

## **“We’re Air Force Academy Cadets; We Ought to be Flying!”**

C/3c Frank Packer, Summer 1961

This is a story of 3 cadets who bucked the Academy Bureaucracy from 1961 to 1964 to learned to fly  
as told by Nick Lacey '64, assisted by Denny Montgomery '64.

Frank Packer, Jack Hudson and Nick Lacey, United States Air Force Academy cadets, Class of 1964, joined our vision, talent, determination, resourcefulness and meager resources to own, fly two light aircraft and build a third, classic open-cockpit bi-plane from parts, while cadets at the Academy. From the autumn of 1961 when we purchased our first light aircraft until graduation in June 1964, we fought the Academy bureaucracy with a Billy Mitchell-like tenacity and learned to fly, gaining significant flight experience. At the time, the Academy did not have the outstanding Airmanship Program that it has today, only an expensive, (from a cadet standpoint) under-equipped Aero Club. Successful outcomes from this cadet-led flight-training endeavor include three top graduates from Air Force Undergraduate Pilot Training (UPT) classes. Two subsequently became highly decorated combat pilots.

In the summer of 1961 after our third-class (sophomore) tour of US military installations in the Continental United States, Frank and I joined Frank’s parents at their vacation lodge along the Maine coast. Frank and I were classmates in 10<sup>th</sup> Cadet Squadron. On a cold, windy morning while we were lying on the beach and talking about cadet life, Frank said, “We’re Air Force Academy Cadets; we ought to be flying!” Frank’s comment seemed imminently sensible to me. Both Frank and I had no flight experience, except the few Air Force Academy orientation flights, a trip to the Inauguration of President Kennedy in 1961 and our recent summer travel on Air Force transportation aircraft. We fumbled with the thought for several days while in Maine. Several days later, over a couple of beers, a workable plan came together.

My home was Fountain, Colorado about 10 miles south of Colorado Springs. I knew several family-friends who flew from the Fountain Airport, a gravel strip about five miles south of Peterson Field, later renamed Peterson Air Force Base. These family friends helped us get started with advice and aviation contacts, particularly a flight instructor. Our plan was to set-up our flight operations at the Fountain Airport and find a suitable classmate with flight experience, hopefully with a private license. Today, the former Fountain Airport is covered with retail businesses and houses.

About two weeks into the fall semester after we returned for our third-class academic year in 1961, Frank came to me and said he met Jack Hudson, a classmate in 21<sup>st</sup> Cadet Squadron, a “Good Guy” who had 35 flying hours and his Private License. Over time, Jack brought tremendous insight and structure to our endeavor, in addition to his flight experience. When we had a day away from the Academy, we visited my family friends who flew from the Fountain Airport. We met Mr. Thomas M. Benedict a very experienced flight instructor who had extensive flight instructor time, including mountain-flying in light aircraft. He also had a certified FAA aircraft mechanic and examiner licenses. In the 1950s, he was airport manager in Aspen, Colorado. We purchased a subscription to “Trade-A-Plane,” a monthly aviation newspaper with used general aviation aircraft buy/sell advertisements. In Trade-A-Plane, we found that the University of Colorado Aero Club was selling an air-worthy Taylorcraft BC-12D for \$650, which was in our price range. The aircraft was at Columbine Airport, just south of Denver.

September 30, 1961, the Falcon football team played Kansas State in Denver, and the entire Cadet Wing was bussed to Denver the afternoon prior to the evening game. Frank and I, with a little too much of our classmate/squadron mate Kris Mineau’s rum and coke, decided that we would make our way to Columbine Airport on the Denver city buses. At the end of the bus line, we still were well short of the airport. Defeated, we returned to Kris’ hotel room in central Denver and later the football game.

Weeks later, after seeing the Taylorcraft (N36324) with Mr. Benedict, we pooled our money and purchased the aircraft. Mr. Benedict and Jack flew the aircraft to the Fountain Airport. On the flight, Mr. Benedict checked-out Jack. We were in business!



Taylorcraft BC-12D (N36324) circa Oct/Nov 1961 at the Fountain Airport. Jack Hudson (left seat) is receiving his aircraft qualification from civilian instructor Thomas M. Benedict (right seat).

The Taylorcraft BC-12D was a post WWII fabric covered aircraft with a 65 horse-power engine. To start the engine required pulling the prop through its rotation by hand. The aircraft was a tail dragger, that is, it had a small tail wheel with most of the aircraft weight, while on the ground, on the two front wheels. Two people could fly in the aircraft, side-by-side, with a very small area behind the seat to store items. A yoke controlled the ailerons and the elevator while foot pedals connected to the rudder. Two small pedals near the rudder pedals provided braking and some steering on the ground. The aircraft was a high-wing monoplane. For instrumentation, the aircraft had “a needle, ball and airspeed,” along with a whiskey compass, altimeter, tachometer, and oil pressure indicator. There was no radio. It carried 12 gallons of aviation gasoline giving it a range of about 300 miles. It cruised at about 90 mph and stalled at about 38 mph. It was a well-designed aircraft with no dangerous flight tendencies.

