

Eulogy for a “Special” Brother

When we were growing up, being brothers, we sometimes had “issues,” Don being older by 3 years older, always won. At 5’7” (he said 5’8”) he quit growing. He came home from college for a visit, walked in, looked “up” at me-I was now 6’2” and went “Uh-Oh,” I just grinned. He took great pleasure from then on putting his arm up around my shoulders and introducing me to his friends saying “this is my little brother.”

Don was a husband, father, grandfather, uncle and a pilot. More on being a pilot later. Don did not have many hobbies, but the few he had, he was passionate about. He loved cars, old or new, and car shows were awesome, but he did not like Jeeps. One of his last purchases was a Jeep Wrangler-loaded, leather bucket seats with every option available. He called me raving about this Jeep. I said, “I thought you hated Jeeps?” He said, “this one is “special” and a lot of fun, besides Lorenda loves Wranglers.” Well, it is sitting in his garage, keys in it for Lorenda.

There are pilots and then there are pilots. Don was a natural, loved flying and being a pretty good judge of what makes a good pilot, he was very, very good.

In the Navy he flew T-34s and the 52F Sub tracker and in civilian life he flew the Convair 580, MD-80, Boeing 737 and had a type rating for the Boeing 747’s. The 52F he flew on two tour cruises in the European area off of an aircraft carrier.

In his obituary you noticed 250-night carrier landings. I would like to expand on what 250-night carrier landing really means.

Taking off and landing on a carrier takes a special talent. It is without a doubt one of the most dangerous and challenging aviation experiences ever, and still is today.

The 52F was a brute of an airplane, multi engine, 4 place aircraft with a 71’ wing span with a takeoff weight of 30,000 pounds. Its job was to protect the carrier from a submarine attack. While taking off and landing on an aircraft carrier in the daytime was extremely challenging, night time operations were

even more stressful and dangerous. Night ops made even normal daytime carrier pilots humbled.

Dons squadron was the “nighttime” squadron. Picture this-it’s raining, wet slick deck, pre-flight with a flashlight, start engines, taxi up to the CAT (catapult) go full power, launch zero to 120 knots, 200’ in 2 seconds. Off the deck flying into a black hole-no lights, just ocean 50’ below. You are instantly on the gauges, instrument flying which takes extreme concentration, absolutely no room for error. So you fly your patrol for 3-4 hours, now it’s time to go back to the carrier-no easy feat, its moved 100 miles, weather deteriorating, get a radar assistant approach, breakout of the weather 300’ above water. There’s the carrier, you are doing 120 knots and have to grab a cable to get stopped in 200’. Arresting wires, 4 of them, ideal wire is the #3 wire. They are 10’ apart so touch down zone is 40’, with a 70’ wing span, landing zone is 110’ wide. You have 20’ off of each wing tip to not hit something, other airplanes or people. Oh yeah, in rough seas the carrier is moving up and down. Also, the carrier is probably your only option, not enough fuel to divert to a land base, if you do not catch a wire, you go full power, back into weather and try again. And if you miss again you are in real trouble. You get one more try, then the only option is to ditch into the ocean at night which is not very survivable. So now you catch the third wire, fold your wings, taxi to parking, shut down and crawl out of the aircraft. Then you watch a squadron mate slam onto the deck and catch a wire. Saying to yourself, wow in 12 hours I get to do this again! And then 250 landing traps later you get to go home. I would say, without reservation, that qualified Don as a very “good” pilot.

Don did not go to church very much but this does not mean he was not a Christian, “he believed.” He was passionate about what he believed was right and wrong. I think the term that would best describe him would be “old school.” Not that there is anything wrong with that. Don was very kind, very caring and genuinely a nice person. I firmly believe Don is in heaven reunited with our father, our mother, and his son, Scott.

I have used the term “special” many times in this tribute to my brother for a very good reason, he was “special.”