

“Roll On, 18-Wheeler”



by

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1 - Road Warrior



I am a solo Over the Road truck driver for a large trucking company. I started driving after I retired from a long career in the aerospace industry. When I was getting ready to retire I knew that I couldn't just sit around the house all day, so before I retired I attended the Roadmaster Truck Driving School for eight weekends and then obtained my Class A Commercial Drivers Licence by taking written and driving tests at the DMV.

I was pretty nervous during my first few truck driving lessons on the Los Angeles surface streets and freeways. One of the skills that a lot of us had trouble with was "double clutching". That is where you press in the clutch and shift into neutral just for a moment, then you tap on the accelerator to bump up your RPM's to synchronize the gears, then you press in the clutch again and shift into the next gear. Most of us became proficient after awhile. A couple of students were grinding gears constantly right up to the last day.

Another difficult new skill was to always remember that you are pulling a 53-foot long and 13-foot six-inch high trailer behind you. (It seems obvious, doesn't it.) This is especially critical when making turns. If you forget to pull well forward into the intersection before you start the turn you will probably drag your tandems (trailer wheels) across the corner curb, which will probably dent the wheel rim and could cause a blowout. You can imagine even more serious and tragic consequences.



Roadmaster Truck Driving School



Learning to back a 53' trailer

I managed to get through the course without any big problems. But there was an incident during one of my first practice sessions in the yard that I would like to forget: my first attempt at backing in a straight line. The other students were standing outside the truck waiting for their turn. My instructor climbed onto the side step to give me instructions. "Put it in reverse, let the clutch out slowly, and let it roll backwards in idle." I put it in reverse and started rolling backwards. It felt like I was going too fast so I stepped on the brake. But I forgot to put in the clutch first. Ohhhh....*that* was a mistake. Now the powerful engine and transmission were fighting against the powerful brake.

The truck started bouncing up and down. I think the front wheels were actually leaving the ground. My instructor was still clinging to the side of the truck when this all started, so now he was along for the ride. His right arm was holding onto the door frame and his left arm was waving in the air like a cowboy on a bucking bronco. The other students were rolling with laughter. Finally he yelled "Push in the clutch!" I did that and the truck stopped bouncing and came to a stop. When the dust cleared I gave him an embarrassed look and said "Sorry 'bout that." He rolled his eyes and climbed down and said "Next".

The Orange Beast

A 2007 Freightliner Century, affectionately known as "The Orange Beast", was one of the first trucks assigned to me when I started driving. It had more than 850,000 miles on it. The 425 HP Detroit Diesel roared like a freight train when pulling a heavy load up a steep grade. The front bumper and side skirts had scrapes and dents from a dozen encounters in truck stops and customer yards ("...they



Freightliner

shouldn't have put those #\$%!%# landscape boulders *there*..."). The relief valves in the brake system would let out a blast of air every now and then, like El Toro in the bull ring. The air blasts kicked up swirls of dust on the side of the road as we went by. It was covered with road grime from the last trip. On one of my first solo three-week tours, the Orange Beast took me to Colorado, Oklahoma, Missouri, Tennessee, Mississippi, Texas, Arizona, and back home to California. There will always be a special place in my heart for this truck.

Proud Mary's

A lot of truckers spend thousands of dollars customizing their rigs. They add heavy chrome bumpers, chrome sun visors, chrome lugnut covers, extra lights on the tractor and trailer, custom paint jobs, and other exterior upgrades. They also add all kinds of accessories inside the cab: TV's, refrigerators, premium sound systems, and high-powered inverters (to power all those accessories). I respectfully call these rigs "Proud Mary's", as in: "...big wheel keeps on turnin', Proud Mary keeps on burnin' ...rollin' ...rollin' ...rollin' on the river..."



Proud Mary's are usually older-model Kenworths, Peterbilts, and Freightliners. There are many others. I'm talking about the ones I see all the time in the oncoming lane as I cross the country every day from east to west and north to south. I have never seen a Proud Mary Volvo or Proud Mary Cascadia. That's no criticism of Volvos and Cascadias – they are powerful, reliable, comfortable trucks. (I know what I'm talking about: a year ago I drove a 2011 Cascadia from Los Angeles to Memphis and back, with a dozen stops in between, and for the past two months I've been driving a 2013 Volvo 670 all over the western states.)

But Volvos and Cascadias lack a special quality that I think attracts Proud Mary owners. The long-nose older-model Kenworths, Peterbilts, and Freightliners have this quality even before you lay on the first piece of chrome. They project an assertive, somewhat menacing, **attitude** – like the “tough guys” in high school who had a switchblade in their pocket and a pack of Camels in their tee shirt sleeve. The International Lonestar has it in spades, mostly because of the pointed nose and the radical forward-sloping grill. The Lonestar is in a class by itself, in my opinion. It screams “Customize Me!” just sitting there on the showroom floor. Inside a Proud Mary cab it is all about comfort and entertainment, customized to the personal taste of the owner. For some it is like the red velvet corner booth at the Lucky Lady casino. Others are as Spartan and tidy as a Marine barracks.

Problems on the Road

You frequently have to solve mechanical problems out on the road. For example, at a customer location in Oklahoma a driver for another carrier came up to me with a worried look on her face. She said she had backed under a trailer to hook up to it and the kingpin of the trailer (the hook that attaches the trailer to the truck) went right over the top of the fifth wheel (the notched plate on the back of the truck that the trailer kingpin hooks into). The kingpin was stuck in front of the fifth wheel. I had not encountered this problem before so I didn't know what to tell her. Fortunately another driver came by and he showed us how to get out of this situation: you slowly and carefully wiggle your tractor away from the trailer by going a little forward and a little backward while turning hard-left and hard-right until the kingpin clears the fifth wheel.



I have found that most truck drivers are eager to help you when you have a problem, especially one that they have learned how to fix from hard-earned experience. It's always best to be humble in these cases and accept the offered advice and assistance with gratitude and respect. Maybe one day you'll be able to return the favor. When another truck driver passes me on the left I will often see him lift a finger or two from the steering wheel for a moment in a "truck driver salute". The brotherhood still lives.

Do I get drowsy or bored on long stretches? Usually, no. The 12-foot high cab and the huge windshield give you a commanding view. There is a scene in one of the **Batman** movies where he perches on top of the highest building in Gotham and looks out over the city, as if he owns it. That's me. (If I let some air out of my seat and drop down about six inches it completely dispels the illusion.)

Truck Stops

Maneuvering and parking at a busy truck stop can be a nightmare for new drivers. Experienced drivers will maneuver skillfully in the confined yard and back up nonchalantly into a tight parking space and think nothing of it. It's a beautiful thing to watch. On the other hand when I started driving I was a truck stop wimp. I parked in the remotest corner of the lot and avoided backing at all costs. I would much rather take a long walk to the restaurant than scrape another driver's truck or bend a light pole. Now I'm proud to say I usually park wherever I want to and the busy traffic and tight spaces don't bother me. But sometimes I still head for the far corner of the lot where it's quiet and peaceful.



West Texas truck stop at sunset



Vegas Truck Stop

The credit card that my employer provides only works at certain authorized truck stops. You have to keep that in mind and plan your fuel stops accordingly, otherwise you could end up in the boondocks low on fuel and have to buy fuel with your personal credit card. Or worse you might have to ask other drivers at the truck stop for spare cash. I once helped a young driver at a truck stop in Oklahoma who was in that predicament. As I watched him go around to other trucks in the lot, I wondered what other calamities he might get himself into...a door left unlocked...a load too heavy...a turn too tight...a curve too fast...a bridge too low...

Blowouts and “Gators”

I experienced a blowout on one of my eight trailer tires (right inside dualie on axle 5) around sunset one afternoon on I-35 near Waco, TX. I didn't notice when it happened – a motorist alerted me that something was wrong. I pulled over at a safe spot and found that the tire was completely shredded. All that was left was the two sidewalls – the whole center section was gone. I checked my company's Tire Bank map and found that I was twenty minutes away from one of their 130 authorized tire repair shops around the country. I called the Emergency Maintenance 800 number and they said it would be OK to drive to the tire shop. When I got there they replaced the tire in about 15 minutes, no charge to me.



Georgia-Pacific Paper Mill in Toledo, Oregon

We call cast-off tire treads that you see along the shoulder “gators”, because if you run over them they could slap up and bite off your flexible air brake lines. If that happens, you won't lose all your air brake pressure immediately. You will have time to get off the road but you'll be dead in the water

until a repair truck arrives. But if you didn't notice that you were losing air brake pressure (you *are* scanning your gages every 10 seconds, right?) you won't know your air is gone until you apply your brake at a stop sign or behind a slow vehicle – that could be ugly.

Safety Inspections

I was pulled in for a random one-hour safety inspection at a Weigh Station near Fargo, North Dakota. These are performed by the Commercial Enforcement officers of the Highway Patrol. They inspect your lights, brakes, tires, and a dozen other items on the tractor and trailer, as well as check the expiration date on your Commercial Drivers License, medical certificate, tractor registration, trailer registration, and a bunch of permits that you carry for certain types of cargo. It is a real nail-biting time for drivers because they can put you out of service on the spot for not passing any one of the many inspection items.

About six months ago I failed one of these inspections in Reno. The officer found that my trailer brake lights were not working. I suspect that this is a common item to “forget” on your pre-trip inspection because if you are by yourself you cannot easily check it – you have to somehow apply the brake inside the cab and at the same time go to the back of the trailer and see if the brake lights go on. (I have since learned that the trick is to put something heavy, like a gallon jug of water, against the brake pedal to hold it down, or strap it down with a bungee cord, while you go back and check the brake lights.) The inspector put me out of service. Ordinarily I would not have been able to move the truck until it was repaired. But this officer was nice enough to offer to escort me to my customer location which I told him was only about a mile down the road. I completed my delivery on time. Then I called our emergency repair service and they came over from our terminal in Reno and fixed the brake light problem.

On this occasion in Fargo, North Dakota, I passed all the inspection items. I sent a message to my Driver Leader informing him that I passed the inspection and that I would be making my delivery on time. My Driver Leader sent a message back, “Great job, Douglas. Keep up the good work.” It's a great day when you pass a safety inspection.



Port of Houston



Port of Stockton, CA

Border Run

One morning I was crossing southern Texas on US 90 near the Mexican border on the way to a delivery in Laredo. From the occasional high points I could see 100 miles in every direction. At times I

could see a whole freight train from end to end in one view. There were long stretches where it seemed like I was the only moving object in a vast rolling expanse of mesquite and acacia brush, like a solitary ship on the open ocean.



Border Patrol inspection station in south Texas



Delivery In Los Angeles

A shiny new motor-home passed me with a contented-looking older couple in the pilot and copilot seats. For me, over the road truck driving is much better than travelling in a motor-home because it is purposeful and profitable and it is just as comfortable (no offense to my motor-homing friends). The down side of truck driving is that it is long irregular hours, low pay, sometimes hard work, and high risk because of the constant exposure to the most dangerous place in America – our streets and highways. My company warns us not to park, day or night, in the truck stops of Laredo because many trucks have been stolen there. They take them immediately into Mexico and they are never recovered.

Precious Cargo

I had the honor of delivering a load of truck engines from the Detroit Diesel plant in Madison Heights, Michigan, to a customer in North Carolina. The Detroit Diesel plant is like holy ground for a truck driver. After I checked in at the gate I bowed respectfully to the magnificent “Detroit Diesel” sign that covered a large section of the wall of the main building. Then a security guard gave me directions to the inner sanctum (the warehouse). He wore a dark blue uniform with gold buttons and a silver badge. His belt carried the tools of his priestly trade: keys for a hundred locks, a flashlight for the dark chambers, and a billy club to pummel any driver who disobeyed the rules of the inner sanctum. I followed his instructions with the earnestness of a devotee and completed my pickup without incident or injury. The next day it was a privilege to deliver my precious cargo to the customer in North Carolina.

High Desert

I delivered a truckload of beer in cans and kegs from a brewery in Los Angeles to Twin Falls, Idaho. When I rolled into town on a scorching August day I imagined the townspeople would be lining the streets, cheering wildly and shouting "The beer is here! The beer is here!" The specified route took me north from Los Angeles on Interstate 15 to Las Vegas, then up US 93 which runs all the way from the bottom of Nevada to the top. The landscape is windswept high desert - mile after mile of lonely highway, scrub brush, and cattle ranches. US 93 is only two lanes most of the way but it has a very good road surface and there is no traffic congestion. It's an excellent route for enjoying the scenery and listening to audio books, and on a dark moonless night, imagining what ghostly companions may be sharing the road with you as you wind your way through the canyons and mountain passes.



Lonely Highway in Nevada



Cowboys near Parowan UT

Yellowstone and The Badlands

I delivered a nice light load from Ogden, Utah, to Billings, Montana. A light load is much better than a heavy load because you don't have to constantly shift and brake on the climbs and descents. You get paid the same either way. My company-specified route took me through part of Yellowstone National Park along US 191. This highway is usually busy with vacationers, tour busses, and big rigs. But at 6 am on September 25 I had it all to myself for long stretches. I didn't get to see Old Faithful or the other attractions of the park due to my tight delivery schedule but I had the good fortune to see them several years ago on a vacation with my family. After my delivery in Billings I picked up a load in Missoula, Montana, near the headwaters of I-15, and delivered it in St. Joseph, Minnesota. This run took me through The Badlands of North Dakota. The Badlands is an awesome place, too. It's like a mini Grand Canyon, with more trees and bushes.



