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Flying the SR-71

by Brian Shul

In April 1986, following an attack on American soldiers in a Berlin disco, President Reagan ordered the bombing of Muammar Qaddafi's terrorist camps in Libya. My duty was to fly over Libya and take photos recording the damage our F-111s had inflicted. Qaddafi had established a "line of death," a territorial marking across the Gulf of Sidra, swearing to shoot down any intruder that crossed the boundary.

On the morning of April 15, I rocketed past the line at 2,125 mph. I was piloting the SR-71 spy plane, the world's fastest jet, accompanied by Maj. Walter Watson, the aircraft's reconnaissance systems officer (RSO). We had crossed into Libya and were approaching our final turn over the bleak desert landscape when Walter informed me that he was receiving missile launch signals. I quickly increased our speed, calculating the time it would take for the weapons—most likely SA-2 and SA-4 surface-to-air missiles capable of Mach 5—to reach our altitude. I estimated that we could beat the rocket-powered missiles to the turn and stayed our course, betting our lives on the plane's performance.

After several agonizingly long seconds, we made the turn and blasted toward the Mediterranean. "You might want to pull it back," Walter suggested. It was then that I noticed I still had the throttles full forward.

The plane was flying a mile every 1.6 seconds, well above our Mach 3.2 limit. It was the fastest we would ever fly. I pulled the throttles to idle just south of Sicily, but we still overran the refueling tanker

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Please note - we have changed the access to the online newsletters so that you will no longer need a password to access them. GO TO OUR WEBSITE AT: www.clipperpioneers.com. To request a current membership list, email sue@clipperpioneers.com with your request. Click on the "Members Only" button on the righthand side to access the current and previous newsletters.

Flying the SR-71

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awaiting us over Gibraltar.

Scores of significant aircraft have been produced in the 100 years of flight following the achievements of the Wright brothers, which we celebrate in December. Aircraft such as the Boeing 707, the F-86 Sabre Jet, and the P-51 Mustang are among the important machines that have flown our skies. But the SR-71, also known as the Blackbird, stands alone as a significant contributor to Cold War victory and as the fastest plane ever-and only 93 Air Force pilots ever steered the "sled," as we called our aircraft.

As inconceivable as it may sound, I once discarded the plane. Literally. My first encounter with the SR-71 came when I was 10 years old in the form of molded black plastic in a Revell kit. Cementing together the long fuselage parts proved tricky, and my finished product looked less than menacing. Glue, oozing from the seams, discolored the black plastic. It seemed ungainly alongside the fighter planes in my collection, and I threw it away.

Twenty-nine years later, I stood awe-struck in a Beale Air Force Base hangar, staring at the very real SR-71 before me. I had applied to fly the world's fastest jet and was receiving my first walk-around of our nation's most prestigious aircraft. In my previous 13 years as an Air Force fighter pilot, I had never seen an aircraft with such presence. At 107 feet long, it appeared big, but far from ungainly.

Ironically, the plane was dripping, much like the misshapen model I had assembled in my youth. Fuel was seeping through the joints, raining down on the hangar floor. At Mach 3, the plane would expand several inches because of the severe temperature, which could heat the leading edge of the wing to 1,100 degrees.

To prevent cracking, expansion joints had been built into the plane. Sealant resembling rubber glue covered the seams, but when the plane was subsonic, fuel would leak through the joints.

The SR-71 was the brainchild of Kelly Johnson, the famed Lockheed designer who created the P-38, the F-104 Starfighter, and the U-2. After the Soviets shot down Gary Powers' U-2 in 1960, Johnson

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Keep the good stories comin'!

We've been getting some good stories about memories of your times with Pan Am, and we want you to know we appreciate it! Keep them coming, and you will see them in the upcoming issues! Are there memories you've written down that you'd like to share with us in this newsletter - short or long? Have you come across an interesting article that you'd like to share with us? Would you share pieces from a book you've written? Send them to sue@clipperpioneers.com.

Bank balance as of June 30, 2025 was \$9,759.97. The opportunity to renew your membership with your donation is on a form on page 8 of this newsletter, which will go toward continuing forward. It's time to renew if you haven't already! Be sure to clip and send in your check if you'd like to continue to receive the newsletter. Thank you!

