform Paul had the makings of thirteen firebombs.

The number of firebombs is significant in that Charlie and Bert had 11 contracts,

and were in the process of building 11 homes in addition to their two. When the news of the tragedy got out, all eleven contracts fell through and “Artichoke Acres” was out of business. The bank allowed them to finish those eleven houses which were then sold at auction for a fraction of what they were worth.

Charlie and Bert didn’t give up being entrepreneurs though; they bought a seagoing oil tanker.

Due to the steel shortage brought on by the World War I, the government contracted with San Francisco Shipbuilding to build an oil tanker hull out of reinforced concrete. Gil says, “This sounds like trying to float a cinder block but, as any naval engineer will tell you, if a ship displaces more water than it weighs, it will float. And it did.” The SS Palo Alto was completed and launched in 1920; but, the war was over and it was deemed impractical to put the ship in service. It couldn’t be sold as scrap since the hull was concrete and the Palo Alto became a burden to the shipyard. A decision was made to tow it out to sea and sink it. Charlie and Bert heard about this and contacted Mr. Elroy Connors the Shipyard Superintendent. They pitched the idea of towing the ship to Seacliff Park, resting it on the bottom, building a pier to it and creating an amusement park. Mr. Connors liked the idea and had the ship towed to Seacliff Park at the expense of the shipyard just to be rid of it.

The duo then went looking for backers. Charlie’s contacts back in oil well and gambling country, better known as Nevada, proved more than adequate. Problem was these backers found other backers for Charlie and Bert that were unknown to them. Charlie’s friend Al Tamblin, the Mayor of Ely, Nevada got in touch with Stan Evans, part owner of the Last Frontier Casino in Las Vegas and Jim Lockhart, owner of the Calvada Investment Company. They had more in mind than just an amusement park. Charlie and Bert didn’t catch on until the wheels of progress were spinning out of their control.

On a beautiful Sunday afternoon in January 1930 the SS Palo Alto was towed stern first to within 200 feet of the beach. The seacocks were opened and she settled nicely to the bottom. The conversion to ballrooms, dance floors, restaurants, arcades and staterooms was nearly complete when Bert was approached by Stan Evans to convert the vacant engine room into a gambling casino. Bert was appalled and quit the project. Charlie felt he was in too deep to quit. Although he and Bert were not threatened by Stan it was assumed there may be dire consequences if this project didn’t proceed. Charlie decided to go along and the Concrete Casino was born.

Charlie ran the amusement park portion of the ship and Stan ran the Casino. Big bands played there and the Concrete Casino was a big success. Then Stan disagreed with his business acquaintances in Las Vegas about whether he was

skimming profits and got himself killed. After some serious violent debate, Ed Gillette, one of the Last Frontier's managers was sent to oversee the gambling portion of the ship. He and Charlie got along fine. Everything was coming up roses until December of 1931. A sudden terrible storm caused the concrete Casino to be abandoned just before she broke in half. She's still there today. Deteriorated to the point that no one is allowed aboard her now, she sits as a reminder of one of the biggest things to hit California up since the gold rush. The pier has been rebuilt many times and is still a good place to fish.

The Erb family stayed put during the housing development/concrete casino period which got Gil through the first grade. Then the moving started. Gil's second grade was spent in San Jose, California where Novella, for some inexplicable reason known only to mothers, insisted that young Gil take tap-dancing lessons. You must assume she meant well but Gil hated it. Novella was one of those Moms who could kill you with "smotherly" love.

It was also in San Jose where Charlie Erb was part of a crowd that lynched two men who kidnapped and killed the son of the owner of Hart's Department store. It was a different time and there were many less lawyers.

They were only in San Jose for about a year when the Erbs moved to Mt. Pleasant, a typical small town in southern Utah. Charlie had made a deal with a company back in San Jose called Campbell and Budlong that manufactured heavy duty water pumps. Charlie was going to Utah to sell their pumps but, in the mean time, also came up with the idea to use his deep well oil drilling experience to invent a driveable deep drilling machine. He then actually drove the new "roadable" deep well drilling machine to Utah. The country was in a drought in the early thirties and Utah was very hard hit. Charlie's wells went thousands of feet deep and produced copious amounts of water. As the water flowed so did the money and Charlie saved many farmers from going broke.

While Charlie was making a small fortune, Gil started in the fourth grade. They lived in a boarding house along with Gil's teacher, Miss Fontella Langlois. Miss Langlois must have given little Gil special attention as he was allowed to skip the fifth grade with the family's next move to Salt Lake City. Gil was learning more than ABCs while in the Mt. Pleasant boarding house. It was located next door to Ursenbach's Funeral Home. Gil played with young Deena Ursenbach and they discovered the difference between men and women in the mortuary.

It was when they were living in Salt Lake City that Gil experienced one of about a dozen near death experiences he would live through during his exciting existence on or over this planet. He was spending his summers during this time in Beaver City, Utah with Novella's relatives, John and Geneve Joseph. John and Geneve had four daughters; Helen, Elaine, Bonnie Lou and Ruth. Bonnie Lou and Gil were

the same age and played together having the fun and adventures youngsters do during summer's break from school.

During Gil's second summer there, he and Bonnie Lou were tree climbing when, to Gil's shock and dismay, the branch he was on broke and gravity took over. As misfortune would have it, he landed on a spike of the stump from a tree that had been broken during a windstorm. The wooden spike penetrated his left hip, hit the hipbone and came out through his waist. This spike was about as thick as his thumb on the pointy end where it came through. He wasn't satisfied with lying there impaled by this spike of a tree stump and began to struggle. The spike broke off and stayed in him.

They roused out the county doctor from the local pub and met him at his office. The slightly inebriated doc pulled the stick out and did his best to clean out the hole left behind. Gil went back to Salt Lake City to recover. Several days later it became apparent that his sickeningly stinking wound had become infected. The wound had to be reopened, cleaned and a drainage tube inserted. His extremely high fever made it touch and go for a few days but Gil did manage to recover. Antibiotics hadn't been invented yet.

This same lack of antibiotics led to the first tragedy of Gil's young life. Gil's Dad, Charlie, had become ill with flu like symptoms and an incredibly sore throat. One of his men drove Charlie to a doctor in Saint George, Utah near where one of his crews was currently drilling. At this time his business had grown to three drilling crews in southern Utah. Dr. McGregor, who performed a tonsillectomy on Charlie, was one of the only living legal bigamists left in the state. When Utah became a state, bigamy was outlawed, but if you already had two or more wives, you could keep them. Dr. McGregor had two identical houses next door to each other. They say the wives were friendly but didn't associate much. The Doc spent his time equally between the two houses. The old Doc must have had too many worries from too many wives as he preformed a less than sterile job on Charlie's tonsils and this resulted in an infection developing at the base of Charlie's brain. Charlie began having seizures and would lapse into what could best be described as a state of shock. The family had to move back to San Jose so they could be near the medical treatment Charlie needed in San Francisco. In spite of all medical attempts, at the end of six months Charlie succumbed. The medical treatments had taken every nickel the family had. Gil was twelve years old.

It was during the two month period after the funeral in San Jose where Gil had another near death experience. He had lost his father and was at a loss to figure where life would lead him now. Maybe he went into the wrong end of the swimming pool on purpose. To this day Gil can't tell you. He jumped into what he thought was the shallow end of Roosevelt Jr. High School swimming pool only to discover it was the deep end. Gil couldn't swim. He was lying on the bottom in

the deep end semi-resolved to his fate when an alert young boy pulled him to the surface. The lifeguards worked on resuscitating Gil for ten minutes until he came around. Spencer Snapp, Gil's rescuer was a year older, but in the same grade. Gil felt "the Snapper" had given him new life and new hope. They became best friends in high school, went separate ways during WW II, got back together in college and pledged the same fraternity. They kept in touch over the years and have remained the best of friends throughout their lives.

## CHAPTER 2

### THE SKY IS CALLING

---

After losing all the family money to Charlie's illness, Novella decided to move herself and her young son back to Salt Lake City. She worked as a seamstress for the Zion Cooperative Mercantile Institute, ZCMI, a large department store, for the grand sum of \$25.00 a week. Gil got his first job as a stock boy at the neighborhood grocery store. Like most enterprising young men of his generation he held part time jobs all through high school. In addition to being a stock boy, he had a paper route, set pins in a bowling alley and started driving a meat delivery truck when he was fifteen. He was allowed to get his driver's license at fifteen due to his need to help support the family.

Academically, Gil did fine through high school but continued to live with the stigma of always being the youngest in the class. The one thing he really enjoyed through his high school years was skiing. In those years, for 50 cents, you could get a school bus to the ski area, morning and afternoon lessons and lunch. This was at the Dick Durrance Ski School. Gil didn't date a lot but did have a sort of high school sweetheart by the name of Marijane Call. However, this wasn't a real romance. Marijane was always more interested in Gil than vice versa. He joined the swim team and although he wasn't a very strong swimmer, he made up for it by being persistent. Gil also joined the band and played sax and piano. Both of which he wasn't very good at but, his Mom, Novella, insisted. Gil graduated high school in 1941 at the tender age of fifteen. After graduating he transformed the saxophone into a train ticket to California when he sold it for \$35.00. He was pretty much done with Novella's "smotherly" love.

He had taken a course in aircraft engines and applied for a job with Pan American Airways at their base on Treasure Island in San Francisco Bay. The one catch was he couldn't begin work until he turned 16 in October. To fill the gap he went to work washing dishes in Maude Green's boarding house in Berkeley, California. Maude was quite the character and served dishes like meatloaf made from horsemeat. She never told anyone what the meatloaf was made of and the boarders seemed to enjoy the dish. Her gay son Alfred was the cook and would get upset if you didn't like one of his creations.

Novella missed her only chick and followed Gil to Maude's six months later after he had started for Pan Am. This didn't really work out and in a couple of months she moved to San Jose to work as a seamstress again. Gil stayed with Pan Am for about a year and a half as an aircraft engine mechanic.

He then decided to join the Army Air Corps.

This was all during the war years and Gil, like all young men of the era, was waiting for his 18<sup>th</sup> birthday so he could enlist. Fixing aircraft engines wasn't enough for Gil Erb. The sky was calling and he wanted nothing more than to be a pilot.

## CHAPTER 3

# CABBIE ADVENTURES AT THE MISSION RANCH

---

Gil enlisted in the Army in 1944 as a Pre-Aviation Cadet. What this meant exactly he wasn't quite sure. All he knew was the Army kept delaying his enlistment while waiting for an opening in the flight training school. At that time, supposedly, he would be called up as a full Aviation Cadet. He had quit Pan Am to enlist and due to the Army's delaying tactics needed to get another job. So he went to work in South San Francisco as a marine electrician for Western Pipe and Steel. He helped build the Liberty ships that were being turned out by the dozens.

At his new boarding house in San Mateo, Gil had the dubious honor of having a roommate named Star Truth America. His real name was Joe something or other but, since he was 4F and not eligible for military service, he adopted that name to show his loyalty to the flag. Gil remembers him as somewhat strange and probably gay. Thankfully, he did not make any advances towards Gil.

Time passed slowly for this young man who couldn't wait to get into pilot training. His recruiter had told him to sit tight and wait. A cousin, Maurine Gimblin, lived in Carmel, and was pregnant with her second child. Her husband, Bert, was a Lt. Colonel in the Army and part of General Patton's personal staff in the European Theatre. Gil decided he could probably help out and moved to Carmel where he got a job with Joe's Taxi Service and several mis-adventures ensued.

Gil's cab was a big black 1941 Cadillac Limousine. Carmel is a unique town and deserved a unique taxicab. His fares consisted of movie stars like Melvyn Douglas and Bette Davis along with some of America's wealthiest. There was also the Army gang at Ft. Ord, and their favorite spot was the Mission Ranch. The Ranch was on the outskirts of Carmel and featured a great country-western band. It was also a great place to pick-up chicks, especially on Friday and Saturday nights. The soldiers would be loaded with heavy wallets and generous on these nights. One Friday night sticks out in Gil's mind and he tells it this way:

Another one of Joe's enterprises was the Carmel Valley Bus Line. The bus ran up into the valley every morning and back each evening hauling domestics, yard workers, and handymen to the fabulous mansions and estates. There were six of us cabbies sitting in the shack waiting for the action to begin when in walked Marvin, the Carmel Valley bus driver.

“What a bitch of a day,” he said. “I had a Goddamn flat and had to change the Goddamn thing myself. I'm ready to go home. Who

wants to take me?”

The room was as quiet as a mausoleum, but, Conklin, one of the other drivers, broke the spell. “Why don’t the new kid take him?”

Marvin looked at me and said, “Don’t worry kid, I pay full fare. This ain’t no freebie.”

“How far is it?” I asked. “We get busy here pretty soon, you know.”

“I’ve got a trailer over at the Monterey Trailer Park. It’s only ten or fifteen minutes. How about it?”

So off go Marvin and me, up and over the hill to Monterey. Marvin is a fairly good-looking guy with a slender build, big toothy smile, and going bald. He says to me, “Do you like the Duke? I just got a new album the other day and it’s really good.”

“Yeah, I like the Duke. Who doesn’t?”

“Okay, when we get to the trailer, I’ll fix us a coke and we’ll spin it.”

“No, I don’t think so. I gotta get back for the rush.”

“Don’t worry about that. You can relax a bit and I’ll pay full tab for waiting time.”

“Okay, why not?”

So when we get to the trailer, we go in, and it is swish. I mean, it is one of those Airstreams, and the inside is fixed up in pure luxury with modern furniture, soft lights, and a record player to die for. He starts up the record and the Duke is cool. He pours out the cokes, walks over to the sofa, sits down next to me real close, and I feel his hand slip over onto my thigh. My God, Marvin is queer! I was petrified. I leaped off the sofa, out the door, into the Caddy, and am doing a hundred miles an hour down the road in what seemed like about three and a half seconds. When I got back, I walked into a rousing round of applause. Conklin slapped me on the back and said, “Congratulations kid. You just broke the record for getting back to the shack after driving Marvin home.”

Right then the phone started ringing off the wall. The dispatcher had all six of us out on the road in less time than it takes to tell about it. I don’t remember just where I went or whom I took where, but

I do remember that my tip money was unbelievable and the night was still young. It was about two in the morning when I picked up two soldiers and a swish looking girl at the Ranch. She was a doll with platinum blonde hair and a body with all the proper accents in the proper places. They were all three pretty well oiled and the girl was all over the one guy. She had a grip around his neck, and was not about to let go. She was kissing him in the ear, and trying her best not to fall down. He was real good looking, but was pretty blasé about the attention. The other guy had a face like lumpy prune whip and was sort of dragging behind.

The blonde got in the limo first and Lumpy went around to the other side and got in the back seat with her. This, she didn't like one bit, but Handsome slammed the door closed on her and climbed in the front seat with me.

"Get rolling kid," he said.

So I took off and headed back for town. Blondie tried to climb over the seat to get to Handsome, but he gave her a shove and down on the floor in the back seat of the big black limo she went. I heard the rasslin' around and the sound of a zipper going down, the buckle rattling, and I got scared. She was whining, "Stop, stop, please stop." Then it's more than a whine. It was like tears and whimpering and this goon is going all the way.

I knew where Red Alsop, the local cop, hides waiting for speeders and drunk drivers so I put the pedal to the metal and the needle's over seventy when I pass his spot. The siren went off and the lights flashed, and I was one relieved taxicab driver. There was all sorts of thrashing around in the back seat, and they both sat up and got their clothes tidied up just as Red got out of his cruiser and looked in the limo. I got out and started to tell him what was goin' down. Red recognized the lady barfly and sort of intimated, "Not her again?"

Handsome got out too, and explained that his buddy had just got back from being a POW and stuff about how they beat him and broke his nose and jaw and what a hero he was. "If you'll let the kid go, I'll make sure we get the lady home all right. Okay? And, don't worry, I can handle the sergeant."

Well, Handsome had more fruit salad and shiny brass stuff and stripes than Red had ever seen before so he said, "Okay, but make sure you keep him under control. I know you boys are out there

fighting for our country, so I'm going to trust you. I'm going to follow you into town though, just to make sure."

Handsome thanked Red and got back in the front seat. There wasn't a peep out of Lumpy or the broad. Red pulled me aside and said I was smart for what I did but try and be more careful who I pick up next time. "This girl is nothing but trouble, okay?"

Red stayed right behind us, and my speedometer was stuck on thirty-four. When we got onto Carmel Boulevard, Red took off and I was on my own hoping to God that Handsome meant what he said.

I got to the address they had given me and no sooner got stopped than her back door opened and she started running like she had a hot poker up something or other. When she got to the front door and figured she was safe, she let go with the foulest stream of gutter language I have ever heard come out of a human being in my life. I mean she said words that hadn't even been invented yet. This woman was really one pissed off lady. "You said you loved me you shithead and then you sick your horny friend on me. What kind of a jerkoff are you anyway?"

She just kept on yelling and yelling as I drove off. I took the soldiers back to the Mission Ranch and Handsome handed me a twenty and said, "Sorry for the problem kid. Keep the change."

Well I guess there are a thousand cab driver stories but I'd only been on the job three days.

## CHAPTER 4

# ARMY DAYS AS A PRE-AVIATION CADET

---

Finally, in February of 1945, the US Army called Gil to active duty. As luck would have it, he never got to flight training (that would come later courtesy of the US Navy); but he liked the Army and did have a couple of mis-adventures along the way.

The Army sent him to Camp Beale in Northern California where the processing into the service was to take place. There were nineteen young men in his group and all were Pre-Aviation Cadets. There was one wise-ass in the group, Reginald Delaney, who had attended a military school and who lorded it all over the other cadets. Naturally, Reginald was assigned as the acting Platoon Leader. He assumed the authority with zeal and made life miserable for all those who did not bend to his leadership skills or lack thereof. When they didn't do exactly as he ordered, it was KP in the mess hall for the offenders. Gil spent most of his time peeling potatoes.

One Sunday afternoon, a few of the men, including Gil, were playing poker using one of the footlockers for a table. Reginald, now called Reggie, was taking a nap in his upper bunk. Clint Evans walked by the foot of Reggie's bunk and gave his shoelace a yank. Reggie briefly opened his eyes and gave Clint a look as if to say, "You dumbshit, when I wake up you'll get yours."

Reggie continued to snooze away and several minutes later, Gil eased over and gently tied the loose shoelace to the foot of the bed. Again Reggie opened his eyes long enough to give Gil the same disgusted look only much more intense this time.

Time passed and about twenty minutes later with the poker game still in full swing, they heard the crash. Reggie was face down on the floor with one foot hanging up on his top bunk. The laughter was hysterical and the story spread like wildfire throughout the barracks.

Poor Reggie was never the same again. He retreated into himself, asked to be relieved of his job as acting Platoon Leader, and when they boarded the train for Shepherd Field in Texas the following week, Reggie was not with them.

The ride to Texas on the troop train seemed like hell to Gil. There were no bunks: just hard, straight backed seats and no way to get comfortable for even the shortest of naps. To make matters worse, every large city they pulled into added more troops to the already jam-packed railroad cars.

One stop netted them two veteran corporals. They were dirty, drunk, really foul

mouthed, and treated the new recruits with utter contempt. The corporals repeatedly insulted the recruits, told them what suckers they were and recommended that they all go over the hill.

The new recruits stoically endured the abuse and several hours later the train stopped to take on water. The corporals had run out of whiskey by this time and spotted a liquor store across the tracks. They sneaked out on the blind side of the train, made their way up to the front end, and across the tracks to renew their supply of booze.

Two MPs on the train spied the two furtive figures making their dash to the liquor store. The corporals made their purchases, and to minimize their chances of getting caught, each tucked two pint bottles of whiskey under their shirts. They then climbed up into the vestibule between two cars, giggling all the while about their successful coup. About that time the new recruits heard the sound of breaking glass. Four pint bottles of booze had been smashed with wooden MP batons.

These veteran corporals meekly rejoined the group. They removed their shirts and trousers and spent the next hour picking glass shards from their clothes, desperately attempting not to cut themselves and reeking of cheap whiskey.

They finally arrived at Shepherd Field and began their basic training. Gil actually thought it was fun. They all got into great shape for teenagers. Upon graduation, however, it still appeared as if they were never going to get into flight school. The Army split them up and Gil was transferred to Keesler Field in Biloxi, Mississippi. There he went to school on the B-25 medium bomber as a Flight Engineer. Again, this seemed fun to Gil and he liked the Army life.

There wasn't a lot to do in Mississippi so the boys had to be creative in manufacturing entertaining diversions during the week. You can only listen to the radio and study but so much at that age. Late one evening Gil and his buddy, Jeb Davis discovered a natural gas outlet attached to the side of their barracks. Using a talent Gil describes as "evil ingenuity", the boys decided to hold a condom over the outlet and fill it up with gas. After letting the condom get to the size of a large beach ball, they tied it off and added about six feet of toilet paper as a tail. The condom now acts as a lighter than air balloon. Gil and Jeb discovered that when you let the balloon rise to the correct height and light the end of the toilet paper with a Zippo, the balloon would continue to ascend to about a hundred feet and then explode in a giant blue and white fireball that would light the entire field.

This was so cool the boys kept doing it. Naturally this drew a large crowd and then, finally, the MPs. Gil and Jeb were arrested and taken in front of the base commander, Col. Mueller. As they were explaining what in the hell they thought they were doing, Col. Mueller couldn't keep a straight face. The Colonel revealed that

the reports from the control tower were guessing German U-Boat bombardment, poison gas attack, or something extraterrestrial. He let the boys go with a slap on the wrist and when they got back to the barracks the gas outlet had already been sealed off. They were surprised to learn that they were now infamous heroes to the rest of the troops. Gil was still having fun.

Not all of Gil's entertainment happened on base. Most weekends he hitch-hiked to New Orleans. It was here he met his first "real" girlfriend, one Miss Tabby Babineaux, at the USO. Gil won't say what defines first real girlfriend; he is much too much of a gentleman for such, but will admit to dating Miss Babineaux for a couple of months. He also dated the Casio twins, one of which was named Rosemary. Gil can't remember the other one's name. Does sound intriguing though.

Gil also went to New Orleans for two very special celebrations, VE and VJ Day, May 8 and August 14, 1945. The war was over so the Army decided to shut down all the flight schools. Gil's contract with the Army called for flight training. They offered him a clerk typist job with the occupation forces in Germany or a discharge. He took the discharge and traveled to Selman Field in Louisiana for processing out. Total time in the Army, eight months and twenty-three days.

There are two things worthy of note before we leave Gil's Army days.

One, he had to sign up for the Army Reserve after the war and was subject to the draft since he had less than a year of service. Sure enough, he was drafted once more as a private during Korea. The problem with that was he was already a Lt.(jg) in the Navy. To Gil's knowledge, the Navy was going to, but never did, get his official discharge from the Army Reserve.

Two, all his buddies at Pan Am kept harping on him about his crazy decision to join the Army, when he could spend the war at Pan Am and the Navy Reserve. After the war was over they all got called up and had to do four years in the Navy. Ah, the last laugh.

## CHAPTER 5

### ALEXANDRE NYEFSKY YARASLOVICH SLATOFFOVOICH (SLATS)

---

After mustering out, Gil spent a couple of weeks in LA with a friend unwinding who then drove him on to San Jose where he lived temporarily with Novella at Mrs. Keeley's boarding house. Here Gil bought himself an Army surplus jeep for \$500.00 and started at San Jose State under the GI Bill as an engineering student. His two best friends, Snap, the older boy who had saved him from drowning, and Lou DiBari were there as well. Gil was a little too mature by now to stay with Mom and very shortly moved into the local boarding house. It was January 1946.

Besides his two best friends, Gil met two more people who would stand out in his life. One was Slats, the future president of Theta Chi fraternity and the other was Bobby Brown, Gil's beloved wife of 54 years.

Gil tells the story of Slats this way.

San Jose State got its share of ex-officers, and enlisted men and women after the war. Rank having its privileges seemed to carry over somewhat into civilian life. Ex-sergeants looked down on ex-privates, while the ex-officers stood aloof.

Ex-sergeant Howard Slatoff, better known as Slats, welcomed my friends and me to our new way of life in the land of academia. A bullet through his left thigh had earned him a medical discharge the year before and he was now a sophomore who held rank over us. As ex-privates and freshmen, we followed ex-sergeant Slatoff like a bunch of baby ducks follow their mother.

At first Slats accepted us underlings as no more than a bother, but when we became irritants, he said, "Look kids, the goddamn war is over and you don't need no sergeant to wipe your ass no more." Slats hadn't learned to speak college yet.

A year later, Slats became a junior and the rest of us were promoted to sophomore. Slats became a real college man. He made the Dean's List, and was elected president of Theta Chi. Slats had become an egghead, albeit, sometimes a mean one. We still looked up to Slats and when the three of us were asked to join Theta Chi, we accepted the honor eagerly.

Ex-sergeant Slats, now president in charge of our indoctrination into Theta Chi, became a tyrant. As pledges, we were scum, worthless river slime, and not fit to occupy our clothes without the burlap underwear to keep us in a state of constant itch and scratch for twenty-four hours straight. Why we put up with this hazing, I'm not sure. Maybe it had to do with Slats' image on campus. He was a straight-A student, President of Theta Chi, MC at the football rallies, and the entire female student body had a crush on him. He was not a jock but the whole football team went to him when their grades were suffering. Slats was truly the most popular and in-demand man on campus.

Slats' mean side became evident when our indoctrination into Theta Chi turned out to be a nightmare. At Slats' hands, we suffered both mental and physical pain. The slightest infraction of fraternity rules earned us the right to do push-ups by the dozen. On meeting night, we were severely beaten with plywood paddles that we were required to make ourselves. The pattern of Theta Chi was drilled into the business end of the paddles and its imprint on the bare butt was a sight to challenge the cruelest lashings onboard the old wooden sailing ships.

One thing about Slats, to be said in his defense, is that he was fair. He had no favorites. When lined up against the wall in the basement of the Theta Chi house dressed only in our burlap shorts, he acted as though he hated all of us equally and we were the dregs of society.

One meeting night was worse than all the previous meetings. In addition to the physical abuse, he instructed all of us to memorize his full name. Slats' parents were Russian immigrants and had come to the states back in the twenties. Slats was proud of his heritage and demanded that we learn and repeat his full Russian name whenever asked.

"My name is Alexandre Nyefsky Yaraslovich Slatoffovorich. You got that scum? Now let's here it loud and clear!"

After drilling us on his Russian name, we were required to memorize the Greek alphabet and the English alphabet backwards. When we ran into Slats between classes the ritual was, "Alexandre Nyefsky Yaraslovich Slatoffovorich; zyxwvutsrqponmlkjihgfedcba; and without a pause go into Alpha, Beta, Gamma, Delta, Epsilon, Zeta, Eta, Theta, Iota, Kappa, Lamda, Mu, Nu, Xi, Omicron, Pi, Rho, Sigma, Tau, Upsilon, Phi, Chi, Psi, Omega." By now, we had just about had it with Slats, and an insidious plan formed at dinner one

evening.

Slats was in love with and abnormally devoted to his 1936, three window, Ford coupe. The five-window versions were common but the three-window was truly a collector's item. He had restored it to mint condition and he washed and dried the car weekly. Daily, he wiped the car down so not a single spot or blemish would mar its beauty. The chrome was shiny and the dark blue paint job reflected every branch and window as it sat glistening in the sun. The car had only one problem, the engine. It just wouldn't stay in tune and hence, it was a gas hog. Try as he may, he couldn't solve the problem.

One day when the engine was running so rough that it died at every corner, Slats took it to a mechanic who had been recommended by the shop teacher. Charlie was old and grizzled but claimed that he knew all there was to know about the Ford automobile. After just a moment of listening to the rap and rattle of the engine he said simply, "Your carburetor is all fucked up."

Slats refused to admit surprise. "I knew it all the time," he said, "I have been getting lousy mileage lately and I figured that was the problem."

"Well, I got me a wrecked forty-one sedan out back that I'm using for parts. Maybe I can pull the carburetor and see if it will fit your baby. If it works, she ought to run like a Swiss watch."

"Okay," said slats, "Go ahead and give it a shot."

Charlie called Slats the next day and said, "Kid, we did it. This baby runs as smooth as Matilda's ass. C'mon over and pick her up."

Slats picked up his jewel and, just as promised, it ran like a Rolex Oyster. He paid Charlie and, puffed up with pride, drove back to the frat house and parked in the position of honor for all to see.

That night at dinner, Slats just couldn't shut up about the car. "I'm telling you guys, this is the hottest car to hit State College since the war ended. Me and Charlie figured out what was wrong with her and we modified a forty-one Ford carburetor to fit the old mill and it worked like a charm. Charlie didn't think we could do it but I pushed him. We fiddled with it all day and Charlie wanted to give up. He just couldn't get it right, so I took over and drilled out the intake manifold myself, threaded in some new bolt-holes and it slid in there like Henry Ford designed it himself!"

We practically gagged over his overbearing tirade but it led us to the plan. It was actually Jerry Newsome's idea and it was ingenious. We put phase I of the plan in motion that night. For a week we all took turns getting up at 4:00 AM to add a gallon of gas to the Ford's tank. After the first week Slats, in all his glory, announced to the gang, "I really did it guys, this baby is getting over fifty miles to the gallon and is running as smooth as Matilda's ass." Charlie's expression.

A few nights later Slats took the floor again and with supreme coolness announced that his mileage had gone up to over seventy miles to the gallon. His smile was as broad and toothy as the keys on a piano and he was truly in a state of profound euphoria. This went on for another week and his exuberance never waned. He couldn't brag enough about what a genius he was.

We then moved on to phase II. We stopped adding fuel to the tank. After awhile we got what we looking for. Slats was finally silent at the dinner table.

Now we were ready for phase III. If this worked, our mission would be deemed a success. Each night we sucked a gallon of gas out of the Ford. Slats took his car back to old Charlie who, naturally, couldn't find anything wrong. Revenge was ours.

By the end of the month, Slats was a destroyed man. He was quiet, withdrawn, and morose. He spent hours alone in his room. His grades suffered and he lost weight. Slats even quit driving to school and walked the two miles alone. Dating was out of the question. If a football player needed a little math help, Slats was sorry but he wasn't feeling well.

Near the end of the semester, all three of us were formally initiated into Theta Chi. The ceremonies lacked the sparkle that Slats would have contributed, but by now none of us had the guts to admit what we had done. No matter how remorseful we felt.

Slats graduated the following year. He didn't attain cum laude status nor was he anywhere near the top of his class. Shortly after graduation, he moved out of town and took a job with some hardware company. Slats never came back to any of the alumni meetings; he simply disappeared.

At the Alumni get-together, twenty years later, Jerry Newsome, with a tear in his eye read, Slats obituary.

## CHAPTER 6

### THE RAT IN THE CAN

---

While at San Jose State, Gil subsidized his \$65.00 a month GI Bill allowance by working summers at the Barron-Gray Packing Company. Barron-Gray canned fresh fruits and vegetables; fruit cocktail and V8 juice being the main products. Gil worked long hours, sometimes seven days a week, but the OT pay was great. He eased off to part-time when school was in session. This allowed him enough money to stay in school with a few dollars left over for skiing. His skiing became very important as it allowed him to meet his life companion. But, we'll get to that.

As the reader is aware by now, Gil has a talent for insidious pranks, and Barron-Gray would not go unmarked even if somewhat unintentional on his part.

Gil tells the story like this.

During the summer season, I worked several jobs, the best one being in the Quality Control Lab. Here we tested for acid, sugar and salt content, along with weight control. I collected random samples from the fruit lines, then weighed and tested each one.

One afternoon a girl who worked the peach machine got her bracelet caught on a spindle and it pulled her hand into a whirling blade that was meant to cut the peach in half. It cut off two of her fingers. She was rushed to the infirmary in shock while the two fingers were spewed onto the conveyer belt. This belt would eventually lead to placing the peaches in cans, adding sugar syrup, and steaming them in a giant pressure cooker. The two fingers could not be found which led to two hundred cases of canned peaches being destroyed to preclude a lawsuit.

Soon after this incident, Harry Schumann and I spied a huge, gray rat while working the fruit cocktail line. We stomped the vermin into submission and then, not knowing what to do with the rat corpse, decide to stuff it in one of the cans. We added the syrup and ran it through the seamer to be vacuum packed and sealed. We caught the can when it came out of the rotary machine and now had a prize that we could milk to the limit. We spread the story all over the plant and announced the grand opening to be held the following week. There were the skeptics who pooh-poohed the whole thing, the gamblers who made book on whether or not we were telling the truth, and the gore seekers who simply wanted to see a dead rat.

The great day arrived and during lunch break, Harry and I, with great ceremony and fanfare, turned the handle on the can-opener and dumped the contents onto the top of a fifty gallon drum. The gasps from the audience were conspicuously absent. Harry and I became terror struck upon realizing there was nothing in the can but fruit cocktail.

It was only then we remembered that the two fingers caused two hundred cases of peaches to be destroyed. What on earth should we do now? It had been over a week and it was anybody's guess where all the cans of fruit cocktail went. Harry and I figured it was best to keep our mouths shut and prayed no one took us seriously and reported the incident to either Mr. Barron or Mr. Gray. We both lived in mortal fear for months and to this day can't imagine what ever became of Mr. Rat.

## CHAPTER 7

### BATHING BEAUTY BOBBY BROWN

---

Gil managed to maintain a B plus average in his engineering studies at San Jose State College. He enjoyed college and, besides being a member of Theta Chi, he was a member of the national honor society Tau Delta Phi. Gil, an avid skier, also became President of the SJS Ski Club as well as Captain of the SJS Ski Team. He was a little bit older than the other students for the first time in his academic career and this buoyed his confidence. It was either due to his skiing or the romantic whims of fate that he met his wife, Barbara (Bobby) Brown, during, what else, but a ski trip.

Gil tells the story this way.

I was running a ski meeting in preparation for a ski trip to Badger Pass. From the back of the room I heard a lovely voice, “Sir, this is my first meeting and I would like to know how we get to Badger Pass if we don’t have our own transportation?” She had just transferred to SJS for her junior and senior year from the University of California and although she sat at the rear of the room and I couldn’t see her very well, I really liked the sound of her voice.

“No problem Miss, see me after the meeting and I’ll give you a list of the folks with cars who make the trip. I’m sure we can find you a seat.”

I took her for coffee at the Dairy Queen and set her up with John Daeghling who had an empty seat. “Thanks so much. When I was at UC, we had to take a bus. It was a real pain.”

If I had thought I liked her voice, the rest of her knocked me out. But even as confident as I was with the local girls I had been dating, this one seemed out of my class. She appeared a bit too sophisticated for the likes of me and she was a junior while I had barely reached sophomore status.

(Bobby was a real bathing beauty and Gil has kept through the years a news clipping from the local paper that contained a picture of Bobby standing next to the Santa Cruz Pier. The caption reads, “Beauteous Bobby Brown pauses momentarily against the luckiest piling under the Santa Cruz Pier as she surveys the throng on the beach, Bobby, an Alpha Phi, is a history major at State and lives in San Francisco. –Photo by Jack Haddon)

As the weeks went by, she became more and more popular and

my attentions seemed insignificant next to the upperclassmen. She was a pretty good skier and I would follow her down the slopes and watch her every chance I got. I would ski down her same path but at a discrete distance so as not to appear too obvious. I held her in awe and lacked the courage to even make the slightest advance until the day she took a bad spill. She was skiing much too fast and her skis got crossed. I stopped upslope and watched her untangle herself from the snow, the skis and the poles. She finally got to her feet and twisted her body right and left to check on possible injury. Then in a most unfeminine manner she stomped her ski into the snow and, in a not too quiet voice, she exclaimed, “Shit!”

Well, no pun intended, this broke the ice and we started dating from then on. We got along beautifully and never quit.

Gil and Bobby skied a lot, attended many frat and sorority parties together, drank their share of martinis and were rarely apart throughout the rest of their SJS days. In fact, they were only apart during the summer when Gil worked at Barron-Gray and Bobby worked as a secretary at Standard Oil Headquarters in downtown San Francisco.

They went “steady” from then on up until Bobby was set to graduate in June 1949. Gil still had a year to go in his studies and couldn’t find the nerve to ask the ultimate boy-girl question. In later years it would surprise both of them how much their life got decided and changed in a matter of a few weeks.

