



## The Bunkhouse Chronicle

Craig Rullman  
Columnist

### Grounded

I have a photograph somewhere, taken from the rear seat of a British Norman Islander, of my father and uncle. My uncle, the captain on this flight between Pago Pago and the Samoan island of Ofu, is hoisting a beer and flashing a decidedly rakish smile. It simply simmers with mischief. My father is looking back at the camera in mock terror.

You can't see it in the picture, but on the beach below us a gigantic tanker ship sits wrecked and rusting on the beach, half in the water, half beached, a canker sore on a strip of pure white sand and the blinding emerald of the island. Moments later we are to land on a grass strip — marked on both sides by crashed airplanes — and will be greeted by the island's chief and most of the island's children.

Chief Nui charged two dollars to land on the island, and after enough of those landings he was able to buy, and have delivered, the only vehicle that existed there. It

was a small Toyota pickup, just large enough for the kids, and any passengers, to ride in the back on the way into the village.

So my uncle paid the chief, we loaded up, and bombed down the road into Asaga where, in a bizarre twist, a man from my dusty hometown in the Great Basin — 5,000 miles away as the crow flies — was living in a kind of self-imposed exile. I don't know what drove him there, and I was too young to ask the right questions. Perhaps he read too much Margaret Mead. What is certain is that he had cashed it all in to find this island, and to live there raising pigs and catching fish for his new Samoan family. He seemed happy. I think he was also mildly alarmed that the world had shrunk so quickly on him.

I was a reminder of things he'd rather forget.

Most of the men in my family have been, or were, pilots. One grandfather was a naval aviator in World War II, flying TBF Avengers off of carriers in the Pacific campaign. My other grandfather was not a pilot until much later in life, but spent his war as a gunner and radioman, on a version of the same torpedo bomber, as a Marine.

My uncle Rick was of the bush-pilot strain. A decided swashbuckler, he preferred island-hopping, humid bars full of spilled rum and chain-smoking ex-pats, and occasional gunplay; and so bounced from one rainforest to the next, flying seaplanes — the Grumman

Mallard or Goose — around the Caribbean, or those boxy Norman Islanders in the South Pacific. Once, he escorted a giant moose head from Nova Scotia to St. Croix, where it was installed over the bar in the Comanche Club.

I hope it's still there as a kind of monument to the ludicrous, but I doubt it.

My father was a pilot from an older school, the school of Icarus and Daedalus, of St. Exupery, Ernest Gann, and Jackie Cochran, those determined lords of the air. Had flight not existed, he would have found a way to get into the sky. Licensed at 16, an instructor before he was 20, he was the youngest person ever hired by American Airlines, and spent 37 years with the company. He retired with a seniority number of 1. No small feat.

When he wasn't flying, he was thinking about flying, and cultivated an active bias against all things pedestrian. The aeroplane and flight, to his mind, was the summit of human achievement, and he had a difficult time relating to anyone who couldn't appreciate the genius with the same passion.

Like me, perhaps. I am decidedly earthbound. Though I can appreciate the genius, I never caught the bug, and reasoned that if I did not have the passion for it, I could only be a dangerous pilot, like the doctors and dentists my dad regarded with thinly disguised disdain. Later, the Marine Corps would do a lot to suppress my interest in flying at all.

Riding in a helicopter that is on fire, or watching one crash into the sea and kill your friends, can engender a great appreciation for remaining on the ground.

This morning, early, a plane powered up down at the airport. I don't know what kind of plane it was, but the sound of that great engine working to achieve flight reminded me of the tremendous roar of the seaplanes in Charlotte Amalie harbor, and so of my uncle, and my dad, and my grandfathers.

They are all gone now, having vanished into history as quickly as St. Exupery on his ninth mission. He once wrote to remind us all that "Somewhere along the way we have gone astray. The human anthill is richer than ever before. We have more wealth and more leisure, and yet we lack something essential ... somewhere we have lost our mysterious prerogatives."

And I suppose that is why I cherish that photograph I took so long ago, of brothers frozen against time in their quest for those mysterious prerogatives, Gentlemen of Adventure chasing it down in the perfect skies over Ofu.

## Record number of ballots cast in Oregon

SALEM (AP) — The Oregon agency in charge of elections in the state says more than 1 million voters have cast their ballot as of last week, with almost a quarter-million more ballots returned than the same time-frame before the 2012 general elections.

The Oregon Secretary of State said on Friday that the turnout exceeds expectations.

Jeanne P. Atkins says that compared to Friday's total of 1.05 million ballots returned, 805,862 ballots were returned on the Friday before the 2012 general election, and 810,254 ballots the Friday before the 2008 election.

The current turnout represents 41 percent of eligible voters.

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