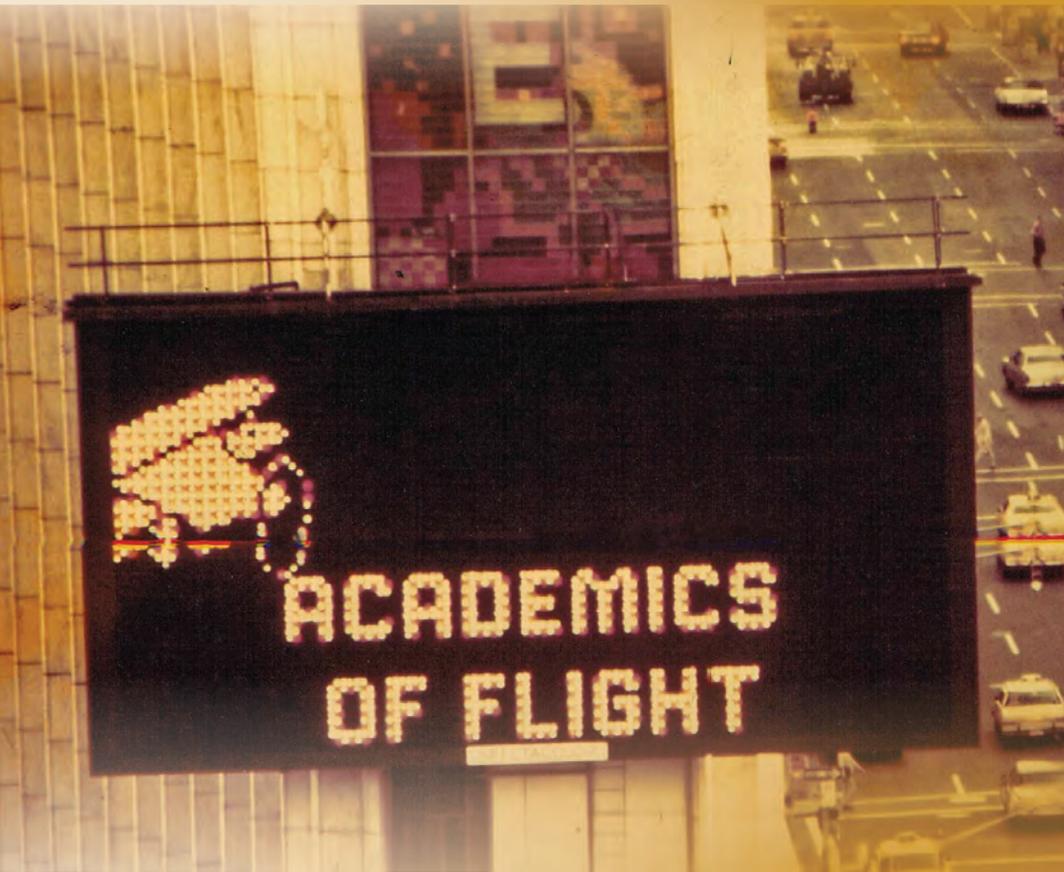


THE SKY IS NOT THE LIMIT



BUILDING A FLIGHT LEGACY

JAMES WESLEY ETCHISON

The Sky is Not the Limit

Building a Flight Legacy

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CONTENTS

<i>Prologue</i>	1
PART ONE	
1 The Farm	9
Cana, North Carolina, 1950s	9
2 School Years	17
Westbury, New York–Fort Defiance, Virginia, 1950s–1962	17
3 My Day in the Sky	29
Fayetteville, Arkansas, 1962	29
4 Loring Air Force Base	33
Caribou, Maine, 1963–1965	33
<i>Senator Vest’s Tribute to a Dog</i>	47
5 Vietnam	50
Phan Rang, 1966	52
Excerpts from Letters Concerning K-9 Perimeter Duty, Phan Rang, 1966	85
<i>Four-Footed “Detectives” Defend Phan Rang AB</i>	89
6 West Coast	90
Merced, California, 1967–1968	90
7 Here We Go Again	102
Saigon, Vietnam, 1968–1970	102

