

Landing Zone

The first time my wife and I visited her Aunt Emily and Uncle Bill, we drove down from Syracuse to their home near Stewart Airport in Newburgh on a Friday afternoon. We unpacked what little we had brought and soon Bill and I were sitting out in the back yard while the women did whatever they do in the kitchen. (This was forty years ago and so I'll maintain the spirit of the times, but I promise not to use the term "womenfolk.")

Just as the sun was dropping down below the yard arm, I began to ask Bill if there was a store nearby where I could get some cigarettes. That's when I heard a rumble that quickly rose to a deafening roar and my ears felt a pressure begin to build, while directly over my head the sky turned black, as if someone had turned the lights out. But strangely, there were white and red lights up there. It was the largest aircraft I have seen in my life and it took up the entire sky. I could see one wingtip down the street and the other up the street. I felt like it was about to plop down on top of us. I could have counted the rivets on the huge airplane had it been moving slower. It passed over us and I waited for the crash that never came.

I looked over at Bill. Not a hair was out of place on his Brylcreem'd head. He seemed quite undisturbed.
"What the **** was that!?" I asked.
"C-130 Air Transport," said Bill, matter of fact like. "The weekend has begun."

Over the years, Stewart Field has been home to the Army Air Corps, to West Point's air fleet, then a B-57 bomber wing. Later, several fighter squadrons and the huge Air Force C-130 Hercules cargo planes of the 105th Airlift Wing, who had just come close to dropping in for supper on their way to the runway a few miles away.

Weekends were especially dangerous in Bill's neighborhood, when the airbase was busy with completing missions. Missed approaches of C-130's were hair-raising, because the "go around" was always done at a lower altitude than the first run. The huge craft flew in over the Hudson River, buzzing the Beacon-Newburgh Bridge and making the trees sway in Bill's back yard, when the flying cargo ship finally screamed in overhead a second time, barely above the tree tops.

Each month, weekend warriors, whose day jobs ranged from selling insurance to filling cavities, guzzled beer all night and then flew an unfamiliar jet trainer the next morning. Accidents, as well as near misses, happened all the time in the flight path over Bill and Emily's neighborhood. There had never been a C-130 crash in the neighborhood, but Bill went on at length with one example after another of crashed A-4 Skyhawk fighters flown by hung-over Top Guns.

"Up on Hillcrest and Whitmore Street, a jet just missed Mrs. Scalzone's house and blew up her garden when he dropped his fuel tanks," he said. "Just two blocks over on Henderson Ave., an A-4 almost landed on Riley's garage." Thinking of our safety that night, I asked, "Will they stop flying by the time we go to bed?" "Oh, sure," said Bill, "by that time the Officers' Club will be open and the pilots will be three deep at the bar."

Not entirely relieved, I again asked Bill how to get to the store.
"Sure thing," he said. "Just drive down this street toward the end and turn left at the plane crash."
"The plane's still there?" I asked.
"No, no," said Bill, "but you can't miss it. All the tree tops are gone."

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The Press at Windswept Farm



Saugerties, NY

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