

LIFE OF AN AVIATOR

SHORT STORIES

by
Robert Novell

The Farm Boy from Idaho



Life of an Aviator

(Short Stories by Robert Novell – Volume One)



The Farm Boy from Idaho

Part One
(The UAV Program)

Dave was one of those guys who was very unassuming, kept a low profile, and never talked about himself, or his past. A unique individual who I had the pleasure of working with on many occasions, but it is my first and last encounter with Dave that I want to tell you about.

The first time I had the pleasure of working with Dave was when I was working a short-term contract in California. The project was one of the first programs by a civilian contractor to perfect an unmanned drone for the US Government. I am not sure what agency was paying for this but considering the money involved, I would expect the Department of Defense even though I never saw anyone in uniform. However, the players who may have been DOD may have worn civilian clothes for security reasons and this I have seen before and understand. The company with this contract was using the Long-EZ homebuilt aircraft, which Burt Rutan had designed, and they were in the final phases of the automation. Dave and I were there as safety pilots to be in the aircraft and watch it take off, fly a programmed profile, and land. Dave and I were given about five hours of flight time in the airplane as the pilot in command and went through numerous briefings on how the automation

worked. Our only real concern was how to override the automation and once we were sure of our safety, we moved forward with the automated flights.

Let me give you a little history on the Long-EZ, which is a variant of the VariEze first introduced in 1976. The Long-EZ has a canard instead of an elevator on the tail because there is no tail. The canard functions as the elevator and the airplane has wing-tip rudders. The nice thing about the canard, which is referred to as a control canard, is that it will always stall before the wing and recover just as quickly. On one flight, I trimmed for a power off stall and the canard would stall, the nose would drop, airspeed would increase slightly and the canard would start flying again, and then the stall would repeat itself followed by an identical recovery. A nice little airplane and remember that the Wright Brothers Flyer also had a canard--not exactly a new concept. The design is considered very safe but there have been a few accidents.

The most remembered accident was the one involving John Denver. He was killed in 1997 and the primary cause of the accident was a faulty fuel valve selector. It was said that the tank he used for takeoff was almost empty and in an attempt to change fuel tanks, it was the faulty fuel selector which was placed in a very hard to reach location, that he was unable to operate that caused the fatal accident. Not exactly sure of all the details but I do remember that the NTSB made mention that it was not the aerodynamic design of the aircraft that caused the crash. OK, back to the story.

The first flight we made using total automation was with Dave at the controls and me flying another Long-EZ as a chase plane. The takeoff was normal, the enroute portion was perfect, and the landing was hard. Dave and I had been briefed that the airplane would fly a coupled ILS down to about five feet and then the autopilot would flare slightly based on the radar altimeter, the power would go to idle, and the airplane would touchdown on centerline. OK, most of that worked except the radar altimeter forgot tell the autopilot to flare -- Dave said it was interesting.

The next flight was for me with Dave in the Chase plane. This was a night flight and all went well except when they lost link with the airplane as I was headed for the ILS outer marker to make a coupled approach for landing. The airplane just kept going and after five minutes or so, I decided to give the ground station a call. "What's happening?" I asked as I keyed the microphone. The ground station responded by saying that they were rebooting the computer and to stand by while things come back on line. The airplane is supposed to go to a predetermined altitude and point, to enter a holding pattern if they lose link but that did not happen. After ten minutes of heading in to the dark of night, I decided to take over manually and go land. We debriefed the problem but no one had a clue as to why they could not restore the link. Oh well, tomorrow was another day.

Dave and I were there for almost a month and although I had to leave to go participate in another program, Dave stayed and things got really interesting for him. I found out about most of this from another source because Dave just does not say much about things in his life.

