

My Recollections of Tom “Torch” Darner

By Perry Lamy, Aug 2024

US Air Force Academy (1971-75)

Tom Darner and I met as basic cadets and members of the Class of 1975 at the United States Air Force Academy on July 5, 1971. That day began a journey for the two of us which should span over fifty years. Outside of family and perhaps some home town acquaintances, I’ve known Tom as long as you could know anyone. We were just out of high school in 1971, most of us about 18 years old, from all different parts of the country (and the world). It was not obvious at the time, but on that day in July 1971 we embarked on an adventure that would become a career serving the United States Air Force for the next 25 to 30 years, as well as, the start of very dear friendships. We were in a group of about 40 “basic cadets” who during a six-week period of intense military indoctrination (called Basic Cadet Training, BCT for short and pronounce Beast) would be transformed into a Cadet Fourth Classman (our rank for the first year at the Academy) able to deal immediately with surviving the rigors of the first year at the Academy in addition to the motivation and skills needed to complete the four-year academic, military, and athletic program which culminated in a Bachelor Degree of Science and a commission as a Second Lieutenant in the United States Air Force.



Wednesday, July 7, 1971 – Our training begins (most of us still have nightmares about this moment)
Barbarian Squadron is on the far right, second in line of the ten squadrons

Our group of forty basic cadets was called “Eight Flight” and we were one of the four flights that made up B Squadron. There were ten squadrons in all, A through J, and each had a name: Animals, Barbarians, Cougars, Demons, Executioners, F-Troop, Guts, Heathens, Invaders, Jaguars. There was also a K-Squadron for guys who decided the Academy wasn’t in their future and were being sent home. The forty of us did everything together: learning how to march, taking advance placement exams, attending classes on the Honor Code and many other military topics, decorum, field and firearm training, studying Air Force history, memorizing quotes, and learning all sorts of irrelevant information (such as, how many steps are there in the circular stairway at the library or how many wheels on a C-5 aircraft). We were expected to know the names and hometowns of all the upperclassman in the squadron. We also had an intense daily program of physical fitness training: early morning runs, Physical Fitness Training, more runs mid-day, obstacle course, and athletic competition for fun. We ran everywhere! In that short six-

week period, BCT transformed a bunch of young individuals into a highly motivated and disciplined team. Our class cheer was “75, Best Alive!” We developed a strong class spirit and we were very proud.



Running the Obstacle Course, Joe Stein on left and Tom on right at first obstacle, July, 1971

For additional background on our perspective, read some of the anecdotes from classmates collected at our class website, <https://75bestalive.org/memories.html>, in “Beginnings”. You will also find many photos taken during BCT of our class under the tab “Gallery”

Following BCT, the academic year began and our Eight Flight became the 4th Classman (Freshman) in Eight Squadron known as “Evil Eight”. In BCT we outnumbered the upperclassman by 4 to 1 but now the upperclassmen (sophomores, juniors, and seniors) outnumber us 3 to 1; so, we received a lot more personal attention and our training continued. It is during this year that I got to know Tom, along with the other members of our Eight Squadron classmates, personally. We were all focused on helping each other survive the difficult academic studies and the upperclassman, so teamwork and looking out for each other became the rule. Occasionally, on a Saturday or Sunday, we were allowed to leave the Academy to go into Colorado Springs or travel up to Denver for the day. I recall making several of these outings with Tom and other members of our class: George Martin, Mike Straight, Art Leiker, Joe Stein—to name a few. Usually, the outing involved going to a movie or eating pizza at the cadet favorite, Giuseppe’s Pizza (aka G’s Pizza), in downtown Colorado Springs. Since we couldn’t have cars, transportation was always a challenge. If the group was large, we would catch rides from upper classman leaving the Academy and meet at a designated place in town. Returning to the Academy required going to the Bijou Street bridge and waiting in a queue by time of arrival for someone to pick us up. All that time, I never remember not being able to get back to the Academy or being stranded without a way back.

In the early Spring of 1972, we were transported in large C-141 cargo aircraft to Norton Air Force Base in San Bernadino, California for the weekend. Each Air Force Academy cadet squadron was sponsored by an Air Force Wing and Eight Squadron was sponsored by the 63rd Airlift Wing at Norton.



Norton Air Force Base and the C-141 cargo aircraft we flew in for the trip (USAF Photo)

The Wing transported cargo all over the world using the large C-141 transport aircraft and so one of those airplanes came to Colorado Springs and took the entire squadron to California. We received briefings on the Wing's mission and life in the "real Air Force" and also attended our first Dining In. This was a military formal dinner that has all sorts of protocol and we were required to wear our Mess Dress, a military formal attire. It was the first time for our classmates to wear this special uniform and we had to figure out how to wear the cummerbund (flap side up to catch the salt) and bow tie. Also included were white gloves.