Gil was sitting in the living room of the Theta Chi fraternity house contemplating what to do with his love interest about to graduate and he still stuck in school working on his undergraduate degree. It was then fate walked through the door in the guise of an extremely handsome Navy Lieutenant Commander. It was pure chance that Gil answered the knock at the door. He was immediately impressed with this naval officer who looked like something out of the movies in his dress blue uniform with all the ribbons and gold. What really caught Gil’s eye though were the aviator wings. He was a recruiting officer who was looking for one of Gil’s frat brothers, Bob Forester, who he had talked to previously about taking a commission in the US Navy and attending flight school. The other frat brother never showed up but Gil was seriously sold. He passed the required tests and signed on the bottom line. Of course, just like the Army Flight School had been during WW II, the Navy Flight School in Pensacola was full at the moment and he would have to wait to be called, probably in six to nine months.

So, with Bobby graduated and working in San Francisco, Gil took a summer job as an engineer in training (EIT) at the Naval Ordnance Test Station (NOTS) at Inyokern in southern California. This place is better known as China Lake. China

Lake sits halfway between the highest point, Mt. Whitney, and the lowest point, the Mojave Desert, in the United States. The average daytime temperature is from 105 to 120 degrees. Gil worked in the Michaelson Lab assisting in the design of rocket launchers. The indoor temperature was about 80 degrees. Gil swears that every time he entered or left the building he would sneeze for about 20 minutes. Dr. Michaelson was the first man to measure the speed of light. His apparatus, which consisted of a light source and several rotating mirrors, was set up in the lab. He was a genius and his method of determining the speed was so simple it was hard to accept. However, as simple as it was, after 50 years, Gil can't remember how it worked.

It was here that Gil had another of his pre-Navy, pre-flight, near death experiences. He tells the story this way.

I took one of the secretaries out for a beer one night and on the way to the club we witnessed an accident in front of us on the highway. Right in front of us a car suddenly ran off the highway and flipped over on its right side. We stopped and I ran to the car. The woman who was driving was conscious but incoherent and smelled of alcohol. I pulled her out through the driver's side window and carried her clear of the car. The smell of gasoline was very heavy and I assumed it was leaking out of the gas tank. When I laid the lady down she started screaming, "Where's my baby, my baby? Where's my baby!"

I ran back to the car and tried to open the rear seat door but it was jammed shut so, in a panic, I climbed head first through the driver's side door and searched the back seat to no avail. There was no baby. There was the smell of gasoline so heavy now as to be nearly suffocating. I got out of the car and had just started running back to the, now nearly hysterical, woman when the car burst into flames. The explosion slammed me into the dust but I was unhurt. The lady screamed, "My Baby!" one more time and passed out. By the time the emergency vehicles arrived the car was completely destroyed and, with the woman on the way to the hospital, I still wasn't sure whether her baby had been consumed in the fire or not. The next day I found out that she worked at the local bar and had already dropped the baby off at the sitters. Obviously she needed a few drinks before going to work as that was where she was supposedly headed. I never heard from her or saw her again.

The remainder of the summer was relatively uneventful until September. Then life altering major events started taking place at a pace that seemed to Gil and Bobby as if they were in a race that was won by the couple who changed their lives the most in the shortest period of time.

## CHAPTER 8

### A HECTIC THREE WEEKS AND THEN SOME

---

The Korean “Police Action” was imminent towards the end of the summer that Gil was an EIT at China Lake and the Navy needed pilots. He received his orders to Pensacola and Navy Pilot’s School. We should note here that Mr. Gil Erb got sworn in as a “direct procurement” Navy Ensign without the prerequisite degree. All around him were graduate naval academy midshipman. How this slipped through the Navy Personnel Admin types we’ll never know. They didn’t ask and he didn’t tell. We will see, as Gil’s story unfolds, the Navy sent Gil to Post Graduate School in Monterey where he got his BS after two years and then on to MIT where he earned his Masters. Both in Aeronautical Engineering. But, let’s not get ahead of ourselves. There’s too much fun and excitement in between.

In an astounding three week period Gil got called up to Navy Flight Training, purchased all his Navy uniforms and gear, quit his job, popped the question, was sworn in as an Ensign, and got married. Bobby had been on Gil’s mind pretty much on a permanent basis. There was no denying that she was the one. All this, along with not wanting to go to Pensacola alone, led to his finally getting up the nerve to propose. He drove from China Lake back to San Jose then called Bobby and asked her to meet him for happy hour at the St. Claire Hotel. Martinis were 35 cents for a triple. On the second one he told Bobby about Pensacola and told her he was not going alone; she was going with him. To this she smiled. Then he asked her to marry him. In true Bobby fashion, she answered, “Not only yes, but Hell Yes! He then gave her a two ring set, diamond engagement and wedding. Where these actually came from is somewhat of a mystery but they were given to him for this purpose by Novella. The assumption is they were passed down through her family. They very quickly sent invitations, picked bridesmaids and asked Snap to be best man. The wedding took place in a Presbyterian Church in San Francisco. Needless to say, Bobby had quit her job for new adventures. He and Bobby were on their way to Florida on October 7, 1949. They stopped off in New Orleans for a small honeymoon. Gil says one thing interesting about honeymooning in ‘Nawlins was he and Bobby caught the strip act of the “Cat-Girl”. When they got back to New Orleans 30 years later she was still there doing the same act. In Pensacola, Gil and Bobby moved into the Paradise Beach Apartments which were essentially a motel room with a kitchen.

Gil began the part of flight training he really didn’t enjoy much, 16 long weeks of pre-flight in a classroom. Worthy of note here is his favorite flight instructor, Lt. Melchoir, who was terrible in the classroom but top-notch when they finally got in the air. He taught Naval History and was thought of as a dunce. He didn’t

really know beans about the subject and just read from the text. He even read to the class that John Paul Jones was a med-i-cor officer, rather than mediocre. In the air, however, he was a super pilot and became a father figure to Gil. Another fact worthy of note was that one of Gil's classmates was none other than Scott Carpenter, one of the original seven astronauts.

Bobby was always supportive of Gil becoming a pilot even though in later years some of the romantic aspect of it wore off after she realized how dangerous this all really was and this guy was not only her husband but their children's father. Hard to replace.

During this period Bobby and Gil moved "up" and into the Perdido Bay Apartments right on the Florida/Alabama border. It was only a one bedroom with a living room kitchen combined but it was right on the water. They had a little white cocker spaniel named Dubhe after the Alpha star in the Big Dipper. The newlyweds and Dubhe would catch crabs right outside the backdoor. They also caught catfish to cut up and use for bait in their crab traps. Gil buried the leftover bait in the backyard. Dubhe would invariably dig the awful mess back up and bring it back to the house wondering why these silly people would waste such a thing. Gil had to start throwing the leftover bait back in the ocean.

There were some things that took some getting used to in moving to the south. One was the blatant prejudice towards African Americans. Remember this was 1949. There were water fountains labeled "Negro" and "White Only." Bobby and Gil had never experienced this type of thing. The "back of the bus/you can't come in here" mentality was foreign to them.

Another problem was the huge cockroaches and waterbugs. They were everywhere. One evening, while playing bridge, Bobby grabbed the back of her neck and let out a ghastly scream. She had her blouse off before she got to the bathroom door. Her friend, Ginny, went to help her and more screams were followed by giggles, then laughter. The ladies, who were laughing themselves silly, held up the disgusting creature for all to see; a laundry tag.

Another thing that made them feel like strangers in a strange land is that no one here knew what an artichoke was.

Bobby's sister, Nancy and her daughter, Linda, came to live with them after her divorce from a Navy Lt.(jg). It seems the young officer took one look at the baby and decided he didn't really want to be married after all. The apartment was crowded but, in those days, family took care of each other as some still do. They were with the newlyweds for what Gil calls, "Damn near a year." He does remember that they did, for the most part, get along pretty well. Poor Nancy got hit by lightning while standing at the apartment kitchen sink. The window was opened about six inches

and the ball lightning hit the ground. One tentacle of lightning snapped to the faucet where her hand was. Her hand was burned and she was shook-up but, other than that, made it through the shocking experience relatively unfazed. Nancy and Linda went back to California when Bobby and Gil headed to Corpus Christi, Texas for his advanced training.

Money was a little scarce in the beginning. Gil's Navy salary at this time was \$200.00 a month. The car his Mom had procured for him, so he and Bobby wouldn't have to hitchhike to Pensacola, required \$125.00 monthly payments. She informed them of the payments necessary for the Studebaker President as they were leaving for the trip. Needless to say, Bobby went to work at the Five and Dime and continued working until he made JG and the car was paid off. Of course, by then, the kids were coming into the picture.

There was an incident right before Bobby started work that was the typical "things always seem to work out story." They were dead broke on December 24<sup>th</sup> and Bobby wasn't starting at the Five and Dime until the day after Christmas. There they sat at the breakfast table with two boxes of Wheaties and a half a quart of milk. That was it except for two dollars and one can of tomatoes. The holiday miracle hit when they picked up their mail. There was an unexpected unemployment check made out to Bobby for \$100.00 dollars from the State of California. They were saved.

## CHAPTER 9

### GETTING HIS WINGS

---

The real fun and excitement that Gil had always been looking for began in an SNJ, Texan Trainer aircraft. The Air Force called it an AT-6. The student sat in the front seat with the instructor in the rear.

Navy flight instruction is given in essentially six stages:

- A. Basic Flight
- B. Proficiency
- C. Acrobatics
- D. Instrument
- F. Formation Flying
- G. Carrier Qualification

(There is no E.)

From the first “little bit exciting but actually pretty routine” flight on, Gil felt very comfortable in the cockpit and knew this was what he was meant to do. He remembers it being exciting and routine all at the same time. The instructors were incredibly well organized and safety conscious, one Navy Chief going so far as faking a dead body to teach the lesson of what happens when you walk into a prop. He was stressing how careful one had to be out on the flight line. They were training in a group of 50 to 60 guys that are going to get weeded by a third before basic is over. Gil says when you’re one of so many doing the same thing it tends to make it feel routine.

The misfits are usually weeded out quickly, and necessarily so. But Gil remembers one that got three strikes before he went out the hard way. They were practicing carrier landings over land in the SNJ. In the days before angled decks you had to approach the carrier by flying parallel to the carrier going from forward of the carrier’s position to aft. At approximately 200 feet in altitude you would be at the 180 degree point next to the carrier and descend to about 100 feet at the 90 degree point. You would descend to deck level at 0 degrees, hopefully in line with the aft end of the carrier at flight deck level. Twice, while practicing over land one of the students stalled at the 90 degree position and nearly crashed but managed to pull it out. Both times he was given a disposition board review and it was decided to keep him in the program. The third time he did this was over water. He went in

and was never recovered.

The first 12 flights with the instructor went off without a hitch and each evening Gil would regale Bobby with his flying stories. He breezed thru the A stage, basic, with only one slight hiccup on his solo flight, number 13.

Gil tells about his first solo flight this way.

I'll never forget my first solo flight. We were shooting touch-and-gos at an outlying grass field and my instructor, Lt. Douglas, told me to stay on the ground, taxi back to the take-off spot, and lock the brakes. The Lieutenant climbed out of the back seat and gave me my instructions. I was to make two touch-and-go landings and the third a final and taxi back to pick him up. He stood clear of the plane and the prop wash and gave me the go ahead signal. I added a bit of power to get the plane moving but the airplane didn't move. I added a bit more power and still no movement. I then realized that the brakes were locked. I panicked. I pulled off the power and just sat there. I simply did not know what to do. My head hung down. What could the instructor be thinking of me? Well, he climbed up on the wing and said, "What the hell is the matter? Are you scared?"

"No, I'm not scared. I just can't get the goddamn brakes off."

He looked as disgusted as he possibly could and said, "Tap with your toes on the rudder pedals." No, I thought, it couldn't be that simple, but I did as I was told and sure enough it worked. I was on my way.

At the debriefing after the hop, he said, "Erb, I don't know how in the hell you got this far and couldn't get the brakes off. I should give you a down for sheer stupidity but you made three damn good landings. Son, you're on your way to becoming a Naval Aviator. So good luck and read the goddamn handbook."

I finished B stage, Proficiency, which includes normal flying, landings and takeoffs, and night flying. All these flights were solo except a check ride after each set of five flights. I done good.

Next came stage C, Aerobatics, and I drew Lt. Douglas again. I'm sure he was curious as to whether I was as stupid as he thought or not. All went well; he demonstrated wingovers, barrel rolls, slow rolls and spins. All these I did real well at and then came loops. He demonstrated a loop with running commentary the entire time.

"First we pick up a good reference point like that highway down

there. Then you open the throttle to almost full but not quite. Now we push the nose over to get up some speed and then, keeping the wings level, pull back on the stick.”

I felt the “G” force on my body and as the airplane pulled up to vertical flight, I blacked out. The blood due to the Gs drained out of my brain and pooled in my relaxed body. In going over the top of the loop the G force was reduced, the blood flowed freely back to my brain and, as the plane started down, I came to. The pull out was completed and Douglas said to me, “OK, kid. Your turn.”

I did exactly what he had done and exactly what I had done. I passed out again. I regained consciousness after going over the top and finished the loop.

A disgusted Douglas simply said, “That was terrible. You didn’t keep the Gs up, you didn’t keep your wings level and you lost your heading over the top. I’ll show you one more time.”

He did the loop and I passed out again. He said, “You got it now? Let’s give it another try.”

I started the loop, I blacked out, I came to, and I finished the loop. To my astonishment Douglas said, “Now that’s more like it. I think you’ve got the hang of it now. Let’s go home.”

I didn’t dare tell him what had happened to me but found out from my fellow students that you have to tighten up all the muscles in your whole body to keep the blood from pooling in your legs and abdomen. Otherwise the brain gets starved and the blackout is the result. When I got into jets later we wore anti-blackout gear. The g-suit plugged into an air supply and when the G forces were felt, the air inflated rubber bladders at your calves, thighs and abdomen. Even then, it’s wise to tighten up when you’re pulling eight or nine Gs. Imagine your body on a conventional scale weighing twelve to thirteen hundred pounds.

Stage D, Instrument Flying, Gil “done good” also with no real exciting events. This is good in the world of pilot training. He had a little more excitement during stages F and G, Formation and Carrier Qualification.

Gil tells it this way.

In the string of my near death instances this isn’t one. I just thought it was. I had made it to the Formation Flying Stage. This was our first time out. Four students would get airborne and fly in

close formation. We would do the maneuvers designed to get us close together while performing the same stunts. While doing these maneuvers together we would try very hard not to run into each other. An instructor was in a fifth plane giving instructions and criticism via radio. We would form up in echelon both right and left and make right and left turns. When in left echelon, all turns would be made to the right and vice versa. It was drummed into our heads that you never turn into the echelon because the fourth plane would be on the inside, slower than the others and subject to stalling out. Even with experienced pilots in the fleet this maneuver happened and lives were lost. As time ran out we had to return to base. All of us would get a line behind the instructor and he would lead us in a tail chase. All four of us would do our best to stay right behind him and he would climb and turn and dive and it was a great thrill just to attempt to follow and keep up. The last plane had the toughest time because it was like cracking the whip. Being at the end made it a struggle not to get “whipped off.”

A month before this, there was a tail chase going on and the last student overshot while trying to catch up to the formation. His prop cut into the tail of the airplane in front of him and severed its controls while damaging his own prop and engine. The one who was hit and stuck with bad controls tragically went into an unrecoverable spin and crashed and burned. The student with the damaged engine bailed out and survived. He was dropped from the program.

I was number three man in one particular tail chase and while pulling out of a dive and into a tight turn I heard a rapid bang! bang! bang! I felt a force on my body that frightened the hell out of me. My first thought was I had been run into. I looked out but all I could see was the lower inside of the cockpit and the control stick was way up in front of me, almost out of reach. However, I still had a grip on it. I knew I was going to crash and burn so I stood up to attempt a bailout. When I did I heard a click, click, click, and I could see out of the cockpit and the stick was back in its normal position. What the hell happened? I relaxed and bang! bang! bang! down again I went. It was then I realized that my tail hadn't been chewed up and I wasn't going to die. My seat under the G force had slipped out of its adjusting mechanism and ratcheted to the bottom with me along with it. If I stood up the seat would ratchet back into the correct position. I pulled out of the tail chase and followed the flight back to Sautley Field. I was literally standing up the whole time but managed to land the aircraft safely.

Gil took his Advanced Training at Corpus Christi, Texas. Here, he would train in the F6F, Hellcat which seemed very big to him after the SNJ. The Hellcat had been very successful against the Japanese Zero. It was heavy, cumbersome and unable to out maneuver the Zero but it had the advantage of speed. When the American pilots were in a bad spot they could just nose over into a dive and outrun the Zero. The Hellcat was so heavy it used to be said they were made by Grumman Iron works, a subsidiary of Baldwin Locomotive; it was armor plated and could take a hell of a beating from the Jap gunners. On the other hand, once the hellcat got the advantage, one weapons burst and the Zero was trash. Training and carrier qualification were a breeze in the F6F.

The last stage of flight training was CQ, Carrier Qualification. This meant six take-offs and landings on the USS Wright. We had all gone through FCLP, Fleet Carrier Landing Practice on land and had the routine pretty well under control. The Wright was a WW II jeep carrier and suited only, by this time, for training purposes. Six SNJs equipped with tail hooks were hoisted aboard one morning and ten of us students walked aboard. The carrier got underway and we were all drinking coffee in the wardroom while the ship got underway into the Gulf of Mexico. We had all been briefed and re-briefed and knew exactly what was expected of us.

I was sitting next to Guy Lyons, a good man and good pilot. He had the floor and was real intense about the story he was telling. He was at the end of the table and had his elbow off to his side holding one of those heavy and indestructible Navy porcelain coffee cups. The steward was making his rounds refilling coffee and asked Guy if he wanted more. Guy apparently was engrossed in his story and didn't hear him. The steward shrugged his shoulders and filled the cup to the brim with very hot coffee.

Just then the word came over the 1MC, "Pilots, man your planes! Pilots, man your planes!"

We all jumped up rarin' to go when Guy threw down what he thought were his last few sips of coffee. He had literally thrown a cup of extremely hot coffee into his own face. Of course, he let out a yell that could be heard in the boiler room and grabbed his face. He was badly burned and was taken straight to sick bay. He had second degree burns to his face and mouth.

Nine of us made our six landings. Guy had to wait about a month before he was healed enough and another carrier availability session came due.

Within a week we all got our Navy Wings of Gold. It was one of the proudest days of my life. Admiral David Montgomery pinned them on me and Bobby gave me a big smooch for the cameras. I had just become Naval Aviator Number T-1471. The date was May 14, 1951.”

For Gil, this was his moment of truth. He began feeling like the hot, young, Navy pilot that he was.

The day Gil got his wings he had an eye opening experience with a fellow naval officer. Most are exactly the leaders and gentlemen we think they are. But not all. Gil, who had gone in as a “direct procurement” Ensign was now a JG. He was driving the car pool that day and had another officer as a passenger. His passenger was one of the midshipmen who had just now become a full-fledged Ensign due to getting his wings. He had been an Ensign for two hours. They pulled up to the gate and got what at best could be described as a sloppy salute. The brand new Ensign shouted for Gil to stop the car! He chewed the marine’s butt up one side and down the other. All the while Gil was thinking what an asinine thing for a two-hour old Ensign to do. He also thought this guy’s going to be out of the Navy within a year or become an Admiral. Sure enough, he retired Admiral Tom Replogle.

## CHAPTER 10

### JET TRAINING

---

Right after Gil got his wings he requested Jet Training back at Pensacola. Par for the course, however, the school was full at the moment. The Navy said Gil was needed on the west coast and actually cut orders. Then a friend of Gil's, Jimmy James, asked him if he would like to join him and another guy in trying out for a movie about Navy pilots. They auditioned with about 20 other guys and, to Gil's amazement, he, Jimmy and Jimmy's other friend were picked. The Navy acquiesced and the boys went to Whiting Field in Pensacola for the next thirty days to make the film "They Fly with the Fleet". It was a short subject being made for the Navy and directed by Mark Robeson. It covered all the phases of flight training. The Erb luck was holding and the making of the film lasted exactly thirty days; just enough to allow Gil to get into the next jet training class in Pensacola.

Jet training took thirty days and began at Whiting Field in Pensacola with the single seat F-80 "Shooting Star". The Army Air Corps (Air Force) designation for this jet was the TO-1. The jet engines on this old bird did not have a very good throttle response and during touch-and-go practice when the pilots received a wave off it would seemingly take forever to get up enough speed to take off again. This slow throttle response time caused the death of one pilot when the plane in front of him blew a tire and skidded sideways to a stop. The following F-80 couldn't get up enough speed in time to take back off over the disabled plane.

Jet training here consisted of doing all the things in a jet that the pilots already knew how to do in the prop planes. The F-80 wasn't configured for carriers so there was no carrier take off and landing practice.

Gil managed to ace this training, of course, with only one slight hiccup. He tells the story this way:

The F-80 was the first US operational jet. It was a single seat airplane and, on my first take-off, the fuel filler cap on the left wing came off and all the wing tank fuel was sucked out. The right wing was still full and the unbalanced load put me in a barely controllable right turn. I was able to climb out okay but, even with the full left stick, the airplane was in about a thirty-degree right turn. My chase pilot yelled at me, "What the fuck are you doing?" I answered, "Beats me, I can't get the wing up. I got full left stick in but it ain't workin'."

The tower operator came up on the radio and said, "I think he lost his left wing fuel load on take-off. We saw the vapor cloud as he

climbed out.”

There was no fuel transfer capability in the F-80, so I just had to keep flying in the right turn until the fuel burned out. It took about twenty minutes to burn enough to get back in balance so I could resume level flight. The rest of the flight was thrilling but uneventful.

Gil spent about 30 hours in the old F-80 before heading back to Corpus Christi and the challenge of all-weather flight.

# CHAPTER 11

## FIRST BORN

---

All-Weather Flight was a truly intense and difficult program. All the flights were made “under the hood” in the SNB. “Under the hood” meant an amber shield was put over the front windshield where the student wearing blue tinted sunglasses couldn’t see a damn thing except the instruments in the cockpit. The SNB was nicknamed the Slow Navy Bomber or the Bugmasher. It was a twin-engine WW II navigation and bombardier training airplane. It carried a pilot and co-pilot and five training seats for students in the aft cabin. For Gil’s purpose it carried the instructor and two students who took two hours each instrument flying out of a four hour flight. Here they had to learn, not only flying blind, but communications and procedures for flying in commercial airways. The hardest part was learning the “Charlie Pattern.” This is a very difficult pre-set flight pattern that must be done while flying blind and is the toughest thing in all of flight training. At least it was for Gil. It took him a lot of practice to get good at this.

Gil had a very interesting final check ride and the following is in his own words:

For our final check ride, four of us took off on an overnight flight to Tinker Air force Base in Oklahoma city. While I was away, Bobby was going to fly home to San Francisco and I was going to join her there after finishing the course. We had two weeks leave before reporting to San Diego to wait for assignment to a jet squadron. She was eight months pregnant and had to get one of the girls to buy her ticket because she was out-to-here in maternity clothes and thought maybe the airline wouldn’t sell her a ticket.

We spent the night at the BOQ at Tinker and the next morning we had a message from Corpus Christi. Our instructor, whose wife was also pregnant and a week overdue, was in the hospital. So off we went straight as an arrow back to Corpus. He went straight to the hospital but she wasn’t there. Bobby was! I was the father of a five pound eight ounce baby boy. I have to admit that this birth was pretty easy on me. Bobby came through fine and Mark Michael Erb was born.

Upon completing his all-weather training and after reporting to San Diego, Gil was ordered to a jet fighter squadron, VF-191, at Moffett Field located outside of Sunnyvale, California. He had joined the Navy to see the world and ended up nearly back in his hometown. Sunnyvale is just seven miles from San Jose.

Gil and Bobby set up housekeeping with a brand new baby in San Jose.

## CHAPTER 12

# A “NUGGET’S” FIRST NEAR-FATAL CARRIER EXPERIENCE

---

At Moffett Field the “nuggets” like Gil spent six or seven months learning to fly different combat missions in the F9F-2 Panther jet. These included intercepts, bombing, strafing, and air-to-air gunnery. The training was very intense.

Then it was time to learn to land these babies on an aircraft carrier.

The squadron moved to Naval Air Station, El Centro, California. El Centro was right on the Mexican border across from Mexicali. The pilots partied and drank tequila while attempting to keep in mind rising at dawn for field carrier landing practice. They flew in a pattern exactly like they would for a carrier landing only this was a simulated carrier deck painted on the runway. The landing signal officer (LSO) stood at the corner of the deck in a day-glo flight suit with day-glo paddles in each hand. As each pilot would approach the landing spot he would give them signals, such as too high, too low, too fast, too slow and, if they were doing really badly, they would get the wave-off signal. At first most of the nuggets were receiving wave off signals. As time went by and they got better, the LSO ended up for the most part just standing still with his arms straight out. This meant a “roger” pass.

A month later, the squadron moved back to Moffett Field to commence practicing the real thing. Four of these rookies, including Gil, took off for a rendezvous with the carrier, USS Princeton. To qualify, they had to get in eight arrested landings and eight catapult assisted take-offs. Prop planes can fly off carriers; jets need a boost.

Gil was told that the exhilaration of the first landing aboard an aircraft carrier is equivalent to the first night of a honeymoon. It is his opinion that they are both pretty exciting but won't go into much detail on the honeymoon.

He tells it this way.

We got to the ship and got in line to take turns making our approach, and, hopefully, landing aboard ship. When my turn came, I made a real good approach. The LSO gave me the “cut” signal. I chopped the power, dropped the nose, and slammed heavily down on the deck. The tail hook on the jet caught the heavy cable on the carrier deck, and both me and the plane, came to an abrupt and violent stop. After regaining my senses, I taxied forward to get positioned

on the hydraulic catapult. Jets were still brand new to the Navy at this time.

The jolt the pilot felt when the cat was energized jammed him violently back against the seat and headrest. This jolt also forced the stick back, which caused the nose to come up too high and lead to a stalled condition. To counteract this effect, the pilot must place his right elbow up against his stomach and hold on to the stick tightly to keep it in the proper position. The throttle suffers the same force with the tendency to reduce power, which, of course, is just the wrong thing to do. To prevent this, there is a rigid rod positioned just forward of the throttle handle. The pilot grasps the throttle handle and the rigid rod together in his grip thus preventing any reduction in power on take-off.

I taxied into position on the catapult, was properly hooked up and given the one-finger turn up signal. I added power up to the 80% mark and checked all the instruments for normal readings. After the cat officer gave me the two-finger turn up signal, I added power to the 100% mark and grabbed for the rigid rod.

It wasn't there!

This is the point where I panicked. Here I was turning up at full power and nothing to keep the throttle and my left arm from pulling off the power. Being a young Navy pilot and relatively immortal I made an instantaneous decision to go through with the take-off. Not to mention there were a lot of shipmates watching and, like most young men, I'd rather suffer injury than look less than brave. Being panicked, and not showing it, is a young man's privilege.

I saluted the cat officer, the "OK to fire" signal. I now had three seconds to grab the stick, get my elbow in my stomach and, WHAM! Off we go. So I grabbed the stick and got my elbow in place and concentrated on pushing, as hard as I possibly could, on the throttle to keep it in the full power position. The catapult fired and the acceleration force was something I will never forget. I pushed so hard on the throttle that, to this day I swear I could have bent it in half.

To my dismay (as well as everyone on the flight deck, the bridge, and the observers on vultures' row) in concentrating on pushing the throttle forward, I also pushed the stick forward and when I went off the end of the flight deck the plane headed straight down to the blue

ocean. Everyone on the ship knew I would hit the water. The crash alarm sounded, the ship went into an emergency full rudder turn to avoid hitting the airplane, and the rescue helo was on its way to pluck me out of the sea.

However, *I* didn't know I was going in the water, I only knew instantly that I was in a hell of a jam. When I realized my mistake I quickly pulled back on the stick with the adrenalized force of someone trying to save his own life. I got the nose as high as I could without stalling the plane. As I eased off a bit, the plane shuddered and scooted forward with the tailpipe dragging near the water. Fortunately there were no big waves. The sea was calm and they told me later that I churned up a white water trail for two miles.

Slowly the airplane gained speed and I was able to pick up a few feet of altitude by tenderly jockeying the stick back and forth. I finally got high enough to ease the nose over and accelerate to a life saving flying speed.

I wasn't about to risk another cat shot without the device, so I binged back to Moffett Field. Sure enough, I had been assigned a plane that wasn't configured for operations aboard ship.

## CHAPTER 13

### INVERTED IN THE DARK

---

As if the near death experience of his first cat shot weren't enough, Gil tells another hair raising story that happened during the intensive training in the F9F-2 to get the new pilots ready for combat flying in Korea.

The squadron, VF-191, had just returned from a nine-month tour in the Sea of Japan flying strikes over the beach into North Korea. The skipper, Commander Johnny Magda, was shot up badly on one of their last missions, and rather than eject from the airplane, he elected to ditch alongside the carrier. The landing in a rough sea didn't work out and Magda was lost. He had been the leader of the Blue Angels. When the Korean War broke out, the Blue Angels were disbanded and formed the nucleus of VF-191. They called themselves Satan's Kittens after the famous WWII F6F Hellcat. Fritz Roth and Jake Robke had been with the Blue Angels and stayed on for VF-191's next cruise. I was assigned as Fritz's wingman. He was the finest pilot I had ever seen or hope to see. From him, I learned all the Blue Angel tricks and techniques. Fritz led our four man division and he taught us all the maneuvers and how to fly in a tight, Blue Angel formation. Duane Tarpinning, a second tour pilot, was number three man and John Schorr, another "nugget" like me, was number four.

Our squadron was a part of Carrier Air Group Nineteen, which consisted of our squadron and three other sixteen-plane squadrons. We were the only fighter pilots. The other three squadrons were designated Attack. When we boarded the aircraft carrier, USS Princeton, later on in the year, for our tour to the Far East, the entire air group would embark as a single, well-trained, operational unit.

The training phase for the upcoming deployment was intense. We practiced day and night for a full nine months in order to pass our readiness tests and get prepared to go into real combat.

We lost three pilots to operational accidents during the training cycle and I almost made it to number four. One of the "experienced" second tour pilots, Jack Waits, and I went on a night cross-country flight. It was an hour and a half round robin in which we returned to our home base, Moffett Field, to land. When we got back to Moffett, a California super fogger had hit and the visibility was down to almost zero on the ground.

“No sweat,’ Jack said. “We’re down to fuel minimums so we will make a Ground Controlled Approach. You just stay tight on my wing while I contact GCA.”

“Moffett GCA, this is Feedbag Zero Four with Feedbag One Six requesting a two plane approach.”

“Roger, Feedbag Zero Four, we have you both on radar. Make a ninety degree right turn for identification.”

“This is Feedbag Zero Four. Will comply.”

“Roger your turn. Start your descent on a heading of zero niner zero.”

I had made dozens of practice GCA approaches but none on the wing of another airplane, none when the weather was bad, and none at night. To say the least, I was a little puckered. I went over the procedure in my mind.

1. Slow to approach speed using the speed brakes.
2. When slow enough, drop the wheels and flaps.
3. Don’t peek out of the cockpit. Keep your eyes on the instruments.
4. Do not over correct.

Jack came up on the radio and said, “Okay, One Six, when we get on final and I say “Wheels down-Now!” don’t hesitate, Do it! Same for flaps. Got it?”

“Yes sir!”

He hadn’t mentioned speed brakes.

We were in the clear at ten thousand feet, and would enter the murky fog at about three thousand feet. We started the high speed descent. GCA had us under positive control and leveled us off at fifteen hundred feet. I could barely see the outline of Jack’s airplane, but his running lights were bright, so I flew in just as close as I could. Thank God for Fritz’s training.

“Feedbag Zero Four, this is Moffett Control, turn to a heading of zero four five, slow to approach speed, and start a standard rate of descent.”

It was then the unthinkable happened. Jack's lights simply disappeared. I saw nothing but black. I knew we were in a turn, I knew we were descending, and I knew we had to slow to approach speed, but where the hell was Jack? I was completely disoriented. My training paid off though as I locked onto my instruments. I was still descending and I was rolling in the turn we had started. Suddenly the lights of Main Street Mountain View, a small town near Moffett Field, came into sight. I was extremely grateful to see Mountain View's lights except for one thing. It seems I was inverted and so close to the ground that I could read the sign on the theater marquee.



It was upside down!

I pushed the stick forward with all my strength and I could feel the negative “g” force on my body as the plane started up. In just a fraction of a second, I was back up in the black fog. I held what I had on the controls, and in what seemed like hours, but was actually only several seconds, I was in the clear looking at the most beautiful stars I had ever seen.

I got the airplane back to level flight and yelled out as calmly as I possibly could, “Moffett GCA, this is Feedbag One Six. I lost zero four. Do you have me on your scope?”

“Roger One six. We got you. Make a left turn and come to heading zero niner zero. Maintain your present speed and altitude....”

I followed their life saving instructions and finally touched down on runway four five. As I was rolling out on the runway, my engine quit. My fuel gauge read zero. I was towed into the parking line and climbed shakily out of the cockpit. It was great to be alive and on solid ground.

Jack was waiting for me in the line shack. He was as white as a sheet and shaking as bad as I was.

“Gil, it was my fault. Can you ever forgive me? When we started to turn on final, I put the speed brakes out and forgot to tell you. Thank God you made it.”

All he would have had to say was, “Speed brakes-Now!” But if he had I wouldn’t have this great story to tell.

I did forgive him.

Another pilot error incident occurred at El Centro, CA where the squadron had gone for gunnery and FCLP-Field Carrier Landing Practice. They were simulating making carrier approaches and landings. It was a night flight and Gil was number three in the pattern. Suddenly a massive ball of fire appeared right in front of him. Billy Diehl had gotten disoriented and flown into a barn.

With his recent experience and this incident, Gil became a firm believer in flight safety.

## CHAPTER 14

### OSCAR'S FEET

---

Combat training was complete and VF-191 was ready to go to war. Very soon they would be heading for the Sea of Japan off the coast of North Korea where a mighty battle was taking place. These young, patriotic, pilots were told they would fly from the USS Princeton and help win the fight against communist aggression.

Hold on though, there was still one box on their qualifications sheet that required an "X" before they could embark with five thousand sailors, marines, pilots and officers of the United States Navy. They had to go through the dreaded Survival School. The Navy thought this was a logical and necessary thing to do considering the real possibility of being shot down. Most of these young hotshots felt they were invincible in their metal birds that moved so fast they couldn't be caught by bullets. The Navy always wins in these differences of opinion.

There were twelve of them that reported to the Army Survival School located just east of Oakland, California. The school was set in a heavily wooded three square mile area. During the indoctrination lecture most of them were only casually paying attention since they were Sierra Hotel (shit-hot) Navy pilots and not just some ground pounders.

The group was turned loose in the woods with a complete survival pack including gear, maps, and bottled water. The goal was to evade the enemy in his own territory and make their way to the friendly area. The friendly area was marked off in a clearing approximately two miles from where they were dropped. It had a massive red, white and blue American flag flying high enough in the air to be seen from a mile away. The young pilots zigged and zagged through the woods; hiding behind trees and rocks, taking advantage of the natural cover, as well as they could. It was fun.

Of course, they were caught before they got halfway to the friendly area. All of them were put in handcuffs and "severely" beaten to get them to divulge the "master battle plan". They went along with the charade and not one of these hotshots gave up any information.

At the end of the day everyone gathered in the debriefing room to accept the critique of what they had done right and what they had done wrong. This critique ended with closing remarks by the Commanding Officer of the Survival Training Unit, Army Captain, Oscar Delgado. His lecture included a dramatic finale Gil remembers as "The Lesson of Oscar's Feet."

He tells it this way.

Captain Delgado made his way to the podium with the assistance of two beautifully hand-carved canes with ivory handles. He said the canes were a gift to him from two lovely Japanese nurses. These nurses worked in a hospital near Tokyo where he had recovered from wounds received after he was shot down behind the enemy lines in North Korea.

He had been an artillery spotter flying the L-28. The L-28 is a light, single engine plane that was quiet, camouflaged, and barely noticeable by the North Koreans. On, what turned out to be his final mission, he was calling in coordinates for a bombardment by sixteen inch projectiles from the guns of the battleship USS Wisconsin. She was cruising fifteen miles off shore. He still doesn't know what hit his plane but he ended up in a flat spin and crashed in a rice paddy. He was unhurt and there were no enemy soldiers in the vicinity. He was cold though. This was January and there were six inches of snow on the ground.

