

## 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 our bags and soon Bill and I were sitting out in the back yard while the women did whatever women do in the kitchen. (It was forty years ago, and I could express that sentiment and get away with it then.)

Just as the sun was dropping below the yard arm, I asked Bill if there was a store nearby where I could buy cigarettes. Before I finished the sentence, a deep rumble behind me quickly rose up to a thunderous roar. My ears felt a pressure beginning to build, while directly over my head the sky turned black, as though someone had turned the lights out. But strangely, there were red and white lights up there, running down the wings. The largest aircraft I have seen in my life took up the entire sky. I could see one wingtip down the street and the other on the opposite horizon. I was sure it would plop down on top of us. Had it been moving slower, I could have counted the rivets on the huge airplane. As it passed over us, I waited for the crash that never came.

I looked over at Bill. He seemed quite undisturbed. Not a hair was out of place on his Brylcreem'd head.

"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 an air fleet from West Point and to a B-57 bomber wing. Several fighter squadrons and the huge Air Force C-130 Hercules cargo planes of the 105th Airlift Wing have also called Stewart home. These were the guys who had just come close to dropping in for supper on their way to the runway a few miles away.

When the Air Force was busy completing their missions, life in Bill's neighborhood could become spine-tingling. A C-130's missed approach would cause neighbors to stop what they were doing, when they heard the big engines explode into higher power to pull the plane back up in the air for the "go-around." Hearts raced, waiting for the transport plane to come back on its second landing attempt at a terrifying lower altitude. Pilots just couldn't get the leviathan any higher, while tilted over in the tight ten mile turning circle. The huge craft returned, flying in over the Hudson River's Beacon-Newburgh Bridge, scaring the hell out of drivers on their way home from work. Screaming in over Bill's back yard, the giant bird would sway any trees in the path of its final approach.

Worse, each month weekend warriors, whose day jobs ranged from selling insurance to filling cavities, guzzled beer all night and then flew unfamiliar jet trainers the next morning. Accidents and near misses happened all the time in Bill and Emily's vicinity. He could go 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," Bill 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 then the Officers' Club will be open and the pilots will be three deep at the bar."

Not entirely relieved, I asked Bill again 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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