

Flying Moby

by Philip E. Boyer



Cessna Six-Seven-Eight-Sierra-Papa, also known as “Sugar Pop” – the airplane that carried Moby to Philadelphia in 2006.

I was working at my CATIA scope one day in August, 2006 when Linda Carrithers called me into her office. There sat Bryan Freed, along with Bill Murphy, another supervisor who oversaw our crew with Linda.

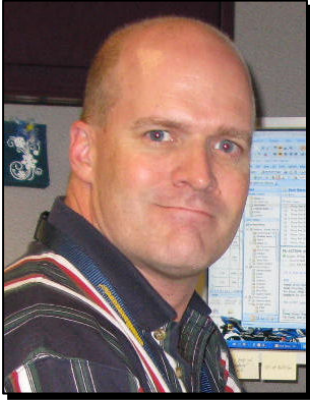
The atmosphere in the office was solemn as I sat down across from Bill and Linda and listened to them explain why I was there and what they were asking of me and Bryan. Moby Bradford, the engineering designer who was a forty-year veteran of the shipyard and then some, had been battling with ocular cancer, and he was preparing to undergo an experimental, last-resort medication regimen on a monthly basis in Philadelphia. A car drive would be long and tiring for Moby even as a passenger, and the airlines were subject to delays and other unpredictable snags. They had approached Bryan, who gladly volunteered the use of his airplane to transport Moby to his appointments. But they also needed someone who could safely fly through weather that exceeded Bryan’s qualifications, and therefore give the flights a greater chance of succeeding. Bryan had suggested me.

We would not be compensated for the flights. If we agreed to do this, we would have to take vacation time or make the time up.

I told them I would be honored.



Cancer. It was a disease that in recent years had touched my life in indirect ways, like the menacing, unseen footfalls of an ancient, stalking predator. While my family and I were living in Florida, Sarah McLeod, my friend from UVA, had survived a battle with breast cancer. Robin Burford, a close friend of my wife whom we had known when we lived in Gloucester, Virginia (now “Aunt Robin” to our two boys) had confronted the same disease twice and beaten it both times. I had ridden my motorcycle in three annual Ride 4 Kids events in the hope that my participation could in a small way succor the children suffering from brain tumors and give support to their families, as well as lay a paving stone or two on the way to a cure.



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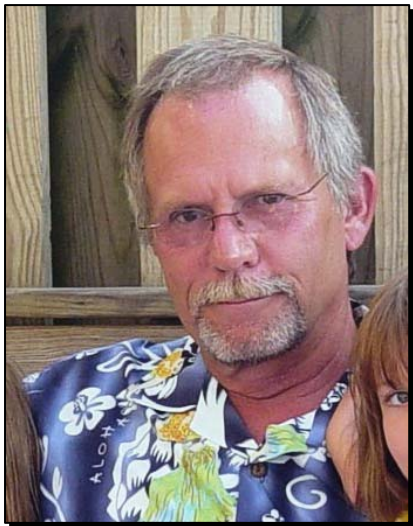
Bryan’s and my paths had converged at the shipyard by some interesting and fortuitous circumstances. I learned to fly while attending the University of Virginia, then followed a convoluted career path that included working as a psychiatric technician, then an interstate truck driver before starting at The Apprentice School in 1992. After graduating as a marine designer in 1999, I left Newport News Shipbuilding at the end of 2000 to pursue an aviation career in Florida, earning my commercial and flight instructor certificates along the way. But the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 put the aviation industry into a freefall, and I returned to the more stable employment of the shipyard, now Northrop Grumman Shipbuilding – Newport News, in 2004.

Bryan had come to Newport News Shipbuilding after graduating from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology with a degree in naval architecture and marine engineering. He worked on a wide variety of projects, including the Seawolf submarine, where he first worked with Moby. He earned his pilot’s license in 2001 and went into partnership with another pilot to buy his airplane, a Cessna 172SP.



Bryan S. Freed

The two of us met when Rob Curtis, an engineering designer in E22 who knew us both and knew of our mutual interest in airplanes, thought we should be introduced. Bryan and I met in early 2006 through Rob and began flying together.



