

Unusual Attitudes

BY MARTHA LUNKEN



A Name I Won't Utter

IT'S AN ODD NAME, "SILENT Birdpersons" or "Flying Burritos" or "Kwiet Kestrels." Not just right, but close. It's possible you've heard of, maybe even belong to, this quasi-venerable and intergalactic order of aviators — male aviators. If not, it's something like the Flying Knights of Columbus or the Order of Masonic Boom(ers). Except that the "Birds" (the name still won't come) are even more covert and exclusive. This sacrosanct fraternity would be the Opus Dei of flying except for an avowed disassociation with any noble, charitable or socially redeeming cause. Bird

thing goes for the ladies. I still think single-sex classrooms, locker rooms, bathrooms and dorms are a good idea, but maybe I'm not cut from the same dress pattern as most women in this still (thank God) predominately male business of flying. Whatever. From way back as a young gal hanging around the aerodrome, I've been hugely curious about and a little envious of the Birds.

Since it was so exclusive, with membership restricted to professional and experienced aviators, it's probably a simple case of hero worship. To this day, no man has made the first team as a serious boyfriend (or husband) who can't fly

stake or a Catholic diocese, only not exactly.) The plan flopped because the shades were drawn, and knowing when to crawl back inside was a crapshoot. It would be hard to explain wriggling backwards through that casement as some guy came in to pee.

OK then, I'd smuggle my way into the big time, the "Wing Ding" held in midsummer at the Taft (as in William Howard) estate owned by a rich Bird in Cincinnati's prestigious Indian Hill. A huge swimming pool behind the imposing and historic Georgian house was ideal for these very private annual Bird bashes. Conveniently, Ebby lived in the carriage house, so I knew the layout. What an adventure this would be — spying on a storied Wing Ding was like watching forbidden native rites on Bali Hai in *South Pacific*, except where was Luther Billis when you needed him? Naturally I couldn't keep my mouth shut and dropped hints about the plan; I chose to ignore dire warnings that I'd end up bare-ass in the pool if I got caught.

On the appointed Friday afternoon in July, I stashed my VW behind the carriage house, positioned for a quick getaway, and crept through the woods to an oak tree near the pool behind the "big house." It was hot in a long-sleeved black turtleneck, my face blackened with oily soot from Ebby's fireplace and his small-but-powerful Swiss binoculars dangling from my neck. The tree was kind of a challenge, but I finally hoisted myself up into a perch with good cover and a good view and I fished out a wad of papers stuffed in my pocket, chapters torn from a new paperback, to pass the time.

By 6:30 I'd finished *The Godfather*, about 60 Birds had assembled, and a big bus had pulled in close to the pool — probably a band. By 7 I'd decided this was highly overrated, nothing but a glorified cookout and a waste of time. Birds



gatherings are about drinking, topless bartenders, big steaks, male bonding, raunchy jokes and hugely exaggerated tales of flying and sexual prowess. At least that's the way it was in the old days.

How would I know all this? I'm a little embarrassed, but it's been a lifelong fascination. Odd in this era of women's rights, but by now you know I'm anything but a feminist and my panties don't get wadded up about guys clinging to their male-only traditions. Same

airplanes better than I can. And, gentlemen, that definitely narrows the field!

This compulsion to know what went on at Bird meetings led me, years ago, to clamber through a casement window in the men's room on the second floor of Lunken Airport's terminal building. From there I could crawl across the roof and peer through a large window into the Airman's Club room where the Cincinnati Hangar meets in winter. (Note: A Bird hangar is like a Mormon

milled around the pool, laughing, chatting, guzzling or sipping and greeting late arrivals. By 7:30 they'd finally taken their places at long tables, and then some Bird Wizard ("Key Bird") announced it was time to turn to the west. Suddenly, things weren't boring anymore, and I broke out in a cold sweat. My tree was oriented on a line due west of the pool, and this obviously meant somebody had rattled me out. En masse they rose to their feet, turned to face directly at me and raised their glasses in a toast. Then they sat down and started eating. It took 10 minutes before I resumed breathing and realized the toast wasn't for me. This was a sacred Bird rite in which members solemnly toasted their brothers "gone west" at the beginning of every dinner.

