SWEET PEGGY

and

THE 'TO FLY' STORY

by

Jack Lynch MBE, Wing Commander RAAF (Ret'd)

On Saturday 14 August 1979 I wrote a poem I called 'To Fly'. Writing it was an almost instantaneous and instinctive creative experience for me, catalysed by one specific twenty minute period during a two hour test flight in the prototype RF-111C, with the tail number A8 -126. I was the Detachment Commander of a team of about thirty Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) members, including a navigator and a back-up pilot, two engineers, plus all of the different tradesmen, logistics and administrative support personnel needed for our planned six month task. We were based at the General Dynamics (GD) aircraft factory, Carswell Air Force Base, Fort Worth, Texas, in the United States. The General Dynamics factory was situated on the opposite side of the runway to the United States Air Force (USAF) Carswell Air Force Base. Our task was to conduct a very thorough five month Flight Test Program on the prototype RF-111C, the reconnaissance version of the F-111C aircraft. We were flying on that particular weekend to catch up on some lost time due to minor hitches through the week.

I was the pilot, and filling the navigator/weapons systems operator right seat for our mission was a young General Dynamics Flight Test Engineer, John Korstian. General Dynamics had built the F-111 series of aircraft for the United States Air Force (USAF) and the Royal Australian Air Force – the only two air forces to operated that aircraft. Sadly the F/RF-111C aircraft have now (since 2010) been retired from service. Under contract to the RAAF, General Dynamics had in recent months modified F-111C tail number A3-126 with a very impressive array of cameras and other electronic, television and infra-red sensors to be the prototype RF-111C. A total of four aircraft were to be modified for the reconnaissance role. The remaining three aircraft to be modified and tested back in Australia, at RAAF Base Amberley in Queensland. It was a dream project for a new Squadron Leader, working with the best team of people imaginable.

After ninety minutes in a Military Operating Area (MOA) about 100 nautical miles northwest of Fort Worth, collecting test data with the various sensor systems, at different heights and speeds, over an array of specialised targets on the ground, we had completed our mission. We were cruising back to base at 15000ft / 450kts (knots) (840 km/hr) true airspeed (TAS). We had plenty of fuel left, and the sky was a dreamlike composition of puffy white clouds against a brilliant

blue background. It was just daring us to 'play' in it for a while. It was one of those dares that pilots instinctively know must be accepted, or a rare opportunity would be lost forever. About 2 – 3 eighths of cumulus cloud dotted the atmosphere around us, as far as we could see. Cloud bases were 2500 - 3000ft above ground level (AGL), with occasional tops billowing up to 15,000ft, capped by some immense brilliant white bulbous domes. All manner of interesting shapes filled the sky from bases to tops: short and long tunnels about two wingspans wide; gullies and canyons three to four wingspans wide, and a few hundred feet deep; holes just big enough to fly through; and steep slopes of mixed smooth and craggy mountainous shapes. The perfect sky in which to play in a fast jet. In short, it was easy convince ourselves that this sky had been created just for John Korstian and me, as reward for our diligence during the previous ninety minutes. After all we had more than satisfactorily completed our duties on behalf of Queen and President; it was a lazy summer Saturday; and we would now have the flight test program back on schedule. Reward accepted with relish and gusto!