“Moby” Bradford

Moby and I had never socialized outside of work, but I liked him a great deal, and we worked together in an atmosphere of easy, mutual respect. A graduate of The Apprentice School and a Master Shipbuilder, his forty-year history with the shipyard had included a multitude of new aircraft carriers, the Double Eagle Project, and research trips across the

Atlantic to Odense Steel Shipbuilding in Denmark to help develop E51's World Class Guidelines for manufacturing. He had served as a mentor for many E51 employees, including Linda. One of Moby's gifts was that he did not care what someone's job title or experience level was. If you brought him a question, he would provide an answer or find it; if you expressed a concern or had a suggestion, he listened with sympathetic patience. All this had earned him an iconic status and the enduring affection of his coworkers. Bryan and I both knew that the eyes of many would be on us as we flew these missions for Moby. We had to be prepared.

Bryan and I planned outbound and returning courses that took us northbound through the airspace above the Eastern Shore of Virginia into Maryland, Delaware, New Jersey, and ultimately Philadelphia International Airport, along airborne routes segmented between navigational stations ("navaids") on the ground. These routes were known among aviators and air traffic controllers as "Victor airways," and they would make navigation possible when visual contact with the ground and horizon was not. We reviewed the systems on his airplane, N678SP (affectionately known as "Sugar Pop" to Bryan and his girlfriend Gayle), in preparation for the flights, particularly the currency of the data for the Global Positioning System. I pored over the instrument approaches into Philadelphia, which in the event of bad visibility would be executed in airspace busy with airliners and corporate jets traveling at twice our speed. The goal was to make each flight as boring – uneventful, in other words – as possible, both for the sake of safety and the peace of mind of Moby and anyone who might accompany him.

While Bryan and I readied ourselves and the airplane, our coworkers rallied around Moby. Donations and good wishes poured in from all over. It was a moving demonstration of one of the qualities of my department I had long been aware of: a warm, close-knit cohesion among its employees. How this was manifested ranged from such minor things as the daily playful banter we shared to make each other laugh, to coming to someone's side in the event of an illness or death in the family. Now I was witnessing an expression of this familial esteem in a rare and precious way, under what was for me – and far more so, of course, for Moby – extraordinary circumstances, which brought everyone's emotions into sharp relief. Linda, whenever we discussed the flight preparations, thanked me and Bryan again and again for what we were doing, and I never doubted that she meant every word. It was humbling.

The days leading up to our first flight on August 31, 2006 were a time of rising suspense, not just because of the anticipation surrounding our untested plans and the desire to get Moby safely to his first appointment, but also because of something entirely beyond our control. Tropical Storm Ernesto, after menacing Haiti and Cuba and crossing eastern Florida before finally swinging northeast into the Atlantic, was expected to make landfall on the North Carolina coast on the day of our departure. Our go/no-go decision was in limbo up until the morning of the thirty-first. As the hour of our planned takeoff approached, Bryan and I pored over the aviation weather reports and forecasts, before finally reaching the conclusion that getting to Philadelphia would not be a problem. At most we would encounter clouds and a few light bumps during our climb-out before leaving the cloud cover for more mild-mannered conditions to the north. Whether we could complete a return flight the same day would still have to be decided, but that meant a worst-case scenario of spending the night in Philadelphia, or possibly landing somewhere short of our home airport on the way back – no big deal.

Moby arrived at Hampton Roads Executive accompanied by his brother Brad, as Bryan completed his preflight. After a quick safety briefing, our two passengers, both of whom were substantially taller than either Bryan or me, shoehorned themselves into the snug-fitting rear seats while Bryan and I strapped into the pilots' seats. Bryan sat on the left, while I occupied the traditional flight instructor's position on the right. We started the engine, set up our radios and navigation equipment, and after a call to Norfolk Approach Control to secure our clearance to depart under an instrument flight plan, lifted off into the low morning overcast. I had the controls until the clouds, their upper portions lit almost incandescently white by the morning sun, fell away below us, and Bryan took us from there to our assigned cruising altitude, bound for our first navaid. The flight proceeded as uneventfully as we had hoped, with the overcast gradually breaking up and scattering in our wake – cloud bands in advance of Ernesto. Bryan and I exchanged turns at the controls and discussed our next steps as the Eastern Shore, Maryland, and the Delaware Bay drifted serenely past below. Moby and Brad remained fairly quiet behind us, sometimes napping, contemplating that lazy, majestic passage of the earth, and occasionally snapping photographs.



Clouds pass beneath our wings as we cruise north to Philadelphia.

