

And God Laughs...

The Arthur Jones Autobiography

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“Kick the tires, and light the fires.”

Anon.

The Douglas DC 3 was supposed to be the first commercial airliner that was capable of being operated at a profit; introduced in the mid-1930s, this airplane, commonly called the Gooney Bird, still remains in service, nearly sixty years later. But while this airplane probably was responsible for the successful establishment of the airlines in this country, it could not do the same thing in South America; something else was needed, something larger, faster and capable of carrying a much heavier load. The solution was provided by the C46 Commando, or C 46; similar to but much larger than the DC 3, this was the airplane responsible for opening up the interior of South America.

After the war, many surplus military airplanes were sold to the public, and some quickly became so cheap that they were almost free for a while; you could buy a BT 13, a basic trainer, for \$75.00, in like new condition, the only problem being that you could not make any money with one. Most of the surplus C 47s, the military version of the DC 3, were snapped up by the airlines and modified for carrying passengers. But the most sought-after surplus planes were the C 46s, because you could make money with them.

The C 46 was designed for a very specific purpose, to carry cargo over the Hump, the aerial route from India into China, crossing the highest mountains in the world, the Himalayas; the so-called China Road was all but impossible to use, so hauling military supplies into China on the ground was not a practical solution, thus the development of the C 46. And the design features of this airplane made it ideal for use in South America as well, because of similar terrain; no other airplane then existing could have done what the C 46 did.

These airplanes had two enormous, supercharged engines, the best of the so-called ‘round engines’ ever made, the Pratt and Whitney R 2800s, engines that were both very powerful and reliable; and, after the war, you could buy them by the thousands for practically nothing. One company in Miami leased these engines to many of the Latin America airlines for \$3.50 an hour that they were used; and since aviation gasoline cost only about fifteen cents a gallon, that meant that your operating expenses for a C 46 were about \$37.00 an hour for the plane and \$10.00 an hour for the crew. These planes had a cruising speed of 200 miles an hour and most small airlines charged a dollar a mile, so generated \$200.00 income at a cost of less the \$50.00 for every hour flown, which was very profitable.

I made two round trips from Miami to South America during one twenty-four hour day, flying a total of twenty-two hours that day, which was unusual; but many other pilots averaged at least one round trip a day for several years. I knew a twenty-nine-year-old Brazilian pilot who then had 19,000 hours as pilot in command of heavy airplanes, most of it flying C 46s.

The biggest problem with the C 46s was the fact that demand exceeded supply, all of them that were offered for sale after the war were quickly snapped up; initially at very low prices, but once the potential value of such planes became widely known the prices started to rise; fourteen years after the war I paid \$190,000.00 for a highly modified and greatly improved model of the C 46 called a T Cat, or Transport Category. It was even more powerful than the original model, faster and capable of carrying heavier loads. These planes had been modified so much that a special license was required to fly them.

At the end of the war several C 46s were parked on Dum Dum airport in Calcutta, India, and abandoned; the government did not then believe that the cost of flying them back to this country would be justified. So they sat there in a terrible climate for ten years, rotting; people moved into them and lived there, doing terrible damage to the planes in the process, building fires on the floor of the cabin to cook their meals and shitting out of one of the broken windows. After ten years of this they were a mess.

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Nevertheless, once the price of a C 46 reached a certain level, even these junkers became attractive; so Everett Jones of Miami decided to buy them, fly them back to this country and do whatever was necessary to put them back into like new condition and then add them to his fleet of other C 46s. But as things turned out that was easier said than done.

When my closest friend in Miami, Ralph Demers, heard about the plans to bring those planes back to this country he saw a golden opportunity, or so he believed. These planes could carry 12,000 pounds of cargo, and at that time it cost \$2.00 per pound to ship live cargo from India to this country by air; so Ralph believed he could save \$24,000.00 in freight charges by bringing animals from India aboard each of these planes as they were ferried back. Which, if true, would enormously increase his profits from the sale of animals imported from India.

His biggest problem then being the fact that he did not have any money to buy the animals in India with; so he did a selling job on Everett Jones and talked him into putting up the money needed to buy the animals. Then off he went to Calcutta with the pilots and mechanics that were needed to repair the planes enough for the flight and then fly them back. And he had no difficulty finding enough animals to buy, could have filled up ten such planes; but knowing something less than nothing about Indian animals, he did not know 'what' to buy. Among other things he bought 700 cobras, only to find after he eventually got them to Miami that they were worthless; all of these cobras had been 'fixed,' their fangs had been removed so that the Indian snake charmers could handle them safely. And nobody would buy a cobra without fangs.