The real highlight of this visit was a visit to Disneyland in Anaheim, which was a real treat! We spent the day doing all the things kids do at Disneyland today and it was a welcome relief to the regimented routine at the Academy. Unfortunately, George Martin and I got into trouble. It was getting to be close to the time we needed to leave to meet the bus in the parking lot that would take us back to base. George wanted to do one more ride, the Submarine. Tom and I protested that there wasn't enough time to do the ride and get to the parking lot. George felt the time was an "about time" and the bus would wait. Tom and the others didn't agree and left for the parking lot. George and I rode the ride and then ran to the parking lot arriving about 10 minutes late. No bus in sight. We wondered how we would get back to the base. Then we saw an Air Force bus meandering through the parking lot coming our

way. It was our bus and they had returned to find George and me. We got on the bus only to be greeted by the meanest First Classman (Senior) in Eight Squadron. He looked at us and told George and I we were to report to him after our return to the Academy. Unfortunately, the only empty seats left were at the back of the bus and George and I had to make the “walk of shame” down the aisle to the seats. When we passed Tom sitting near the back he said quietly, “See, I knew we wouldn’t make it.” I should have listened to Tom!

We returned to Colorado on Sunday and while waiting at Base Operations to board the cargo airplane for the trip back, I took a few pictures of my classmates. Tom and Joe Stein are below.



Joe Stein and Tom at Norton Air Force Base during Eight Squadron Trip, 1972

Most of us survived our first year (several “washed out” for a variety of reasons, mostly academics but others self-eliminated) and after the school year was complete, we departed for our summer programs. The summer was made up of three 3-week periods: leave was one of the periods, survival training back at the Academy was the second, and the third training was an optional program—going to jump school or spending 3-weeks at an Air Force base. Upon returning to the Academy after the summer, we were now 3rd Classmen (Sophomores) and our class was reassigned to another squadron for the last three years at the Academy. Tom was assigned to 23rd Squadron and I went to 12th Squadron but despite being in separate squadrons we saw each other often as 23rd lived down the hall from 12th. I often saw Tom walking to classes and so we would catch up enroute to the Academic building.

Graduation day came on June 4th, 1975. Our class suffered the largest attrition (46%) in Air Force Academy history. We started with 1404 in July 1971 and 756 graduated four years later. This was a tough time to be in the military as the draft and the Vietnam war had ended and protests against the

military was at a peak during our four years at the Academy. The social pressures against young men in the military were enormous so there is a lot to say about Tom and the rest of our class that stayed the course and make military service a career.

Following the week of graduation festivities, each of us, as new 2nd Lieutenants, proceeded to our first base of assignment in the "Real Air Force". I started pilot training that Fall at Reese Air Force Base in Texas and would go on to fly B-52 bombers. Tom went to a special program to earn his Master's degree at Michigan State University and then started pilot training at Columbus Air Force Base in Mississippi in the Summer of 1976. After pilot training, he flew the F-106 Delta Dart interceptor (It was during this assignment that Tom earned the nickname "Torch", a story I always enjoyed hearing and is certainly documented elsewhere). Going our separate ways, I would not see Tom again until we arrived at Edwards Air Force Base in California for Test Pilot School.

US Air Force Test Pilot School (1983-84)

In February 1983, the officers selected to attend the United States Test Pilot School (TPS) was announced for the classes entering in the July 1983 and January 1984. On the list with me were Academy classmates Tom Darner, Dan McCorry, and Kevin Burns. Classes started on Tuesday, July 5th and students and their families began arriving at Edwards Air Force Base the prior week. None of the Academy guys had seen each other since leaving the Academy. Interestingly, exactly 12 years since we first met at the Air Force Academy, Tom and I along with our classmates were about to embark on another great adventure.

There is no doubt amongst any of the Test Pilot School graduates that the year of study is the most grueling life experience that any of us would ever encounter. The school was serious business. We had something like 40 academic test, 6 graded flight check rides, would fly over 20 different kinds of airplanes, and would be busy virtually 7 days a week for long hours every day, either studying for academics or preparing for a flight in an airplane we had never flown. There was no time for redoes or practice to get better. The expectations by the staff were that you would show up prepared to fly and learn everything the experience would provide. The school was an exclusive opportunity as many pilots applied but only a small number would get selected to attend the course. Completing this course is a great achievement and one that each of us valued in our professional experience and accomplishments. Tom was very proud of being selected and graduating from Test Pilot School...this was an experience we both reminisced about numerous times during the last 40 years.

All married Test Pilot School students were required to live on Sharon Drive in on-base housing. Upon arrival at the base, we went to the Base Housing Office to receive a set of keys for the vacant houses and we choose the house that would be our home for the next year based on its condition and location on the street. The Senior class were half-way through their ordeal and being it was Fourth of July weekend, they welcomed us to a celebration and picnic complete with traditional Independence Day activities such as pie eating contests and tug-of-war. The picnic was held on the street in several front yards of vacant houses.