Now, Oscar was a pilot and, apparently, a damned good one. He wore the same kind of shoes that any sensible pilot would wear. After all, the rudders needed to be felt by the pilot. He had to have that delicate touch to stay in balanced flight and use his plane to its maximum capability. He was one of the pros' and he knew the feedback helped the pilots to keep their efficiency where it should be. To wear anything but lightweight loafers or flight deck shoes was out of the question. Can you imagine the dancers in the Bolshoi wearing galoshes? Yet, for the deployment to a hostile land, we were issued heavy boots that laced halfway up our calves. No real pilot would be caught dead in these lumberjack gunboats.

Well, Oscar's lecture about what we'd done right and wrong during the exercise came to a conclusion and he started to hand out our little paper diplomas when one of his own sergeants stood up and asked him why he needed those fancy canes.

"When I was shot down, it was cold and snowy but none of the enemy had spotted me. It was getting dark and I had a great chance to get down to a deep valley and make my way to the coast. It took me three days to reach Yo Do Island where I knew I had it made. I was picked up by a squad of South Korean soldiers, and I'm here to tell the story.

"Yes Sir, but what about those canes?"

“Well, as you can guess, frostbite can be enemy number two. I was wearing lightweight shoes just like the ones all you pilots are wearing today. And, just like you, I had to feel the feedback from those rudder pedals. I was a hotshot too. I could really feel the airplane with my moccasins and it seemed I was part of that bird. Problem was those moccasins weren’t too good in the snow when the temperature got down to the tens and twenties. They did a bang-up job while I was in the air, but, on the ground, trying to get home, they weren’t worth much.”

With that remark he sat down on a folding chair and pulled off his shoes and socks. Captain Delgado had no feet. His legs, both of them ended in stumps.

While in Korea, I kept my moccasins and flight deck shoes in my locker and never flew a single sortie “over the beach” without my cumbersome boots snugly tied right up to the middle of my calf. Maybe I couldn’t quite feel the sensitive feedback from the rudder pedals but I don’t think I can ever put the picture of “Oscar’s feet” out of my mind.”

They all got their last “X” placed in their qual sheet that day and the “Lesson of Oscar’s Feet” was never forgotten.

## CHAPTER 15

### WHAT AM I DOING HERE?

---

It was an incredibly exciting time in Gil's young life. Here he was a hot Navy pilot and on his way to war against the commies. He would serve two tours in the Korean "conflict". The first was aboard the USS Princeton flying a F9F-2 Panther and the second aboard the USS Oriskany flying the F9F-6 swept-wing Cougar. As usual with Gil, he had another near death experience during his first tour in Korea. To Gil's recollection this was "near death" event number five in about a dozen or so and entirely his fault for "dropping the nose twice". This may not seem an obvious dangerous situation until you read and understand what happened that day in the Sea of Japan. Gil has often wondered why his path to eternity was not a short one.

The following article was recently reviewed and edited by Gil and the author. It was written by Gil and first published in Warbird magazine in February 2003.

#### WHAT AM I DOING HERE?

##### Flying F9F-2 Panther Jets in Korea

During the Korean War I served as a US Navy fighter pilot based on the aircraft carrier USS Princeton, then later the USS Oriskany. In mid-1952, the movie "The Bridges at Toko-Ri" starring Grace Kelly, William Holden, Mickey Rooney, and Earl Holliman was being shot on location aboard the USS Princeton. Grace Kelly, sadly for all the sailors, did not embark on the ship since her scenes were all at the Hotel Fujiya where she and her "husband", William Holden, met for the romantic portion of the movie. The three male stars, Holden, Rooney, and Holliman came on board in Yokusuka, Japan and were with us for two tours of approximately thirty days each while we fought the Korean War in the Sea of Japan. They were photographed on the flight deck, in the airplanes, in the wardroom, in the ready rooms, in the staterooms, and nearly everywhere else aboard ship except the heads, although there was a scene where Bill Holden was shown walking down the passageway to his stateroom in a too small Navy-issue towel.

It was really exciting having these Hollywood stars aboard our carrier with us and all three were very cordial and joined in with all of us fighter jocks when we weren't flying and they weren't on camera. Bill Holden turned out to be a decent poker player. We felt as if they

were almost part of the same crew with the same objectives. The photographers, sound men, director (Mark Robson), were there too but with the stars of the silver screen in our midst, they were mostly overlooked by the majority of us. Celebrities being just that.

Holden wore the same flight gear that we did and was photographed as if he were one of the fighter pilots; but even though he did a great job of acting the part he never actually got in the air. Rooney and Holliman played the parts of the helicopter rescue crew. As exciting as the filming of the movie was, we still had our jobs to do and what happened to me on one of our sorties could have, in my opinion, made a thrilling scene as part of the Toko-Ri screenplay.

My division of four Panther jets was launched just before the sun appeared over the horizon. Although the Panther was a fighter airplane and designed for air-to-air combat, the MIGs never came our way. Hence we used our guns for less dramatic but still quite lethal purposes. Our mission on this pre-dawn launch was interdiction. This meant that we were to fly at about five thousand feet over North Korea and look for targets of opportunity. We were attempting to slow down the supplies being trucked or trained down to the front lines. The supplies were coming from Manchuria where the Chinese had their support centers set up to aid the North Koreans. The stateside politicians called the US involvement a “police action” but as far as we were concerned it was a goddamn war. They did shoot back at us as we strafed their trucks, trains, and just about anything else we could find to hit that would hurt them somehow. One of the new pilots screamed frantically over the radio one day, “Skipper, they’re shooting at us!” The skipper calmly replied, “Roger. That’s okay. They’re allowed to.”

When we couldn’t find anything moving to hit, we would strafe their power lines. We would shoot at the ceramic insulators on the tall steel towers that carried high voltage power. This would cause the wires to fall to the ground or hit one another and essentially create a massive short-circuit. This would black out an entire countryside and thus, hopefully, impede their ability to make war. We never found out if this really had much effect on the North Korean war effort but when we couldn’t claim a truck convoy or a supply train, we could brag about the fireworks display we created.

This particular morning turned out to be one with a target rich environment. We spotted a truck convoy as it pulled into a small village near Punchon. It was a place that the trucks would try to get

into and hide before daybreak. We weren't allowed to fly at night and the enemy knew this. Hence, most of their traveling was done at night and they would attempt to get into these lean-to shelters and hide during the day. Their timing just happened to be a bit off this day and they were late getting to their shelters. We saw them move into the village and disappear but we knew they were there.

Our rules of engagement were such that we were to try never to endanger civilians if at all possible. When the target justified the action we had to go for it. As it turned out, this truck convoy stopping point was not a village at all but simply a bunch of huts built for the sole purpose of hiding the vehicles until the sun went down. Anyway it was, "Katie, bar the door. Let's shoot us up some trucks."

We were used to getting shot at by small arms fire from the ground but our jets were so fast that rarely did any of us get hit. We thought this attack would also be a piece of cake. Our technique was to put out the speed brakes, which tended to stabilize and slow the airplane down so we could put the bullets right where we wanted them to go while in our strafing dive. For the pullout: we would close the speed brakes, add full power, and get the hell out of there as fast as possible.

I was in my dive and zeroing in on a hut with the nose of a truck sticking out from it. I felt I had a sure kill, so I bore in a bit more than I normally would have just to make sure I got good gun camera coverage on my run. The truck must have been loaded with high explosives because it blew up with a bright, fiery flash. This was followed by black smoke and debris that came flying up and directly in my flight path. I had been concentrating on my run so much that my pull out altitude was no more than fifty feet off the ground.

There's no telling what hit me but the plane jerked violently than began shuddering while continually slowing down. The shock had dazed me somewhat and I neglected to add full power or pull the speed brakes in. I quickly became a sitting duck. My enemy and I had switched roles and I was now the target of opportunity. I immediately saw the flashes of small arms fire from the ground. It was coming right at me. I then heard the splat, splat, splat of the bullets hitting my airplane. Next the canopy exploded and I felt like someone had jerked my left arm out of its socket. I did my best to remain calm and get my act together. I rammed the throttle home and hit the speed brake button. As I started to accelerate, I stayed close to the ground in a tight ninety-degree bank and high-G turn in hopes that

this would make me a harder target to hit. As I got clear I found that the ground fire had knocked out my radios and my hydraulic system, busted out the canopy, and broke all the pencils in my pencil pouch sewn on the left sleeve of my flight suit. My arm was tingling slightly but there was no blood and I was still alive. I had been very lucky and knew it. However, my troubles were just beginning.

My Division Leader, Lt. Fritz Roth, pulled up alongside of me to assess the damage. Twenty to thirty holes dotted the airplane, but surprisingly, only the radios, canopy, and hydraulic system were damaged. The loss of the hydraulic system presented two big problems. First, the seat bottomed out and my head was about a foot too low in the cockpit, making it difficult to see out. Second, the hydraulic boost for the control system failed, freezing the stick in the center position. I had to use many times the normal force to move the controls. Using both hands I was still barely able to control the plane.

Getting back to the ship as quickly as possible was now my only objective. Fritz flew wing on me as we headed east. He radioed the ship and explained my problem. About fifteen minutes later we spotted the entire task force of two carriers, one battleship, two cruisers, and six destroyers, making a massive formation turn into the wind just so I could get aboard. I remembered Johnny Magda in a similar predicament. He elected to ditch and was lost. I elected to land aboard. I dropped down to five hundred feet and entered the pattern. Had to lower the wheels and flaps with emergency air pressure since the hydraulics were all gone.

Now the problems began to multiply. I needed one hand on the throttle and two on the stick so I was one hand short. In addition, the deck was pitching up and down about a hundred feet in each direction, riding on a rough sea. Visibility was good, or would have been if I could have seen out. My seat was slunk down in the cockpit, and even though I loosened my harness and stretched up as high as I could, I can still barely see over the nose. This sunny day was about to become a nightmare.

As I rolled out waiting for the cut, I lost sight of the LSO. The morning sun was directly behind him and he was nothing but a dazzling blur to me. I had made more than two hundred of these landings by this time in my career, so I continued on, mostly by instinct. As I approached what I thought was the cut position, the LSO reappears waving his arms frantically. I wasn't getting the cut;

I was getting a wave-off instead. “My God,” I thought, “what is going on? I know I am in good position, my speed and altitude are right. Even though I can’t see I know I am okay. What’s with this wave-off thing?”

When landing aboard a carrier, most of the LSO’s signals, made with his brightly colored paddles, are informative suggestions to the pilot. Two of his signals, however, are mandatory and must be obeyed: the cut signal, which means cut off the power and land the plane, and the wave-off signal, which means that something isn’t right. It could be a foul deck, or possibly the plane is out of position for a safe landing. Whatever the problem is, you had better damned well honor his signal.

With one hand, I quickly added full power before returning it back to the stick. Then with all of my strength I pulled the stick back, rolled left, and took the stupid wave-off, still wondering what the hell the problem was. I speculated that perhaps the LSO was still pissed off at me because I beat him at gin rummy the night before and he owed me twenty bucks.

I finally got around the pattern and back for another try. This time I got the cut signal. “Goddamn it! It’s about time!” went through my head. I jerked back the throttle, moved my hand back to the stick, and pushed it forward to lower the nose. To my unimaginable surprise, there was no ship. The USS Princeton was gone. I couldn’t believe my eyes. It had to be there. So I pushed the nose over a bit more and therein lay my mistake. The cut had been given me while the ship was rising due to the heavy sea. My first pass with the wave-off was because the ship was in a down cycle. If I had been given a cut, I would have hit the deck with about 150 feet of rapid decent. The impact would have been violent enough to seriously damage the plane, the flight deck and probably me.

Now the situation was worse. I had pushed the nose over twice, which doubled my sink rate. Suddenly, the ship was coming up at me at an unbelievable speed. If I had lowered the nose only once, it would have been okay, but twice created a disaster situation. I hit the deck with a force that jarred my spine, puckered my posterior, jammed my feet, and plastered the airplane on the deck so hard that it broke every rib and rivet that had formerly held this beautiful blue Panther together.

The sirens sounded, the crash alarm blasted, the crash crew

readied their hoses to put out the fire, and I sat there stupefied. I was stunned, shocked, and surely going to get chewed out for dropping the nose twice. The destroyed airplane was pushed over the side of the ship, adding another aviation tragedy to the bottom of the Sea of Japan.

Miraculously, I was unhurt. My back was a bit tender as they helped me out of the cockpit, but otherwise no damage was apparent. They walked me into the flight deck office where Doc Adams was waiting to practice his art on a pilot who should have been seriously injured after being shot up in combat and crash landing his airplane. Doc had me pull down the upper half of my flight suit so he could see where I had been hit. He noticed all the broken pencils, so he was convinced he would have to cut out a bullet and save my life. But there was no bullet. There was no blood. Except for a slight discoloration on my skin, there was no sign of a wound. He sat me down and pleaded with me, “Gil, you want a Purple Heart, don’t you? How about I scratch you a little bit so I can get one lousy drop of blood? You’ll be a hero.”

“No, no, no!” I said. “Don’t touch me! Jesus, I’m in enough trouble already. I dropped the nose twice and cost the Navy a Panther.”

About an hour later, the regular recovery was underway. The deck was still pitching wildly up and down. Two other airplanes ended up in an identical situation to the one I had just experienced. Each pilot was cautioned to just hold on and don’t drop the nose a second time. Trust in the Lord and your recently educated LSO.

Nothing was ever said to me about the lost plane. Everyone from the captain on down seemed to be extremely pleased that I got home in one piece. That night after evening chow, Bill Holden came to my room and brought a bottle of Johnny Walker Black. We talked until the scotch bottle was empty. The next day he was back in front of the camera, and I got launched with a serious hangover.”

There was a very cool picture taken after this incident that made both the San Jose evening news and Palo Alto newspapers. Gil being from San Jose and Lt. Roth being from Palo Alto, this makes sense to the Navy PR world. The picture is of Lt. Roth and Gil still in their flying suits with Lt. Roth shoving his 38 caliber pistol through the hole in Gil’s sleeve made by the 30 caliber bullet that tore through it and busted up his pencils. One caption reads “Close but no Purple Heart”. Had the author not had access to these articles he would have never known that Gil and Lt. Roth returned to this site near Punchon and put the two anti-aircraft guns that

had fired on Gil out of commission.

During this tour one of Gil's buddies, a pilot by the name of Claude Roesner who later became a pro golfer, had a habit of flat hatting or buzzing what was a beautiful 3 to 4 mile stretch of beach. At the end of the beach was an old building that Claude would buzz right over (50 feet or less) in his Panther. The Koreans were observing this daily occurrence and decided to load the building with dynamite and blow it as he flew over it. Luckily, they were slow on the uptake and detonated the building after he passed it. It did serve as a lesson for old Claude though and his days of buzzing the beach were over.

## CHAPTER 16

# COLLISION! COLLISION! COLLISION!

---

Another incident that happened while Gil was with VF-191 on the USS Princeton he tells like this:

The Task Force would operate for three days and on the fourth day it was necessary to “replenish.” During the three operating days the ship used up most of its fuel, food, bombs, and ammunition. We didn’t fly on Replenishment Day so it was relax, work on the airplanes, read the letters from home, and listen to briefings on the operations for the next three days.

Far away on the other side of the world, a similar Task Force was operating near the Azores in the Atlantic Ocean. One of the carriers was the USS Wasp and one of the many destroyers in the force was the destroyer Hobson. It was time to recover aircraft, so the order was given to make a one hundred and eighty degree turn to the left to head “into the wind” and start the recovery. The entire Task Force responded properly except for the Hobson. She turned right and into the path of the Wasp. The collision ripped open the bow of the Wasp and literally cut the Hobson in half. The Hobson sunk immediately with the loss of 176 lives. This was one of the worst naval tragedies in history. News of the “Hobson Incident” made world wide headlines and of course it was shocking news to us even on the other side of the world.

We had flown for the three days and tomorrow was “Replenishment Day.” I hit the sack at about eleven PM after having watched the wardroom movie and lost ten bucks at Gin Rummy. My bunk was positioned on the starboard side of our stateroom, which was pretty far forward and directly over the flare of the bow of the ship. It was a large room because of its location over the flare and was shared by three of us junior officers. The other two bunks were located on the opposite side of the room. The door to our room opened directly onto the passageway leading directly to the hangar deck.

Replenishment started at dawn and the first ship, an ammunition ship, had come along side. She had all her lines over and was in the process of high-lining bombs and boxes of ammo to the deck edge elevator opening on the hangar deck which was a few feet aft of the door to our stateroom. The hangar deck is actually the main deck

of an aircraft carrier and where all maintenance procedures on the airplanes take place and the replenishment crew connects all lines to the supply ships. All above it, including the bridge and the flight deck is considered superstructure. The deck itself is solid steel and 6 to 8 inches thick.

I was half awake and conscious of the activity taking place on the hangar deck. The carrier has the responsibility of maintaining station on the ammo ship since with her four screws and rapid helm response she is much more maneuverable. The ammo ship is single screw and vastly under powered relative to the carrier.

Suddenly, the MC blared out all over the ship:

**COLLISION!-COLLISION!-COLLISION!  
CLEAR THE FORWARD PART OF THE SHIP!**

**COLLISION!-COLLISION!-COLLISION!  
CLEAR THE FORWARD PART OF THE SHIP!**

Instantly I was wide awake with a vision of the Wasp ramming the Hobson. My two roommates were out the door in a flash and I was inches behind them. We got through the stateroom door and onto the hangar deck. We could see the gun tubs on the ammo ship moving rapidly toward the carrier and the actual collision. The screeching was frightening as we continued aft. I remember kicking something as we ran. I thought it was a shoe. The lines connecting the two ships had parted and were dragging in the water as the ammo ship drifted forward toward the bow of the carrier and the collision before moving away. The carrier had reduced her power and turned away from the ammo ship. We could see that the danger had passed as the distance between us and the ammo ship continued increasing.

We stood in the clear on the hangar deck as the corpsmen rushed forward from the Sick Bay. A lot of the crew was shaken up and a few were injured when the lines parted and snapped back. One sailor got his foot caught in the bite of a line and his foot was severed from his body. It was his shoe and foot that I kicked when we ran out of our room.

We were told to report to our Ready Rooms while the damage forward was assessed. Three cups of hot coffee later I went back to my room. There was a tear in the ships flare that started a few feet aft of my bunk, widened to about three feet at the head of my bunk, and continued on into the next state room. The view from my pillow if I

rolled up on my side was about fifty feet straight down into the Sea of Japan. I was shaken pretty badly but felt lucky not to have been a casualty.

That afternoon, after several survey parties had examined the damage, the Princeton and a destroyer escort were underway to the shipyard in Yokuska, Japan for repairs. Three weeks later the Princeton rejoined Task Force 77 and I was back in my old room with my bunk over the patch on the flare. Operations continued and the memory of

**COLLISION!-COLLISION!-COLLISION!**

would be with me forever.

## CHAPTER 17

### THE WARRIOR'S HUMANITY

---

It is the author's belief that no one discovers their own humanity the way a warrior does in combat. Gil was no exception. He had no problem going after any and all combat objectives as ordered. In his own words he could have dropped the big one if so ordered and it was a military objective his superiors deemed necessary to pursue the "war" successfully. He knew there were people in the buildings, trucks and trains he blew up in North Korea. This is the face of war. There were a couple of times though when this warrior was in a position where he could have killed at will and he would have been considered just "doing his duty". But Gil was not only a warrior; he was also a human being.

One morning the military objective was a North Korean intelligence and communications center. They sortied pre-dawn in an attempt to strike the intelligence center at approximately 7:00 AM. Their own intelligence led them to believe this was when the center changed shifts. Physically, the intel/comm center was located in the basement of a hotel/restaurant. The 500 pound bombs would have no problem reaching and destroying these facilities along with the people there. Such is war. The Panthers would back up the AD Skyraiders and use their machine guns for flak suppression. The jets carried machine guns as well as bombs and often, in engagements of this type, would "mop up" using those guns.

Gil had completed dropping all his bombs and was returning to see if there were any more targets of opportunity. He spotted a group of about a dozen or so North Koreans in white kimonos running for their lives up a steep slope away from the destroyed hotel. They were sitting ducks for his Panther's machine guns. As he was lining up his strafing run, knowing he was about to take the lives of a dozen humans very violently, he experienced a moment of something to this day he can't quite describe. He reasoned that these people were dressed like farmers not intelligence gatherers. The objective was to destroy the intel/comm center and kill as many of the enemy as possible. Civilians were not the objective and never were. He released the trigger and pulled off.

In another instance Gil had an ox-cart, which was traveling up a mountain road, and its driver in his sights. These ox-carts were used to carry munitions and would explode mightily when hit with machine gun fire. This particular ox-cart driver heard Gil's Panther screaming towards him, panicked, and drove off the side of the road and tumbled down the mountain. Gil felt relief that he didn't have to shoot this poor peasant.

There is a difference between warriors and terrorists and Gil was definitely one

of America's finest examples of its warrior class. The "heart of the lion" comes to mind.

Gil's first Air Medal reads as follows:

For meritorious achievement in aerial flight as Pilot of a Jet Fighter Plane in Fighter Squadron One Ninety One, based on board the USS Princeton, during operations against enemy aggressor forces in Korea from 2 May to 13 July 1952. Completing twenty missions during this period, Lieutenant, Junior Grade, Erb carried out destructive attacks against the enemy in the face of hostile antiaircraft fire. His skilled airmanship, courage and devotion to duty throughout were in keeping with the highest traditions of the United States Naval Service.

The Navy presented Gil with a Gold star in lieu of a second Air Medal. It read exactly the same with the exception of the next twenty missions taking place from 20 July to 12 September 1952.

Still on his first combat cruise with VF 191 off the USS Princeton, Gil was also awarded the Commendation Ribbon with Combat Distinguishing Device for:

With outstanding aggressiveness and coolness in the face of intense enemy fire, Lieutenant Junior Grade Erb materially aided in the destruction of the Suiho hydro-electric power plant by obtaining direct hits on the plant and defending anti-aircraft positions.

## CHAPTER 18

# SCOTT, THE ARCHITECT, IS BORN IN A HURRY

---

After Gil returned from his first deployment to Korea, he and Bobby enjoyed a wonderful shared adventure. At least it was an adventure for Gil. Bobby may have seen the whole thing from a slightly different perspective.

It had all started nine months previously; the very night before Gil was to deploy. Gil had to be aboard the USS Princeton by 0800 and they had made arrangements to spend their last night together at the home of Bobby's Aunt and Uncle near NAS Alameda. The relative's house was small and it looked as if their farewell night would be spent on a squeaky sofa-bed in the living room. This did not quite fit Gil's or Bobby's idea of what a farewell evening should be so at dinner Bobby came up with the following for her Aunt's benefit: "Aunt Nonny, Gil and I have to put in an appearance at the Officer's Club this evening. The wives want to make some plans for while the boys are away." Of course Gil and Bobby left and went straight to the "No Tell Motel".

Gil's first Korean cruise ended just about nine months later and when Bobby met the ship she was very large with child. In fact, she had to convince Gil that it was indeed only one child and not twins. Back at their home in San Jose, Bobby had done a beautiful job of getting ready for the new addition to the family. The nursery, which was actually the sunny end of the master bedroom, was draped in pink and blue. It was full of all those things you would expect in a nursery; at least that which could be afforded on a Lieutenant's salary. They were very much ready for the baby's arrival but the baby wasn't.

At two weeks overdue Bobby decided to do something about this and resorted to the old wives' tale remedy of drinking castor oil. Why she chose this method instead of the bumpy car ride fix may have been due to some womanly intuition on what was to follow that evening. About a half an hour after taking the elixir, Bobby announced to Gil that they should head to the dispensary at his duty station, Moffett Field. She was ready.

Her pains had subsided by the time they got to the dispensary. This was for the best since the corpsman there informed Bobby and Gil that the dispensary was not equipped for delivering babies nor were there any Doctors there experienced in this procedure. He suggested they drive to Oak Knoll were Bobby could be admitted. It was his opinion that the baby would come the next day and he offered to call the hospital and announce their impending arrival.

So off they go to Oakland and the large Naval Hospital at Oak Knoll. It was

well after midnight and they were cruising along discussing names for the baby when Bobby started exclaiming that she had to get to a bathroom immediately. Gil could see a glare ahead of them that turned into many various colored flashing lights announcing the CLUB UBANGI. The parking lot was jammed, the noise from the band was ear-splitting, and everyone in the place seemed to be inebriated and having one hell of a time. It was not the most desirable place to stop but a personal emergency is just that.

Bobby waddled out about five minutes later with a pained look on her face. She was sopping wet from the waist down. Her water had broken in the ladies room of the infamous Club Ubangi.

Gil started to feel the panic set in and had his old Buick going just as fast as possible on its worn out tires. When Bobby screamed that she could feel the baby's head, Gil told her to hold on that they were almost there. This was a lie. They still had twenty miles to go. As Mother Nature would have it, her pain subsided for the moment and the old Buick continued to roar down the highway. They passed what looked like a sanitarium of sorts and Gil was thinking at least they'll have a bed a maybe he could deliver the baby himself but Bobby was quiet now and he decided to keep going.

About five minutes later Bobby began to scream that she can't hold it any longer at the same time as red lights began to flash in the Buick's rearview mirror. Gil kept the hammer down because there was no way he was going to stop at that point. While they were entering the Oakland City limits they came to a roadblock. Gil would have to stop or ram into two police cars blocking the road. He stopped and yelled to the police that they were having a baby! They just asked him were he was headed and he told them Oak Knoll. Now he was doing over ninety but with one police car flashing lights and leading the way with two more following. At the gate, the police car pulled aside and they headed straight for the emergency room.

The police had radioed ahead and, when they got to the emergency room door, two corpsmen were waiting with a gurney. Bobby was yelling, "It's coming! It's coming!" They whisked her away through the swinging doors and Gil was instructed to calm down and just wait.

It was only several minutes before a nurse was heading towards Gil with a bundle in her arms. A bundle that was screaming its head off. The nurse smiled and informed Gil that it was a boy and that the doctor was taking good care of his wife. She let him take a quick look at his brand new son before returning to the delivery room to clean him up.

Gil was much too stressed at this point to attempt to relax as the nurse had instructed him. Soon however, when the waiting room began to brighten as the

sun came up, he noticed that it was one of those rare times when there was no morning fog in the Bay Area and the day was going to be clear as a bell. Gil knew then that everything was going to be okay.

Three cups of coffee later Gil was allowed to see mother and son who were doing fine. Bobby was barely awake but smiling a very sleepy smile. The new son was sleeping with his eyes jammed shut and snuggled down in his Mom's arms. Gil could swear that the baby had a smile on his face too. He looked out at the day and realized it was just perfect. It was also the day after Christmas, December twenty-sixth, 1952 and Scott Charles Erb, Gil and Bobby's second son, had just come into the world.

## CHAPTER 19

# THEY MADE THE VALLEY TREMBLE

---

Being home in San Jose from his first combat cruise to Korea was a joy for Gil. Not only was he with the love of his life, Bobby, and his sons in their new house but he was training in the F9F-6 Cougar. And, oh man, the Cougar was supersonic!

Chuck Yeager, who Gil got to meet once, had broken the sound barrier five years earlier and the Navy was ready to put supersonic jet fighters into action in Korea.

VF-191 was back at its home base, Moffett Field, and the combat veterans were pulling double duty. That is, they were practicing combat drills in the new Cougar while training the “nuggets”. VF-191 “Captain” Commander Elder had flown the F9F-6 at NAS Patuxent River, Maryland and was ready to show his boys how to break the sound barrier. After climbing to 40,000 feet they would do a split-s or zero-g pushover and then dive at full power until they hit mach 1 on the mach meter. They could remain at mach 1 for about a minute and then had to, very gently, pull back on the stick and out of the dive. Horsing the stick back would cause a stall situation and you would need to push forward again and repeat the pull out. If you did this too many times it would lead to a progressive stall and into the ground. Sadly, they did lose a couple of pilots this way.

The third time Gil made the San Jose Evening News; the first being flight training and the second being Korea, was not for his heroics but for what was titled, “They Made Valley Tremble”. At the time, sonic booms were unheard of and they caused quite a stir with the local population as evidenced by the following paragraphs from the article. It appeared on the front page of the San Jose Evening News on Friday August 14, 1953.

Moffett Field-The jet pilots from VF 191 who cracked through the sound barrier Tuesday had no idea they were causing sonic blasts which rocked the Sunnyvale-Mountain View area.

“There’s absolutely no way you can tell when you’ve set off a sonic shock wave,” said Cmdr. Robert M. Elder, skipper of the fighter squadron. “I didn’t know anything about the booms until I landed.”

The Navy pilots were flying the F9F-6, the Navy’s newest operational jet fighter.

The planes had been cleared to fly faster than “Mach 1”—the speed of sound—for the first time. Actual mph speed, a military secret, is presumed to be in excess of 750 miles per hour.

“I think I was the only one who deliberately flew faster than sound,” Commander Elder said. “I made the first run, to test the plane’s stability at supersonic speeds.”

After the skipper reported that the plane was “very stable,” the other pilots were permitted to pass the speed of sound in their regular combat maneuvers.

No one knows for sure why sound-blasts sometimes occur and sometimes don’t. One theory is that when the planes reach mach 1 the sound waves from the plane’s own engine pile up in front of the engine like snow in front of a snow plow. The longer the plane flies exactly at the speed of sound, the tighter the waves pack in, and the louder the blast if the plane is headed earthward in a steep dive. Once the plane flies faster than mach 1, however, the waves no longer accumulate in front of the ship, but spiral off smoothly and harmlessly behind it.

Commander Elder emphasized that the phenomenon can occur with any ship capable of supersonic speed, and is not peculiar to the F9F-6.

Moffett Field authorities logged the shocks in a series—about five jolts at 3:35, three or four at 4:28 and four at 6:40. The field’s public information office did not acknowledge the explosions were caused by any of the station’s planes or any of its activities, although they said some Moffett aircraft were flying at the time.

From the entire area, hundreds of housewives and workers telephoned anxious inquiries to switchboards of the San Jose Mercury, the Sheriff’s office, local police stations and Moffett Field.

Rumors scattered that there had been a major explosion at Sunnyvale’s Westinghouse plant or at the Schuckl cannery in Sunnyvale. Both stories were scotched quickly by officials of the two concerns. Will Long, office manager of Schuckl’s, said he believed at first one of the boilers had blown up. Employees at Westinghouse assumed the noise was caused by an explosion within the plant. Some workers in the two installations left their jobs for the day.

While Sunnyvale’s eastern industrial area seemed to get the major force of the shock, it drew no small attention in Mountain View and in Santa Clara. Police in Mountain View said residents believed the noise came from Sunnyvale and rushed into the streets to see if any explosions or fire were visible. Santa Clara police reported they had

few calls, mostly from residents in the Lawrence Road area, wanting to know if any Santa Clara plant had suffered a disaster.

The San Jose Evening news also ran photos on the front page of Cmdr. Robert M. Elder, Lt.(jg) Charles G. Erb and Lt.(jg) Norman F. Lattin beside their individual planes. This, of course, tickled the shit out of them as well as the whole squadron.

Needless to say, they broke a lot of windows and soon were prohibited from doing supersonic flight over populated areas.

Gil describes breaking the sound barrier as a “pleasant” experience but no great shakes; pun intended.

Squadron 191, Satan’s Kittens, were a fun bunch and only very serious when they were flying combat maneuvers.

The Commanding Officer of Moffett Field had a thing for racing sports cars so they built a track using the runway that ran parallel to a huge hangar used to house the US Navy’s largest dirigibles ever built, the Akron and the Macon. This hangar at the time was the largest ever built. It would cloud up and rain in there. Well, it wasn’t that hard for the CO to get his crew to lay some asphalt between the runway and the end of the parking lot adjacent to the hangar; it being between the hangar and the runway. They laid the asphalt in two s-patterns at each end of the runway connecting to each end of the parking lot. Voila! Instant sports car raceway. The cars were all homemade hopped-up MGs and such and would do 160 to 180 mph. There was even one with an Allard body and Cadillac engine.

Someone, probably the CO, thought it might be good publicity for Moffett Field and the supersonic Cougars to get a picture of a couple of the jets and the cars prior to the normal race day. Naturally, Gil, being the Duty Officer this particular Sunday and Gary Radcliffe his deputy, drew the honor of having their pictures taken with their Cougars, several of the sports cars and a set of triplets that were professional models. This was about a month before the actual race.

It was a beautiful sunny northern California day and perfect for taking publicity photos. The cars, jets, drivers and pilots all got their pictures taken over and over including some with the bathing beauties sitting on the wings. The pilots and drivers were showing off and flirting to no end.

Someone, probably the CO again, decided it would be a good idea for one of the jets to actually race the cars down the runway. Gil was chosen as the lucky one to pull this off. All were anxious to see how it would come out. After all engines were warmed up and everyone was in line across the runway, the CO motioned from his car to the officer with the big American Flag. He waved it several times and then brought it to the ground. Off they went. The cars pulled immediately away and

began racing down the runway. The Cougar did not take off so quickly. Halfway down the runway the jet began eating up the space between him and the cars. Two thirds of the way down the runway and the jet was airborne and roared over the cars at 160 mph plus. Gil was in the lead with a huge smile across his face. Gil said that movies were made of this but he never got to see one. Race day, a month later, came off beautifully and was attended by thousands. Publicity pays.

Gil was a division leader by now and heavily into training the nuggets in simulated combat missions. The veterans were getting ready for their second Korean Tour and they had to weed out of the new pilots, 30 in all, those who wouldn't be able to cut the mustard. Specifically, they had to get down to 24 total and these had to be the best.

They also had an Air Force Captain join their group for training under a Navy/Air Force pilot exchange program. Gil tells that this Air Force pilot was one of the best he'd seen. His flying was superb in every respect and he was definitely a candidate for going overseas with VF-191. He performed extremely well all through the training program including field carrier landings. However when it came time to actually land aboard the carrier he just could not do it. He made 40 to 50 attempts and somehow could never get in position to get the cut from the LSO. Needless to say he was dropped from the program. He went back to the Air Force and flew F-86s.

VF-191 had another Air Force Captain on their first tour to Korea and he worked out perfectly and flew as well on and off the carrier as any of the Navy pilots. His name was Bob Jones and he endeared himself to Gil and his buddies by booking them into the Royal Hawaiian on Waikiki Beach by saying, "This is Captain Jones and I'd like a suite..." They didn't know he wasn't a Navy Captain wearing eagles and he never bothered to mention it either.

All good things come to an end so it is with breaks between combat tours. Not quite the expulsion from paradise but close. After about six months in homeport Gil had to kiss Bobby and his small sons goodbye and head back to Korea with the rest of Satan's Kittens from VF-191. This time they pulled the USS Oriskany.

## CHAPTER 20

# WHY MODERN AIRCRAFT CARRIERS HAVE ANGLED DECKS

---

The USS Oriskany left San Francisco and headed to Hawaii for its ORI-Operational Readiness Inspection. This takes about two weeks and then they would be on their way to the Sea of Japan. It was here they discovered the problem of the Cougar's swept wing configuration and hitting the carrier deck with much more force than the F9F-2 Panther which was straight wing.

Gil wrote a paper about his thoughts on this and his early days as a Navy pilot. The text follows:

Operational needs and politics seem to fight each other most of the time but occasionally they have a way of getting along. For example, in the Navy's budget there was no money for the development of a new aircraft or weapon, but the budget overflowed with funds earmarked to update existing weapons systems. The Navy needed a swept wing, supersonic airplane but there was no money for research and development. The F9F series, called the Panther, was the Navy's first operational jet fighter, starting with the -2, and the -5. These were straight wing jets with large tip tanks and had no supersonic speed capability. The decision was to modify the existing Panther by merely sweeping its wings back, installing a bigger engine, and a few other details having to do with supersonic flight. These modifications and other details would eventually lead to the Navy's procurement of the "Costly Cougar." What could be a better plan?

The Panther was a good, solid airframe and performed well during the first phases of the Korean War as a fighter-bomber but it was outclassed by the Air Force F-86 when it came to air-to-air combat with the Russian MiGs. The Panther never engaged enemy fighters in MiG Alley up near the Manchurian Border; rather it flew Combat Air Patrol (CAP) missions over the Carrier Task Force (CTF) operating in the Sea of Japan off the Korean East Coast and interdiction missions over North Korea. The CAP was strictly precautionary just in case of an air attack on CTF-77. There never was one.

