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## Flying the SR-71

*(continued from previous issue)*

*by Brian Shul*

(from the previous issue... 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.)

I am proud to say I flew about 500 hours in this aircraft. I knew her well. She gave way to no plane, proudly dragging her sonic boom through enemy backyards with great impunity. She defeated every missile, outran every MiG, and always brought us home. In the first 100 years of manned flight, no aircraft was more remarkable.

With the Libyan coast fast approaching now, Walt asks me for the third time if I think the jet will get to the speed and altitude we want in time. I tell him yes. I know he is concerned. He is dealing with the data; that's what engineers do, and I am glad he is. But I have my hands on the stick and throttles and can feel the heart of a thoroughbred, running now with the power and perfection she was designed to possess. I also talk to her. Like the combat veteran she is, the jet senses the target area and seems

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### **No Password Needed for Members Only Section of the Website**

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](http://www.clipperpioneers.com). To request a current membership list, email [sue@clipperpioneers.com](mailto: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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to prepare herself. For the first time in two days, the inlet door closes flush and all vibration is gone. We've become so used to the constant buzzing that the jet sounds quiet now in comparison. The Mach correspondingly increases slightly and the jet is flying in that confidently smooth and steady style we have so often seen at these speeds. We reach our target altitude and speed, with five miles to spare.

Entering the target area, in response to the jet's new-found vitality, Walt says, "That's amazing 50" and with my left hand pushing two throttles farther forward, I think to myself that there is much they don't teach in engineering school.

Out my left window, Libya looks like one huge sandbox. A featureless brown terrain stretches all the way to the horizon. There is no sign of any activity. Then Walt tells me that he is getting lots of electronic signals, and they are not the friendly kind.

The jet is performing perfectly now, flying better than she has in weeks. She seems to know where she is. She likes the high Mach, as we penetrate deeper into Libyan airspace. Leaving the footprint of our sonic boom across Benghazi, I sit motionless, with stilled hands on throttles and the pitch control, my eyes glued to the gauges. Only the Mach indicator is moving, steadily increasing in hundredths, in a rhythmic consistency similar to the long distance runner who has caught his second wind and picked up the pace.

The jet was made for this kind of performance and she wasn't about to let an errant inlet door make her miss the show. With the power of forty locomotives, we puncture the quiet African sky and continue farther south across a bleak landscape.

Walt continues to update me with numerous reactions he sees on the DEF panel. He is receiving missile tracking signals. With each mile we traverse, every two seconds, I become more uncomfortable driving deeper into this barren and hostile land.

I am glad the DEF panel is not in the front seat. It would be a big distraction now, seeing the lights

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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](mailto:sue@clipperpioneers.com).

**Bank balance as of July 31, 2025 was \$9,008.90.** 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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flashing. In contrast, my cockpit is "quiet" as the jet purrs and relishes her new-found strength, continuing to slowly accelerate. The spikes are full aft now, tucked twenty-six inches deep into the nacelles. With all inlet doors tightly shut, at 3.24 Mach, the J-58s are more like ramjets now, gulping 100,000 cubic feet of air per second. We are a roaring express now, and as we roll through the enemy's backyard, I hope our speed continues to defeat the missile radars below.

We are approaching a turn, and this is good. It will only make it more difficult for any launched missile to solve the solution for hitting our aircraft. I push the speed up at Walt's request. The jet does not skip a beat, nothing fluctuates, and the cameras have a rock steady platform.

Walt received missile launch signals. Before he can say anything else, my left hand instinctively moves the throttles yet farther forward. My eyes are glued to temperature gauges now, as I know the jet will willingly go to speeds that can harm her. The temps are relatively cool and from all the warm temps we've encountered thus far, this surprises me, but then, it really doesn't surprise me. Mach 3.31 and Walt are quiet for the moment.

I move my gloved finder across the small silver wheel on the autopilot panel which controls the aircraft's pitch. With the deft feel known to Swiss watchmakers, surgeons, and "dinosaurs" (old-time pilots who not only fly an airplane but "feel it") I rotate the pitch wheel somewhere between one-sixteenth and one-eighth inch, location a position which yields the 500-foot-per-minute climb I desire. The jet raises her nose one sixth of a degree and knows I'll push her higher as she goes faster. The Mach continues to rise, but during this segment of our route, I am in no mood to pull throttles back.

Walt's voice pierces the quiet of my cockpit with the news of more missile launch signals. The gravity of Walter's voice tells me that he believes the signals to be a more valid threat than the others. Within seconds he tells me to "push it up" and I firmly press both throttles against their stops. For the next few seconds I will let the jet go as fast as she wants.

A final turn is coming up and we both know that if we can hit that turn at this speed, we most likely will defeat any missiles. We are not there yet, though, and I'm wondering if Walt will call for a defensive turn off our course. With no words spoken, I sense Walter is thinking in concert with me about maintaining our programmed course.

To keep from worrying, I glance outside, wondering if I'll be able to visually pick up a missile aimed at us. Odd are the thoughts that wander through one's mind in times like these. I found myself recalling the words of former SR-71 pilots who were fired upon while flying missions over North Vietnam. They said the few errant missile detonations they were able to observe from the cockpit looked like implosions rather than explosions. This was due to the great speed at which the jet was hurling away from the exploding missile. I see nothing outside except the endless expanse of a steel blue sky and the broad patch of tan earth far below.