He also bought a bunch of very large bats, so-called Fruit Bats, little realizing that these were prohibited, could not be legally imported into this country; something he learned only after he had sold a lot of them in this country. Which sales almost got him tossed into Federal prison, and did cause him to have to refund all of the money paid to him for these bats, plus the cost of shipping them back to India.

He also bought a lot of other types of Indian wildlife, including a lot of birds; but they had so much trouble on the return flight, which led to long delays enroute, that everything on the plane except the cobras and bats died before he could get them back to Miami. So the first trip was a disaster; Ralph did not make a cent of profit and Everett Jones lost his investment.

But Ralph was very persuasive, managed to talk Jones into financing a second trip, which turned out even worse. On that trip Ralph bought only birds, but the airplane broke down in Amsterdam and since repairing it would take much too long for the birds to survive the delay, Ralph traded the birds for enormous poodles; believing that they would survive the trip and that he could sell them here as pets.

Well, they survived the trip alright, but then he found that he could not even give them away in this country; they were huge, mean as Hell, ate an enormous amount of food and were not wanted by anybody. In the end, simply to get rid of them, he gave them to a Seminole Indian who had an alligator farm in the Everglades and he fed the dogs to his alligators.

But his biggest problem was caused by the fact that he hired an Indian man to come with him to help care for the birds during the trip; in order to get that man into this country, Ralph had to guarantee that he would pay for his transportation back to India after a short time in this country. And Ralph was dead broke, did not have the money needed to ship the Indian back home. So he managed to get the Indian's visa extended several times, trying to give himself enough time to get the money for a return ticket to India.

In the meantime, the Indian was living in a monkey cage in the barracks building that Ralph used to hold his animals, barely surviving on a diet of over-ripe bananas that Ralph picked up in the alleys behind food stores where they had been discarded. And it did not appear that the situation was likely to get any better soon, and the immigration officials were getting very strident in their demands that the Indian be shipped home immediately.

So Ralph decided that he had only one way out of the situation, he would have to kill the Indian; so he invited the Indian to go with him on a hunting trip in the Everglades, planning to shoot him and then pass if off as an accident. And

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they eventually made two such trips, although Ralph never did kill the Indian; told me later that he simply could not bring himself to do it, that the Indian was so grateful for all of the attention Ralph was giving him for his entertainment that he found it impossible to shoot him.

Eventually Ralph did get enough money to send him back to India, and said that the Indian told him just before he departed that the things he appreciated most were the hunting trips in the Everglades.

Time after time, for a period of many years, Ralph would stumble into something that had the potential to make him very rich; would then work like a maniac until he had a new business up and running, but would then turn it over to somebody else and sit back while they stole him blind, never seeming to be aware of what was happening until it was far too late.

He repeated that exact pattern at least ten times during the years that I knew him; rich one day, starving the next, and never learning from the experience. Almost no exotic animals were imported into this country between 1939 and 1945, because of the war, so after the war there was an enormous demand for almost anything that you could import in the way of wildlife; and literally huge numbers of animals were available in South America, Africa, Singapore, India, Thailand and several other places, at very low prices. Tropical fish were also in great demand and hundreds of millions of these were sold in this country.

Ralph was in on the ground floor of both the animal and fish businesses and might have become a billionaire if he had simply continued to run a business after he got it established; but he always hired the wrong people. After selling all of his tropical snakes to me for several years, being clearly aware that I was reselling them at a big profit, Ralph decided to start competing with me, but did not know how to go about it; so he hired Brad Bradford to run that part of his business, invested a lot of money building cages to hold thousands of snakes, gave Brad any amount of money that he asked for to buy snakes with, and eventually had more snakes than anybody else in the world, nearly a hundred thousand snakes. Brad could, at least, find a lot of snakes to buy; but did not know how to sell them, so far as I know he never managed to sell a single snake.

When Ralph finally got around to asking Brad what the problem was, Brad told him . . . "I bought the wrong kind of snakes." Thus, in the end, Ralph was forced to sell all of these snakes to me and Ross Allen, for practically nothing.

