

Phantom Memories

In Search Of Thunderbird F-4Es

by

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*For my wife, Donna,
who graciously has always allowed me
to chase my dreams -
and for Bill Alexander,
Michael Jacobsen,
and Don Mann,
who allowed me to drive them nuts
during long miles on the road.*

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Pete Nino - Painter

Other Titles by the Author

*Tools For Spike And Nails:
Building A Better Life (Lessons Learned)*

Sing Me No Sad Songs (A Novel)



CHAPTER ONE

What Am I Doing Here?

*I came across an aircraft within a park one day.
'Twas one I knew so long ago and now 'twas on display.
We talked awhile of days gone by like buddies to the end.
He told me I should plan a trip to visit all my friends.*

I stood looking across the Pecos River from the vantage point of a visitor's rest stop high above the river's calm, green surface. Before me lay the wide and deep chasm the river had carved through sedimentary rock over the eons of floods and droughts and harsh semi-desert conditions. To my left, just out of sight around a bend in the chasm, was the confluence of the Pecos and Rio Grande Rivers. And to my right, the highest roadway bridge in Texas spanned the river's inhospitable basin. The bridge's graceful arches held it 273 feet from the riverbed and carried it 1,310 feet from eastern cliff edge to western cliff edge.

This would be my fifth crossing of this narrow two lane bridge on a motorcycle and you'd think I'd have gotten used to it by now. But I am a hopeless *edgeraphobic*...a term I devised to explain my fear of any edge that sits higher than my storage shed roof. It's not the height that gets to me. I have no fear of

Gary Younglove

heights no matter how tall. I have ridden on my belly in the tail of a U.S. Air Force KC-135 Tanker at 35,000 feet looking down to the ground five or more miles below and enjoyed the beauty and serene sense of wonder at the scope of our globe. I have flown in various other aircraft, including the USAF Thunderbirds F-4E Phantom II, right side up and right side down in any number of situations and never felt the least bit of phobia. There were, of course, no edges; and thus no way to trip, jump or fall onto the surface of that wonderful globe below.

The bridge, however, is one long stretch of roadway with two very well described edges guarded by only the shortest of barriers on either side in the form of what seems to be a knee high guard rail of galvanized steel. That guard rail would surely keep my bike on the road while catapulting me into the abyss should I chance to go near the 'edge'. Yet, if I was to complete my mission, I had to brave the crossing as I had on previous trips this way. So, I attacked the bridge with focus - meaning I stared straight down the ribbon of concrete and asphalt to the end of the bridge more than three football field's length away. And, not surprisingly, I defeated the demon in me, made the crossing without incident, and sped west toward Judge Roy Bean's Langtry, Texas, and other points of interest further on.

I was halfway through an 8,000 mile motorcycle trip that would end up taking me from Texas to Florida to California and back to Texas. I would travel through 16 of our wonderful states on this journey that was, in fact, a quest that had its roots in Las Vegas, Nevada, more than 30 years before.

Back then, in that long ago history of my forgotten youth, I was the Administrative Officer for the USAF Air Demonstration Squadron, better known as the Thunderbirds, specifically, during the period April 1970 - April 1972. In that assignment, I performed a variety of duties including executive

support, general administration, budget, human resources (or personnel as we called it then), and other various functions. On occasion I even played the part of Squadron Commander while the Demonstration Pilots, or Demos, other support officers and support crew were on the road. This was a dubious honor since most of the team was away. But my military records did show that I had 'command' - a term that back then was quite important on performance evaluation reports as I learned later while sitting on military promotion boards.

The genesis of my motorcycle mission, then, was based on two opposite activities: What I did not do *and* what I did do.

