

## ***Nothing Beats Flying To This Aviator***

*by Lt. Col. Bob Russell*

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Lt. Col. Tom Bishop, Group Two Commander, is not hard to find. If he isn't in his house, look up in the air. If he isn't in his hangar, look up in the air. If he isn't at a Civil Air Patrol meeting, look up in the air. In fact, the first place anyone should look to find Tom Bishop is "in the air." Few individuals have spent more time in the air than this "love of flying" gentleman.

Most pilots from an Air Force background "brag" about having anywhere from 1,000 to 5,000 hours flying time accrued during their career. Many private pilots are reasonably happy if they reach 800 to 1,000 hours of flying time. Commercial pilots sometimes get 10,000 hours of flight time over a long period of time. But Lt. Col. Bishop has accrued 33,000 hours in at least 14 different commercial aircraft, dozens of private aircraft, gliders, and several aerobatic airplanes—and is now flying helicopters!

He is the holder of an Airline Transport Pilot (ATP) rating and he is a Certified Flight Instructor for Instrument Flying (CFII). Interestingly, since Tom's wife knew she would probably never see her husband unless she was flying, Jean Bishop, a senior CAP pilot, is also an instrument rated pilot with about 1200 hours of flying! The Bishops basically eat, drink, and sleep flying as part of their lives—and have for forty years of marriage.

In fact, fate placed the two aviators together in 1962. Tom was at Maxwell AFB and asked to do a demonstration jump (skydive). To his surprise, his pilot was a cute 17 yr. old who was attending Rice University straight from the eleventh grade, who had previously attended Hockaday finishing school and who Tom teased for chewing gum the entire time she flew the plane he jumped from. Following the flight, Jean persistently asked to learn how to jump and Tom finally ended up teaching her and two of her girl friends how to skydive—"the best students I ever had," he affirms. Jean, now a major in CAP and the Texas Wing's legal officer (who has attended the Southwest Region Staff College and the National Legal College) eventually logged 87 jumps—and Tom, always

one to attack a sport with an amazing drive, has over 3500 freefall “leaps” from an airplane!

Born in Hobbs, New Mexico, Colonel Bishop’s dad was in a Tank Corps in Africa fighting Germans at the time. “By the time I enlisted in the Air Force, I had moved all over the Western U.S., but I reluctantly have to confirm I am a native New Mexican, rather than a native Texan,” he says with a grin.

At age 18, Tom joined the Air Force intending to go through the Aviation Cadet (AVCAD) program and becoming a pilot—but he had to wait until 19 and ½ to begin pilot training—while waiting, he became an electronic technician at Keesler AFB. By the time he was ready to fly, the Air Force canceled AVCAD and required pilots to have a college degree and go through Officer Training School (OTS), so the would-be flier changed his path. “My best Air Force duty station was Lajes Field, in the Azores Islands, a remote communication site with some Navy security guys. We had Portuguese cooks who would fix anything you wanted 24/7, our own private club, motorcycles, and the SCUBA diving was great,” Tom reflects, thinking about days gone by.

Seeking a college degree, Lt. Col. Bishop headed for Auburn University, one of the well-known central U.S. universities in Alabama, and was majoring in electronic engineering and aviation management when Delta Airlines made him an offer he couldn’t refuse—to fly—so he left college and became the youngest pilot (23) in his training class of 1966. He started as a copilot on the Convair 440, and soon moved through a variety of airframes: DC-6, DC-7, Convair 880, DC-9, DC-8, L-1011, MD-80, B-727, B-737, B-757, B-767, and he finally retired flying the MD-11 to Japan and Korea. When asked what his favorite airplane was, he replied, “As long as I am in the air, I am happy—it doesn’t matter if it is a tail-dragging J-3 Cub or a Boeing 757 (which was his favorite when flying for the airlines).” Tom continues to fly a variety of aircraft, including the Cessna-188 “AgWagon” used to tow cadets at his airfield between Denton and Decatur, and his Schweitzer 2-22 glider used to give orientation flights. And, recently, he has focused on a bird that has its wings rotating above the cockpit—a helicopter.