Flying the SR-71

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began to develop an aircraft that would fly three miles higher and five times faster than the spy plane- and still be capable of photographing your license plate. However, flying at 2,000 mph would create intense heat on the aircraft's skin. Lockheed engineers used a titanium alloy to construct more than 90 percent of the SR-71, creating special tools and manufacturing procedures to hand-build each of the 40 planes. Special heat-resistant fuel, oil, and hydraulic fluids that would function at 85,000 feet and higher also had to be developed.

In 1962, the first Blackbird successfully flew, and in 1966, the same year I graduated from high school, the Air Force began flying operational SR-71 missions. I came to the program in 1983 with a sterling record and a recommendation from my commander, completing the weeklong interview and meeting Walter, my partner for the next four years. He would ride four feet behind me, working all the cameras, radios, and electronic jamming equipment. I joked that if we were ever captured, he was the spy and I was just the driver. He told me to keep the pointy end forward.

We trained for a year, flying out of Beale AFB in California, Kadena Airbase in Okinawa, and RAF Mildenhall in England. On a typical training mission, we would take off near Sacramento, refuel over Nevada, accelerate into Montana, obtain high Mach over Colorado, turn right over New Mexico, speed across the Los Angeles Basin, run up the West Coast, turn right at Seattle, then return to Beale. Total flight time: two hours and 40 minutes.

One day, high above Arizona, we were monitoring the radio traffic of all the mortal airplanes below us.

First, a Cessna pilot asked the air traffic controllers to check his ground speed. "Ninety knots," ATC replied. A twin Bonanza soon made the same request. "One-twenty on the ground," was the reply. To our surprise, a navy F-18 came over the radio with a ground speed check. I knew exactly what he was doing.

Of course, he had a ground speed indicator in his cockpit, but he wanted to let all the bug-smashers in the valley know what real speed was. "Dusty 52, we show you at 620 on the ground," ATC responded.

The situation was too ripe. I heard the click of Walter's mike button in the rear seat. In his most innocent voice, Walter startled the controller by asking for a ground speed check from 81,000 feet, clearly above controlled airspace. In a cool, professional voice, the controller replied, "Aspen 20, I show you at 1,982 knots on the ground." We did not hear another transmission on that frequency all the way to the coast.

The Blackbird always showed us something new, each aircraft possessing its own unique personality. In time, we realized we were flying a national treasure. When we taxied out of our revetments for takeoff, people took notice. Traffic congregated near the airfield fences, because everyone wanted to see and hear the mighty SR-71. You could not be a part of this program and not come to love the airplane. Slowly, she revealed her secrets to us as we earned her trust.

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Flying the SR-71

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One moonless night, while flying a routine training mission over the Pacific, I wondered what the sky would look like from 84,000 feet if the cockpit lighting were dark. While heading home on a straight course, I slowly turned down all of the lighting, reducing the glare and revealing the night sky. Within seconds, I turned the lights back up, fearful that the jet would know and somehow punish me. But my desire to see the sky overruled my caution, and I dimmed the lighting again. To my amazement, I saw a bright light outside my window. As my eyes adjusted to the view, I realized that the brilliance was the broad expanse of the Milky Way, now a gleaming stripe across the sky. Where dark spaces in the sky had usually existed, there were now dense clusters of sparkling stars. Shooting stars flashed across the canvas every few seconds. It was like a fireworks display with no sound.

I knew I had to get my eyes back on the instruments, and reluctantly I brought my attention back inside. To my surprise, with the cockpit lighting still off, I could see every gauge, lit by starlight. In the plane's mirrors, I could see the eerie shine of my gold spacesuit incandescently illuminated in a celestial glow. I stole one last glance out the window. Despite our speed, we seemed still before the heavens, humbled in the radiance of a much greater power. For those few moments, I felt a part of something far more significant than anything we were doing in the plane. The sharp sound of Walt's voice on the radio brought me back to the tasks at hand as I prepared for our descent.

The SR-71 was an expensive aircraft to operate. The most significant cost was tanker support, and in 1990, confronted with budget cutbacks, the Air Force retired the SR-71. The Blackbird had outrun nearly 4,000 missiles, not once taking a scratch from enemy fire. On her final flight, the Blackbird, destined for the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum, sped from Los Angeles to Washington in 64 minutes, averaging 2,145 mph and setting four speed records.

