

And God Laughs...

The Arthur Jones Autobiography

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“Fuck it; who wants to live forever?”

George Bergin

George Bergin was a friend of Bill Hetrick's who lived in Fort Worth, Texas, before he started working for me in Picayune, Mississippi. In Texas he had a wife and children, a nice home, a car, and a fairly successful business; then one day he packed a few clothes into a single small suitcase and walked away from everything, did not even say goodbye to his family. He caught a bus to Mississippi and asked me for a job; said he wanted to work on big airplanes and learn to fly.

For nearly a year he lived in a room in a house that was being rented by one of the airplane mechanics who worked for me. He did not appear to have much money but said he was not interested in money, said that if he had a bed and something to eat he would be perfectly satisfied. But his stated attitude towards money was either a pose or later changed.

Since I was twelve years old my weight has varied up and down by more than sixty pounds, from 144 to 205 stripped, and briefly reached an extreme low of 118 pounds during the Caprivi crocodile trip as a result of repeated attacks of malaria; but when George came to Picayune I weighed about 180 and he weighed about the same. Bill Hetrick and I, with the help of several other men, were rebuilding and extensively modifying a B 25 medium bomber that I bought in Canada while using a second bomber for animal and fish hauling trips to Latin America.

Picayune, Mississippi, was about sixty miles northeast of New Orleans and provided me with the closest available airport that was big enough to handle my large airplanes; or perhaps I should say that it was apparently big enough, because the runway certainly was not strong enough to handle heavy airplanes. Over a period of about three years we ruined that runway, and by the end it looked like a relatively flat roller coaster; had sunk in several places as a result of the weight of my planes.

Picayune was a small and very conservative town in the Bible Belt and was largely controlled by one man, a man who made a large fortune in the Tung oil business and by building the shortest railroad in the world; cargo that is shipped by rail over two or more different railroads is not charged freight in proportion to the length of the railroads but by the order of use, the line that hauls the freight first gets most of the money. So the man who ruled Picayune built a railroad only about three miles long, then shipped his Tung oil on his own short line first; the result giving him very low freight costs that provided him with a virtual monopoly in the Tung oil business.

Two brothers, both very fat, were associated with the airport: Big Pic, who weighed about 500 pounds, owned a DC 3 airplane that he used occasionally and his brother Little Pic, who weighed about 300 pounds, was the airport manager. Little Pic was convinced that we were engaged in some sort of criminal activity, which we were not, and was constantly trying to find out the details of what we were doing. So George started feeding him all sorts of utterly phony hints, telling him a long list of lies that were at least interesting.

On one trip to Merida, Yucatan, George took a very young girl with a fantastic body to the airport and photographed her in the cockpit of my bomber, stark naked; he posed her as if she was flying the plane and took the pictures from a low angle that showed only sky as background, giving the impression that the airplane was in flight.

When we got back to Picayune Little Pic immediately started trying to find out what we had been up to on that latest trip; so George told him . . . “I'm going to quit this fucking job, I just can't stand it any more,”

When Little Pic asked him why, he said . . . “Because the fucking regulations in regard to aviation are getting ridiculous in Latin America; on this last trip they made us hire Mexican pilots, and some of them can't fly worth a shit. Look at this: this one didn't even have any clothes.” Then he handed Little Pic the picture of the naked girl in the cockpit; and Little Pic believed him.

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Most of the Yucatan peninsula is very low and relatively flat, with no streams on the surface; all of the rivers are underground and the only water that can be seen from the surface is in places where the limestone surface has collapsed down into an underground river, sinkholes that produce what they call sinotes, a Mayan word for wells. One of the best restaurants in Merida is in a cave located in the side of a sinote, and one night when we were eating there George ordered what he believed to be Lima bean soup, because the menu listed it as Sopa de Lima.

So I told him . . . “That does not mean Lima bean soup, George, it is Lime soup, hot, salty limeade, worse tasting than which I can think of nothing.” But he had to learn the hard way.