The interdiction mission was to interrupt the flow of supplies from Manchuria to the battle zone. Trucks and trains were the main targets and bombing the highways and railroad tracks was the most

effective means to cut the flow. Rail cuts were probably the most successful role of the Panther. With luck, and I mean lots of it, a four plane division could get twenty-four cuts. Each plane would drop, in rapid succession, three of its six two-hundred-and-fifty pound bombs from the left wing down on a stretch of track. Then shift slightly to the left to bring the right wing to bear and release the remaining three, this tactic could result in six clean rail cuts. Of course, the North Koreans were prepared for this and within minutes after the planes disappeared over the horizon, thousands of laborers, with picks and shovels, were on the job and the track bed would be repaired in time for the next train to make its run after the sun went down.

Occasionally, a train would be caught out in the open at sunrise and then the fun began. The lethal prop planes, the Douglas Skyraiders with their enormous load of bombs would be launched. The Panthers would fly CAP, in the off chance that a MiG would appear. No MiG's ever showed up. The Skyraiders never missed but while they were destroying the train, there were hindered by ground fire. Here was another area where the Panther with its twenty-millimeter cannons mounted in the nose had a vital role. It was fairly easy to spot the gun emplacements and then the Panthers with their cannons would do their job so the Skyraiders could finish off the train.

The Grumman Aircraft Company was often jokingly referred to as the Grumman Iron Works, a subsidiary of Baldwin Locomotive. Its history dates back to WWII when their Wild Cat, Hell Cat, and Bear Cat took inconceivable punishment from the Japanese Zero, but always came out the victor. The Grumman reputation held and the Panther was just as indestructible as its predecessors. With its armor-plated cockpit and re-sealable fuel tanks, AA and ground fire failed to bring it to its knees. The Grumman engineers also knew that the first jet aircraft to enter the fleet would have to be compatible with the propeller driven planes in and around the carrier. They would be in the same landing pattern with the same wind conditions and land on the same carrier deck.

The jets, just like the props, would enter the pattern heading upwind and fly by the ship's starboard (right) side at two to three hundred feet off the deck. The four-plane division would then peel off, one at a time, to establish the landing interval, and start the downwind leg. The one-hundred-eighty-degree spot was usually marked by a destroyer, a cruiser, or at times a battleship. With wheels and flaps down, and the arresting hook extended, the descending

turn to a landing was started. With forty-five degrees still to turn the Landing Signal Officer (LSO) picked up the plane and with his bright orange and yellow paddles, directed the pilot to the right altitude, the right speed, and the right alignment to make the arrested landing. With a clear deck and everything in readiness on the ship, the LSO would give the “cut” signal to the pilot. Power came off instantly, the nose dropped slightly for a quick look at the deck and to set up a rate-of-descent. The wings were leveled as the stick was pulled back to establish the proper landing attitude and cushion the landing. The airplane then hit the deck and an instant passed waiting for the hook to catch a wire. When the pilot felt the strain on his shoulder straps and the airplane came to a violent stop, he was home free. As the button was pushed to retract the hook and release the airplane from the arresting gear, the pilot added full power to get out of the landing area a make room for the next plane to land. Under the direction of a flight deck crewman, he was taxied forward, parked, and climbed out of the cockpit to make his way to the ready room for the debrief.

This, of course, was all done on what now is called a straight deck carrier. The Cougar helped show the Navy the wisdom of having an angled deck carrier. A slower plane with straight wings could make a slower approach to the landing area, cut the power, lower the nose and then flare the bird to cushion the landing impact. In the supersonic cougar our approach was at a higher speed, but we still took the cut and lowered our nose. However, the swept wing gave us no flare, hence no cushioning effect. So we hit the deck with a pretty severe impact. That bounced the plane back up in the air and into a protective barricade that kept us from floating into the planes that were parked forward.

In those days the landing surface was wood supported by a steel deck. After many of these hard landings the steel deck underneath, unknown to us, had caved in and no longer supported the wood landing deck above. This created a spring-board effect that caused the planes to bounce even higher and sometimes over the barricade and into the pack of planes parked forward. They solved the immediate problem by drilling large holes through the wood and filling the void with concrete. These were serious accidents though and ultimately led to angled deck aircraft carriers.

## CHAPTER 21

### FLAT-HATTING OVER KOREA

---

Gil's second combat tour in Korea, after the ship passed its ORI inspection off Hawaii bombing the deserted island of Kahalawii, by his own admission, was not quite as thrilling as the first. In fact Gil described it as an uneventful cruise. The war was over right after they got there and they flew mostly reconnaissance missions while the peace talks were going on in Panmunjon. That's not to say there weren't any sea stories to tell about this cruise. They were quote "hardened veteran combat pilots" unquote and as such would find imaginative ways to make the time go by and sharpen their flying skills. After all they were home ported in Yokusuka, Japan and that port has its own myriad tales.

Gil and five of his pilot buddies were taken off the carrier by a destroyer and transported to one of the ports in South Korea. They were guests of the Army Ground Forces there. The Army took the pilots up to the front lines at the DMZ and showed them around. The Army had two missions at the time. One was winterizing the tents; adding wooden floors and oil space heaters. The other was bringing all enlisted men's education up to the 5<sup>th</sup> grade level. The Army officers had an "O" club, naturally, so the pilots joined them every evening in riotous drinking bouts. Gil describes this as, "We spent a week partying with the Army."

Gil does readily admit that even though the second tour of Korea was rather uneventful, they did have a lot of fun. They spent much of their time "flat-hatting"; flying low over the countryside doing essentially a touring kind of operation.

One of Gil's favorite sea stories from this cruise had to do with a certain pilot who shall remain nameless since he went on to an exceptional career in the Navy. This pilot was returning from a mission, flying a F8U Crusader and attempting to land on the carrier flight deck. The emphasis here is on "attempting" to land on the flight deck. Something mechanical went awry as he was making his approach to the aft end of the carrier, no one is sure what went wrong, but instead of landing on the flight deck he went straight into the hangar bay. It was a small miracle that the hangar bay doors were open at this time. Normally they wouldn't be. Another small miracle was there were no planes on the aft portion of the hangar deck at this time. Well, the wings caught the sides of the door frame and the plane exploded. However the cockpit section and front of the aircraft remained intact and slid through the hangar deck and came to rest at a ladder that led down to sickbay. The pilot climbed out of the cockpit in a daze and wasn't quite sure where he was or what the hell was going on. He realized he was near sickbay where he normally was scheduled daily for a sitz bath due to his hemorrhoids. The medical personnel

recognized him and told him that there had been an accident on the flight deck and they all needed to scramble up there. So he took his flight suit off and climbed into the bath. Ultimately the story came out much to the pilot's embarrassment.

At the end of Gil's second tour of Korea it was time for him to make a decision about staying in the Navy or not. He'd been in almost six years and wanted to get his Master's Degree. He applied for Post Graduate School in Monterey and Test Pilot School at Patuxent River, Maryland. If he didn't get one or the other of those he was going to get out of the Navy and go back to San Jose State. Either of the two Navy options would require a certain amount of obligation to the Navy and he would stay in the Navy and make it his career.

The Navy gave him both.

## CHAPTER 22

### GIL AND BOBBY GET DEGREES

---

In June 1954, Lt.(jg) Erb and Bobby packed up the two boys and headed off to Monterey, California so Gil could attend Post Graduate School. Discussing this always puts a smile on Gil's face since he wasn't a graduate yet. He got his Bachelor's Degree in Aeronautical Engineering from Monterey in June 1956 and his Master's Degree in Aeronautical Engineering from MIT in June 1957.

The Erb family was in Monterey for two years. This was long enough to buy a house and have their third and last child. Their daughter, Danna, was born while they were in Monterey and she was the girl they had been waiting for.

Going to school was obviously good duty. Gil described it as a piece of cake, as in, lots of free time. He got to play a lot of golf. He also got to fly SNBs and SNJs out of NAS Monterey to keep his flight proficiency as well as the flight pay that is so important to a young Navy pilot with a family to support. During this period of Gil's flying there were actually no near-death experiences. His driving was another matter.

The truth is, so many pilots, especially the younger ones, believe if they can handle an aircraft at great speeds it only seems natural that this would transfer to driving an automobile at high speeds. Gil was no exception.

During the summer after Gil's graduation and before his orders came through for MIT, Bobby and the kids were with friends at a beach house while Dad was left home because of work. One of the girlfriends' husband was an old classmate of Gil's from San Jose State and was staying with him while their families played at the beach. The boys decided to do a little drinking out at the old infamous Mission Ranch one evening. There is seldom such a thing as a little drinking when the boys are out without spousal supervision. Gil, being the drunkest, naturally got to drive home. He is unsure about the nature of the cause of the accident but he does recall running off the road at a high rate of speed. His friend was not seriously hurt but part of the tree they hit came through the driver's side window and smashed the left side of Gil's face. He damn near lost his eye. The Naval Speed Letter that went from the Navy Hospital in Oakland back to PG School described his injuries as:

FRACTURE COMPOUND, LEFT MANDIBLE MAXILLA

RELINTIS, NEC, Traumatic, Left Eye

CONCUSSION, BRAIN, Mild

The doctors also had to dig a lot of wood out of the side of Gil's face. He spent about six weeks in the hospital.

Before he was released he had to pass an eye test to maintain his flying status due the severe injury to his left eye. Gil was extremely depressed when he couldn't pass it. He tried a total of three times and just couldn't get past the damn test. Luckily, a new doctor comes into this particular examination room and volunteers to look at Gil's eye. The Doc tells Gil his eye looks fine and there should be no reason for him not to pass the test. He looks through the machine himself and he can't pass the test either. The doctor took him into a different room and, lo and behold, Gil passed. So the Doc goes back into the other room to check out the optical equipment and discovered that the left lens was in backwards! Gil smiles at the story now, but, for the little while that he contemplated his flying days as over, he was crushed.

Now you would think nearly losing your left eye, a broken jaw and a concussion would tell you something about the evils of drinking and driving but, au contraire, this was not to be Gil's last car accident, nor even his worst, but let's not get ahead of ourselves.

Bobby and Gil sold the house in Monterey before heading off to Boston and MIT in their brand new Ford station wagon. In that Ford were Gil (who is still recovering from his broken jaw), Bobby, Mark, Scott, Danna (who is still in diapers), a white cocker spaniel named Duhbe and "a goddamn bird." Each morning they would depart at 0400 AM, breakfast at 0800, lunch at noon, and then stop for the day around 1500 at a motel with the all-important pool for the kids. They were a happy band of gypsies headed on a cross country adventure.

Bobby had a very big heart and was always helping others. The Ford was being refueled at a stop near the Massachusetts state line and Bobby got into a conversation with a little old lady named Annie who was sitting at the bus stop. Seems she had missed her bus. Of course, Bobby offered to take her into Boston which was about 2 hours away. Gil was slightly taken aback considering how full the car was already but relented. When they got to Boston, Annie was trying to direct them to her son's place but each new turn only ended with her confused look and, "No, this isn't right." They drove around Boston for about an hour before Gil and Bobby accepted the fact that this poor old lady didn't have a clue as to where she was going. Gil finally pulled over and engaged a police officer on one of the city's corners. He and Bobby explained their problem. They had picked up this older lady and now it seemed she had dementia or something and they didn't know what to do with her. The policeman looked in the rear window and said, "Oh, Hi, Annie. How you doing?" He then turned to Gil and told him not to worry he would get her home.

Gil also likes to tell the tale of his celebrity encounter their first night in Boston. After all the motels they decided to splurge and stay in a nice hotel downtown. Gil was in the process of transporting the dirty diaper bucket (long before Pampers) and proceeded through the door next to the revolving door. There was an astonishingly beautiful woman standing there obviously waiting for something so Gil smiled his best smile and said, “Hi.” She smiled and said “Hello”. Her accent led him to recognize that he was talking to Gina Lollabridgada. He and the dirty diaper pail went on.

They moved into an area called Stoneybrooke Village. This was a housing development that had been designed by an MIT architect for the purpose of providing housing as cheaply as possible. All the homes were identical. Gil and four other of his classmates from PG School plus their families settled into these, at best, very modest homes. The houses had been designed for a twenty year snow load. As luck would have it, during the one year they were there, they experienced a heavier than twenty year snow load and it broke the back of all the roofs in the neighborhood. What fun. Gil remembers the houses being so cheaply built with little or no insulation that, in winter; moisture would condense on the inside of the windows, drip onto the sill and form icicles. And this was inside!

Gil began his studies and the head of the department was none other than Charles Starke Draper, the inventor of the Inertial Navigation System (INS). His thesis advisor was a gentleman of Chinese descent named Y. T. Li and one of his instructors was Walter Wrigley who worked with Draper on the INS. The courses here were more intense than those at PG School and much of their coursework centered on the mathematics involved with inertial navigation. Gil became very familiar with the math behind, the operation of, and the working parts, like accelerometers and vertical sensing devices, of the INS. The device itself was about the size of a large beach ball. Gil and several other Navy officers were invited to a formal demo of the INS test model at an Air Force base in Maine. They flew out of NAS South Weymouth and their pilot for this trip was a gentleman named Sam Powell who made a nearly fatal error on take-off. Six of them climbed into a SNB (remember the Slow Navy Bomber/Bugsmasher?) where normally there would only be the pilot and co-pilot. Gil ends up being one of the four passengers in the backseats. Sam gets ready for take-off and trims the plane (sets trim tabs) at a setting adequate for the pilot and co-pilot but didn't take into account the people in the back. There are very tall trees past the end of the runway and Gil spots these about the same time he realizes Sam, due to the extra weight in the back, is having a problem keeping the nose of the plane down to get up enough speed for take-off. Both Sam and the co-pilot are working hard at keeping the nose down and weren't free to reset the trim tabs had they even realized what was wrong. Gil could see that, by now, they were committed to taking off. So he unstrapped himself and literally crawled forward to reset the trim tab. He turned the trim tab wheel as fast

as he possibly could and the plane managed to get up just enough speed to clear the trees. It caught some small branches and leaves. All in the plane had some choice words for Sam and he learned a valuable lesson. A lesson that nearly cost six lives.

After the thrilling take-off they made it to the demo and the test went well. The INS test model was installed in the nose of an F-94. A plumb-bob was dropped from the nose of the plane to the tarmac where a chalk line "X" was drawn. The pilot then took-off and flew around for approximately an hour. He then landed and taxied up to as close to the chalk mark as possible. The INS was off about 10 feet which was more than acceptable. The Navy bought it and installed it in the A3J which Gil later flew.

Sid Cox was Gil's thesis partner and it was suggested to them that they try to come up with a vibration damper (complicated shock absorber) using what they had learned from their INS experience. They did. The metal shop was too busy to build the conceptual device so Gil asked for the use of their tools so he could attempt to build it himself. He did and it worked as advertised!

Charles Draper threw a party for the graduates where Bobby received a PHT. This was a certificate for Pushing Hubby Through.

## CHAPTER 23

### HIGH WATER PANTS

---

After getting his Master's at MIT, Gil got orders to Nuclear Warfare School in Norfolk, Virginia. The Navy wanted to keep him busy while he was waiting for placement in Test Pilot Training. For some reason Navy Admin Personnel figured he would make a good guided missile expert due to his engineering background and degrees. He was assigned to SACLANT (Supreme Allied Commander, Atlantic) and was going to be the Guided Missiles "expert" on the Admiral's staff. That meant he would be the guy who briefed the various NATO commanders on our nuclear weapons delivery capabilities. This was very heady stuff for a boy from Utah. Not only would he have to travel to several NATO countries and thought this would be very cool indeed; but he also didn't know the first thing about guided missiles. This may be why he learned as much as he could and then taught the course.

This new duty station caused Gil and Bobby some concern since it had the reputation of not being sailor friendly. That is to say they had heard of the signs stipulating that dogs and sailors keep off the grass which had been put up during the WWII years. Well, several years prior, the Navy, in order to make a point, decided to pay in cash using two dollar bills. After about six months, the civilian population got the message and Norfolk became a "Sailors Welcome" community.

The Erb family settled in Norfolk for about a year. Long enough to buy a house in a new area called Thoroughgood. (Little did they know at the time just how much of their lives would be spent in the Tidewater Area.) Interestingly enough, when they left Norfolk the real estate market was terrible so they had to rent the place in Thoroughgood. They became landlords to a friend of a friend; young Lcdr. Elmo Zumwalt who later had some success in the Navy. He became CNO.

One of Gil's better TDY (temporary duty) trips was to Cape Canaveral where he was briefed on the latest missile tests. These included the Titan, Atlas, Jupiter and Polaris missiles. Being the Navy's "missile expert" he was given the VIP treatment and assigned a car with driver along with an Air Force Major to show him around. Just as he was about to begin his tour he was asked if he would mind being joined by another VIP. Gil said, "OK," of course, and the other visitor turned out to be Charles Lindbergh. They very much enjoyed each other's company, being like-minded pilots, and had dinner together that evening. Gil felt this day had been the highpoint of his Navy career to date.

Another interesting story that happened while Gil was stationed at Norfolk he tells as follows:

I arrived in Hampton Roads in 1957 and was assigned to the Nuclear Warfare School at SACLANT. SACLANT is the acronym for the Supreme Allied Commander of all the NATO Forces in the Atlantic theatre. I trained for six weeks at the instructor school in the NATO compound, then two months at Sandia Base near Albuquerque, New Mexico, where nuclear warheads were stored and developed, and then two more weeks at Cape Canaveral where the Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles were assembled and tested. I became an “expert” on the warheads and the ICBMs such as Titan, Atlas, and Polaris, which had the awesome power and range to deliver weapons of mass destruction to an enemy target half way around the world.

I was a fresh caught Lieutenant and had just completed three years in the Navy’s Postgraduate program, which led to a Master of Science degree from MIT. Now, with the cram course I had just completed, I felt more than qualified to be the briefing officer for the senior NATO commanders who would attend the one-week course designed to familiarize them with the awesome power available to the Allied Forces in the event of a confrontation with the USSR.

I was to make my debut on the podium next week and I had rehearsed my pitch over and over and was ready to go. The fact was, I was excited about being in front of the NATO staff but there was that bit of stage fright that hung back in the recesses of my brain. There were the “what ifs?” that I feared. What if my mind went blank? What if my voice gave out? What if the sound system broke down? The fact that I was a mere Lieutenant and all my audience would be Commanders, Captains, and even a General or an Admiral, bothered me, but what the hell, I was the trained “expert” and they were the students who were there to learn. What could possibly go wrong?

Finally the big day arrived. My presentation was to be the first one of the series right after the Welcome Aboard speech by the school’s Commanding Officer. My blues had just come back from the cleaners; I wanted to be as fresh and as sharp as possible so I wore khakis to work and would switch to blues just before the class convened. I carefully took my uniform out of the plastic bag and inspected it. My shoes were shined, I was clean-shaven, I had a fresh haircut, and I had even manicured my fingernails. I put on a sparkling clean white shirt and tied my tie into a perfect Windsor knot. I then stepped into my trousers, zipped up the fly, buckled my belt, and donned my blouse that was resplendent with wings and four rows of ribbons earned in the Korean conflict. I am ready. Everything was perfect

and I was ready to take on the entire North Atlantic Treaty gang.

For final assurance I looked into the full-length mirror and was shocked to find that my trousers were three inches too short. The cleaners had returned somebody else's pants. I looked just like Alfalfa in the "Our Gang Comedies." This would never do in front of the auspicious audience I was about to face. To add to the consternation, one of the men handed me a roster of the students who were to be in the class today. The first name on the list was Vice Admiral Jerauld Wright who had just assumed command of all the SACLANT forces and was the most senior officer in NATO. Second name on the list was Rear Admiral James R. Thach, who had been a famous WWII aviator and had shot down twelve Japanese aircraft before he, himself, was shot down and became a prisoner of war. There were three others: a four star Greek General, a French Rear Admiral, and a Brigadier from Turkey. All this and my trousers were three inches too short. Just then the buzzer sounded and I realized that all the students were in place and the moment of truth was at hand.

The lights were dimmed in the auditorium and I slunk up to the stage, took my position, and signaled for the lights to brighten. The room lit up and there I stood; impressive in all my glory, as a spic and span as any naval officer could be, and with my three-inches-too-short trousers safely hidden behind the podium. I said a silent prayer and launched into what I had been trained for and rehearsed at least a thousand times.

I told this star-laden audience about the atom bomb and about the first three nuclear detonations ever on the surface of the earth. The first was the Trinity shot. It was the test to see if an atomic bomb would even work. It did and Alamogordo, New Mexico, leapt from an obscure non-entity city to one whose name will be remembered whenever WWII is the subject. The second was Fat Man, dropped from the Enola Gay onto the crowded city of Nagasaki. The third, Little Boy, landed on Hiroshima. I told of the B-29, which flew over Hiroshima, and the clouds were so thick that the target couldn't be located. The B-29 proceeded on to Kokura, the secondary target. When just about to release the bomb on Kokura, an escort plane radioed that Hiroshima had opened up and the primary target was visible. The rest was history. Admiral Thach seemed to be a little uncomfortable at this point and I said, "It's about time for a break. We will resume in fifteen minutes." I never left the sanctity of my podium.

After the break, I finished my pitch in grand style and without a flaw. There was a mild round of applause and Vice Admiral Wright stood up and thanked me on behalf of the class for a stimulating presentation.

As all the stars filed out, only Admiral Thach remained. He approached the podium and with a look in his eyes that I will never forget said, "Son, your talk was excellent. I never knew until today that Kokura almost got hit. I happened to be in a POW camp in downtown Kokura the day the bomb fell on Hiroshima. By the way, your pants are three inches too short. Do something about that."



Gil at Seacliff Park, California—1930



Bathing Beauty Bobby Brown—1948



Wedding Day—1949



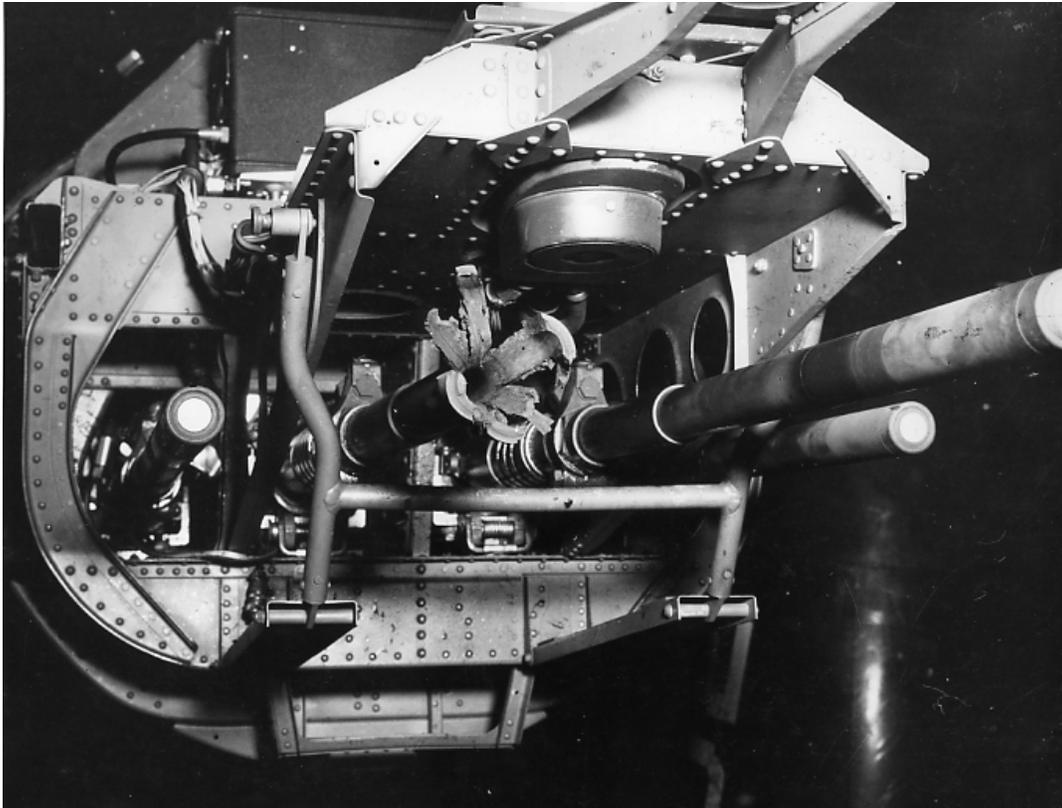
First Flight, Pensacola, Florida—1950



Pinning on Wings, Pensacola, Florida—May 14, 1951  
Naval Aviator Number T-1471



F-80 Shooting Star, 1st Jet Gil Flew—1951



Gil's Panther, Barrel Frozen Due to No Plug, Blew-Up Upon Firing, Korea—1952



“Near Miss” Gil & Fritz Roth (Blue Angel), Korea—1952  
30 Caliber Korean Bullet Through Sleeve



Gil & Bill Holden, USS Princeton, Korea—1952  
Filming “The Bridges at Toko-Ri”



Jimmy-San Trio, USS Princeton—1952  
(Trio Holding Ukeleles)



PR Photo Moffett Field, F9F-6 Cougar—1953  
“I must be dreaming.”



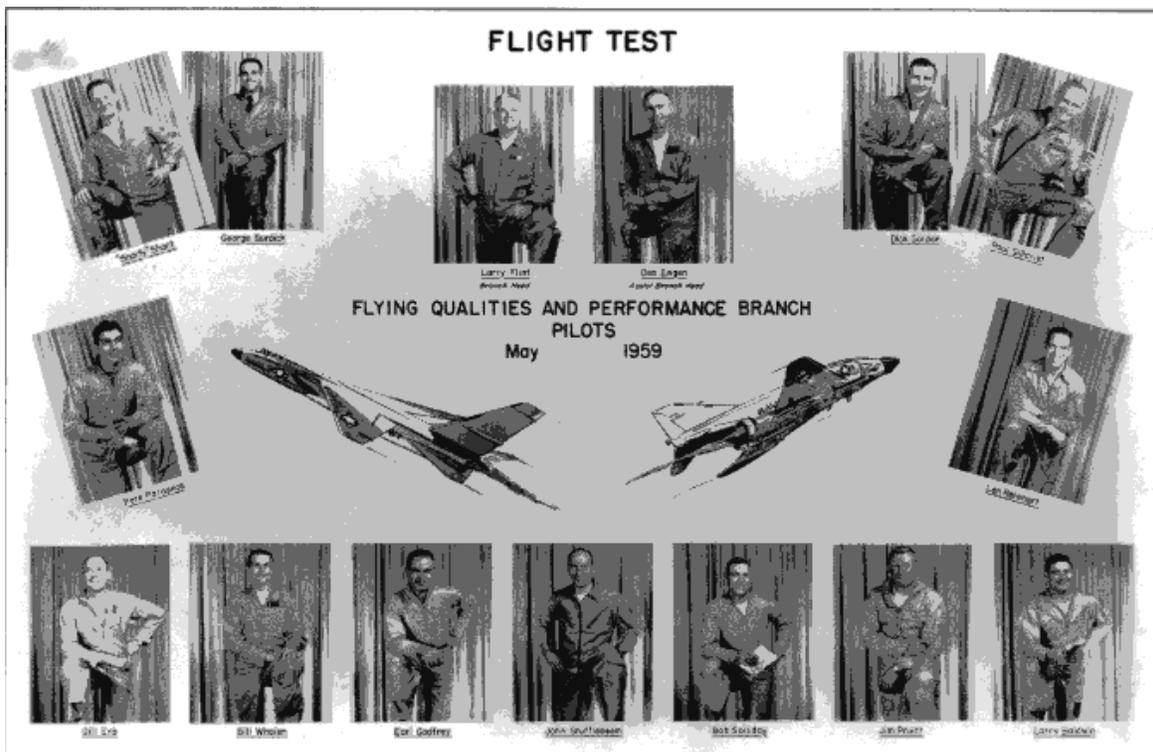
F9F-6 Cougar, USS Oriskany, Korea—1953



Gil & Friends Over Mt. Fujiyama—1953



The Kids—1955  
 Scott, Danna, Mark



Gil's Group of Test Pilots, Pax River, Maryland—1959



The Beautiful Vigilante, Pax River, Maryland—1960



The YAO-1 Army Mohawk—1960



Climbing into the Vigilante, Sanford, Florida—1961



USS Saratoga CVA 60  
“Nuke Spook” Nuclear Weapons Officer—1963



Roger Pyle with Gil and the “Bitch Kitty”



Ultra-Light Becomes Airboat  
Jet Pilot Becomes Airboat Pilot

## CHAPTER 24

### YOUR AVERAGE LIFE SAVING JUDGMENT

---

In 1958, while at Nuclear Weapons School, Gil was stationed in a naval aviator proficiency billet at the Fleet Training Center in Norfolk, Virginia. Although he was still classified as a naval aviator, his primary duties did not involve flying. Hence, he must get his twelve hours in the air each quarter (3 months) to keep the family budget sustaining flight pay any way he can. A pilot can go up to 90 days without getting in the air but if he goes 91 days, he loses a month of the flight skins. Gil knows that neither he nor Bobby would be happy about this. Typically enough, on this occasion, Gil has waited until the 87<sup>th</sup> day and is beginning to panic. He's only got three days to get in his twelve hours in the air.

The Navy tries to make it easy for its pilots to get in the required air time but the guy Gil is working for then demanded twelve hour days plus at least one weekend every month. Add the fact that his family needs him a few hours each day, his love of some leisure time, and his natural tendency to procrastinate; well, this particular scenario happened with amazing regularity each quarter.

The sum of all of the above lead to Gil signing up for a cross-country flight in an antique Beechcraft SNB-5 Expeditor. The reader knows by now that the SNB is a twin-engine, World War II-vintage bombardier-navigation trainer. The pilots called it the Bugsmasher. It carried a pilot, co-pilot and 5 students. Of course, there were no students on this particular flight because no one really wanted to occupy these seats just to bore holes in the sky so some Naval Aviator could keep his family fed.

This day was no different than any other where Gil was getting in his required air time except, to his dismay, his boss decided to go along with him. This was merely so his boss could make some pocket change. He was a full Commander and Gil was a Lt.(jg) at the time. Gil was not looking forward to the hours stuck in the plane with a boss he didn't get along with. In fact they almost never agreed on anything. However, the boss may not always be right but he is always the boss so Gil, who was proud of his professionalism, sucked it up and got on with the flight. Besides, this day, in the pilot's seat, he was the Plane Commander of the aircraft since he was the one who signed for the plane.

Off they went to bore holes in the wild blue yonder. First stop was Atlanta, Georgia where the airplane was quickly serviced and fueled; then on to Naval Air Station Jacksonville. While they were having a quick sandwich at NAS Jacksonville, Gil and his boss had a less than joyous conversation about how Gil screwed up his approach and shouldn't have let the Boeing 747 bluff him out of the pattern.

Just as the two of them were walking out of the ready room to man the mighty Bugsmasher for the evening flight back to Norfolk, the duty officer grabbed them and requested they take a Chief Petty Officer back to Norfolk. The Chief's wife and infant son had been in a horrific car crash in Norfolk and both were in critical condition. A helicopter had brought him in from his ship out in the Atlantic. This request was a no-brainer. The Navy takes care of its own. Of course they would take him. So the Chief gets buckled into one of the student seats and they get airborne as quickly as possible on what had now become an urgent flight back to Norfolk. It was nighttime now and Gil was in the pilot's seat of authority and should be able to count on his co-pilot to pay attention to what he says and follow instructions promptly, efficiently and without comment. This, the Commander does and all goes well as they get airborne and head almost due north for home.

All goes well until they reach the Dismal Swamp. As the lights of a local municipal airport near Sunbury, North Carolina, passed under their wings, they found themselves entering that black ominous area which lies directly in their path to Norfolk.

The Dismal Swamp is 40 miles long and 20 wide. It is one of nature's most remote and beautiful areas. It is marshy, heavily wooded, and abundant with creatures ranging from great black bear to deer, raccoons, fish, frogs, and snakes. To visit the swamp in the daytime on an airboat is truly a thrilling and priceless adventure. But at night, it is simply black, with no breadth or depth. To Gil, the swamp was trying to warn him not to land there or it would kill them all. That very thought was crossing his mind when four or five minutes into the swamp their starboard engine began to whine in agony.

Instantly hands were flying in the cockpit as he and the Commander's training took over. The engine, now dead, was no longer a friend and the vibrations in the cockpit were reaching the disaster level. Together, they managed to get the beast under control. They had turned the correct valves, pushed and pulled the right levers, turned the correct knobs and now had the Bugsmasher under control once again. But she was limping along with half her power gone.

The Chief in back hadn't moved and was busily clutching his seat for all he was worth. Gil tried to reassure him and said, "Don't worry, Chief, these things happen all the time, and this old bird can fly on one engine just as well as two. We got her all trimmed up, and it's only about thirty minutes to touch down at Breezy Point."

This pronouncement came from Gil, the man in command who knew his boss would chew his ass royally if he said something wrong. This was the point where a decision needed to be made to go on to Breezy Point or go for an emergency landing at the nearest field. Gil looked at his boss who now had his hands folded in his lap, staring out of the windshield in what appeared to be a state of shock. Gil could not

get a word out of him and was wondering if he was in some kind of blackout. His eyes were open but he didn't seem to be there or aware of his surroundings.

What should he do? Gil was wondering where the hell his commander was while also thinking about the decision to go on or not. What about the poor Chief in the back who didn't know if his wife and son were alive or dead. Did he say the right thing? Should he go over the swamp for another 30 miles? A lousy thirty miles. Sure they could make it. The SNB can fly on one wing. He'd done it in practice many times. It was part of the training he'd gone through to check out in this tin antiquity. God, the poor Chief back there. He had to get him to Norfolk. They had to go on. There was no question in his mind and certainly not the Chief's. The boss, forget him; he was gone.

These thoughts kept repeating in Gil's head. But while they were his body was rebelling and his hands began turning the plane around. Somehow, while he was thinking his hands decided to pick a heading for Sunbury and out of harm's way.

It was a lightless night with no references like stars or a discernible horizon. The black was infinite but the Bugsmasher kept plodding along. She's no longer purring and has to strain to stay in the air. They flew on until Gil could make out a spark of light ahead. It got brighter and formed itself into two parallel streaks. They had just gotten into position for the final approach when the other engine began to whine and shake violently. There's nothing that could be done by this time except to make sure the flaps and wheels were down and locked. They continued on, and as the shaking got more violent, the thump of the wheels hitting the runway suddenly let Gil know he had made it.

To this day Gil has no idea who or what made the decision to turn back to Sunbury. He feels that something in a remote section of his mind overrode his emotions about getting the Chief back to Norfolk and said, "If one engine went bad the other probably will too."

The second engine died on the runway and the SNB had to be towed up to the apron in front of the operations shack. The last drop of oil had drained out of the engine, and it had frozen a solid as an iceberg. They had taken on a large dose of contaminated oil back in Atlanta, and, as Gil's Lady Luck looked down on them, one engine lasted 15 minutes longer than the other. Had they gone on to Norfolk they would have ended up somewhere near the center of the Dismal Swamp.

After getting the plane parked, Gil and the Commander followed the Chief into the Operations Office. He telephoned the hospital and found out his wife was out of surgery and in the recovery room. Her left leg was very badly injured, but she would be okay. Grandma had taken the baby home unhurt. The Chief thanked them for the ride and ran off to catch a bus for the last leg of his trip to Norfolk.

The boss had still not uttered a word until Gil had called NAS Norfolk to report on what had transpired. His first comment was, "I hope his wife is okay." They spent the night in a motel and, at breakfast the next morning, discussed the previous evening's adventure. The Commander only commented on just how bad Atlanta had screwed up and how they needed to be notified of the problem immediately. It was obvious to Gil that the Commander's blackout was real and that he had no idea when or how they got back to Sunbury. When they got back to work everything returned to normal and neither of them ever mentioned the blackout. Gil finished his tour there and went on to a real flying job as a test pilot at NAS Patuxent River in Maryland.

Gil stayed in the Navy and made all his promotions on time. However, he gets a grin on his face every time he thinks of the Fitness Report the Commander gave him. Years later, he had an opportunity to review his personnel records. His Fitness Report upon detachment from the Fleet Training Center was fairly good except under "Judgement". The Commander had checked "Average."

