

FLIGHT TO PHOENIX

Keith L. Sorrels

3/1/91

0630 was the appointed time. I parked out on the empty flight line, the winter loneliness of the now abandoned air tanker base was quite a contrast to the mid summer bustle of activity. I gathered my gear and walked past the empty retardant tanks. Being about ten minutes early, I unlocked the kitchen, made coffee and poured myself a cup.



I heard a noise outside and was surprised that it was Jim Cook. This was the first time that I had seen him this early in the morning without his "no eyes glasses". Jim always had those glasses on, there were even local bets on what color Jim's eyes were although the most popular bet was bloodshot. "Is Merl here" Jim asked. "Not yet" I said. His expression harbored some contempt for his co-pilot who was probably still sleeping. Cook's co-pilot Merl has many talents however people meeting Merl for the first time are usually preoccupied by

his startling height. At 6' 8" Merl understood well the intimidation at his command. Merl had been Cook's co-pilot for the past 2 years. The airplane for our flight today was a 1945 Consolidated PB4Y-2. A four engine patrol bomber built for the Navy during World War II, close cousin to the famous B-24 Liberator.

This PB4Y-2, "Charlie 30," was originally equipped with 1830 cubic inch engines producing 1,350 hp each. Sometime after falling into private hands, 2600 cubic inch engines from a B-25 were adapted to the plane giving it an additional 350 hp per engine which was a substantial boost in performance. The plane eventually was fitted with a 2,000 gallon tank with a door system for carrying and dropping of fire retardant on wildland fires. Captain Jim had been the pilot of tanker "Charlie 30" for over thirteen years and during that time they had both seen their share of flame.

Forsaking my coffee, I followed Jim as he strolled out to the plane and started his pre-flight walk around. He didn't speak, but automatically made his rounds: inspecting, touching, moving the various control surfaces and draining the fuel tank sumps until he said "We need to bolt up the tank covers" without delay Jim and I rounded up the tools necessary and fastened the doors back in place with about 20 bolts each. Merl still had not arrived and Captain Cook's look of contempt for his late co-pilot was now showing signs of the kind of pain usually associated with an ulcer.

I started feeling uncomfortable with the situation and so volunteered "I'll go try to find Merl", Jim didn't try to talk me out of it.

As I started driving on my quest, my mind started to search for a scenario that would explain Merl's absence. Would I find Merl's car alongside the road? No? la-bamba howbeit not much to look at was for the most part dependable. My mind flashed to other possibilities that when analyzed also proved to be beyond reason. It was about this time my mind put forth a story so bizarre, so big, that it had to be the reason.

A scene flashed before my mind's eye. I walked up to Merl's room and knocked on the door...no Merl. I knocked again, louder.....no Merl! I roused the manager and still in his robe he fumbles for the right key as we stand at the door. Finally the door swings open and..... there is Merl, stretched out in bed, his long legs jutting out past the end of his bed, sticking out like railroad rails left hanging from a long since collapsed trestle. His face shows that life's struggle is over, only his punch-line revealing smile remains. A smile frozen in stone! Merl is dead! Just my luck that he would succumb on this important day. What will Jim do? Cancel the flight or carry on, because that's what Merl would have wanted.

The fantasy fades as I spot la-bamba heading toward the airport. After turning around, I follow him to the airport unobserved. Cook is talking to Joe Moody. Joe is the local provider of aviation fuel and superb ice cream he cranks up at our base bar-b-ques, (Joe was tragically killed in a mid-air collision during the Spring of 1992 at the Chico airport) By the aroma, I detect that they are drinking coffee, so while Merl walked to the plane I poured myself a short cup and took a "shoot the bull position". With about 3.2 sips of not so good coffee past my lips, Cook says, "let's go". The sink drinks the remainder of my coffee and I make a pit stop.

As I head out to the plane, I can see Merl making entry into Charlie-30 by way of the photography hatch. As I arrive Cook calls down from the cockpit window "You can use the pilots ladder" I toss up my bag and started up the ladder. The climb feels good, it's as though I'm part of the crew instead of just a passenger. Climbing slowly, I take time to savor the moment. Merl shuffles past me and takes his appointed seat. I sit down in the flight engineers seat and Cook hands me a headset to use. The headset microphone is not working so they cannot hear me; however, I can hear them as they communicate. Their minds are already lost in their engine starting checklists as the number two engine starts up almost immediately. "The batteries are kinda low", Cook comments. Then after a bit of coxing number one starts. The combined roar of the engines remind me to install my earplugs. So far so good. Then comes the struggle with number 3, it cranks and cranks with not much happening except that the starter slows down and the engine pukes out fuel from the bottom.

I step up on the platform and poke my head and shoulders out through the entry hatch on top of the fuselage. The morning sun has just climbed up off the horizon. I start having fears that number three won't start, scrubbing our trip. With number two throttled up, electricity life blood is flowing and at least old number three is turning over at a faster rate now. Crank, crank but still nothing. Now Cook tries number four. After what seems like an eternity, number four finally fires.....and dies and fires..... then roars to life. Now it's number three's turn again. Surely it will be shamed into starting by it's running brothers! It fires, winds down and stops.