I did not pilot a Thunderbird aircraft. I was not a 'Demo'. I was not a pilot. I was not assigned to any particular aircraft on the team. At first, it would seem that this nothingness would never give rise to a trip idea, let alone a quest. But my non-Demo, non-pilot, non-aircraft status gave me the opportunity to ride in the back seat of nearly all of the aircraft assigned to the Squadron during my tour. It was a privilege available only to the non-rated officers and selected enlisted members of the Thunderbirds during the period the team flew the F-4E. It was a gift from above. It was something almost surreal. They even let me hang onto one of the aircraft for a publicity shot. What more could a ground pounder ask for? I know the pilots who took us up on their training missions or en route to or from the show sites considered it a pleasure to give us our kicks - and sometimes banter about our lack of experience with the other pilots, forgetting the mike was 'hot'. But we 'ground pounders' considered it an honor to be able to fly in the back seat of the most powerful and most strident example of America's destiny in a war torn globe. We were able to ride, to fly, and to be as proud as anyone could be in that time of anti-war sentiment. We were part of a team that

Gary Younglove

had no equal. And we knew it!

From 1969 until the fuel crisis of 1973, the USAF Thunderbirds flew the McDonnell Douglas F-4E Phantom II Fighter - the backbone of the Vietnam war air effort. The team used eleven aircraft during that period. Two of the aircraft were lost to crashes. The remaining nine aircraft still exist with seven of them on display around the United States and two



Sometime After My First Ride

in mothball storage at Davis-Monthan AFB, Arizona (although now available for museum collections). All nine remaining aircraft are jealously guarded by past-Thunderbirds from the F-4E era. In fact, most recently, a few past-Thunderbird team members in Arizona with the help of a couple local Girl Scouts restored one of the aircraft to its Thunderbird colors. It now rests 'peacefully' in Corona de Tucson, Arizona. But more about that in a later chapter. First, the quest is born.

I took up bike riding at the ripe young age of 63 nearly three years ago. I ride a 2002 Yamaha V-Star Classic 1100a. My friend, who owned a Harley Davidson, jokingly called my bike a 'Hardly' and the name stuck until I painted a Thunderbird F-4E on the tank. At that point I named the V-Star 'Thunderbike'. In the two years I had been riding Thunderbike I logged nearly 30,000 miles. In August 2004 with my legs now confidently under me I decided to try a long distance ride and planned a trip through the American



Thunderbike – Yamaha V-Star 1100a Classic Cruiser

Heartland from Texas to Wisconsin and back while stopping to visit long lost friends along the way. Of course, I rode Thunderbike by the Harley place in Milwaukee as slowly as possible before I struck out for home.

At one point I was in Monett, Missouri, at the nicely landscaped and relaxing City Park. I had gone there at the urging of a past-Thunderbird like me. His name is Michael Jacobssen and he is the preeminent unofficial historian of the F-4E Phantom era of the Thunderbirds and he told me I would find Ole #3 there. Number 3 was the Right Wing position on the Thunderbirds and the Number '3' was painted on the vertical stabilizer, or tail as many call it.

So I went to the park in search of Ole Number 3 and found it!!! There was good old 66-0315 - the official USAF tail number of the #3 F-4E on the Thunderbird team. It was on

Gary Younglove

display on a pedestal and looking as though it was flying a high speed low level pass by the park's large pond nearby. I was overwhelmed. I had been in that actual aircraft's backseat over 30 years earlier. That very aircraft and I were face-to-face again! My number on the team was '9'. There are '9' Thunderbird F-4Es still around. My mind started clicking. I could, as '#9', visit all '9' remaining aircraft and pay my respects. What an idea!

Okay. So I thought: Let's say I launch my Yamaha V-Star in mid-April and motor to Tampa, Florida, where 66-0302 is on display then to Athens, Tennessee, where 66-0319 is on display then to Monett, Missouri, where 66-0315 is hoisted on a pole and gave me this idea. Then I take a week's break at home near San Antonio, Texas, before heading to points west and visit the remaining 6 aircraft (tail numbers 66-0286,0289,0291,0294,0329,0377). The western leg would take me to the Tucson area in Arizona; Atwater, California; and Battle Mountain, Nevada. At each location I would pay my respects to these old and wonderful friends of the past. Along the way there would be many exciting roads to ride and many memories to relive. I was getting excited. Wow. What a trip.

Now as I stood near the edge inspiring gorge of the Pecos River I was at the halfway point of that trip. I did what I dreamed of in Monett, Missouri. I was on my quest. It was wonderful and awesome and unequalled. I, frankly, was surprised that I had come this far. But now there was nothing that would stop me from completing this journey. This Phantom Knight with Phantom Memories was on a roll.