## CHAPTER 25

# THE “ROMANCE” OF TEST PILOTING

---

Just as the family was settling into the new house in Thoroughgood, rush orders arrived sending Gil to Class 23 of Test Pilot School. This was to be Gil’s all-time favorite duty. He spent two and half years there and as Jimmy Buffett would say, “Some of it magic, some of it tragic, but I had a good life all the way.”

The Erb family moved into what they called the “cinder blocks” which were essentially Navy housing for relatively junior officers. These were in no way satisfactory for a family of five so Gil contracted to have a home built in Town Creek. It took six months to build the house due to hiring the wrong contractor at first and having to replace him with the right contractor. The first contractor always brought his own lunch to work which consisted of two sandwiches and a fifth of whiskey. He also took off several times for deaths in his family. In the short time he worked for Gil he attended the funerals of his wife, his father, his nephew, his wife again, and lastly his mother. The second contractor was the opposite of the first and the Erbs ended up with a very nice home for the next two years.

The time at Pax River began with school, of course. After seven years of college Gil thought he’d had enough of it, but the Navy thought differently and put him through six months of Test Pilot School. However, he was also assigned to the Flight Test Division immediately. The Flight Test Division wanted to use his Aeronautical Engineering background/degree while he went through Test Pilot School. Gil ended up double-hatted at this time but admits he could handle it. As the Navy people put it, “Can do, easy.”

When Gil first arrived the CO decided he needed some time in a jet since he had only been doing proficiency flying while getting his degrees. Since he had flown F9Fs before the skipper thought he should start out with the F11F, Tiger Cat. This was the first jet Gil had flown that included an after-burner. So he read the handbook and off he went.

This was the beginning of a marvelous experience for Gil even with the expected tragedies one encounters in this type of operation. He remembers it with pride. He got to work with some of the best people in the business such as astronauts John Young, Pete Conrad, and Wally Schirra. He had already served with Alan Shepherd on the Oriskany during his second Korean tour. Heady company indeed.

After graduating from Test Pilot School, Gil was assigned to the Flying Qualities and Performance Branch of the Flight Test Division of the Naval Air Test Center. The mission here was to evaluate the new airplanes being considered for purchase

by the Navy. The test pilot's job was to decide whether the aircraft were suitable for the fleet and then make recommendations for improvements/changes. They also participated in the test and evaluation programs conducted by the defense contractors.

The test pilots were also charged with the evaluation of the airplane's ability to hit its G limits, both plus and minus, at high and low speeds and high and low altitudes. The limits are expressed in the V-n diagram which depicts the envelope that the airplane must operate within. If these limits are exceeded the results could be disastrous. The V-n diagram presents the combination of speed and G forces the aircraft must withstand at all altitudes.

In Gil's words:

Hitting the extreme corners of this graph gets to be romantic. The contractor pilots get paid a small fortune for this. The Navy pilots get no bonuses to make sure they did it right.

There are four critical points the test pilot had to demonstrate. These were the extreme G forces at low altitude, low speed: low altitude, high speed: high altitude, low speed and finally the most extreme; high altitude, high speed. The last test requires the test pilot to wear a pressure suit and an airplane equipped with a drag chute used to recover from inadvertent spins.

While Gil was at Pax River, the two latest jets being considered for purchase by the Navy were the F4F Phantom and the A3J Vigilante. The testing program was far reaching and bordering on rare atmosphere flight. Both airplanes had been flown at altitudes in excess of 100,000 feet. Gil's boss, Larry Flint, at the time held the world's altitude record of 103,000 feet. He made an appearance on the Gary Moore Show "What's My Line?" Nobody guessed his job.

One of Gil's best friends was doing the high altitude, high speed test on the Phantom when the plane stalled at 60,000 feet and he got into an inverted spin. He pulled the chute but recovered too low and had to eject. As the rocket seat pushed him out of the cockpit his shins hit the instrument panel and he later lost his left leg as a result.

Gil tells a story of the Vigilante which consists of two parts. The first is about being a test pilot and the second, although still about the Vigilante, has more to do with the tragedy that led Gil and Bobby to decide his flying days were over. The second part of the story we'll address in a few years/chapters. The first part belongs here:

While stationed at the Naval Air Test Center at Patuxent River,

Maryland, I was assigned to the Flight Test Division. Here we tested each airplane for its ability to be handled by fleet pilots. Fleet pilots are, as a whole, the best in the world but frequently a situation occurs when the pilot is called upon to exercise his expertise to the fullest in order to survive. He therefore needs an aircraft that is as perfect in as many respects as it is possible to provide him. He also needs to know that he is not investigating new ground. The airplane must have been flown in all extreme flight conditions such as low and high speeds and low and high accelerations or “g” forces. These extremes in extreme combinations are the real test of an airplane to perform its designed duties and be better than the enemy’s vehicle.

The first person to fly to these extreme situations is the highly paid company test pilot. He is risking his life by penetrating the unknown; an area of flight where the airplane has never been before. After the company pilot shows us that the airplane does its job then the Navy pilots at Pax, fly to each extreme to verify that, in fact, the company pilot did his job. When the airplane is finally approved for fleet use, it has been thoroughly tested and is ready for the mission for which it was designed and to be flown by pilots of the fleet.

When the Vigilante arrived at Pax for its qualification tests, we were all in awe at its beauty. It was massive, weighing over thirty tons, but was as sleek and smooth an airplane as we had ever seen before. When merely standing still, it looked like it was crashing through the sound barrier. It was designed, and proved later, to be a airplane that could fly in excess of two times the speed of sound, Mach two plus.

There were five pilots assigned to the Vigilante program and it proved to meet all the criteria it was meant to meet. Its mission was to carry a nuclear bomb to an enemy target at supersonic speeds and get the pilot safely back to base. It had no armament. Its only defense was its speed, which was achieved by the latest developments in jet engine design and the airframe configuration to handle the power. It was also the most beautiful airplane I had ever seen. About this time in the evolution of naval aviation it was deemed that two men were needed to get the job done. The Vigilante carried a pilot and a bombardier. The pilot’s job was simply; fly the airplane while the bombardier had the responsibility of navigating to the proper target and releasing the bomb for an accurate hit.

Although the Vigilante passed all of its tests with high grades, it had one area in which, although satisfactory, could have been

improved upon. This was pitch control during landings. The fore and aft movement of the control stick was not quite as positive as it could have been in order to keep the craft on its exact glide path and to a safe landing aboard the aircraft carrier. Sometimes it took excessive stick movement to get the desired result which was simply “stay on the glide path right to touch down.” Also if there was turbulence in the air due to bad weather and gusty windy conditions, the pilot simply had to work harder to get aboard.

The airplane was approved for fleet use by the Chief of Naval Operations and went into production in 1960.

Remember the Vigilante’s pitch control problem.

## CHAPTER 26

### THE BREAKS OF NAVAL AIR

---

Gil felt that the test pilot job was the most fun and challenging of his career. It was also the most memorable and tragic. Gil calls several parts of this segment of his history, “Bad days at Black Rock.”

During Gil’s tenure Pax River suffered a horrible four month period where nearly a dozen of his friends were killed or seriously injured. Some say, “That’s the breaks of Naval Air.” This statement seems somewhat flippant considering the seriousness of these Naval Air tragedies.

The following is an accounting, to the best of Gil’s recollection, of that period. He feels it needs to be included here to show not only the dangerous drama of test piloting but to pay tribute to his comrades in arms who gave their lives in the line of duty.

Bill Whalen and his wife, Teddy, lived between Gil and, his friend to this day, Jack Roulstone. He was flying a F8U Crusader project plane early one morning when something went wrong with the hydraulic system. The Crusader, rather than using flaps, used movement of the entire wing to change the angle of attack for gaining the extra lift for take-off and landing. The wings are moved to the normal position after take-off and locked. After flying around and performing the required tests Bill attempted to put the wings in the landing position. The hydraulic cylinder that moves the wings worked but the locking mechanism did not. The wings stayed locked in the normal flight position and the cylinder arm went right through the wing. This means that Bill cannot get the plane under about 240 knots or a stall condition would occur. Landing at 240 knots is problematic at best. He notified the tower of his situation and they told him to hold until they could get in touch with the project office for advice. After much communication between the Admiral and the factory reps it was decided to sacrifice the plane. They had Bill head the plane out over the bay and eject while he was still over the field, NAS Pax River being at the southern end of the Chesapeake Bay. Bill ejected at 10,000 feet. His chute opened then immediately collapsed and he free fell to his death. What had happened was in the Martin Baker seat there is a link that connects the parachute to the pilot’s harness. It is the plane captain’s (maintenance Chief) responsibility to connect this link when the pilot gets settled in the cockpit. It is the pilot’s responsibility to make sure this is done. Neither of these things happened and it cost Bill his life. As in many accident cases it is a series of events rather than just one thing that causes the crash.

Buck Swanson was returning from a cross-country trip and on the downwind

leg of his approach, for some unknown reason his engine quit. The A4D Skyhawk did not have enough speed and altitude to make the runway so he ejected but was too low. Buck hit the water before his chute had fully deployed. His body was recovered late the next day.

Gus Baxter wanted to get a checkout flight in a Vigilante so Gil's partner in the test program, Tommy Fitzgerald, agreed to fly in the backseat with Gus up front at the controls. There are no controls in the back seat as it is a bombardier-navigator station. Gus was primarily a prop pilot and not used to the electronic controls of the modern jets. During the landing he grabbed the flap handle with his big fist and broke it off. In the Vigilante the flap handle is simply a toggle switch with the shape of a flap mounted on it. Like Bill Whalen, here we are again with a situation where you can't get the plane slow enough for a safe landing. They are low on fuel so there is no time for any consultations with Admirals and project offices. So with the Whalen incident on their minds they decided to land, drop the tail-hook and engage the arresting gear. This was a sound decision. However Gus got too slow and the airplane stalled, hit the ground, cartwheeled and exploded. Both flyers were lost.

John McCafferty was at high altitude in a Phantom when, unknown to him, he began breathing contaminated oxygen. This was discovered during the accident investigation. He simply passed out and crashed into the Chesapeake Bay.

Paul Gillcrist, a friend of Gil's who was a "nugget" during Gil's second tour with VF-191 and the author of the popular book "Feet Wet", was trying out that lower left hand corner of the V-n diagram (a very strenuous maneuver) when he got a control reversal. Paul ejected from the T2J Buckeye but he was upside down. He was slammed into a cornfield still in his seat and the folks at Pax River didn't believe he would survive. "Punchy", however, didn't agree. Gil believes Paul was one of the orneriest and most determined individuals he had ever known and recovered in spite of injuries and broken bones too numerous for the doctors to count. Paul Gillcrist eventually returned to flight status and a very successful Navy career. He retired a Rear Admiral.

Two pilots in a U-2 spy plane were returning from a flight over the Soviet Union when a series of mishaps cost them their lives *after* they had been rescued. The U-2 was flying at 60,000 feet where the temperature is about minus 59 degrees Fahrenheit. The planes throttle controls froze at the cruising power setting. The U-2's wings are long and thin which is suitable for very long range high altitude flying. Because of this the plane has a top speed limit. If they exceed this limit the wings will break off. To get down from this high altitude the pilot must reduce power so as not to exceed his top speed limit. Further, he can't stay up there until he runs out of fuel because, even though he could keep under the speed limit, the two pilots would freeze to death before getting down to a warmer altitude. Without the fuel

there would be no heat in the plane. The only answer was to eject and free fall to a warmer altitude. Their ejection system was equipped with a barometer that causes the parachute to open automatically at 15,000 feet. By the time they reached this altitude both pilots were so cold that the shock of the parachute opening caused injuries to both of them. It is not known whether they were unconscious when the parachutes opened but they were when the Air Force rescue helo (a very large helicopter called the Flying Banana) picked them up. One was in a farmer's field and the other in a High School ball field. Their injuries were not fatal. Pax River was the closest medical facility so they landed in front of the control tower and two doctors and two nurses, all Navy medical personnel, went aboard the helo to administer to the two pilots.

Across the airfield from the control tower was the catapult testing equipment location. This is set-up just like the steam catapult on an aircraft carrier and is used to test minimum end speeds for take-off on a carrier and the steam pressure required for each particular aircraft.

The medical personnel had just gotten aboard the helo when across the field Paul Murray had just received a catapult shot in a F8U Crusader. He had already taken two or three cat shots previously and flew away from each. For some reason on this cat shot the steam pressure was too low and he ended up too slow at the end of the catapult with his nose too high and entered a stalled condition. Paul had to eject since the airspeed wasn't enough to keep flying and the jet was wallowing, out of control, and in a semi-stalled condition. When Paul ejected it pushed the nose over and the plane started to almost fly. The Crusader kept wallowing out of control and was heading for the control tower without a pilot. Due to the low altitude, Paul and his parachute never separated from the seat and both of his feet were nearly severed. The doctors were able to reattach his feet and he actually walked again. This was a miracle story that made the AMA Journal. Today Paul is four inches shorter.

Back at the control tower the helo was preparing for take off. The tower operator saw the F8U headed his way and screamed to the helo, "Lift off! Lift off!" The helo pilot tried to lift off but didn't make it and the pilotless Crusader hit it dead center. The eight people in the helo lost their lives. The engine from the Crusader continued through the parking lot and killed two more men who were driving along in their pickup. Definitely a bad day.

Gil, of course, has his own near tragedy story while at Pax River and tells it this way:

I had been flying nothing but jets for most of my Navy career when an opportunity came up to check out in the AD Skyraider. It was a single engine prop plane that carried a bigger bomb load, off a carrier

deck, than the famous WWII B-17 bomber. The B-17 operated from ten thousand foot runways and carried all its bombs internally while the AD carried them externally, under its wings. The AD was the most powerful single engine prop plane ever built.

The airplane arrived at Flight Test and was slated to tow target sleeves for gunnery practice and technique development. There was no “Pilots Handbook” available but this didn’t bother the pilots who had flown the airplane before so why should it bother me? I, being too proud to ask for a checkout by an experienced pilot, sat in the cockpit for about twenty minutes and familiarized myself with the location of the instruments, the throttle and mixture controls, and the various other nit-picky things like the control stick.

I was scheduled for a two-hour flight later in the day. I did ask one of the old-timers what the stall speed was and what speed to make the approach for landing. He said, “Oh, I don’t know. Let’s see, after two hours or so, you will be almost out of gas and the bird will be light so bring it in over the fence at about eighty, maybe eighty-five knots.”

What I didn’t find out until later, was that the pilot I talked to was an old Korean veteran and had flown only the AD-2 while the airplane I was about to fly was an AD-5N. This version was much heavier than the -2 and had been modified to carry about a thousand pounds of electronic gear and two extra crewmen in the aft fuselage. The “N” designated it as a Night Electronics Countermeasures craft.

I blithely put on a soft helmet and goggles and felt a lot like Snoopy about to engage the Red Baron. I got the engine started, contacted the tower, got clearance for take-off, and soon found myself climbing out over the field boundary passing through an altitude of fifteen-hundred feet. It was a sunny day, not a cloud in the sky, and I could see for miles in any direction.

The sound of the powerful engine added to my exhilaration but suddenly that sound just stopped. I instantly pushed the nose over in order to maintain airspeed. That powerful engine was no more. It had quit and I could read the writing on the prop. It said “Hamilton Standard”. I was in trouble and instinctively looked for a spot where I could put her down. There were houses and trees and streets and cars and the Patuxent River itself. I turned toward the river and had about three or four minutes before I had to get the flaps down and get set for the water landing.

I had that time to think about what had caused the engine to “just quit” and my reasoning said it had to be fuel starvation. I checked the fuel selector valves and all were in their proper position. Maybe it was the fuel pump itself. I then remembered the starting procedure. Hit the starter and flick the fuel primer a couple of times to get the fuel to the engine since the engine driven fuel pump didn’t operate until the engine RPM got to be over a thousand.

I hit the primer button and “Shazaam” the engine burst out with a loud roar that lasted two or three seconds, then all was that deafening silence again. I hit the primer again and again “Shazaam.” Hope entered my brain and I “Shazaamed” all the way back to the field. I called the tower and explained that I had lost the fuel pump and was coming in on the primer. They acknowledged and cleared me to the nearest runway. I got on final, dropped the wheels and flaps and slowed the plane down to ninety knots remembering that a normal approach speed was eighty to eighty-five. I felt a lot more comfortable with the extra speed in the event anything else went wrong.

At about fifty feet above the runway with my attitude all set up for touch down, the left wing dropped and I was in a stalled condition. I hit the primer again and the sudden burst of power brought the wing up and I hit the runway with the force of a pile driver. Why on earth had the airplane stalled? I was sure that ninety knots was well above stall speed even though I had a full load of fuel.

I was able to taxi back to the Flight Test Line and climb shakily out of the cockpit. It was back to the good old solid jets for me and you could take this prop stuff and shove it. The skipper had got the word from the tower about my emergency landing and was in the line shack when I walked in. He congratulated me on how well I had handled the situation and ordered the chief to check out the engine for a sheared shaft on the fuel pump. He returned a few minutes later and said, “Yep, Captain. That’s what it was all right. Lt. Erb did a fine job in getting her back safely.”

At Happy Hour that night, I didn’t have to buy a single drink. I was the hero of the day. I did say that the wing dropped just before the touch down. The skipper, with an all knowing look in his eyes said, “What was your approach speed?”

“I brought her in at about ninety. I knew I was heavy and ninety seemed to be a good cushion.”

“Erb,” he said. “You’re lucky to be alive. The -5N stalls out at ninety-five.”

Better to be lucky than skilled and Gil was both.

Another one of Gil’s adventures that wasn’t quite so serious but definitely uncomfortable involved a test flight in a YAO-1 with the aforementioned Paul Gillcrist. Paul wrote a detailed account of this “fun” flight in his book, “Vulture’s Row.” In September 1960, Paul went along with Gil on a service ceiling test flight of a YAO-1 Mohawk. As Paul explains it, the definition of service ceiling is the altitude above which the plane cannot sustain a rate of climb of 200 feet per minute. They were told the cockpit heater was malfunctioning but decided to take it up anyway. All went well until they began reaching some real altitude while the cockpit temperature went in the opposite direction. Around 35,000 feet, while turning blue, shaking uncontrollably and finding it damn near impossible to keep the frost off the inside of the windshield, they decided to scrap this foolish test. The Mohawk was an artillery spotter for the Army and the Navy was doing the testing as a favor. The plane would never need to fly at high altitude anyway

Needless to say back on the ground they were admonished by the flight test engineers who wondered at these new test pilots backbone. Paul said that Gil had a “violent’ answer to this, “Screw the service ceiling!”

There is another story concerning the Martin Baker ejection seat installed in the YAO-1. In this particular configuration there was a danger of hitting your feet when you ejected from the cockpit. The pilot and co-pilot were required to wear a set of garters around their calves that had a lanyard hooked to the seat. Upon ejection the lanyard would automatically retract and pull the feet close to the seat. The crewmen hooked the garters to the pilot’s legs when they entered the cockpit. On this flight, Gil was checking out a new Army Captain in the YAO-1. That meant it was Gil’s job to show this young man how to fly the YAO-1 Mohawk. Gil is in the left seat and the Army captain is in the right seat. This is simply a demo flight to familiarize the guy with the plane. He’s already a pilot. As they were taxiing out Gil noticed what looked like steam coming from the left landing gear. He assumed it was just hydraulic fluid due to the way the brakes were not responding. However the YAO-1 had props that could reverse pitch and stop the plane or back up so Gil said the hell with the brakes and kept going. “We don’t need no stinking brakes!”

They taxied to the end of the runway and Gil got on the radio and asked for permission to take off. The tower came back, “Negative Mohawk 66, you’re on fire!” Gil tried to convince them it was a simple hydraulic leak but the tower seemed adamant so Gil checked the left landing gear again. Sure enough he was on fire! The engines were shut down immediately and both pilots began a mad scramble to get away from the plane. Gil was about a hundred yards away when he realized the

Captain wasn't with him. Gil looked back and the captain is hanging by his knees out of the right side of the plane. Gil has to run back and unhook the man's Martin Baker seat garters and help him out of the plane. The fire engine arrived and one of the firemen grabbed the hose and shouted for the others to turn it on. They did and nothing happened. By now the whole wing is on fire and they are anticipating one hell of an explosion. This is the only time a pilot has too much fuel. When there's a fire. Another fireman brought over another hose that spewed foam over the wing and engine and put the fire out. The whole wing had to be replaced.

There was an infamous cartoon passed around Pax River showing a monkey flying a jet with the caption, "Gil's not in today, he sent Sam instead." It seems that during a shopping trip to DC where Bobby was looking for a dress, the kids spotted a little spider monkey in a pet store window that was on sale for \$20. Naturally, they had to have it. Bobby told them if they could come up with the \$20 they could get it. Well, the kids went back to Pax River and began crabbing. Within a week they had the \$20. Gil built a cage for the monkey that cost him \$50 worth of materials but after a month they had to get rid of Sam. It seems he was, at best, untrainable.

While at Pax River Bobby became somewhat of a local hero. She saved the life of a 9 year old local boy named Gary Swaney who got into trouble by swimming too far out into the river. Bobby and the kids were enjoying a day at the beach when she heard the boy's pleas for help. She began swimming towards the boy but quickly realized the current was too strong. After returning to the beach to get an inner tube her kids were playing with, she jumped back in the water. Pushing the inner tube ahead of her, she swam the approximately 300 feet to where the boy was clinging to a piece of an old wooden raft. Bobby placed the boy in the inner tube and fought the current back to the beach. Bobby made the local paper in an article titled, "Huck Goes up the Creek-Gets Paddle Later at Home." Gary had disobeyed his parents and went to the beach without their permission.

## CHAPTER 27

### A CDO'S WORST DUTY WEEKEND

---

Even though Gil still considers Test Piloting at Pax River his most challenging and rewarding time as a Navy Pilot, this is also the place where he stood his worst ever weekend duty. In his own words:

I had just been promoted to Lieutenant Commander and was now available to stand a watch at the Naval Air Test Center at Patuxent River, Maryland. The watch was as the Command Duty Officer for the entire complex. I was the weekend stand-in for Rear Admiral Mickey Hayes. My first day started at 0900 on a Saturday morning. At 0915, I heard the sirens. The base police were responding to something that was probably routine and why should I concern myself with a fender-bender? I am now in the shoes of a Rear Admiral and such trivia is beneath my station.

Another blast of the siren, and another, and my Command Chief burst into my office. "Sir, there has been a serious accident. A woman is dead. I think we better go take a look-see."

He drove the sedan with me riding shotgun and we made our way up to the accident scene.

"She didn't know what hit her Commander."

Her Volkswagen bug was stopped dead in the lane heading up the steep hill to the main gate. A large truck wheel and tire had crashed through the windshield and into the driver's seat. Crushed under the tire was a young girl who had died instantly. A large, worn-out tandem truck had entered the base through the main gate and in proceeding down the hill, lost the left front wheel. The wheel careened down the hill and collided with the VW. The Base Police were on the job and I was assured that the ambulance was on the way and that the Chaplain's office had been notified.

"Let's go back to the office and take care of the paperwork." I said to the chief. "I'll call the Chief of Staff and make sure the Admiral is notified."

Back in the office, we started to fill out the standard accident forms but before we were done, the phone rang. A First Class Petty Officer was being held down at the Shore Patrol Headquarters on a

“drunk and disorderly” charge.

“It’s Eddie Stewart, sir. He’s in my division and a damn good man. Can you let me handle it?” said the chief.

“Sure thing,” I said, “go to it.”

\* \* \*

“I got him back to the BEQ and I think he’ll be okay sir.” The Chief said. “He just needs to sleep it off. He’s got a girl in town. She’s a bartender over at the Patuxent Bar and Grill. Eddie goes down there a lot and apparently had too much to drink last night. He’ll be okay now though.”

Twenty minutes later, Eddie was caught trying to get through the gate. He got out of hand again but his one hundred and forty pounds was no match for the three semi-giants manning the gate.

“Don’t you think we better lock him up, Chief?”

“No sir, I’ll put the fear of God in him and he’ll be okay this time.”

Exactly twenty minutes later, Eddie tried it again with the same result. This time we put him in the guardhouse and now he could sleep it off behind bars.

After lunch, I decided to take the duty sedan and tour the center. As I was driving on one of the back roads, I saw smoke rising off-base in a remote wooded area. I radioed the city fire department and drove out through the back gate to get to the scene. I got there just as the emergency vehicles arrived.

A large wooden packing crate was the center of the fire and several others alongside were burning too. It was a homeless community of about thirty men, women and children living in filth and unimaginable squalor. There were wet clothes draped over scraggly bushes, piles of raw garbage smelled as if they had been there for years, and upturned cardboard boxes with week old pizza slices turning a moldy green. An outdoor fire with a black stewpot in the center had gotten out of control and ignited the makeshift hut. Three or four of the women were in hysterics, wailing and sobbing, and tearing at their clothes. It seemed a bit extreme but I soon found out that an infant had been consumed in the blaze. Not one of the women would admit to the identity of the child. I waited for the city authorities to take over and

then went back to the calm and serenity of my plush office.

Later that afternoon, there was a gentle rap on my door. “Sir, I have a young man wants to see you.”

He was as sharp a looking young sailor as I had ever seen. He could have been Tom Cruise dressed out for a part in a movie. The uniform was freshly pressed and you could cut a finger on the creases in his collar. It was Eddie.

He stood at rigid attention and was as sober as a judge. “Sir, I apologize for all the trouble I’ve caused and I beg your forgiveness.”

“Yes Sir, he don’t normally do stuff like that but he’s in love. He ain’t gonna be no more trouble. I’ll see to that.” The chief was old enough to be his father and I felt like he was treating Eddie as an errant son.

“All right, carry on. I’ll take your word for it Chief.”

The rest of the watch was uneventful until that evening around midnight. I was informed that an unidentified aircraft was within our airspace and flying erratically. I called Air Traffic Control, “No, there is no flight plan on the board for the traffic you describe.”

Maybe it’s a terrorist plane with high explosives aboard about to put an end to the Navy’s testing program. I thought of calling Andrews Air Force Base and getting them to send Interceptors down, but that would be too late. I had no idea what to do except wait it out, besides it was probably some dumb civilian lost and trying to find a place to land.

The decision was soon made for me. The phone rang and I said “CDO’s office, Lcdr. Erb speaking.”

“Sir, we lost him and I think we got trouble.” The tower operator said. “He disappeared right over that swampy area off the end of runway six. He’s on the deck somewhere but we can’t find him.”

The chief and I jumped into the sedan and sped out to the scene. The leader of the crash crew spotted us and immediately reported. “It was a Piper Tri-Pacer sir. He went in at about a 45-degree angle right into the water. Both wings broke off and the engine is sitting in the pilot’s seat.

“Where’s the pilot?” I asked.

“I don’t know, sir. We got guys probing all around but we can’t find the body. It’s not in the airplane. We’ll keep looking but we’ll probably have to wait until the sun comes up.”

We got the numbers off the tail of the Tri-Pacer and tracked down who the owner was. His name was Marvin Peterson, DDS. His address was a mile or two outside of the main gate. Dr. Peterson had his office in his home. The Chief and I drove out there and I knocked on the front door. A middle-aged woman with her hair in curlers and in a blue flannel nightgown appeared. She was frightened until she saw me in my uniform through the glass. She opened the door and I said “Mrs. Peterson?”

“Yes?” she answered in a sleepy whisper. “Can I help you? The doctor’s in bed.”

“Are you sure?” There’s been an accident and we think he may be involved.”

“Why yes, I’m sure. I heard him come in about an hour ago. He’d flown his plane to DC for a dental symposium. He went upstairs and went straight to bed.” She explained that he snored a lot and that they slept in separate bedrooms.

We had difficulty waking up the good doctor. He was passed out as cold as a dead mackerel and reeked of liquor. He was still fully dressed and sopping wet. We got him up and sober enough to tell the story. He had gone to the symposium and admittedly had too much to drink. He made it to his airplane, didn’t bother to file a flight plan, and got lost trying to find Waldorf airport.”

“Where’s your car? How did you get home?” His wife asked.

“I hitchhiked,” he said in a slovenly gurgling voice. “I think.”

It was pointless to get any more information out of him until he had a chance to sleep it off. We called the Crash Crew and told them to call off the search for the body and the Chief and I headed back to the base.

On the way back, we saw the blaze. The Patuxent Bar and Grill was burning. The fire fighters had the fire under control and most of the damage was confined to the back porch area of the converted house. The fire crew found a charred body on a burn-black mattress in the debris. Susan Gray, the pretty young barmaid, in tears, said, “He was so drunk that I put him to bed in the back room. I took his

cigarettes away but I think he must have had another pack.”

It was Eddie.

Obviously, not all Naval Air tragedies happened while flying. These pilots were under some very heavy stress before stress became accepted as something that could actually be part of an American male’s mental makeup. Gil tells the following story with sadness:

Full blown Navy inspections in full dress blues are a vital and necessary part of Navy life. They keep morale peaked and give each officer and enlisted man a chance to show off to his teammates, his wife and kids, and the public in general. However, at the Naval Air Test Center, Patuxent River, Maryland, dress blues inspections were rarely held. Most of the work days and nights were spent in flight gear—usually that bright, brilliant, and easy to spot, gaudy orange flight suit.

This day was one of those rare exceptions. The Director of the Flight Test Division was being relieved by the new Director, Captain Bob Elder. Bob was a great guy and had been my Squadron Commander in VF-191, Satan’s Kittens.

The inspection was scheduled for 3:00 on a Friday afternoon. We were lined up in the Flight Test hangar waiting for the Directors, old and new, to make an appearance and make the Change of Command official. The Test Pilot School had just graduated a new batch of pilots and one of the newcomers to Flight Test was Lcdr. Frank Owens. He was assigned to my outfit, the Flying Qualities and Performance Branch.

Frank and I were just getting to know each other when the two Captains marched into the hangar and the ceremony began. After it was all over, Frank and I agreed to meet at Happy Hour and renew our conversation. What I didn’t know at the time was that Frank had just had his car tuned up, had a full tank of gas, and had purchased at the local hardware store, a roll of Duct Tape and twenty five feet of garden hose.

Frank didn’t show up at the Officers Club for Happy Hour. The next morning, Frank was found in his car parked in a remote section of woods outside the main gate at the Test Center. The garden hose stretched from the exhaust to the window on the driver’s side snugly and neatly held in place by the duct tape. The investigating officer said the engine was still warm.

The real “why” of his suicide will probably never be known. He left no note. His wife did say that he was nervous about getting into the testing business and one of his friends said that he and his wife were not getting along too well. He left two daughters without a daddy, Debbie age four and Suzanne age eleven.

## **CHAPTER 28**

### **EXCITEMENT! EXCITEMENT!**

### **WE'RE MOVING TO FLORIDA!**

---

In January 1961 Gil was ordered to the Navy's first Vigilante Squadron, VAH-7, based in Sanford, Florida near Orlando. Bobby stayed at Pax River long enough to sell the house. Then the Erb family all moved to a neat house on Lake Kathryn. It was 1961 and there was no Disney World yet. Gil had gotten the place through his Wing Commander who, actually, wanted to sell it. He made a deal with Gil to temporarily rent the place for the cost of his first mortgage, \$114 a month. Gil was supposed to show the house whenever anyone was interested. In two and a half years nobody came. The family spent a lot of time water-skiing and gigging frogs. The children loved it there. According to Gil, this was a pure fun and relaxing time in their life. Bobby published her preschool workbooks. She and the kids spent hours collating and mailing the books all over the US and Canada. Gil got to fly an awful lot since he was the only experienced pilot in the brand new Vigilante. It was mostly training so the pressure was minimal.

Gil got to meet one of his neighbors while putting around in his boat on the lake one day at dusk. Two guys in another boat came alongside and threw a two foot alligator in his boat. "Welcome to the neighborhood!" They shouted. One of the gentlemen was Stoney Fetter. They are still friends. Later that week Gil and Bobby hosted a party and one of his neighbors knocked over their mailbox while backing out of the driveway. Gil asked the kids to fix the mailbox the next day and they did. However, since the post was broken they just knocked off the broken part of the post and nailed the mailbox to the top of the much shortened post. When Gil got home he chewed the kid's butts for being stupid. The mailman wouldn't deliver to such a short mailbox. The next day when he got home the mailbox was nailed on a freshly cut pine tree about 30 feet in the air.

The kids loved Lake Kathryn. Here they learned the art of snake catching from the locals and caught hundreds of them including cottonmouths, rattlers and water moccasins. Mark got a homemade buckboard go-cart due to his not be able to ride a bike with his cast. The go-cart they named Lizzie. Unknown to their parents they would take many long adventures on Lizzie. There were logging trails and dirt roads for future developments that led right to the beach. Then there was the incident of the "borrowed" bull dozer that got driven into the canal and had to be extricated by a crane. Boys will be boys. They were close siblings though. Scott recalls with pride the day Mark saved his ass from a drowning being administered by the local bully.

Gil wrote a little piece about the place on Lake Kathryn and the alcoholic neighbor who often “stole” his supply of vodka and gin. In Gil’s own words:

Excitement, excitement! We’re moving to Florida! The Navy saw fit to send me to Sanford, just a few miles out of Orlando. We’d had enough of the cold northeast part of the United States and it was time to move. Boston is famous for a lot of things like beans, Harvard, and old Ironsides, but nobody mentions the snow, the sleet, the ice, and the all around horrible weather from December to March of each and every year. Pax River is not much better in the winter and it’s time to go south.

We found a beautiful house on Lake Kathryn and were welcomed heartily by all the neighbors except for Maurine Marvin. She was an alcoholic widow and succeeded in upsetting the whole neighborhood with her complaining about how the world had screwed up her life.

“Damn that Henry Marvin. Why’d he had to die? Some say I drove him to it. But I didn’t give him the cancer. He did that all by himself. And no Goddamn insurance. So I got to go to work again. Bastard. Good thing I can get back to nursing or I’d be in the poor house. Thank God though, I got Pickles.”

Pickles was a miniature Dachshund. She fed him. She babied him. She fed him. She petted him and she fed him again. Pickles only weighed about five pounds but he looked like an overstuffed sausage. She kept him locked up in the house while she was at work and when she came home; she let him out in the backyard by the lake for no more than three minutes. In those three minutes, he did all his businesses and, believe it or not, reduced his weight by thirty percent. I don’t think Pickles was a happy dog.

Lake Kathryn was ideal for our family. We had a ski boat. The kids swam and played on the sandy beach. We all got suntanned. My job was almost perfect and we were truly living “high off the hog.”

Then tragedy struck. Maurine screamed loud enough for the folks in Orlando to hear. And that was thirty miles away.

“The goddamn alligators ate my Pickles. Son of a bitch. First Henry and now Pickles. Somebody up there sure got it in for me. But I’ll get those goddamn ‘gators if it’s the last thing I do. I’m calling the game warden right now and if he don’t shoot ‘em, Goddamnit, I will. It ain’t safe for man or beast around here.”

“Alligators?” I said to myself, “I don’t for one-minute believe it. In our beautiful Lake Kathryn? Maurine’s nuts. She’s gone off the deep end for sure. We ski, we swim, we fish, we’ve been here for six months and you can’t tell me there’s an alligator within ten miles. I never heard anything so far fetched. Poor gals going to wind up being a resident at that old folks home where she works instead of just changing bedpans.”

About bedtime that night, I heard a commotion in our backyard down by the lake. I grabbed my flashlight and ran down to see if somebody was making off with my boat but it was tied up tight. There was another boat beached next to the dock and the markings on the side said “GAME WARDEN.” Two men had the ‘gator nose tied and were wrestling it into the boat. He was over eight feet long, they said, and weighed about three hundred pounds.

“Don’t you worry none, mister. These critters won’t bother you unless they’re hungry, which ain’t likely around here. There’s plenty of fish to keep ‘em happy.

“Oh, yeah? What happened to Pickles then.” I yelled.

“Well, I guess he got et. If you wuz a ‘gator, could you resist a tender little morsel like that? They’ll eat chickens too, but you folks don’t need to worry. They just don’t get that hungry to bite on us humans.”

They putted away to put the alligator in another lake nearby where the neighbors, unlike us foreigners, were at home with the creatures, and there were no small dogs or chickens to get “et.”