Western North Dakota



Oregon coast near Newport

Snowstorm in Iowa

It started snowing shortly after sunset as I drove through farm country on I-29 in western Iowa. I was heading towards my fuel stop and DOT rest break in Council Bluffs. I slowed to 40 MPH in 9th gear and pressed on in spite of the snow - you don't want to run out of fuel in the boonies in the middle of an Iowa winter. There were no 'Chains Required' signs on this road and the highway was well-plowed so I didn't have to chain-up, thank goodness (it's a real chore). After about an hour I reached my destination - a small truck stop with a Subway and a 24-hour gas station. There were still two spaces open. When there are no spaces (it's always first come-first served) my next choice is usually a Walmart Supercenter because they are open 24 hours and they have clean bathrooms. If there are no truck stops or Walmarts I look for a Rest Area. I have an iPhone app that locates the closest truck stops, Walmarts, and Rest Areas using GPS. So far I have always found a safe and legal parking place.



Jackknife in snow storm in western Iowa



Coors/Miller Plant – Elkton, Virginia

I had planned to continue driving at 4 am the next morning to try and make my delivery on time, but when I pulled back the cab curtain I saw an all-white parking lot and heavy snowfall was still swirling under the streetlights. I sent a message to the planners to let them know I would wait until daylight and then assess the driving situation. They were OK with that. At daylight I fired up the rig and proceeded slowly out of the freshly-plowed parking lot. The streets were also freshly plowed and I had no trouble making my way to the I-29 on-ramp. I pressed on towards my delivery in Sioux City, Iowa, holding my

speed down to 40 MPH. Most of the other big rigs proceeded cautiously like me, but a few of them blew past in the left lane. I wondered if I would see them in the ditch before long. Sure enough I passed three abandoned cars and two big rigs that had skidded off the highway during the night. They were stuck in the deep snow and muddy ground at the center of the grassy median. Both of the big rigs were jackknifed. The drivers were probably going too fast and had made some unfortunate driving error, such as a sudden lane change, that might have been forgiven on a clear day but on the slippery road last night it ended up with the trailer trying to pass the tractor - jackknife. There didn't appear to be any other vehicles involved. They will have an expensive towing bill and there may be more serious consequences for their truck driving careers. After two plodding hours I arrived at my destination and completed my delivery.



Southern Wyoming



Delivery Locations First Year

Just Passin' Thru

As I was passing through northeast Texas on my way to Oklahoma I realized that I would not be home for Thanksgiving this year. But I did see a wild turkey! It was just outside of Cantonville, near Scatter Creek. The big bird was strutting around there by the side of the road.

A little while later I was able to do something that I've been looking forward to since I started driving: I passed a couple of kids who were playing on a hay bale in a field near the highway and they gave me the sign to blow my air horn...I was happy to oblige.

I've never had the desire to linger very long in the towns that I pass through, even when they are very attractive and picturesque, as so many of them are. It's not just because I have a delivery schedule to meet. It's because I know I'm just a visitor in these places. I have no investment of toil and tears and joys and sorrows and triumphs and failures and accomplishments and regrets – the things that bind us to a place over some period of time.

When I was a young man, my father confided to me that some day he wanted to travel around the world working on a freighter. He had a long and fulfilling life, but he never fulfilled that wish. I think in some way maybe I'm fulfilling it for him. *Is that right, Dad?*

2 - Nasty Bob

We had a gentleman in our driver orientation class who came to be known as “Nasty Bob.” He had previous driving experience with several other carriers. He usually knew the answer to the questions before the instructor finished asking them, and he shouted them out (which annoyed the instructors). He had a knowledgeable opinion on everything about trucking and he was always glad to share it with anybody who would listen. The other rookie drivers and I hung on his words. Bob would plop down next to a fellow student whom he had never met before and launch into the most intimate and ingratiating conversation, mostly one-sided. Like one of Mr. Twain’s colorful characters, “I never saw a more sociable man...or at least I never saw a man more sociable on short acquaintance.”

One day during our lunch break Bob enlightened us on the trucks he has driven. “The best truck overall, dollar for dollar, is the Freightliner Cascadia,” he told us. “That Detroit Diesel will get your 45,000-pound loads up and down Grants Pass, Chiriaco Summit, and everything in between with no problem. On the Grapevine you’ll be passing Kenworths and Peterbilts left and right, and of course Volvos, too.”

Another time he told us, “The best type of trailer to pull is dry vans. You get on with a large carrier that does dry vans and you’ll always have a load. Reefers? Hah! What are you going to do when you run out of reefer fuel on that shortcut between Laredo and El Paso in July? You’re going to pay for 10,000 melted ice cream bars, that’s what! Flatbeds? A few extra cents aren’t worth all the extra sweat of tarping and strapping those loads, and they aren’t worth the worries about whether your load is secure as you go around that freeway offramp. Tankers? Now that’s something I might consider. It just depends on who you work for and what you’re hauling. I know a guy who used to haul “bio-waste” (human excrement) between treatment facilities. One day he was getting ready to unhook the hose from the tanker and he forgot to open the pressure relief valve first. When he unhooked the hose, it sprayed him from head to toe. He spent the next three hours with a soap bucket and a garden hose. He quit that job the next day. So that’s why I recommend dry vans.”

Bob was very opinionated, but that’s not why we called him “Nasty Bob.” One day in the lunch room Bob started telling us about his pet peeves. He said, “There’s two things I can’t stand: people who talk on the cell phone while driving – they wander all over the road and speed up and slow down like there’s nobody else around; and people who act like the public roads are their private driveway – the ones who park on the shoulder about two inches from the white line just to check the map, and the ones who suddenly cut across two oncoming lanes to avoid missing the McDonald’s drive thru entrance. You know the type.”

We coaxed Bob to go on. “One time I was feeling worn out after a long stretch on the I-5 in northern California, so I pulled into a rest area for a little snooze. As I got to the entrance there was a line of cars and trucks winding around a shiny new 40-foot motorhome that was halfway blocking the entrance road. I saw that the rest rooms were closed for renovation and they had put several temporary porta-potties in place. The motorhome driver, instead of pulling into a designated parking spot just 50 feet away, parked his motorhome right next to the first porta-potty. I was pretty tired, as I

said, and this really pissed me off, the way he was making everybody go around him like that. I noticed that there was a heavy steel dumpster on skids sitting next to the porta-potty. I pulled gently up to the dumpster with my Freightliner and nudged the dumpster in front of the porta-potty door. As I drove away to my parking spot, I saw the porta-potty rocking back and forth and I heard the motorhome driver cussing at the top of his voice. I suppose somebody eventually let him out, but by then I was asleep in my cab.”

“Did you really do that, Bob?” we asked. “Yep, sure did,” he said. “Well,” we said, “that was pretty nasty!”

One day we asked Bob if he had any tips for life on the road. Bob thought about it a moment and said, “Well, did you know that your VHF antenna makes a good hunting boomerang?” We looked at each other with dumbfounded expressions. “You just remove one screw and it comes right off that little pedestal. I can knock down a jack rabbit at 15 yards. Of course, then you have to skin ‘em. There’s not a lot of meat on those old Jacks, but if you get yourself a good-sized one you’ll be fine.”

Now we were all a little dubious, but Bob continued, “After you skin ‘em you filet the meat into a pot of boiling water, and toss in some salt and pepper and a potato and an onion and maybe a carrot or two, and Voila! - you’ve got yourself Jack Rabbit Stew!” he exclaimed as he kissed his fingertips.

“OK, Bob,” we said, “if you say so. Have you got anything else?”

Bob put his hand to his chin and thought about it a moment, and then he looked at us with a devilish grin and said, “Oh, yeah. Here’s a little trick you can pull if you find yourself behind a Walmart truck at the weigh station. When he pulls onto the scale, you pull up right behind him so that your steer tires are on the scale. Those Walmart drivers are usually old retired guys who can’t see very well. They won’t even notice what’s going on behind them. And the scale attendant will just be staring at his computer screen. As soon as the red ‘Overweight’ light goes on, you back off the scale. Now the Walmart driver has to pull over and go inside and explain why he’s 11,000 pounds overweight. As you drive by the scale window you’ll see him waving his yellow scale receipt at the attendant: “I don’t understand, Officer, it scaled just fine at the Pilot. See!”

“Bob, did you really do that?” we asked. “Well, sure I did,” said Bob. “Say, you don’t think I would lie to you guys, do ya?”

And that’s how he came to be known as Nasty Bob.

3 - The Scapoose Skid

I woke up cold and grumpy after another night on the road. I had spent the night in my cab behind the lumber yard where I picked up a load of bagged wood chips the day before. After a breakfast in the cab of coffee and a banana I headed south on Highway 30 towards Scapoose, Oregon. Smoke from a saw mill up ahead went up straight and white in the morning air. The highway followed close by the Columbia River on my left. Under the dark clouds the river was a dull mirror reflecting the barges and houseboats along its banks.



I was hauling 45,000 pounds of bagged wood chips through timber country with my 2012 Freightliner Cascadia. Powerful Peterbilt and Kenworth log trucks passed me every 15 minutes or so on the winding road. Each one carried 20 to 30 logs on their trailers.

“A little brisk this morning, huh Stoney?” I said to my traveling companion. Stoney wagged his tail in agreement. Stoney is a black and white collie/shepherd puppie that I found one evening a few weeks ago at a northern Arizona truck stop. He was nosing around the trash cans.

He came right over to me when I offered him some fresh water in a cereal bowl. I hung around for two hours at the rest area to see if his owners might return for him, but nobody came around. I called the Highway Patrol to see if anybody had reported a lost puppy. They said ‘No’. So I told them that I was going to take him with me, and I gave them my name and phone number. I knew that if I left him there he would be coyote food before morning. He has been a cheerful and road-happy companion. “Stoney” doesn’t say much, but he’s a rock-solid little friend.

I was holding 45 MPH in ninth gear on the undulating road surface as we wound our way through the Oregon forests, getting into the rhythm of the road. As I came around a curve I saw that a pickup truck had skidded off the road a few hundred feet ahead. The pickup was sitting in the ditch by the side of the road and the driver was standing outside next to the truck, talking into a cell phone. I found out later that he had hit a patch of black ice – ice that you can’t see until you’re on top of it.

When the driver saw me he waved his arms frantically to alert me to the ice patch. Instinctively I started to press lightly on the brake pedal. I remembered the warning in one of our training videos: “If

you hit a patch of ice, don't make any sharp turns and don't slam on the brakes - it could make the trailer jackknife." That's when the trailer swings out and tries to pass the tractor. If that happened I would probably wipe out the pickup truck *and* the driver.

I could see that I wouldn't be able to stop before reaching the ice patch. I only had a moment to decide what to do. I took a firm grip on the steering wheel and aimed a little to the left of the pickup truck. My truck went across the ice patch and off the road onto a frost-covered grassy area, just missing the pickup truck and driver. We were still doing 40 MPH and not slowing down as we barreled across the slippery grass. The ground sloped downward toward the river bank and the river was getting closer and closer. We were sliding on the frosty grass and the brakes were no good at all. Then as I came over the top of the river bank I saw that I was lined up perfectly for a large river barge filled with sawdust!

The barge was tied up to a loading ramp that was directly in my path. With the sawdust and the long narrow barge, it looked like one of those runaway truck ramps that they put near steep grades on mountain roads, in case truckers lose their brakes. I could see that it was going to be either the river or the barge, so I chose the barge. We hit the loading ramp at about 30 MPH. We plowed into the pile of sawdust, and immediately came to a jolting stop, with sawdust flying everywhere. When the dust settled I looked at Stoney and said "Well, boy, how did you like *that* ride!" He jumped into my lap and gave me a big sloppy kiss, like it was all just another romp in the park.

We had a heck of a time getting the truck off of that barge. But that's another story for "Rollin' On".

4 - Daniel's Ride-along

As usual my nephew Daniel, age 9, started fidgeting even before we finished the first hymn. When we sat down he gave me a little poke in my side. "Uncle Doug, when can I go with you in your truck?" I looked down at him and touched my index finger to my lips and whispered "Shhh. Wait 'til they pass the plate."

I knew that his mother had taught him to behave properly in church, to respect the Lord's House and all. I didn't want to encourage any bad habits. I gave him a reassuring wink. I looked over his head with satisfaction at the members of my extended family. They shared the fourth pew on the right with me almost every Sunday: Daniel's father, John, on the end; his mother, Ellen, by his side; his older brother, David, age 13 (surreptitiously checking his iPhone); and his blonde-haired blue-eyed little sister, Riley, age 7.

Daniel waited anxiously through the announcements and the scripture reading. Finally the pastor signaled the organist to begin the Offertory music and then the ushers started passing the plates. "How about next weekend?" I whispered to Daniel. "I have to make a run to Phoenix and back." He started a little forward in his seat and his face widened into a smile. "OK!" he said with vigorous nod of his head. I would have to confirm the plan with his mother, but I had talked to her about taking Daniel with me before so I was pretty sure she would approve it.

I was looking forward to riding with Daniel. He still had the excitement about trucking that his older brother, David, had when he started riding with me two years earlier. David did a three-week tour with me last July when he was out of school. We went from Los Angeles to El Paso, Kansas City, Milwaukee, Memphis, Houston and back to Los Angeles. Passing through Hot Springs, Arkansas, we took a water tour of Lake Hamilton in a World War II surplus Duck amphibious vehicle. Our tour guide, a retired high school teacher from Hot Springs, described the points of interest. For humorous effect during his memorized narration he would end every other sentence with a raspy drawn-out "quackkkk". It made me want to offer him a throat lozenge. David really enjoyed the boat ride. It was a welcome diversion from our long hours on the road.