The houses on Sharon Drive were built in the 1950s and were not much more than stucco walled, tarpapered "shacks" with swamp coolers for air conditioning in the California Mojave Desert. They were considered substandard for military officer housing (not many years later these houses were condemned by the Air Force...if you ever watch the part in "The Right Stuff" where Gordon Cooper



Fourth of July, Tug of War, 1983



Fourth of July, Pie Eating, 1983

arrives at Edwards, our experience was very similar) and exclusively reserved for Test Pilot School students. Living on the same street facilitated studying and provided the families with a close support group during our long absences. We would have many street parties and cookouts during our time at TPS. The base commanders and most especially the housing office left us alone and didn't bug us about having our lawns cut. Everyone was sensitive to the challenge and difficulty of our training and so no one fooled with us. Below are pictures of a St Patrick's Day party and parade we had in which Tom and Patty's girls we dressed up to help celebrate.



St Patrick's Day, Sharon Drive Parade, Mar 1984

We had assigned seats in class and Tom sat two rows ahead of me against the left wall of the room. For our flying training we were organized into student test teams with the responsibility of flying practice test flights to collect data with which we would write a final graded-report. Tom and I were in different course curriculums since he was a fighter pilot and I was a bomber pilot so we never were on the same student test teams. Generally, we flew our test flights with other members of our student team, however, we did fly one T-38 flight together for a check ride practice in September 1983. It was our first graded check ride so we were crewed together to go practice the flight profile.

Also in September, the Senior class went on their two-week field trip and we decided (it was tradition) as our class prank to fill their classroom with newspaper. We got together after class and worked on crumbling newspaper. Some of the wives helped out as well. I don't know where we got all those newspapers.



Prank on Senior Class during their field trip, Sep 1983
Perry (left), Tom (center), Kev Burns (right)



Our Classmates from TPS Class 83B, Tom (lower right) and Kev Burns (left, standing)

In December 1983, we gathered at the Edwards Officer's Club to attend the graduation of the Senior class. It was Christmas season so the club was decorated for the occasion. Tradition called for the Junior class to present a skit and Tom performed his famous "Little Man" performance. Class 83B then became the Senior class.



Tom and Patty, Senior Class Graduation, December, 1983

In February 1984, our class went on a two-week field trip. We visited aircraft manufacturing plants, other Air Force test facilities, flew American Airline simulators in Dallas but the highlight of the trip was a weekend in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. We had two Brazilians in the class and initially had suggested to the Test Pilot School staff that we include a trip to Brazil on our field trip. The idea was shot down by the Wing Commander as having the appearance of a "boondoggle". Our class leader, Scoop Cooper, got the Brazilians to work a formal request from their government to the US State Department. The Wing Commander wasn't too happy about this end-around but our class was going to Brazil. To justify the trip, we had to visit the Brazilian flight test facility following our weekend in Rio. This worked out great for the class as we got to fly a variety of Brazilian Air Force aircraft. Not a "boondoggle" after all.

Upon returning to our classroom, we found it converted into a beach complete with a pool. The Junior class prank was selected to remind us of our weekend at Copacabana Beach in Rio de Janeiro. All the desks had been removed and junior class had brought in many wheel barrows of desert sand. It took a while for us to clean it up and get the classroom set up in time for Monday morning academics. (Our desks were stored in a hangar next door to the Test Pilot School.)

Tom and I did get one of the best rides during our year at Test Pilot School. We were selected to fly the U-2 spy-plane at Beale Air Force Base in northern California. Toward the end of the course each pilot would fly a variety of different airplanes brought to Edwards for that purpose. Since we were training to be test pilots which included flying airplanes that had never been flown before, this experience was the closest thing to preparing us for that situation. It was usually one flight in the aircraft and we would prepare for the flight by reviewing the flight manual or other information made available to us to prior

to the flight. We would then construct a flight profile which included conducting a set of flight maneuvers which we had been taught for the purpose of evaluating the aircraft.



Our classroom after the junior class prank

This is what Tom and I did in the U-2. The U-2 was a strange airplane that looked more like a glider than a modern jet aircraft. It operated at altitudes about 70,000' and required wearing a pressure suit. The U-2 was a notorious airplane made famous in May 1960 when Francis Gary Powers was shot down while flying over the Soviet Union for the CIA. Tom and I had the opportunity to fly one of the U-2s made for overflights and built in 1956. This airplane was unique as it had been converted to a training aircraft by adding another cockpit for a student pilot. The airplane was a U-2CT #56-6692 and is shown below.



Photo via Fred Carmody

The U-2 Tom and Perry flew at Beale Air Force Base

On April 15th 1984, Tom and I drove up to Beale from Edwards and the next day both of us receive ground school training from an Air Force U-2 instructor pilot. The training consisted of ejection seat operation and, most importantly, pressure suit training. We wore a 1960s MC-3 partial pressure suit for

the flight. Both of us had to receive altitude chamber training in how to breathe in a pressure suit helmet and what do if we loss cabin pressure at 70,000' during the flight. The altitude chamber training included a rapid decompression that caused the suit to immediately inflate to protect our blood from boiling.

