

Merle Jenkins



Merle Jenkins was born in Lake Crystal, MN on December 12, 1935, but grew up in Northern Arkansas, which is where he met Shirlene. They soon became sweethearts, and were married in June of 1958. He was in the Army Reserve from 1953 until 1958. After a short wedding trip he went on active duty. In the 1950's he had thoughts of building an airplane. Little does he know what the future held in store for him! His first two years was in engineering, working on ground vehicles. His first son was born in Germany while he was stationed there from November 1958 ~1960. He re-enlisted for another two years for Army Aviation and trained at Fort Rucker Aviation Center in Alabama to be an aircraft mechanic.

After that he moved to Fort Benning, GA. He worked for the First Aviation Company, maintaining Dehavilland Otters (DHC-3) (left photo). The Army then got the Caribou (DHC-4) (right photo), a twin engine cargo aircraft which two jeeps could be driven into it when the



tail is opened up. He served as Crew Chief and flew all over the USA. He escorted banana-shaped helicopters (upper photo) from North Carolina to California. When asked there they were going, the head honchos would reply "Can't tell you!" Two more sons were born at Fort Benning.



Merle made a flight with three Caribous from Fort Benning to Thailand by way of first going to Canada, then to Greenland, Iceland, Scotland, Germany, and to Italy where he got to stay a few days. The next leg of the trip was to Turkey, New Delhi, and Calcutta. They were to go over Burma, but were told at the last minute "You can't fly over Burma." So they ended up flying along the coastline to Thailand. When they arrived in Thailand, they gave them a big welcome and had a big party, which was especially heart-warming for the crew. One thing he found especially interesting was the Thais would proudly bring bowls of rice to the soldiers in a palm leaf as a special treat.

The Army Rangers were the primary soldier in Vietnam at that time. His tour was from

1962-1963.

While stationed in Korat, Thailand, he flew TDYS (Temporary Duties) to Vietnam. At that time 15,000 military personnel were there, yet America hadn't even mentioned there being a war going on then. After six months of TDYS in Korat, the company was transferred to Cape St. Jacques, Vietnam to continue TDYS.

He came back to the USA to Fort Rucker as a Crew Chief for the Pilot Transition course for the Caribou. At least four of the 'Boos flew every day. He also received an FAA Certified Airframe and Power Plant license. After getting plans, he started



building a Stits Flutterbug. A Major was using the same building and he was building a Pazmany PL-1. The Major said "He came in one day there was a pile of tubing, then he came back in a few days later there there was a fuselage!" The Major had been working on his



main spar for over a year. Merle and his family lived in Daleville, AL. His daughter was born at Fort Rucker, AL, in 1966. In early 1966 the Air Force says "What are you doing with fixed wing cargo planes?" So the Army went to rotary wing aircraft (helicopters) and the Air Force took over the Caribous in 1966. Merle requested to re-enlist for chopper school, but didn't get into that program because they said that he had a critical MOS. He decided to get out of active duty because of an impending second tour to Vietnam. While on vacation in Texas he applied for a civil service job, then returned to Fort Rucker and worked as a helicopter mechanic for a civilian contractor for six months when he received notice that there was a temporary position open in Corpus Christi at the Army Aviation Depot Center on the Naval Air Station. He took the job and worked on helicopters from Vietnam and helped rebuild whole copters.

In 1967 he received a call for a permanent position in Moore Field, TX, after Hurricane Beulah hit the area, where he worked for the US Department of Agriculture on the Screwworm Eradication Program; the little buggers would fly into any open wound on any animal, domestic animals as well. The female would lay up to 400 eggs on the wound and the larvae would feed on the animals, eating deeper into the body, which caused great pain, and soon the animal would die. They solved the problem by dropping irradiated male flies, building a barrier 150 miles into Mexico and the southern part of the US. The scientists reasoned that if it were possible to clinically sterilize and release huge numbers of male hominovorax as breeding time approached, fertile males might be out-competed and the majority of female flies would lay sterile eggs. Irradiating the males was the method used for sterilization. Merle worked as the Chief Mechanic for 18 C45s, 6 DC3s, 1 Caribou and DC2s, and Helio couriers while at Moore Field. Approximately fifteen years later the program had done its job of getting rid of the screwworm flies in the US, and the program was moved south, into Mexico.

In 1968 Merle and Shirlene bought some property on the west side of Highway 281, and grew citrus while still working at Moore Field. A bad freeze occurred in 1985 and 1987, so the citrus groves were gone in the area. Mr. Burch purchased the land bordering them on the north and built hangers and a runway. Burch was the postmaster in Mission and hired Shirlene for a temporary job for thirty days, and she worked there for twenty years as a rural delivery mailperson!

He worked for the Mexican Fruit Fly Eradication program for two years, was laid off, and hired on at McAllen Aviation as an A&P mechanic. He worked on American Airline airplanes, which was nice as he and Shirlene could fly to visit his family in Spokane, WA, by just paying the taxes, no air fare! He also worked for the Pan Am Flying Club while in the McAllen area, maintaining Cessna 150s, Cherokee 140s, and Comanche 260s. He finally learned to fly, and soon flew to Northern Arkansas to visit his siblings.

No more work was available so he went to work at McAllen Aviation for a few years. McAllen Aviation was then bought by AMR Combs and he worked for them, sometimes on American Airlines, if necessary. This lasted for a couple more years, and then he started working for himself on privately owned airplanes.



Their Dog "Bissie"



Burch's Perch