

By David Rose, Contributing Editor

In the late '50's, early '60's, flying up around 35,000 feet or so was a lonely experience. The traffic was virtually all military and there wasn't a lot of that.

Not many airliners up there either. Commercial jet service in 1959 had American Airlines with just a few 707's; Delta had around 6 jet Convair 880's and United's jet fleet consisted of a few Convair DC-8's. That was just about it.

So, if you were a hot young fighter pilot out there at night, you were all alone. You would file a flight plan with 'base ops', light up and blasted off. Climbing through 24,000 you'd contact the closest center and give them your call sign; simply your branch of service and the last three of your tail number. En route you'd report your altitude and time over station, the name of your next VOR and fuel remaining. If your speed varied more than 10 knots you would inform them of that also. Beyond those few contacts, and considering you were using UHF rather than VHF radios, you might fly coast to coast and just about never hear anyone else's radio transmissions. It was you with your thoughts. Alone. Uninterrupted. Unbothered. And I was 'unbothered' a lot.



The Air Force had just put me out of a job by grounding all the '86's. For the moment I found myself assigned to Base Flight at Robbins AFB near Macon Georgia. They had 5 T-33's there, and with me, only 5 "T" bird pilots. That seemed great on the surface, but back then the Air Force dictated how many hours you were required to put on your fleet and that requirement was a bit onerous for the 5 guys tasked to fly those hours off every month.

The Air Force didn't seem to care how the birds were



utilized, just so the time got flown off. The point is that I virtually

owned my own "T" bird. Wherever and whenever I felt like going, I went. There was a girl in LA I was seeing a lot of, and they knew me by name at Greenblatts Delicatessen on Sunset; Pizzeria Uno in Chicago was a regular haunt of mine, and the Red Cedar Lounge in Wichita had the best ham sandwich in the country. For a magical 18 months in the early '60's I had nothing to do but put time on those birds.



I was the only bachelor in that group of 5 and there

was no way the other pilots could be away from home, just “putting time” on the birds, as much as I. So it didn’t come as a complete surprise when word had come down to deliver one of the T-33’s to Davis Montham AFB in Arizona. The Boneyard. Finished. Grounded. Any airplane’s worst nightmare. And I would deliver her.

Maintenance of course picked the bird with the highest time, which just happened to be the most trouble free of them all, and subsequently, the one I had flown the most. As pilots, we generally ignore the rational intellects view of inert objects. We tend to see aircraft as less a collection of parts and more as a dynamic being – each aircraft exerting its own active influence upon us; every airplane possessing its own enigmatic life; each aircraft seemingly alive. The sense we develop for each aircraft may be good, or it may be bad. In this case it was good, and filing the flight plan that afternoon, I realized I wasn’t thrilled to make the trip.

Preflighting the bird, I felt a sadness akin to that of sitting with an old dog who’s grown old without us. But when we blasted off into the dusk she headed for the stratosphere just as eagerly as ever. Though I might be returning there thousands of times in the years to come, not so this old girl. It would be one stop for fuel at Carswell AFB outside Dallas, then on to Tucson.



The sun had already set as we crossed into Alabama and it was one of those cold, clear nights when you can see forever. The distance to the horizon from 35,000 feet is well over 200 miles, so the lights of Jackson Mississippi were already in sight as I called center, reporting over the VOR at Montgomery. “Montgomery Center, Air Force 698, Montgomery at 25, 350, Shreveport at 15 with an hour 30 on board”. Maybe they’d come back with “Rodger 698”, maybe they wouldn’t. To balance the stick and the flight planning with no autopilot you’d jot down the time and fuel remaining on a little pad strapped to your leg, then compare the new numbers to those on your flight plan and look for discrepancies. A time difference might alert you to the possibility of stronger winds while a variance in fuel remaining would get you thinking about an engine problem or a possible fuel leak.



Satisfied everything is going well, we continue on, crossing the Mississippi near Jackson.

I smoked in those days. That little zipper pocket up on the left arm of your flight suit was just big enough to hold a pack of Luckies and a Zippo. There was something special about the aroma of cigarette smoke mingling with the scent of the rubber from your Ox mask and I’m on my second Lucky as the moon’s reflection causes the Mississippi to light up off to our right.

I can see Greenville AFB about hundred miles up the river where I had finished up my pilot training. I’m still thinking of my days as a cadet when the lights of Dallas come into sight and it’s time to start down. The evening is passing quickly now and I am aware this will be her last landing before Davis Montham. Contacting the tower I call Carswell in sight and with no other traffic in the area, we’re given landing instructions while still fifty miles out. We touch down as smoothly as I can and taxi to transient parking. They begin refueling the bird and I’m off to Ops to file for DM. “Headed for the bone yard is she” quips the Airman behind the counter as he reviews my flight plan. “Yes” I reply, and add that it seems a shame.



