

# SIR OF THE MONTH



TOM CRULL was born, raised, and schooled, in Portsmouth, Ohio, on the Ohio River. It was a gritty riverside factory town of steel mills and shoe factories. When Tom was 14 he was hired for after school work in a shoe factory, first unloading leather, then upgrading to the shipping department. In his last two years of high school he worked at a local airport, being paid in flying lessons, and then flying time, after he soloed.

When he reached his eighteenth birthday, just two months after Pearl Harbor, he decided to become a naval aviator. He failed the dreaded Snyder test. The examiners were encouraging, however, and suggested he see the Army Air Corps people who were just next door. He did, and they passed him on both the flight physical and written tests.

He went the typical Aviation Cadet route, enduring the same concerns of all cadets - avoiding the 60% and higher washout rate. He graduated in March, 1944, was checked out in P-40's, and then shipped to Dover, Delaware for training in P-47 Thunderbolts for transition and gunnery.

After more than a year of training, he was shipped to the 12<sup>th</sup> Air Force in Italy, where he flew his 78<sup>th</sup> combat mission on his 21<sup>st</sup> birthday, and even at that young age was the most experienced operational pilot in his squadron. The missions were ground support, busting tanks, trains, troops - anything that moved. In the last months of the war the fighting, and ground support missions were very intense, as the Germans were pushed back into their own country. He flew a total of 112 combat missions.

Tom had graduated as a Flight Officer, and returned to the States as a 1<sup>st</sup> Lt. and P-47 instructor in gunnery and dive bombing. This school closed as the war in Europe was about to end, so he was assigned to ferry military aircraft, which gave him an opportunity to check out in many different aircraft. Soon the job expanded to ferrying planes to many South American countries.

One long ferry assignment was piloting a Stearman Primary Trainer to Peru, with a stop at Tampico, Mexico. However, Tampico was socked in. On the instrument approach his flight group broke up and was scattered. He tried to make it to an alternate field inland, but "ran out of daylight, fuel, and courage at the same time," he said. So he elected to land on a sand bar which, fortunately, he was able to do with minimum damage to his aircraft. He soon met some Mexican workers, and was able to trade his parachute for a mule, which he rode into a nearby banana plantation. After he returned to his Stearman, some plantation workers generously helped him cut brush to lay a temporary runway. Finally, with a minimum runway finished, he was able (after purchasing some tractor fuel) to take off and continue to Tampico. There, at a hotel, he found the rest of the pilots, who'd had similar experiences, and were enjoying some "R & R" with secretaries from the consulate. They said they had "thought of looking" for him for the past three days. All ended well with his arrival in Peru. This ferry mission, he said, took "months".

In November, 1946, returning from another ferrying mission, he learned that the Ferry Command had closed, and had "ruffed" (discharged) most of its pilots, but since he'd not been present, he'd avoided this action. Ironically, the Air Force decided it had discharged too many pilots and was now desperate for replacements, so when Tom did show up, he was sent to Topeka Army Air Field as an operations officer.

In 1947 he was assigned as an operations officer to the VIP

squadron in Washington, D.C. He said he felt like a square fighter peg in a round transport hole, so in 1950 he volunteered to go to Korea, to the joy and relief of his commander. Here, this fighter pilot was more at home, flying P-51's and P-80's for a total of 100 combat missions. He added that Korea was his worst combat experience. "We were killing a hundred Chinese for every one of us they got, but they still ran us out of pilots." He stayed on there until he could get an assignment to Wright Patterson Air Force Base so he could fly F-86's. He wanted to come back to Korea and settle the scores with the MIGs. But on arriving stateside at Travis, he learned the Strategic Air Command (SAC), was "drafting" fighter pilots, so he tried to hide out in the latrine, but failed, and was found, drafted, and sent to the 31<sup>st</sup> Fighter Wing, which turned out to be "the finest fighter outfit (he) was ever in." In this unit he flew jet fighters across the Pacific, pioneering in the first fighter in-flight refueling in the Pacific area. While in Japan he flew air defense for the Japanese before their Self Defense Force was created.

While he was operations office of a fighter sqdn. at Great Falls Montana in 1956, three black suited, red tied civilians came to town. After a couple of melodramatic meetings in a downtown hotel room, he found himself out of the Air Force after 14 years, and flying U-2's for the Central Intelligence Agency. He flew for the CIA for five years.

The U-2 flights were typically 8-10 hours long, flying at 70,000+ feet (13+ miles), taking pictures that could identify items as small as trucks. So high he could look down and see the vapor trails of fighters and missiles, which were sent up trying, but failing to shoot down America's U-2's, flying in their airspace - until their success with Frank Powers. (Tom says his fellow pilots didn't call him Gary.) It was a delightful and productive adventure for a fighter pilot. Little known is the fact that the U-2's were not only flown over Russia, but over every trouble spot in the world where U.S. interests were at stake, as they still are today.

Tom returned to the Air Force in 1961, with his years flying for the CIA causing him miss a promotion date. He came to Hamilton where he flew helicopters in the Air Rescue Squadron, waiting to get back into fighters again, but it didn't work out.

Next he was assigned to Yakota Air Base in Japan, as director of operations, for three years, flying T-39's and T-33's followed by a Vietnam tour of one year in which he flew 360 combat missions as a Forward Air Controller (FAC).

Tom's last assignment was back at Hamilton Field in its Air Rescue squadron again, until his retirement, in 1973.

Now a civilian, he decided to go back to school at Golden Gate College for an MBA in accounting. At graduation, one of his professors suggested the Bank of America trust department, but shortly after starting work there he decided that was not what he wanted to do, so he went to Travis and was hired as a flight instructor for the next 15 years, teaching people to fly.

In 1994 he retired completely, but still keeps up his flying with a Piper Aero at Gness Field which he flies two or three times a week, locally and to reunions, with his Wife Jane. They met in high school and married in 1948. They live in a beautiful house high on a hill here in Novato. Their home also has an attractive rear garden with a fairly large pool, where he said his three children, Sandra, Betsy, and Tom Jr. and their friends enjoyed many happy times. Now grown, the three of them all live in the local area.

In 1994 Tom was recruited by Bill Awtrey, whom he flew with, and who taught his son in school. Well done, Bill.