I told John to secure all paperwork and cinch up his seat harness, in readiness for twenty minutes of aerobatics - just for us. I could see his smile of anticipation right through his oxygen mask. Although not a jet pilot, he held a civilian private pilot's licence, and really enjoyed doing aerobatics in a sprightly single piston-engined Bellanca Decathlon Super 180 sometimes at weekends. “Aerobatics? WOW Jaaack! The USAF don't do murch o’ thaat in their F-111s. Aa'm shure in for thaat burdy!”, came his great Texas drawl in response. For the duration of the Flight Test Program the stipulated operational wing loading limits of positive 4 'g' had been lifted to the original design operational limits of positive 6.5 'g'. Our configuration of no external stores on the wings, relatively low fuel (but certainly sufficient and safe) load, and the full operational 'g' loading available , would make our beautiful camouflaged bird very agile indeed - especially for a jet weighing in at just on 66,000lbs/30,000kg at the current fuel state. Although the right seat of the modified jet had no throttles, it still had a control column that would allow John to do some flying, with me managing the power. We got a clearance from Fort Worth Center (US spelling) for a block of airspace 15 nm square from 2500ft up to 20000ft. If we got too enthralled in our self-appointed morale boosting 'task’, our jet could storm across that block in just 90 seconds at 600kts (1120km/hr) or 10 nautical miles/ 19 kilometres per minute! Once given the clearance to operate in our requested block, Fort Worth Center would keep all other aircraft out of our block, while we 'explored some of the extremities of the new reconnaissance RF-111C's operational capabilities '!

We began by diving at about 30 degree nose low attitude, between two towering cumulus clouds (cu's), managing power to reach 600kts as we levelled out just under the cloud bases. What

followed was twenty minutes of what most pilots can only dream about. I began our frolics, and at various times gave John his turns at 'exploring the envelope'. Initially we zoomed up the steep white mountainside skimming about 5ft from the cloud surface, in afterburner with a rate of climb of 35000ft/minute. I used combinations of throttles and the speed brake to control our speed. Breaking the sound barrier would not be good for international relations! About six thousand feet from the 15000ft dome, at 450kts and slowing, we rolled '126' on its back until we arrived (very quickly) at our peak, heads 5ft from the cloudy dome, upsidedown, pulling 3 'g' at 300kts (560km/hr), arcing over the round mountain top, accelerating rapidly down the profile of other side as we rolled 180 degrees to the upright. Sometimes we just floated over the cloud tops at zero 'g'. We sped through the tunnels, canyons and valleys. WOW! Sometimes upright; sometimes upside-down; sometimes slicing through cloud canyons or holes at 90 degrees of bank – but never straight and level! Our airspeed varied from 600kts after diving to the bases of the cloud - 660kts (1230km/hr) would have put us supersonic (with broken windows on the ranch houses, and frightened people and animals below), to a lazy 250-300kts (465-560km/hr) as we lazily rolled over the tops at bank angles from 30 degrees to upside-down. At high speeds we did some extremely 'low flying' with only our heads and the top surfaces of the fuselage above the surface of cloud. We did 6.5 'g' / 360 degree tight turns around columns of cloud, and if we had had an open cockpit we could have had run gloved fingers across the surface of the 'white rocks'. However, our hair and silk scarves might well have been slightly tousled by such a high speed slipstream. Two ‘little boys’ were certainly having fun in their amazing fire breathing toy!

John had thoroughly enjoyed his fair share of the 'pole time', and apart from voice communication during safe control handover/takeover procedures, barely a word was exchanged between us. Boyish excitement and sheer joy have their own way of transmitting themselves between individuals in such circumstances. In twenty minutes that seemed to pass in less than half that time, we had performed every imaginable manoeuvre within the allowable flight envelope of an RF-111C. We had used almost all of the airspace allocated by Fort Worth Center. The air traffic controllers watching our radar blip and accompanying annotations of heading, altitude and airspeed parameter changes on their screens, must have known what we were up to, because of the remarks made when I requested our clearance back to base:

> “Fort Worth Center, Aussie 126, operations complete, request descent direct Carswell, for visual approach via initial”.
>
> The voice from Fort Worth Center responded: “Aussie 126 Fort Worth Center, cleared as requested, track direct Carswell, descend to 3000, QNH 1020, make visual approach,

runway 36. Shure hope you gaahs had furn up there!"

I replied: "Aussie 126, descending to 3000, direct Carswell, QNH 1020, visual approach runway 36, and yes we did thanks".

