

16 July 2014

Our Plane Crash & Memorial Bench Dedication- 'George, Bill & Hugh's Excellent Adventure'

"Please God; don't let me die in this field all alone."

There are many threads to this story. The names are not pseudonyms. I tried to be as brief yet concise as possible.

As with most true stories many people played a role in each story's success. My story of survival is no exception. Many of you know the events about my plane crash, my rescue, recovery and my journey to this point in my life. It's documented in two of my books; my invitations to speak and the information at my web site.

No one's success, however small and measured, is accomplished alone. Like many others, I've had a plethora of people who've helped me along the way. Many are acknowledged in two of my books; others have come along to assist me to fulfill my purpose since they were published. Whenever names are mentioned, some are omitted; not purposely but, in my case, because there are so many names; far too many to mention here. To all who've played a role in my journey and have helped me physically, emotionally and spiritually to fulfill my purpose ---and I hope you know who you are---THANK YOU! God Bless you.

To provide the proper context of the details about "(My) Plane Crash and Memorial Bench Dedication" i.e. 'George, Bill and Hugh's Excellent Adventure,' names are mentioned because of their role in my second visit to the site of my plane crash. Without their commitment in time, talent, resources and their shared passion to help me achieve my quest, the Memorial Bench and Plaques would not have been realized---to wit: this story's about how the Crash Site Memorial Bench and Plaques inscribed with the names and ranks of those who perished and the name John Davieau became a reality. What follows is a brief story (though it may not seem that way) of how all that happened.

In June 2012, my two friends and "faithful companions" Bill Buchanan, "Cap'n Bill of Marines" and Hugh Tuck, "Sir Hugh of Atlas" called our search for the crash site, "George, Bill and Hugh's Excellent Adventure." It **WAS** an adventure and it **WAS** excellent!

A quick review: I first visited the crash site in May 1974. That trip was to find the man who found me on fire outside the plane and saved my life. All I had was a letter written by his wife (Pearl Davieau) in October 1970 to my parents in Pittsburgh, PA. She wrote how "My husband Johnny, found your son Captain Burk on fire, rolling on the ground outside the burning plane. Johnny threw the dirt on him to put out the fire, then came back to the ranch house and called Hamilton Air Force Base..."

John Davieau found me on fire a literally a minute or two after we crashed. He hadn't heard the crash; he was in a ravine about 100 yards from the site and smelled smoke from the fire. "What are the neighbors doing burning on a day like today" he thought. He turned the truck 90 degrees to the right to find the source of the smoke. As the vehicle lurched over the top of the ravine, he saw the tail of the plane. He drove quickly to the site, jumped-out of the truck and found me rolling on the ground on fire.

He scooped dirt and sand and put-out the fire. Had he not found me when he did, I would've burned to death outside of the plane.

For years, I wanted to find him and thank him for my life. From his wife's letter, I knew he managed the Mangle's Ranch, a 2,000 acre cattle ranch in Schellville, California. When I first met him that day in May 1974 and introduced myself, he didn't recognize me. When I said, "Mr. Davieau, the last time you saw me I was on fire." He paused for a few seconds, walked quickly towards me, embraced me and began to cry. "Oh my God," he said, "I never thought I'd see you alive again." His wife Pearl and 15 year-old daughter Laurie responded the same way. He told me, "God sent me to find you." I spent three wonderful days with them; John and I visited the crash site in the same pickup truck he drove the day he found me. "Pop" had a fifth of Jim Beam Whiskey he saved for special occasions. Over the years, he often said "Boy we did some damage to that one." Yes we did! Over the next 31 years, I remained in touch with them and saw them about 12 times—in California 23 December 1990, at their 50th Wedding Anniversary at the Catholic Church in Sonoma, California (they didn't know I'd attend, I my wife Olga and I lived in Overland Park, Kansas) and several times in Texas and Arizona. I also sent them a Christmas gift every year.

On 28 December, 2005, "Pop" Davieau passed a week shy of his 90th Birthday. "Mom" Davieau passed July 2007. I love them both and not a day goes by that I don't think of them and so many others who played a role in my rescue, recovery and journey. What a list! I start with God work down from there.

Now fast forward to June, 2012. My second invitation to speak at the weekly Wednesday morning breakfast meeting of the Golden Gate Breakfast Club (GGBC), at the Marine Memorial Club (MMC), downtown San Francisco, California. My first invitation was August 2009. Both invitations extended to me by Bill Buchanan. Bill's a former Captain, U S Marines Corps and Vietnam Veteran. My first invitation was August 2009. Pete Kramer, a friend, former U S Marine and Vietnam Veteran and an airport firefighter in Sun Valley, Idaho recommended me to Bill Buchanan. Bill and Pete are related by marriage. I've known Pete Kramer for 20 years.

