

Born to Soar: Bill Higdon

Based on interviews and excerpts from Bill's unpublished autobiography, *Thoughts and Memories*

by Barbara Henderson

Anyone who's cruised San Francisco Bay with the Islander 36 Association knows Bill Higdon as an affable fellow and an astute sailor. And there's some-thing in those twinkling, knowing eyes that suggests he's packed a lot of living into his 84 years.



Bill Higdon

The Higdon's are a hardy bunch--Bill's parents lived into their 90's, and three of his four siblings are alive. Bill was born with club feet but played varsity football in high school; he survived a number of physical injuries and three killer diseases (Empyema as a child, lung cancer in his early 50's and colon cancer at age 60). The lung infection was so serious he lost the ability to walk for a time. But Bill says he's had a "lucky life." He's had three wives (claims his string of crushes on girlfriends started in 2nd grade), and three children (many of you know Jim, his youngest).

Tabriz, (Persia) was Bill's birthplace December 20, 1919; his father worked for Near East Relief following WWI. After the family returned to the States, Bill was joined by three more brothers and a sister, and grew up in Kansas City, with a view of an amusement park over the rooftops, providing a spectacular display of electric lights at night. He attended 7 schools in his 8 primary years. Bill discussed mechanical and scientific matters with his grandfather, and, with brother Bob, designed various experiments, like the aerial tramway from the house to the garage roof; little brother Pud was usually the guinea pig, but always managed to survive.

Bill recalls that Halloween in his high school days was more trick than treat so he and friends would put neighbors' porch gliders on their roofs. And then there was the time he got "taken for a ride" to Texas, trying to recover a family watch stolen from him, and wound up in the pokey. But he always seemed to have a friend or relative in the right place to get things squared away.

When Bill was just in the third grade, his aunt took him out to a local air field, and Bill's interest in aviation was sparked. After graduating from high school, he took a summer job there, sweeping up, and befriended the two airfield mechanics; for a month he went up with a flight student on days off and lunch hours. He attended Kansas University, but funds for course materials got spent on a model T, and his fraternity rent went to buy a partnership in a plane. Painful recovery from foot surgery and eye injuries contributed to his dropping out, but he got his wish and went to Parks Air College in Kahokia, Illinois.

Bill never had to look for work. That's not to say he didn't talk his way into a few jobs, sometimes asserting qualifications that were a bit of a stretch, but he was adept at quickly learning



Bill in the spring of 1944, as a civilian contract flight instructor for the Army Air Corps, Mustang Field, El Reno, Oklahoma.

whatever was required. Bill worked as an airplane mechanic, acquired a pilot's license, became a flight instructor for the Army, was a crop duster, went into business with 3 others to help build the Scott's Valley Airport and establish a GI flight training school; piloted the company president of Aero Industries Technical Institute, worked for California Eastern Airlines as a Flight Crew Training Supervisor, then became a Systems Engineer (trouble shooter) for Garrett Air Research Manufacturing. He then joined Douglas Aircraft,

and was a Flight Test Engineer on the B-66 and the C133. After the second time he almost had to bail out, he got out of the test flight business.

From 1958-83 Bill worked for Lockheed, initially claiming expertise in "telemetry," then quickly read up on it in the company library. When the designer of that system came by, wanting to meet the "expert", Bill complimented him on the design and its stability and from then on, Bill could do no wrong, progressing in the company, ultimately to the Space Systems Division, retiring as Senior Staff Engineer at age 63. In one of his jobs at Lockheed he was being considered for, they proudly showed him how they punched computer programs for satellite systems into milar tapes. Bill took one look and said, why not do it with electronic signals on magnetized tape? They laughed, but two weeks later called him back to develop just such a system. In 1971 he worked on computer-simulated satellite systems--remote piloted vehicles (a/k/a "spy planes"). Son Jim recalls going to see the first satellite that had been brought back from space, that his father had worked on.

In June of 1965 Bill married current wife Marge in Kansas City. She was racing snipes so Bill "got on board." He claims the first thing he did was to run the boat into the dock. They moved to northern California in 1966 and sailed 11 foot Sunflowers, exploring the Delta. In 1978 Fred Harbaugh, a co-worker and I-36 owner, sold Bill a partnership in "Seaward", which Bill sailed quite a bit, and learned as he sailed, self-taught, as he'd done with most things in his life. When Harbaugh bought back his share in 1999, Bill acquired Blockbuster. He joined the Islander 36 Association in 1985 at the age of 66 and has been a cruising regular.

Bill admits he made a lot of mistakes in his life, but says he never really had to pay for them - things just always worked out for him - he's had a lucky life.