What I didn't realize when I planned this quest was the impact it would have on me in my travels. The journey was without equal and showed me a country filled to overflowing with courage, dedication, patriotism, and beauty. It is a story about America and those who make it great. It is a story that touches on the edges of both reality and the surreal. And it a

Phantom Memories

story about the wonderful aircraft known as the Phantom II and people known as the Thunderbirds who make the experience so meaningful. Hop on Thunderbike behind me, be my biker buddy for awhile, and hang on for a wonderful adventure in search of Phantom Memories.



CHAPTER TWO

The Heart of a Thunderbird

*I thought of what my friend had said, he made my thinking clear.
A trip of such a magnitude does make this biker cheer.
But, first I must arrange my thoughts before I move out fast.
To truly know what lies ahead I must relive the past.*

To truly understand the basis and depth of meaning behind this trip, you will need to understand what a Thunderbird, both the human and the 60,000 pounds of metal, plastic, rubber and paint are all about. With that foundation you will grasp more readily the what and why of this trip and the reasons it was an honor above all and had such an impact on me.

Many men and women who apply for and gain entry to the Thunderbird Brotherhood and Sisterhood, witnessed the Thunderbirds perform their 'magic' at some time in their youth. And it is from that awe and respect for the Thunderbird spirit that propelled me to make this trip. I was joined on one portion by a friend, Bill Alexander (who even applied a Thunderbird decal to his Honda Gold Wing windscreen), and, on the second portion, by Michael Jacobssen (a past-Thunderbird like me), and Don Mann (a close friend). We were like young boys dreaming again of things to be; like

desperados waiting for a train that would take us back to our youth; like flyboys on a vacation trying to 'one-up' each other. Yet, in the end, we were men who knew anything is possible if we gave it the best of our efforts.

Becoming a Thunderbird begins in youthful innocence for most of those who make the cut. Nearly all of us fortunate few began our love of flight as youngsters - and many as youngsters watching the Thunderbirds perform. To a young child, a Thunderbird is a God, a hero, an icon, a celebrity. This child sees the Thunderbird as a magical person who has somehow risen above the rest and now looks down from on high with wisdom and strength and protection. The child trusts the Thunderbird completely because the Thunderbird is a symbol of everything the child has been taught to emulate.

We Thunderbirds have all seen this respect, this honor, this outright love when we were on "The Team" and it had the same effect on all of us. It made us proud to be a Thunderbird. But it also made us aware of the responsibility that comes with the title. It reminded us that we were once each a young child too - and that in our hearts we were still children with dreams and hopes for a future that was filled with all the good things we had been taught to seek and respect.

Each Thunderbird had a family - be it made up of a mother, father, sister, and brother or just one of these. In most cases the family was a spouse and children. And our children were no different than those who wanted to be like us and looked up to us in worship. But the relationship with our children was different. It was a relationship that was even more special than that with the beaming young child on the ramp whose highlight of the year was getting an autograph and being able to touch a modern red, white, and blue jet aircraft. Our own children saw us every day when we weren't on the road. They went to the movies, ate meals, played catch, and vacationed with us. They also saw our weaknesses, knew of

Gary Younglove

our failures, and knew we couldn't jump tall buildings in a single bound. Yet, they still revered us because we were not only a parent, a protector, a task master...we were also *their* hero. There was a special something in the way our children said: "My Dad/Mom is a Thunderbird!"

In their own innocent way our children taught us things we should have learned when we were the child. They reminded us that we grow old too quickly and forget the excitement of seeing an air show for the first time and being able to actually talk to someone who very few get to approach. They forced us to face the reality that we are only men and women who just happen to be very lucky as well. They saw us put our pants on one leg at a time; yet, in their hearts and voices they still said: "My Mom/Dad is a Thunderbird!" What lessons we could learn if we could only remember what we knew then. And what a difference it would have made if we could have had a magic book of lessons so we wouldn't have to relearn them in the process of growing up.