The SR-71 served six presidents, protecting America for a quarter of a century. Unbeknownst to most of the country, the plane flew over North Vietnam, Red China, North Korea, the Middle East, South Africa, Cuba, Nicaragua, Iran, Libya, and the Falkland Islands. On a weekly basis, the SR-71 kept watch over every Soviet nuclear submarine and mobile missile site, and all of their troop movements. It was a key factor in winning the Cold War.

TO BE CONTINUED IN THE NEXT ISSUE

This story originally ran in the April 2008 issue.

Don't forget to check out our website at: www.clipperpioneers.com

If you enjoy reading the Clipper Pioneers newsletter, and would like to see it continue, please send in your renewal if you haven't already, for 2025. Funds are dropping, and we may not have enough to continue without your help! Form is on page 8.

Writer seeks Pan Am pilots to interview

My name is Jason Ross. I am a writer who is attempting to speak with former Pan Am pilots who went on to fly with United, following the purchase of the Pacific routes in 1986. I'm looking to interview several pilots for the writing of a potential book focusing on United's purchase of the Pacific.

A little about myself. I grew up fascinated with aviation and especially aviation history. Influenced by family members who worked for Pan Am and served in the Air Force, I started my career as an Air Force officer. Over time I became passionate about organizations' cultures and how they have led to success or failure, and everything in between. Ultimately, this led to my interest in the acquisition of Pan Am's Pacific routes and individuals' experiences with the acquisition.

If you are interested in sharing your experience, I can be reached at jason.r.ross@gmail.com. Thank you again for your help.

Best regards,
Jason Ross

Identity Theft an Ongoing Threat

How will I know if someone steals my identity?

Check your bills and account statements. Look for things you didn't buy, withdrawals you didn't make, or changes to your address that you didn't expect.

Look at your medical bills and insurance statements. You might see charges you don't recognize.

Check your credit reports for mistakes or accounts you don't recognize. Right now, the three nationwide credit bureaus — Equifax, Experian, and TransUnion — let you get a free report online once a week. Get your free weekly report from each bureau at AnnualCreditReport.com.

You also get a free yearly credit report from each bureau at AnnualCreditReport.com or by calling 1-877-322-8228.

How do I protect myself from identity theft?

There are things you can do to help keep your information safe.

Protect documents with personal information. Keep things like your birth certificate, Social Security card, and account statements in a safe place. Shred papers with personal information on them before you throw them away.

Don't give your Social Security number to someone who calls, texts, or emails you. Even if they say they're from the government, your bank, or a company you know. They're not. It's a scam.

Protect your information online and on your phone. Use passwords that are hard to guess. Add multi-factor authentication for extra security on accounts that offer it.

Pan Am Philadelphia Area Pilots (PAPAP)

We meet the second Tuesday of every quarter at the Continental Inn in Yardley, PA at 1200 for a bit of BS before going to our private conference room upstairs for lunch. Been going on since 1992 and it's a great way to stay together. Contact: Chris Blaydon 215 757 6229 or cblayd@aol.com

Flying Boat Reunion clip now available for viewing

A 15-minute special that aired April 27, 2016 on Ireland's popular RTE TV show "Nationwide" is now available for viewing. China Clipper First Officer Robert Hicks (94); Merry Barton, daughter of Folger Athearn (Pan Am's station manager in Noumea, New Caledonia in 1941); Director of the Foynes Flying Boat Museum

Pan Am -- Personal Tributes to A Global Aviation Pioneer

The Pan Am Historical Foundation recently published the highly acclaimed Pan Am – Personal Tributes to a Global Aviation Pioneer, a book that caught the attention of Pan Amers and aviation enthusiasts around the world.

Flying Somewhere? Useful Tip for Air Traffic

FlightAware is a free flight tracker that will change what you think about live flight tracking and aviation data.

Layovers for Pan Am

Check out Pan American layovers at www.paacrewlayover.com, where some 81 cities and over 161 hotels are shown in photos.