Most kids get tired of riding along with their trucker dads or trucker uncles or trucker aunts after awhile. Actually I would be concerned if David showed too much interest in truck driving. It's an honorable profession, of course, but a young man with David's intelligence and sensibilities should 'set his sights higher', as they say. Daniel's big brother is getting to be a young man now (he starts high school in the fall) and he doesn't ask me for rides anymore, but I would love to go with him again whenever he wants to. The truth is (this is a secret) he is my favorite.

On Saturday morning at 7 am I pulled onto the gravel driveway in front of my sister's house in my 2012 International ProStar and gave the air horn a long blast. A few moments later Daniel came running, followed by his mom. She was pulling Daniel's suitcase on wheels with one hand and carrying his sleeping bag in the other. Draped over the handle of the suitcase was a Walmart shopping bag

containing two bananas and two bottles of Geyser Spring water. Daniel ran directly up to me and gave me a hug. Then he stepped back and gazed at the massive tractor trailer in front of him. I could see from his expression that this was a big day for him.

I opened the driver's side door and showed him how to use the grab handles to lift himself up and where to place his feet so that he wouldn't slip as he climbed in. He sat in the driver's seat for a moment and looked around inside the cab. "This is like my tree house!" he exclaimed. I could see the resemblance to the plywood and cardboard tree house that his father and I had made for Daniel and his brother and sister in their back yard a couple of years ago. Except this tree house had a whole bunch of switches and dials and levers and lots of black vinyl upholstery. He looked at the bunk beds in the back of the cab where he would be sleeping, and the food cabinet with a fishnet screen on the front. He spotted a place next to one of the bunks that would be perfect for his laptop. He thought to himself, 'This is gonna be so cool.'

Daniel's mother handed me his sleeping bag and I hoisted it into the cab, and then the suitcase. I put the snack bag on the seat and called into the cab, "Daniel, I'm gonna do my walk around inspection. Do you want to watch?"

"Sure," he said. I helped Daniel climb down and then I started the inspection in my usual way by opening the hood. "There's a long list of things we check every day before we drive. I'm gonna do a quick walk around just to show you some stuff. I did my long inspection early this morning."

Pointing to the left side of the engine I said, "This is the dipstick, just like on your dad's car." I pulled it out and showed him the oil level. Pointing to the front of the engine I said, "This is the radiator fluid." I showed him how the pink fluid was at the right level, between the max hot line and the max cold line. I pointed to the tire. "Do you know how much air pressure there is in a car tire?" I asked. "No," he said. "About 35 pounds per square inch," I said. "Truck tires have about 110 pounds per square inch. When one of these blows it makes a loud Bang! and the truck wants to veer to the side. You have to grip the steering wheel tightly and wrestle it to the side of the road as soon as it's safe. But blowouts on the front tires are pretty rare." Daniel nodded as he filed away my tidbits of information into his bright little mind.

I pointed out the fuel cap under the door, and the fuel tanks. "These hold 250 gallons of diesel fuel," I said. "That's good for more than 1,500 miles." I tugged on the fittings on the brake air lines where they attach to the trailer. "These are called 'glad hands'," I told him. "The brakes are operated by high-pressure air flowing through these lines." I showed him the metal lever near the trailer tires that releases the tandem locking pins. "This lever allows me to move the trailer box back and forth on these rails to distribute the weight. I have to make sure I'm not overweight on any of my axles," I said.

Daniel was taking it all in with great interest, so I kept going. "I'm checking the trailer doors now to make sure they are securely fastened. We wouldn't want one of these to swing open in traffic."

When we got back around to the front of the truck I tugged on the passenger-side door to make sure it was locked, and checked the mirrors to make sure they were in proper position, and looked underneath the truck to make sure there was nothing leaking or dragging and nothing was under the truck. I said, "One of my trucker friends told me that one afternoon at a truck stop in Phoenix he found a drunken homeless person sleeping under his trailer." Daniel's expression registered curious surprise. "He crawled under there to get out of the hot sun." "What did your friend do?" Daniel asked. "He woke him up and made him get out of there," I said. "It's a good thing he checked." Daniel nodded with eager agreement.

I helped Daniel into the cab and then I followed. I made sure Daniel's seat was adjusted so that he could see easily all around and I made sure his seat belt was fastened. Then I started the engine and released the air brakes. Daniel and I waved goodbye to Ellen, and then we were off! As we rolled slowly down the neighborhood street Daniel spotted a neighbor in his front yard, someone we had seen before but we weren't close friends, and Daniel gave him a big wave. He looked over at me with a proud smile as I gave our neighbor a short blast on the air horn.

We made our way through town to Pearblossom Highway, which would lead us to I-15 South and then I-10 East to Phoenix. I could see that Daniel was impressed by the roar of the engine as I shifted through the gears at stoplights and stop signs. "I usually start out in fourth gear if I have a light load like today," I said. "Once we're rolling in 4th I press in the clutch, bump the accelerator to bring up the RPM's a little, press in the clutch again, and then shift into 5th. That's called 'double clutching'. I keep doing that until I'm in 9th or 10th gear. Those are my cruising gears."

Daniel stared at the switches and gages on the instrument panel. He thought to himself, 'This is like when my dad asked the pilot if I could look inside the cockpit when we flew to Hawaii.' Daniel asked, "How do you remember all these switches?" I responded, "After a while you become so familiar with them, the ones you use over and over, that you don't even think about it. Like this one, which we use all the time. It's called the Jake Brake. It helps us slow down on steep hills without having to step on the brakes, by using engine compression. Otherwise we would quickly wear out the brake pads."

We merged into the truck lanes on I-10 East in Ontario. I set the cruise control at 60 MPH and we settled in for the long drive. After about an hour of "What does this switch do?" and "How fast are we going?" and "Why does it sound like that?" and a dozen similar questions Daniel turned to me with a drowsy look in his eyes and announced, "OK, Uncle Doug, it looks like you have things under control. (!) I think I'll go into my bunk for awhile." He waited for me to acknowledge that it was OK and then he unbuckled his seat belt and climbed into the lower bunk. I would have him use the lower bunk when we were rolling, just to be safer. He would be sleeping in the top bunk when we parked in Phoenix tonight. I installed a one-by-six keeper board across the outside edge of his bunk to make sure he didn't roll out during his sleep. I watched him snuggle in the pillows and cushions of the bunk for a moment and then I turned all of my attention again to the road. My ripening adventure with Daniel rolled on.

Around noon I pulled into the McDonald's in Blythe, California, for our lunch break. After shutting down the engine we sat in the quiet cab for a few moments while I changed my duty status on the Qualcomm terminal. I noticed that Daniel had already logged into the McDonalds WiFi on his laptop. He was intently watching a YouTube video. "What's that about?" I asked. "Bullies," he said, still staring at the screen. "Bullies?" I asked. Daniel looked at me and said "You know, bullies. They're putting up posters about bullies at this school. " He showed me the picture on the screen. "Are you having a problem with a bully?" I asked. "No, " said Daniel, "I'm just watching a video." It seemed like a good opportunity so I told Daniel my bullying story.

"When I was in 9th grade it was my first year in a new high school. There was a bully in one of my classes - another boy who was a little bigger than me, but not that much bigger. He sat behind me and he would tap on the back of my head with his pencil. When I turned around to see what he wanted he just glared at me and then he grinned at the other kids around us when he realized that I wasn't going to do anything about it." Daniel perked up a little when I said that. Maybe he had seen something like that happen to one of his friends, or maybe it had happened to him.

"Daniel, there are moments in a boy's life that demand a courageous action. Well, I'm sorry to tell you that on that day I didn't rise to the occasion. If I had known then what was at stake I would have hauled off and punched that bully in the nose. But I didn't. Week after week I shamefully endured the pencil tapping." Daniel was listening intently now. "I began to dread going to school. One day I felt so demoralized that I walked off the school grounds at lunch time and wandered down to the gas station and hung around there until it was time for school to get out and then I walked the rest of the way home. The school officials didn't come after me and I don't think my parents ever found out. I eventually completed the school year without any further incidents, but I never participated in any sports or other after-school activities. I think things would have been much different if I had stood up to that bully. "

Daniel nodded his head slightly and gave me an understanding look. "Daniel, if you ever find yourself in a situation like that here is what I want you to do..." Daniel maintained his steady gaze on me. "...I want you to stand up straight and put on your angry face and poke that bully right in the nose with the palm of your hand, like this." I thrust my hand toward Daniel's face with my palm facing forward. "Will you do that?" Daniel looked shyly at the ground for a moment and then he looked up at me and said, "OK." I put my hand on the shoulder of the little boy with the fawn-like temperament and said, "Don't worry about getting in trouble – all the loving moms and dads and teachers and all the angels in heaven will be standing right behind you, whatever happens." I looked at the floor for a moment to compose myself because I was shaking a little inside and then I looked up. Daniel, still looking at me, cocked his head intelligently and said, "OK." After a moment I said, "Let's go have lunch."

Just then I noticed something move across the grass just outside the truck. It was a big old jack rabbit. They are much taller than your typical bunny rabbit. They have a haggard Abe Lincoln look about them, all bone and gristle. Daniel followed my gaze and spotted the rabbit, and in the next instant he flung open the passenger-side door and jumped down from the top step and started chasing

the rabbit. They zigged and zagged for several moments at top speed all around the picnic tables. Finally the rabbit took an unbelievably huge leap into some bushes and disappeared. Daniel turned and looked at me with a big smile and raised his arms in a disarming shrug. I shrugged back at him and climbed down from the cab and we walked together into McDonalds.

After lunch we crossed the Colorado River into Arizona. Then, along with all the other trucks, I pulled into the weigh station at Ehrenberg. It's usually a quick and painless procedure where they weigh each axle of your tractor and trailer as you drive slowly over the scales. Sometimes they ask you what you're hauling and look at your bill of lading. In border areas the agents will lead a drug-sniffing and people-sniffing dog (seems like they're always German Shepherds) around your truck, looking for drugs and illegals. At this weigh station it was just scales. We got the green light and pressed on.

About two hours later we approached Buckeye, Arizona, where I would be making my delivery at the Walmart Distribution Center. I pulled up to the guard house and put on my parking brake. I told Daniel, "I have to check in." I took my papers into the guardhouse and came back in a few minutes. I said to Daniel, "This is called a 'drop and hook'. You drop your loaded trailer and take away an empty trailer for your next pickup." Daniel listened with keen interest. I dropped my trailer at the assigned space and then drove around to another side of the yard and hooked up to an empty trailer. Then we parked for a few minutes while I updated my load status. Daniel watched the other trucks maneuvering in the yard. He asked me, "What are those little trucks?" He pointed to a strangely shaped yellow vehicle with one seat and a narrow cab that was hooking up to a trailer nearby. "Those are yard pups," I said. "They move the trailers around inside the yard."

I punched the address for my next pickup into the GPS. It was a distribution center in Tolleson, Arizona, just a few miles away. When we arrived I checked in with the guard and he assigned me to a loading dock. I explained to Daniel, "This is going to be a 'live load'. We will back up to an assigned dock and then the lumpers (warehouse workers) will load pallets of product into our trailer with a forklift while we wait in the truck. We'll probably be here for about two hours." Daniel's eyebrows went up. "Oh! ...OK," he said. I don't think he was expecting such a long wait. "Waiting around is a big part of my job," I told him. He gave me an understanding nod.

I pulled up next to my assigned dock and got out and opened the doors of the trailer and then backed up to the dock. Then I got out again and chocked the wheels of my trailer with a rubber wedge that they kept on a chain by the loading door, and then climbed back into the cab. Within a few minutes we felt the jostling of the forklift going in and out of the trailer. I told Daniel, "I like this moment, when I'm sitting in my cab and they're loading or unloading my trailer. I get the same feeling when I'm in the barber chair at Supercuts - the satisfying feeling of being attended to and all you have to do is sit there." Daniel smiled in agreement.

They finished loading about two hours later. The dock door light changed from red ("Don't move your truck") to green ("safe to move"). I told Daniel that it's very important to obey the dock door light. Dock workers have been injured when a driver pulled away, thinking that the loading was done, and a dock worker was still inside the trailer. A clerk came out from the shipping office and handed me

the paperwork for my load. I said "Thank you" and got out and closed the trailer doors and installed my security lock on the door latch. Then we left with our loaded trailer.

It was almost 8 pm now, too late to do anything special like go to a movie, so we headed for the Pilot truck stop a few miles away near the Interstate. It's one of my regular stops (I like their Church's Chicken Tenders). I was lucky to find an easy pull-through parking spot. I parked the rig, did my post-trip inspection, and shut it down for the night. Daniel and I went inside and had a nice sit-down chicken dinner.

After dinner I showed Daniel around. "Here's the Trucker Lounge," I said, pointing to a mini-movie theater with several rows of cushioned chairs. There were several drivers lounging in the comfortable chairs. "This is where drivers seem to be watching TV shows and movies but they're usually just thinking about their load assignments or their family or some other concern." On the screen was one of those depressing crime shows, so we didn't linger there. "This is the Trucker Store," I said, pointing to the rows of truck accessories, road atlases, DVD's, cigarettes, and grocery items. "Those are the showers," I said. "For \$10 you get a warm shower in a nice private bathroom with clean fluffy towels. After a week of 16-hour days on the road it can almost make you feel human again." Daniel smiled at that.

We sat on a bench outside and watched the truckers fueling and backing into the parking spaces for awhile. Then it was time to go to bed. We returned to the truck, changed into our pajamas, and climbed into our bunks. Daniel sat silently in his bunk for a few moments and then he asked me if he could use my iPhone. He wanted to watch YouTubes for awhile. I said, "Sure." I handed him the phone and said, "Good night, Daniel." He said, "Good night, Uncle Doug."

