

NOTES OF AN AVIATION PIONEER

by E.P. Lietz

Received via email Wed, 21 Apr 2004

I enjoyed the newsletter, Jake. I noted a letter from John Koehler (PHX SSA) concerning a target shooting session in PHX. I went hunting with John several times north of PHX. Dove hunting was great out there. This was in the Cave Creek area and I am sure that is all covered with homes now. Things have changed a lot since the old days. I was glad to hear that John is still around. I did enjoy that station group in PHX. They were all great people.

Hope all is well with you. I am having health problems. My emphysema is getting worse and my heart is lousy. I strongly suspect that I am paying for the indiscretions of my youth. I did have a lot of fun however and can't think of anything in my life I would have changed.

This isn't a hair raising war story but some things about the Hump. You have to actually see that thing to understand just what it is like. I have often wondered why someone didn't put a huge resort hotel somewhere in that place. As far as scenery is concerned it is beautiful. One distinctive feature I remember so well. We flew basically east until we got just north of Kunming and then turned Northeast to A-1 or the city of Hsinching.

Right where we turned North there was a sort of rock just like Devil's Tower in Wyoming. It was probably three miles across a perfectly flat top and went straight up for many thousands of feet. The walls were straight up and down and it looked pretty hard to climb. After I checked out as first pilot I decided to see just about how high that thing was so I dropped down and flew as close to the height I could. My altimeter said 15,000 feet. BUT as I flew past I could see people running around on top of that thing. It looked to me like they were living up there. How anyone could have possibly got up there amazed me. I actually wonder what could possibly be up there as far as water and a way to grow food. But they were up there and how anyone could have climbed that smooth wall amazed me. It was perfectly round and went up for about ten thousand feet from the base.

Too much flying can really wear one out. When I was in the Air Guard there were many months I flew over 200 hours with FAL and Guard flying. We were required to fly 85 hours a month on Frontier and many Guard missions were 125 hours long. When we flew to Vietnam out of PHX it was over 125 hours. We had to sit on the ground somewhere for 2 days to stay legal as far as the Air Force was concerned. Before I finally gave that up I got pretty worn out.

We were restricted to 1000 hours a year civilian flying and 125 a month Air Force flying. Neither one paid any attention to what was going on in the other group. Incidentally, to get gruesome, Shirlee and I went out to the National Veteran's Cemetery here to see what it was like and what we had to do to be buried there. I went through my military records to get the necessary paper work and came across one that stated that I had flown 530 combat hours during my tour overseas.

We got an Air Medal for 150 hours, A DFC for another 150 hours and another 150 to get the Oak Leaf Cluster to the Air Medal. I flew a lot more than that but had never kept track of it. We got credit for combat time when we were actually over Jap held territory and subject to anti-aircraft fire or interception by Jap fighters. Each mission we flew we were over that territory 8 hours.

Regarding the Challenger DC-3 that ran off the runway at SLC. The Captain was Bill McChrystal. I was about a 2nd year copilot and not too long after that I checked out as a Captain myself. We were on the last leg of a flight into SLC from either Denver or Billings, don't remember which. The weather at Salt Lake was horrible. We were holding on one leg of the Ogden radio range waiting to see if the weather might come up to minimums before we had to proceed to an alternate. It was night, snowing, the whole nine yards.

The stewardess came up into the cockpit, leaned over Bill and put her hand on the arm rest of his seat. She said one of the passengers was sick. I noticed that her hand was jerking and she had trouble holding onto the arm rest. I got the distinct impression that something was seriously wrong.

I told Bill I would go back and see what the problem was. I opened the door to the cabin and immediately got a shock. Several other passengers aided by one of our ground people had this guy across two seats holding an oxygen mask to his face. What I could see of his face was very black. He was kicking his legs and jerking his whole body around. I went back up to the cockpit and told Bill that this guy was in serious trouble. Bill called the company and they agreed to let him try an instrument approach into SLC. Of course the weather was below our legal minimums but Bill declared an emergency.

We went ahead and made the approach. We were landing south on the north south runway. Bill broke out below the clouds just a few feet to the left of the left side of the runway. I could see it but Bill apparently couldn't. I told him to turn slightly right and then he picked it up. He put it on the ground about half way down the runway. NOW just before we touched down the wind changed from CALM to about 35 knots on our tail directly out of the north. Add to that the runway was

covered with ice. There was no way Bill could have stopped that thing. We slid all of the way to the end, hit the boundary fence and tore about a mile of it out of the frozen ground, posts and all. There was a guy in a DeSoto car driving east on the highway. Our left wheel hit him right in the center. We then slid, car, airplane and all across the highway and into the field with one wing almost touching the approach lights at that end of the runway. Just before we hit Bill reached up and turned off all of the cockpit switches. He didn't want a fire. We came to a screeching halt and both of us just sat there. Then Bill reached up to turn on the switches again. He was going to call the company on the radio. I stopped him from doing that. Then he remarked, "There went a promising career."

(Bill McChrystal would later win the Guinness world record as the pilot with the greatest number of hours (17,111) flying the DC-3! He retired from FL in 1976 and passed away Jul 8, 1992, aged 76.)

OK, no one on the airplane was hurt. The four people in the car were severely injured. The company had an ambulance standing by to take care of the sick passenger. It turned out that the passenger was having an epileptic fit. Nothing anyone could have done for him at that time. Actually he had recovered when we hit, got off the airplane and climbed onto a bus. They never even found him for several days after that. It also turned out that we had a registered nurse aboard. She knew what the problem with this guy was but said nothing. At the hearing she said she was not a doctor and did not feel it was her responsibility to diagnose anything. The ambulance picked up the injured people in the car and got them to the hospital very quickly.

The airplane was standing almost on its nose with the tail in the air. The left gear was gone. My overcoat was hanging on a rack in the tail. I needed that overcoat. It was colder than a mother-in-law's kiss out there. So I climbed the seats just like a ladder. When I got up there the stewardess was standing there behind the last seat crying her head off.

Her name was Batsine Frazier, we called her Batsy. I put my arm around her and convinced her no one was hurt, everything was OK, got her to stop crying and then put on my coat. I helped her back toward the cockpit. The only way off that airplane was out of the small door behind the captain's seat. She got out that door and stood on the ground. Just then some JERK said, "My God, you killed everyone in that car." This just wasn't so but poor Batsy did a little jerking around herself and passed completely out. They got her to a hospital. She stayed there for a couple of days. Then she quit her job and rode a bus back to Denver. I doubt if she ever got on another airplane.

Hearings and legal procedures continued for the next two or three years. Actually the tower had a major part in all of this. A cold front was just passing through, the runway was covered with ice and we actually had about a 40 knot tailwind. The tower NEVER gave us any of this information. The last word we got was that the runway was OK and the wind was calm. Had that been the case the accident would never have happened. If that cotton pickin nurse had told us the guy was an epileptic it never would have happened. Such is life.