



Gene Ziegler

Octogenarian Time Capsule

## **Go home, your Mother wants you**

*The last thing you want to hear from your commanding officer.*

Six words I learned to expect in my single digit years when my older sister or my father tracked me down on a local playground to let me know it was nearing dinner time. But it was the last thing I expected to hear from my U.S. Army company commander as I stood at attention in front of his desk.

“Your mother called me. I hate when mother’s call. She said you hadn’t been home in two years. And you didn’t call her on her birthday. Is that true?” He didn’t wait for an answer. “I’ve put you on a two-week leave. Go home, your mother want’s you. Dismissed.”

From my base in El Paso to my home in Allentown is 2,000 miles and I had \$30 in my pocket. “Go over to the Air Base. Maybe you can catch a hop”, he mumbled as I left is office. “Remember you have to travel in uniform”.

As luck would have it, just as I walked into the flight dispatch office at Biggs Air force Base, a Coast Guard pilot was filing a flight plan to fly a World War II Sea Plane to Floyd Bennet Field in Brooklyn, New York. He had a copilot and a three-man crew, and readily agreed to take me along. One problem, he didn’t have a spare parachute, and I would need one to hitch a ride.

The dispatcher suggested I go to the next building and check one out from the Air Force. They were obliging, but the only thing they had to give me was a full-sized combat issue parachute. I took it, we boarded, and I was airborne, headed home to mother’s call.

The crew was casual and friendly. We draped out parachutes over seats and stood around near the bulkhead drinking coffee and devouring a large box of doughnuts brought on board by the officers. It was going to be a rough ride. The plane seemed clumsy and labored to stay airborne. “How fast does this fly?”, I asked”. “About 127 knots”, the crew chief answered. “That’s the equivalent of 146 miles per hour”. Quick math; 2,000 miles at 146 miles per hour. “That makes for a 14-hour trip. Are we going to be in the air 14 hours?” “No”, he replied, we’ll stop overnight, probably Memphis.”

We did overnight in Memphis and the officers treated us to a good dinner and nice hotel room. We were back at the airstrip early the next morning, in the air quick order and had resumed our comradery with coffee and doughnuts, comparing life in our respective services.

World War II aircraft were notoriously utilitarian. There was no air conditioning, no insolation, and no sound proofing. As a result, conversations required a great deal of shouting and hand

waving. It came initially as an uncomprehending shock when in the midst of a conversation both engines stopped. The sound of silence could well have been the loudest sound I've ever heard.

Before we could grasp the implications of a less than aerodynamic plane without engines, the law of gravity immediately applied, and the nose of the plane took us into a dive. Almost as one, we turned our eyes toward the seats where our parachutes, draped carelessly about, represented an obviously hopeless chance for our survival. The terror was palpable as we climbed toward the rear of plane and our chutes knowing we would never pass through that slim moment of getting out of the plane alive.

Then as suddenly as the engines stopped, they started again. We would learn later that a blocked fuel line has caused the problem and our cool-headed pilots simply switched to an auxiliary tank. The engines were stopped for barely 40 seconds and in that time, we lost 2,000 feet in altitude. From the crew's point of view, the engines were stopped for at least ten minutes and we dropped a country mile. We agreed that each of us had lost one our allotted nine lives, and that we would be better persons going forward having been spared by the grace of God.

We made an emergency landing at an airbase somewhere in Georgia where a mechanic cheerfully announced that it was an easy fix and he would have us on our way in no time. The crew was having none of this, having seen the hand of God, secured their duffels headed off down the runway determined to find a land route to return to New York. The pilots pursued the crew in a borrowed Jeep, bought everyone a generous lunch and convinced them to complete the journey with the plane.

## Part II

We landed as expected in Brooklyn at exactly 5:00 PM on a hot and sweaty Saturday evening in the midsummer of 1960. Stepping off the plane reminded me of the persistent humidity of living in the east. The crew grabbed their bags and hurriedly headed home like horses headed to the barn with barely a wave of goodbye in my direction leaving me alone on the tarmac considering my next move. I asked a mechanic who arrived to take charge of the plane where I could turn in my parachute. "Not here", was the bad news. "That's an Airforce parachute. You will have to return it to them". The chute was valued at \$180, about two months pay for me at the time. I had no choice but to take it with me.

Picture me in full summer kaki dress uniform, carrying a duffel bag, and wearing on my back a thirty-pound combat parachute that stretched from my neck to my hips, walking through the gates of the base onto Flatbush Avenue in Brooklyn on a Saturday night. The street was crowded with pedestrians, people hurrying home from weekend work and others getting an early start on weekend revelries. There were open shops and restaurants, hawkers, sidewalk vendors and diners, teenagers, hard-hats, and wise-guys. It seemed like not one missed the opportunity to comment on my predicament. "Hey buddy, the war's over", "Join the ARMY and see the world", "I love a man in uniform". I ducked into the nearest subway station, but that bought me no relief. "Hey pal, that parachute ain't gonna help you on the subway". I caught a train to the Port Authority Bus Station and heard (my favorite) from a little old lady, "Would you like to stand near the door, son, in case you have to jump?".

A long bus ride to Allentown, and an incurious midnight cab driver who tossed the parachute into his trunk without comment, and finally, home. There's no place like home.

### Epilog

I was able to turn in the parachute at a nearby Air Force base a few days later and took a commercial flight back to Texas.

*Gene Ziegler, Chandler Arizona, November 2018*