Maurine stayed drunk and home from work for about a week then one afternoon, she came home, and introduced us to Pickles II. Pickles II came from the pound and weighed right close to one hundred and fifty pounds. He was a combination Doberman and Labrador, with a touch of Great Dane.

Maurine still stays sloshed most of the time and still gripes about that son of a bitch Henry Marvin, but now she adds, “Just let one o’ them ‘gators try takin’ a bite outta my Pickles here. We’ll show ‘em won’t we boy.”

When Gil first landed in Florida, the A3J Vigilante had not yet arrived due to a slow production rate, so he was temporarily assigned to a Replacement Air Group (RAG) to fly the A3D Sky Warrior. The A3D was a sub-sonic carrier based nuclear

weapons delivery aircraft nicknamed “The Whale”. It weighed some 50,000 to 60,000 pounds.

When Gil first joined the RAG Group there seemed to be some resentment towards this hotshot test pilot from Pax River. In fact they called him the “Patuxent Puke”. The other pilots played many a trick on him but he managed to get through it all. During Gil’s checkout flight in the A3D he flew a flawless performance even though they threw everything in the book at him. When it was time to land the field was socked in and he had to make a GCA-Ground Controlled Approach and did it perfectly. The “Patuxent Puke” was dropped after this. While Gil was getting qualified in the A3D the other A3J pilots began arriving along with the Vigilantes to form VAH-7. Gil was the only one with significant experience in the A3J.

The squadron grew to seven pilots in several weeks time but the new CO had not yet arrived. The new CO, Bud Gear, did finally arrive and the squadron took an immediate liking to him. He was a good man. Bobby and Bud’s wife, Sally, became the best of friends as did Bud and Gil. What happened to Bud and Sally so affected Gil that he wrote the experience down in the second half of his tale of the Vigilante.

Remember the Vigilante’s pitch control problem.

In Gil’s words:

I was ordered to the first squadron, which would fly the Vigilante, VAH-7 in Sanford, Florida. Four other pilots arrived and we flew as much as the funding and time would allow. We all made several landings, both day and night, aboard carriers operating off the coast of Florida and morale was at an extreme high.

Our Commanding Officer had not yet reported aboard but was to be a highly qualified pilot who had flown the A3D Sky Warrior. The A3D was also a large carrier based nuclear weapons delivery airplane but it was a generation outclassed by the Vigilante.

When the new CO, Commander Bud Gear, arrived, we welcomed him and his wife Sally with open arms. They were both perfectly suited for the job and the whole squadron respected them from day one. Commander Gear dived right in to our flight schedule and flew every chance he got in order to catch up with us experienced jet jockeys. He was great and excelled at everything he did in the airplane. In just three short months, he was ready to go aboard ship. Getting qualified aboard the carrier is the gold star in operating any airplane and Bud was ready. He got in twelve beautiful day landings aboard the USS Franklin D. Roosevelt and was ready for the night work.

The big night finally arrives and Bud and I were selected to go aboard the FDR, which was operating about one hundred miles off the coast. We both got in gear and marched out proudly to sign the yellow sheets and man our planes. When we got to the line shack, we found that I had been assigned the skippers aircraft by mistake. Bud always flew the same bird since he was the CO while the rest of us took whatever was available. The switch was made and Bud instructed the line Chief to call the change in to the Operations Office. I hastily read the Yellow Sheet, which is the maintenance record, for Bud's airplane before we made the switch. I noticed a comment regarding "sloppy control response" which Bud had noted on a previous flight. The problem was marked as having been corrected a few flights back and no new problems were noted. I then read the comments on my airplanes Yellow Sheet and all was AOK and ready to go.

When we got out to the carrier and established communications, we were informed that the deck was ready and Bravo 100 was called down to make the first approach and landing. Bravo 100 was the airplane initially assigned to me before the switch. Bud rogered the order, and promptly entered his dive into the traffic pattern leaving me up at 20,000 feet to be the next to be called down. I listened to the approach control channel as Bud entered the pattern and got on glide path which would lead him to touch down.

Suddenly I was listening to the Landing Signal Officer scream "Viggie in the groove, pull up your nose. Pull up your nose. WAVE OFF! WAVE OFF! WAVE Off!"

Then I heard the klaxon horn blasting away. Bud had hit the end of the deck and sheared off his wheels. The airplane skidded up the deck and plunged off the end of the landing area into the water.

Both of the ships helicopters were launched and the area searched for over an hour with no success. The airplane had sunk almost immediately and Bud was not recovered. In the meantime, amid all the confusion and activity of the search, they apparently forgot about the other Vigilante circling up at 20,000 feet. This was okay with me. I wanted to stay on the scene and find out if my Commanding Officer and friend was to be recovered. Finally, after about an hour and a half, I was contacted and ordered back to Sanford. During that hour and a half, a report was made to Sanford that Bravo 100 had been lost at sea and neither the wreckage nor the pilot had been recovered.

It is amazing to me to this day that news, good or bad, travels so

fast. By the time I got back to Sanford and out of my airplane there had been radio and TV broadcasts relative to the pilot lost at sea. Even though we had told the line Chief to inform Operations of the switch in aircraft assignments, the word never got out. Apparently the Chief did not make the notification.

To describe the look on Sally's face as I climbed out of my airplane is impossible. She, of course, expected to see her husband and the two of them were going to my house to tell Bobby of my being lost in the accident. Sally broke down in tears and sobbed heavily in my arms. She obviously knew that she had lost her husband.

As the days went by, my wife Bobby, came to Sally's aid and to this day the two of them are still bonded by the tragedy. I, too, have a deep feeling for Sally and that feeling will never diminish. We still see her from time to time but never is a word mentioned about that night. Years later, Sally remarried, and continued on with her life but to this day, I'm certain, there is never a night that she doesn't go down to the water's edge and talk to Bud. Theirs was a true and lasting love. The kind great authors write stories about.

The inexplicable sadness of the tragedy did not end there. Our son, Mark, ten years old, was in a special kind of a hospital sponsored by the Masonic Lodge about forty miles from Sanford. He was being treated for a residual bout with polio he'd contracted when he was a baby. We were encouraged to visit only on weekends and then stay for only a short while so as not to interfere with his rehabilitation. When Bobby and I walked into his room that Saturday morning, his tearful, wide-eyed comment was, "Dad, I thought you were dead."

Gil and Bobby did their best to help Sally and her six kids get through the trauma of Bud's death and remained friends over the years. Sally later married a stock broker and Gil and Bobby visited them many times on the island of St. Croix. Sally's oldest daughter, Sally Jr. became an F-14 pilot and married another Navy Lieutenant by the name of G. Gordon Liddy Jr. Yep, that G. Gordon Liddy.

Although his time at Sanford was mostly a joy for Gil he did have another one of his near-death experiences while serving there. At dusk one evening, as he was taking off for a simulated night bombing mission, his maintenance guys, accidentally, almost killed him along with all the personnel in the tower. Just as he was lifting off in an A3J, the aileron jammed in a hard over position and the plane violently banked hard left while going out of control. Gil reached back to disconnect the hydraulic system, thought better of it and turned on the auto-pilot instead. This saved his life and those in the control tower he was headed straight

for. The people in the tower were screaming their heads off when he missed them by about 20 feet. Gil swears he could see the fright in their bulging eyes. If he had turned off the hydraulic system it wouldn't have corrected the problem. During a pre-flight inspection by the ground crew, they had discovered the accumulator for the emergency aileron system was low. It was supposed to be at 500 pounds. They accidentally charged it to 2,000 pounds. This caused the accumulator to explode during the vibration of takeoff. It blew a hole in the back of the aircraft and caused the aileron to go hard over. Gil had to land the plane on auto-pilot with a full load of fuel. Gil got a sincere apology from the Crew Chief and a couple of enlisted men got in a boatload of trouble.

Sanford was eventually closed due to the inadvertent dropping of an A3D engine into a high school field but Gil had nothing to do with this.

On one of his last Vigilante flights out of Sanford the Inertial Navigation System that he had worked on at MIT got installed. On this flight he took off and then relinquished control to the bombardier/navigator in the back who cannot see out. They flew for three hours, hit all their checkpoints and returned and then made a simulated bombing run. The bomb came within a thousand feet of its intended target. When you're talking 6 megaton device this is close enough.

While at Sanford, Gil took the Vigilante aboard the USS Enterprise where they had a fairly successful shakedown cruise for about three months in the Caribbean. In-port time was spent at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. The Enterprise had eight reactors and could really move out when needed. They were answering a distress call from a C-130 that had to make an emergency water landing, when Captain Vincent P. DuPoix called for all the speed the ship could muster. The Enterprise did approximately 42 knots that day (about fifty miles an hour) but got beat to the scene by a destroyer that was closer. Gil says, "That aircraft carrier was shaking like a dog shitting razor blades." Admiral DuPoix later became Commandant of the Naval Academy.

The Vigilante developed a bad reputation because of its carrier landing characteristics. They were poor at best. The Navy terminated the contract and only 58 were delivered to the fleet. The Vigilante was later converted to a high altitude reconnaissance airplane, the RA5C, and served well in Vietnam. Its original mission was to deliver a nuclear bomb at a speed in excess of Mach 2. That mission was now out of the question. The A3J had three holes in the back of the plane; two for the engines and one for the bomb tray. This configuration was supposedly to "lay down" the weapon. That is, to fly directly over the target, lay down the bomb and just keep going. Or you could do a loft or over the shoulder maneuver. In trying to set a Circular Error of Probability the Vigilante failed. The CEP should be no more than 1 to 2 thousand feet. The Vigilante's was more like thirty miles. This was caused by the plane being supersonic while the bomb was not. It slowed and

tumbled coming out of the plane which took away most of the accuracy.

The Vigilante did, however, get the reputation of becoming the fastest two man transfer vehicle in the Navy's arsenal. Gil made one supersonic checkout flight where he took off from Sanford, went out to sea and then up to Cherry Point, North Carolina. He got to Cherry Point in about twenty minutes; quite a thrill even for an experienced Navy jet jockey.

While the Navy was trying to decide what to do with the Vigilante, Gil got orders to report to the Lovelace Clinic in Albuquerque, New Mexico. This is where all the astronauts got tested. Gil had to wear a pressure suit for his Vigilante flying and so he was subjected to the same tests. While simulating a sub-orbital flight in a pressure chamber Gil's blood pressure went to 250 over 170. He was in the hospital for several days on medication and the Navy told him that this was the end of his flying days. It also ended any aspirations of his becoming an astronaut. Gil says he was known as the half-assed-tronaut. He would need to stay on this medication and it said right on the prescription not to operate heavy machinery, etc. Gil was devastated. He loved to fly. Bobby, however, thought it was time for a husband and father to give up this dangerous pursuit and really put her foot down. Gil was forced to agree. So he put in his official request to voluntarily be taken off flying status and it was immediately approved.

On the other hand, Gil was pleased with his next set of orders to the USS Saratoga as the Nuclear Weapons Officer, better known as the Nuke-Spook.

## CHAPTER 29

### EXHILARATION

---

Before we leave the flying portion of Gil's career it is appropriate to include here another piece written by Gil that shows his absolute love of flying. It is the author's opinion that this is one of the best descriptions of the thrill of flight ever written.

In all my flying days, one stands out and alone from the rest. It was unlike most of my flights, in which I practiced tactics, strafing, and bombing. I was flying the Vigilante, a mach two nuclear weapons delivery aircraft. Its sixty thousand pounds looked beautiful, the airplane handled like a fighter, and the price tag was a mere thirty million dollars. In the air it gave one the feeling of complete dominance over the entire world and the exhilaration one feels when in command of the universe. This particular flight was a routine test flight after extensive modifications had been made to the two jet power plants. The Maintenance Department needed ten hours of flight time on the engines before they could be assured that all the changes went in properly and that the plane was ready for operational and training flights.

So my test flight was simply to take-off, buzz around and do nothing but enjoy the scenery for the first three of the ten hours needed for qualification. I took off from Naval Air Station, Sanford, Florida, and climbed to forty thousand feet. It was a clear blue day with a scattering of the typical cloud puffs that one sees on a typical clear blue day in the sunny south. I could see the Atlantic Ocean out off my right wing and the Gulf of Mexico on my left. The Atlantic this day was an intense blue that seemed to extend to Africa while the Gulf was more green than blue, and I imagined I could see Houston peeking up over the horizon. It felt like I was in charge of the whole state. I could see an area of what looked like a gigantic shopping mall under construction. It appeared as though an enormous hole was being dug for some purpose. In a few years what I saw would be a project that one day would draw millions of visitors. It was the first step in the development of Walt Disney World and the massive hole would be his man-made lake.

At forty thousand feet I was above all the commercial traffic, and I thought about putting on autopilot and taking a nap. There was nothing else to do except get time on the engines and record a few

instrument readings. Then as I looked out and saw the curvature of the earth, I felt as though I was king of the immense circle below. I turned the airplane to follow the horizon; and in a turn over fifty miles wide, I saw cities spread out in complete random as though they had been thrown there by a careless hand tossing people, buildings, cars, and highways out indiscriminately with absolutely no purpose in mind.

As I turned, my view went from Jacksonville, to Tallahassee, and then to St. Petersburg. From St. Pete looking down toward the southern part of the state, I could see Lake Okeechobee and the beginnings of the Everglades. I imagined alligators and tourists meandering throughout the blue waters, the green swamps, and the corkscrew highways that had no destination.

Then my view hit Miami. Miami was different. It seemed that it had been planned by an orderly mind. Its streets were square and each section, residential or commercial, fit together to make up a pre-planned vista. Each area seemed to be there to tightly box in the giant Miami International Airport. I could even see passenger planes landing and taking off into the same air where I sat. But all that activity became insignificant to me in my position of power. I was in control not only of my wonderful machine but it seemed as if I could change the order of the world simply by turning the airplane in a new direction.

Then something took place over which I had no control. The clouds, which were at first small and spare, seemed to grow and climb up to meet me. Suddenly I lost my control of the planet, the blue sky turned to a murky gray, and the airplane began to bounce and shudder. My eyes lost the vast, blue-green panorama and I had to fix my gaze inside the cockpit. I looked at my speed, my altitude, and my horizon indicator. I had to keep the airplane under control as my earthly references were gone and I now had to depend on dials and gauges. My wings didn't want to stay level and my altitude wanted to get me higher and higher. My lackadaisical euphoric feeling was replaced by a practical sense of responsibility. I had to maintain control of my Vigilante and get out of the thunderhead I had flown into. I banked to my left and steered to a reverse course to get out of the violence and confusion. As I turned, the sky blackened and flashes of light startled my senses. My eyes were torn from the cockpit to see where the next lightning would strike and just how intense it would be, and I wondered if one would touch me. I was the invader and I

should be punished as I trespassed into their world. Then suddenly the sun and the blue sky surrounded me and I was again in the seat of glory and power.

The sky was now full of clouds and I descended to play among them. There were farm animals, grotesque giants, fairy tale creatures, all forms and shapes made up by whoever molds the clouds into ones imagination. I climbed and dived and rolled around these sky dwellers. I flew into the mouths of dragons and rolled over the backs of whales. I skirted mountains and valleys and could feel the speed that I possessed while the cloud people sat there motionless. My imagination soared and the exhilaration was timeless and endless.

And then it hit me. Time! What time was it? Where was I? How long and how far had my mind's eye carried me? There was no panic, no fear, just a feeling of responsibility to my airplane and to my own well-being. I leveled my wings and flew over a vast plain with buffalo thundering in stampede below. I tuned in Sanford on my homing system and found that if I headed due east for exactly 87 miles and let down to five thousand feet, I could call the tower and start my landing procedure. I hated to leave the new world I had discovered but prudence dictated. I touched down and taxied up to the Maintenance Hangar. I braked to a stop and opened the canopy. An attentive mechanic placed the egress ladder up to the cockpit and I climbed down onto the concrete ramp. I walked into the Chief's office.

“How did it go Commander? Any problems?”

“No Chief, it was a piece of cake. Here are the readings I took. You guys did a great job on those engines. I logged 3 hours and twenty minutes and, by the way, tell the next pilot to watch out for googled-eyed monsters as he climbs out after take-off.”

## CHAPTER 30

### SECOND LIEUTENANT HEMMINGWAY

---

The USS Saratoga, CVA 60, was home-ported in Mayport, Florida near Jacksonville. Bobby and the kids moved into Navy Officer Quarters (housing) and liked it there. Once again there was a lot of time spent fishing and crabbing. Gil's omelettes made with freshly caught and picked crab meat became a family favorite.

But, Gil seems to never get a posting where he doesn't need to go to school first and this was no exception. Prior to reporting aboard he attended the Navy Nuclear Weapons Officer Course, Class Number Six in the spring of 1962. This was at the Atomic Weapons Training Group Field command, DASA, Sandia Base, Albuquerque, New Mexico. Gil, in his own words said he, "done good there." In the words of the Deputy Chief of Staff, Nuclear Weapons Training, Colonel Samuel E. Otto,

It has been called to my attention that you ranked first in the class of seven students who graduated in the Naval Weapons Officer Course, Class Number Six. I congratulate you on this achievement. In attaining it, you have demonstrated not only admirable technical ability, but also commendable industry, attention to duty, and competitive spirit. I hope that the training that you have received during this course of instruction will enable you to increase your value to the United States Navy, and that you will continue to develop the qualities you have demonstrated here. I wish you continued success in your career.

This base in the Sandia Mountains where the school was located also served as a SSS...Strategic Storage Site for Nuclear Weapons. Gil learned to take these weapons of mass destruction apart and put them back together.

Back in Mayport while getting ready to get underway for a Mediterranean cruise, Gil met a couple of Marine Officers that were being deployed with the Sara. He was so impressed with one incident involving these marines that he wrote the episode down. This is what happened in Gil's own words:

The USS Saratoga is an aircraft carrier, home-ported at Naval Station Mayport just outside of Jacksonville, Florida. It was scheduled to leave for a Med Cruise in three days. Marine Captain Duane Collingsworth held muster for the twenty-six enlisted marines under his command and uttered four simple words that would place

his military career in serious jeopardy.

“You, you, and you,” he commanded, pointing out three of his marines. He could have pointed out three men in a Brooklyn police lineup and not have made a more inept choice for the special detail he had been assigned before the ship got underway. During the next three days the ship had to be fueled, stocked with food for five thousand men, the Air Group had to be loaded aboard; and last, and certainly not least, get some money on board. It would be six months before the Sara touched another US port and the crew didn’t want to get paid in lira, pasetas, pounds, or francs. They wanted and needed good-old, American cash dollars, and it would take a lot of it, too: five million dollars to be exact. Captain Collingsworth’s assignment was to pick up the money from the Federal Reserve Bank, and therein lies the problem and the basis for this story.

Captain Collingsworth was your typical gung-ho marine. He could do a thousand push-ups and stand at rigid attention for eight hours if ordered to do so. He wore a pair of dress trousers that could slice off your finger when properly pressed by the ship’s tailor who lived in mortal fear of him. His second-in-command was Second Lieutenant Herschel Hemmingway. Hemmingway had been aboard less than a week and had been in the Marine Corps less than six months. He was *not* your typical gung-ho marine. He was blonde, fair skinned, about five foot eight, and weighed a pudgy one-seventy-five. The width of his fairly broad shoulders blended in with his stomach, which blended in with his equally wide gluteus maximus. He could easily get a side job as the stand-in for the Pillsbury Doughboy; but Second Lieutenant Hemmingway was a marine, and don’t you forget it.

What are twenty-six grunts doing aboard a bird farm you ask? Well, they are the guards and orderlies for the admiral’s staff and the ship’s captain, and they guard the top-secret spaces where the special weapons are stowed. All of their stations must be manned every hour of every day for the six months the Sara will be at sea. The marines also run a few errands for the ship’s Disbursing Officer, such as today, for example. Three of the brightest and shiniest non-coms were just selected by Captain Collingsworth. Their job was to arm themselves with nine-millimeter semiautomatic pistols, proceed to the Jacksonville Federal Reserve Bank, and pick up ten canvas bags containing five million dollars in ones, fives, tens, twenties, fifties, and a bunch of one-hundred dollar bills. This would keep the Sara Maru financially independent for the entire six-month cruise.

Since all marines are cut from the same mold and rigidly trained, Captain Collingsworth had no problem in selecting a sergeant, a corporal, and a private to do the job. He simply looked over his men and arbitrarily uttered those fateful four words, “You, you, and you.”

Sergeant Angelo Funicello had been a hit man for the Chicago Mafia. He had assumed the identity of his last victim and had ducked into the Marine Corps to hide for a few years until the hunt for the killer of the unidentified body cooled down. Both Corporal Eddy Fontaine and Private Felix Baum had been juvenile delinquents, and rather than be incarcerated in juvenile hall, they were allowed to join the Marine Corps. All three had adapted quite well to their new way of life, and passed themselves off as pretty good marines. That is, until Captain Collingsworth uttered the fateful words and Angelo came up with the plan.

It was a perfect set up. Five million, in cash, couldn't be ignored. Eddy and Felix listened intently, more intently than they had ever listened to anyone in their entire lives. They were going to be millionaires.

The plan was simple. Pick up the ten canvas bags and drive the battleship-gray Chevy Suburban out to Angelo's girlfriend's trailer at the Cozy Mobile Home Trailer Park. Maria would be at work, so they could transfer the bags to a car they were going to steal, get a large tarpaulin to cover up the Suburban, pick up Maria from work, and the four of them would hit the trail to Maria's grandmother's farm in West Virginia. They would lie low for a few days, divide up the money, then split up, and go their separate ways. Angelo decreed that he and Maria would get half the loot and a fourth each for the boys. Eddy and Felix fussed at the division of the money, but Angelo prevailed. After all, he was the brains, he was experienced, it was his plan, and certainly, Maria deserved something for her part, even as small as it was.

Everything started off as smoothly as if the job had been planned for months and rehearsed a dozen times. The three of them strapped on their sidearms complete with extra clips. They checked out the Suburban from the motor pool and headed straight for 116 Palm Avenue in beautiful downtown Jacksonville, home of the Federal Reserve Bank.

They pulled up in front of the big overhead door. Bank clerk

Andrew Hays saw the official government car on the closed-circuit TV screen and pushed the door control button. The giant door slowly rose and Andrew beckoned them on in. He looked over the paperwork and it looked good to him. He pushed another button, the vault door swung open, and there sat ten canvas bags, each containing one half of one million dollars. Angelo fought to contain himself. He wanted to burst out laughing at such a simply heist. Life was just too good to him. He controlled himself though, and signed all of Andrew's papers. The giant door slowly opened, and out went the Suburban and Angelo and Eddy and Felix and five million dollars in small bills.

Eddy was driving with Angelo riding shotgun and Felix in the back. No sooner had the giant door banged closed than hysteria took over. They all three burst out in completely uncontrolled laughter. Tears came to their eyes. Angelo banged on the dashboard like a crazy man literally screaming with laughter. Eddy banged on the steering wheel with uncontrollable frenzy, and Felix rolled on the floor with the bags of money, shaking and laughing and yelling out loud, "We did it! Goddamnit, we did it! I can't believe we fuckin' did it!"

Felix calmed down, caught his breath, and pulled out his pocketknife to cut open one of the bags. Tears were still streaming down his face. "Put down that goddamn knife," yelled Angelo. "This thing ain't over yet. We still got to git us a car and git out to Maria's place. Straighten up and knock this shit off." He reached over and slapped Felix on the back of the head. "You hear me jarhead?"

"Yea, I fuckin' heard ya. Don't be such a hardass, man. We got it made."

Eddy looked over his shoulder to see what was going down when the crunch came. It wasn't a big crunch, just a little bang on the right front end of the truck. It broke out the headlight and smashed in the fender. Eddy had veered off to his right and hit a light pole. Angelo was mad now, real mad. "You stupid jerk. Can't you drive this fuckin' car? I ought to slap the shit out of you. Back the fuck up and get this show on the road. We ain't got all day, ya know."

Eddy put it in reverse and the car shuddered violently. He had hit hard enough to mash the fender up against the tire. Passersby were stopping to watch the scene as Eddy got out with Angelo right behind. Angelo had lost it and started slapping Eddy on the back of the head.

“Knock it off,” yelled Felix as he climbed out. “Let’s pull this goddamn fender out and get the hell out of here.” They all three grabbed the fender and pulled as hard as they could. It gave way and they could see that the wheel was free.

Back on the road now, they settled down. “Find us a goddamn shoppin’ center where we can get us a car,” said Angelo.

Eddy pulled in to the Greater Northern Florida Shopping Center. It had a gigantic parking lot. Eddy was to stay with the car while Felix went to the hardware store and bought a big tarp to cover up the Chevy. Angelo, having stolen dozens of cars in his colorful career, marched off to the rear of the lot where the employees parked and where the car’s owner was more likely to be at work than on a short shopping trip. Luck was on Angelo’s side and he found an older Dodge that looked to be in pretty good condition. The late-model cars were impossible to hotwire so an older one had to do. Also, older cars were a better pick than the newer ones with alarm systems. It didn’t matter that the Dodge was a bright, canary-yellow.

Angelo looked around. No one seemed to be paying any attention to him, so he tried the door handle; again, luck was with him. It wasn’t locked. He slunk down under the dashboard from the passenger side and started sorting out the wires. He had thought of everything, right down to the tools he would need for the hotwire job. Angelo was a pro. He cut the red and white wire and whamo, off went the alarm!

It screeched and screamed but no one paid one bit of attention to it. The American shopper is so used to hearing them go off accidentally that no one paid any mind to them anymore. Angelo was cool. He eased out of the car, eased the door closed, and casually sauntered away. Still unobserved, he made his way back to the Suburban. Felix had the tarp in back and had used it to cover up the moneybags.

Time was short, and Angelo knew they had to get moving before they were missed. The alarm on the Dodge finally stopped and no one appeared to have noticed; so Angelo got back in the car, finished the wiring job, and off he drove with Eddy, the Suburban, Felix, and five million dollars right on his tail.

They pulled into the Cozy Mobile Home Trailer Park and parked the Chevy up close to Maria’s trailer. The park was heavily wooded and the trailer was located way in the back where there were only a few neighbors. It was a lovely park and well suited for the purpose

for which it was being used. The money transfer was made and the tarp was put over the Chevy and tied down tightly. They cut open one of the bags and each took a few hundred dollars' spending money.

Angelo knew that Old Man Turner would be at work. His beat up old Ford pickup was parked in the driveway next to Maria's. His shop was just a few blocks away from the beauty parlor where Maria worked, and he always drove her to work in his old Honda Civic. Thinking ahead, as master criminals do, Angelo switched license plates from the pick-up to the Dodge and from the Dodge to the pick-up, and off the trio went to get Maria and head for West-by-God Virginia.

Maria got in the car and was speechless when Angelo explained what was coming down. She was a cute little snippy girl who had grown up in a borderline life of shoplifting and prostitution. She was just over five feet tall and had the body of a Barbie doll. Angelo had picked her up in a bar and they had been shackled up for almost a year. When he told her of the plan to go to her grandmother's place in West Virginia, she was delighted. She loved her old granny and hadn't seen her in years. To get back home as a millionaire was beyond her wildest dreams.

Angelo figured that if they left right now, they could make it to West Virginia sometime around noon tomorrow. So off went the foursome to their new and wonderful life.

Captain Collingsworth was in a stupor. It was inconceivable that one, let alone three, of his precious marines could be so stupid as to think they could steal five million dollars and get away with it. But the bank had assured him that the money was turned over on time and that all the paper work was in order. The ball was in his court. He lost all his Marine Corps composure, and while standing at rigid attention in the Captain's quarters, he blubbered out the story with tears streaming down his face. He was a destroyed human. The Captain called the Admiral, the Admiral called his Chief of Staff, and the Chief of Staff called the FBI. The FBI man pooh-poohed the whole thing.

Nobody in his right mind would even *attempt* to steal five million dollars worth of government money. The dumb marines were probably lost, or had stopped off at a bar somewhere for a beer and got all drunked up. But he'd look into it.

“Bullshit,” yelled the Chief of Staff, “You fuckin’-well better look into it and get us our goddamn money back. We’re going to sea in three days and we’re not going without that money. So get off your ass and get to work before I call the president of the fucking U-nited States. Period.”

Now properly motivated, Special Agent Woodrow Cash went to work. He alerted the Jacksonville City Police, the Florida State Highway Patrol, the Alabama State Highway Patrol, and the Georgia State Highway Patrol to be on the lookout the battleship-gray Chevrolet Suburban, and three pathetic marines trying to rip off the United States government. He made the report to FBI headquarters and Condition Red went into instant effect.

Old Man Turner stopped off on his way home to pick up Maria. They told him that she had left early with the gentleman friend and a couple of his buddies in a canary-yellow car. So the old man just drove on home to his trailer at the Cozy Mobile Home trailer park. He spotted the Chevy under the tarp, and when he saw that it was an official government car, he was more than just a bit puzzled. The clincher that something was wrong was the upside-down license plate on his old Ford pickup. He knocked on Maria’s door, but no answer. He didn’t want to get Maria into any trouble, but he never liked that jerk she was living with and this was just too much. Maybe they had kidnapped her.

Old Man Turner called the police. He gave them the license number of his beat up old Ford pickup and repeated what the girls had said at the beauty parlor about the canary-yellow car. The police called the FBI. The FBI called the Florida State Highway Patrol, the Alabama State Highway Patrol, and the Georgia State Highway Patrol. They were cautioned to only identify and track the vehicle. *Do not* try to apprehend. These men are armed and dangerous.

Later that night, an alert patrolman on the interstate near Atlanta spotted the canary-yellow Dodge, and the license number checked out. It was heading north. The Highway Patrol was on its toes, and about every twenty minutes, a position report was made to the FBI.

Old Man Turner had heard Maria talk about her home in West Virginia and how much she loved her grandmother. He passed this information on to the FBI. They located grandma’s house and had it staked out before the sun came up. The old Dodge rolled in right at twelve noon, and the foursome climbed out to be greeted by an even

dozen, fully-armed FBI agents wearing armored vests, complete with FBI stenciled on their backs in giant yellow letters.

Maria was placed in the local lockup. She claimed she had been taken against her will, and so they left her with the West Virginia authorities. Angelo, Eddy, and Felix were taken to FBI headquarters in Washington, D.C. The money, except for \$350, was turned in to a Federal Reserve Bank in D.C.

The FBI had done its job and the money was returned. Prosecution of the boys would be turned over to the Judge Advocate General and twenty-four hours prior to shoving-off; the boys found themselves back aboard the USS Saratoga. They were assigned a defense attorney, a Navy Commander, who advised them that they would be better off being tried at a Captain's Mast, rather than getting involved in the military legal system in Jacksonville. They should plead "not guilty" and suffer the wrath of the ship's Captain rather than certain conviction by JAG.

Now the problem gets sticky: If they plead "not guilty," then they must be incarcerated in the ship's brig and tried at sea. If they can be convinced to plead "guilty" and throw themselves on the mercy of the court, the ship can order up three brand new marines to fill out the twenty-six man team needed to do the twenty-four-hour-a-day job. It simply means that being three men short, the watch schedule will have to be re-done and each and every one will have to spend extra hours on duty. This becomes a morale problem for Captain Collingsworth. "So let's just talk to Angelo, Eddy, and Felix and advise them to plead 'guilty,' get off the ship, let JAG handle the case, and we can get three replacements and go off to sea with a full complement...."

"No," said Angelo. "No," said Eddy. "No," said Felix.

"Look," Captain Collingsworth pleaded, "the case is cut and dried. Better to throw yourself on the mercy of the court ashore."

Again, "No.", "No.", "No."

The special weapons officer pleaded with them. The ship's executive officer pleaded with them. The operations officer pleaded with them.

Again, "No.", "No.", "No."

Second Lieutenant Hemmingway was sitting quietly in the corner

when everyone had exhausted themselves and it looked like the Sara was going to sea with three men in the brig. He meekly stood up and said with a tiny voice, "Would it be all right if I talked to them, sir?"

Everyone in the room sniggered quietly and sort of glanced away from Second Lieutenant Hemmingway. The executive officer finally spoke up and said, "What the hell? What have we got to lose? Go ahead Mr. Hemmingway. See what you can do."

"Thank you, sir. I'll only be a few minutes, and I'll just take them into the locker room. Is that okay?"

The locker room was right next door, and everyone in the office could hear Mr. Hemmingway's words through the thin, metal walls. "Now listen, you guys. You are being real dumb about this thing. The Captain isn't going to let you off. He's real pissed and I'm sure you would do better ashore. Okay?"

"Sorry sir," said Angelo, "but we don't see it that way. We want to stay aboard and take our chances with the Captain."

"Okay. If you want to stay on the ship I'll make you a deal. Each one of you hit me as hard as you can. I mean double up your fist and lay one on me. After all three of you have had your shot, then it will be my turn. I get to hit each one of you. Then we'll do it again. You each hit me, and then I hit each one of you. We'll keep this up until either you knock me out or I knock all three of you out. If you win, you stay on the ship. If I win, it's off the boat you go. Is it a deal?"

Angelo was ecstatic. They had it made. He was big and had grown up fighting. He'd let Eddy and Felix go first, and then he'd step in and cold cock this fat-fairy-cocksucker. "Okay, it's a deal," said Angelo. "If we knock you out, we stay, right?"

"Right," echoed Second Lieutenant Hemmingway.

Eddy was first and took a healthy swing. It staggered Mr. Hemmingway a bit, and a drop of blood squeaked out of his lip. "Wow, that was pretty good," said Mr. Hemmingway, "Who's next?"

Felix stepped up and laid a good one on exactly the same spot. This one really staggered Mr. Hemmingway. He almost went down, but, although a bit weak in the knees, he held on. The cut lip was bleeding profusely now. He wiped it clean, held his handkerchief up to it for several seconds, then said, "Your turn Sergeant Funicello. Let's see what you got."

Angelo was a lefty, and when he hit, he hit with everything he had. Mr. Hemmingway went down. To make matters worse, he hit his head on the corner of one of the lockers. It was a nasty gash and the blood literally squirted out. Mr. Hemmingway lay there, dazed, for a full nine-count. Then with the help of one of the benches, he got to his feet and shook his head to clear the cobwebs. He shrugged his shoulders and daubed his bloody handkerchief on the open wound. The bleeding seemed to subside and Mr. Hemmingway spoke up in a slightly garbled little voice and said, "My turn now. Okay?"

Without a moment's hesitation, Second Lieutenant Hemmingway swung at Angelo. The impact with the side of Angelo's face made a sickening bone and tooth shattering clomp! It was the sound of a sledgehammer hitting a redwood tree. Angelo spun around slowly as he fell to the deck. He was out as cold as a Spanish mackerel and there he lay, inert.

Standing there in stark terror, Eddy and Felix screamed "Guilty! Guilty! Guilty! For God's sake guilty! Get us the hell outta here!"

When Angelo woke up in the ship's infirmary, his jawbone had been broken in two places and there were five teeth missing. He was moved later that morning to the NAS Jacksonville Hospital, where he was treated for "wounds received in a fall in the locker room." The doctors worked on him for over two hours wiring his jaw back together. The dentist couldn't do any good until the jawbone knitted, but then he could take an impression and make a five-tooth bridge.

That afternoon, three marine replacements reported aboard the USS Saratoga. After the new men had been checked in, Captain Collingsworth sat down at his desk and relaxed for the first time in three days. He pulled Second Lieutenant Hemmingway's service record from the file. He had given the record a cursory look when Mr. Hemmingway had reported aboard for duty but now he had time to dig a little deeper. He discovered that Second Lieutenant Hemmingway had been an undefeated Golden Gloves champion in the state of New Jersey, had been selected to participate in the upcoming Olympic Games, and was the undefeated United States Marine Corps boxing champion in the 175-pound class. The latter award was received just two weeks before reporting aboard the USS Saratoga.

## CHAPTER 31

### ALONE IN THE WATER

---

Eventually, Gil and the USS Saratoga left for the Med and his naval adventures continued unabated even though he was no longer flying. It seems even when Gil is not flying he still can manage to risk life and limb for his country. His first harrowing encounter aboard the Sara happened on this first Med cruise. Gil tells it like this:

I was awakened from a sound sleep. The ship's radiation alarm had sounded. At the same instant my phone rang. I grabbed the phone. It was my Leading Chief.

“Sir, we have a leaking birdcage.”