Tom's flight was on July 17th and was about 3 hours long. The flight profile consisted of takeoff, a steep climb to altitude, slow climb to above 70,000', performing an evaluation of handling qualities and engine operation, descend to lower altitude to evaluate aircraft handling and aircraft system operation, and then return to Beale Air Force Base for approach and landing evaluation. While Tom was flying, my job was to ride along with a U-2 instructor pilot in a souped-up El Camino chasing Tom down the runway during his touch and go landings and calling out height above the ground. Tom and I both thought riding in the El Camino was as exciting as flying the plane. As I recall, Tom did 3 or 4 landings in the U-2 but unfortunately hit the tips of the wing while rolling on the runway. There were thick wooden skids on each wing tip as this was a common occurrence since the U-2 had bicycle landing gear and such long wings. In fairness to Tom's flying skills landing the U-2 was very difficult particularly for pilot's who had flown only fighter aircraft.

The next day on Apr 18th it was my turn to fly and that flight is a highlight of my flying career. At 72,000' the sky is deep blue and you can plainly see the curvature of the earth. The aircraft was very difficult to fly at altitude as the range from stalling due to low speed and going supersonic (also bad for the airplane) was about 8 knots. The engine was very finicky and you had to move the throttle very, very slow to keep it from stalling or flaming out. I had a little better luck with my landings; the instructors attributed it to my background flying the B-52 which has long wings. Both Tom and I left Beale with a healthy respect for the men who used to fly the aircraft over the Soviet Union and China.

In early Spring, Class 83B approached 100 days left in the course. To celebrate this milestone, we had a Toga party at Scoop Cooper's house. Everyone was encouraged to wear some type of Toga or costume. The evening culminated with the posting of "99" on the sign at the end of the street. This was a daily reminder to each of us on our drive to school of how long we had left before completion of the course and graduation.



99 days to go!



Patty wearing Tom's Air Defense Command flight suit



Tom came as an Arab (Bill Nusz with him)



Kev Burns in his Toga



A very happy moment!



At midnight, the sign is changed to 99 days

Graduation from TPS was in early June 1984 and celebrated with a formal dinner and ceremony at the Edwards Officer's Club. By this time, each of us had an assignment following graduation, some of our class was headed to Eglin Air Force Base in Florida others to Wright Patterson Air Force Base in Ohio, but Tom and I would go up the flightline for an assignment to the 6512th Flight Test Squadron better known at the base as "Test Ops".



One last street party just before graduation, Jun 1984



Test Pilot School Class 83B, Graduation, June 1984



John Barnoski, Tom, and Kev Burns (Perry behind Kevin)

Test Operations (1984-87)

We arrived to the 6512th Test Squadron as brand-new Air Force test pilots itching to get our hands on some real flight test work or be assigned to the next big project. Test Operations or “Test Ops” for short was kind of a bullpen for test pilots. There was a Fighter Branch where Tom was assigned and a Bomber Branch where I was assigned. We were all in the same building but different offices. We each had a desk and our immediate task was to get certified in the aircraft we would fly and complete a short check out in chase operations (a mission using an airplane to chase or accompany an aircraft being tested). All of us were checked out in two aircraft. Everyone flew the T-38, which is the trainer we learned to fly

and the mainstay of the Test Pilot School course. The other aircraft was based on the needs of the squadron and aircraft to support the base's test mission. I checked out in the A-37 which was a fighter version of the T-37 we flew in pilot training. During Test Pilot School each pilot flew the A-37 and we practiced out-of-control and spin performance in this airplane. Tom checked out in the single-seat A-10 attack aircraft. There were a number of small projects and modifications being performed on the A-10 enough to warrant having a couple of test pilots checked out to do the testing.



An Edwards Air Force Base T-38, Tom and I flew this airplane for proficiency and for chase missions.



The "ED" on the tail signifies this aircraft is assigned at Edwards Air Force Base

One evening, I'd guess in July 1984, while still living on Sharon Drive (the Sharon Drive houses were scheduled for remodeling and the class replacing us at Test Pilot School were all living on 17th Street for their time at school, so there was no urgency for us to move out while we were waiting for the houses we had bought in Lancaster to finish construction...more on that later) I was walking down the street to go visit Tom. Half way there I saw Tom coming my way to meet me. He was walking slow and looking down at the ground...I could tell something was very wrong. My first words were "Torch, what's the matter?" He proceeded to tell me that he had "crashed" and A-10 that afternoon. I couldn't believe it!

