



Tales from a
**Sisters
Naturalist**
by Jim Anderson

Reno Air Races

The Reno Championship Air Races are held on the third weekend in September. I've been there since they started in 1964. More than 250,000 fans of air racing come from all over the world to take part, and my family has been among them for many of those 51 years.

My brother Don and his son David met me at the Riley Junction and we drove down together. When we arrived we met up with my Air Force Reserve son, Col. Ross Anderson, Commanding Officer of the USAF Reserve Wing at Nellis AFB, his wife, Doni, and son, Connor.

There are aircraft from around the world racing at Reno; all of them modified and slicked up to go fast.

But it's the fans who are also noisily involved; they cheer, blow whistles, wave their arms off, toot horns, laugh when everything is going as it should ... and cry when "Murphy's Law" hits.

If it were possible to put the energy of air racing fans into the fuel tanks of the

aircraft that roar past them on each race, those old World War II fighters would go 900 mph.

For years, Bob Hoover, fighter pilot, air racer, and supreme air show acrobatic pilot gave Reno air race fans more than they ever expected for the money they paid to watch the show.

Hoover, looking spry in his straw hat at 93 was at the 2015 races, seated in the shade of a hanger, hawking his book "Forever Flying" with the help of his loyal fans and friends. I had the honor of meeting him and Kim Furst, the young lady who was watching over his tired old body, and who produced a film about his life, "Flying the Feathered Edge."

Hoover's good-old-days of performances in the twin engine Aero Commander Shrike business aircraft included loops, rolls and landings on first the right and then left wheel — with one and both engines shut down. He was one of the pilots who, I'm sure, inspired my two oldest boys to take up flying as a career.

Hoover is still recognized as one of the greatest air-show pilots of all time, and he probably made the engineers who designed the Shrike happy they put what they did into that aircraft. What the fans didn't know was that Hoover — because of his knowledge of flight, and skills as a "stick-and-rudder man" — never exceeded the design specs engineers put into that beautiful airplane.

The Unlimited Class of racers push the envelope to the limits and unfortunately go too far. There have been three nasty wrecks at Reno, two of which involved those overworked fighter aircraft. The wreck of a modified P-51 Mustang "Galloping Ghost" in 2011 was a tragic example.

This year's race only had one "Murphy's Moment:" A North American T6 — perhaps the noisiest aircraft to race — had landing gear problems, made a belly-landing, damaging the left wing to the point where it was grounded.

Every time I go to the Reno air races I run into someone who makes that long trip more than worthwhile. My son Ross introduced me to a fellow Air Force Reserve pilot he flew with on several occasions, and thinks the world of him. Turned out he's the T-6 pilot who had the landing gear problem, Kevin Sutterfield.

That led me to his dad, 64-year-old Stan Sutterfield, who was racing an RV-8 in the Sports Class (and took first place on Friday's race), and Pat Sutterfield, wife of Stan and mother of Kevin, who holds everything together in their mobile home/shop in the pits at Reno. Truly, air racing at Reno is a family event.

Kevin's life is an example of how many race pilots end up doing what they love to do. Lt. Col Kevin Sutterfield learned to fly before he had a driver's license, soloing on his 16th birthday from Vandenberg Airport while



PHOTO BY CONNER ANDERSON

Race of the Big One – The Unlimited – Pilots in old WWII fighters fighting to stay in the lead, and racing fans loving it!

attending Bloomingdale Senior High School.

After graduating from the USAF Academy in 1997, he was commissioned as a second lieutenant and attended jet-pilot training. While at pilot training, he swept the awards, winning the Distinguished Graduate (#1 Order of Merit), Outstanding Flying Award, and the AETC Commander's trophy.

Then he was hand-picked to fly the Air Force's top air-superiority fighter, the F-15C for 10 years throughout the Middle East and Asia. In 2004, he attended the prestigious Fighter Weapons School at Nellis AFB in Nevada (as did my two sons Dean and Ross), and in 2007, he was selected to transition to the F-22 Raptor. He's currently commander of the USAF's most experienced F-22 fighter squadron, the

302d FS, and the Air Force (reluctantly) looks the other way as he races a T-6 for the fun of it!

Flying is, literally, in his blood. His dad, Stan, is a retired airline pilot, and also an FAA Certified Flight Instructor. When Kevin was 8 years old he would sit on his mom's lap in the right set of the family's trusty old Piper Tri-Pacer. From that seat he could see out the windshield and hold the control wheel in both hands as his dad had him turn right and left.

Kevin has an enduring love of historic aviation, which led to his involvement at the Reno Air Races. He'll tell you, "It's a real privilege to fly these amazing aircraft and to be part of a this legendary aviation event. For a kid that grew up looking through the airport fence, this is a dream come true."

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