This is not a startling announcement unless you happen to know what a birdcage is. I was in charge of all the nuclear weapons aboard the aircraft carrier USS Saratoga operating in the Mediterranean Sea just off the coast of France. The core of a nuclear bomb is pure U-238 and is about the size of a softball. As it sits by itself, it is rather innocuous but when compressed by an explosive charge, as in an atomic bomb, it has the power of three megatons of TNT. That is three million tons of TNT. One pound of TNT can leave quite a hole in its target and you can multiply that effect by a three with nine zeros behind it; well, I think you get the picture.

Of course one of these things is not going to be set off aboard the “Sara” but if you were to stack these cores up like cannon balls, it would create a radioactive catastrophe. So it is imperative that they be stored in a manner that won't allow even two of them to get together. Hence, the birdcage.

The birdcage is a welded steel framework surrounding a cylindrical container, which holds the core. This contraption doesn't allow a single core to come within two feet of another one.

Another problem exists and that is that U-238 starts to deteriorate when it comes in contact with the oxygen in the air. So each cylinder within the birdcage is filled with pure nitrogen. The nitrogen is under pressure to insure that no air can get in to damage the core. The pressure is checked every three days and if the pressure goes down below a certain value; a nuclear hazard exists and that is exactly what happened. “Sir, we have a leaking birdcage.”

We didn't have the capability of correcting the problem in our shop so the whole shebang had to be transferred to an ammunition ship where the repairs could safely be made. Since I was the man ultimately responsible, I elected to be the escort to make the transfer.

Fortunately, there was an ammo ship, the USS Triton, about three miles to starboard. It was in the process of transferring gun parts to one of the destroyers in our task force. The day was winding down and flight ops were over. "Angel," the rescue helicopter, was through for the day and landed on deck for me to board and take the leaky mess over to be repaired and bring back a replacement. It just wouldn't do that we were one weapon short when we had enough of them to blow up the entire world a couple of times over.

At the last instant before take-off, the Communications Chief ran out on deck with three men and three big canvas bags of mail to go along with us to the ammo ship. By radio, the pilot was briefed on his cargo; me, my birdcage, and three bags of outgoing mail, one of which contained highly classified material.

It was a noisy ride over to the ammo ship and the sea was rough. The evening breeze had stiffened and below, the waves were rising and falling about five or six feet. When we got to a hover over the Triton, it became obvious that the birdcage was too delicate to take any harsh treatment, like bouncing off a steel deck, so I elected to abort the transfer. The mailbags, on the other hand, could simply be lowered by the helo's rescue cable and that part of the job would be over and done with.

Two of the mail bags were successfully grabbed by the crew on the Triton but the ship heaved just as the last bag was detached from the cable and it scooted over the side and into the churning Mediterranean Sea. The Triton doing about twenty knots sailed away.

Now here is the situation. The only thing to keep a mailbag afloat is the air inside. The canvas isn't waterproof and it's only a matter of a few minutes before it sinks. We know that there are Soviet submarines watching every movement of the task force and one probably has his periscope watching this whole show. By the time the ammo ship makes a turn to pick up the bag, it will have sunk and fallen into the hands of our bitter enemy, the Russians.

The obvious solution is for me to be let down on the rescue cable,

pick up the bag, and save the careers and reputations of myself, the Communications Officer, the Commanding Officer of the USS Saratoga, and anyone else who was dumb enough to get caught in a situation like this in the first place. Also, recovering the mailbag would prevent the shift in the balance of worldwide power over to the Communists with the critical information about the war plans of the United States Navy contained in the slowly sinking mailbag.

So down I go into the, fortunately, luke warm, Mediterranean Sea. The helicopter pilot's aim isn't too good in the shifting winds, and I enter the water about twenty feet away from the mailbag. I slip out of the harness but keep on my life vest. I then dog paddle over to the bag, snatch it and dog paddle back to the rescue sling. But the rescue sling is nowhere to be seen. The wind has blown the helo off its target—ME. I can see the crewman in the aft station pointing and gesturing wildly, trying to tell the pilot where I am. The wind is picking up and the waves are getting higher and are starting to break over the top. In the salt spray, the helo disappears. I mean he's gone and I'm alone in the water. He is running out of gas and has no choice but to get back to the Sara and refuel.

Talk about lonely? Time slows to a molasses pace. The minutes seem like weeks. But the wind dies down, the waves go away, the stars begin to shine, and I feel at peace. I am in a world of my own.

I should be terrified. Is he coming back? When? It's dark. Can he find me; an inconspicuous blob in the middle of a giant ocean? Should I write a farewell letter to my wife and children? I could put it in the mailbag, which I am holding onto ever so tightly. No, when I drown it would probably sink to the bottom and some Russian would pick up the bag. With all the secret stuff, they probably wouldn't bother with my final letter to the family.

Then I see a light so bright it illuminates my entire world. Could it be the entrance to heaven or could it be another helicopter with a super powerful searchlight shining down on me. I chose to believe the latter and in the moment of salvation find myself dangling from the end of a life saving piece of wire.

Back on ship, I am greeted with applause. I don't know whether they are clapping for me or for the helo crew and I don't really care. I am back on terra firma, or whatever the expression is for the solid feel of the USS Saratoga under my feet.

Later I was told that I was in the water for less than twenty minutes and another helo was on the way before the first one left the area where I was. A week later, at a celebration dinner in Marseilles, the Captain of the Saratoga presented me with a trophy of my experience. It wasn't a medal or a letter of commendation or anything quite so grand. It was a makeshift mailbag, made from an old pillowcase, with the words, "US MAIL—HELO," suitably inscribed with a magic marker attesting to my heroism—a dubious award at best.

Another sea story Gil likes to tell about his USS Saratoga days he calls the Parker T-Ball Jotter story. He tells it like this:

Commander Mark Rhodes was the Executive Officer of the aircraft carrier Saratoga and my immediate boss. I had reported aboard recently as the Nuclear Weapons Officer. The year was 1962 and the cold war with the USSR was in full swing. My job has the highest security classification on the ship and "Security" was my middle name. I woke, slept, ate and worked with security twenty-four hours a day seven days each week. I made daily reports to the Captain of the ship and almost hourly reports to each and every nuclear agency in the entire technical and political world. I had a great crew and they followed my example and were even more diligent than I when it came to guarding and babying those weapons that could destroy the world should the unthinkable happen.

We were cruising in the Mediterranean Sea and it was time for some rest and relaxation so we headed for Marseilles, France and the first liberty for the ship in well over a month. In spite of the fact that my job was critical, I drew the short straw and ended up in charge of the shore patrol squad while in port. We anchored out in the bay and I and my Marine Detachment of fifteen marines and twenty additional sailors proceeded by small boat to the French Police Headquarters. There we would do our best to keep two thousand fun loving sailors and aviators under some semblance of order.

Around midnight, I was summoned back to the ship. I went straight to Commander Rhodes' quarters and was informed that there was a flare up in Lebanon and the ship was ordered to get underway at 0800. To impress on me the validity of the mission he handed me a CONFIDENTIAL message that held the order to move the ship to the hot spot. He then proceeded to be more specific in what I was to do to get two thousand men back aboard. We both realized that the task was impossible but if we could get eighty percent of them back and in a satisfactory state of health, then the ship could sail a safe

course. My job was evident. As we discussed the problem, I took notes on what I later realized was the back of the CONFIDENTIAL message he had handed me.

Back ashore I went with the tragic message and my marines, sailors, and the entire French Police Force went to work. The word spread rapidly throughout Marseilles. Every bar, hotel, restaurant, and yes, bawdyhouse was contacted and the majority of the crew was obedient and returned as ordered back to the ship. We did in fact get about eighty percent of the men back and in a condition that, although the majority with horrendous hangovers, the Sara could get underway.

The remaining twenty percent constitute a collection of stories that would fill a dozen books and in fact did fill a dozen French Police Blotters. The charges ranged from simple failure to cooperate fully with the authorities to what crimes you would expect on a New Years Eve in the seamiest section of the worst ghetto in a typical United States “big” city. Most of the stragglers were rounded up by noon and two destroyers were held back to catch up with the task force and transfer them by high line or helo back to the Sara.

I stayed ashore with a Supply Officer, with a lot of hard cash to bail out the offenders who could be bailed out, and six Marines. After we had done all we could, we then headed for Naples, Italy in the ship’s vehicles that were left to us for this exact purpose. We had four sailors who were successfully bailed out of jail but two others had committed inconceivable acts and the French would not release them without a trial.

We proceeded to Naples and three weeks later rejoined the ship. I’ll just say a very good time was had by all during this period. The Lebanon thing had been settled and it was back to a normal routine. I hadn’t been aboard for more than twenty minutes when a Marine Orderly banged on my door with orders for me to report to the Exec’s Cabin immediately.

It is at this point that I must describe the XO. He had been passed over for promotion for the second time and his career was about to come to an end. He was not a happy man and had not been a happy man for the entire time I had been on board. In fact he was mad at me, the Navy, the ship’s Captain and just about anyone else with whom he had the fortune to meet up with.

He sat me down across the desk from him and proceeded to relate

to me the incidents from the time I had entered his room on the night of the emergency deployment. Literally word for word he repeated our conversation.

“Commander Erb,” he growled. “You entered my sleeping quarters at exactly twelve fifteen AM. We had just received orders to deploy to quell the Lebanon situation. You sat in a straight back chair at the head of my bed next to my nightstand. I handed you the CONFIDENTIAL message we had received concerning our emergency deployment.”

At this point I panicked. I remembered the CONFIDENTIAL message he handed me and remembered that I turned it over and took notes on its back. But what had happened to it? I had no idea whatsoever. My career was over. I had a security violation coming. It would go into my fitness report. Goodbye US Navy. Here I was in charge of enough weaponry to destroy the world and I had lost a classified document. What could I have done with that message? My mind was a blank.

He continued, “You took that message from my hand and as we talked, you turned that message over and started taking notes on it. We discussed what would be your best course of action to get the men back. DO YOU REMEMBER THAT?”

“Yes, sir. I remember it.”

“Well, Commander Erb, you picked up my Parker T-Ball Jotter right off my night stand to write your notes. DO YOU REMEMBER THAT?”

“Yes, sir. I remember it.”

“Well that Parker T-Ball Jotter was a gift from my wife and I want it back. NOW! DO YOU UNDERSTAND ME?”

I couldn't believe my ears. All he wanted was his goddamn pen back. My career was saved. I was home free. I went immediately to my friend the Supply Officer. He opened up the Ships Store and I got a brand new Parker T-Ball Jotter, took it out of its wrappings and had it in his hands in a record breaking eleven minutes.

He couldn't have cared less about the CONFIDENTIAL message. In fact he had dismissed its significance completely. The rest of the cruise was duck soup and even after this harrowing experience, my promotions came on time. My career did not suffer.”

## **CHAPTER 32**

### **GIL WRECKS DOCTOR'S PORSCHE; DOCTOR SAVES GIL'S LIFE**

---

It was 1962 and Gil was aboard the Saratoga steaming in the Mediterranean. One of Gil's best friends and shipmate was Doctor Larry Glass a Lieutenant Commander and Ship's Surgeon. To give you some idea of just how good friends they were, one night about 2300, Larry woke Gil up and asked if he would assist in a procedure. Of course he'll help. Weren't they shipmates? After Gil was somewhat awake, Larry told him he was going to give himself a vasectomy. He wasn't drunk but Gil still had trouble accepting this. But, the Doctor was determined and left Gil little choice since he would just do it himself if Gil didn't help.

So here they are in the operating room and Larry has given himself the required two injections of Novocain in the scrotum, got up on the table, made his first incision, cut one vas deferens, all the while explaining to Gil what to hand him next. Before he can make his second incision, however, the crash alarm goes off and being Ship's Surgeon he must report immediately to the flight deck to handle any injuries. "Goddamnit!" Larry screams. But, he grabs a jockstrap and several pieces of gauze, packs himself together and heads to the flight deck.

Gil went back to bed.

About 0300 Dr Glass shook Gil awake once more and requested his services again to finish the procedure. They did.

Around this same time Gil, believe it or not, damn near got an unsat Fitness Report. They had an excellent Weapons "W" Division. Gil, as Special Weapons Officer, led this division. However, any messages that came in had to go first to the Gunnery Officer, a Department Head, who was Gil's boss. Gil and the Gun Boss didn't get along that well. This was due mainly to the fact that the Gun Boss was a micro-manager to say the least, and tried to run Gil's spaces. Spaces he did not have clearance to be in. Gil did accept that the boss was always the boss.

One day Gil got a Top-Secret message from the US Nuclear Weapons Control Center asking why he had not responded to the message they had sent three days prior. This was a message concerning some modifications to the weapons. Gil had never received the message and so had to go looking. It seems the message had gone from the Radio Shack to the Gun Boss but hadn't made it to Gil. While Gil is looking through the files in the Gunnery Office, in walks the Gun Boss and starts screaming at Gil for being in his personal file. Gil had no idea it was his

personal file but he had just found the three day old message in there. Words were exchanged and the Gun Boss attempted to send in an unsat fitrep on Gil for getting into his personal file. Well, the Ops Officer, who was a friend of Gil's, intercepted the report and revised it.

On the other hand, while aboard the Sara, Gil did receive a commendation for quick thinking during a major crisis. "W" Division was conducting a nuclear exercise using an A4D parked on jacks on the hangar deck. They conducted this drill while the mechanics were working on the plane. Essentially, they were seeing how quickly they could load and unload the nuclear weapons safely. During the exercise, one of the mechanics accidentally hit the switch to drop one of the gas tanks. Six hundred gallons of aviation fuel was dropped and began spreading across the hangar bay after the tank split open. The same hangar bay also at this time has about a half dozen nuclear warheads sitting around. Obviously, no one is interested in having a fire at this time.

Gil and the crew had the hangar bay door, which was forward of where they were working, closed immediately. Then the deck edge elevators were opened on both sides and the bridge was requested to make a hard left turn. This resulted in first, the fumes being blown out to sea and secondly, the avgas being washed overboard with the help from the sailors and the salt water wash-down hoses.

Gil also likes to tell the story of how Captains really are king aboard their ships. One night the sailors were coming back from liberty and the Captain happened to be walking past the quarterdeck when he saw a young sailor whose hair he thought was a little too long. He stopped the lad and told him to get a haircut. The sailor being somewhat braced by the evening's libations came back with, "But, Captain, your hair is longer than mine!" The Captain just looked at his crewman with a grin and said, "That's right son. But there's only one Cool Daddy on this ship and that's me. *You* will get a haircut."

Another unique Captain's story told by Gil concerns an observant young Warrant Officer (WO) who was standing the quarterdeck watch one evening when the Captain returned with a lovely lady on his arm. Well, the Captain, of course, had access to the Admirals' Quarters which were not occupied at this time. In order to get there he had to escort the young lady up a ladder where the Warrant Officer happened to notice that the seams in her stockings (Remember silk stockings with seams?) were amazingly straight and provocative. The Warrant Officer, who happened to work for Gil in "W" Division, was still on duty when the Captain and the lady departed. Being an observant young man he noticed that the lady was no longer wearing the stockings with the amazingly straight seams. This was all well and good but the WO thought it would be funny to make a note of this in the ship's log. Yes, it was funny. No, it was not smart. The Captain found out about it and ordered him immediately off the ship. He was gone in two days. Gil remembers

the WO as a brilliant guy with weapons who also had a warped sense of humor.

Another one of Gil's favorites from his at-sea days happened while he was performing one of his collateral duties. When the enlisted men are up for re-enlistment the Division officer brings him in his cabin and attempts to sell the sailor on re-upping. This one kid, who was a 4.0 sailor and an excellent candidate for re-enlistment, told Gil he was leaving the Navy. Gil in no way could persuade him otherwise. Finally, Gil asked the gentleman why he was getting out.

"I'm going back to West Virginia, sir, to get on relief like my Daddy and his Daddy before him."

Gil thought this was a joke like the guy who told his Division Officer he'd stay in if it wasn't for having to wear the hat; but the kid seemed very sincere.

Gil's last story about his days on the *Saratoga* is not the fun the others were. In fact, it was one more incident in his string of near-death experiences.

Dr. Larry Glass and Gil were roommates in Officer Country aboard the *USS Saratoga*. While in-port in Naples, Italy for some R&R, they decided to take a week's leave and go to Munich, Germany. There Larry fell in love with a Porsche Carrera. A gal at Army Headquarters there helped Larry with the paperwork but still couldn't get it done while they on leave. Gil, after getting his International Driver's License, was the one to go back and pick up the Porsche a week later. He then drove it back to Naples in the hopes of getting it aboard ship to take back to the states. There's a lot of room in the hangar bay on an aircraft carrier. Larry was grateful and drove the Porsche around the Neapolitan countryside for several days. Then, when Larry had the duty, Gil and another of his fellow officers borrowed the Porsche to head to Livorno, Italy to see the Leaning Tower of Pisa.

It was about four in the afternoon and the two of them were on their way back to Naples. Gil had gotten pretty used to the Porsche's handling by this time and was having a ball taking the curves at a good clip. He was exercising a little drift in the rear end around one sharp curve when he realized much too late that there was a farmer's vegetable truck broke down in the middle of the road. He had to make an instant decision on whether to hit the truck or a small tree off to the side of the road. Natural instinct took over and he hit the tree. His finely tuned aviation trained brain told him that hitting smaller object is better than smashing into larger object. The steering wheel imprinted the Porsche logo in reverse on his chest.

The other officer was critically injured and taken by ambulance to the hospital. Gil, under his own power, rode with the police to the local hospital to be checked out. The Italian doctor in his best broken English told Gil to get out and exercise. While exercising he should wave his arms about and "work out" the pain in his chest where the steering wheel had hit him. He then rode with the tow truck back

to the ship.

After reporting aboard and getting back to his stateroom, he explained everything to Larry, who was less than pleased. Being the outstanding ship's surgeon that he was, he put aside his disappointment long enough to give Gil a good going over. While listening to Gil's chest he told Gil to lie down and under no circumstances lift his head more than an inch off the pillow until he could check him out further. Something caused Larry great concern but he couldn't or wouldn't tell Gil exactly what it was.

Gil was flown by helicopter to a US Army Hospital in Lundstuhl, Germany. There it was discovered that he had ruptured the innominate artery at the aorta and had a large aneurysm. In his medical report, Larry had "suspected bleeding around the heart and its structures or damage to one of the major chest blood vessels." What all this medical terminology boils down to is that Gil's artery was being held together by the outer layer of the artery only and it had blown up to the size of a golf ball. Think of the skin on a hot dog. If the outer layer burst, Gil would have about two minutes to say his prayers.

He was "med-evaced" to Bethesda Naval Hospital in Maryland on the outskirts of Washington DC. Bethesda had one of the brand new heart bypass machines that were in their infancy back then. However, the machine was being used by Senator Estes Kefauver at that time. The Senator died the next day. Gil was transferred to Walter Reed Army Hospital where they also had one of the brand new heart bypass machines. He remembers being picked up by two drunken Army guys in an ambulance. They thought it best to go out the back gate from Bethesda to keep out of trouble. Then the drunken pair proceeded to get lost and took two hours to complete what should have been, at most, a 30 minute trip.

All this time, Bobby is flying to Washington and all she's been told is that Gil was in a serious car accident but is still alive. Gil spent a lot of time in the hospital and Bobby stuck with him as much as possible.

The accident happened on July 19, 1963. On November 4, 1963, Dr. Donald E. Morel, a Navy Captain, summed up Gil's diagnoses as follows:

1. Aneurysm, innominate artery, right, n.e.c., traumatic; treated; cured.
2. Contusion of upper sternal area and base of neck anteriorly; treated; cured.
3. Abrasions, multiple, secondary to trauma: treated cured.
4. Fracture of teeth, right upper central and lateral incisors; treated; improved.

5. Hypertension, mild, essential, benign, etiology undetermined; treated; improved.

It seems that Gil wrecked Larry's car and Larry saved Gil's life.

On a sad note, Larry got his Porsche repaired and brought back to the states. He was killed in an accident while driving his beloved Porsche.

After his time in the hospital, Gil returned to the Sara for a short while before being transferred to the Naval Academy.

## CHAPTER 33

### LIFE AT THE NAVAL ACADEMY

---

In June of 1964, Gil, Bobby, the three kids and Nellie Kelly with the Spots On Her Belly, their Dalamation, packed up and left Florida for Annapolis, Maryland and the Naval Academy. Nellie Kelly was something of a celebrity in that she had given birth to a litter of twelve puppies while the family was in Sanford. This was near some kind of record and she wouldn't be allowed to have anymore.

They lived in a nice apartment on Perry's Circle for a short while before being given Captain's quarters on Bowyer Road on the academy grounds. It was a great family oriented place to be and the quarters were incredible. The house had a full basement decorated with relics from the Reina Mercedes, a Spanish man of war that had sunk in the Chesapeake Bay in the late 1800s. The house had a full three stories above that. Every room had a fireplace and the quarters came complete with steward, maid and yardman. Gil and Bobby were expected to and did entertain quite a lot.

Gil checked into the Weapons Department and became Chairman of the Weapons Systems Committee. Gil's fitness report describing his accomplishments in his first year teaching at the academy describes just how well he fit the Naval Academy and vice-versa:

Cdr. Erb is one of seven commanders specifically selected for duty in the Weapons Department of the U. S. Naval Academy. He has enthusiastically and competently accepted the challenge of teaching midshipmen and of contributing wholeheartedly to the Naval Academy environment. Within a month of reporting aboard, while preparing himself for teaching the fall semester, he volunteered to assist in the teaching of the Midshipman Fourth Class Digital Computer summer course. During the Fall and Spring of the regular academic year, he instructed midshipmen second class in Weapons Department courses, "Terminal Ballistics" and "Target Intercept Analysis," respectively. These two latter courses are rigorous, technical courses, requiring a thorough knowledge of probability theory, chemistry of explosives, blast and shock damage, warheads, fuses, safety and arming design considerations, theory of rocket propulsion, the theoretical study of the fire control problem, and the use of analog computers. As a member of an Ad Hoc Curriculum Committee, he was a strong contributor to the revised curriculum for the class of 1968. He has taken a personal interest in the improvement of presentation techniques within the

department through the use of visual aids, and he is actively pursuing a project for the development of a “model classroom.” This project has required frequent consultations with salesmen, and visits to other institutions, and here Cdr. Erb has been a most diplomatic representative for the Naval Academy. Cdr. Erb is particularly suited to the task of teaching in the Weapons Department through his past operational experience as a naval aviator, his association with nuclear weapons, test pilot training, and prior instructor billet assignments. He makes a fine appearance before the midshipmen, providing positive encouragement and motivation at all times. Cdr. Erb is recommended for promotion when due.

These were busy times for Gil. Not only was he teaching Systems Engineering, but also became head of the new Computer Lab and director of the new TV Studio. One of Gil’s students was the most famous of all Dallas Cowboys quarterbacks and the enemy of all Redskins fans, Roger Staubach.

However, that activity which was the most time consuming and gave him more sheer pleasure came from his being in charge of the sailing program for the 13 foot inter-collegiate racing sloops called Skipjacks and the 44 foot ocean racing yawls. This all began with his taking of a sailing course. Bobby, Mark and Scott all took the same course.

The kids had a good time at the academy also where they had the run of the base. Besides the sailing there was swimming, scuba diving and Boy Scouts. Gil and Scott beat out five other teams in a scuba competition. Danna and Scott won a ton of ribbons for the USNA swim team. Mark became the Captain of their explorers club. It seems there were steam tunnels underground connecting every corner of the academy. They smoked cigars and ate candy bars from the huge drums of provisions under the captain’s quarters. Also, in mid-winter they could traipse the two miles into old Annapolis while staying warm.

One of Gil’s favorite sailing stories begins with a gentleman named Huey Long who was related to the infamous Huey P. Long, Governor of Louisiana. It seems Huey Long couldn’t get his asking price for his 60 foot sloop Ondine. So he donated it to the Naval Academy with the stipulation that its name be changed. He realized a whopping tax write-off and the Naval Academy realized a new sloop which they named the Severn Star. Shortly thereafter, the Severn Star, with Gil and his crew of midshipmen, beat Huey’s new boat, the Ondine II, in a race from Newport, Rhode Island to Bermuda. Bobby flew over to Bermuda to celebrate with Gil and it was one of their best vacations.

Interestingly enough, while Gil was in Bermuda, he got offered the Executive Officer position by an old friend of his who was the Commander of the Naval Station.

It was coming vacant in a couple of months. Gil and Bobby figured they would catch “island fever” if they stayed on one island too long and turned it down.

Bobby and Gil were frequently invited to attend Embassy parties in Washington DC. Invited is the polite term for “expected to go.” Maybe a better term would be “encouraged to go.” We must show the flag at the Embassy parties and have full dress military officers present.

One memorable Embassy party they attended with their friends, Captain Dick Fuller and his wife, Betty. This party was at the Malaysian Embassy. It was a lovely party and there were military representatives from many countries around the world. Remember this is at the height of the cold war. Well, of course, they hit it off with a couple of Russian officers and their wives. The Russians spoke excellent English. Gil and Dick decided to invite them to the Naval Academy for a weekend tour. They even took them sailing. Gil remembers it as an incredibly nice weekend and the Russians were extremely grateful for the chance to see the Naval Academy. We have met the enemy and they turned out to be much like us.

When Gil’s tour at the academy ended in 1968 after 4 years, he got orders to Houston, Texas where he was to be the Navy’s senior officer in the Space program. It was a job where he would only fly a desk but it involved promotion to Captain. He would have been directly responsible to the Chief of Naval Operations. Gil traveled to Houston and met with the gentleman he was relieving, Captain Mac Balf, and had a very pleasant briefing on the new job. A week later back at the academy Gil got a phone call and was informed that the orders had been canceled and the job had been civilianized. It went to a Texas Senator’s son. It was a great disappointment for Gil.

His second set of orders was to Columbus, Ohio as Chief of Staff for Admiral Clancy and the F-111 Program. The F-111 was an Air Force Program but was to be adapted for carrier use by the Navy. He hadn’t even had a chance to visit his new duty station yet and Admiral Clancy showed up at his front door at the academy in uniform. Obviously he let the admiral in. Over coffee the Admiral advised Gil not to accept the orders since the F-111, as far as the Navy was concerned, was going to be canceled. It was known only to a select few. As it turned out, the program was officially canceled before Gil could even turn down the orders. This was another disappointment.

In discussing new duty assignments with his detailer in Washington he told the gentleman that he’d accept almost anything but definitely did not want orders to Washington DC. He was not a bureaucrat. Sure enough, his next set of orders was to the Naval Air Systems Command in Crystal City, Virginia near the Pentagon.

He submitted his request to be added to the Retirement List the same day.

The family moved into a rented place in Lake Barcroft in the Washington suburbs next door to Pierre Salinger who at one time was Kennedy's Press Secretary among other things. Gil went to work as a Project Officer in the Parachutes and Escape Systems Division at NAVAIR.

During this time the kids began to experiment with the popular drugs of the time. Remember this was the late 60s and almost all teenagers of that generation were experimenting with sex, drugs and rock and roll. It was part of the times. Bobby and Gil came to the conclusion that it would be better for the family if they got the kids out of that area and the influence of certain individuals so Bobby and the kids moved into the Thorougood house back in Virginia Beach and Gil got an apartment in Arlington near his work. Gil went home each weekend while he waited for his retirement to come through.

His last Fitness Report read as follows:

As project officer for parachutes and advanced escape systems, Cdr. Erb has revealed outstanding leadership and management capabilities. Although many of his programs were drastically reduced due to budget reductions, he was undismayed and redoubled his efforts to justify his programs with the increased competition for available funds.

As Casualty Assistance Officer in regard to the death of Capt. H. F. Lang, USN, Cdr. Erb spent many extra hours of his own time and willingly assisted in every possible way. He performed this sensitive assignment in an outstanding manner.

Although he has retired from active duty, Cdr. Erb will be working as Commander of the Junior Naval Reserve Officer training corps in the Virginia Beach, Virginia High Schools. His dedication to the Navy and concern over leaving the Naval Air Systems Command without an on-board relief are exemplified by the fact that he volunteered to return to the Washington area at his own expense to brief his relief on his unfinished programs.

Cdr. Erb's wide and varied experiences, his outstanding personality and his pride in the Navy will serve him well in his future endeavors and ensure maximum continuing benefits to the Naval establishment.

D.K. Weitzenfeld, RADM, USN

Gil retired from the Navy on November 30, 1969. He had a total of 13 years of flying with the Navy. Of his 2100 hours of flying 1500 of those were in jets.

RADM T. J. Walker, USN, Commander, Naval Air Systems Command wrote in a letter to Gil:

Your retirement from active service and entry into the civilian community is a significant milestone marking the close of a career of loyal and faithful service to the United States Navy.

In that time your assignments have been both interesting and diversified, including duty both afloat and ashore as pilot, test pilot, operations officer, special weapons officer, project engineer, instructor and safety officer and coach for the Naval Academy racing squadron. During your Naval service you were awarded the Air medal with gold star, Navy Commendation medal with Combat "V", Navy Unit Commendation (CVA-37), National Defense Service medal with star, Korean Service medal, and United Nations Service medal. Because of earlier service in the US Army Air Corps, you received the American Campaign medal and World War II Victory medal.

The Commander, Naval Air Systems Command extends his sincere appreciation for your many years of service in the Navy with particular regard to your service with this Command. May you have continued success and good luck in your future endeavors.

## CHAPTER 34

### HOW ONE BECOMES A DEVELOPER

---

Life was not over by a long shot at this point, just active duty. Gil still had to make a living and get the kids through college. The first born, Mark went to Miami in a brand new yellow Firebird where he became Commodore for Miami's sailing team. Not bad for a kid with polio. Scott went to Virginia Tech to become an architect in a Volkswagen. Gil does admit that between Mark's polio and Danna's being the darling little girl, Scott may have gotten the short end of the stick at times.

Gil has almost as many stories concerning his life after the Navy as he does while he was in. In these next few chapters we'll try to hit the high points and a couple that weren't so high.

Bobby and Gil built a beautiful home in an upscale neighborhood in Virginia Beach that was designed by their son, Scott. Gil tells a short story about this new place this way:

We moved into our new house complete with swimming pool in the middle of July 1971 and it was hot. Our house was right on Keeling Cove, which was at the center of three coves at the northern end of Little Neck Point. The Smiths lived on the cove to our left and the Pattersons on our right. The cove water was fairly clear back then but not really suitable for swimming. It was beautiful to look at but had a muddy bottom.

The area was heavily wooded and abundant with wildlife. We fed scraps to the raccoons and threw bread out on the cove for the ducks. We counted thirteen of them. There were four rather plain looking girl ducks and nine gorgeous males with green fluorescent heads. We thought the boy ducks were horrible trying to drown the girl ducks all the time. The girls seemed to enjoy the game though since they kept coming back for more.

After playing their games, the girls would climb up on the bank and try to find a nest into which she could safely hide her newly laid eggs. No matter how hard she tried though, the raccoons found them. The raccoons apparently took the eggs home to their children and scrambled them for breakfast.

We also had two families of red foxes and a big black rat snake along with countless squirrels and rabbits. The raccoons, ducks,

squirrels and rabbits stayed but the foxes moved away and some boys on bicycles killed the black snake.

One day a boy and a girl duck together climbed up onto the bank and were strolling next to the pool. The crystal clear water was so inviting that they took a little swim. My wife, Bobby and daughter Danna were just thrilled and immediately went up to the old hardware store and bought a 50 pound sack of rabbit pellets. The hardware store man told them that the ducks just loved them. They sprinkled them liberally around the pool and Daisy and Donald, of course the girls had immediately named them, were in hog (or is it duck) heaven.

When I got home that night, they couldn't wait so show me the new visitors. Well, it was cute to see two ducks paddling around the pool. Just then Donald started to try to "drown" Daisy so we left them and went in for dinner.

When I got home the next evening, the girls, my girls that is, were even more excited than the day before. We now had thirteen ducks in and around the pool. They were dining on the pellets and trying to drown one and other and just having a great time. It was obvious that they all preferred the swimming pool to the muddy cove.

It was really hot this night and I wanted to jump in the pool and refresh myself after a hard day's work, so I shooed away all the ducks and dived in. At that moment, that pool was worth every last cent we had paid for it. And it had taken just about every last cent we had to pay for it.

When I climbed out of the pool it suddenly dawned on me that just perhaps we had created a monster. I didn't sleep easy that night and the next evening when I got home it was quite clear that we had, in fact, created a monster. The ducks had found a new home and weren't about to give it up. The monster part was that the pool had lost a bit of its clarity. It was turning to a slightly green color that just about matched the color of the rabbit pellets. I broke the news to the girls as to what I thought was happening. They pulled out their color charts and sure enough the pool was turning duckshit green.

We all agreed that the ducks had to go.

We already knew that if we shooed them out, it was just a matter of an hour or so and back they were. Shooing simply wasn't going to do the trick. Our dog Snoopy wasn't any help at all. When we said,

“sic ‘em,” he just turned around and walked back in to the house. We really couldn’t have expected much more though. He was a seventeen-year-old Chihuahua and he was all “taco’d out.”

I got out my twelve-gauge shotgun and fired a blast up in the air. This got their attention and they instantly made a “gang takeoff.” Maybe they got the idea and had vacated the premises for permanent.

Bobby woke me up the next morning and said, “Honey, they’re back.”

I tried the shotgun trick again. And again, away they flew.

Later that day, Bobby called me at work. “Honey, they’re back.”

After three more blasts of the old twelve gauge, I was out of shells and worried that someone might call the law. It’s illegal to discharge a firearm within the city limits. Then I remembered that I had some M-80’s left over from a Fourth of July celebration down in Florida. I think I had confiscated them from my kids because they were dangerous. Why I kept them, I’m not sure but I found the shoebox and there they were.

An M-80 is shaped just like a Girl Scout marshmallow but it’s silver and about twice as big. A one-inch fuse sticks out and the power when it goes off seems to exceed that of a small atomic bomb.

That evening I gave it a try. I lit the fuse and tossed it way up over the pool and off it went with a bang that made my shotgun noise sound like a popgun. The ducks were gone in a wink of an eye and I had the problem solved. Why on earth hadn’t I thought of those M-80’s earlier?

Next morning, I was devastated. There were thirteen ducks paddling gracefully around in the now murky green water of the Erb swimming pool. Although the rabbit food meals were long gone, the slow digestive process in a duck kept the pool green. They must have foraged elsewhere for food but nothing in the Lynnhaven River could compete with the relatively clean water in the Erb’s pool for just leisurely paddling around. I continued the M-80 barrage for the next couple of days but in just a few hours, Donald and Daisy and their friends were always back.

Then a miracle happened. I lit off one of the last M-80’s and tossed it high in the air, hoping that maybe the ducks would finally

get the idea that I didn't really want them on our property at all.

It didn't go off. It was a dud. It hit the water and I started digging in the shoebox for the last firecracker when the miracle occurred. The M-80 went off. Underwater. With a "Thwoomph." It wasn't a very loud "Thwoomph" and I wasn't sure what effect it would have on our feathered interlopers but up, up and away. They were gone. Instantly!

Next morning when I woke up, the pool was empty. No ducks. I called Bobby at noon. No ducks. When I got home that evening, no ducks. Next morning, no ducks. Had we won? I wasn't sure but it looked like maybe we had hit the jackpot.

The ducks did not return. Apparently the underwater burst had done something to the ducks plumbing system that did the deed. It had puckered some sensitive part of their underwater anatomy that they would never forget. We had won. The pool cleared up and the Erb's now had regained control of their most prized possession. What a great day!

The following week, we were invited for cocktails over at the Patterson's. We walked in and the first thing that Gwen uttered was, "Bobby guess what? Look out the window. We have thirteen new ducks in our cove."

On his way to becoming a successful developer, Gil experienced a few bumps in the road. His first job out of the Navy he got by doing a favor for a friend of his who happened to be a retired Navy Captain and head of the Junior Reserve Officer's Training Corps (JROTC) for the Virginia Beach area. He had some family problems back in Maine (hell of a problem: his Uncle had died and left him two and a half million dollars) and asked Gil if he would take over for him. Gil agreed. So, the first Monday after Christmas vacation 1969, Gil essentially became a teacher at Princess Anne High School in Virginia Beach. He had a great Navy Chief working for him who took care of the drill and uniform aspects of the training while Gil took care of all classroom duties. The young lads (all boys at this time) seemed to favor Gil and would come to him for counseling with their problems. This being 1970 the problems almost always were due to drugs. After a year and a half of this, Gil had enough of being a drug counselor, resigned and moved on.