Thinking this, I began to collect bits of learning in my life in the hope I could share with my sons some of the lessons I wish I had known years ago. I also hoped these lessons would help them avoid the pain that often comes with learning a lesson the hard way. I began by reading all my journals that I started writing in my teens and continued well into my fifties. I also read letters and other writings that chronicled my feelings at various times of my life. When I found a line or paragraph I thought would be useful, I put it into a separate pile. The reading became something of a challenge because I was reading about my past and the successes and failures of that past.

By the time I reached the Thunderbird years, I realized I was reading lessons I had forgotten in the rush to succeed and prosper, and had to relearn while on the Thunderbird team. They were lessons such as: "*Happy people have come to*

understand that people like people who like being themselves. They are who they are. They don't apologize." And: "The strongest enemy you will meet in your battle for youth, will be yourself." And: "Above all else, learn to laugh at yourself." And: "Freedom is not permission - it is the absence of need for permission." This reiteration of neglected lessons continued throughout the Thunderbird years of my life and I was struck with the realization that the time on the "Team" provided me some of the more memorable and valuable experiences along with their valuable lessons.

So, I finally amassed enough material to create a book of these lessons and titled it *Tools* for my sons who were at that time nicknamed Spike and Nails. And I filled it with forty-four categories of lessons from Growing Up to Loyalty to Patriotism to Pride to Humility to Growing Old to Death. These lessons came from many experiences, but most of them we all learned as a Thunderbird or as we walked through our lives with the heart of a Thunderbird beating loudly in our breasts.

We learned that it became *difficult, in the press of business, to recall when we grew too old to remember the simplicity of childhood happiness. Or that our strength lies in what we think we can do. And that true friendship is unconditional.* As we worked together on a common mission of quality and dedication we learned that *a man's word and his promise are the same thing.* And when recovering from a set back, we learned that *the words 'if only' are the first two words of regret.*

It became clear that being a Thunderbird was much more than the shows, the fame, the adoration of those who wanted to be like us. It was a time of learning and growing and being humbled in the midst of greatness. We learned we could *become successful without humility...but we knew we would sacrifice friendships without it.* It was a time that taught us that

Gary Younglove

we each had our own special creativity and it was our obligation to use that creativity to support the mission but also to generate love, humor, peace, friendship, hope, understanding, and all good things. And the long hours and sleepless nights taught us that work must have merit and meaning before it can have worth; in the process, we experienced the weary joy that comes from a job well done.

It took some time to compile these and many other 'Tools' for my sons but the effort was worth it. I remembered that *we often don't know what we want or what we have missed until it is too late to embrace either.* And I wanted to tell my sons *procrastination in youth is the worst kind because it is the shortest time of their lives.* I wanted them to know that being a Thunderbird was an honor above all. Wearing the 'Thunderbird Patch' was a badge of excellence to others; but to a Thunderbird it was a symbol that we had learned the lessons of loyalty, friendship, honesty, truth, worry, freedom, patience, creativity, work, success, failure, as well as the lessons of the other thirty-three categories in the book.

But above all I wanted my sons to know that the 'heart' of a Thunderbird is at the core of the soul of a Thunderbird. It's not the statistics, the flair, the excitement, the thrill of it all; although those were certainly compelling facets of our lives. The reason any man or woman, and especially a Thunderbird, can stand tall and blameless among others is because of the lessons of the heart learned over many years of Thunderbird-like living. And in those lessons of the heart, the Thunderbird can be everything the young child on the ramp believes him to be. When the smoke has lifted and the eyes grow dim and the body complains with creaking joints and shortness of breath, this is what matters. This is what it really means to be a Thunderbird.

And now as a senior citizen with sons far away from my influence and I from their growth and future, I was about to

Phantom Memories

reach out again into the unknown for a taste of the reality I had known so long ago. Nine Thunderbird aircraft waited for my respect. I had learned much about living under their wings. My association with them had proven that their spirit was a force to rely on. After more than 30 years of growing in the Thunderbird legacy, it was time to salute these old friends. It was time to begin the quest - the search for phantoms.

As I gazed at the embroidered patch given to each Thunderbird that passed muster on the team, I was humbled by the many who had gone before and have gone since down that honorable road. I would not only be visiting nine old friends; I would also be honoring all those who have served.

Gary Younglove



The Patch - Worn By Those Who Earned It