

A Tribute To Trous, Grace Period Two

by John Achor

If you've read "Grace Period," you know it is the story of a major aircraft accident in January 1969. I won't recount all those details again - only enough so this part of the story makes sense.

A bit about my background may help us both understand why I am putting this down on paper. I have a lot of problems with organized religions. You would probably judge me as - at worst, an agnostic and at best, a deist. I also believe what Ernie Pyle, the World War II war correspondent, had to say on the subject: There are no atheists in foxholes. I've been in a number of foxholes, more figurative than literal, and I have called on the Almighty on those occasions. That's the dichotomy I faced accepting the conclusion I reach at the end of this tale.

I flew with Ralph W. Trousdale; he preferred to be called "Trous, as in trousers," in the mid 1960s. He came to Fairchild Air Force Base in Spokane, Washington under a "cloud." Trous transferred there from the 1st CEG (Combat Evaluation Group) at Barksdale AFB, Louisiana. The CEG are the grand gurus who told all us line pilots how to fly the KC-135 (a four engine jet, air refueling tanker). Trous and his CEG team visited Fairchild earlier and ripped the knickers of many a pilot in our squadron. So, when he arrived as just another line pilot, it was payback time.

He could have skipped his check out flight at Fairchild. The grade was a foregone conclusion - FAILED. I was assigned to his crew following that initial check ride and we were under the gun. We all passed his second flight check and went to work as a crew. I soon learned that Trous had probably forgotten more about the KC-135 than the rest of us would ever know about the bird.

As luck would have it, CEG visited Fairchild again, and this time failed several Standboard crews including the pilots on the senior crew. Standboard crews were the local gurus of flying and the equivalent of a local CEG. The most experienced Aircraft Commander in the squadron, and the most capable of assuming the empty Standboard position was - you guessed it, Trous. After only a few months of flying with him, I found myself the senior Standboard Copilot.

I learned more about life and about flying from Trous than I'll ever be able to remember. He was always a teacher, even when I didn't realize it. Trous was a true mentor, and I will forever be grateful to him for what he imparted to me. My only regret is that I did not tell him this before his fatal heart attack.

I upgraded to Aircraft Commander and had my own crew. Later, I was transferred to Alaska to assume command of a reconnaissance crew. The last I knew, Trous was still at Fairchild. We lost track of one another over the years.

It's time to get back the aircraft accident. On that cold January night, I was flying an RC-135S (a strategic reconnaissance version of the KC-135) from Shemya Air Base, Alaska. They've changed the name of the base, but the island is still way out there toward the Russian end of the Aleutian Islands.

About thirty minutes past midnight, I landed on what was later determined to be a slush- covered runway. I didn't know it, but our fate was sealed early on landing. I cut engines and tried to slow the aircraft. When I became aware that we would not stop on the runway, I did my best to move the airplane to the right side. The nose wheel steering was as useless as the wheel brakes due to the slush. I used the ailerons to "bicycle" the plane to the right. We needed to go there; otherwise we would be faced with a twin row of telephone poles supporting the landing lights for the opposite approach.



That is the runway elevation you can see just above the left stabilizer.

We made it, went off the right corner of the runway and over a forty foot cliff. Eighteen of us escaped with a few relatively minor injuries. I told



This is all that's left of the old girl after the carcass was dragged to the "million dollar" dump.

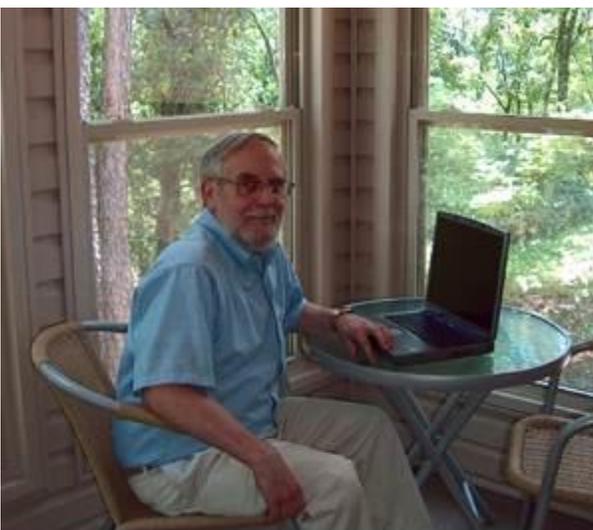
the accident investigation board I remembered twisting the nose steering wheel to the stops with no effect, and I remembered using the ailerons to do the job. In "Grace Period" I said I always thought someone was riding the jump seat that night. That's where the story rested for all these years.

Several months ago, I woke up in the middle of the night and remembered something more. It was Trouse who taught me how to use the ailerons to "bicycle" an airplane. I am firmly convinced that if we had gone off the centerline of the runway, that three of us in the cockpit, my Copilot, one of my Navigators and I, probably would not have survived being impaled on those phone poles. The destructive force those poles would have caused the plane might have affected those who were seated further aft as well.

I'm not sure if I believe in guardian angels or not, but now I think I know who was riding the empty jump seat that night. Thanks Trouse.

The End

Post Script: Trouse, like many of the good ones, died far too young and I never got the opportunity to tell him this story. I was able to contact one of his sons and a daughter. They gave me an email address for Trouse's wife Jean. I sent her the story to read and was able to talk to her on the phone. I learned she died shortly after we talked. At least I got that part done before it was too late



John enjoys the piney woods of Arkansas.

Author's Note:

This is a true story that relates to the demise of an RC-135S, originally known as Nancy Rae, later as Wanda Belle, and finally Rivet Ball - Serial Number 91491. I logged the last landing in this bird on January 13, 1969.

There is a more detailed description of the accident on my web site. On the home page, look for the link, "Follow The Bouncing Ball." You can find my site at: www.johnachor.com

On my site, you can see some of my other long and short prose as well as a poem or two.

I noted the plane's serial number above; this is the rest of that story. Remember back in those days, we had Air Force serial numbers rather than using Social Security Numbers. This item didn't come to light until after the

accident. One of our NCOs pointed out that the last three of my personal serial number, 491, matched the bird's last three.