Of course, we did not keep our mouths shut regarding our aircraft and our very-own flight training program. We even purchased the USAF Air Defense Command orange flying suits from military surplus and worn these off and on base when we went to fly. Soon B/Gen W. T. Seawell, Commandant of Cadets, and others in our chain-of-command heard about our aircraft purchase. Gen Seawell is said to have commented, somewhat in disbelief, that the annual insurance cost for his civilian aircraft was more than our purchase price.

At first as to be expected, Jack did most of the flying. My first flight in the Taylorcraft was with Jack while he practiced his spin entry and recovery. Rather than giving me a gentle, straight and level, confidence-building orientation flight in the Taylorcraft, Jack launched from the runway, climbed to altitude, stalled the aircraft and entered a spin. The aircraft shuttered, the fabric covered fuselage fluttered like it was coming apart, the door close to me flexed like it was ready to give way, the nose of the aircraft abruptly dropped straight down and the ground started rotating. Actually, the ground wasn't rotating, we were. “Damn Jack, are we going to die, already!!!” That was my thought, but I was too petrified to get

the words out! Jack recovered the aircraft; we climbed back to altitude, and we did it again, and again, and again!! So much for a nice gentle, confidence-building orientation flight. Eventually when we got on the ground, I was shaking like a leaf. My only comment to Jack was, “Well, guess we are going to have to do that again tomorrow, so that I can get used to those spins.”

At the time, there was a regulation prohibiting cadets from owning a car at the Academy, but no restrictions regarding cadets owning an aircraft. That was about to change. Almost immediately, the 21<sup>st</sup> Cadet Squadron, Air Officer Commanding (AOC) started counselling Jack regarding the aircraft and our flying. AOCs were commissioned officers in-charge of cadet squadron and military training. In 10<sup>th</sup> Cadet Squadron, Frank’s and my squadron, the AOCs seemed to be rather “cool” about the issue. I never once was approached by our AOCs, and from my knowledge, neither was Frank, well,,, until his dramatic emergency landing near Washington, D.C., the summer of 1963 --more about that later. I think 10<sup>th</sup> Cadet Squadron AOCs, in their hearts, felt that as Air Force Academy cadets, “we ought to be flying.” However, the pressure began to build, particularly on Jack, to bring our Taylorcraft to Pine Valley, the gravel airstrip on the Academy grounds, now Davis Airfield, where our flying activities could be monitored and supervised. We, but mainly Jack, “slow-rolled” the bureaucracy for 18 months.

During the spring of 1962, we repainted the Taylorcraft white with orange sun-bursts on the upper and lower sides of the wings and elevator. The Taylorcraft really looked “classy.”

Because of my playing varsity basketball, and Frank being on the varsity gymnastic and varsity baseball teams, our check-out in the Taylorcraft didn’t start until the spring of 1962 and carried through the fall. My first flight with our instructor was in September 1962, and I soloed in October. Over the next three months, I flew solo as much as I possibly could and completed my cross-country check-out.

As Second Classmen (Juniors) during the fall of 1962, we started getting more weekend passes from the Academy. We would go to Fountain Airport and fly on Saturday afternoon, then stay overnight with my parents. There was plenty of room in their home. Two decades earlier, my folk’s 8 children lived in the house. Characteristically, my mother was a worrier. She generally tried to show support for our flying, being somewhat of a risk taker herself when she was much younger. Just after World War I, she had several flights around Colorado Springs with her brother-in-law, who was a former WWI Army Air Corp pilot, in his Jenny, JN-4. But one Sunday morning in 1962 as Frank, Jack and I were eating a breakfast of scramble eggs cooked by Frank, my mother came into the kitchen and offered her serious, best aviation advice. “Now boys, I am very concerned about the dangers of your flying, and I want you *to fly slow and low!*” Unaccustomed to my mother’s incessant worrying and trying to keep a straight face, both Frank and Jack about choked on their scrambled eggs.

About this same time, Jack came up with the idea that we should build a classic 1930s bi-plane from parts that we likely could acquire in Colorado, Nebraska, Kansas and other adjoining states. We could build the aircraft during our spare time at the Academy in the unused woodworking shop on the ground level at the east end of Vandenberg Hall. Jack acquired access and the keys to the shop, and we started collecting parts to assemble a WACO UPF-7 bi-plane. Over time, we purchased wing panels, an engine, a fuselage, wing struts, landing gear and other WACO parts. I can’t remember whose vehicle we borrowed and how we hauled the parts to the Academy, but we did.