While teaching at the high school Gil, naturally, had his summers free. Not one to sit idle, he got a summer job selling boats. These were from 14 foot runabouts to 28 foot cabin cruisers. He had fun selling these boats but couldn't make a living at it so he also used this time to get his real estate license. He had already quit the

JROTC job.

After a few months of selling real estate he was offered a job by a broker named R. E. Smith. In his first three months with Mr. Smith he sold 13 houses. In the same time Mr. Smith had sold two houses. The firm did well and prospered but after a while they had a parting of the ways and Gil had to sue Mr. Smith for commissions he was owed. He won. Shortly thereafter Mr. Smith unfortunately passed away. As Mark Twain said, "I never wished death on anyone but there have been occasions where I have read obituaries with a smile."

It just so happened that the real estate office that Gil had helped set up was located in a building owned by a successful real estate developer by the name of Ray Breeden. Ray called Gil and asked him two things; would he go to work for him and would he teach him to fly. Gil told Mr. Breeden that he would come to work for him but that Ray would have to get his private license on his own and then Gil would teach him how to fly. Ray agreed. It was the beginning of a grand relationship and many flying vacations all over the east coast from New York to Key West and out to the Bahamas. On many of these trips the wives went along. The first aircraft Ray bought was a single engine, four passenger, Beechcraft Sierra. They eventually upgraded to a twin-engine Piper Aztec which Gil already had experience with in the Navy. The Navy had used this plane for a utility plane. Gil had been one of the pilots to check it out before the Navy purchased it.

On one occasion they were returning from Key West and, while Gil was asleep in the co-pilot's seat, Ray somehow managed to fly into the Lake George Test Range. Gil woke and told Ray they needed to make a hard right and get out of the test range that was forbidden airspace and Ray disagreed. He kept his course and soon after two Air Force jets buzzed them and then forced them off the range. This cost Ray a \$1,500.00 fine.

Ultimately, Gil became the CEO of the development company, along with being the head salesman, and learned the business inside and out. During the building of one of their projects, a 151 townhouse development called Deerwood Trace, Gil managed to get his picture in the newspaper again. The Ledger-Star ran an article concerning a Siamese cat called Bossman. It seems Bossman had somehow gotten dry-walled in the ceiling of one of the townhouses while it was being built. She was missing for four days before one of the buyers checking on the progress of their townhouse thought they heard strange cat-like sounds coming from the walls. The construction superintendent, Gil, seeing no alternative, called the local fire department and watched while they hacked at the ceiling, which had been installed only a few days before, with crowbars and axes. Bossman was rescued and returned to his owners. The title of the article was Cat's Meow Cost \$1,600.00.

Gil spent five years with Ray before going off on his own.

Next, Gil teamed with a gentleman named Charlie Reich, another retired Navy officer and red-hot real estate salesman. They were going to buy a small piece of land together and build 38 townhouses. Charlie didn't show up at closing on the land. Gil called him and Charlie had decided to back out. Gil pursued the project by himself. The townhouses all sold before he could even finish them and Gil made a lot of money.

On his next project he built five warehouses with a partner named Bill Walker which sold quickly and he made another significant sum. He had become a successful developer.

At this time he bought an ultra-light that he named the "Bitch Kitty". The Bitch Kitty, however, is an episode in Gil's life that deserves a chapter of its own. It will follow in the next chapter.

Gil, while he was a developer, had a gentleman working for him he affectionately called "Lurch" after the character in the old TV show, *The Addams Family*. Gil tells us about Lurch thusly:

Seems like about a thousand years ago but I guess it was only back in the seventies. I had bought a beat-up, old house and it was run down, needed paint, and the roof badly in need of repair. It wasn't fit to live in. The location, however, was its attraction. It was right on Shore Drive in Virginia Beach, and sure to be valuable one day.

I worked on, what I jokingly called, restoration, and was about to give it up when, up drives Lurch in a beat up old Ford pick-em-up truck. We didn't call him Lurch at that time and never, ever did to his face. It probably would have been okay though, because, in addition to being a country boy, he was not aware that television had replaced the radio as America's number one time killer. He had probably never even heard of the "Addams Family." His real name was Ferris Bowden and when I spoke to him direct, he was always Ferris.

Lurch was a six foot ten giant and weighed a solid three hundred pounds with not the slightest hint of excess baggage. He was the picture of health and youthfulness, although he had to be in his fifties. His face was strikingly handsome, but he had an unpleasant, farm-boy odor about him. Size wise, his hands matched his bulk and were work-worn and dirty. He wore bib overalls and grimy high top shoes with no laces. The shoes were worn and run over on the sides and were not even fit to give to a charity drive. His overall appearance was, shall we say, disheveled, unkempt, and really country.

"Hey man!" he said. "Your "ruff" don't look too good. Want it

fixed? Me and the boys can have it lookin' like new by sundown and I'll do it for free if you'll let us move in for a few days."

I didn't know what to say. I thought to myself, "What have I got to lose? It would just sit here vacant and deteriorate further. Maybe I can salvage something out of it after all."

He then added, "Course you'd have to buy the shingles and tacks, but we'd put 'em on for nuthin'."

Lurch was true to his word and the roof went on in record time. They had done a professional job, which was the first surprise. Maybe this old house did have some potential after all. Anyway, he and the boys moved in.

At the time, I wasn't sure who "the boys" were. There were three of them. Mikey was ten, Evan was eleven, and Scooter, seventeen. They were street urchins right out of *Oliver Twist*.

And then the second surprise hit. Mama moved in too.

Mama was Lurch's mother and had to be in her eighties. She was dressed in "granny" clothes, and looked like she had just rolled in on a covered wagon. Her dress was calico and shapeless, but was neat and clean. She had a wide, toothless smile and her skin was milky white and looked like it was about three sizes too large for her body.

"She was a pretty thing when she was young," Lurch claimed in his husky, uneducated voice, "and she is still beautiful to me and the boys."

He occasionally paid me a few dollars in rent. I never asked for the money, but I'm sure that when he had a few extra dollars, he felt obliged to pay as much as he could afford. This was okay with me and I felt pretty good in having done my good deed for the year.

A couple of months later, Lurch asked me to come over and talk a bit. He invited me in and I was simply shocked. They had no furniture. The boys slept on the floor, on pads and Lurch had a smelly old mattress on an open set of rusty bedsprings. They had fashioned an eating table in the living room out of a sheet of plywood set up on four boxes with more boxes for chairs. The kitchen had all the appliances in it, which were in the house when they moved in, but I wasn't sure any of them were working. There was also a rusty, old metal garbage can stuffed full of pizza boxes, empty coke cans, paper plates and assorted plastic knives, forks, and spoons. Completely out

of contrast, was a fairly clean and neat bathroom.

“Where’s your mama?” I said.

“She’s right in there. Come on in and say hello.”

The second shock of the day out distanced the first by a thousand miles. The room was beautiful. It had been freshly painted, had crisp looking chintz curtains on the windows, and the bedroom furniture looked brand new. It had three or four colorful throw rugs on the floor, and mama was sitting up in bed under a luxurious flowered comforter, in a flannel nightgown, reading a “True Stories” magazine. I didn’t realize it until now, but mama, was unable to walk. I found out later that there had been some kind of accident and her legs were paralyzed. Lurch and the boys took care of her every need. They kept her bathed and clean, fed her, took her to the bathroom, and kept her supplied with “True Story” magazines. She was truly a happy lady. She was with her family and that’s all that mattered.

I eventually found out that all three boys were some sort of distant kin to Lurch and his mama. Their parents had abandoned them, and Lurch took them in and taught them to help him put a “ruff” on a house. They did good work and made ends meet in a meager sort of way.

One day, a year or so later, Lurch started hauling in old, beat up household appliances, and just storing them in the backyard. I couldn’t believe my eyes. There were washers and dryers, hot water heaters, stoves, refrigerators, and dishwashers. I counted thirty-eight unsightly pieces of the unsightly junk.

“Ferris,” I said. “Just what the hell is going on? You can’t turn this place into a garbage dump. This stuff has to go. It’s ugly and nasty and the neighbors are going to complain.”

As if to back up my edict, a city inspector served notice on me. “Clean it up or suffer the consequences.”

“Okay Ferris!” I said. “This is it. You clean up this mess or you’re outta here!”

“Okay, Mr. Erb, we’ll get rid of it but it’s gonna hurt. We was savin’ this stuff to sell off to a friend of mine. He’s a used appliance dealer down home.

A couple of days later, I went out to the house. The yard was clean

as a whistle. Every last piece was gone. I said to myself, *“Thank you, Lurch old man. You did a great job.”*

But something else didn't seem quite right. There was no sign of life or activity. I got the feeling that Ferris had cleaned up the mess and just took off. I went up to the back door and tried the handle. It was open. I went in and my mind and body were not ready for what I saw. Lurch had moved every last appliance into the house. I could barely squeeze in through the door, let alone move from one room to the next. The kitchen, living room, dining room, bedroom, and halls were jam packed with the smelly old pieces of junk. There just weren't words to express my shock and dismay.

Then I thought about mama's room. I had to move a big refrigerator to get in, and then came the next sight to completely blow my mind. Mamma's room was just as it was when she had been lying there in bed reading “True Story” magazine. I wouldn't have been one bit surprised to see her still there, but she, along with Ferris and the boys, were gone.

I never saw, or heard from, any one of them ever again.

Two weeks later, I tore the house down and sold the vacant lot.

The last project Gil developed was called the Trade Center. They built 35 warehouse/commercial/storage type units. Gil sold 24 of these units and maintained ownership of six commercial units and eight storage units. These he leases. This led to his second retirement. At 79 he is still managing the leased property but maintains that in reality he is retired.

## CHAPTER 35

### THE BITCH KITTY

---

The story of the “Bitch Kitty”, Gil’s Ultra-light, certainly deserves its own chapter. Gil told this story as follows:

Not too many years ago, I was a combination real-estate broker, builder, developer, and in general doing anything I could to make a buck. An old friend came up to me one day and said, “Gil, let’s buy an Ultra-light.” We were both retired Navy fliers and it seemed like an exciting thing to do. Jack and I had flown together many times. He had been a squadron commander and had all his tickets punched in his very successful Navy career and now was apparently bored with just loafing around and wanted some action in his life.

My comment was, “Hell, yes! Let’s go for it.”

A few weeks later, three big boxes were delivered to a warehouse that I had under construction and the boxes contained all the parts and pieces for a two hundred and five pound airplane. I wrote out a check for the charges and immediately called Jack. We were dumbfounded. I mean there must have been a million or more pieces and a small ten-page booklet of instructions. There were miles of aluminum tubing, ten thousand nuts and bolts, a box with a snowmobile engine in it, and an acre-and-a-half of bright orange and black canvas. It was late in October so the orange and black color scheme was quite appropriate.

At this point, our project needed a name and with Halloween approaching, we thought of Black Witch, the Pumpkin Plane, and several others, none of which was really right. That evening over a couple of beers, the name Bitch Kitty hit us and stuck. To this day, when we reminisce about the venture, we shed a tear and share a chuckle over the Bitch Kitty and what it did to our group.

I had better explain that an Ultra-light plane was something new in the aviation field and sort of defied all the rules that had ever been written. It was a single place machine with a snowmobile engine that you had to start just like a lawn mover. I mean pull the rope to get it started. It was not licensed by the FAA and there were no flight restrictions as to when or where to fly it since it weighed less than two hundred and five pounds. The fact that it was going to be built

in my warehouse right under the traffic pattern of the NAS Oceana didn't bother us a bit. We'd probably never get that high anyway.

Jack turned out to be no help at all so, me, being an Aeronautical Engineer, had the burden of creation exclusively to myself. By the way, building an Ultra-light is more like playing with an Erector Set and had nothing to do with being an engineer. It was more like "put tab A in slot B" than anything brilliant. Jack did drop by every day or so with the comment, "Wow, she really is coming along, isn't she?" With that he would go home for cocktail hour while I worked on into the night. But it was a labor of true love and I just couldn't give it up in spite of the risk of losing a very happy marriage of many, many years.

As the Bitch Kitty started to take form I was besieged by visitors from all walks of life. A catholic priest came by, why I'll never know, and merely shook his head. Others were fascinated but skeptical and one old friend, Roger, came by and said emphatically, "I want a piece of this thing." He, too, was a retired Navy flier so with his financial contribution and moral support, he became member number three of the Bitch Kitty Klub. His support was strictly moral and all he could do was hand me the screwdriver when asked. That is, if he was around when I needed the screwdriver. In short, construction was my bailiwick and my partners were nothing more than interested observers, each with a passel of money tied up in the thing.

As our "Phoenix" approached completion, a fourth partner joined the club. Larry was a bit of a nut and had never been in the military but had taken private flying lessons and had accumulated almost one hundred hours in the air. The other three of us counted our hours in the thousands. Money was no object with Larry and he thought flying was greater than sex and so he divorced his wife and bought his own airplane. But what he bought needed some work and he had yet to get it in the air. He figured some Ultra-light experience before he got into a real flying machine would be a good investment.

At this point, I'll make a simple statement. If you fall out of a real airplane, or fall off a tall building, the results can be, shall we say, fatal. But somehow, falling out of this Ultra-light thing, which had the appearance of a stupid toy, just didn't seem dangerous at all. But wait...wait until you hear the rest of the story.

A long and tedious month passed and finally the Bitch Kitty was ready to fly. We needed to get some hours on the brand new engine

so we took turns taxiing it in and out of the warehouse and up and down the street anxiously pressing for the big ten-hour mark when the engine was run-in and ready for flight.

It was a Sunday afternoon. The sky was clear and the four of us were ready and chompin' at the bit. We had a vacant lot next to the warehouse that we had cleared of all debris and Roger won the toss. We strapped him in and he gave us a cheerful smile and a tally-ho as he gave her the gun and was airborne almost instantly. We cheered, screamed, yelled, and jumped up and down with excitement. He was to fly in the local area, practice a few turns, keep her at about two hundred feet, and land back at the take-off spot so the next one of us could give it a go. But no, Roger took up a heading of north and disappeared over the horizon.

We had arranged for a more suitable operating site on some vacant land which was not under the Oceana flight path and which belonged to a friend near where I lived on Little Neck Point. Roger had no excuse for his stupid action except to say later "The wind just wasn't right so I thought I'd take a look at our new base." It was a pretty flimsy excuse but we figured out where he had gone and when we got to our new base Roger was sitting there with a big grin on his face. "What kept you? I've been here for thirty minutes."

I was next to fly the Bitch Kitty and it was the thrill of a lifetime; scooting over the treetops at a couple of hundred feet, looking down into peoples back yards, racing a boat out on the river, waving at folks who heard the screech of her engine, and, in general, in a new world up there without a care to mar the feeling.

After about thirty minutes, and not too sure how much gas was left, I landed back at our new base. It was getting dark and too late for Jack or Larry to fly, so we tied her down under and giant oak tree and left her there for the night. The weather turned bad for the next week or so, and we were smart enough to wait for conditions to improve.

An Ultra-light gets airborne at about twenty miles an hour and cruises at between thirty and forty. She has a stall speed of around fifteen miles an hour and our ten-page booklet strongly advises not to fly in the wind is over ten miles an hour or gusting plus or minus five miles an hour. Finally though, the weather blessed us and Jack was up next.

We got him all strapped in and headed north into the wind and away he went. He got airborne right away and we heard him ease off the throttle from full take-off power but he reduced it too much and we never heard him add it back again. We didn't know what was wrong as he turned back to the field. The turn was too sharp and the Bitch Kitty was losing altitude rapidly. Jack went into the river about fifty feet off the shoreline and both he and the Ultra-light were underwater. We watched awestruck and started running towards him knowing that he was in serious trouble. There was no movement at the site except for a few bubbles rising. When we got to him, he was strapped as tight-as-tick into the seat and was not moving. We got him free and up on the sand and started CPR. To our wonder and relief, he choked up on a couple of mouthfuls of river water, opened his eyes and said, "What the hell happened?" To this day not one of us has an answer, including Jack. Everything appeared okay when we got the plane out of the water. There was a lot of bent tubing and busted joints, but the engine ran fine.

Back to the warehouse went the Bitch Kitty and my job was cut out for me. After she was all repaired and ready for flight, we found that our base on the Lynnhaven had been subdivided and houses were under construction. "Hell," we said, "That's no big deal. We'll just put her on floats. And put her on floats we did and for a new base, the boat dock in my back yard in Keeling Cove was the Bitch Kitty's new home.

The Bitch Kitty liked her new home and both Roger and I flew the pontoons off it. Jack was no longer interested and Larry was too busy with his business to pay us much mind until one day I got a call, "Hey, Gil, this is Larry. How about getting my ride in the Kitty?"

"Fine," I said, "I'll fly it over to your place and we'll make a pilot out of you yet."

Larry lived on the River about a mile from my house as the crow flies, so I cranked her up and off I went to give him his checkout. I landed and taxied up to his beach and he was rarin' to go.

"Larry, the wind is about five or six knots and no gusts. Its ideal but I think you better get the feel of her on floats before you get airborne."

"Sure thing," he said, "Ah cain't wait."

Larry got in the seat and didn't bother to strap in which was the

smartest thing he did all day. Not to strap in, that is. He gunned the engine and was headed directly into the wind and before I could scream, "TOO MUCH POWER!" he was fifty feet in the air. The wings wobbled and he dropped the nose and headed back down toward the water. Why he didn't reduce the power, I'll never know, but, as he got lower and lower and about to plow into the river, he yanked back up the stick and up, up, and away, he went. Finally at about two hundred feet, he got the power reduced and started back down with the Kitty somewhat under control but with the wings still waving like a sick goose. When he was about to hit the water, he pulled up the nose again and took off all the power. The airplane stalled and the right wing dropped, hit the water, and the Bitch Kitty did a cartwheel. Larry was thrown out of the cockpit and slap-dab into the Lynnhaven River.

When I got to him in his neighbor's boat, he was floating in the water waving his arms. I pulled a wide-eyed Larry out of the water, unhurt. All he could say was "What the hell happened."

The Bitch Kitty was a tangle of tubing, wires, and the engine was sitting squarely in the pilot's seat where Larry would have been if he had strapped himself in.

We towed the mess back to Larry's house and it was unrecognizable as a once beautiful and colorful flying machine. As far as I was concerned, it would never fly again. I'd had it. But I was wrong.

We loaded it up on a trailer and carried it, floats and all, back to the warehouse where the whole thing started. Larry, Jack, Roger, and I looked her over and simply said, "Sayonara." We never dreamed it would fly again and I wish it hadn't.

The Bitch Kitty, no longer resembling an airplane, sat in the warehouse for a couple of weeks. One day two young men wanted to take a look at the warehouse which was for rent. I took them in and showed them around. It was too big for the computer school they wanted to set up but one of them, Gene Hall, noticed the pile of junk in the corner and said, "What the hell is that?"

I explained what it was and he was really intrigued. His partner, Neil Lies, shared his interest and we spent the next hour talking about flying in general and the Ultra-light in particular. They both came back the next day and made me an offer I could, and did, refuse.

We'll rebuild the Kitty and pay all expenses if you will teach us to fly it."

“Hey, think this thing over,” I said. “This ain’t no toy. It’s a right serious airplane and the last thing you want to do is learn to fly in one of these. You need to learn in a Piper Cub or a Cessna or something like that where the instructor can be with you. After you solo and get your ticket, then you might tackle the Kitty. You get your private license then come back and we’ll talk about rebuilding the thing.

The next day they were back and we made the deal. It was simply, “We’ll rebuild it and we both will start taking flying lessons. Deal?”

I agreed. I found that Gene had been in the Navy as an Aviation Mechanic and Neil had been a control tower operator. So they both knew what they were getting into. They both started taking ground school at Suffolk Airport and were due to get their first flights in a couple of weeks.

In less than a week, however, Gene had replaced all the broken and bent tubing, had installed new flying wires, and Neil had taken the orange and black nylon cloth to a friend of his who worked in the parachute loft at NAS Oceana. I couldn’t believe my eyes. The Bitch Kitty looked just as good as the first day it flew, over a year ago, and the engine hummed like a bass butterfly. They had junked the pontoons, they were not repairable, and put back on the conventional landing gear. I was amazed. They even had rebuilt an old trailer to carry it and had secured permission for a test flight at the Suffolk Airport.

Two days later, a Sunday, they loaded the Kitty on the trailer and I was stuck. I was to be the test pilot. We drove down to Suffolk and there was another Ultra-light readying for flight. We unloaded the Kitty and parked her next to a bright green craft that resembled her but was of a completely different design. The Kitty’s tail was an inverted VEE while the green one’s was conventional. While our engine was mounted directly aft of the pilot, the Green Machine’s engine was on top of the wing.

We talked to the owner and pilot and he had been flying down here at Suffolk for several months. I commented that the sky was overcast and although the wind was steady on ground, what was it like up a hundred or so feet? He said. “No problem. It’s always like this here. I’m about to take off and you can see for yourselves.”

He made a smooth take off and climbed to about two hundred feet and was circling the field. I was still a bit hesitant. I just didn’t

like the overcast. My experience told me that there could be gusts under the clouds as they rolled by.

“Come on, Gil. We came all the way down here and really want to see this thing fly. We got a lot of time and money in it. Don’t let us down.”

“Okay. What the hell, let’s give it a bloody go.”

We cranked up the engine, and I taxied around the apron for about five minutes and everything looked and felt good so off to the runway I went, gave her the gun, and started my climb to a safe altitude. I couldn’t have been higher than a hundred feet, two hundred at the most, when the gusts started to hit. I was being tossed around like a Kleenex in a typhoon. I had full left rudder, full left stick, and the airplane insisted on a forty-five degree bank to the right. I was barely able to control the Kitty. The gusts eased off a bit and I headed directly downwind to the landing end of the runway. I still had difficulty maintaining altitude and heading but was able to get to the approach end and start down. I had no idea what the landing would be like; I could only hope that as I got closer to the ground, the gusts would ease up.

Suffolk Airport has power lines at the field boundary and I had to get over them and then fly her to the end of the runway and hopefully to a satisfactory touchdown. I thought I had plenty of altitude to get over the lines but I suddenly realized that I wasn’t going to make it. A severe downdraft had caught me and it was into the lines for sure. Directly below the power lines was a six-foot high cyclone fence. There was maybe fifty feet from the bottom of the power cables to the top of the fence and if I didn’t push over to go under the lines, the Bitch Kitty and I would fry together. If I did push over, I would probably hit the fence and who knows what would happen then. I chose to push over then haul back on the stick and pray I didn’t catch the fence with the landing gear. I did just that and I cleared the fence by a couple of feet. While no more than ten feet in the air, I got caught by a strong, gusty crosswind and landed in the grass to the left and short of the end of the runway. As soon as I stopped, I cut the power and the wind caught the left wing. I was sure the Kitty was going to go over but I got out of the cockpit and grabbed onto the wing and my weight held it down. Gene and Neil were coming at full gallop and got there in time to take over and help keep her from blowing away.

We then heard the sound of the Green Machine. He was in the

same trouble that I was in and the wind conditions were even worse. He was trying to get over the top of the power lines but it was obvious he wasn't going to make it either. He hit the lines squarely in the middle and the sparks and smoke and sound of the screeching engine was terrifying.

The crash crew was on the way to the end of the runway, having seen my predicament. They saw the impact of the Green Machine with the power lines but were helpless to do any more than stand back and wait for the sparking to die down. It was too dangerous to approach the plane for the cables were blowing around and arcing as though it were a thousand Fourth of July's.

About half an hour passed before VEPCO could cut off the power and the crash crew could approach the site. The pilot was dead. He was electrocuted by the ten thousand volts being carried by the power lines and his singed body was carried away in an ambulance.

That night I didn't sleep. I shuddered through the night thinking about what could have happened to me. I didn't attribute my being alive to any skill or great flying experience. I was just plain lucky.

The Bitch Kitty was never again to fly. Gene and Neil got her to my back yard and there she sat, still an airplane in one piece, but somehow I knew she was jinxed and had to be destroyed. I took her apart, piece-by-piece and put her back in the boxes that had once been her home.

I didn't know whether to blame the airplane itself or just blame it on bad luck. The engine still worked fine and as time passed into the following spring and then summer and I got over the trauma. I had a great idea. What if I mounted the engine on my twelve foot Johnboat? What kind of trouble would I be getting into then?

I used the Johnboat for fishing and putting around in Keeling Cove where I lived. It was made of aluminum and was twelve feet long and I was sick and tired of rowing. Wouldn't it be great if it had motor and then I realized that I had one right out back in the box it came in, the Bitch Kitty's engine. Gene Hall and I had become close friends by this time and I told him of my plan to put the Bitch Kitty engine on the Johnboat. He thought it was a fine idea and to work we went.

I did some calculations about where and how to mount the engine so as to have the proper center-of-gravity and designed a system of

aluminum struts to attach it to the gunnels. We both worked with hacksaws, wrenches, and screwdrivers and pretty soon we had an airboat. We, of course, needed a name and “Alice the Airboat” seemed like a winner.

For steering control, we rigged up a rudder and mounted it in the props slipstream. I again was elected to be the Test Pilot and I did exactly what I was taught in the US Navy. Go at it slowly. I got the engine started and at idle I took the controls. All went well except Alice wouldn’t turn properly. When I deflected the rudder, her stern simply went sideways. There wasn’t enough forward speed to make the rudder effective. If I added power to go faster and deflected the rudder, she would turn but still not enough.

We talked it over and decided to attach a fixed underwater array of stakes or rudder-like strips to combat Alice’s’ desired to skid. It worked and sure enough, we had an Airboat, this time one that we could control. It could carry a passenger up in front of the pilot but with two people, Alice was overloaded and couldn’t get up on a plane or go over about ten miles and hour.

I’ll admit that it was a cumbersome looking machine but with the light load of the pilot only, it was fast, and I mean real fast. I also had a Boston Whaler that would do about forty-five miles and hour and with me in the Whaler and Gene in Alice, it was neck and neck.

We toyed with her for about a month and had a great time exploring the many coves and inlets of Lynnhaven River. Even in shallow water.

## CHAPTER 36

### FAREWELL, MY LOVE

---

Gil wasn't too sure if he was alive or dead, or how old he was, or who were all these people in the room, and more particularly, who was the woman standing there. So he clamed himself down a little and tried to figure things out.

*I sure don't recognize any of the people in the room except for the woman. If she's my mother, I am twelve. If it's my wife, I'm sixty. If the man on the bed is my dad, he will be dead in about an hour. If it's me on the bed, then the woman must be my wife. But will I be dead in about an hour?*

Gil's Dad had died in 1938 when he was twelve. He thought, *now, that woman isn't my mother. It must be my wife so I must be sixty but things aren't getting any clearer. Why am I having trouble breathing?*

Gil heard the Doctor's say, "We've got to crack open his chest and get that heart working now or he won't make it. Get into the OR and get me as much help as you can find. I've never done any open-heart work but I've watched two or three."

Gil got lucky that day. At Norfolk General, a cardiology team was scrubbing for elective surgery on a retired policeman. All six of them, two surgeons, an anesthesiologist, and three OR nurses, hopped into a Rescue Truck and with sirens blaring, made it to Virginia Beach General in just over half an hour.

Gil had pneumonia too, which really complicated the surgery, but these guys were good and the teamwork was textbook. One of the surgeons stripped a vein out of the right leg, while drugs to drain the lungs were administered by the anesthetist, and the cardiologist opened the chest to get at the heart. Four hours later, Gil was in recovery and Bobby was thanking God.

When Gil was released two weeks later, he was a newly educated man. He knew the meaning of terms like cholesterol and diet. Diet was the most important thing he learned. He began to count calories and fat grams like a pro. His cholesterol got down to 190 from the 350 the day he had the heart attack and his weight got down to 185 from 240. At seventy-five he still had a few years ahead of him.

He's 79 now and still going strong although he is minus one kidney now also.

Bobby was not so lucky. She died in 2003 of emphysema and Gil was devastated. He couldn't even bare to stay in the home they had shared and his son, Scott, had designed. Gil moved into a condo. To help him with his grief he wrote the following:

Hurricane Isabel was imminent on the East Coast. It was late September 2003. We lived in Little Neck Point and if someone sneezed in Smithfield, our power went out. Little Neck Point is at the very end of the line in a heavily wooded section of Virginia Beach and the slightest suggestion of a breeze topples a tree somewhere along the line and down goes a power pole, out go our lights, along with the electricity that keeps Bobby's oxygen concentrator doing its job. Bobby had emphysema.

Bobby got caught up in the smoking fad back in the forties and could never shake the habit. It was her addiction. She wanted to quit but it was not to be. We tried everything; hypnotism, the patch, will power, I hid her cigarettes, she hid her cigarettes, but somehow none of the schemes seemed to work.

The doctor said, "Mrs. Erb, you've got to quit smoking or the treatment I give you simply won't work." She quit for a day or two. Several days in the hospital and the drama of the rescue squad coming to our home in the middle of the night seemed to work too—but only for a short time.

In the local hospital here in Virginia Beach, she got superior treatment. Pure oxygen was pumped into her lungs. Medicated vapor was pumped via a nebulizer. When discharged she could go several days without a cigarette. Then, a few days later, just one drag on one with "practically no tar or nicotine," and then "Honey, will you pick up a carton of Virginia Slims for me. Make sure they are the long ones, with a filter, and low-tar."

Of course, I could have said, "No." But, I just couldn't deny anything to the love of my life.

Bobby loved four things—bridge, smoking, her children and me. I'm not sure today in what order I would put them. But we did have a most happy life together. Fifty-four years of it. Sure, there were a few downs, but mostly ups. We brought three wonderful children, a mess of grandchildren, and six great grandchildren into the world. In the end it was all worth it.

When Isabel was a day or two away, we headed for safe ground. Bobby found us a motel near Richmond and on the 18th of September, she and I, and Danna and Jim, our daughter and her husband, headed west. That night, all went well but towards morning, Bobby had breathing problems and I had Danna call to find out where the

closest hospital was. It was Virginia Medical College Hospital in Richmond, thirty minutes away. She was admitted while I parked the car and when I got to the emergency desk they said she was being transferred to the “Palliative Ward.” What on earth is the Palliative Ward, I wondered. I doubt if one person in a thousand knows the definition of palliative. I didn’t. Webster says it means “care without cure.”

“It’s terminal,” said the nurse. She wouldn’t look at me. The nurse turned and left me standing there.

When I found the palliative ward, it was a small wing. There were ten or twelve doors and some of them had paper butterflies hanging over the patient’s rooms while the other rooms were lounges, nurse’s offices, and an admitting desk. It was beginning to soak in that Bobby wasn’t going to make it this time. She was in a private room, on oxygen, and with a needle in her arm. A machine was attached to the needle and was rigged to deliver one milligram of morphine each time she pushed a button that was held in her right hand. I don’t think she ever pushed the button. I did it for her. It was set so that she could get a shot every six minutes, or ten milligrams an hour.

I slept on a recliner they put in the room for me that night and every time she moved or made a noise, I pushed the button for her. The next day the doctor put the morphine on a continuous drip but I could still, if I felt she needed it, give her an extra milligram.

While Bobby lay dying, I found out what the ward was designed for. It seemed every nurse was a Mother Theresa. They were obviously chosen for their compassion and understanding of the end stages of life. They were courteous, gentle, and treated me as one of the most important people in their lives. They were there for Bobby and me. They treated Bobby as if she was their primary patient. She was looked in on, washed, rubbed and petted and loved by each and every one of them. This was so important to me. I knew that though she was dying, she was being cared for and loved, not only by the ones her loved her most, but by these marvelous nurses as well.

The second night, Danna, Jim and I stayed in the Hospitality House. At two AM we were called and told the end was near. We went to her. We were holding her hands as well as each other as she took her last breath. The doctor felt for her pulse, felt her heart, looked at her eyes and said, “Time of death, two forty four.” We each kissed her goodbye and went back to the Hospitality house.

Tears came later. There was too much to do; papers to sign, people to call, and a thousand things that now seem quite unimportant, but we did them all. Time for grieving and remembering came later and would continue forever. Time eases grief but doesn't make it disappear. Bobby was much loved and her memory will never die.

## CHAPTER 37

### ONE MORE (HOPEFULLY LAST) NEAR MISS

---

During one of our last interviews, I asked Gil what he'd been doing since he retired. He said his managing of the units at the Trade Center really doesn't take up much of his time. He did get involved with a gentleman by the name of Bob Gow who was somewhat of a high roller and he and Gil became partners of a sort in between trips to Miami and the Bahamas with their wives as well as hunting trips to Texas for wild boar and Uruguay for doves. They got involved in a development called Powhatan Plantation in Williamsburg, VA. Gil was getting tired of dealing with contractors in general by this time. He made some money and got out of the development game, period. So now he is retired for the third time. What he calls no-shit retired.

Of course, being Gil, his retirement would have to include at least one story that could easily have been fatal. While he was still with Bobby at the house on Little Neck Seems he fell out of his 16 foot runabout while cruising by himself near Virginia Beach. This was around 8:00 PM on a hot, July evening. He was running at full speed and the steering rod broke. The boat went immediately hard right and rolled. It broke into three pieces and the transom hit Gil's thigh. He ended up underwater and confused. Good old Navy training kicked in and he blew a bubble and followed it to the surface. When he got to the surface he noticed his foot was over his shoulder. He shoved his foot where it was supposed to be and, since he had lost control of that leg (it was broken) he tied his ankles together loosely with his shoe strings. He could see the bone sticking out of his thigh and noted the trickling blood. It was getting dark and he was hoping against hope that somebody would come along, see him and pick him up. He was really beginning to get worried as the tide was going out and he would have to crawl across an oyster bed to get to shore. In fact, he had made up his mind to do just that when he got rescued. A six year old boy had seen the mishap from shore and alerted his Dad who came to Gil's aid. The Erb luck was holding as usual and his rescuer turned out to be Dr. David Young, an orthopedic surgeon. Gil actually got put back together by the Navy Doctors. Dr. Young was visiting Gil one day and remarked that, although the Navy was taking good care of him, he could do better. At Dr. Young's recommendation he was transferred by ambulance to the Bayside Hospital. His back was hurting him pretty badly while he was in traction for 30 days back at the Navy hospital and the Navy Doctors wanted to put him in a cast from his waist to his ankle. Dr. Young said he had a better idea and fixed Gil up with a brace that allowed him to walk that same day. Albeit not very well. When he was doing some follow up exams the next year Dr. Young asked him when he had broken his back. Somehow this had been missed the year before but Gil allows that, since he was in traction anyway, they

couldn't have done anything else for him.

Gil likes to call his near fatal misses his “What Am I Doing Here?” stories. He flew a total of forty-three different planes during his Navy career. After listening to his last near-miss story I had to ask him, “What *are* you doing here?”

He just shrugged in shoulders in the old shipyard salute and laughed.

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

---

Gil is almost 80 now and has found a lovely new companion by the name of Pat Kiser. They have homes in Norfolk, VA and The Villages, FL. He and I have spent almost two years interviewing, taping, and getting to know one another as did Pat and my lovely wife, Carol. For me it has been both an honor and a privilege, not to mention, highly entertaining.

Steven Craig Reynolds  
Alexandria, Virginia, May 2006

When Steve and I first met, I had to like him right off. He had heard of my exploits through his next door neighbor, my son, Scott and wanted to write my life story. My first thought was this is ridiculous; what's to write about? Then I said to myself, well, I guess I did have some close calls. Our meetings lasted for almost two years and took us from Alexandria, VA to Juno Beach in FL with a stop or two in Norfolk, VA and Lady Lake, FL. We got along superbly and it was fun recalling some of the incidents of the past.

We worried about a title for the oral history and then Steve came up with "Flying the Navy's First Jets (Sierra Hotel)." Sierra Hotel is a military expression used by pilots when you don't want to blurt out either the maneuver just completed was "Shit Hot" or, in some cases, "Shit Happens." It seems to me that both meanings are appropriate considering situations from being impaled on a wooden spear to flying a swept wing supersonic airplane off an antique straight-deck carrier.

I think Steve did a great job and I am flattered that he took the time out of his busy retirement to allow me to reminisce a bit.

Thanks Steve.

Charles "Gil" Erb, Cdr. USN (Ret)  
Norfolk, Virginia, May 2006



Gil & Pat—2005  
Photo by Steve Reynolds