

# *The Trailing Edge*

October 2023

## **Lee Erb, A Eulogy**

My father, Lee Erb (12 August 1929 – 13 February 2020) passed away in Texas while I was in California with his third grandchild and my wife was on a trip to Okinawa. It was not a convenient time for me, but then when is death ever at a convenient time? My wife got home from Okinawa and within a day or two I was on my way to Texas to get there two days before the memorial service. After leaving to come home, I would realize that by dying when he did, he gave me the last, greatest gift he could, for as soon as I got back home and back to work, my workplace was closing down for something we would eventually call “the pandemic”. If everything had happened one week later, chaos would have ensued and the funeral would likely have not happened, at least not for a year or two.

The funeral was held on 28 February 2020 at 1400 at the First United Methodist Church, Arlington TX, where he had been a member since 1953. The funeral was led by Reverend Ramiro Rodriguez, Associate Pastor. Music was provided by organist John Williams. This was a real treat for me, because John’s first job at First Church Arlington was to accompany the youth choir that I was a member of back in the ‘70s. He was very pleased to do it, because he remembered that Mom and Dad would frequently tell him how much they enjoyed his organ playing.

For the service, I was given the opportunity to speak if I wished. As someone who speaks in front of people for a living, it would seem silly to claim “stage fright”, not that such a thing was an issue. I also knew that if I passed up this opportunity, I would regret it later. As such, I sat at Dad’s desk and quickly scribbled out some notes in five to ten minutes. At the appropriate time, I delivered my speech and it seemed to be well received. While I intended it to be “short”, it went on longer than I had expected. In fact, I think it was longer than the pastor’s Meditation. To be fair, at most he had known Lee for maybe two to three years, and I don’t know how much Dad was able to attend church in those years. Thus, the pastor was working mostly from what we had told him.

I was happy with the way the presentation went. Not perfect, but good enough. Because I prefer to speak extemporaneously from notes and not from a full manuscript, there was no record of what was said. Therefore, people such as my wife, who were not able to attend, had no way to know what I said. Primarily for her, I decided to keep my notes and recreate the presentation in written text so that she could “hear” it. As presented here, this is a recreation from the same notes, so it won’t be exactly the same, but it will be close enough. In fact, it will be embellished a little bit as I don’t have to think at the speed of speech. As you can tell from the dates, this has been a low priority project. I was motivated to finally do this after attending the memorial service of a fellow church member with the memorial service for the mother of a good friend in the near future.

### **The Eulogy**

I am Russ Erb, second son of Lee Erb.

It seems appropriate today that I am speaking to you from notes written on 3 by 5 note cards. Lee always had a stack of 3 by 5 cards with him that he would use to record notes, thoughts, and ideas at a moment’s notice. In fact, I picked up these very cards from his desk, so these are actually his 3 by 5 note cards.

I credit Lee largely for making me who I am today.

Around the second grade, I showed an early interest in airplanes. As for model airplanes, all I knew was the balsa gliders and rubber powered models with the flat sheet balsa wings. As I had been reading some library books about airplanes, one Saturday in the back yard I asked him if there were any model airplanes that used actual airfoils. That day he took me to the Hobby Hub, a local hobby shop where my brother and I bought all of our model train supplies. I had never noticed that they had a large supply of model airplanes too. He bought me a Guillows Cessna 150 model kit, a kit of the balsa and tissue type like he used to build when he was a kid. He pulled out his old model building table and set it up in his room for me to use. He then proceeded to teach me how to build the model. When I found a book at the library about building models like this, he bought me my own copy of the book.

When I was about 5 or 6, we were out in the back yard when our neighbor from across the street stopped by to talk over the fence to invite Lee and my brother to come join the Boy Scout troop that he was starting. About four years later, Lee would become Scoutmaster of that troop, and would remain so for 25 years. This was clearly his calling, as his whole life would become centered around Scouting. He would remain active with the troop until it disbanded after 50 years. His proudest achievement was the wall of pictures in his office of over 30 boys who had reached Eagle Scout.

It was always assumed that I, too, would join up as soon as I was old enough. I studied the books so much that I was able to be promoted to Tenderfoot at the first meeting I could attend. The minimum time to reach Eagle Scout was two years, and I did it in about 2.5 years. A highlight of my scouting experience was the 1975 Canoe Trek. This was when Lee took me and six other boys to Charles L. Sommers Canoe Base in Ely, Minnesota. From there we spent 10 days paddling and portaging our canoes through the Boundary Waters Canoe Area and on up to Quetico National Park in Ontario Canada. We covered well over 50 miles, powered solely by arms and legs.

I stayed with Scouting until I moved away to college. Because our troop emphasized older boys teaching the younger boys, this was my first exposure to the art of teaching. I found I was pretty good at it and actually enjoyed it. I didn't realize at the time that this was the first introduction to what would become a significant part of my life's work.