A few weeks before my second invitation in June 2012, I mentioned to Bill Buchanan if he'd like to help me find the crash site. I didn't have to ask twice. All I had was the address, 27665 Arnold Drive, in Sonoma California that was in the official Air Force Accident Report. He told Hugh Tuck, a GGBC member, of our plan and Hugh asked to go along. I gratefully accepted.

After my June 2012 address, I met Hugh Tuck outside the MMC at 0730. We headed across the Golden Gate Bridge towards Mill Valley, California, to meet Bill and change to his vehicle, a four-wheel drive pick-up truck. We drove north on Highway 101, took Route 37 east towards Vallejo. At the Sonoma Raceway, we turned left and headed north towards Sonoma on Arnold Drive. About a mile north of the raceway, I saw a street number and gate on the left and yelled, "Stop!" Bill backed his truck up and turned into a short driveway. In front of us was a large white sign with black letters. The address on the large stone pillar on the right side of the gate matched the address on the USAF Accident Report. The gate was locked. The sign on the gate indicated it was private land and had the owner's name and a phone number. Bill called the number, introduced himself to the person who answered and the reason

for his call. He was put on hold. After a minute or two, a woman answered and Bill asked her if she had any knowledge of the plane crash on the Mangle's Ranch in 1970. She said she remembered it well and that she and her brother used to ride their horses into that area when they were younger. Bill asked her to hold on, that "Captain Burk was next to me and he's about to lose it." The conversation was quite emotional for me! The woman was Mara Roche and her family owned the property where the plane crashed. She told me where she was located in Sonoma and we arranged for us to meet at noon.

What transpired over the next few hours was amazing. As agreed, we met Mara a few hours later at the family's Wine Tasting Room in downtown Sonoma, California. She shared her remembrance of the crash and other events that I didn't know. Mara said her family sold 1700 acres of their property to the Sonoma Land Trust. Some of the land they sold to the Trust is where the plane crashed. We visited for two hours. I had to leave to catch a late afternoon flight back to Phoenix. Before we left, Mara gave me the names and phone numbers of two staff members at the Sonoma Land Trust: Bob Neale and Wendy Eliot and the adjacent land owners Nancy and Tony Lilly. I told Mara I'd like to return to the crash site once again and that my first visit with John Davieau in May 1974 was an emotional blur, surreal and hard to grasp for me. A second visit would be less emotional and probably be my last visit.

At 1400, we left Sonoma enroute to San Francisco International Airport. As Bill drove us down Arnold Drive towards San Francisco, I was on my cell phone, calling the numbers and names Mara gave me, introducing myself and leaving messages with two people at the Land Trust—Bob Neale and Wendy Eliot and Nancy and Tony Lilly. I didn't know them and they didn't know me.

Over the next six weeks, I sent and replied to numerous emails and calls to Bob Neale and Wendy Eliot, Bill Buchannan, Hugh Tuck, Mara Roche and the Lilly's. Mara told me to access the crash site I'd have to gain access via their property and the Lilly's property. When I asked for the Lilly's help, Nancy Lilly graciously agreed to allow me access to the crash site from their property, as well. Nancy told me she was a college student in southern California and remembered the crash and what her parents told her. She knew there was a survivor but, like many people, didn't know what happened to him.

Through the calls and emails over that six week period, I coordinated a date and time most convenient for everyone to meet at the Roche's Gate on Arnold Drive and then drive to the crash site. That day was Wednesday, 12 August 2012. Bill, Hugh and I would arrive at 0900. Bob Neale, Wendy Eliot and a few others would arrive at 1000. I asked for a little more time so I could walk around the site and gather my thoughts.

On Tuesday, 11 August 2012, I flew to San Francisco. Hugh Tuck met me at the airport. I spent the night at the MMC. Early the next day, I met Hugh curbside at 0730 and we headed for Mill Valley to meet Bill Buchannan and to change vehicles. At 0900, we met Mara Roche and her brother at the entrance to their property. A minute or two later, Nancy and Tony Lilly arrived along with Mr. and Mrs. Rich Kiser, long-time friends of John and Pearl Davieau. I'd never met them before. After brief introductions and my thanks for their courtesy and help, three four-wheel drive trucks headed-out to the crash site. I was nervous and anxious for what I'd see and remember.

