

Bob Jones: A Life Aloft

By Peter Stekel

Bob Jones was born in 1935 in South Lyon, Michigan [on the Lower Peninsula, north of Ann Arbor], and was raised on a dairy farm. He always had his heart set on being a flyer from an early age - though the closest he ever had to a Plan B was to become a mortician instead. In college he lived and worked in a funeral home for three months, taking over the work of a friend leaving a job there. This was during and after WWII and dairy farming was incredibly labor intensive because there wasn't a lot of machinery. Farmers still used teams of horses to supplement tractor work - if they had tractors. In comparison to the work he'd done growing up, being a funeral director looked easy, though, "the hours were odd."

After eight years attending school at a one room country school house, and four years of high school, Bob enrolled at Michigan State University. He didn't have a major in mind - only the desire to fulfill the two-years of college required by the Air

Force to enroll as an aviation cadet. Bob's best subject was Air Force ROTC. His hopes of flying were dashed when the 20 year-old was turned down due to high blood pressure. Bob knew it was nothing more than a little white coat syndrome but the examiners wouldn't change their minds.

Shortly after that, the Navy showed up on campus with a helicopter and I asked them what they were doing. When the recruiter said they were signing up pilots, Bob said, "I'll be there"

After being accepted by the Navy in January, 1956, Bob went through four months of pre-flight training. At that time cadets had the choice of Naval aviation or flying for the Marines. Bob chose the Navy because he wanted to fly fighters. At that time, a large percentage of Marine cadets were going into helicopters. Also, "the Marines had a tendency to put some of the recent graduates into a jeep as a forward air controller."

Fleet Squadron training in those days left much to be desired. The Navy squadrons were commanded by pilots who had begun flying during WWII or Korea and there

were no standardized courses for checking out in a new aircraft. Training on a new aircraft was decided completely by each individual squadron commander. "Basically, we read the flight manual, took an open book test on the flight manual, sat in the airplane with the engine not running to get familiar with where all the switches were, and did a blindfold cockpit check. Once you passed that, you would crank it up and fly it." On top of all that, jets were still new, and as a result, the accident rate in those days was pretty horrific. Col. William T. Hewes, USMC, Ret., has written of that time, "It was a training system Charles Darwin would have been proud of."

Completing his advanced flight training in 1957 in F9F-2 aircraft, Bob was assigned to VA [Attack Squadron] 146 based at NAS Miramar in San Diego. At age 22 he was deployed on the USS Ranger from 1958-1959, then the USS Oriskany in 1960, and the USS Lexington in 1961, flying the NAA FJ-4B fighter/



LTJG Jones in a VA-146 FJ-4B circa 1960 NAS Barbers Point, HI (R. Jones Photo)

attack airplane. "Our primary mission was nuclear weapons delivery," carrying both atomic and hydrogen tactical weapons from carriers based in the western Pacific Ocean either around Japan, near Okinawa, or the south China Sea around Hong Kong and the Philippines. The weapon they carried, the Mk-28, had a yield of one megaton and was carried externally on the FJ-4B. The plane carried three drop tanks in addition to the weapon and was configured for in-flight refueling.

Of all the commanding officers Bob served under, the best had been a dive bomber pilot in WWII. But he was a real hard nose. Bob had been in the squadron for six months at the time this particular CO took over and had already had a couple of safety issues. Bob was made #4 in the CO's division and was told, "That's not because I like you or respect your flying ability. It's because I want to watch you." And if he failed, "It will give me great pleasure to rip those wings right off your chest." That was his method of being a CO and, "He was good." The soft-spoken fellows didn't cut it when, "What you were doing was real and there were real consequences for fouling up."

This CO had many lessons to teach and one that has stuck with Bob all these years occurred at the start of a six-month cruise with this CO. In the ready room the CO told the pilots he intended to bring all of them back alive. Being young at the time, and inexperienced, he thought, "Wait a minute. What's all this 'back alive' stuff?" And thinking about all the accidents that happened during those days, Bob said, "On the 1959 cruise, I think we were the only squadron who brought back every man alive."

With four years of carrier service under his belt, Bob was assigned as instrument flight instructor in VA 43 RAG [Replacement Air Group] at NAS Oceana in Virginia. He flew the F9F-8T as well as A-4 aircraft to remain carrier qualified, serving another three years.

In those days the Navy wouldn't let pilots fly off carriers if their vision was worse than 20-30 or if they had to wear glasses. "I became very nearsighted and my vision went to 20-50." Bob could have stayed in the navy and flown multi-engine aircraft but, "I decided that if I was going to fly multi-engine aircraft I would go with the airlines."