On one trip to Merida we took several animals that I had traded to the local zoo for several hundred flamingos; we took an African lion, several smaller exotic animals and one huge Aldabra tortoise that weighed about 300 pounds. I hauled that tortoise to the airport in the back seat of my car, having removed the seat cushions, and he shit about five gallons of very loose shit in the car; we never could get the resulting odor out of the car so eventually I traded it off.

On another trip to Merida I saw another B 25 that had crashed out in the jungle, had been repaired just enough to get it into the air again and was then flown to Merida; it was the damndest looking thing I ever saw. It made a belly landing in the jungle that badly bent the blades of the props, so they jacked it up using logs for levers, lowered the landing gear into position, hammered the blades into a relatively straight condition, and then chained a huge log above the wing to serve as an additional main spar for the wing, having assumed that the actual main spar was broken. The B 25 is a midwing airplane so the log was well above the top of the wing and thus did not destroy the wing's lift. But that log had to add several tons of weight and an enormous amount of drag and yet they managed to make the plane fly.

They also had been required to hack out a very rough strip through the jungle in order to take off again and must have spent at least a year getting that crashed airplane back into the air.

The Mexican government was planning to open a big museum in Mexico City and wanted to use a huge stone that was covered with very intricate Mayan carvings as the main artifact on exhibit; they located this stone, which they estimated had a weight of about 15,000 pounds, in an ancient ruin hidden deep in the jungles, in a place that could be reached only on foot. Then they spent more than two years dragging that stone artifact through the dense jungles, up and down mountains, across rivers, for a total distance of about 150 miles, trying to reach a landing strip large enough to accommodate a plane big enough to haul the heavy stone.

The closest strip to the ruins that was large enough for their purposes was across the border inside the country of Guatemala, and eventually they got there with the stone. But the pilot of a C 46 that he had flown more than 2,000 miles in order to get to the strip they planned to use wanted to look at the strip on the ground before trying to land the C 46 there; so they visited the strip in a small airplane, and the C46 pilot took one look at it and said thanks but no thanks. Thirty-odd years later that big stone artifact is probably still sitting there alongside that jungle strip.

The largest sinote in Yucatan is located among the giant ruins called Chichen Itza, east of Merida; this natural well is very deep and quite large and it was used by the Mayans as a place to sacrifice victims to their gods. They took young virgins, wrapped them in gold chains and then threw them into the sinote. About 1900, the American Consul in Merida bought the land around the ruins, dredged the sinote looking for gold and departed with a big smile on his face; but to this day nobody knows exactly what he found.

A doctor who lived right in the middle of Merida had an adult crocodile living in his house, had raised it there since it was a baby; this croc had free run of the house and appeared to be perfectly tame; young children played with it as if it was a pet dog, even put their hands inside its mouth; but, so far as I know, it never hurt anybody.

The main market in Merida had literally thousands of small stands selling damned near anything you could think of: a tremendous variety of vegetables and fruits, the meat from both domestic and wild animals, about a hundred different kinds of tropical birds, seafood of all kinds from shrimp to octopus, monkeys and other wild animals up to and including adult jaguars, both harmless and poisonous snakes and a long list of other things. If you could stand the smell, it was a very interesting place to visit.

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Years later I hauled thousands of American doctors to Yucatan in one of my big jets in order to conduct three-day medical seminars in cooperation with the medical school in Gainesville, Florida. The Mexican government cooperated with us in conducting these trips for doctors and all of the doctors enjoyed the trips very much. Leaving from the airport on my farm north of Ocala, we could reach Merida in about an hour and twenty minutes so it was not a long trip. But it was a short trip to another world; most of Yucatan has changed very little for at least 500 years.