The first incident I learned about happened at night during the enroute portion of a flight over the slow rising hills of the Sierra Nevada Mountains. Dave was about one thousand feet over the highest peak when the computer decided it was time to change fuel tanks. The Long-EZ has a fuel tank in each wing and a manually controlled selector valve. However, in this airplane, the computer could do it electrically and this is when Dave had the problem. I asked Dave about this later and this is how he responded:

“Yea I was flying along looking at all the lights below, and the stars above, not really focused on any one thing because everything was running so smoothly. Then, the engine quit. I immediately took over manually and tried to restart the engine and nothing but the quiet of the night. I then reached down and switched tanks, hit the starter, and the engine tried to start. OK, one more time, as I watched the ground lights grow closer, and then the engine caught. As I climbed back up to altitude I picked up the microphone and asked the boys in the ground station if they showed any problems and they responded, “No why---something wrong?” I then just told them I was coming home and I would brief them on the ground. I think Dave said that it was pretty much a one sided conversation but he was promised they would prebrief him on programmed fuel tank changes that would occur on any future flight. After Dave had finished his debrief he was invited to a 10:00 AM staff meeting with all of the engineers involved in the program to give his recommendations.”

Funny how they always have to have a staff meeting with everyone over three feet tall when they have a problem like this. I think that it is believed that this type of gathering adds value to the program but not sure, it really ever does anything except to identify a person to blame if it happens again.

The other event that occurred was something that helps personify the personality and quiet confidence of the Farm Boy from Idaho. This occurred some months later and the project had moved to the Dugway Proving Grounds in Utah. Once again, I was not a participant -- I was in Brazil working a program there -- but Dave was there to finish the program. There would be a few manned flights, day and night, followed by some tweaking of the airplane and the computer programs, in preparation for the big day. The airplane was going to do everything unmanned which would include: a normal takeoff, fly a programmed profile, lose link with the ground station, proceed to a predetermined point, establish the link again, and return for a landing.

It was the last manned flight that I want to tell you about now. This was programmed to be a night flight that would take the airplane out over the Great Salt Lake, descend to fifty feet for a period of time, and then climb back to altitude, and return for a landing. When Dave was briefed on the profile he thought about it for a minute, while he sat quietly, and then he said, "OK the only thing I need different is a pair of NVGs and I am ready." The program manager responded no problem and everyone left to get ready for the flight.

For those who do not know what NVGs are, let me explain. These are Night Vision Goggles that are used by the military to operate at night. Originally developed for the infantry and tank operators they were soon adapted for military aviation and became standard issue for helicopter operations. They are typically the most efficient at two hundred feet and below so they are ideal for helicopter operations and were a very effective tool for Dave considering what he was tasked to do.

As we continue our story, we find Dave descending to fifty feet over the water of the Great Salt Lake and to say that his reaction time would be minimal in the event of a malfunction is an understatement. However, Dave was not afraid to take the challenge and for fifteen minutes he sat in this Long-EZ, at fifty feet, and quietly waited for the worst to happen but all went well. Think for a minute if you will. It was the dark of night, the airplane was flying autonomously, and Dave had no radio communication with the ground station. The chase airplane was in the air close by but the most they could do was circle over the wreckage should an accident have occurred. Sound like fun? Dave never hesitated to accept the challenge and there are few who would have. His skill as an **Aviator**, coupled with his quiet confidence based on his lifetime of experience, doing not so normal aviation task, is a perfect example of who Dave was and a prime example of why he was respected by all he flew with.

Part Two (Old Friends Fly Together Again)

Now, it is five or so years later, Dave, and I are in Colombia doing some work with the folks running "Plan Colombia." For those of you unfamiliar with this program let me explain. This program was put together by the US, in conjunction with the Colombianos, to stop the flow of cocaine in to the US. The primary focus was to go after the Cartels, the growers, and the guerillas who claimed to be freedom fighters. Conceptually this is a good program but they left one component out of the equation -- the user. Others often ask me when I tell them I work in Colombia if Colombia is as dangerous as they see on the news considering all the problems with the Cartel and cocaine. My response is always the same, "No, the Colombianos don't have a problem with cocaine. They have a problem with the

gringos in North America that use cocaine and keep the Cartel in business.” People will then just stare at me for a few seconds and respond simply by saying, “Oh.” So, now that you know what it is Dave and I were doing in Colombia we will move forward and talk about Dave’s history. I will leave the story about all of the work we, and others, have done with “Plan Colombia” for another day because I want to focus on the conversation Dave and I had one night at our favorite German Restaurant while enjoying a few beers with dinner.