In 1964, Bob resigned his Regular USN Lieutenant's commission and began 31 years of flying with United Airlines, eventually retiring at the mandatory age of 60 as a 747 Captain. Among the many highlights of flying for United was participating in the fastest around-the-world flight, Friendship One. Jones was one of four pilots and two flight engineers chosen by Clay Lacy, a senior United captain, to fly the United Airlines 747SP during the record setting attempt.

They departed from the Museum of Flight in Seattle on January 29, 1988 and landed 36 hours and 54 minutes later, traveling at an average speed of 623 mph. One hundred people paid \$5000 each for the privilege of being passengers on the historic flight and all proceeds went to charity. The passenger manifest included such luminaries

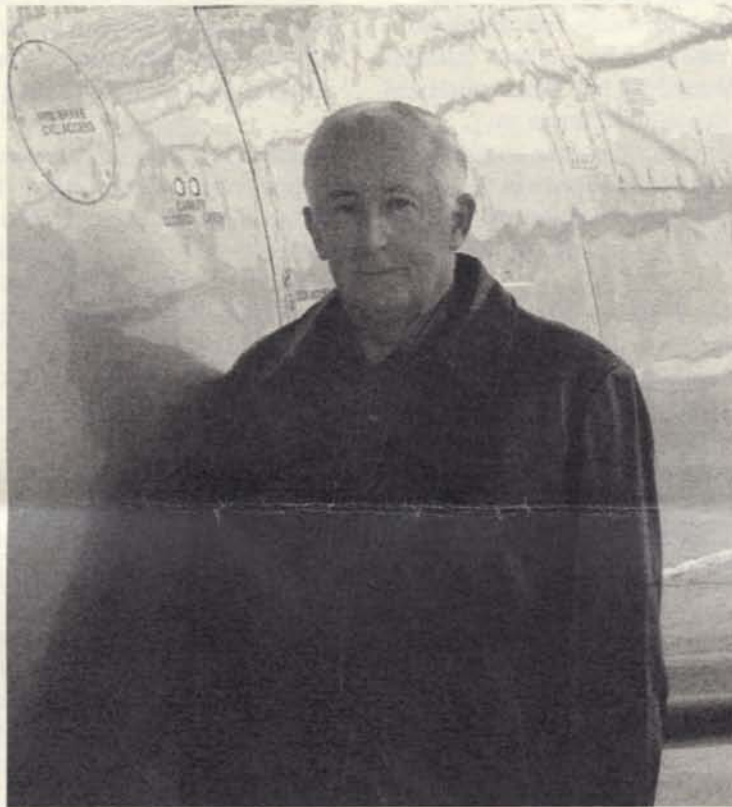
as Neil Armstrong, Bob Hoover, General Lawrence Cragie, Bruce McCaw, Joe Clark, UAL CEO Eddie Carlson, and Moya Lear.

This was no normal FAR part 121 operation. Since it was so long, some rules had to be waived and they flew it under FAR part 91. There were four pilots, including Clay Lacy, and they would alternate flying, taking an hour nap here and there. The cockpit door was never closed and, "Passengers could come in at any time and it was sort

of a zoo at times." But it was fun. There were two refuelings, Athens and Taipei and, "We burned a horrendous amount of fuel because we flew the airplane as fast as it would fly. "The limiting mach for that aircraft is 0.92 mach and we flew it at 0.92 mach most of the way." The ground crews were fast too. Refueling at Taipei, Taiwan took 25 minutes from touch-down to take-off.

Since retirement, Bob has continued to fly. In 1979 he and his wife, Sylvia, purchased a SNJ-6 Texan and he flew it in the Reno Air Races between 1981-2000. The SNJ was sold in 2004 but Bob continues flying in a Cessna 206.

Through it all, Bob Jones



Bob Jones in Seattle's Museum of Flight, 2011 (P. Stekel Photo)

hasn't lost his love of flying.

"It was always a job I looked forward to doing." He feels fortunate in having worked for United Airlines. "Maintenance was outstanding and we always had good airplanes to fly. Good mechanics. And couldn't have asked for more with support and good equipment." So much has changed with the TSA and security that Bob looks back on his commercial aviation days as belonging to a "golden age."

A member of Cascade Warbirds since shortly after the squadron was formed, Bob makes his home in Federal Way with his wife, Sylvia. They were married in 1962 and have two children and four grandchildren. Their son is a MD11 Captain for FedEx and son-in-law is a B737 Captain for Alaska Airlines. ✪