The alarm on my iPhone woke me up the next morning at 6 am. I almost didn't hear it – it was under Daniel's pillow. Daniel merely rolled over as I retrieved the phone, without appearing to wake up. I got dressed and started the engine and turned on the heater to warm up the cab, and then started making breakfast for us. I heated water for my instant coffee on my single-burner camp stove (the little ring of eager blue flames always cheers up a chilly morning). I spoke a command to my iPhone, "Play playlist 1" and it started playing a tender melody by Simon and Garfunkel, '...in my little town...'"

Now I heard rustling of covers from the top bunk. I said, "Good morning" and Daniel responded with a sleepy "Good morning." I placed ten saltine crackers on a paper towel and spread them with peanut butter and put a dollop of strawberry jam in the middle of each one and covered them with another cracker. I retrieved the two bananas and the two Geyser Spring waters from Ellen's picnic sack. Daniel climbed down and sat next to me on my bunk and we enjoyed our breakfast.

I performed my pre-trip inspection and we departed. Now it was Sunday morning. If this truck stop had had a Truckers Chapel, like some of them do, I would have looked into attending the services.

But this one didn't, so I headed for another place of peaceful repose, the Eldorado Hot Springs Resort in Tonopah. This is a remarkable little resort located about 50 miles west of Phoenix on I-10. I found it by accident one day because it is located next to the Tonopah Truck Stop.

From the highway all you see is a solid wall of 10-foot tall reeds that have been carefully placed and manicured to provide privacy for the resort. Inside the wall there is a small compound where the owner, a grizzled old fellow who calls himself Desert Pete, has set up half a dozen large porcelain bath tubs that are fed by a constantly recirculating flow of natural hot spring water. All the tubs are in a single area of the compound which is open to the warm sunshine during the day and to the twinkling stars at night. The sign on the fence says "Nude Bathing Only". (If you are too modest for that you can pay an extra \$2.50 per hour for a private tub located behind a garden wall.)

But never mind the hot tubs. I brought Daniel here because just inside the entrance gate and off to the side there is a quiet, peaceful desert garden. It is underneath a 30-foot high water tower. There is a musical drip...drip...drip of water leaking from the tower, not because of incompetent design or neglect, but on purpose, to irrigate the desert garden. Birds flitter around and make bird noises in the surrounding bushes. Soft breezes caress the tops of the reeds and the acacia branches. The whole effect is mesmerizing. It's a fine place for a Sunday morning meditation. I sat down on a stone bench and Daniel sat down next to me. We sat motionless and let the peacefulness of the place sink in. After a few delicious minutes I felt a tug on my sleeve and heard someone say, "Uncle Doug?" I opened my eyes and smiled at Daniel and said "Ready to go?" He looked like he was relieved that I hadn't fallen asleep, like I tend to do when I'm watching him play his video games. We returned to our magnificent white machine and pressed on.

We cruised past rock formations that resembled elephants and battleships and castles. We counted the Freightliners and Peterbilts and Kenworths and Internationals (there sure are a lot of Freightliners). Daniel rode for awhile in the passenger seat and then moved to the bunk to watch YouTubes.

We stopped for a bathroom break at a rest area near Blythe. Daniel noticed that a lot of truck drivers had pets with them, mostly dogs. He asked, "Uncle Doug, have you ever had a pet with you?" I said, "Our company policy doesn't allow pets. It's because we don't always drive the same truck. So it's important to keep the cabs as clean and inoffensive as we can." Daniel nodded his understanding. "But one time I did have a little dog with me for awhile." Daniel perked up. "He was a black and white collie/shepherd puppy. I found him one evening just before sunset at a deserted rest area in Arizona. He was nosing around the trash cans."

Now Daniel was listening intently. "He came over to me when I offered him some fresh water in a cereal bowl. I hung around for two hours at the rest area to see if his owners might return for him but nobody came around. I called the Highway Patrol to see if anybody had reported a lost puppy. They said 'No'. So I told them that I was going to take him to the local animal shelter. I knew that if I left him at the rest area he would be coyote food before morning."

Daniel asked me, “Why would somebody leave a little puppy there like that?” I said, “I don’t know, Daniel. We don’t know what really happened. Maybe it was an accident.” Daniel nodded. “I made a little bench for him on the passenger seat with my suitcases and a blanket. He would have been a good road dog - he never whined or got restless. When we got to the shelter I carried him inside and turned him over to the people there. I checked back with them about a week later and they said he was adopted right away by a nice family with a boy about your age.” Daniel stared at me for a long moment without any expression. We headed back to the truck and continued on our trip.

In two hours we approached my final stop, a large distribution center where I would be making another easy drop and hook. I checked in at the guard station, dropped my loaded trailer at the assigned spot, and hooked up to my new empty trailer. “Well, Daniel, it’s time to head for home.” Daniel gave me a nod of agreement and settled back in his seat for the last leg of our trip.

In another hour we pulled into my sister’s driveway. I helped Daniel gather up his stuff and then we carried it up to the house. Ellen came to the door right away. “Hi there!” she said. “So, how are the travelers?” She gave Daniel a hug and then me. “Mom,” said Daniel excitedly when we were inside, “Truck driving is really fun!” “It is?” said his mom. “Yeah, but it’s not easy. You have to be smart, because there’s a lot of rules you have to follow. And you have to be pretty strong to handle all the equipment. And you have to get out of bed in the middle of the night sometimes and start driving again – right, Uncle Doug?” “Oh, that’s for sure,” I said. His mom held up her hands and exclaimed brightly, “Well! Where do we find such men!” “I don’t know!” said Daniel, beaming. His mom and I laughed.

After a moment I said, “I’d better get going.” I looked directly at Daniel and said, “Thanks for riding with me, Daniel. You’re a great companion.” He gave me a big hug. I turned away and walked down to my truck with a spring in my step thanks to Daniel.



5 - Fly Boys

Donnie shifted into 10th gear and set the cruise control for 60 MPH. He was quiet for a few moments and then he said with a mischievous look, "I've been wanting to tell this story for a long time, and now I have a captive audience." I smiled indulgently and said, "I'm all ears, little brother."

I was riding shotgun with my truck driver brother on a delivery from Los Angeles to Sacramento and back. I am retired, same as him, but I don't have a retirement job like he does, so I have a lot of free time on my hands. This is my second ride- along.

Donnie continued, "I thought I will organize it around the airports where I've tied down my airplanes over the years. I promise to bring it in for a landing before we get to Sacramento."

"Sounds good," I said, intrigued once again by my full-of-surprises younger brother. I settled back in my seat. Donnie stared down the road for a few moments to collect his thoughts and then launched into the story.

Rockford - 1977

"I didn't start thinking about becoming a pilot until I was 23," said Donnie. "I was working as a technical writer at Sundstrand Aerospace in Rockford. You remember." I nodded. "Like most kids, I suppose, I was always intrigued by airplanes – 'zoom zoom' and all that. I was still intrigued by airplanes when I was in college - for the final project in my Expository Writing class I chose the subject 'How Airplanes Fly.' But I never imagined myself as a pilot. Those were the impressive men and women in the snappy uniforms that you happened to see now and then in airline terminals, or the dashing, confident fighter pilots that we saw in movies. I never imagined myself actually becoming a pilot - until I met Howie."

"Howie?" I said.

"Howie Zimmer," said Donnie. "He was another tech writer in my department. He was a Private Pilot – you know, an amateur, as opposed to a Commercial Pilot who flies for a living. He talked about flying and airplanes all the time. He rented Cessnas at the Rockford airport. He assured us he was going to buy his own plane someday, a four-seater so that he could take his family along. He rhapsodized about a plane called the "straightback 170", which had fuselage lines that went from the back of the cabin straight down to the tail, with no rear windshield like the 172's that came later."

"Howie's enthusiasm for flying and airplanes was infectious. One day he asked me if I would like to go flying with him. I said, 'Sure!' He took me to the Cessna Pilot Center where he had reserved a two-seat Cessna 150. When we rolled down the runway that Saturday morning and he pulled back on the yoke and the Earth dropped away below us and we started climbing, I was transfixed. The new perspective, being able to see over the tops of trees and hills for miles in any direction, was amazing."

“When Howie made gentle banks and swoops it was exhilarating. He let me take the yoke. I made a tentative bank to the left and then to the right, and then I pulled back on the yoke and climbed a few hundred feet. He showed me my altitude on the altimeter and my airspeed on the airspeed indicator and my bank angle on the attitude indicator. He pointed out several other instruments that were dutifully displaying my position in space and the condition of the engine and other important information. I was hooked.

“That was a big moment,” I said.

“Yes,” said Donnie meaningfully, “it was like discovering a whole new dimension of living. As soon as we landed I went to the counter at the Cessna Pilot Center and signed up for their Private Pilot program. Over the next couple of months, in the evening, I attended ground school at their facility along with several other student pilots. They gave us a thick book produced by Cessna with all the knowledge we would need to pass the FAA written test, as well as a sectional chart, and a plotter which we used to draw course lines on the chart and calculate compass headings and so forth. “

“The best part, of course, was the flight instruction. The instructor determined what flying skills we would work on in each session, such as takeoffs and landings, radio procedures, cross-country navigation, and my favorite – stalls. That’s where you pull back on the throttle and hold the nose up until the wing loses lift and the plane starts to fall out of the sky, until you recover by lowering the nose and adding throttle. If you wait too long the plane will enter a spin, which is very disturbing because it looks like you are pointing straight at the ground and the controls are not responding because the wing is stalled. To recover you have to push forward on the yoke and apply rudder in the opposite direction of the spin. Once you master spin recovery you feel like a real pilot.”

“Some of the instructors were young guys who were building hours so that they could apply for an airline job. Others were retired guys who did it just for fun. My instructor was named Ernie. He must have been about 70. He was easygoing and patient (what more could you ask for?). He always wore a brown leather jacket, like the ones they issued to WWII bomber pilots, but he was never in the service. We flew one of the school’s two-seat Cessna 150’s. This plane was designed specifically for safe, economical flight training. It is very forgiving of common student pilot errors, such as touching down at too fast a speed or landing with improper technique into a strong crosswind. In other planes, such as a tail dragger, those mistakes could easily result in a plane wreck. The sturdy little 150 would just grin and bear it as you bounced and screeched your way down the runway.”

“I passed the FAA written test without any problem and I made steady progress in my flying lessons. After about 10 hours of dual instruction my instructor decided I was ready to go solo. That was a big day. My instructor and other members of the flight school staff and several students who were hanging around came outside to watch me take off. I had to do three touch and go’s and then land. The takeoff went smoothly (that’s always the easiest part) and my three landings were a little rough but passable. When I taxied back to the flight school and shut down everyone congratulated me. My instructor took a pair of scissors and cut off the backside of my T-shirt and wrote on it “First Solo Donnie Peck Nov 11, 1977 E.Fisher”. He stapled it to a wall in the flight school office next to a bunch of others.

Now I was qualified to fly solo, with restrictions on how far I could go and what types of airports I could land at.”

“Those first solo flights were the most fun I’ve ever had. You can imagine the thrill and satisfaction of walking up to an airplane, climbing in, and taking off all by yourself. I flew all around the Rockford countryside practicing stalls and navigation and other skills, and I spent many hours doing touch and go’s at the Rockford airport, both during the day and at night.”

“How did you like flying at night?” I asked.

Donnie replied, “I liked it a lot. You can actually see everything you need to see very well, usually. The image in your windshield when you’re on final approach to a runway at night is one of the most beautiful things I can imagine, especially if you are low on fuel. I’ve thought about installing runway lights on our driveway in Acton. That would be kind of neat, don’t you think?”

“Oh, yeah!” I said. “So how much did all this cost?” I asked.

Donnie said, “All in all, for me, it came to about \$3,000. I paid by the hour for the airplane and instructor after each lesson. The FAA required you to complete a minimum number of hours with an instructor and a minimum number of solo hours. After you met the FAA minimums, you kept going until your instructor decided you were ready for the FAA flight test. For some students, that led to some pretty heated arguments and frequent instructor changes.”

“After six months I was just about ready to go for the big test, but then things changed at work. I was getting restless at Sundstrand. I wanted to work for a company that actually made airplanes, not just airplane parts. I sent my resume to Lockheed, Boeing, Northrop, and several other aerospace companies. Lockheed called me one night in March, 1978, with a job offer to be a technical writer at their facility in Burbank, CA. I said ‘Yes!’ immediately and moved out there about two weeks later. Mom and Dad drove with me in my red Buick Skylark convertible. We stayed in motels for a few days until I found an inexpensive apartment on Sherman Way in Burbank, close to the Lockheed plant. Then Mom and Dad flew back home.”

Donnie looked over at me and said, “I have to get gas up ahead. Would you like to take a little break?” I said, “Sure.” Donnie pulled into the Flying J Truck Stop in Frazier Park and shut down. He got out and filled up the two diesel tanks. Then he pulled forward to the wait line so that we could go inside for a few minutes. We both took a bathroom break and then got donuts and coffee and returned to the truck and proceeded with our trip.

Agua Dulce

“ After I got settled in to my new job as a tech writer and copy editor at Lockheed I resumed my flying lessons at a flight school at Burbank Airport. The airport was not as busy then as it is now. But it was still a major airport with airliners landing and taking off during the day and night. They had strict procedures for approaching and departing from the airport. I realized after a few lessons that I had made a mistake choosing that place for flying lessons. I moved to a small airport called Fox Field in

Lancaster, about 60 miles north of Los Angeles on the edge of the Mojave desert. Fox Field has a single runway and a control tower and simple approach and departure procedures – and no airliners. It was ideal for flight training.”