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## Flying the SR-71

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I have only had my eyes out of the cockpit for seconds, but it seems like many minutes since I have last checked the gauges inside. Returning my attention inward, I glance first at the miles counter telling me how many more to go until we can start our turn. Then I note the Mach, and passing beyond 3.45, I realize that Walter and I have attained new personal records. The Mach continues to increase.

The ride is incredibly smooth. There seems to be a confirmed trust now, between me and the jet; she will not hesitate to deliver whatever speed we need, and I can count on no problems with the inlets. Walt and I are ultimately depending on the jet now – more so than normal - and she seems to know it. The cooler outside temperatures have awakened the spirit born into her years ago, when men dedicated to excellence took the time and care to build her well. With spikes and doors as tight as they can get we are racing against the time it could take a missile to reach our altitude. It is a race this jet will not let us lose. The Mach eases to 3.5 as we crest 80,000 feet. We are a bullet now - except faster.

We hit the turn, and I feel some relief as our nose swings away from a country we have seen quite enough of. Screaming past Tripoli, our phenomenal speed continues to rise, and the screaming Sled pummels the enemy one more time, laying down a parting sonic boom.

In seconds, we can see nothing but the expansive blue of the Mediterranean. I realize that I still have my left hand full-forward and we're continuing to rocket along in maximum afterburner. The TDI now shows us Mach numbers not only new to our experience but flat out scary. Walt says the DEF panel is now quiet and I know it is time to reduce our incredible speed. I pull the throttles to the min 'burner range and the jet still doesn't want to slow down. Normally, the Mach would be affected immediately when making such a large throttle movement. But for just a few moments, old 960 just sat out there at the high Mach she seemed to love and, like the proud Sled she was, only began to slow when we were well out of danger.

I loved that jet.

*(Brian Shul passed away May 20, 2023)*

*This story originally ran in the April 2008 issue.*

**Don't forget to check out our website at: [www.clipperpioneers.com](http://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](mailto:jason.r.ross@gmail.com). Thank you again for your help.

Best regards,  
Jason Ross

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## Health Tips

### What is muscle-strengthening activity?

Muscle-strengthening activities make your muscles do more work than they are accustomed to doing. These activities can include your legs, hips, chest, back, abdomen (stomach area), shoulders, and arms. You can use a moderate or greater level of effort.

### Benefits

Increases your bone and muscle strength. Helps keep your muscles strong if you're losing weight. Improves your balance.

### What you can do

Slowly raise and lower arms and legs for several counts. You can even do this while seated.

Dig in the garden, rake, or push a lawn mower.

Carry heavy loads, like groceries or laundry.

Take a class that uses weights and exercise bands.

### How long/how often

Aim for at least 2 days a week. No specific amount of time is recommended: just stop when it's difficult to do another movement. Take it slowly: gradually increase the amount of weight, the number of sets or movements, and the number of days a week.

## **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

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## **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

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## **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.

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## **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.

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## **Layovers for Pan Am**

Check out Pan American layovers at [www.paacrewlayover.com](http://www.paacrewlayover.com), where some 81 cities and over 161 hotels are shown in photos.

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## **Check Out the Lockerbie Website**

A website has been created for Lockerbie. It can be viewed at [www.lockerbie103.com](http://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

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## **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/>

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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

**There are no obituaries to report this month.**

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*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](http://www.clipperpioneers.com). Know of someone from Pan Am who has passed? Email the obit to Sue Forde at [sue@clipperpioneers.com](mailto:sue@clipperpioneers.com), or mail to: Clipper Pioneers, attn: Sue Forde, c/o P. O. Box 3457, Sequim, WA 98382.*

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## How to Recognize Phishing

### Don't Take the Bait

Phishing occurs when criminals try to get us to open harmful links, emails or attachments that could request our personal information or infect our devices. Phishing messages or "bait" usually come in the form of an email, text, direct message on social media or phone call. These messages are often designed to look like they come from a trusted person or organization, to get us to respond.

### Stay Safe with Three Simple Tips

**1. Recognize.** Look for these common signs: Urgent or emotionally appealing language, especially messages that claim dire consequences for not responding immediately. Requests to send personal and financial information. Untrusted shortened URLs. Incorrect email addresses or links, like amazon.com

A common sign used to be poor grammar or misspellings although in the era of artificial intelligence (AI) some emails will now have perfect grammar and spelling, so look out for the other signs.

**2. Resist.** If you suspect phishing, resist the temptation to click on links or attachments that seem too good to be true and may be trying to access your personal information. Instead, report the phish to protect yourself and others. Typically, you'll find options to report near the person's email address or username. You can also report via the "report spam" button in the toolbar or settings.

**3. Delete.** Delete the message. Don't reply or click on any attachment or link, including any "unsubscribe" link. Just delete.

<https://www.cisa.gov/secure-our-world/recognize-and-report-phishing>

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## 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](http://www.flyingboatmuseum.com) Enjoy images from Pan Am here: <http://www.timetableimages.com/ttimages/ao1.htm>

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**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!**

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## 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.

Alfred Gilbert  
(415) 516 0359  
asgilbert747@gmail.com

## Stranded in the Sky: Untold Story

Philip Jett is the author of STRANDED IN THE SKY: The Untold Story of Pan Am Luxury Airliners 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](http://www.philipjett.com) and email him at [philip@philipjett.com](mailto: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](mailto: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: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

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