Colonel Bishop recollects not being fond of helicopters over the years. “Once in a Huey at Fort Benning, it went into autorotation...I was sitting on the floor with my feet on the skid outside and thought about jumping—but the aircraft was going down too fast

and I might have been ‘eaten’ by the rotor blades as the helicopter dropped if I jumped! Fortunately, a savvy crew chief grabbed me, pointed up at the blades, and I understood. Later, during advanced Special weapons and Tactics (SWAT) training, we rappelled from a Huey for several days and my interest was renewed.” Tom recently purchased a Brantley two-place helicopter built in Vernon, Texas, and is very happy with his new acquisition. “Helicopters don’t fly—they just beat the air into submission,” he chuckles, using an old adage. “It sure is fun.”

Exploring all corners of flying, in addition to commercial piloting, helicopter flying, and gliding, the intrepid aviator has also proven to be extremely skilled in competitive aerobatics. “Everyone who flies at some point in time has the fantasy of chasing Baron von Richtoven (the famous “Red Knight” of Germany) across the sky—well, aerobatics is a peek into that window.” Colonel Bishop started by flying a Reed 100-hp “clip wing” Piper Cub, then transitioned to a 150-hp S1C “flat wing” Pitts, and finally, he built and flew a 230-hp Laser, a modified Stephens Acro aerobatic plane. His skills and hard worked netted him the title of United States Intermediate National Aerobatic Champion in 1982, just another rung in his long ladder of accomplishments.

Most pilots, when they fly, have one takeoff and one landing—unless the pilot is going from airport to airport or perhaps practicing pattern work with multiple landings and takeoffs. Tom Bishop holds the unenviable record of the “most takeoffs and landings in a 24-hour period” – 442! He explains, “In 2001, one of my friends and fellow skydivers, wanted to break the world record for the maximum number of jumps (500) by an individual in a 24-hour period. I agreed to hold this event at Bishop Field (his airport).” For this auspicious event, a Pilatus Porter PC-6 turbine-powered aircraft (which is normally used for skydiving activities) was flown—the same type aircraft used in the movie with Mel Gibson, “Air America.” Tom continued, “We averaged 2 minutes and 28 seconds per jump at an altitude of 2000 feet (required by Federation Aeronautique International or FAI). I flew 442 takeoffs and landings in support of my friend jumping—it was only later that we realized that I, too, had set a record, in addition to my friend, Mike, who set the skydiving record!” The ardent flier admits that it was fun, a bit painful, and “probably one of the dumbest things I’ve ever done in my life.” He said that neither Mike nor he could walk over to do a television interview; they had to hold each

other up while walking—like “coming off a boat after several days at sea until you get your land legs back,” he recollects.

Bishop’s amazing path through life includes more than flying—he has also been involved in a variety of law enforcement professions (the details and stories would probably require a whole separate story). He was a deputy for a county sheriff, an investigator for the county attorney’s office, a U.S. customs officer, the chief of police, and is now a reserve police officer. “I have always enjoyed helping people and I hate illegal drugs and people manufacturing and peddling them to our kids, so it gives me much pleasure to occasionally ruin the drug dealer or illegal drug manufacture’s day,” he admits.

Speaking of working with people and kids, Civil Air Patrol—since it also involves flying—is right up Colonel Bishop’s alley (see related story, this issue). “The cadets and seniors I work with are some of the most dedicated, professional volunteers in the world, always wanting to know what else they can do and never asking for anything in return.” For Tom, of course, he acknowledges that the “most rewarding part of CAP is the twinkle in the eyes of young cadets when they experience aviation for the first time.” He smiles, “Most of the last group of cadets that we did glider orientation flights for were 12 or 13 years old and if I heard ‘awesome’ once, I must have heard it 50 times that day—it makes the time and cost and effort all that much more worthwhile.”

So what would this high-and-fast-flying, jumping, law enforcing, charismatic leader say to cadets who might have doubts about their futures? “I believe one of the secrets to being happy in life is working and playing at things you enjoy and these may not be what others think you should do. If you are miserable in your career, you will be miserable in life. Try to find something you really want to do and work hard for it. Never let anyone tell you that you can’t accomplish something and, especially, that ‘it is too late.’ You are never too old and it is never too late.”

These few sentences of philosophy epitomize this gung-ho aviator and all CAP cadets – and many seniors – should take heed. Many of us go through life wanting to do something but are afraid to try. Lt. Col. Tom Bishop and his wife, Jean, are living proof that “where there is a will, there is a way.” They would be glad to discuss this at length

with anyone having doubts—but if you can't seem to find the Bishops at their home, in their hangar, or at a meeting...well, just look up in the air.

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