“I completed my required training hours about two months later and then my flight school scheduled me for the FAA flight test. A flight test instructor met me at the airport. He had a clipboard with a checklist on it and he made notes as I did my pre-flight inspection, and he made notes when I taxied out to the runway, and when I called the tower for clearance, and when I took off, and he silently continued making notes throughout my test flight. He had me do stalls and steep turns and a few other maneuvers and then he said, without any emotion, “You can return to the field now.” I landed and taxied back to the flight school and turned off the engine and waited for him to say something. Finally, after he finished making notes on his clipboard, he looked at me and smiled and said, ‘You passed - congratulations.’ It was a very happy day.”

Donnie continued. “With my steady job and a modest apartment and no other financial responsibilities I was in a good position for my next big step. I decided one day to buy an airplane. I got the idea that I could actually do that from a brochure that I noticed on the wall at the Lockheed Credit Union. They were offering low-interest loans for cars, boats, and – airplanes. They even had a picture of a Cessna on the brochure. I researched what to look for when you buy a used airplane, such as number of hours on the engine (they have to be overhauled every 2,000 hours or so), flying characteristics of different models, insurance costs, tie down costs, etc. I found a clean-looking red and white 1959 Cessna 150 for sale for \$6,700 at Nagel Aircraft in Torrance, CA, and drove down there on a Saturday morning and inspected the plane and then wrote them a check. I flew it home to Agua Dulce Airport, taking the long way and savoring my first flight in my first very own airplane.”



“Over the next year I flew ‘Six Six Four Zero Tango’ (the FAA-registered tail number) all over Southern California. I made a list of the tower and ground control frequencies for all of the small and medium-sized airports from San Diego to Santa Barbara and taped it to my cabin roof. On a Saturday morning I would take off early from Agua Dulce and then fly for hours, touching down at a dozen airports. Sometimes I would just do touch and go’s and sometimes I would park and explore the airport and maybe have breakfast or lunch.”

“As I approached each airport I would look at my frequency list and then call for landing clearance, such as ‘Torrance Tower, Cessna six six four zero Tango, five north, landing with Oscar.’ That gave them my call sign and position and informed them that I had the current wind and active runway advisory, called ‘Information Oscar’, which was updated and given a new alphabetical name every hour. Then they would clear me to land. In those days, before 9/11, you could fly in and out of the LA basin without an instrument flight plan. You could even fly directly over Los Angeles International Airport without even contacting the tower or approach controllers, by following a specified route at a specified altitude – it was called the VFR Corridor.”

“That’s pretty neat,” I said.

“Yes,” said Donnie. “It was a great place to go when you wanted to take someone sightseeing.”

“Another one of my favorite flights was to Catalina Airport on the island of Catalina about 20 miles off the coast of Los Angeles. The runway is on top of a 3,500-foot high ridge in the center of the island. The east end of the runway drops off sharply down to the ocean. When you are on final approach it looks like you are landing on an aircraft carrier.”

“Wow!” I said. “That’s sounds kind of scary.”

Donnie replied, “The landing procedure is no different from any other landing, it just looks scary. But sometimes pilots would get freaked out by the cliff and they would touch down too far down the runway. Then they would have to slam on the brakes to stop before the end of the runway. There were several accidents where pilots, including one in a corporate jet, ran off the west end of the runway, which also sloped down to the ocean on the other side of the hill, but more gradually.”

“Do you remember when I flew home for Ellen’s wedding?” Donnie asked.

“Yes, of course,” I said. (Ellen is our younger sister.)

“What did you think about that?” Donnie wanted to know.

“I think we were all very proud of you,” I said.

“That was my first long cross-country,” he continued, “from Los Angeles to Madison, Wisconsin. I followed the interstates most of the way. It’s easy to get lost on a cross-country, especially if there is no radio beacon to home-in on at your destination. I managed to get lost once on the trip. I was taking

a short cut up the Mississippi River after leaving Interstate 80 at Davenport, Iowa. You'd think it would be easy to keep your bearings when you're flying over the Mississippi River, wouldn't you."

"Yes," I said, "it seems like it."

"Well, it turns out those little river towns all look alike from the air. You've got a bridge that crosses the river, and the town is clustered around the bridge, and the highway goes out in opposite directions from the bridge into the countryside. I was going to land at Clinton, Iowa, for a rest break and fuel stop, but when I got to where I thought it should be I couldn't find the airport! I ended up following the river all the way to Dubuque, about half an hour further north. My fuel gage was near Empty when I finally spotted the airport. As soon as I landed I shut off the engine and got out of the plane. As I stood there I realized that my knees were shaking. I was so thankful for solid ground that I kneeled down and kissed the tarmac."

"I was living about 45 minutes from Lockheed at the time. Before long I got the idea, 'Why don't I fly to work!' It was a little silly to fly such a short distance but it sure was fun. I would drive to the Agua Dulce airport, fly to the Burbank Airport, tie it down in the general aviation transient parking area, and then ride a bicycle that I kept there about five blocks to my office. The only problem was that sometimes weather would roll in during the day and I couldn't take off since I was not yet instrument-rated. Then I had to call somebody and plead for a ride home and a ride to work the next day."

"After I accumulated about 200 hours of flying time I began to feel pretty confident about myself as a pilot. I was working alongside several former Air Force pilots. My department manager, for example, flew F-104's and other fighters during a long Air Force career. Nobody actually encouraged me to, I just got it into my head one day that I wanted to become an Air Force pilot. I never consulted with anybody about it, I never talked to Mom or Dad about it, I just strode into the Air Force recruiting office in Burbank and said 'I want to be an Air Force pilot.'

"The Air Force recruiters scheduled me for a battery of pilot aptitude tests and a flight physical. I passed them all. For the flight physical I was in a large auditorium with about 100 candidates for all the branches of service. Almost all of them would be enlisted troops, not officers. I remember the doctor who examined me looked at my folder and said with curious surprise, 'What are you doing here?' I told him, 'I'm going to be an Air Force pilot.' Then he finished the exam and said, 'Next.'

"After I passed all the qualification tests they explained what was in store for me as a Pilot Officer Candidate. I would have to complete ten weeks of Basic Training at Lackland Air Force Base. Then I would attend three months of Officer Training School at Randolph AFB. Both of these are near San Antonio, Texas. Then I would begin one-year of flight training at Williams AFB, near Phoenix, Arizona. I told them, 'Let's do it!'

"The next day I gave my notice at Lockheed. My department manager recommended that rather than simply quit I should take a military leave of absence. That way I would get credit for my two years of employment with Lockheed if I every decided to return. That was good advice."

“I gave my notice to my landlord and I placed an ad in the pilot newspapers for N6640T. I sold it right away to a man who lived in the local area. Two weeks later I left for Lackland AFB, Texas.”

“Basic training was a breeze. I remember hardly anything about it, except there was a lot of marching around and a lot of physical exercise, mostly running. I guess the point was to identify the candidates who had bad attitudes. Anyway I “graduated” and a few days later reported to Randolph AFB for Officer Training School.”

“There were about 20 young men and 10 young women in my OTS class. All of us were recent college graduates. We lived in the base dormitory. We ate all of our meals together at the base cafeteria, except for during our time off on weekends when we were allowed to go into town. During the day we attended classroom sessions on how to be an Air Force officer. After three months I completed the course and was commissioned a 2nd Lieutenant in the U.S. Air Force. They called us ‘90-day wonders’.”

Williams AFB

“I was assigned to Williams AFB in Phoenix for flight training. I lived in a private room in the Bachelor Officers Quarters. The program consisted of three parts: classroom, flight simulator, and flying the T-37 twin engine jet for the Basic Phase of training, and the T-38 supersonic twin-engine jet for the Advanced Phase.



“We had classes on aircraft systems, theory of flight, meteorology, and flight planning. We had plenty of witty guys in our squadron, and the instructors, who were also our flight instructors, were also fun-loving guys, so the classes were always lively and entertaining.”

“We also had three field trips outside the classroom: the altitude chamber, ejection seat training, and parachute training.”

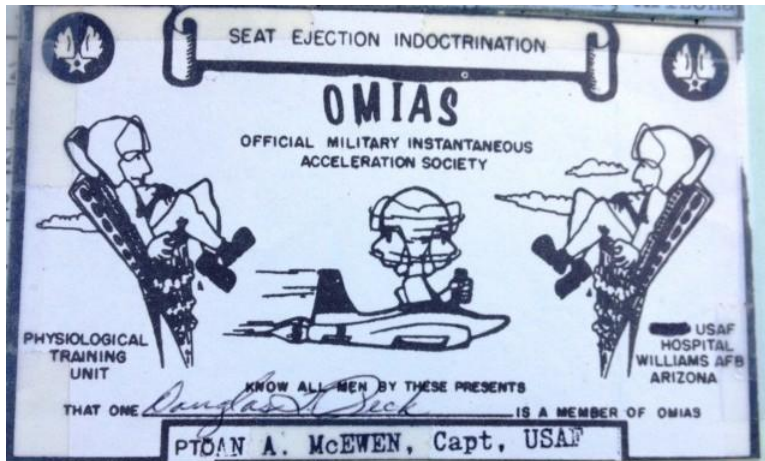
“They had about ten of us at a time enter the altitude chamber, which was a special room inside the medical unit on base. We wore our flight suits, helmets, and oxygen masks. After we were inside we connected our oxygen hoses to their oxygen system, and then they sucked the air out of the room to simulate high altitude. Then they had us take off our oxygen masks and do some tests to demonstrate how hypoxia – oxygen starvation – affects your mind and body. They gave us a list of simple math problems to solve, such as ‘ $3 + 4 = ?$ ’. After a couple of minutes we started skipping problems and answering them incorrectly. They said that without supplemental oxygen we could pass out in only a few minutes at high altitude. It was a very convincing demonstration.”



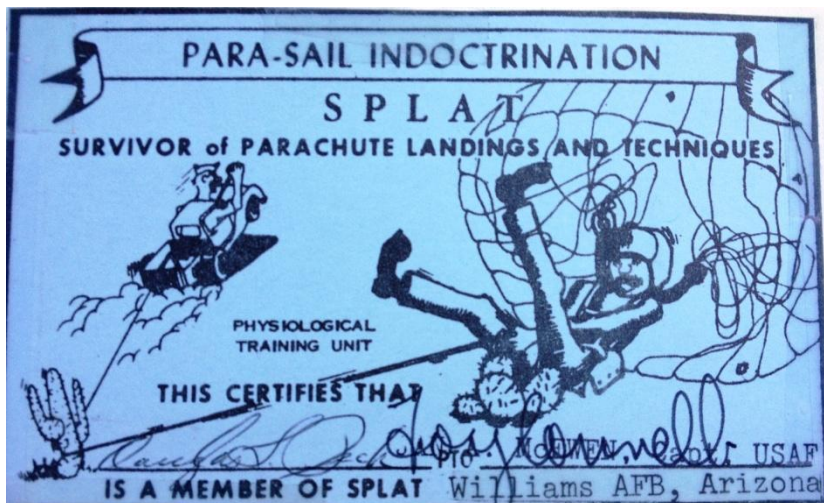
“For the ejection seat training they took us to a room in the medical unit where they had a special T-37 seat rigged up on pair of vertical rails. When you pulled the ejection ring under the seat you were launched upward very quickly about one foot. The instructor explained that in real life an explosive canister under the seat would shoot the seat and occupant straight up through the plexiglass canopy.”

“Whoa!” I said, “That sounds a little dangerous.”

“Oh yeah,” said Donnie, “pilots have been injured and even killed during ejection. We all hoped and prayed we would never have to use it.”



“For the parachute training we didn’t actually jump out of an airplane – we did something they called ‘parasailing’. They took us in an Air Force bus to an empty desert area off base. They attached us to the parasail and then they attached the parasail with a long nylon cable to a pickup truck. When we gave them the signal that we were ready, the pickup truck started slowly forward and we started running. The parasail immediately lifted us about 100 feet into the air as the pickup truck continued driving across the desert. Then the instructor in the pickup truck released the cable. After just a few splendid seconds in the air we floated back down to the ground. The key thing, they said, was to keep your feet together, bend your knees a little, and fall on your side as soon as you hit the ground. It was a very hard impact but we all survived without any broken bones.”



“We completed the classroom training in about two months, then we started the flight simulator sessions. We had 3-axis simulators (roll, pitch, and yaw) with realistic engine and alarm and landing gear sounds. They duplicated the cockpit of the T-37 and had a computer-generated display screen. Once they started the simulator session and began throwing heading and altitude changes and simulated emergencies at you, you forgot you were in a simulator and you sweated real sweat. We frequently came out of there completely drenched and exhausted. “

“After the simulator training we started our actual flying lessons. The simulator sessions also continued for awhile, interspersed with actual flying. We flew for 1.5 hours about every other day. In the beginning we always flew with an instructor. After about 10 hours of dual we were allowed to fly solo.”

“ We would start each flying lesson by reviewing the lesson plan with our instructor in the squadron room, then we went to the Operations Room where we got our parachutes, helmets, and oxygen masks, and then we boarded an Air Force van that took us from the squadron bldg to the flight line. Usually one or two other students and instructors rode in the van with us to the flight line.”

“The T-37 jets that we flew in the Basic Phase were lined up in one section on the flight line, and the supersonic T-38 jets that were flown in the Advanced Phase were lined up in another section. The T-37 looks like a guppy that swallowed a Hershey bar and it went sideways. It has a broad rounded nose and the cockpit is covered by a clamshell plexiglass and aluminum canopy that swings open to the rear. The student and instructor sit side by side, which is ideal for training. The instructor also has a control stick and a set of rudder pedals. The two throttles are on the center console.”