Crashed, how? Why are you alive? He explained that the airplane was OK and not damaged but that he had run off the end of the runway during a touch and go landing. His flight that day was a training flight to get checked out in the airplane. Since the A-10 was a single-seat airplane, the instructor, John Bush, flew alongside in another A-10. Tom and John had been out practicing some flight maneuvers in the airplane and then came back to the runway traffic pattern to practice landings. On one of the landings, Tom performed a full-flap touch-and-go but once on the runway and applying full power, the aircraft refused to fly. It came off the runway a few feet and settled back down. This happened a couple of times and then Tom realized that he wasn't going to get into the air and that he needed to stop the aircraft. He immediately pulled the throttles to idle and applied full brakes but he had traveled so far down the runway trying to take off there was not enough runway left to stop. The airplane went off the end of the runway (which was three miles long) at the south end. Fortunately, the flat desert all around the runway is an advantage if you leave the runway for whatever reason; however, Tom had another problem. There were some concrete pillars and steel trusses off the end of the runway for lighting and landing antennas. Fortunately, Tom's airplane was sufficiently slow and controllable that he manages to avoid hitting any of these obstructions. Obviously, it could have been disastrous to hit anything with the airplane at any speed as broken airplanes tend to catch fire or breakup. It took about 20 minutes for the crash rescue fire trucks to reach him followed shortly by the Wing Commander whose first words were "Are you OK?" This was more of an embarrassment than a screw up and John Bush and Tom got their procedures worked out before another flight. Much like Tom's F-106 flameout experience, God was looking out for him on this day.

During the next few months, we moved out of our houses on Sharon Drive and moved to houses we had built on Vista Serena Court in Lancaster, California. For the time, this was a wonderful new sub-division in Lancaster and four of us in the Test Pilot School class bought houses and continued to be neighbors just like at Edwards. Tom and Patty lived two doors down from my house at the end of the cul-de-sac. Life was good as we had pools and got settled into desert living in California. For the next three years, Tom and I carpooled into the base, about a 35-mile trip each way. We would trade off driving and most of the time our schedules supported carpooling. As with most carpools, there is never a shortage of discussion or conversation. Tom and I would share all our "war stories" and day's experiences. My fondest memory of these trips was Tom's need to get an ice cream cone half way in the trip while passing through Rosamond. He loved getting ice cream and it became a regular part of our journey home.

Tom was eventually assigned to the F-16 test team and flew special projects in that assignment. He was the project pilot for an Israeli F-16 project called Peace Marble. The project was a foreign military sales program and involved some modifications the Israelis wanted on the airplane for their use in the Middle East. Since the Israelis were not allowed to fly out of Edwards due to sensitive Air Force work in the area it was Tom's job to fly their tests. During this program, one of our base commanders thought Tom had performed some questionable activities for the Israelis. This guy went so far as to open an investigation on Tom's behavior. For a while it was alleged that Tom was a spy for the Israelis. Fortunately, this didn't get too far and the two-star center commander intervened and directed all investigations cease. Tom had done nothing improper and was commended for completing the program for Israel in a professional manner.

Although Tom and I had only flown once together—the flight at Test Pilot School—in 1985 and 1986 we flew on three long weekend cross-country flights. The flight environment at Edwards was much more permissive than what Tom and I were accustomed to in our previous flying assignments. As an Air Force test pilot, you were given a greater level of responsibility and treated like an experienced pilot who

knew how to deal with unknowns and could stay cool under pressure. This was a fairly exclusive flying organization unlike any other operational flying squadron in the Air Force. So, if you requested the use of an airplane to fly around the United States to train for a couple of days, you were given all the fuel you could burn. The condition was you could not earn per diem payment for expenses incurred while conducting this "official business" and you were supposed to "train". We had a certain number of training requirements to complete each quarter and many of these could not be performed during the normal course of the flight test mission at Edwards. Also, we only did test flying in clear, blue-sky weather. We never flew at night or in the weather nor did we ever land at any other base. So, it was recognized by the leadership that allowing two pilots to train by flying around the country served the proficiency requirements of its pilots.

Our first cross-country mission was in Nov 1985. It was a 4-day, 10-flight trip from Edwards to Eglin Air Force Base Florida, then up to North Carolina, back to Arizona, and then to Sacramento, California. Our landing locations to spend the night were always at bases that we knew someone and could spend the night at their house, that way, we didn't have to pay for a room on base (remember, no per diem). On the fourth day enroute to Luke Air Force Base outside of Phoenix, Arizona we had just leveled off at our cruise altitude of about 35,000' when we both heard a loud THUMP. It sounded like something had hit the underside of the airplane but 35,000' is too high for birds. We began looking around the cockpit, Engines are good, generators are working, hydraulic pressure is good...what was that? After a few minutes, Tom said, "Oh, I see the problem." The noise we heard was the step that came out the side of the airplane to help pilots get in and out of the aircraft. The step pulled straight out of the aircraft just in front of the rear cockpit. It was a hinged tube that folded down once fully extended. It was somewhat flimsy, strong enough to step on but could probably be easily broken off in the air stream most especially doing 300 miles per hour. When stowed in the airplane, the step is held in by a snap tab that releases the cover attached to the step. To use the step, you grab the cover to pull out the step. Apparently, at the previous stop the crew chief didn't properly secure the snap so the cover wasn't locked into the airplane. Somehow while climbing to altitude this cover may have vibrated open or the air flowing by under the little cover caused the step to pull out. Fortunately, it came out about 6 inches and was jammed due to the air pressure from our speed--like holding your hand out the window of a speeding car. The bad news is that this step was located directly in line of the left engine inlet. Had it broken off, it would have been sucked down by the engine and caused a big problem for us...loss of an engine, engine fire, or blades breaking off the engine and penetrating other areas of the airplane, all bad news.