Our return to base was uneventful, and we did a visual approach called an 'initial and pitch'. That meant running in at 1000ft above ground level, into wind for the duty runway, offset slightly to the right at 500kts indicated airspeed. At one third distance along the runway we simultaneously pulled the throttles back to idle power, rolled to 70-80 degrees of bank, extended our speedbrake (which in the case of the F-111 is the large undercarraige door), and pulled to about 5.5 'g', varying bank angle to maintain height through 180 degrees of turn to the downwind leg; the drag causing the airspeed to rapidly decrease. Soon after rolling wings level, in just a few seconds the speed had decreased from 500kts to under 250kts so the undercarraige could be extended for a normal landing. The high speed 'initial and pitch' served as a good morale boost for our RAAF team observing from the ground, whose admirable professional skills and labours kept us flying. The efforts that they all put into the RF-111C Project well deserved an opportunity to see, and hear, 'their baby do its thing'. During normal weekday operations, some of the older General Dynamics staff who had worked on various aspects of F-111 design, development and production some years prior; also were always keen to know when we would be returning to base, so they too could see *their* 'baby doing its thing'. I hasten to add that we did no manoeuvres that were dangerous or illegal – just fun!

After landing, we taxied to our parking spot and handed the jet back to our maintenance crew. On that occasion everything was serviceable. Back at our office complex we gathered with our team of interested parties; including engineers, photographic and interpretation officers from the RAAF and General Dynamics, for a detailed debriefing and study of images captured by our array of optical and electronic sensors, to ensure compliance with the RAAF's specifications. The flight had been very successful.

When the mission debrief was completed, John Korstian and I sat over a coffee and debriefed the important extra 'task' that we had jointly and joyfully performed. Few words could explain the uniqueness of timing, conditions and opportunity that we had just exploited – unashamedly totally for our own benefit. Head shaking and nodding, plus smiling and mutual slaps on the back were really the most effective tools of communication that we could muster before we went our separate ways home.

I went back to my motel which was very close to the airfield. I grabbed a can of 'XXXX'

beer (we took 72 cases to the US with us on a RAAF C-130 support aircraft, at the beginning of the project!), and spread out on the bed, still wearing my sweaty flying suit and thick white woollen RAAF-issued 'socks-flying'. After two cans of XXXX (that is the actual name of Queensland's primary beer – some say because Queenslanders cannot spell 'beer') I was in a totally relaxed state. My brain was idling in the Alpha wavelength region; just basking in the mental replay of that unique twenty- minute period in my life. Very soon poetic inspiration took command. I literally bounded up from the prone position, and grabbed an A4 notepad and a sharp 2B pencil. As if possessed by some sort of poetic spirit I began to print just ten short lines of neat words. They flowed like tepid honey from the tip of my 2B pencil. The longest line had nine words; the shortest had one word. Yet they all made total sense. They captured what John Korstian and I had just shared. The poem 'To Fly' was thus born. After completing the last line, I read the whole poem out aloud to myself – slowly and with feeling. Not a single word needed changing. Although for over more than three decades I have mentally relived that experience countless times, from the moment that I laid that 2B pencil down to now, still not a single word needs to be changed to capture that occasion. The great American test pilot Chuck Yeager was once asked by an interviewer if in retirement he missed flying. His was response was something like “Hell no! Ah still have every significant mission vividly ready for mental recall as I sit on my porch!” I can relate to that sentiment exactly.

The fifty nine words from those few inspired minutes in my Fort Worth motel room, were my perfect personal expression of what had been possessing my soul since I first rolled RF-111C A8-126 on its back to barrel down the slope of a mountain of white cloud, in the Texas summer sky, on that most memorable of all of the Saturday mornings in my life as a pilot – 14 August 1979.

Now, on the next page is the poem, to be read s-l-o-w-l-y and with vivid imagination and feeling.