Snacking on Coke and Clark bars from the vending machines, the parallels of this old bird's flying career and mine play on my mind. It had only been 12 years since she'd rolled out of Lockheed. Originally fitted with a pair of machine guns in her nose, she had been pressed into service for gunnery practice, then later converted back to pure training configuration to spend her

remaining years in support of the Air Material Command. I trusted my flying career would last considerably longer.

Back out on the flight line I find her all gassed up and ready to go. 700 miles to DM and it will be all be. It's her last preflight and I do a thorough job, trying to remember all the points of the long ago discarded checklist. Tip tanks secure; gun bay doors locked, pins out, freedom of controls. You learn the checks as a rhythm of movement around the aircraft and eventually the points become ingrained. If you skip one your nervous system alerts you with a twinge. The checks around the cockpit follow a similar pattern. Throttle, master, ignition, light off. The need to follow the laminated sheets of a checklist had passed years before.

The Airman pulls the chocks and waves us off and rather than issuing a string of taxi instructions the Tower just cleared us to take off. It's nearly midnight and the moon lights up the cockpit as we turn on to the active. Rolling down this 12,000 feet of concrete I remembered that it had hosted B-24's during WW II, and now B-52's and B-58's. Carswell was named for Army Air Corp Major Horace Carswell, who, returning from a mission during WW II, discovered one of his crew members parachutes had been destroyed by the same flak which had crippled his bomber. Major Carswell remained at the controls in a failed attempt to land them both safely. His family accepted the Medal Of Honor as a grateful nation sought to make amends.

A right turn now puts us on course as we again climb to 35,000. The sky is clear all the way and the lights of El Paso are already in sight. It's the early '60's, and number one on the "Hit Parade" is the classic western ballad "El Paso" wherein Marty Robbins laments the hapless misfortunes of a cowboy lover. "Out in the West Texas town of El Paso, I fell in love with a Mexican girl" he sang. But it would all end badly for the cowboy "on hill outside 'Rosa's Cantina'. Now up over the VOR just outside El Paso I key the mike and report "Air Force 698, on the hill overlooking Rosa's Canteena at 27, 350, DM with an hour plus" "Rog Air Force. We got cha" comes the reply from center. Things were a little less strict in those days.

Catching the little South Western corner of New Mexico it's already time to start down. Less than an hour or so now and it's all over for her; then rest.

Tucson is in sight as I cancel out with center and call the tower at DM. Descending to the traffic pattern I report that "This bird will be retiring", and imagine the words knifing through her.



One of the instructors in my pilot training class had been Lieutenant "Dirty boy" Katrier. He used to do something I have emulated many times over the years and still love to do today. He would come down final, call for a go around and a closed traffic pattern, then suck up the gear, get fast and low down to the runway, perform a sharp right and left turn to 'clear' the runway, then at the far end of the

runway at over 200 knots, he would pull straight up toward pattern altitude, then nearly over on his back, roll out on downwind. It was an aerobic maneuver for sure but no one has ever called me on it. It just looked fantastic and I've done it a hundred times now in everything I've flown from the 104 to my Pitts. "Shining your ass" is the vernacular.

So, fat on fuel, and reluctant to end this bird's last flight, I do a number of those 'closed traffic patterns', getting fast and clearing the runway with really sharp, low turns; pulling hard straight up to pattern altitude and rolling smartly over on downwind. It's dark and the runway lights are sharp and clear; the lights of the cockpit are low, just enough light to see the airspeed; then, on steep final, doing all over again. Finally I resign us both to a touch down and full stop. The little bit of aerobatics are exhilarating, and as we taxi off near the end of the runway I feel OK with this bird. She's given her best and I have tried to appreciate it. It was a great ride. But now it's over and you're both well satisfied. She's going to the barn and it's OK.

The tower directs "nice show Air force, follow that taxiway to the gate." A long taxiway takes us to a wide gate entering the highway which runs alongside the base. A little truck with a big 'Follow Me' sign is there waiting, and as we approach, he drives out on to the road.

Now, just like the dream we've all had, I find myself taxiing down a highway. A few yards later we turn across the road into another gate and are stopped next to a guard shack. That's it. Shut down, unstrap and head to the 'Follow Me' for a ride to the 'Q'.



Look back? Sure.

It's just an airplane standing there, but for the moment, it's goodnight to an old friend.