Since the situation wasn't getting any worse everything was OK for the moment but it would be another matter when we began slowing and landed. At what speed would the force holding the step from coming out any further be reduced to pull the step out further. We were worried this step would cause a problem as we performed a landing at much slower speed. Fortunately, the step stayed put through the landing and as soon as we taxied clear of the runway one of us reached down and shoved it in.

The rest of the day went uneventful. We landed at McClellan Air Force Base in Sacramento, California where I remained to join a test team I was working with for a couple of weeks. Tom flew the jet solo back to Edwards and so completed our interesting four-day trip.



This was the aircraft we flew, #375; the step can be seen below the fuselage in the vicinity of the "R" in Air Force

Our third cross-country trip together occurred in July 1986. In two days, we flew from Edwards to Pease Air Force Base in New Hampshire. Enroute to Pease we planned our route to fly over Niagara Falls but we were flying over a layer of clouds and couldn't see the ground; however, there was a big hole in the clouds right over the area of the Falls. That was the only place it was clear to the ground. The action of the water going over the Falls must create a condition that isn't conducive to cloud formation. Anyway, Tom rolled the airplane 90 degrees and for a moment we had a nice overhead view of the American and Horseshoe Falls.

My parents picked us up at the Pease Base Operations, bought us dinner, and gave us a place to sleep for the night. They enjoyed meeting Tom and were impressed that we flew in our own jet airplane all the way from California. It was actually the first and only time my parents got to see me fly in an Air Force airplane. The next day they drove us back to Pease and the Base Operations clerk let my parents watch the takeoff from the aircraft parking area near the runway. We spent that night at Offutt Air Force Base with Tom's brother who was stationed there. On the fourth day we flew back to Edwards and logged a total of 10 flights and about 16 hours of flight time. Aside from the one T-38 flight while at Test Pilot School, Tom and I flew 28 flights during the course of 11 days on three-cross country missions. We alternated seats so one of us would fly in the front seat for the day and then switch seats so the other guy had the front seat. It was always great fun and Tom was always a pleasure to fly with.

After three years of Air Force test pilot duty, it was time for most of Tom and I to be reassigned from Edwards to our next duty. Since we were all approaching promotion to Major, Air Force personnel decided to send us to Staff College. Amazingly, Tom and I were both assigned to attend Armed Forces Staff College at Norfolk, Virginia. We packed up and headed to Virginia.

Armed Forces Staff College (1987-88)

Armed Forces Staff College was a special school with students from every service and from foreign militaries. Also, the school was only 5 months long as compared to the 11-month Air Force staff college at Montgomery, Alabama. That meant less time sitting in class and a quicker return to flying or some other fun assignment. Just like Test Pilot School, students at Armed Forces Staff College could show up a few weeks early to get settled in and ready to start class. Larry Newcome, a classmate of ours from Test Pilot School, was also attending school and he was there to greet my wife and I when we arrived. My recollection is that Tom and family arrived the night before school started. Larry and I were on the street to meet them but I can't remember how we knew they were arriving. It was after dark and they were looking for their house which was down the street from ours. Tom and family were very tired but happy to have arrived.

The College was on the Navy base at Norfolk but was in its own little compound. The school building was in the center of the compound and students lived in the housing on the perimeter surrounding the school. It was a little compound and you could walk everywhere including to class. This was a very relaxed environment compared to the hectic year we experienced at Test Pilot School. There were no tests and all classes were either lectures or seminar discussions.

On the downside, attending this school put us in a special category of military officers. Congress had passed a law called Goldwater-Nichols Act which mandated that graduates of a joint school (a military school that has students from all services) must be assigned to a joint job, which is a job in the Defense Department or working for a regional headquarters. The law had no wiggle room so Tom and I received assignments to Combined Forces Command in Seoul, South Korea. We were "odd ducks" as test pilot and material acquisition guys so we got jobs that they couldn't fill with other Air Force officers. Despite having an abbreviated school experience now, we were off to South Korea for a one-year remote tour (family not invited).