TO FLY

To soar and roam

To float and drift

To race

Upside down

Through a cumulus rift

To hug the profile of a mountain of white

A dazzling sculpture in shape and light

Climbing

Diving

Savouring life

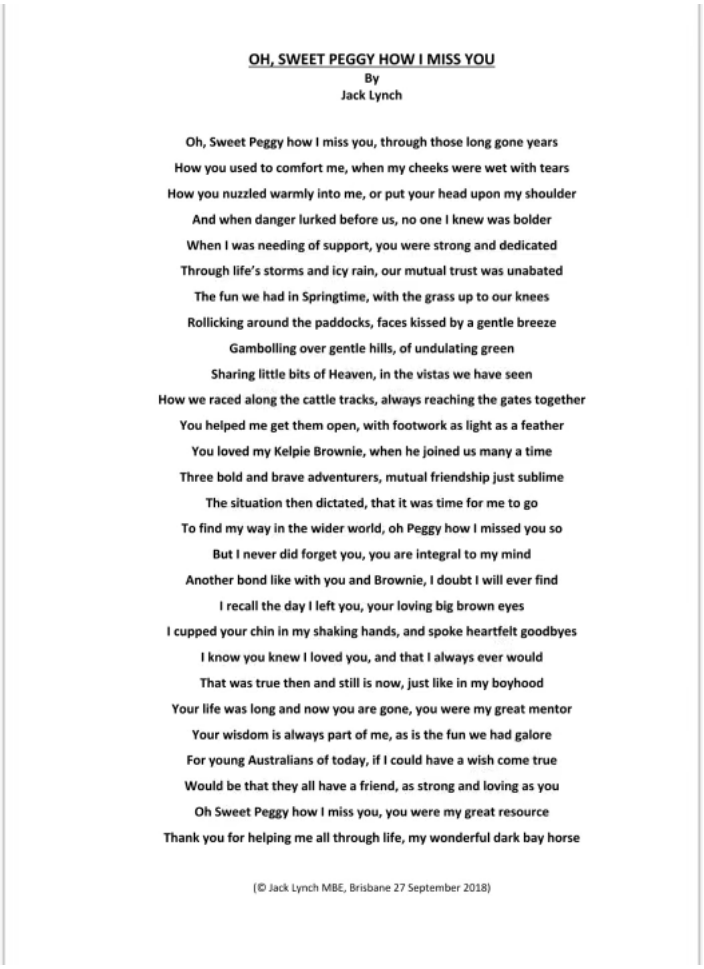
Serenely thriving

On the priceless vision of a cloud-strewn sky

To be like the eagle

To fly

To fly



OH, SWEET PEGGY HOW I MISS YOU

By
Jack Lynch

Oh, Sweet Peggy how I miss you, through those long gone years
How you used to comfort me, when my cheeks were wet with tears
How you nuzzled warmly into me, or put your head upon my shoulder
And when danger lurked before us, no one I knew was bolder
When I was needing of support, you were strong and dedicated
Through life's storms and icy rain, our mutual trust was unabated
The fun we had in Springtime, with the grass up to our knees
Rollicking around the paddocks, faces kissed by a gentle breeze
Gambolling over gentle hills, of undulating green
Sharing little bits of Heaven, in the vistas we have seen
How we raced along the cattle tracks, always reaching the gates together
You helped me get them open, with footwork as light as a feather
You loved my Kelpie Brownie, when he joined us many a time
Three bold and brave adventurers, mutual friendship just sublime
The situation then dictated, that it was time for me to go
To find my way in the wider world, oh Peggy how I missed you so
But I never did forget you, you are integral to my mind
Another bond like with you and Brownie, I doubt I will ever find
I recall the day I left you, your loving big brown eyes
I cupped your chin in my shaking hands, and spoke heartfelt goodbyes
I know you knew I loved you, and that I always ever would
That was true then and still is now, just like in my boyhood
Your life was long and now you are gone, you were my great mentor
Your wisdom is always part of me, as is the fun we had galore
For young Australians of today, if I could have a wish come true
Would be that they all have a friend, as strong and loving as you
Oh Sweet Peggy how I miss you, you were my great resource
Thank you for helping me all through life, my wonderful dark bay horse

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