“After the van dropped us off at our assigned aircraft, I completed the exterior walk-around checklist, then we climbed in. As soon as I sat down I would attach my oxygen hose to the oxygen regulator and perform other tasks to get settled in the cockpit. Then I completed an engine start checklist. The engine start involves several steps – you don’t just turn the key. The engine noise on the Tweety Bird is extremely loud. When you give it a burst of throttle to pull out from the parking spot, everybody within a half mile turns to watch.”

“I would then call the tower and request taxi clearance, and then taxi to the hold line at the end of our assigned runway where I would complete the pre-takeoff checklist. We almost always took off on Runway 30 Left. Williams AFB had three parallel runways – 30 Left, 30 Center, and 30 Right. The ‘30’ indicates the compass heading of 300 degrees.”

“After I completed the pre-takeoff checklist I would call the tower and say ‘Hook52 (or whatever my call sign was for that flight), ready for takeoff’. After a few moments the tower would respond with something like ‘Hook52, cleared for takeoff, Coolidge departure.’ That was the name of the departure procedure that we were required to follow when we went to the Coolidge-Florence airport, about 40 miles south of Phoenix, where we did our touch-and-go’s. The departure procedure specified the ground track that we had to follow and the altitudes that we had to maintain along the route. We all memorized it after a few times. In Phoenix it was always sunny, so it was easy to spot the reference points on the ground – a rocky pinnacle here, a water tower there, and so on.”

“When we arrived at the Coolidge-Florence airport we would position ourselves to enter the pattern at the right location – a 45-degree angle to downwind – then make the pattern entry call on the radio – ‘Coolidge traffic, Cessna T-37 entering on the 45 for 23, touch and go’. When we were established on downwind at the correct airspeed we would lower our flaps (which gives you better control at slow airspeeds) and then lower our landing gear, and say out loud ‘three green’ to confirm to

ourselves and to the instructor that we had three good gear-down indications. Then we would turn to final and complete our touch-and-go. “

“In the T-37 it was very important to maintain the proper engine RPM and airspeed on final approach, because the aircraft did not accelerate very fast. You had to keep your airspeed and RPM’s up in case you had to abort the landing for some reason, such as another aircraft doesn’t see you on final and taxis onto the runway for takeoff. Once I allowed the nose to climb a little on final approach which caused the aircraft to get a little slow. My instructor drove home his point by slamming his stick forward and then back, which slammed us both forward in our seats. He knew it was coming so he was OK, but I, of course, wasn’t expecting it, and my helmet bounced off the instrument panel. Yup, he made his point.”

“After the touch-and-go’s we would fly to the military-only airspace east of Phoenix. The airspace was divided into a low-altitude layer from the surface to 17,000 feet, and a high-altitude layer from 17,000 to 25,000 feet. “

“The T-37 would climb at about 3,500 feet per minute and the top speed was about 400 MPH. So it didn’t take us long to reach our assigned block of airspace. Once we got there the instructor would have me do stalls, spins, and other maneuvers. “

“What does it feel like to fly at 400 MPH?” I asked.

Donnie replied, “We only flew that fast at high altitude and you don’t usually have any sensation of speed up there. But there’s one exception – when you’re flying around big puffy cumulus clouds. They would often form in the afternoon. My instructor loved it when we encountered them. We would do bombing runs on the clouds. I would push the nose down and gain speed and then just before entering the cloud I would pull up into a Chandelle – a fast-climbing 180 degree turn. Sometimes my instructor would take the controls and do a series of aerobatic maneuvers, like diving towards a cloud, then pull up and go inverted over the top of the cloud, and then roll right-side up again. Then he would do a couple of perfect aileron rolls or barrel rolls.”

“That is so cool,” I said.

Donnie continued, “After about 10 dual flights with my instructor I was allowed to take my first solo flight. That was a very special day. I was assigned to a high-altitude zone to practice aerobatics. They had us do aerobatics because it builds your confidence in the aircraft and in yourself when you can perform outside the normal envelope like that. For the next hour-and-a-half it was just me and my T-37 doing loops and rolls and Split-S’s and Immelmann’s and Hammerheads, flying upside down and right-side up and even sideways (that’s called ‘knife edge flight’). This was definitely the highlight of my flying career. I still dream about those high-altitude aerobatic flights in the T-37.”

“I experienced just one equipment malfunction during my training. I had just taken off for a solo training flight and I was climbing out on the departure route. When I did my 14,000-foot check I discovered that my oxygen gage read zero! I couldn’t continue my training flight without supplemental

oxygen because I was assigned to the high-altitude zone. I called Approach Control and said, "Williams Approach, Hook52." They responded, "Go ahead, Hook52." "I'm 5 miles east on the Globe departure at 14,000 feet. My oxygen gage is reading zero. Request return to base." "Roger, Hook52. You're cleared to land, 30 Right, fly heading 270 to intercept the final, descend and maintain 4,000 until intercept." I said "Hook52" to acknowledge the instructions.

"I completed the landing and parked the aircraft and went into the Squadron Operations room. They were aware of my 'incident' and had already arranged another aircraft so that I could continue my training flight. I took off in the new aircraft and did an hour-and-a-half of solo aerobatics in the high-altitude zone. In the meantime the squadron mechanics repaired the problem with the oxygen regulator on my first aircraft."

Trouble in Paradise

Donnie continued, "Up to that point I was doing pretty well on everything they asked me to do. But I began having problems when we started the Instrument phase of training. "

Donnie and I were now about halfway between Los Angeles and Sacramento. We passed a sign indicating a Rest Area up ahead and Donnie said, "Why don't we take a break." I said, "OK." Donnie pulled in and parked and walked over to a picnic table. I followed and sat down across from him.

"The Instrument phase was where you had to perform your departure, fly the mission, and return to base and land with reference only to your instruments. Under actual instrument conditions you are in the clouds so you can't see anything outside the aircraft. We had instrument training in the flight simulator as well as simulated instrument training in the aircraft, usually under Visual Flight Rules (VFR) conditions, not in actual weather. "

"From the beginning I had trouble orienting myself by only the instruments. Several times I failed to make required heading or altitude changes because I wasn't sure of my position. In actual instrument conditions if you missed a heading or altitude change you could fly into the mountains that surround Phoenix."

"The problems continued to occur during several more instrument training flights. After one of these flights my instructor said that I would be flying with our flight leader on my next lesson. A couple of days later we had that evaluation flight. I thought I did OK on most of it, but there were several incidents when my flying revealed that I was confused about my position. When we landed, the flight leader said I would be scheduled for a Review Board in a couple of days."

"The Review Board consisted of six officers from the flight school and the school commander. They reviewed my records while I sat facing them by myself in a chair. Then they asked me questions about my flight training. They wanted to know if I thought my problems were caused by bad training. I told them I thought the training was very good and that I just had problems 'keeping up with the aircraft'. That was the phrase my instructor used when he became exasperated with my mistakes. After

they finished their questions they told me that I would be on administrative leave until further notice and then they dismissed me. “

“A few days later I was told to report to the squadron commander. He welcomed me courteously into his office. Then he explained that I was going to be eliminated from flight training. He said that usually about a third of pilot candidates each year are eliminated. He said it was no disgrace. He said that since I was an Officer Training School graduate I had three options for my future: Navigator School, Missile Launch Officer School, or early discharge. Early discharge was an option up to a certain point in the flight training program. It was only an option for the OTS graduates, not for the ROTC or Academy graduates who had received a full college scholarship at government expense. He asked me to think about it and then let him know my decision by the following Friday.”

“The next day I went back to his office and told him I had decided on early discharge. He said ‘OK’ and ‘Thank You’ and told me to report to the Base Personnel Office the next day for further instructions.”

“Base Personnel had me fill out forms. They said it would take several weeks for my discharge to be processed. In the meantime I would be assigned to supervise the Wood Shop in the base recreation center. I reported to the Wood Shop from 9 to 5 every day except Sunday and assisted the sergeant there who actually ran the place. ”

“Why didn’t you choose Navigator School or Missile Launch Officer School,” I asked.

Donnie replied, “I wasn’t interested in sitting in the back of a cockpit facing a wall of switches and gages all day. And I didn’t want to be stuck 50 feet underground in a steel egg shell for weeks at a time at some remote missile base.”

“Did you talk to anybody about what was happening?” I asked.

Donnie answered, “I called Dad when they finally told me I was being eliminated. It was a hard phone call to make. Dad said ‘I see...I see.’ “He asked me how I was doing and where I would be going next. I told him I would be going back to work at Lockheed. He was very happy to hear that.”

Donnie was hunched over and staring down at the picnic table. I walked around and sat down next to him. I put my hand on his shoulder and said “You gave it your best shot.” He continued staring at the table and made a half-smile and said, “Yes, I suppose so.” His weary expression betrayed the mortifying regret that he has carried inside for more than 30 years. After a moment he looked up at me. His face brightened and he said, “Don’t worry, things got better.” He stood up from the picnic table and said, “Let’s get going, OK?” I said, “Sure” and we walked back to the truck.

Chandler

After we were rolling again Donnie resumed his story. “During my time off from the wood shop I hung around the Chandler Airport, which was located near Williams AFB. It was a typical small-town airport with a couple of dozen airplanes in the hangars and tie-down spaces. One day I noticed an ad on

the bulletin board for a Stits Skycoupe 2-seat homebuilt aircraft for sale. The price was \$2,250. That was just a few dollars less than the balance of my savings account. I called the phone number and met with the owner and the next day I gave him a check. “

“The Skycoupe is a very basic airplane. It has a 65 HP Continental engine with a fixed pitch propeller. There is no electrical system and no radio, and there are no lights on it so you can only fly during the day, and you had to hand-prop it. All of these were plusses to me since I was looking for a very basic airplane just to have fun flying around the Arizona desert. “

“To hand-prop it I would check that the wheel chocks were in place and the tie downs on the wings were secure, then reach inside and turn on the ignition switch, then walk around to the right front side of the plane behind the propeller and place my left hand on the cowling to brace myself, and then pull down sharply on the propeller. Usually it would start right up.”

“The pilot reviews that I had read about the Skycoupe joked that ‘it takes off at 65, flies at 65, and lands at 65’. That was pretty close to the truth. One cool feature was that I could easily remove the doors and fly around like that. Then you could really savor the smell of the desert after a light rain.”

“I re-upholstered the two-place bench seat with black vinyl cloth and added extra cushioning. I repainted the plane myself in a two-tone white and light blue pattern, painting with spray cans. It really spruced it up.”

Return to Agua Dulce

“After my discharge came through I moved back to Los Angeles. I tied down the Skycoupe at Agua Dulce Airport. I made several flights up and down the coast and I made some flights into the Mojave Desert north and east of Los Angeles. Without a radio it was challenging to get in and out of the local airports. Most of them had control towers and you had to call for clearance before you landed and then fly at 500 feet over the runway and look for a green light from the tower, which meant you could complete your landing. The hand-propping and not having a radio got to be too much of a nuisance and I decided it was time to sell the Skycoupe. I placed an ad in a couple of pilot newspapers and sold it to a local dentist within a month or so. ”

“One day a pilot friend invited me to go for an aerobatic flight. He was a student in an aerobatic flying course at Santa Paula Airport. The school offered Citabria and Pitts aircraft for rent. The Citabrias were much cheaper than the Pitts, so that is what he always flew. When we got to the aerobatic practice area south of the field, he did some loops and rolls and Chandelles, just basic maneuvers. It re-awakened my interest in aerobatics.”

“ I started searching the ads in the pilot newspapers for low-cost aerobatic planes. I found a homebuilt mid-wing taildragger called the Sonerai. It was very streamlined thanks to the tandem seating configuration, which gave it a narrow fuselage. The best part was it had a bubble canopy, like the F-15 and other fighters. The Volkswagen engine gave it a top speed of 140 MPH. It was for sale from a private owner in Iowa. “



“ I called the owner and we agreed on a price and made arrangements for me to come pick it up. I rented a lightweight boat trailer and bolted on some two-by-two cross members to secure the plane better and drove to Iowa. The owner had arranged for a lawyer friend of the family to join us when I arrived at the owner’s house. We sat in the living room and discussed how he and his brother had built the airplane and they had flown it for several years. He asked me what my plans were for the plane and I said I would just be flying for fun in my spare time. I gave him a check for the agreed amount and we loaded up the plane and I returned to Los Angeles.”

“Did I mention that the plane had folding wings?” said Donnie.

“No,” I said. “That would make it a little easier to tow, wouldn’t it.”

Donnie laughed and said, “Yes, it would. It was a clever design – you grab the end of the wing with one hand on each side and pull the wing out about two inches, and then rotate the leading edge of the wing downward until the wing is vertical, and then you fold it back against the fuselage. I had no problems hauling it all the way to Los Angeles.”

I asked Donnie, “Where were you working then?”

Donnie said, “I went back to my old job as a technical writer for Lockheed. I was assigned to the F-117 Stealth Fighter program. It was Top Secret at that time. The program was declassified about ten years ago. It’s funny when you think that this Top Secret airplane was being assembled in a hangar in downtown Burbank. On Friday nights at midnight a C-5 Galaxy transport plane would land at Burbank Airport and taxi up to the hangar and they would secretly load the F-117, with the wings removed, into the C-5, and fly it out to the test base in the Nevada desert.”

“Anyway,” continued Donnie, “back to the Sonerai. I waited for a nice calm morning to make my first flight. On the takeoff roll I accelerated to 70 MPH and then pushed forward a little on the stick to raise the tail and then waited for the plane to lift off the runway. That’s how we did it in the Citabria and it worked well also for the Sonerai. I climbed at about 800 feet per minute up to 6,000 feet to clear the mountains north of Agua Dulce and then headed for the Antelope Valley west of Palmdale. There’s no air traffic there so it’s a great place to fly aerobatics.”