While they carved into big steaks and slathered ears of corn with butter, my stomach growled and my butt ached in that miserable tree. I was contemplating ways to escape when "things" finally got under way. But understand, it was a long time ago and

or too absorbed in conversation to notice a small figure in the dark with a plate of food strolling out to the driveway. So I nonchalantly approached an old black waiter from the Sky Galley who knew me, and I winked. His eyes got very big and an even bigger grin broke out on his face. Then the grin vanished and I heard from behind me, "Hey, I warned you. ..."

I guess my guardian angel was on duty (reluctantly, I'm sure) because it was Ebby's best friend, a swell guy who owned a Spartan Executive and who was gentlemanly and sober enough to give me a break, a good head start. I sprinted for the woods clutching a steak and an ear of corn, and before the posse could be assembled, I found my way to the VW behind the stable.

It was a splendid adventure. It was brilliant and glorious, and I'll go to my grave guarding the identities of those Birds, my heroes and friends, at that long-ago Wing Ding.

A couple years ago, strong in my vow

when I looked in the mirror. At 6:30 on a Friday, "borrowed" Bird wings on my sports jacket lapel and a short prayer for courage on my lips, I strolled into the meeting in that same Airman's Club room I'd peered into 35 years before.

For the next three hours I mingled, laughed, drank and ate with men I'd known, dated and worked around all my adult (OK, big-person) life. Not one of them had the slightest suspicion that this Benz guy was an imposter, much less a woman. There was just one moment, sitting at the bar with a shot glass of "bourbon" and a smoldering cigarette, that I eavesdropped on a conversation between two guys at adjacent bar stools and I suffered a "tree-stand moment" all over again.

"You're right, she was always a problem ... a loose cannon ... probably enjoyed making my job difficult ... I never knew what ... it's a shame Martha couldn't be more like her sister. ..." It was my ex-boss from the FSDO and his friend, a local helicopter guru. And they were talking about ME! When, as with the "gone west" toast, I realized it was pure coincidence, I couldn't stop shaking with laughter, tears streaking my makeup and softening the glue on my moustache. I had to go to the men's room and put myself back together.

Well, that was the funny part; the sad part was it was a "ghost" meeting. These 20-some guys were a mix of elderly, inactive aviators, some young and painfully green CFIs and a sprinkling of corporate pilots trying too hard to be both hearty and cool. Even the jokes were forced. At least the Key Bird had bucked some opposition and hired two bartenders who shucked their tops, but, gee whiz, they didn't even get much attention. I felt so sorry for the obviously less endowed of the two that I left her a \$5 tip under my shot glass.

Eventually the word got out, of course, with interestingly diverse reactions. But at a meeting later that year, the Key Bird read a letter from the old freight dog's daughter. She was writing to thank the Cincinnati Hangar for the hospitality they'd shown her father ... and to tell them that, sadly, Hugh Benz had "gone west." ✈

Burro QB

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this is probably somewhere between imagination and fact. If memory serves ... people emerged from the bus, but they didn't have musical instruments; they were like mermaids who'd forgotten their bathing suits. They all jumped into the pool and started performing a kind of (but not exactly) Esther Williams swimming routine. I couldn't really see the choreography but it must have been great, because it sure had everybody's attention. Then when they got cold or tired of swimming and climbed out of the pool, they headed back into the bus followed closely by some of the Birds, which was odd because I'm pretty sure none of them had been in the pool.

When it got really dark and everybody was either resting in the bus or deep in conversation, I decided it was safe to split. But there were lots of steaks and corn left on the grills, and I was certain these guys were too drunk

to never grow up, I felt a powerful urge to make one more foray into Birdland. See, there wasn't much talk about the group anymore, and I anguished over its fate. Had the torch been passed? The sacred traditions preserved? Was this generation of Birds as vibrant, sophomoric, deliciously macho and sexist as their brothers 35 years before? Were they still the elite cadre of "real" airmen? ... Were they still my heroes?

To find out, I assumed the persona of Hugh Benz, a retired ONA and Zantop freight pilot and longtime Bird from Portland, Maine, who was visiting his daughter and her family in Cincinnati. An ascot partially hid the tracheotomy collar that explained my almost inaudible whisper. ... God forgive me for that deception, but I couldn't disguise my voice like I could my face and figure. Padded with a towel and a bed sheet and outfitted by a medical supply house and a local costume store, I even scared myself