Around the eighth grade, I had decided that I wanted to grow up to be a pilot, like an airline pilot or some other form of pilot. I asked Mom and Dad what I should do to become a pilot, and without hesitating they said that I should join the Air Force and let them train me to become a pilot. They went on that the best way to do that would be to go to the Air Force Academy. Thus, I started down that path to the Air Force. My experience in Scouting was very helpful during the application process. For some reason we conveniently skipped over that part that my imperfect vision disqualified me from attending Air Force pilot training.

Years later I would realize that there were other avenues to become a pilot, including schools such as Embry-Riddle that focus on exactly that. When I asked Dad why he didn't tell me about those, his answer was simply "Well, those were expensive!" Yes, he was smart enough to know if he could convince me to go to the Air Force Academy, then he would get out having to pay for my college. I can't really say I blame him.

About the only uniform item that Lee kept from his Air Force days was his flight jacket. It wasn't in very good shape, and it never came out of the closet. At some point in my teenage years, I noticed that the patch on it said "Air Force Flight Test Center." "Flight Test", huh? That sounded like a cool way to combine engineering with flying. While Lee had done flight test, he always said that his preference was to design aircraft. Designing aircraft sounded cool, but not nearly as cool as getting to fly them. Thus, he and I ended up on opposite ends of the development cycle. The idea of flight test stayed in the back of my mind, though I wasn't really sure how to get into it.

At the USAF Academy, I quickly signed up to be an Aeronautical Engineering major, just like Dad. On one weekend that first semester, the Aero Department sponsored a picnic for Aero majors and wannabee Aero majors. At that picnic, someone gave a presentation about the USAF Test Pilot School. A key takeaway was that the program wasn't just for pilots, but there was also a track for Flight Test Engineers. That sounded like a good way to get into flight test, so from that point on all of my career decisions were focused on getting in to Test Pilot School.

During my senior year at USAFA, I applied for and was selected for a National Science Foundation fellowship for graduate school. I knew that I wanted to go to Texas A&M because that was where I planned to go if I had not been selected for the USAF Academy. Lee used his connections in the Aero Department at Texas A&M to connect me with my graduate school advisor, who only four years prior had been the Commandant of the USAF Test Pilot School.

After graduating from graduate school in 1985, I started my flight test career. I would go to Test Pilot School in 1989. I would then teach at the USAF Academy for three years, and later started teaching at Test Pilot School in 1997. One of the things I would do while teaching at Test Pilot School would be to become a glider pilot and instructor. I would take Mom and Dad flying in the gliders whenever they would come out to California to visit.

While a student at Test Pilot School I was introduced to the Experimental Aircraft Association which I joined. Lee heard this and immediately joined after me. His membership number was only 164 more than mine.

In 1996, I was introduced to the Bearhawk airplane, which I was immediately interested in building. I asked Dad what he thought of the design, and he said it looked very good, except that I should probably get someone else to do my welding. I thought that odd, until I realized that he said that because he was never able to learn to weld with any proficiency, and thus assumed I wouldn't either. Of course, I just saw that as a challenge to prove him wrong.

At the time I was building, Lee was working on corrosion control for the F-22 landing gear. He was very adamant that I should take steps to prevent corrosion in my airplane, because he didn't want his grandchildren flying around in a corroding airplane. I followed his demands...er...requests, and I estimate that my empty weight is about 50 to 100 pounds higher because of it. On the other hand, twelve years or more later there is still no sign of any corrosion.

I made it a point to take him flying anytime he was near the airplane. In 2012, I flew him to the Planes of Fame Museum in Chino, CA. In 2014, I flew him to a museum in Ramona CA that had a flying example (undergoing maintenance) of an H-21 helicopter like the ones he tested as a young Flight Test Engineer at Edwards AFB. In 2013, I flew him from his home airport in Arlington TX to Lubbock TX to visit the Silent Wings Museum to see the cargo gliders from World War II. On the flight back, as I'm running through the usual checklists, Lee says to me over the intercom "I could never remember to do all that".

To my wife, Tuki, he was an example of the father she wanted but never had. Emmy was born in 2015. After the trip to California in 2014, Lee declared that he was done with travelling long distances. Thus, it was Tuki's idea to bring Emmy here to First United Methodist Church in Arlington to have her baptized so that Lee could participate in the ceremony. We did that just before Thanksgiving 2015. That was the only time Lee would get to see his third grandchild face to face.

At my Air Force retirement ceremony in 2003, I said to Dad that I finally felt like I had accomplished as much as he had. He laughed at me, saying that I had already passed him up many years ago.

#### **Aviation Accomplishments**

To read more about Lee Erb's aviation accomplishments, go to <http://eaa1000.org/2003nltr.pdf#page=4>

**- Russ Erb**