He went through the same pattern of behavior time after time, with snakes, birds, fish and animals; took a situation with actually great potential and utterly fucked it up. Ralph did not appear to be stupid; quite the contrary, seemed to be far above average intelligence, spoke several languages fluently, had read practically everything and could discuss almost any subject with an obviously clear understanding of what he was talking about. But, as it is with most people, his pattern of behavior was apparently stamped into his genes and he could not change it.

When he was rich, which never lasted very long, Ralph would give you the shirt off of his back, and never accept anything in return, would appear to be insulted by an offer to pay him back; but when he was broke, which was his usual situation, he would steal your teeth. He helped me several times when I badly needed help, but he also stole from me when he was broke and had an opportunity to steal.

Finally, a few years before he died, he reached such a low point that he literally begged me to help him, and I did; he had lost his house, had been kicked out in the street, had lost his car, his business and was reduced to the point of starving. So he called me asking for help.

So I moved him and his wife up to Lake Helen, Florida, gave him an apartment to live in, free of rent, and paid him a salary that was more than adequate for all of their needs; and asked for nothing in return, did not want or need any help from him.

But that situation quickly led to serious problems, because his apartment was located very close to my office; so Ralph started calling the women who worked in my offices and asking them to visit him in the apartment, and they did. Then he started giving them advice about how to get along with me; told them that only he could provide them with such information because of his long association with me. Which was pure bullshit, since he never did learn how to get along with me.

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When that started I was forced to move him several miles away to another apartment, with no phone so that he could not call anybody working for me; and all of my employees were ordered to avoid him like the plague, with one exception. Ray Olive was not only permitted but was required to visit Ralph every day, because by that point Ralph was very sick and could not properly care for himself; his wife, Margaret, died shortly after they moved to Lake Helen. I did not visit him as often as I should have, because by then he was simply pitiful and it was very difficult for me to even try to talk to him. And, a year or so later, he died; having been supported up until the end by welfare provided by me.

For several years, Ralph had an agent who bought animals and reptiles for him in Barranquilla, Columbia, an Italian-born man named Adalgiso Canova, and Canova eventually ended up working for me at a time when I was still learning to speak Spanish; as a consequence, I still speak Spanish with an Italian accent that I picked up from Canova. In Latin America I was never recognized as an American after the first few years; most people assumed I was a Latino from some other country or perhaps an Italian. I could never pass for a Mexican in Mexico but could pass there as a Colombian, and vice versa. Which proved to be an advantage after the Latin Americans started losing their respect for Americans.

In Columbia, when somebody died, you had to buy a very poorly constructed casket from the church, for a few dollars; these coffins were painted in a very gaudy fashion, with brightly colored circles, red, green, blue, etc., which let people know that you were a cheap skate. But, for another \$2.50, you could get the church officials to paint the coffin black, which let people know that you had died rich.

But then they would not bury you; instead, stuck the coffin inside a crude vault until the body was reduced to bones, and then removed the bones and threw them away in order to clear the vault for its next occupant.

They started raising money from the peasants living in and near Barranquilla about seventy years ago in order, they said, to build a huge church, and spent very little of this on any such construction; fifty years after they started building this church it still looked exactly like it did a year after they started.

Kenny Earnest, the son of the owner of the California Alligator Farm, in Buena Park, California, spent a year with me in Columbia in 1957 and 1958, and we usually stayed in a small but nice hotel owned by an Italian. The room that we occupied shared a bathroom with an adjoining room, but since this hotel was seldom full we usually had a private bathroom.

The floor of the bathroom situated between the two rooms was about three feet above the level of the floors in the rooms, so you had to climb up a short stairway in order to enter the bathroom. For the only time in my life I grew a huge, bright red beard and a very heavy mustache; and one night while working on a film in our room, stripped to the waist and with my hair sticking up in all directions, I went into the bathroom. As it happened, the other room was occupied that night, and as I got up to the level of the bathroom floor I saw that the door leading to the other room was wide open.

There was no light in the bathroom so the only available light was a spillover from my room which was then behind me. When I leaned out into the other room in order to reach the door so that I could pull it shut, I saw a man on a narrow bed with his feet towards me, and just as I saw him he opened his eyes and saw me. I was very muscular, massively built for my height, and must have looked very intimidating to the man on the bed when he opened his eyes and saw me; saw me for only a couple of seconds, because I quickly closed the door.