Cranking continues..... it fires, winds down and just a few seconds before stopping, Cook makes an adjustment and number three is among the living. Now I'm smiling inside and out!

After an initial warm up, we taxi out in apparent I.F.R. conditions. But wait, there is no fog today! The cockpit windows are coated inside and out with a heavy coat of dew. The visibility is so bad that Cook is looking out his side window and asking Merl if there is any traffic on his side. Merl fumbles with a roll of paper towels he found and with cooperative help from Cook the windshield is more or less cleared.

All four engines are warmed up and running smoothly and the preflight checklist is complete. We are ready to go! My watch says 0757. Cook wisely advises me to hang on. My "seat" is a kneeling position between and just behind the pilots. I lock my hands around the seat frames and peer down the runway. Looking out, I get the feeling that I'm riding on some kind of tractor. The crude metal nose does not resemble anything streamlined such as what you would expect in an airplane. Slowly the throttles are moved forward and the bomber strains at the brakes. When Cook releases the brakes, the acceleration is brisk, and I'm glad that I'm hanging on. Cook has a firm grip on the control yoke while Merl plays the engine control leavers like a demented organist. As we reach rotation speed, Cook applies back pressure on the yoke and we're airborne. The roar of the engines is intense and I think, "Wow... this is great!" We climb-out just at the south end of Paradise. I wonder if my wife and children can hear us. I look out at the area of my house and mouth the words, "I love You".

We proceed east and the morning sun is right in our faces. I take a few pictures and realize that I am probably losing a few due to the camera auto-focusing on the window. "Ever seen Lake Tahoe from the air" Cook asks with a glance. I tell him no and that I am really looking forward to it. After a short time we are over the lake and it is beautiful. Merl says he has to look at some maps back on the deck and invites me to sit in the co-pilots seat. I eagerly comply and am instantly spellbound by the two propellers turning just outside my window. An awesome sight! Cook and I exchange small talk about Lake Tahoe and bomber flights in times past and of good men lost to bad wars. During this time Cook invites me to fly the plane. Wow.. I make a few gentle aileron turns and maintain our altitude. It's amazing how well the plane responds to subtle control pressures in light of all the chain and cable used to operate the control surfaces. Captain Cook exclaims that his bladder is un-comfortably full (or something like that). He gets up out of his seat and walks toward the back of the cabin. I am the only one at the controls of this airplane! Yikes! Merl has his head buried in maps. I'm halfway tempted to bank into a semi steep turn or pull a fair amount of back pressure just to get a rise from Jim or Merl but, since I'm the invited guest, conservative wisdom over-rules and I dutifully maintain our altitude and heading.

After a few minutes Merl snakes himself into Cooks seat. I maintain control of the bomber and make a few gentle turns. The rudder controls almost feel as though they are welded. I give up trying to get the feel of them. Captain Cook is now back in the left seat and takes the controls. We are now looking at the Sierra's just South of Lake Tahoe and Jim asks if I had ever seen the Sierra's from out of a bomber before. Of course I haven't!

Merl has moved to the bombardiers area below us, I can feel one of my shoelaces being un-tied by Merl's hidden hands. Cook points the aircraft directly toward the jagged peaks of the high Sierra's and I think "all right!" we're going to fly close to the sides of the mountain peaks. As we get closer and closer, Cook's plan becomes apparent. We are pointed directly toward a notch between the peaks and as we zoom through the notch, we clear the mountain by about 300 feet on the sides and about 200 to 300 feet above!

This "shooting the notch" experience is just the first in a series of six or seven. Because of the elevation, the mountains are giant piles of barren rocks devoid of any trees. Here and there are small lakes and patches of snow. I think of hikers out there enjoying the solitude when all the sudden there is a tremendous roar as our bomber comes into view, a ghost plane. Then in ten or so seconds, it's gone, so fast they wonder if they really saw what they saw. In reality there probably was not anyone who observed our antics because it was still winter.

I think about the danger involved, but because of Cook's vast experience in tight low level flight and the bomber's great climbing ability (since we're unloaded), I push aside the fear and concentrate on enjoying the ride. Merl says "we don't usually do this; Cook is doing this for you". The large child-like grin on his face validates his statement.

We finish our dance with the peaks and exit the Sierra's over Bishop, California. With the White Mountains on the left we start descending. The terrain below is desert like; hills with a few pinion pines scattered around and not much else. I trade places with Merl and we see the Saline Valley and talk about how a B-25 Mitchell bomber once landed there. Cook says he has heard that the bomber's tracks are still visible on the dry lakebed. Cook says, "This is probably a good time to assume the bombardiers position". The reason is because Death Valley is up ahead. I readjust my earplugs and make my way to the bombardiers position. The passage is narrow and low. I crawl on all fours to get there. As I'm crawling, I can feel in my ears that we are still descending.