At 0920, we arrived at the crash site through a gate on the Lilly property. About one-half of the crash sites located on their property, identified by a four-foot high fence and a large grove of tall Eucalyptus Trees. In a large, open pasture, I saw the area where we crashed; the 15 foot burned-out stump of what used to be a 30-40' tall Eucalyptus Tree and the grove of Eucalyptus Trees that rimmed the crash the site; all on the Lilly's property. I climbed-out of Bill's truck and walked the approximately 30 yards to the crash location. It all came back to me! My recall was more real than I expected. Thought I buried my memories of that day long ago. Guess the box, ribbon and bow I 'buried' is closer to my emotional surface than I imagined. Right next to the fence line, the Lilly's had their Ranch Foreman, Glen Mohring place a large, round table with a tablecloth, six chairs, large jug of cold water, cups and a large basket of grapes and bagels. Wasn't expected, greatly appreciated! It was a hot day! Hospitality's a lot like Quality—"You know it when you see it."

I walked the area and reminisced. I looked at the area above the fence line where I opened my eyes literally minutes after the crash, after John Davieau found me rolling on the ground near the plane on fire. The two small trees, approximately 40 yards away, now about 30' tall, where stumbled to and laid under in the waist high prairie grass; where I curled-up, burned, broken and prayed to God to please not let me die like this in this field all alone. Must have been a lot of dust in the air!

At 10 o'clock, Bob Neale and Wendy Eliot arrived; a short time later, Tom Walsh from the Novato Patch online newsletter and Matt Cerkel, a Marin County, California Park Ranger arrived, as well. Handshakes, hugs and thanks in copious amounts followed. I was AND remain eternally grateful and appreciative for everyone's time, energy and courtesies that permitted me to visit the crash site.

We stayed at the site for three hours with periodic water and food breaks. I walked all around the area. Before we left, I mentioned to no one in particular my idea...my hope..my Vision...for some type of a memorial at the site. Everyone thought it was a good idea. Bob Neale and Wendy Eliot offered to help and be my "boots on the ground."

From August 2012 and the next 14 months were busy. I shared my Vision with the family members and the people mentioned above. Emails supplemented my calls to Bob Neale and Wendy Eliot about my idea and their invaluable feedback. Ideas and specific examples for a memorial were exchanged. On 31 December 2013, The Sonoma Land Trust transferred responsibility to The Sonoma Parks Foundation. A few months later, that responsibility transferred to the Tolay Regional Park. That's the land where the Memorial Bench and Plaques reside.

A Memorial Bench built by the Sonoma Parks Foundation was selected and the cost was shared with the then seven surviving family members. All agreed the \$1500.00 would be divided evenly between those who expressed an interest to participate. I remained as the conduit between the family members and the Sonoma Land Trust, who in turn, communicated with the Sonoma Parks Foundation. The Parks Foundation would build and install the Memorial Bench. Throughout this entire process, the surviving family members in Oregon, California, Arizona, Texas, Colorado, the United Kingdom and New Zealand and the others mentioned above were kept in the loop. As roles and missions changed, new contacts at the Land Trust were added. In May 2013, Bob Neale told me that Kara Caselas would be my contact at

the Sonoma Land Trust. Her assistance and communications over the ensuing weeks was invaluable. In January 2014, Kara was assigned to another project and her responsibilities for the Memorial Bench transferred to Trevor George (great last name).

On 30 November 2013, I mailed a check for \$1500.00 to the Sonoma Parks Foundation for a Memorial Bench. The \$1500.00 included maintenance on the Memorial Bench for 15 years

In January 2014, another idea came to mind. What about a plaque to memorialize the men on the plane and the man who saved my life? List the names by rank as they appeared on the official USAF Accident Report. That idea was shared with the family members and our contacts at the Sonoma Land Trust.

It was then I asked Elaine Ramirez, who lives nearby, to be our contact with the Land Trust and Sonoma Parks Foundation. Her father was our Flight Engineer and Steward. It made sense. She lived nearby and she graciously agreed.