8	Germany	119
	Erbenhiem, 1970	119
9	Up, Up, and Away	131
	Salt Lake City, 1971	131
10	Once a New Yorker, Always a New Yorker	136
	1971–Present	136
	<i>Home, Sweet Home</i>	141
	<i>If I Had a Hammer</i>	147
	<i>Toys “R” Us</i>	156
	<i>Be Like Water</i>	159
	<i>Trains, Trains, Trains</i>	163
	<i>An Apple a Day . . .</i>	165
	<i>Freight Dog</i>	172
	<i>Cobano, Costa Rica: 1990s–Present</i>	176
	<i>The Next Generation</i>	181

PART TWO

11	Academics of Flight is Born	187
	The Beginning	187
	<i>Out of the Apartment</i>	190
	<i>The Drug Trade</i>	192
	<i>The Goodfellas</i>	194
	<i>Ground to Flight</i>	198
	<i>The Academics of Flight Staff</i>	207
	<i>The Students</i>	216
	<i>Flight Engineer</i>	232

<i>Government Agencies</i>	239
<i>New York State Rehabilitation Agency/ Veterans Administration</i>	239
<i>Federal Aviation Administration</i>	240
<i>Carolina Air Academy: Mount Airy, North Carolina</i>	241
<i>AirNet: Columbus, Ohio, 2000s</i>	251
<i>Apartments</i>	256
12 Domestic to International	260
<i>Pakistan</i>	261
<i>Morocco</i>	267
<i>Nigeria</i>	270
<i>El Salvador</i>	278
<i>Nicaragua</i>	279
<i>Guyana</i>	282
<i>Aruba</i>	283
<i>Trinidad</i>	286
<i>Jamaica</i>	292
<i>Antigua</i>	295
<i>Panama</i>	297
13 Academics of Flight International	301
<i>Miami, Florida, 1997–2012</i>	301
14 Flight Tales	316
<i>Epilogue</i>	327

FOREWORD

MY GOOD FRIEND JIM ASKED ME TO WRITE THE FOREWORD to his book, which is good because I really want to talk about him!

I met Jim for the first time in 1986, when a call to the dispatch office came in, and the gentleman on the other side asked whether I (or anyone for that matter) was interested in teaching for him! He had an ATP class scheduled in a very short time hence, and it was full of customers who had already paid, most of them line-pilots from Europe who had been flying for years for companies such as Sabena and KLM. I happily accepted, and went to his office at the appointed date and hour, and met “The Man!”

Instead of a detailed rundown on what I was supposed to teach, this tall, thin man dedicated a few minutes, and returned to what he did best: Juggling a myriad of balls, smiling all the while, and knowing exactly what he expected of each and every one.

The reason people working with him put up with this chaos—albeit not in Jim’s eyes since he knew which arm would catch the 5th ball—was quite simple: He was a fundamentally decent man, looking at the world through a unique prism, and a great sense of humor.

He offered whatever a customer wanted: Flight training, Flight Engineer training, Flight Attendant training, Dispatch training, and if you wanted a class to start tomorrow, Jim would have no trouble committing to it without having arranged for any resources: And, yet, by the next day he would have all assembled, his Rolodex ensuring that people would provide what he had promised.

He was a habitual globe-trotter before that became a cliché. He served in Asia, attended Grad school in Germany, traveled extensively in Central and South America, the Caribbean, and Africa, and no matter where he went, he made friends! His secret? He was a friend to other people, first.

While being a good friend, he can be profane, politically so incorrect that longshoremen would blush, but you would always know that he has your back.

While Jim's professional life was 4 appointments in 10 minutes, the quiet center was his home, where his beloved wife and daughter shared in, and were the recipients of, a dedicated man creating a beautiful home.

Jim has a story to tell, and he tells it well.

After all these years I think it was not Jim who was "crazy," but it was us: He was the one who kept the show going, and kept all commitments in the best possible way.

Thank you, Jim.

Michael A.N. Winkler
Baldwin, NY
January 2014

VIETNAM

While writing this book, I corresponded with retired Lieutenant Colonel Martin F. Heuer, who was gracious enough to provide his thoughts, which are excerpted below.

The story of Airman First Class James W. “Jim” Etchison, U.S Air Force, and his flying as a crewmember/gunner on both 174th and 161st AHC “Slicks” is really quite rare, yet it is something that actually happened during the Vietnam War. Jim was a sentry dog (K9) handler assigned to the 366th Air Police Squadron at Phan Rang AFB in February 1966 and served there until he finished his tour in February 1967. It was March 1966 when he started flying missions with Army Aviation.