When I get to the bombardiers area, I find that the seat is a cardboard box, which appears to contain spare parts. The "seat" is within windows held together by a thin metal framework. The view out the front is 180 degrees of startling. Even though there are more than a few "bug splats" on the windows, my mind is able to erase them in order to see the world outside. This is better than any "E" ticket ride at Disneyland!

The world below is rounded barren hills. Cook skims the plane barely over the top of one giving me quite a thrill. As we descend the temperature is getting warmer. We are looking for Death Valley, the lowest place in America. I'm hoping the place doesn't live up to its name. Up ahead is an expanse of land lower than we are and very flat. We gradually descend until we are just 30 feet above the valley floor which consists of sage brush and salt flat. Our speed is 168 knots.

The air is smooth and the engines sound strong and faithful. It is an unreal dream like feeling as we zoom along our low slice of the earth. This is the scorpion census run I've heard Merl talk about before (I'll bet they don't usually do this either!)

Now the ground is a mixture of salt flat and rough broken ground, no life is seen. Ahead in the distance a large power-line appears crossing the valley in front of us. I start to wonder if Cook sees it because we're obviously below it. My concern grows until I notice the nose of the plane turning slightly until we are aimed at one of the power poles. Ah ha, Cook *is* aware. As we approach the span we suddenly climb just high enough to clear the obstacle and then we drop back down to our previous altitude. We are so low that our wing-tip vortices are kicking up dust on the surface behind us. Soon I see a paved highway just to the left of us and although there are few cars to be seen, there are occasional road signs and we are so low the lettering would be large enough to read if we were a bit closer to the road. For a moment, I wish that I could be on the ground and see this bomber fly over my head, hear the roar of the engines and feel the vortices.

What an experience that would be, howbeit a short one. Our low level flight lasts about 20 minutes and as we come to the south end of the valley we climb up a bit and proceed to our destination. I figure that the thrills are over but every new mountain range provides the opportunity to "thread the needle". As we proceed the pilot says that another bathroom trip is necessary (or something like that). Merl tells me to sit in the left seat where I maintain our heading and altitude for about 20 minutes. I am keenly aware of the drone of the engines, the motion of the plane, and the passing scene below us.

In consideration of what a special flight this is, I carefully sear the events into my brain. Too soon my flying time is over as Cook taps me on the shoulder. I take this time to wander further back into the plane. In the area between the metal retardant tanks, the reverberant tone of the engines can only be described as a near spiritual experience. I walk back to the tail-gunners position. Although I can't see out because the plexi-glass has been replaced by sheet metal, I develop a feel for the relative isolation that assignment must have caused. Looking around, I marvel at the complexity and crudeness of the control cables and chain which service the rudder and elevators. After tracing my steps back forward to the cockpit, I change my clothes and prepare for the warmer climate of Phoenix. The ride is turning rather mundane in comparison to our past experience. But wait! Camel peak which is west of Phoenix lies just ahead. As we fly through the gash between the humps, we are so low that I can see individual cactus waving, as if welcoming us to Arizona.

We arrive at the Chandler airport and Captain Cook performs a super smooth landing. Certainly the adventure is over. Not true, Cook borrows a car from Jessica who works for Douglass Aviation and for the next hour Merl and I are gripped with fear as Jim weaves back and forth through the Phoenix traffic. Jim doesn't help the situation when he admits he has less than desirable driving habits and that driving in general makes him nervous! After supper, Jim and Merl dropped me off at the Phoenix Airport and during my seven hour wait for my flight, I wrote out the notes that made up this story. Being an aviation enthusiast, I will remember this flight as one of the aviation highlights of my life. My thanks to Jim Cook and Merl Schmetgen who made this trip possible for me. During this trip I took 24 pictures and to my horror the film was not caught by the take-up reel. I did not end up with a single photo, however this trip is clearly preserved in my mind and in this story.

The summer of 1992 was the last year that Tanker Charlie-30 was operated as an air tanker. It was assigned to White River, Arizona for 60 days and Billings, Montana for 60 days. At the end of the year Charlie 30 was sold to the [Lone Star Flight Museum](#) in Galveston Texas for a rumored, \$500,000 dollars. Note: Because of the hurricane damage, the museum has since moved to Houston, TX.

Updates: 11/8/2020

- While undergoing restoration, on September 13, 2008, Hurricane Ike hit and produced an 8ft storm surge with inundated the museum damaging several aircraft including Charlie 30.
- In 2015, Charlie 30 was sold to the Pima Air and Space Museum and said to be [damaged beyond repair to flying status](#) due to the flooding of the salt water.
- [Restoration work photos](#) before the hurricane:



- Charlie-30 now on static duty at the Pima Air and Space Museum -

This image was originally posted to Flickr by Gillfoto at <https://flickr.com/photos/12914838@N00/41039593412>(archive). It was reviewed on 20 October 2018 by FlickreviewR 2 and was confirmed to be licensed under the terms of the cc-by-sa-2.0.