So...between January and April, close coordination continued between Elaine Ramirez, the family members, now at 12, Trevor George at the Sonoma Land Trust and Karen-Davis Brown at the Sonoma Regional Parks on the type and size of a plaques. Before she changed positions, Kara Caselas suggested that three plaques would be needed. She said the names listed on one plaque would make the plaque too large to fit on the Memorial Bench. Subsequently, cost for the three plaques and the names were finalized. Elaine coordinated this information with Trevor George and the family members and asked they send the money to her for payment. After the plaques were finished and attached to the Memorial Bench, the final step was to select a day and date to dedicate the Memorial Bench and Plaques. Trevor George, Sonoma Land Trust and Karen-Davis Brown, Sonoma Regional Parks, determined the best date for both organizations was Wednesday, 18 June 2014 at 1000. Elaine emailed the day, date and time to the family members. I emailed the information to my guests.

Karen-Davis Brown and Trevor George were most helpful to Elaine Ramirez in selection of the site for the Memorial Bench and coordinated the transportation and installation of the Memorial Bench. Sonoma County Parks Ranger Brandon Bredo and Sonoma County Parks Maintenance worker Bill Broaders dug the footings and installed the Memorial Bench. They also cut a path through the tall grass for easier access to the site. Brando Bredo arranged for vans to transport family and invited guests from a pre-determined assembly point to the crash site.

In addition to the coordination of the date and time of the dedication with family members, Elaine Ramirez identified a local hotel convenient to the site, arranged a meet-and-greet the night before at a local Pub; she included directions to Petaluma from the San Francisco Bay Area and the surrounding area and a map of the Tolay Regional Park.

There was one item that was omitted. I asked Elaine and Trevor George via email, "Okay, we arrive at the crash site, then what?" Trevor told us the Land Trust hadn't planned a dedication. Trevor called me and we shared our ideas. We both agreed that some type of a dedication was appropriate. So...with Trevor's input, I wrote a draft Dedication Program, emailed it to the family members and our invited guests. Everyone agreed it was a good idea.

Early May 2014, I had another thought and shared it with Elaine Ramirez. I expressed my concern about the care and maintenance of the Memorial Bench after the first 15 years. How would it be maintained and kept in pristine condition so future family members and others could visit? I suggested a trust fund be established at a local bank and donations earmarked for future maintenance of the Memorial Bench and the Plaques. Three weeks later, Elaine, in concert with the Sonoma County Regional Parks Foundation, created the Tolay Bench Maintenance Fund. The Fund will be administered by the Sonoma County Regional Parks Foundation in Santa Rosa, CA.

On Wednesday 18 June 2014 at 1000 PST, family members who represented 10 of the 14 men on the plane and the spouse of the sole survivor, to include a family member from New Zealand one from the United Kingdom and invited guests, approximately 50 in all, gathered at the Memorial Bench. The Colors were presented by the Travis AFB, CA Honor Guard. Unknown to but a few, Elaine's husband, Robert Ramirez, had contacted officials at Travis and coordinated their participation. The Honor Guard's participation added more solemnity, honor and patriotism to the dedication. After the Colors posted, Teresa Ferrer sang The National Anthem and the led us in The Pledge of Allegiance. We then paused for a moment of silent reflection or prayer.

I was privileged to lead the dedication as we honored and acknowledged each man lost that day, 44 years ago. I began the ceremony by reading the poem "Memories" by Louis Bailey. For the family members and me, I acknowledged and thanked the many people mentioned above whom, without their generosity in time and resources and their desire to help complete my vision for a memorial and the family's commitment to it, the Memorial Bench and Plaques would still be a dream. John Davieau was honored, too. The plaque's inscribed with, "...And John Davieau, the man who saved his life." The Memorial Dedication lasted about 30 minutes. Afterwards, family members and guests spent two hours at the crash site, to remember and reflect on their individual memories.

I pray the Memorial Bench and the Plaques will help the family members who lost their husband(s) fathers, sons, brothers and uncles to heal a bit more. I know there's never any closure. As the sole survivor of the plane crash, I hope the Memorial will be my legacy for those who survived and future generations.

To ALL who helped---"Thank you" doesn't capture the depth and breadth of my, and our, appreciation for your time, energy and resources. Now, you too can say, "I helped build this Memorial."

"Commitment is an act, not a word." Jean-Paul Sartre

"Memories" Louise Bailey

"I feel warmth around me
like your presence is so near,
And I close my eyes to visualize
your face when you were here,
I endure the times we spent together
and they are locked inside my heart,
For as long as I have those memories

we will never be apart,
Even though we cannot speak anymore
my voice is always there,
Because every night before I sleep
I have you in my prayer.”

Written and shared with respect and humility.

“Captain George” ☺ Burk, (Uncle George) USAF (Ret)

www.georgeburk.com

gburk@georgeburk.com

1-800-769-8568

480-212-6321 Mobile