

TURNING FINAL WITH HOWARD MORGAN

Good Memories of a Very Good Friend

by Jed "Skip" Scully - March, 2011

I telephoned Howard on his last birthday, July 5th, 2010, as I have for most of his birthdays for the last 49 years. "Howya doin' Skipper.. when you coming to see me?" "I'll be there Howard, when we come back from France around the New Year." "Well, I'll be waiting, with a double for each of us.." we finally arrived at his doorstep one evening, and his daughter Victoria told us we were a day late, Howard had touched down, closed out his flight plan, and gone home.

To say that I was stunned puts it very mildly. I was too late for the before landing checklist, but my fond memories of Howard are as sharp, and clear, and as amusing, as when we first met in August, 1961.

I had just graduated from law school, and had taken a job at UC Berkeley in June. I was transferring to the Reno, Nevada Air Guard unit which had recently received RB-57 aircraft, and I was eager to return to a unit with a recon mission. By the end of July, my transfer paperwork had got "lost" and I was being called up with the 146th ATW, as the wing Intell Officer. Intell and Plans were housed together, and our first day back on active duty I met Lt. Col. Howard H. Morgan, Jr, assigned through the intervention of then Senator Barry Goldwater, to a vacant slot as Wing Plans Officer.

I knew the wing, since I had been a member of the 115th Bomb Sq (L) & the 146th, (except for five years of active duty) since 1948; and Howard knew flying. He loved flying, a lifelong, happy, stick and rudder man. We were a great pair. I handled the paperwork for Intell and Plans, and he kept me out of bureaucratic trouble. There was the little matter of the Bar Examinations. He hid me from other duties, and performed them for me, for three weeks so that I could concentrate on passing the Bar. We had an adventurous time that year, going to Japan, Vietnam, the Philippines, Kwajalein, Taiwan, Okinawa, and of course Hawaii. And then suddenly, except for some tense times during the Cuban Missile Crisis, our active duty tour was over. Howard went back to work as an engineer at North American, and I began my years at UCLA. We both continued in the Guard, but Howard transitioned to duty as a flying training supervisor, with the 195th MAS & TAS.

It was just after his birthday, in 1963, when Howard called me and said that he had been "detained" by members of the LA County Sheriffs Aero Detail, for low flying over Redondo Beach on July 4th. Would I represent him in his upcoming court case. Of course, I would. He told me that he had been doing barrel rolls over the surf, for the amusement of the July 4th crowd, in his stagger wing Beech, and the cops were waiting for him when he landed at Torrance Airport. He said that he was at least three quarters of a mile out from the shore and from swimmers and surfers, although he acknowledged being 200 feet or so above the waves. The applicable FAA regulations at that time, required that an aircraft be at least 2000 feet from any person or structures, and he said he was at least that far away. The California Public Utility Code, under which he was cited, adopted whatever the FAA or other Federal regulations stated was the safe flying standard. However, the local FAA office took no action over the incident. We asked for a jury trial, and Howard insisted that we have as many women on the panel as possible, since he was convinced that his rakish smile and debonair demeanor would swing the jury his way. My argument was that the lifeguards who testified that Howard was too close, were inaccurate because of the parallax effect, in that they did not have visual reference points to the side when looking straight out to sea in order that they could accurately judge altitude. The jury didn't buy the argument; and although they liked Howard, they found him guilty of unsafe flying. The FAA didn't agree; but that didn't matter to the DA's office. Except for the verdict, we had a very good time during that trial. It was a vintage Howard occasion; with good laughs and strong drinks after court each day, just to keep things moving right along.

I think it was on Howard's next birthday, that I took my kids down to his house in Huntington Beach for another 4th of July celebration. Since his birthday was the next day, the two occasions always blended together into one happy blast. Howard had just returned from a trip to Vietnam, via Taiwan, and the chain lockers of his C-97 were chock full of fireworks. The entire neighborhood gathered around while Howard set up a Coliseum type display of rockets and flares. I told my kids to stay well back of me, and I was against his garage. The first rocket he touched off, rose about 6 feet and then executed a sharp 180, flattened out and headed straight for my head. I instinctively dropped to the ground with my kids under me, and the rocket buried itself in his garage wall. For years, he left it there as a sort of memorial to his skills as an artilleryman.