On one trip to South America for tropical fish George and I got into a violent confrontation with the police in San Juan, Puerto Rico. I was using a letter of credit issued by the Esso Corporation for purchases of fuel, and bought about 900 gallons of aviation gas in Puerto Rico on an earlier trip and charged it to that letter of credit; but the guy who handled the letter of credit fucked it up; instead of submitting it to the Esso company for payment he sent the bill to my address in Slidell, and the postoffice sent it back with a note saying that no such person was known at that address. So the guy in Puerto Rico then jumped to the conclusion that the letter of credit was a forgery.

When we stopped there again, northbound with a load of live tropical fish, the fuel guy came roaring up to my plane and started accusing me of having cheated him; so I told him he could either call the police or go fuck himself, and he did call the police. I told the police what had happened and showed them the letter of credit, which was perfectly valid, but they insisted that we go to the police station; George sat down in a chair while I was talking with the cop who was in charge of the station, but when the cop tried to order me to sit down I told him to go fuck himself; he started to come out from behind his desk but when he did George stood back up so he changed his mind. George told me later . . . "Shit, I was not about to sit there and watch them try to beat you up; what the fuck, we all have to die sometime."

I then demanded to see a judge immediately and the police took us to the office of a judge in a police car. When the judge heard the whole story he told the fuel man . . . "If I were you, I would get these people back on that airplane and out of here as soon as possible; if the fish on that plane die as a result of you causing a delay, then I will hold you personally responsible, and it will probably take every cent that you can earn for the rest of your life to pay for that load of fish.: Sometimes even a judge is reasonable; not often, but sometimes.

On another trip through there we had a run in with a Customs agent. He demanded to know just what we were hauling, and accused us of hauling meat from Nicaragua. Several other people had been hauling fresh beef from Nicaragua in ex-military airplanes, and there had been several fatal crashes as a result of that business; so he told me that if I came in there with a load of meat he would make me take him down town and show him my meat market. I was not interested in the meat business and told him to get his ass off of my airplane or I would throw him off, and he left mouthing threats about what he would do on the next trip. When I landed there that day he could have charged me for two violations but did not notice either one: I had several passengers on board with no seats for them; and, secondly, I did not have a clock on my instrument panel and that was a requirement.

I took another Federal agent friend of mine on a later trip, disguised as a copilot and wearing a wire, so that we could trap this asshole if he tried to bother me again, but he never came back.

George made several trips with me to South America, one trip to Africa and other trips all over both Mexico and this country; he would try almost literally anything without hesitation, appeared to be afraid of nothing. I taught him to fly and he eventually got a private pilot's license so could then legally fly my smaller airplanes. But he never did learn how to navigate worth a shit, repeatedly got lost. On one trip to Colombia and Surinam, Dutch Guyana, we took two small airplanes and a total of seven people. We flew around Cuban airspace, landed in Jamaica for fuel and then went straight south across the ocean to Baranquilla, Colombia.

George was supposed to simply follow me, but he kept losing sight of my plane and I had to turn around several times in order to find him; so, finally, I had him fly in front of my plane, and then I told him which way to go in order to reach our destination.

On that trip, in addition to George, I had Eliza Steffee, a beautiful girl from Baton Rouge that played a part in the film, Bill Binnings, Herbert Prechtel and a man named Raymond Johnson who weighed 370 pounds at a height of five feet and seven inches.

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Raymond Johnson was very fat, but was also as strong as an ox and was afraid of nothing; he was the half-Mexican son of a retired Texas Ranger named Walter Johnson who was a legend in his own time; Raymond's father shot a Mexican sniper out of a tree across the Rio Grande south of a small border town. The sniper had been shooting people more or less at random and ranger Johnson was called in to put a stop to that. He killed the sniper with one shot at a range of more than a mile. But then Mexican rebels came across the border in great numbers, on horseback, and they chased Johnson a distance of more than two hundred miles. During that chase he killed several of the men following him and eventually got away from the others. He was one of the finest rifle shots I ever saw; could, and did, shoot flying buzzards out of the air with a .22 rifle, holding the gun upside down and with the butt of the stock against his forehead.