“Once I got to the practice area I cleared the area – made gentle turns to the left and right to check for any traffic – and then pushed the nose down to accelerate to 140 MPH, and then pulled the nose up to about 10 degrees above the horizon and completed a nice, easy aileron roll. I found that it had a much faster roll rate than the Citabria – just a little flick of the control stick and it was on its way around. I continued for a couple of hours doing loops, barrel rolls, split-S’s, and Lazy Eights. It was very responsive and the bubble canopy gave me excellent visibility all around. “

“One of my favorite aerobatic maneuvers was a hammerhead turn with a vertical half roll,” said Donnie.

“A hammer what?” I said.

Donnie explained, “You push the nose down to gain airspeed to 140, then pull back on the stick until you are going straight up, then you do half an aileron roll while you are in the vertical, then you kick left rudder to turn the airplane around before it runs out of airspeed at the top of the maneuver, and then you head straight down for just a moment, and then you pull back gradually on the stick and recover to level flight.”

“Wow!” I said. “That sounds like a regular airshow!”

Donnie smiled and said, “It is a very satisfying maneuver, once you master it, because you are combining two maneuvers – the hammerhead turn and the aileron roll. While you are climbing in the vertical you can look to your left and see the wingtip follow the horizon as you do the half aileron roll. I only had enough horsepower to do half an aileron roll in the vertical before it ran out of airspeed. Airshow performers flying the Pitts and other powerful planes will do multiple aileron rolls in the vertical. I flew the Sonerai for about two years. It was the most fun airplane I’ve ever flown, other than the T-37.”

“By and by I started wishing for a plane that was more practical and comfortable for longer cross-country flights. I placed an ad in the pilot newspapers and sold the Sonerai to a man from Oxnard. Then I started looking at the ads for Cessnas and Grummans and several other models. I eventually decided on a 1972 Grumman TR2 that was for sale at Santa Monica Airport. I met the owner there one Saturday morning and gave him a check and flew it home.”

“One of my favorite flights in the TR2 was from Los Angeles to Seattle and back. I flew the inland route along Interstate 5 on the way up and along the coast on the way back. The snow-capped volcanic mountain peaks – Mount Hood, Mount Ranier, and several others – and the rugged Oregon and California coastline were awe-inspiring.”

“Another memorable flight was from Los Angeles to Dallas, although that one didn’t end quite so well.” I looked at Donnie with concerned interest as he continued.

“On the way back, just after I took off and had gotten about a mile from Sweetwater Airport in east Texas the engine started losing RPM’s. I couldn’t hold my altitude. I turned back to the airport and looked around for a place to put it down in case I couldn’t make it to the airport. The engine kept losing

RPM's even at full throttle and I could see that I wasn't going to make the airport. I lined up for landing on a plowed field ahead of me and let it settle onto the soft soil. I was rolling out just fine until I hit a deep rut. The nose wheel dug in and the airplane went up on its nose and then over on its back. I was hanging from the seatbelt straps as dust and debris from the floor of the airplane settled around me. "

"Holy Smokes!" I exclaimed. "Were you hurt?"

Donnie replied, "Not a scratch. I was able to push the broken canopy back just enough to climb out. The plane was totaled - the wingtips were damaged, the cowling was all smashed, the propeller was bent, and the tail was damaged. "

"What did you do?" I asked.

Donnie said, "I walked to the airport terminal and sat down on a sofa there and just zoned out for awhile. A fire truck and news crew showed up but they didn't know that I was the pilot and I didn't raise my hand so they went on past me. After all the commotion was over I went to the airport office and explained what happened to the manager. He gave me the name of a local salvage company who could recover the aircraft. They loaded the wreck onto a flatbed truck and moved it into a corner of one of the airport hangars. Later on they would disassemble it for parts. I took a bus back home to Los Angeles. They sent me a check for \$800 a few weeks later. I didn't have hull insurance, only liability insurance, so all I could do was take the loss and move on."

"I went back to work and kept my nose to the grindstone, licking my wounds and saving up for my next plane. I began taking UCLA Extension courses in computer science during the evening. Over the next two years I completed the Certificate in Systems Analysis and the Certificate in Telecommunications. That enabled me to get a job in the computing department at Lockheed. That is where I stayed until I retired in 2011."

"Also about this time I started dating a beautiful and smart young lady named Raili who would later become my wife."

"How did you you meet Raili," I asked.

"We met on a Sierra Club hike in the hills above Los Angeles. She pretended to be having a problem with her backpack, so I went over to help her and we started talking and I just got hooked. I couldn't stop talking. At every rest break we sat together and it seems like I did most of the talking. We did many more hikes together after that and after about two years we were married. We got married in Finland – you remember."

"Yes," I remember. Dad flew to the wedding with you," I said.

"That's right, said Donnie.

"Were you still flying then?" I asked.

“Yes,” said Donnie. “I rented Cessna 150’s and Cessna 172’s at Whiteman Field in Los Angeles while I was dating Raili and after we were married. We made many flights together all around Southern California. I also got to take Dad for a flight when he came out for a visit one year. And the following year when Raili’s father came for a visit from Finland I took Raili and her father for a sightseeing flight.”

“I also joined the Edwards Air Force Base Flying Club,” Donnie continued. “I was working frequently at Edwards then. One day I heard about their flying club and went over and asked them if they allowed contractors to join. They said, ‘Sure!’ They operated out of the 5,000-foot auxiliary runway which parallels the 15,000-foot main runway at Edwards. They offered flying lessons and they also rented Cessna 172’s, and a stylish French-built 4-seater called the Tobago. I got checked out in both of them. Flying in and out of Edwards was very interesting. We had to follow a precise ground track and specified altitudes to stay clear of the main Edwards traffic. I was often in the air at the same time that F-15s, F-16’s, B-1’s, C-141’s and other military aircraft were taking off and landing on the main runway.”

“One day I was on downwind for landing when the Edwards Control Tower called me on the radio and said, “Cessna 227 Bravo, extend downwind for two fast-movers.”

“What did that mean?” I asked.

Donnie said, “It meant that a flight of two fighter aircraft were inbound at high speed, probably about 400 to 500 MPH, and the controller wanted me to extend my downwind to stay out of their way. A moment later, up ahead and to the left, I saw the two F-16’s streaking in over the northern edge of the dry lake bed and go past on my left. I watched them over my left shoulder as first one and then the other made its high-bank 180-degree turn to downwind about halfway down the main runway. When they were on downwind behind me they lowered their flaps and landing gear and then turned to final and completed their landing. It all took just a few seconds.”

“That’s pretty cool,” I said.

“Yes, “ said Donnie. “There was also something interesting going on at Edwards. Another time I was getting ready for takeoff and made my radio call to the tower and requested the Lancaster Departure, which goes east and south towards Lancaster. The tower replied ‘Lancaster Departure is closed. Alpha Corridor is hot. You’re cleared for Rosamond Departure.’ I replied, “Roger, 227 Bravo.”

“What did that mean?” I asked.

Donnie replied, “It meant that an aircraft was making a simulated bombing run in the Alpha Corridor, a block of airspace that intersects the Lancaster Departure route. I would have to use the other departure route which goes west and then south towards the town of Rosamond.”

“So you didn’t want to tangle with an F-16 on a bombing run?” I asked facetiously.

“No,” said Donnie, grinning, “that wouldn’t be a good idea.”

Donnie continued, “The pilot’s club held their monthly meetings in an auditorium in the Edwards Test Pilot School. Many of the club members were active duty and retired military pilots. Imagine that – these guys flew the hottest, fastest jets in the world, but they still enjoyed flying Cessnas in their spare time. I felt privileged and lucky to be a part of it all.”

Upland

“Eventually I got the itch to own another airplane. I was thinking about taking instrument flying lessons, so I was looking for a plane that would be suitable for that. I found the plane I was looking for at a little airport near Gilroy, CA, south of San Francisco. It was another Grumman 2-seat model called the Yankee. It had the radio equipment that I would need for basic instrument flying: two Comm radios, two VOR radios, and a glideslope receiver with marker beacon.”



“Raili and I drove to Gilroy on a Friday night and stayed in a motel and then met the owner and his wife at the airport on Saturday morning. He and I went for a short orientation flight. I was delighted with the plane. It was essentially identical to the Grumman TR2. They invited us to have lunch with them at a local restaurant. At the restaurant I gave him a check for his asking price. After lunch I flew my new airplane home to Cable Airport in Upland and Raili drove back to our house in Upland.”

Donnie continued, “I enrolled in an instrument flying course at Brackett Field in Pomona, CA. I flew with an instrument instructor in a Cessna 172. We flew instrument approaches in Visual Flight Rules (VFR) conditions at several local airports such as Chino, Long Beach, Ontario, and Palmdale. I passed the FAA instrument written test and about three months later, after a couple of dozen training flights, I passed the FAA Instrument flight test and received my Instrument rating. I guess you could say I conquered my old nemesis.”

“That must have been a very satisfying feeling, Donnie,” I said.

“Yes,” said Donnie, “I’m proud of that achievement.”

“ I made many instrument flights in VFR conditions in my Grumman Yankee over the next few years. I only made one landing in actual instrument conditions – those conditions just didn’t occur that often in southern California, and I didn’t go looking for them.”

“My one and only actual instrument landing was an ILS approach at Van Nuys airport. The approach went just like all my other VFR instrument approaches, descending on the glideslope through the clouds, and then I popped out of the bottom of the overcast about 800 feet above the ground on final and completed the landing.”

“ I enjoyed the precision of instrument flying and I enjoyed the concise, competent communications that we were trained to use with the controllers. I was flying the same instrument approaches as professional pilots. It felt like I had really arrived.”

“When David was five years old I took him for his first plane ride. We flew around the Antelope Valley out of Fox Field. He enjoyed the flight and he didn’t get scared or airsick. If he had ever asked to go flying again I would have taken him, but he never asked again and I didn’t push it. In the back of my mind I was thinking about all the close calls that I had survived during 30 years of flying and that maybe now I was pushing my luck.”

“As time went on I flew less and less and finally placed an ad in the pilot newspapers and sold my Grumman Yankee to a Border Patrol agent from Santa Ana. I haven’t flown in more than ten years. Occasionally I think about maybe flying again someday.”

“Well,” said Donnie, “our delivery is coming up at the next exit. It’s an easy drop and hook at the Walmart Distribution Center. “ Donnie pulled into the Walmart yard and checked in with the attendant. Then he parked the trailer in an assigned spot and disconnected from the trailer. He drove over to another part of the yard and connected to an empty trailer. After finishing all of these tasks Donnie updated his load status on the QualComm terminal and then he smiled at me and said, “That’s that!” I gave him a grateful look and said, “Thanks for telling me your story, Donnie.” Donnie returned my gaze and said, “You’re welcome, John. I enjoyed telling it.”

“So,” I said with a chuckle, “what do you want to talk about on the way back?”

Donnie reflected for a moment and then he gave me that mischievous look and said, “Have you ever owned a sailboat?”



6 - Jersey Boys

"Hi, Deb. Could I please confirm my pickup time?"

My Fleet Manager responded, "You can pick up after 0700. Don't forget your load straps."

It would be a nice light load of Fritos chips from Phoenix to Las Vegas. Since my retirement a year ago I've been driving long haul. The first year I drove all 48 and was on the road for up to three weeks at a time. Now I stay closer to home, driving the southwest region, and I'm home every weekend. It's true that 'home is where the heart is.' While resting in my truck after completing my delivery in Las Vegas I decided to take a trip down memory lane and write a story about the early years.

Allentown

Under the nervous gaze of her husband Robert, Anita gave birth to a healthy baby boy in a hospital delivery room in Trenton, New Jersey, on February 11th, 1954. Robert may have been holding his first-born son, 14-month old John Robert, in his arms. An adorable little sister, Ellen Lynn, would be coming along in three years. This was the close family unit that would nurture, educate, entertain and mold my brother and sister and me during our childhood years.



Grandma Mom Doug John Grandpa

We lived in a two-story three-bedroom house on Waker Avenue in Allentown, New Jersey, population 2,100. My father had placed a three-foot high brown letter "P", in an attractive script style, in the center of the triangular peak on the front of the house. It made ours stand out from the rest of the houses on the street. I imagine that people driving by may have sometimes remarked "See the P? That's where the mayor lives." Our father served on the city council for many years and then he was elected mayor. From time to time this distinction garnered special treatment of my brother and sister and me from neighbors, friends, and store keepers, similar to that of preacher's kids. One thing that

impressed me was that Dad's letters in the stack of mail on the kitchen table were often addressed "Honorable Robert S. Peck". I think my brother and sister were as proud of our father as I was.

My mother was an attractive, loving and kind-hearted person. Aside from the much too taken for granted title of Mom, she had no honorifics in front of her name. She cooked our meals, washed our clothes and performed all the other home-making and child-raising duties of a typical 1950's housewife. She left her home in Newfoundland, Canada, when she was 18, all by herself, and got a job in New York City. A little while later she met my father and before long they were married. They moved to Allentown and began raising their family.

My earliest memory of the house on Waker Avenue was playing with my brother and sister and neighborhood friends on the metal swing set in the side yard next to our gravel driveway. There was a typical one-person swing seat suspended from two chains as well as a two-person swing seat with handlebars where you sat facing each other. You swung back and forth by leaning in on the down swing and leaning back on the back swing. You could really get that thing going if you swung with abandon like my brother and me. Fortunately my father had sunk the feet of the swing set in concrete shoes so that it wouldn't tip over. I remember one painful day when I pinched my finger badly in one of the mechanisms of the swing set. I'm sure that Mom came running from the house and tended to the emergency with love and kisses and bandaids.