Combined Forces Command, Seoul, South Korea (1988-89)

We finished staff college in February 1988 and packed up for our next assignment. Tom went over to Seoul about a month ahead of me. Due to the job, I was going to fill in Korea, I needed to attend a 3-week training course at Hulbert Field in Florida. I didn't get over to Korea until sometime in April 1988. It was my first long trip overseas and I couldn't believe being on an airplane for 10+ hours. When I arrived in South Korea in the early evening, it was already dark. I was in a very foreign country, didn't understand the language, couldn't read the signs, and didn't know how I would get to the base. After clearing customs and getting my bag, I walked out into this large terminal area and immediately ran into Tom. I was surprised and relieved to see a familiar face. He was with my sponsor (the guy whose job I was taking) and had called Air Force Personnel to find out exactly when I was traveling and due to arrive. This helped my sponsor who didn't have the same luck and had no idea when I would arrive. Tom found my sponsor and they drove to the airport to meet me. Tom had already moved onto the base but I would have to deal with the base housing office to get quarters assigned which would take about a week. They dropped me off at a hotel right across the street from the base and told me to get some sleep as I was noticeably fatigued.



Perry and Tom at the Korean DMZ, May 1988

Within a week, I moved in with one of the guys from my office. We all lived in small houses on the large Army garrison called Yongsan. Each house had a separate bedroom but common areas for a living room, kitchen, and bathroom. Generally, there were 2 to 4 officers assigned to each house. These houses were throwbacks to the Korean War. As a base operated by the US Army, the Army guys viewed any structure that wasn't a tent like a hotel in Vegas, or so it seemed to us Air Force types. The small houses were called "hooches" (an Army term for a military shelter) and each came with a Korean maid who would do your laundry, vacuum, clean up the kitchen, etc. Tom lived down the street not too far away. Tom and I worked in separate buildings on the base and it wasn't convenient to visit each other during work hours. We did spend many evenings roaming around the streets just outside the base. A shopping and bar district immediately adjacent to the base was called Itaewon. The street went up a long hill and there were shops, tailors, restaurants, and bars all over. It was like little America as every business had some type of English name, such as, American Pie, Eagles, Red-White-and-Blue, etc. Just about anything you wanted to buy was available. Any type of sporting clothes, jackets, coats, boots, Gor-Tex athletic gear, custom tailored shirts, suits, and uniforms. If it could be sewn you could buy it. Likewise, all sorts of nick-nacks were available, brass, ivory, jewelry, all custom made. The problem was that almost everything you bought had some sort of defect. For example, a man's duck down jacket had a women's zipper. Items with English lettering had spelling errors. (The "duck down" joke was a favorite trick of Tom's. If we were engaging a street vendor and the vendor mentioned "duck down" Tom would immediately crouch down. The vendor never could figure out what he was doing. It was always funny!)



Tom and an Army officer he worked with on the other side of the DMZ negotiating table. Technically they are standing in North Korea.

Later during the year assignment Tom's family joined him and I didn't get to see him as much. They rented an apartment close to the base and got into the Korean culture. Although it was less than ideal conditions, I know Tom appreciated having them there and my sense is they made the most of the remaining months in Korea.

I left Korea a couple of months after Tom and family departed as I had arrived in-country later. My next assignment was to Omaha, Nebraska, while Tom was going back to the flight test business in Nevada. After three consecutive assignments we would never have another assignment together. I may have run into him a couple of times at Edwards but except for a brief visit in Northern Virginia I would never see Tom again.

Larry Newcome's Funeral (2010)

In February 2010, Larry Newcome, one of our Test Pilot School and Armed Forces Staff College classmates, died from cancer. Larry and JoAnn Newcome lived directly across the street from me on

Sharon Drive. We spent many Friday nights together having pizza at one of our houses or driving into town to get dinner. It was our special night to forget about flight test studies for a couple of hours. We became great friends. While Tom and I were together in Korea, Larry's wife, JoAnn, died during a medical procedure that caused a blood clot in her brain. It was tragic and a shock to us. Unfortunately, being over in Korea made it impossible to see Larry or attend the funeral. Upon returning from Korea, while stationed at Omaha, Nebraska, I was sent on a temporary assignment to Virginia and visited Larry. He was somewhat discouraged and pessimistic about life.

Larry would recover from this downturn, remarry and have two more kids. He retired from the Air Force and lived in Northern Virginia doing work on unpiloted aircraft. All was great...life was good. Then in January 2010, Larry's wife called to tell me he was in the hospital with a bad cancer diagnosis. Within a couple of weeks, he died. I made arrangements to attend his funeral the following weekend but a winter storm crippled DC and Northern Virginia and the funeral was delayed a week. The following weekend, I traveled to Washington National and was picked up at the airport by Dan McCorry, an Academy and Test Pilot School classmate of Tom and me. He drove me to a hotel and picked me up for the funeral. Attending the funeral were other Test Pilot School classmates, George London, Dan McCorry, Howard Lewis, and Tom and Patty. After the funeral, we all went to have lunch and briefly reminisced about many topics but mostly involving our time at Test Pilot School and our flight test assignments.