The next morning the Italian owner of the hotel told me what that man said to him about the experience . . . "I had the most terrible nightmare of my life last night; I dreamed that I woke up in the middle of the night and saw the Devil standing over me."

Knowing exactly what had happened, the Italian told him . . . "Un Diablo, si; el Diablo, no." A Devil, yes; the Devil, no.

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Across the street from the hotel was a restaurant that sold sandwiches and ice cream, and it was a very nice restaurant situated in the middle of an expensive part of town with many beautiful homes, so most of the customers were relatively wealthy.

Kenny Earnest and I ate there frequently, and because of our appearance we always attracted a lot of unwanted attention from the other customers; as that man said, I looked like the Devil and Kenny looked far worse. Kenny is almost totally deaf and then wore a huge hearing aid, and also had one glass eye. His hair was long and usually uncombed and he had a long but scraggly beard and his clothes were usually filthy from working with animals, and he smelled like a long-dead goat. Both of us wore cartridge belts and pistols in plain sight; we had permits for these guns but most other people concealed their pistols. So we got noticed.

So I thought I saw an opportunity to create a 'miracle,' something that would send shock waves all over the country, and provide me with a bit of revenge for the unwanted attention we were attracting.

So I told Kenny . . . "Listen to me very carefully, and then do exactly what I tell you to do. I am a bit pissed off by all of these people staring at us and jabbering about us, so I want to give them something to talk about that will blow their minds. First, pull out your pistol and bang it down on the table, and that will instantly get their full attention. Second, look carefully around the room, making eye contact with everybody here. Third, reach up and remove your glass eye, and make damned sure that they all see it. Fourth, clean it with your handkerchief and then pretend to put it in your shirt pocket, but actually keep it concealed in your hand. Fifth, then spread the empty socket as wide open as possible and make sure they see that, and then close the socket with your fingers and then keep it closed afterwards. Sixth, then reach up to your good eye and pretend to remove a second glass eye; this time, of course, you cannot show them an empty socket, so instead close that good eye and keep both eyes closed while you clean the glass eye for the second time. Seventh, then pretend to return the glass eye to the socket of your good eye. Eighth, when it appears that the second glass eye is in place, open that good eye widely with your fingers and again make eye contact with everybody in the room. Ninth, then open the empty socket again and give them another look at that. Tenth, then pretend to remove the glass eye from your shirt pocket and let them actually see you as you insert it into the empty socket.

"At that point, if anybody is still here after that, all of them will be convinced that you have two glass eyes, but that you can see with them; its highly likely that the Pope himself will be here to investigate an obvious miracle by day after tomorrow."

But the bastard wouldn't do it; in spite of the fact that the opportunity to create a miracle seldom arises.

Some years earlier, in Colima, I did create a miracle. My room in the hotel there, on the second floor, was directly across a narrow street from a church, and they invariably started ringing the church bell at four every morning in order to call the faithful to worship, and continued to ring it for several hours, and this was disturbing my sleep. So on the next trip I took a very powerful pistol that used compressed gas instead of powder to drive the bullets, and thus was almost perfectly silent. So, at exactly midnight I fired one-shot to ring the church bell, and then repeated that at half-hour intervals throughout the night; by morning the street was packed solid with people for blocks around, people wanting to be witnesses to the Miracle Of the Bells. And I am sure that they still believe it.

On one of those trips to Colima, taking Herbert Prechtel and a man named Roy Hurst with me, I landed my airplane on a small island in the harbor about a mile off the shore of the Pacific Ocean near the city of Manzanilla; I wanted to film landings and takeoffs onto and from the island because it was a very scenic location. It was a Sunday afternoon and thousands of people watching from the beach could see what we were doing.

Most of the island was as flat as a pool table and appeared to be dry and solid, and a small mountain ran down one side of the island. I looked the spot over carefully from the air before landing and it appeared to be perfectly safe; but was not. In fact, the surface was only a few inches thick, dry sand barely covering very thin mud underneath it.

After we landed, with no mishap, I got the camera out of the plane and was mounting it onto a tripod when suddenly one of my feet broke through the thin crust of dust on top of the mud beneath it and I sunk down clear up to my knee in the soft mud.