The years and decades passed. Howard married Margie, fathered Andrea, and raised Nancy and Randy. He continued as an Air Technician in the 195th where he was the icon of

the skilled and happy seat pilot. I saw less of him, except during Guard trips and dining ins. On one memorable occasion, all the wing staff was ordered to show up for an annual AFA meeting in Palo Alto. We landed just before lunch, and the keynote speech was scheduled for 2PM. The commander advised us to go have lunch and to show up together, promptly at 1:55. It was a long lunch table. The waitress took our orders and most of us ordered either a glass of beer, wine, or a cocktail. As the waitress is moving away to the bar, Howard called her over and whispered in her ear "Make those drinks doubles" and slips her a healthy tip. Luncheon was indeed hilarious and we all showed up promptly on time - most of us worse for the wear. The commander spots Howard lurching in and says: "Col Morgan, come on down and sit next to me, with the rest of the senior staff." Howard complied, and fell promptly to sleep during the introduction of the keynote speaker. Many of the rest of us faded away as well, but we were well out of sight.

It would not be fair to focus on Howard's fuel filled conviviality on social occasions, without pointing out his consummate professionalism behind the stick or the yoke of his aircraft. He had good genes and an amazing regenerative capacity to enjoy a great time and not appear to show the aftereffects. I believe that his ability to nod off saved him from the usual mishaps associated with hard celebrating. Most of his peers in rank and all of his commanders oscillated between irritation and jealousy at Howard's flying skills, organizational energies, his leadership capacities, and the fact that he was genuinely liked and admired by his fellow pilots and by the crews and support people who worked with him, AND having a great and good time while doing it. Who can forget the sight of every member of the 195th passing in review before some dignitary, imitating Howard's slight gimp and broad smile as they, and he, saluted and passed the reviewing stand.

Howard was a kind and generous friend. My kids loved him. As our careers and lives moved farther away, we always kept in touch. Sometime after Margie's death, he told me about his "Chinese sweetheart Ming," and their daughter Victoria. I had known that Howard had served with the 308th Bomb Group, the only B-24 outfit assigned to China in World War II. He was stationed in Kunming, and I believe it was there that he met Ming. I did not know about the wonderful careers of Ming and Victoria until after he had moved to his golf condominium in Banning. He shared with me how proud he was of them and how happy he was to be an active part of their lives again.

I remember his early history. His mother died when he was quite young, and his father raised both he and his brother Al, while owning and managing the Arizona Stage Lines, a rough and tumble bus and coach company that linked the smaller towns and cities in competition with Greyhound and Santa Fe Trailways. Howard finished his engineering education at USC, and earlier had gained a civilian pilot's license through a federal program prior to World War II. When he came home to Arizona, after the war, he followed his dad into the bus business while maintaining his Air Force affiliation as a reservist. I met his father one time, who was the master template of Howard, except that he had a thin mustache. On that occasion, he gave Howard one of his most prized possessions - his black book, complete with names and addresses of anyone he might want to know, throughout the world.

Howard was a skilled pianist, with an automatic lyrical ear. He was a first class mechanic and could and did fix everything, from his 37 Ford Phaeton, to his T-6 which he proudly flew with the Condors, when his Guard flying days were over. He and his buddy Bill Quinn would fly up to San Luis Obispo in his T-6 to hang out with the boys during summer camp, and give us good acrobatic rides out over Morro Bay. He always brought his golf sticks with him, and easily waxed any of us foolish enough to try even a quick 9.

And now - now what is there left to say. It is not that it is an unanticipated shock that one should pass away just short of his 94th birthday. But Howard, as one who loved life, and his family and friends so fully, his departure seems premature.

As Howard has touched down, I, among his many remaining wingmen, will abort and go around for another try, before we join him in the great beyond.

Jed "Skip" Scully