As I recall this brief meeting, I am smiling as Tom was in rare form that afternoon. At one point, we were discussing the validity of the many rumors about a secret airplane that had been developed in the 1990s while we were all in the test business. Rumors emanated from people in Southern California seeing strange lights flying over the desert and a sonic boom that would occur every Thursday morning over Los Angeles. There had been talk of a project in the Air Force budget called "Aurora" that sparked many of the rumors. The group was divided over whether or not "Aurora" ever existed. Finally, Tom broke the deadlock. The five of us together probably knew everyone involved in the flight test business during this period of time. Tom proposed that if any such project existed wouldn't it require someone from the flight test business to be involved. He then asked if any of us ever knew or had heard of anyone "disappearing" (to a secret assignment) during this period of time. We looked at each other and agreed Tom had a good point. Obviously, the rumors were just that.

Zoom Sundays (2022-2024)

I retired from the Air Force in 2006 and except for an occasional email or Christmas card didn't see or hear much from Tom. He had several assignments in the Washington DC area before retiring from the Air Force and then worked for the MITRE Corporation for a number of years. After finishing my last assignment at Wright Patterson Air Force Base in Ohio, my family moved to Fairview, Texas just north of Dallas.

Then in March of 2022, Tom and I had a conversation on the phone and caught up on all we had done since our last visit at Larry Newcome's funeral. It was shortly after this conversation that Patty informed me of Tom's condition with Lewy Bodies. Talking on the phone was OK but Tom suggested we try a Zoom call. That began a weekly Zoom Calls and conversations every Sunday morning for the next two years.

So, every Sunday morning, Tom and I would engage in a Zoom conversation, mostly for about 2 hours but sometimes for over 3 hours. We missed a couple weeks while Tom and family moved from Virginia

to Florida, or during visits from family, or if we were away or traveling, but every other Sunday we engaged in conversation. Most of our discussions were about the past, our experiences at the Academy, in Test Pilot School, flying at Edwards, or our time in Korea. Tom also filled in the details of his experience with flying the F-117 (after returning from Korea) and his time assignments in DC before retiring from the Air Force.

At one point in late 2022, I was involved in transferring my DVD movie collection to hard drive, a task Tom had done before with his own collection of DVDs and he offered many suggestions on the best way to proceed. I sent Tom a copy of all these movies as he had lost his movies or wasn't able to access them following the move to Florida. In another discussion, we had lengthy discussion about Tom's Dad who was a B-17 bomber pilot during World War II. Tom had questions about the decorations his father had received for the combat missions in Europe so during a trip I made to the Air Force Historical Archives located in Montgomery, Alabama, I researched his Dad's unit history and his combat missions. Although there was a record of the decorations in the documents, I was not able to find the specific citation that accompanied the Distinguish Flying Cross decoration. The archives are rich in information and did have details about every mission flown and its outcome, which I shared with Tom during several sessions.

Initially, Tom didn't show any sign of the disease and there was no lack of recall of past events or losing train of thought in discussion. As we progressed through this two-year period, however, and much during our sessions in Spring 2024, he would occasionally forget what we were talking about particularly if it was a complicated explanation or story. Even during our last time online in July 2024, I was amazed at his recall of the past. He grew progressively tired and fatigued and our discussions which used to be for two hours period began being only one hour. Today, I miss those Sunday discussions.

The two-year Zoom calls with Tom will always be a special experience for me. I know Tom enjoyed them and for me they were the only link to the past experiences I've described above. Time changes your recall and perspective of events and this was a healthy experience for both of us. I am equally grateful to Tom's wife, Patty, for arranging these meetings with a Zoom call link that arrived in my email every Sunday prior to the call. As I recall, it was her suggestion to try Zoom and she was most supportive of making sure Tom was ready for the call. Thank you, Patty, for this most special opportunity.

Reflections (2024)

I hope this collection of anecdotes and stories about my experience with Tom Darner will help maintain his memory and offer Patty and family with an insight on who Tom was as a classmate, fellow officer, and friend and what he meant to those who served with him.

In retrospect, Tom and I were very fortunate to have shared these experiences across the many years since 1971. Due to our experience during four years at the Air Force Academy, each of us regards our classmates as brothers. I have always considered them to be as much a member of my family as my biological family. Band of Brothers, from Shakespeare's "Henry the Fifth", was often used to describe our class long before it was popularized by Stephen Ambrose famous history story about Company E. We could depend on each other no matter what the circumstances. So, it was with Tom and I—whether getting through Hell Week at the Academy, studying for a test at Test Pilot School, or flying a long cross-country, we watched out for each other. It never mattered how long the gaps were when we didn't have direct contact, our relationship just continued as if it was a continuous interaction. My life is richer for having known Tom and his family and our friendship will always be a cherished memory for me.