I knew a little bit about Dave’s history from others but did not know any real specifics. So we talked about his time as a smoke jumper, how he had gone to New Zealand and flew tourist up to the glaciers, his crop dusting days, and even about him having flown the DC-7 as a water bomber with the forestry service. His life had been one adventure after another but this night what I wanted to talk about was his time in Laos flying with Air America. Turns out his nickname was “Mr. Porter” and this is the part of his life I wanted to share with you. However, first let me share with you my insights as to the value of AA in Asia.

Air America is thought of only as a CIA operation involved in covert operations trying to change the political reality of Southeast Asia during the 50s, 60s, and 70s. While I am sure there is substance there, I cannot speak with any authority on such issues. However, what I can talk about is Air America’s contribution to the health and welfare of US forces in Vietnam and other countries as well. I left Vietnam in July of 1971 after eighteen months in country. Although I had never worked directly with anyone with Air America, I knew who they were and some of what they did. More importantly, I knew for sure that many a downed airmen owed their lives to Air America, that there were many refugees who would have died without their help, and the intelligence they provided saved the lives of many US infantrymen in forward operating bases.

OK, I am going to get down from my pulpit, here in the third dimension, and focus on finishing my story about Mr. Porter.



The first question I had for Dave was “Why did they call you Mr. Porter?” “Long story,” but let me give you the short version:

“People are always telling stories about their favorite airplane but for me my favorite airplane was always the one I was flying; however, when I was flying the Porter I was the airplane. If I wanted to do something special with that airplane I could do it---it seemed that if I thought it then the airplane could, and would, do it.”

The logical follow on was, “What do you mean specifically and remember? I have never had the pleasure of flying a Porter.”

“As you know there were a lot of real short runways we used in Laos, and other countries, which were no more than a hundred feet long and about as wide as the main gear. There were some smaller, some that had an uphill grade, some that had a downhill grade whereby you would simply takeoff, disappear off the end of the runway in to the valley, continue to accelerate, and then reappear above the imaginary extended runway centerline in a climb and proceed on to your next stop. I was good at what I did, hence the name Mr. Porter, but there were a lot of pilots that were just as good as I was.

The other thing that I did, we did, were airdrops out of the Porter. There were a lot of different configurations we used but the one configuration that I most enjoyed was when we rigged the rear of the airplane with a shelf across the back that was at about a thirty degree angle with a release bar at the bottom of the shelf that we controlled from up front. Things got busy during the drop trying to control the stick, control the power, keep your eye on the drop zone, and pull the release handle but after you did it a few times, it became routine. Most of us could put the load out with pin point accuracy so my skills here were not unique by any means.”

Part Three (A Little History about AA)

OK, this is typical Dave. He will always underestimate his capabilities and acknowledge the skills of others. We continued our discussion and most of the things we talked about he wanted to keep between he and I so let me give you a quick overview of an article I read on line at the University of Texas at Dallas. The article was written by Dr. Joe F Leeker and records the facts, as presented by Mr. Jack Pearson, on typical Porter operations. That which follows is only a part of what he wrote.

“The Porter was utilized by Air America’s customer to do re-supply missions either by landing the load on a short mountain strip or if the strip was only a helicopter pad to air drop the loads. Airdrops were either free fall or parachute drops. Most of the Porter upcountry assignments were in support of the right

wing forces and of mercenary operations, although we did do some work for USAID customers. Flights in support of USAID objectives were dropping rice and medical supplies for refugees by free fall and landing some loads if strips were available. There were numerous Officials and

Citizens of these villages moving into and out of the main Hmong city of Long Tieng and every time you landed there were groups of people trying to get a ride back to Long Tieng. A pilot had to really keep on his toes, as some of the strips were of an elevation above sea level that severely restricted the aircraft's capability of lifting too heavy of a load. As the strips were so short you would roll to the end with full reverse and brakes to stop while others were so steep you had to go to full power after landing just to get to the end of the strip.