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So I told Herbert and Roy to very cautiously get back in the plane, that we had to get to Hell out of there, if we could. But as soon as the plane started to move forward the nose wheel broke through the crust on the surface and then the two main wheels broke through as well; then we were sitting there sunk in the mud up to the level of the bottom of the wing. Scratch one airplane, or so I thought; it then appeared to be impossible to salvage the plane, because where we sunk into the mud was actually the firmest part of the island and as you moved towards the water surrounding the island the surface became progressively softer.

It also appeared to be impossible for us to get off of the island even if we abandoned the plane, and it appeared to be obvious that we would have to abandon it. But, about an hour later, still trying to figure out what to do, we saw four Indians approaching the island in a small boat. To reach our position, they had to get down flat and almost swim across the mud, but they eventually reached us.

With their help we were then able to lift the plane up out of the mud and move it to what appeared to be another dry spot; using gasoline from the fuel tanks in order to remove the mud from the propeller and the air intake to the engine, and tearing the pants that enclosed the wheels off with our hands and discarding them, we finally got the airplane cleaned up enough that I thought it might fly. We removed everything possible in order to decrease the plane's weight, drained out most of the remaining fuel for the same purpose, and I told Herbert and Roy that I would have to leave them on the island in order to lighten the plane as much as possible.

But when I attempted another takeoff the same thing happened, the nose wheel broke through first and was quickly followed by the main wheels.

So we lifted and moved the plane for a second time, and then I told Roy . . . "There is only one possibility for a successful takeoff, we must lighten the weight on the nose wheel; so I want you, Roy, to lay down across the top of the fuselage, immediately in front of the tail, and stay there until I can gain enough speed to keep the nose wheel in the air. After that, what you do is up to you; you can stay there and go along for the ride, or you can slide off to the side and fall back onto the surface."

And it worked, with Roy's weight on the tail keeping the nose wheel above the surface I was able to start building up speed without breaking through the surface again, slowly accelerated up to a speed of 50 miles an hour but then started to slow down as I reached a softer area and the main wheels started to sink into the surface; if the wheels broke through at that speed I was dead, and I knew it. So then I had to force myself to do one of the hardest things I ever did in my life; I had to lower the nose in order to reduce the drag and permit the airplane to gain speed again, but I did it. And the speed increased, and when the speed reached 55 miles an hour I yanked the flaps to the full down position and pulled the airplane into the air, and it flew.

Herbert told me later that all he could see was a cloud of dust moving towards the water until suddenly the plane climbed above the dust and flew away. I returned to Colima, landed on a small pasture outside of town since they still did not have an airport there, and walked to a nearby motel where we were staying. By that time they finally did have a fairly reasonable road into Colima; there was a very deep but narrow canyon near Colima that had always prevented them from building a road. Bridges were built across that canyon every year for nearly forty years, and usually stayed in place about a week; as soon as the rains started the bridges collapsed. But, finally, they managed to build a bridge that did not promptly collapse. Thus the motel, because for the first time in several centuries they were starting to get a few visitors. Before that bridge was built, very few people ever went in to or out of Colima, so it remained almost untouched for about four-hundred years, or longer. Even the Spanish spoken there was different from most of Mexico, and the style of living had remained almost unchanged from the time of Columbus.

The last time I visited Colima, and flew around the volcano in a small jet, about ten years ago, it was immediately apparent that the altitude of one of the two volcanoes that are situated just to the north of Colima had increased its height by at least two thousand feet, and was getting ready for another massive eruption because large quantities of smoke was coming out of several holes near its peak. So far have heard nothing about any such eruption but it is obvious that it is coming soon, and the next one may well destroy the city of Colima.

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Herbert and Roy returned to the beach with the Indians but did not manage to get ashore until well after dark, and then had to try to avoid the police by skulking through the alleys; they were utterly filthy by that point and had neither any identification or money with them, having left all such things in the airplane.

Thus they had to walk the better part of forty miles in order to get back to Colima, but did finally catch a ride on a truck for the last few miles. So they did not reach the motel until about noon the next day. And the first thing Herbert said was . . . “Man, that was great, we need to do things like that more often.”

I was never aware of just when Roy slid off of the tail, but he did at least stay on long enough to accomplish my purpose.