Finally, carefully complying with altitude and course instructions from the approach and tower controllers, we descended over the masts of ships moored along the shoreline of the Delaware River as the airport expanded before us. Then, with a big Boeing flying only a few hundred yards away on an approach to a parallel runway (“Don’t look left,” an approach controller had dryly briefed me days before), we landed on runway two-six at Philadelphia International. It was a sprawling complex of multiple runways and huge terminals, and we felt very small, yet deeply satisfied, in that tiny Cessna. We had safely brought Moby to his objective.

We shut down in front of Atlantic Aviation, a general aviation facility that



Flying “in formation” with a Southwest airliner on final approach into Philadelphia.

serviced corporate jets and small aircraft like ours. Moby and Brad hurried off to find a taxi to convey them to his appointment, while Bryan and I secured Sugar Pop and rode in the courtesy van to an Appleby’s adjacent to the airport for lunch. We debriefed each other companionably about the flight we had just accomplished – unlike a drive, which would have been something to endure, flying always felt more like an *achievement* – and about the one still ahead of us. Nothing particularly complicated awaited us in terms of navigation, and the weather was unlikely to present any serious challenges – until we got close to home. Ernesto was still a wild card.

We rode back to Atlantic Aviation, where I quickly began looking over the weather reports and forecasts along our route and in the Hampton Roads area. Ernesto was an ragged, menacing blob of bright colors on the radar – returns from the precipitation it was dumping on North Carolina and beginning to shed on southeastern Virginia. Nonetheless, by comparing the time of our expected arrival and the associated forecast with the trends on the radar, it appeared we would face conditions that we could negotiate safely. I brought Bryan into the flight planning room and discussed with him what I was seeing. We would encounter increasingly dense cloud cover during the last portion of our flight home, and an instrument approach into Hampton Roads Executive seemed likely. Otherwise, “I think we can do it,” I said. Even if we decided that we could not, turning around and landing in more benign conditions on the Eastern Shore was an easy option. Bryan gave his agreement. We were “go.”

Moby and Brad returned to Atlantic Aviation not long after Bryan and I did, and before we climbed back aboard the Cessna, Brad captured a photograph of the other three of us standing outside the airplane – Moby, tall and still-imposing, and the more modest figures of Bryan and me, the tops of our heads well below the overhang of the wing. In the picture, all three of us are smiling brightly beneath a thin, high overcast that mollified the sunlight on that mild August afternoon.

We went through the same ritual of squeezing into the cabin again – Bryan and I calling over our shoulders to ensure that Moby and Brad, who was nearly as big as his brother, had sufficient legroom – and went through the engine start and radio/navigation setup. We soon discovered that we faced a formidable challenge, not from operating the airplane, but in trying to talk to the ground controllers. The ground frequency was as jam-packed as any I had ever heard, buzzing with staccato exchanges between the controllers and airline crews who had tight schedules to meet. One pilot, after being informed he was nineteenth in line for departure, responded in a particularly pithy and expressive way: “Uhh.” We finally managed to jump into that verbal torrent, and were promptly told to sit and wait for our clearance. It came through several minutes later, and we taxied back to runway two-six for our departure. The tower cleared us for takeoff, and we were soon airborne again, following a series of vectors to avoid airline traffic as we cleared the vicinity of Philadelphia International.

We soon settled into our planned route and assigned altitude, and again enjoyed the slow slide of the earth below. The weather did exactly as Bryan and I had expected: the closer we flew to Hampton Roads, the thicker the undercast of clouds became. We picked up our clearance to descend from Norfolk Approach, and I took the controls to bore through the murky-white stratus en route to the starting point for our approach into Hampton Roads Executive. Now the ride became increasingly rough as we encountered the turbulence at the leading edge of Ernesto, and I vigorously worked the ailerons and rudders to keep the airplane where I wanted it. It was nothing I had not experienced before, but as I navigated along the route of our approach, I told myself, *Phil, don't screw this up*. I was less preoccupied with making a safe landing – which I felt quite confident about – than I was about the state of mind of our passengers. A scary moment or two during the approach and they might decide small Cessnas were not a viable option after all.

We dropped beneath the overcast and made a bumpy, lurching final approach to runway two at Hampton Roads Executive, where I executed a landing that was particularly smooth given the turbulent conditions and stiff crosswind. We taxied clear of the runway and shut down in front of the small terminal, where Moby and Brad slowly eased out of their seats, stiff from the two hours spent in the close quarters of the rear cabin. They did not say much, but simply thanked us and headed into the terminal for the drive home. I hoped they had not been scared off.

