

## The All American Boy

His teeth I remember most about him. An absolutely perfect set kept totally visible through the mobile shutter of a mouth that rarely closed as he chewed gum and talked, simultaneously. A tricky manoeuvre which demanded great facial mobility. He was in every way the epitome of what the movies, and early TV had taught me to think of as the "All American Boy". Six foot something, crew cut hair, big beaming smile, looked to be barely twenty. His mother must have been very proud of him!

I was helping him to refuel the Neptune P2V on the plateau above Wilkes from numerous 44 gallon drums of ATK we had hauled to the "airstrip" on the Athey waggon behind a D4 driven by Max Berrigan.

I think he was an aircraft mechanic. He and eight of his compatriots had just landed after a flight from Mirny, final stop McMurdo. Somehow almost all of the rest of his crew, and ours, had hopped into the weasels to go back to base for a party, leaving just a few of us "volunteers" to refuel.

I remember too, feeling more than a little miffed when one of the first things he said after our self-introductions was "That was one hell of a rough landing strip you guys have - nearly as bad as Mirny". Poor old Max had ploughed up and down with the D4 for hours knocking the tops of the Sastrugi and giving the "strip" as smooth a surface as he could. For there was not really a strip at Wilkes just a slightly flatter area of plateau defined by survey pegs.

But it was a very happy meeting - they being the first visitors we had seen all year, and this was November 7.

The dog team was a big hit of course. Nothing like animals to break the ice, if you will pardon the metaphor.

But back to the refueling.

As you might imagine, trying to fill the fuel tanks of, in those days, a large aircraft from drums with a single hand pump, could be well compared with one of those crude parallels about porcupines and hot butter. What was more galling for me as my arm began to seize, was the fairly brisk flow of fuel out of some drain hole aft of the bomb bay area in the fuselage where the huge auxillary tank had been mounted to give the aircraft its long range capability.

In answer to my questioning this curious exercise of pumping ATK out on to the snow via the aircraft, my new found comrade dismissed it as "pretty usual spillage". He should know. I had never even been close to a specialised aircraft like this before, let alone helped refuel it.

So eventually we were done and trundled back to the station to join the party. Lofty had excelled himself again in the pastry department - it was about the only department he did excel in. "Eat it or wear it" was his favourite riposte. And our visitors had brought with them some fresh meat and vegetables, so in today's vernacular, we "pigged out".

Next morning; some of us who had not blown ourselves away at the party, escorted the nine visitors back up to the aircraft, to see them off. My toothy mate told me about the JATO bottles they carried and would use to boost the take-off. These had some kind of solid fuel rocket propellant, were about the size of a hospital oxygen cylinder, and up to three could be clipped into special racks on each side of the fuselage to be fired electrically from the cockpit during the take-off run. I think they were supposed to burn for 20 seconds.

Great! As official photographer, I had charge of the 16mm camera on the base which had a magnificent 200mm lens. So I lugged a heavy tripod out to the strip and on advice from the pilot, gave myself a good vantage point to film the take-off run; especially the firing of the JATO's.

We said our farewells and I remember my new “mate” gave Osluck (sired by Oscar out of Muckluck - surprise, surprise) a big hug. Their smiles matched - except for the gaps in Osluck’s teeth.

The cockpit crew certainly had the better of the plane’s accommodation. The rest were plopped around in little cramped jump seats, mainly sharing its belly with the long range fuel tank.

The engines started with a whine and this ungainly looking bird waddled over the wind-blown snow waves like a pelican, wings outstretched, to the edge of the more or less flattened sastrugi called the Wilkes airstrip.

It was way before fancy zoom lenses and quick release fittings, so I had to commit to the long lens for the whole take-off sequence, and the JATO rockets just filled the viewfinder at the start of the roll. Everything was looking good.

The engine pitch rose to a scream making the propellers tear frantically into the still air, and a huge fluff of snow billowed out as the plane began its roll. Right on cue I saw the JATO rocket flames spit rearwards, seeming to paint the side of the ‘plane in fire.

Hey hang on! It wasn’t seeming at all. It **WAS** suddenly burning right onto the tail.

The plane was now well in the air - thrown there by the JATOs’ thrust.

The sharp-edged JATO flame had vanished, no longer flaring from the bottle, yet there was fire all over the rear of the aircraft.

It turned into a steep left bank, and I could hear some frantic garbled shouts over the nearby Weasel’s radio about fire, smoke, and not being able to see anything. I kept the camera rolling but a nearby rise in the plateau screened us from the remaining drama.

I am sure we all hoped in those few seconds that somehow the pilot had succeeded in **any** kind of safe return to the earth. But then the black geyser of smoke above our snowy screen signalled immediately that he had not.

The next few minutes will remain in my memory as one of those nightmare sequences. Imagine riding pillion on a D4 going flat out across sastrugi at about 10k per hour, trying desperately to cover perhaps a kilometer in case we could help. The weasel beat us of course, and we came over the brow of the rise to see through thick smoke, three shadowy figures staggering to the weasel, all with their hands over their faces.

In fact four had escaped. The other five could not be seen or heard, and the heat from the burning wreck prevented us getting closer than about 20 metres to the fuselage, which was largely intact.

The rest of the plane was scattered over a wide area.

Apart from severe burns to the exposed skin, those who got out were relatively lightly injured.

It was agreed that the five others must have perished and our priority lay with getting the injured back to base as quickly as possible. Max and I were asked to stay back and record the wreck site as well as we could, in case a blizzard wiped out vital evidence for any crash investigation. Locating the bodies of the others for later recovery was also part of the plan.

In forty minutes or so we had paced and photographed all we thought was relevant and now the centre of the burnt out metal bird was cool enough to approach closely. Knowing where most of the crew had been sitting, it was obvious where they should be, and led by the faint sweet sickly smell of badly burnt meat, we found a jumbled mass of almost unrecognizable bodies - all but one.

He was fixed in the remains of the exit doorway; his hands on what must have been the release levers. I knew who he had been.

My friend of less than a day.

The perfect teeth were still perfect. - but black; and clenched horribly tight.

I wondered what they would tell his mother.

Bill Burch  
Wilkes 1961.