Off load was a matter of seconds and then the mob would try to get on the plane. You estimate that only six could go and there would be 13 or more on the plane. Language was a definite problem, so I would pick the biggest guy or soldier ('Ta Han') I could see and say to him: 'Kup! Hoke', holding up six fingers and pointing to the mob of people on board. 'Krung bin bai bodai, dai lao.' You could see the light come on. What I think I said was 'only six people'. The aircraft will not go and all will die. I used the term 'Ta Han' meaning soldier because I did not know the Lao or Hmong word for people. Even with the reduced number of people on board, we would mostly just run off the end of the runway and off into space while gathering flying speed on the way down. In nearly all the instances of shuttling into and out of these strips working for USAID you were on the ground just a matter of seconds mostly less than one minute. From this, it becomes quite apparent that you cannot search people or inspect cargo, in fact you do not even get out of the seat or shut down the engine all day except for refueling at Long Tieng or Houei Sai wherever the plane is assigned that day. In 1970 it was not uncommon for a Porter pilot to log over 50 take offs and landings in one day. One small deviation of work assignment was the occasional radio call you would get: 'Porter over Site 113, this is Padre. Going to Long Tieng?' Roger Padre be right in. There was a Catholic Priest that worked up country with the Hmong and Refugees named Father Bouchard and where ever or whenever possible the guys assisted him in his travels. Our customers never complained about the deviations on his behalf. While in support of the para-military operations the Porter was tasked to drop food, medical supplies and ammunition to positions and also to move military personnel around the country make reconnaissance flights. Laos has very few roads and the rivers were unnavigable making aircraft an absolute necessity in the conduct of the warfare. Therefore, everything including bags of rocks and lumber had to be flown in by air. The aircraft's ability to make airdrops caused it

to be constantly in use respelling small villages either by air dropping or if it had a small strip we would land the loads.”

Dave was involved in a number of special projects and really did some interesting things, but the exact specifics will have to wait until he feels comfortable with telling others of his accomplishments. Until then, I want to leave you with a quick story about a Porter pilot whose name I do not remember, and then a few thoughts about Air America and the people who served the cause.

In the fall of 1970, there was a small airstrip that had just been taken back from the Pathet Lao. The first Porter pilot back in for Air America was asked to do a survey of the airfield and confirm it safe for use. The pilot did what was asked of him and after takeoff, he radioed back to Air America Flight Information that the field was good to go. The next day another pilot was tasked with doing a resupply flight to the field and ran over a land mine on landing. The pilot suffered no injuries but the airplane had to be sling loaded out by helicopter. When the pilot who had done the survey found out about the incident his concern was about the safety of the other pilot and was relieved to find out he had walked away uninjured. However, I found it interesting that the survey pilot who had obviously missed the land mine on his landing and takeoff never thought about what if it had been him --his concern was only about the other pilot. Sounds to me like the survey pilot may have been someone we know.

The motto for Air America was, “First In -- Last Out.” This band of **Aviators** was not afraid to put themselves in harm’s way to protect the health and welfare of others. Some will say it was all about the money they were paid, and the glory, but you cannot spend your way out of a pine box. I would suggest to you that there was a greater cause they served and Americans today would benefit from taking the time to learn the history of that era.

It has been said that the only thing new is the history you have not read. I wonder if that bit of personal philosophy, left to us by President Truman, could be used in a way today that would strengthen our country and perhaps help mend the social fabric of our society. Sadly, I think that future historians will only know the answer to my question.

OK Dave, take care and fly safe old friend – Cheers.