The next day, my concerns not only proved unfounded, but in fact directly opposite the impression Moby and Brad had taken home with them. Moby unabashedly sang my praises as an aviator in front of me and my coworkers. “Phil is one *hell* of a pilot,” he declared, prompting a bashful but grateful smile from me. It was the greatest compliment I had ever received about my flying skills.



We made two more flights with Moby and Brad. The second flight took place a week later on September 7, this time in sunny, delightful weather. We followed the same course of events on the ground – Moby and Brad heading off taxi-borne for Moby’s treatment, Bryan and I lunching at Appleby’s before returning to Atlantic Aviation to



Some of the “condors” waiting for takeoff at Philadelphia.

plan our return flight. Frenetic radio traffic preceded our departure as before, and rather than being directed to runway two-six for takeoff, which would have been quick and simple, we were sent to two-seven-right, which required us to follow a convoluted series of taxiways that ultimately positioned us on the opposite side of a runway from a Southwest Airlines 767. Behind it was a gargantuan UPS 747, making me feel like a sparrow nervously waiting to take off in a queue of condors. The Philadelphia controllers got us out of there promptly, and after being vectored clear of the airport, we headed southeast for some sight-seeing along the Atlantic coast.

We cancelled our clearance to fly by instruments (unnecessary in the pristine skies) and began a steady descent to a lower altitude. On the way Bryan goaded me, “Phil can’t bring himself to fly visually any more. He has to be able to talk to somebody.” (By flying instruments instead of by visual references, I was continuously in contact with air traffic control.)

I willingly took his bait and shot back with a smile and mock consternation, “*Me?* Not *talk* to anybody? I don’t think I can handle that.” Bryan, Moby, and Brad all laughed at my theatrics. In fact, by flying visually, we were not required to talk to *anyone*, unless we decided to land at an airport with a control tower. (The great majority of airports in the United States have no control towers, including Hampton Roads Executive.)

We did a flyover of Atlantic City, which I had seen neither on the ground nor from a couple thousand feet. Along with the glassy high-rises, I was especially impressed by the forest of giant wind turbines on the western side of the city – the Jersey-Atlantic Wind Farm, I learned later, the first to be built on either coast of the United States. They stood hundreds of feet tall (397 feet, to be exact), their tapered triple blades describing slow, enormous arcs through the air and providing enough millions of kilowatt-hours per year to power over two-thousand homes.

We turned southbound, and dropped to a still-lower altitude that afforded us a wondrous view of that white filament of beach that we flew parallel to less than a mile away above the ocean. Leaving New Jersey in our wake, we climbed to a safer altitude for our crossing over the Delaware Bay, then dropped down again at the tip of Delaware abeam the town of Lewes, where my aunt and uncle lived. We continued to fly just off



Atlantic City, from two-thousand feet.

the coast, past Rehoboth Beach, Rehoboth Bay, and the resort town of Ocean City, Maryland. We soon turned inland and followed the Eastern Shore before turning west over the Chesapeake Bay to make a landing on the narrow, bumpy airstrip at Tangier Island. Moby treated us all to some crab cakes before we climbed back into Sugar Pop for our final leg to Hampton Roads Executive.



The Delaware Bay, viewed from the cockpit.



A few weeks after we completed our third flight into Philadelphia, we received word that Moby had run out of treatment options. As steeled as our hearts might have been in anticipation of that eventuality, the news hit our department like a bolt of lightning. Moments after I got the word, I found Linda and Bill in Bill's office, their eyes awash, their faces stunned. I said nothing, but put my arms around my boss.

Moby passed away the very next day on November 1, 2006. He was fifty-eight years old. The balance of the donations collected to support him went to his family.

While we might have been tempted to look back on those flights as something performed in vain, I truly did not believe that. I thought that Bryan and I had contributed, in our very modest way, to some rays of hope for Moby and his family in some of the most daunting circumstances any of us could imagine. Moby had witnessed the generosity and loyalty of the friends he had worked with and mentored for decades at the shipyard. But Moby had in his last months given us a great gift as well. He had brought out the best in us, given us a cause to rally around. For me and Bryan especially, he had honored us with his trust.

Bryan once told me something while reminiscing with me about that time. He said that Brad had told him that the only time Moby had been able to forget about his cancer was while he was in that airplane with us, so focused on what we were doing in the cockpit and on the tableau of the earth drifting gracefully beneath our wings. Brad was, Bryan said, more grateful for that than anything else.

Bryan and I and our fellow employees who had offered their contributions and support to these flights became known as "Moby's Angels."