Some years before he died he lost a foot from an infected toe, then spent his last years in a bed next to a window that looked out on his yard; by the time he died the screen of that window had been shot to pieces, had hundreds of bullet holes in it. He shot at everything that moved outside that window.

The old ranger had a large family, and one of his daughters, Alice, was a beautiful girl that Leonard McGee went out with for a while in 1947; I saw her again about twenty years later and she was still beautiful. But all of the other children in the family were very fat. Raymond's older brother had fourteen children by one wife and adopted several other children; the table in their house looked like an Army chow hall, seated more than twenty people at each meal. Raymond had kids all over Mexico but never married.

On that trip to Surinam Raymond was badly mauled by an adult Jaguar and we were lucky enough to capture the whole thing on film, both in Cinemascope for a feature film and in a normal format for television. On the same trip George was mauled by a giant anteater that shoved a huge front claw about six inches into his thigh, and we got that on film also.

One day, while trying to film a small, tree-climbing anteater tearing open what we believed to be a nest of termites on a tree limb, it turned out to be a hornet's nest rather than a termite nest; the result being that all of us got stung badly. I had more than eighty stings on my face and chest and George got even more.

We captured a huge Harpy eagle by putting Bill Binnings down in a hole covered with brush and with a piece of raw meat on top of the brush as bait to attract the eagle; when the eagle landed on the brush above his hole, Bill was supposed to grab the bird's leg while wearing heavy gloves, and he did; but then the eagle shit all over him, literally gave him a shower with shit, which amused everybody except Bill.

We built a crude shower with walls made out of small logs, with a platform near the top of the walls, and with no covering above the top of the small enclosure; we planned to film Eliza taking a shower, nude, with the other girl, Penny, pouring water down on to Eliza from buckets. While this was being done two guys came along flying a helicopter that they had been using to dust crops with; the pilot stopped the helicopter just above the open top of the shower so they could see Eliza standing naked below them; Penny started shaking a fist at them and stamping one foot onto the platform she was standing on and we filmed all of that. It added an unplanned but amusing sequence to our film.

Very little that we filmed was planned, we just did the most outrageous things that came to mind and filmed the results, sometimes with spectacular results. We filmed a jaguar killing wild pigs, Javalinas, trying to kill a tapir and eventually being chased away by the tapir. Eliza captured a huge boa constrictor with her bare hands and we filmed some truly spectacular fights between two jaguarandis, the smallest but by far the most fierce type of Latin American jungle cat. We also filmed an ocelot fighting a boa constrictor on the limb of a tree and that was a very funny sequence; neither cat nor snake was injured but they went at it hot and heavy for a while and the funniest part of it was the expression on the cat's face.

George did one of the most dangerous things I ever saw: he climbed a thorn tree; such trees are covered with very long and sharp thorns that are so closely spaced on all of the limbs that it is nearly impossible to keep from being impaled by them. If he had ever slipped he would have been killed. I would not have attempted to climb that tree for a million dollars.

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Later, just before I moved to Africa, I paid George off and left him in Los Angeles; then did not see him again for nearly twenty years. He visited me briefly in the early 1980s, then dropped out of sight again. I have heard rumors to the effect that he was involved with Bill Hetrick in the drug smuggling business but never learned the details.

But, however he turned out later, he always did his best when he was working for me. When he started working for me he had two black eyes; had been involved in several fights with the same man. This other man caught him parked in a lover's lane fucking his girlfriend, yanked the car door open, jerked George out and beat the shit out of him. So George found out where the guy lived, went to his house and knocked on the door. When the guy opened the door, George told him . . . "Step out into the yard, I want to try that again with you." So the guy came out and whipped him again.

Finally, after about four trips to the guy's house, always with the same result, a different man answered the door and told George that he did not know where the previous owner of the house was, said he sold the house and left town. I guess he got tired of whipping George.