

My Aircraft Commander

LTC James G Woolbright

by Sam Pizzo

As many of you old timers of the 55th may remember, Pat as well as myself and others arrived at Forbes in the mid-fifties to begin crew training in the Boeing RB-47E aircraft.

I like many of other Nav's, were fresh out of Radar Nav School at Mather and knew mainly only those class



members from Mather.

Few I believe had any idea with whom they would be crewed with. You may also recall the Wing being called together in an Auditorium whereby the Crews were identified. The crew number was announced followed by the name of the Aircraft Commander, Co-Pilot and the Navigator.

Back in those days my vision wasn't much better than it is today and the glasses I wore were quite thick, i.e., like the bottom of a coke bottle. Thin lenses were yet to come.

It so happened that Pat and Bill Palm, the co-pilot, were sitting in the row directly behind me and one seat removed to the right. As each name was called the individuals stood up, which of course is what we did also.

When my name was called I stood and turned to see those two standing right behind me at which time Pat lets out, in a very loud voice.....Good Lord Bill he's blind !

Needless to say many guffaws were heard from numerous fellow crew members. At that moment I think I wished I was back in civilian life cause I thought for sure that this wasn't going to be a bed of roses. How right I was !

I flew with one Aircraft Commander for nigh onto eight years, that being Pat and lived two distinct aircrew member lives, one on the ground having absolutely no idea what shenanigans Pat would be into from one minute to the next, and the other being that of flying with the most professional aircraft commander (in the air that is) with whom I ever flew. And this includes B-17, A-26, B-29 as well as the RB'S.

Additionally, flying Standboard and Nav Instructor sorties allowed me to see other Aircraft Commanders at work.

He must have been doing something right judging from the fact we made Select Crew AND more importantly judging from the Co-Pilots (Palm, D L Thomas, Tesi and there may have been one more, .not too sure) that moved up to AC'S status, he must have been a good teacher.

At the end of WWII, 1945, I came across a 1922 (my birth year) Silver Dollar that I carry to this day. I never ever leave home without it and never did so back then, even when flying. Pat was one who believed in kidding and he kidded me no end about my goodluck charm, stating I might be a bit afraid of his flying. Not so of course.



Pat Woolbright with the author

Pat was killed about a year or so after I left the crew, and some years later Tom Moncure told me that not much of Pat's remains were recovered after the crash. This I knew, as Burt Barrett flew me in from Area 51 to be a Paulbearer at Pat's funeral but one thing I did not know was that they found HIS silver dollar.

I have no idea when he started carrying it, but I know he did not have one early on, and hearing that touched me deeply.

Too bad his good luck charm didn't do as well for him as mine has for me. I wish it had.

VO,
Sam Pizzo
Pat's Navigator