Check Out the Lockerbie Website

A website has been created for Lockerbie. It can be viewed at www.lockerbie103.com. It might be a worthwhile site to check out, especially for those who plan on visiting Lockerbie. Be sure to enter the web address in the browser (not Google Search, etc.) with the www. Otherwise, they will get hundreds of Lockerbies and 103s and may not find the web site after 15 pages. ~Claude Hudspeth

Enjoy Listening to the Pan Am Podcasts

Now in the third season, The Pan Am Podcast brings the history of Pan American World Airways to life through engaging storytelling and insightful interviews with Pan Am employees, passengers, authors, and aviation enthusiasts. <https://podcast.thepanammuseum.org/>

Pan Am Historical Society has a Facebook page. You can view it here:
<https://www.facebook.com/pages/Pan-Am-Historical-Foundation/226994925218>

*...and God will lift you up on Eagle's Wings, bear you on the breath of dawn,
make you to shine like the sun and hold you in the palm of His hand.*

IN MEMORIAM

Richard H Mitchell, retired Professional Flight Engineer with Pan American World Airlines from September 1955 to March 1987. He passed away on May 23, 2025 in Saratoga California at the age of 95. Hired in New York at the age of 25, he graduated from Spartan In Tulsa Oklahoma with an A & E license and a Commercial Flying license. Richard was transferred to Frankfurt Germany in 1961-2, & San Francisco 1963-87. He flew in the DC-6, B-377 Stratocruiser, 707, & 747. He truly loved the Pan Am family!

For more information and full obituaries about each of these friends who will be missed, click on "In Memory Of..." at our website: www.clipperpioneers.com. Know of someone from Pan Am who has passed? Email the obit to Sue Forde at sue@clipperpioneers.com, or mail to: Clipper Pioneers, attn: Sue Forde, c/o P. O. Box 3457, Sequim, WA 98382.

Save the Date ~ Pan Am Lunch/Lecture December 6 2025

It's time again to mark your calendars for our annual lunch/lecture reunion at Michaels at Shoreline in Mt View, CA

Our speaker is not yet confirmed and we are hopeful that our invitation to the President of World Wings International will be accepted. After a long storied history of camaraderie and philanthropy, World Wings International will be merged with the Pan Am Museum Foundation at the end of 2024, and we look forward to hearing about the history and future of World Wings International.

Look for future updates and registration in October.

Stay well and stay safe,

Alfred Gilbert

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asgilbert747@gmail.com

Places to Visit

Foynes Flying Boat Museum, in Foynes, Ireland – features a full scale replica of the Boeing B314 "Yankee Clipper". This replica was created for the museum from detailed plans by a team specialising in movie sets. Check it out at www.flyingboatmuseum.com Enjoy images from Pan Am here: <http://www.timetableimages.com/ttimages/ao1.htm>

If you haven't paid your dues yet, please fill out the form on page 8 and send them in. We'd like to continue sending out the newsletter - and this is how we can do it - with your donations!

How to Protect Yourself from Scammers

Here are some ways to protect yourself:

Don't respond to unexpected calls, emails, texts, or social media messages that ask for money or personal information.

Take your time. Honest organizations will give you time to make a decision. Anyone who pressures you to pay or give them your information is a scammer.

Never pay someone who insists you can only pay with a gift card, a wire transfer, cryptocurrency, or a payment app.

(from <https://consumer.gov/scams-identity-theft/it-scam>)

Stranded in the Sky: Untold Story

Philip Jett is the author of STRANDED IN THE SKY: The Untold Story of Pan Am Luxury Airlines Trapped on the Day of Infamy, which combined the stories of the Anzac, Hong Kong, Pacific, and Philippine Clippers, with a great deal of original research. The book debuted before a large group of Pan Am clipper families on Treasure Island in San Francisco in May of 2023. He may be available to speak to Pan Am groups or associations without charge. If interested, you may visit his website at www.philipjett.com and email him at philip@philipjett.com. His book is available in hardback, paperback, and eBook.

Please Send Us Your Stories

We'd like to have more stories to share! If you have a story you'd like to send, please send it in sooner rather than later! We appreciate you and the interesting stories you send in for all to enjoy! Email to: sue@clipperpioneers.com

RENEW TODAY!

In order to keep the newsletter and website going for the Clipper Pioneers, it's time for renewal dues of \$50 00 (or more if you wish to donate extra to help keep us going!). If you haven't already, please send it to: Clipper Pioneers, P. O. Box 3457, Sequim, WA 98382. Thank you!

Your Name: _____

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City, State, Zip: _____

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Amount: \$ _____

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