My brother and I shared a bedroom on the second floor. Dad made a two-station desk with a long plywood counter top that went from one wall to the other along the south wall. That was where we did our homework and assembled dozens of model cars and boats and airplanes. The aroma of Testor's Model Glue wafted through the house on many rainy Saturday mornings. Ellen had her own room on the second floor, including her own bathroom. I don't remember ever using that bathroom – I suppose it was off limits to "the boys". But I do remember that it was very clean and tidy, and pink.

Snow Days

One of our favorite things in the whole world was snow days (no school), which usually happened at least a couple of times during a typical New Jersey winter. The wind created four-foot high drifts along the fence line at the edge of the field across the street from our house. We would bundle up like Eskimos and grab our shovels and spend hours building snow forts in the drifts. Then the snowballs would start flying. I remember sending a snowball across the field of battle once, just as a neighbor was driving by. The snowball exploded harmlessly in the center of his windshield. But I suppose it really startled my neighbor because he skidded to a stop and jumped out of his car and started chasing us. I must have gotten away with my misdeed on that occasion because I don't remember any further consequences. Sometimes the top of the snow drifts would melt a little in the late afternoon sun and then freeze during the night. The next morning if you were shorter than a fence post you could prance and slide across the top of the snow drifts like an exuberant snowshoe rabbit.

The best place for sledding was behind the Presbyterian Church on Cemetery Hill. We would take a running start at the top of the hill, holding our steel-runner sleds in front of us. Then we would pop down on our bellies and fly down the hill, bouncing over snow bumps and half-covered rocks. If we

were lucky and completed the turn at the bottom we ended with a long glide across the ice-covered Allentown Pond.

On one of my runs I crashed at the bottom of the hill and somehow managed to slice open the palm of my hand (I still have the scar). With the impeccable judgment of a 10-year old I decided it would be better to walk to Grandma and Grandpa's house (two miles) rather than walk back to our house (one mile). I think it was because from the top of Cemetery Hill I could see Grandma and Grandpa's house on the other side of a farmer's field, but I couldn't see our house which was behind some woods at the far side of the pond. With my little sister in tow we trudged across the field, pulling our sleds behind us.

Grandpa washed my hand under warm water in the bathroom sink. I heard Grandma on the phone in the kitchen, talking to Mom. Grandpa pulled back the little flap of torn skin on my hand and daubed it with mercurochrome. Ohhhh...did that ever sting. But I loved and trusted my Grandpa so I endured the treatment without a whimper or complaint. Grandpa smoked a pipe and wore sweaters and sometimes he would read to us by the fire. He made things for us in his wood shop...a birdhouse...a footstool...and one special time (a secret between Grandpa and me) a slingshot. I had a lot of fun with my slingshot until it was taken away from me one day for shattering a window in a neighbor's barn. "It was an *accident!*" Grandpa finished bandaging my hand. He gave each of us a white peppermint Lifesaver from a roll that he always carried in his pocket. Then he and Grandma drove us home in their dark blue Plymouth with the tan-colored seats that smelled like cherry pipe tobacco.

Bicycles

As soon as the weather warmed up in the spring we would get out our bicycles. From then on until it became too cold and snowy again in the fall we would be on our bikes almost constantly, from the time we were let out of school until dinner time, then out again until it was time for homework or time to watch Bonanza, or Gunsmoke, or I Love Lucy. The mostly level terrain of greater Allentown in central New Jersey was conducive to bike riding. You could hop on your bike and within fifteen minutes be at the playing field behind the grade school, or at the soda shop downtown, or at the park near the Allentown pond.

Our bikes enabled us to socialize with friends without having to ask a parent to shuttle us around. In many towns across America that just isn't possible – there are too many steep hills, or there is too much traffic, or it's too far to ride between home and wherever you want to go. Kids today who don't have a network of safe neighborhood streets for bike riding are forced to socialize in other ways, like texting and multi-player video games over the Internet. But it's the same thing – hanging out with other kids outside of a family or school setting. This is where we learned things about the world that they didn't teach us in school and didn't talk about at the dinner table.

I would ride my bike downtown, for example, and more often than not I would run into one of my friends along the way and we would meander over toward the park where the high school kids played basketball. We would seem to be absent-mindedly tracing circles in the dust at the edge of the court, but really we were tuned into the banter and behavior of the big kids. We came to know the ones to admire and emulate, as well as the ones to avoid if you knew what was good for you. We watched

with fascination as fist fights and wrestling matches frequently erupted during the course of the game, and then we would see the opponents laughing and carrying on again like best friends a little while later. We heard them exchange taunts and insults with mock contempt, using *those words* that were never allowed at home or in the classroom. We saw them trip and fall and smash a knee or an elbow on the concrete and then get up and shake it off and continue playing. We learned what it meant to be a boy.

My brother and I and all our friends had single-speed 20-inch bikes. Nobody had multi-speed “mountain bikes” with fancy suspension systems back then. I painted my bike dark red – maroon was my favorite color. I painted it with a paint brush, not a spray can. It didn’t look professional, but it sure enough made it “mine”.

Boys bikes all had high-rise handlebars, like customized Harleys, and they had long thin banana seats instead of the normal round seats. The banana seats allowed you to slide back on the seat and then adroitly pull back on the handlebars and raise the front wheel off the ground – called “popping a wheelie.” Once you were good at it you could ride a whole block with the front wheel in the air. Boys would customize their bikes by installing headlights and taillights that ran off a little generator that rubbed against the side of the tire. We also attached folded baseball cards with a clothespin to the front and rear forks – they went “pat...pat..pat...pat...pat...pat” against the spokes as we sped down the street.

Girls bikes usually had a wicker or wire basket up front and sometimes they would have streamers dangling from the handlebar grips, and they were missing that tube between the handlebars and the seat so that girls could mount their bikes with lady-like modesty. Boys wouldn’t be caught dead on a girls bike, unless it was one that happened to be real good for doing jumps or popping wheelies, and then it didn’t matter.

We usually didn’t intentionally set out to meet anyone in particular when we left the house on our bikes. We would just head for a favorite location and often as not we would find one or more of our friends there. It was spontaneous.

Music Lessons

My parents encouraged my brother and me to play a musical instrument. My brother chose guitar and I chose accordion. We took lessons together at a music store in the next town. Every year the students of the music store would have a recital in a large public auditorium in Trenton. For our performance my brother and I played “Bill Bailey” (“Won’t you come home, Bill Bailey, won’t you come home? Won’t you come home to meeee?”). If you can imagine two small boys on a large stage under the spotlights in a darkened auditorium, and the “oom pah pah” beat of my accordion mixed with the “strum strum strum” of my brother’s electric guitar, you can appreciate the discordant charm of our performance. It must have been a gratifying night for my parents. On the way home we had a celebration dinner at a pizza restaurant.

One of my favorite songs on the accordion was “Home on the Range”. Almost fifty years later I played that song for a singalong at a Cub Scout campfire with our son, David. I still enjoy dusting off my accordion now and then and playing “Home on the Range”. It’s the only song I remember.

Boy Scouts

My brother and I were Boy Scouts. It was a family tradition. My father and his two brothers were all Eagle scouts. There was never any question whether we would participate. My father was not a uniformed scout leader. He worked in the background, such as recruiting men to serve as scout leaders, arranging a place to hold our troop meetings, arranging guest speakers for our troop meetings, and shuttling us to dozens of campouts and scout events. He made sure we made steady progress on our ranks. My brother and I both achieved Eagle rank and received our Eagle pins in a ceremony at the First Church of Christ in St. Jacob, Illinois. One of my favorite scout events was called "Winter Olympics." Each scout patrol (six to eight boys) had to build a dog sled out of one-by-fours and clothes line. My father showed us how to bend up the tips of the sled runners by making a dozen cross cuts about a foot from the end of the sled runners and then soaking the ends in water overnight. The boys would act like sled dogs with one boy mushing at the back of the sled. We had races against the other dog sled teams.

Our campouts were usually fairly close to home. There were lots of campgrounds in the pine forests of southern New Jersey and in the Pocono Mountains of eastern Pennsylvania. One year our troop took a bus all the way to the national Boy Scout camp in New Mexico. It was two weeks of strenuous hiking with full packs. We had to carry all of our food and water and supplies for two weeks. I remember one afternoon we heard something large moving through the brush at the edge of the camp. Several of us crept cautiously towards the sound and found a brown bear standing on its hind legs with one paw leaning against a tree trunk and the other paw swatting at our bag of food that we had strung up in the branches about 10 feet off the ground. When he spotted us he ran into the woods. None of us at the time understood what a dangerous situation it might have been if the bear had not run away.

I am proud of the fact that I was able to continue the scouting tradition with our son, David, although it was in Cub Scouts, not Boy Scouts. We had many wonderful campouts and field trips. I served as a den leader for four years and then as Cub Master for the final year.

St. Jacob

My father was the general manager of a grain storage and treating business. The local farmers would bring in their corn and other seeds in bulk trailers. The workers would dry it and treat it for insects and then bag it and store it in the warehouse until it was sold. One day a corn dryer caught on fire. The fire spread quickly in the wooden warehouse. The whole place burned down in about half an hour. A few months later my father informed us that we would be moving to Illinois. My brother and I and my sister were 14, 13, and 10 years old, respectively, at that time.

My father traded in our old Pontiac and bought a new Ford Country Squire station wagon for the trip west. It was black with fake wood grain accents on the sides and had a red vinyl interior. We were all very excited about the new car and the big trip. We arrived several days later at our new home in St. Jacob, Illinois, population 550. The new house was much larger than our former house on Waker Avenue, in fact it was one of the largest houses in town. There was a detached one-car garage that looked like it was designed more for a Model A than for a Ford station wagon – we never used it except

for storage. There was a magnificent pine tree in the front yard. Behind the house there was a metal cow barn that belonged to a local farmer and beyond that were farm fields. The best feature of the house to us kids was that you could climb up an attic staircase and open a trap door and stand on the roof of the house.

We moved in just before school started in the fall of 1967. My younger sister and I walked about six blocks each day to the grade school in St. Jacob. My brother rode the bus to the high school about five miles away. It was called Triad High School because it served three towns that were located close together.

During that first year in eighth grade I was very popular, I suppose partly because of the “new kid” appeal but also because I was good at sports and I was outgoing and I loved attention. The teacher selected me, for example to play the lead character in our school play, “Egbert the Soft-hearted Ghost”. I got in trouble one day along with two other boys for throwing erasers when the teacher was out of the room. They were soft brick-shaped chalkboard erasers and they let out a nice puff of chalk dust when you hit your target. Our teacher, Mr. Korte, walked in and caught us red-handed. He lined us up in front of the class, told us to bend over, and then swatted each of us three times on the butt with a long paddle board that he kept behind his desk. I suppose that would never happen today. We all took the punishment without any display of emotion while the other students watched with quietly amused satisfaction. Then we sat back down, tenderly, in our seats and went on with our day. Aside from that day it was a wonderful year and I loved almost every minute of it.

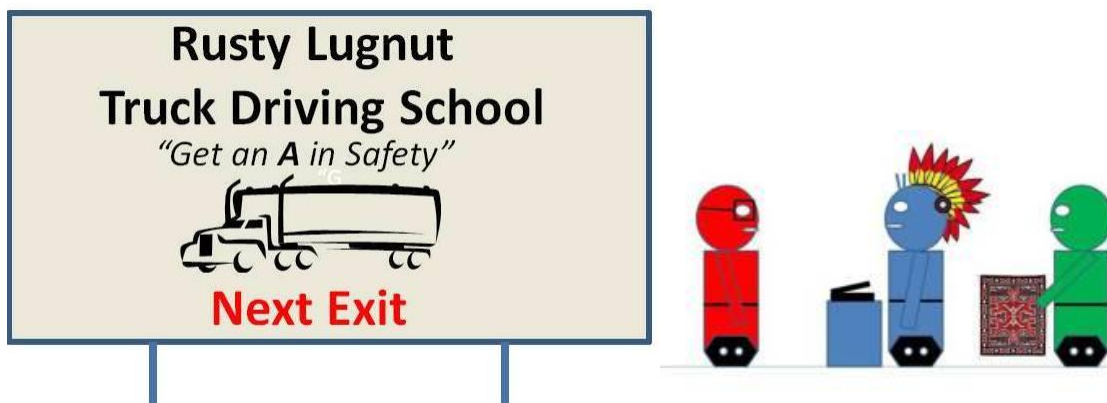
The years to come would have many highs and a few profound lows, but I’ve always been grateful for the innocent charm of those early years.



Ellen, Doug, David and John - 2012

7 - Rusty Lugnut

One day I was rollin' down the Main Street of America (Interstate 80) and I spotted this billboard. I pulled in for a visit and met three interesting characters: Rusty Lugnut, Reggie Retread, and Kathy Kingpin.



Life on the road with Rusty and friends: http://youtu.be/mF_n00cWrGE

Truck Driving Lessons:

Lesson 1 – Pre-Trip Inspection: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FMttrI-Mev4>

This video covers the walkaround inspection that drivers are required to perform, and record in their logbooks, at the beginning and end of their driving sessions.

Lesson 2 – Safe Driving Skills: <http://youtu.be/VUaaSfTlyOk>

This video covers the most frequent accident causes and the techniques that we can use to reduce the chances of accidents.

Lesson 3 – Equipment Operation: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kxGIJgNzYx4>

This video describes some of the nuts and bolts of truck driving from a safety point of view.

Ghost Rider

This music video tells a story about some of the dangers that truck drivers face on the road. Grateful thanks to songwriter Stan Jones for the background music, from "Ghost Riders in the Sky".

Click Here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MLPywoz4RtY>