When Jim first approached me with his story in early 2011, I found it hard to believe. At the time, I was the president of the 174th Assault Helicopter Company Association and had already had some rather

unsettling experiences with people who we categorize as “Wannabes.” Jim said he’d flown many times as a gunner on U.S. Army helicopters of the 174th and 161st during the conduct of regular missions flown by both companies while they operated out of the Air Force Base at Phan Rang, RVN. He said he’d kept a written record of each flight mission, including the crewmembers names of those he flew with and a statement of the mission. I could hardly comprehend such a story because it was so repetitively against all the regulations I was familiar with. He was a member of the U.S. Air Force, had no orders authorizing him to fly as a crewmember on U.S. Army aircraft, nor did he have permission from his own Air Force unit. Yes, there were many personnel of all services who had flown as a gunner on Army helicopters from time to time, but it was usually an emergency requirement, or it was often done when the missions were of the “Ash and Trash” variety with little danger involved. Up to this point, I’d never heard of an individual from another service flying regularly with Army aircrews. One of the most basic considerations for the crew was that the person riding as gunner was qualified to fire the M-60 machinegun; that he knew the rules for engagement and could be counted on in the event of an emergency. Jim, it turns out, was qualified and had obviously convinced the flight crews he would perform his duties, if needed.

Jim and I corresponded for the better part of a year during which he sent me the meticulously prepared

reports of the missions he flew with pilots and crewmembers of the 174th and 161st. I still had reservations, so Jim sent me photos, orders, biographies, and other written material to prove what he was saying. I then began to believe he was exactly who he said he was and what he had done in Vietnam were real life experiences. The final confirmation came from a former 174th pilot, then First Lieutenant Curtis P. “Curt” Laird, who I knew very well and had transferred to the 161st shortly after the arrival of the 174th at Lane AHP. Curt remembered the missions he flew with Jim in the gunner’s position on his aircraft. With that, I was convinced and encouraged Jim to provide all of the information he had to complete the story.

Some of you who read Jim’s record may remember him as “The U.S. Air Force guy who flew gunner on our aircraft in Vietnam.”

Martin F. Heuer, LTC, USA (Retired)
174th AHC 1965-1966
14th CAB 1966-1967

Phan Rang, 1966

*Those that I fight, I
Do not hate.
Those that I guard, I
Do not love.*

—W.B. Yeats

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Vietnam Vet

Airman Etchison is extremely alert while patrolling the perimeter of the base and has on several occasions been instrumental in the detection of enemy probes or attempts to penetrate the base. Due to his alertness and quick response the probing and penetration attempts were repelled.

Staff Sergeant Frank A. Davis

Police Squadron K-9 Element Leader, Phan Rang, Vietnam, January 25, 1967

Educator

I came across the school's website and thought I would send you a hello from the West Coast. What an influence you had on me back in '86—It's been a wonderful career and worth every moment I've been in the business—I've done it all, and in all four corners of the world thanks to you.

Scott Robinson

Academics of Flight graduate

Businessman

He was a habitual globe-trotter before that became a cliché. He served in Asia, attended Grad school in Germany, traveled extensively in Central and South America, the Caribbean, and Africa, and no matter where he went, he made friends! His secret? He was a friend to other people, first...Jim has a story to tell, and he tells it well.

Michael A.N. Winkler

Aircraft Dispatcher

JAMES WESLEY ETCHISON

After attending a semester at the University of Arkansas to study agriculture, Jim Etchison enlisted in the U.S. Air Force at Little Rock, Arkansas, in early 1963, in the midst of the civil rights movement. After being stationed at Loring AFB, Maine, as a sentry dog (K-9) handler with the Strategic Air Command, he volunteered for Vietnam in 1965, to avoid another cold winter. Shortly after arriving in Phan Rang, Vietnam, with his dog to patrol the base perimeter at night, he took on additional duties as a helicopter gunner with the army until returning to the United States in 1966. He returned to Vietnam, working for Pan American Airways in Saigon during the Tet Offensive in 1968 and remained there until 1970. After receiving the MBA degree from the University of Utah and becoming a commercial pilot, Jim flew cargo throughout the Northeast from JFK Airport in New York. After the airline company was dissolved, Jim founded Academics of Flight in 1976, and began teaching pilot and other aviation programs both in the United States and abroad. Currently, Jim manages Academics of Flight and resides with his wife in Queens Village, New York.

COVER PHOTOGRAPH: One Times Square, New York, NY, circa 1980s.
Courtesy of Clear Channel Spectacolor (<http://clearchannelspectacolor.com>).

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