The WACO UPF-7 is a 1930s training aircraft. It is bi-wing with a 220 hp Continental radial engine. A hand-crank is required to start the engine. The aircraft seats the pilot and one passenger in tandem in separate cockpits. The ailerons and elevator are controlled by a stick in each cockpit with the rudder controlled by foot pedals. It is a tail-dragger, cruises at about 117 mph, stalling at 48 mph, and its max speed is 128 mph, with a range about 350 miles. Its flight characteristics are true without dangerous flight characteristics.



WACO UPF-7 (N692JF) circa Sep/Oct 1963 at Fountain Airport. (Photo by Gary Dickinson '64)

On January 20, 1963, Frank and I were flying the Taylorcraft to look at some parts at an airport in Nebraska. That Sunday morning, we were over north-eastern Colorado about 3,000 feet above ground level when we noticed that we were well behind our predicted flight time. We were flying parallel to a highway and saw that cars on the highway were traveling faster than we were. The headwinds were much, much stronger than we had planned, so we decided to return to Fountain. That was Frank's and my last flight in this Taylorcraft.

After New Years 1963, the pressure continued to build on us, especially Jack, to bring the Taylorcraft to Pine Valley. In February 1963, I was boarding the basketball team bus for an away game that weekend, when Jack came on the bus and told me that he was ordered to bring the Taylorcraft to Pine Valley that weekend. Sensitive to Jack's situation, I agreed that Jack had do what he had to do. Jack flew our Taylorcraft to Pine Valley that weekend. It was the last flight for our Taylorcraft, N36324.

Within two weeks, ferocious winds came off the Rampart Range at velocities faster than the Taylorcraft could fly, tore the aircraft from its Pine Valley tie-downs and rolled the Taylorcraft into a ball of wood, fabric, broken propeller, engine, wheels and cables. The Taylorcraft was trashed, a total wreck! Heart-broken, we hauled the wreckage to an old barn at my parent's home. There it stayed until graduation when we gave it to Eddie Cizek, a mechanic by profession and one of my family friends who gave us an enormous amount of help with our flying activities.

Having Cadet Law 301 under our belts, Frank, Jack and I determined that we should sue the Air Force for an illegal order and damages. Jack had signed a "hold-harmless" agreement, under duress I might add, but Frank and I had not. We attempted to consult our law professors, but they offered no legal assistance because of their status as Air Force attorneys. However, looking at their body language, we were convinced that we should bring suit. So, we did! Well,,,,, as we should have expected, the law suit did not go-over very well with the Academy bureaucracy.

During this time, the construction of the WACO was coming along fine. Frank and Jack did the majority of work on the WACO. Frank and Jack were two smart guys which allowed them more time away from



their academic studies to work on the WACO. I was academically challenged and had to devote much more time to the books. Jack was a superb mechanic and led the building effort, and Frank was learning fast.

One evening while working in the woodworking shop in Vandenberg Hall, Frank and Jack were cornered by the Officer-in-Charge (OIC) of the Academy Aero Club, an Air Force Captain. I was not there. I don't know why the Captain thought he had authority over cadets and cadet flying, but he felt he did. After a mildly heated discussion, the Captain told Frank and Jack that they could not fly this WACO without his specific approval. I don't know who, Frank or Jack, but one of them said, "If you don't get off our case, we will sue you, too." Holy Cow!! Fights on!!!

Early spring 1963, our 11<sup>th</sup> Cadet Squadron classmates, Sandy Purcell, Gary Dickinson and Dick Hackford, wanted to sell the Taylorcraft, N95193, that they had purchased from a source in Nebraska. It had considerable ring-worm damage to the surface of the fabric cover, likely from hail, but otherwise was in good shape. The aircraft wings needed to be recovered. Despite knowing that, we still purchased the aircraft. We then started flying the aircraft regularly, but what we didn't do was talk with anyone at the Academy about our owning THIS aircraft. Lesson learned from our earlier experiences: "Keep your mouth shut!"



Taylorcraft BC-12D (95193) circa Sep/Oct 1963 at Fountain Airport. Nick Lacey and unknown person are repairing the tailwheel. Note the sophisticated jack-stand. (Photo by Gary Dickinson '64)

As the academic year ended and our First-Class summer leave began, Frank and Jack stayed in Colorado Springs to finish building the WACO, get it FAA inspected, and do the test flights at the Fountain Airport. In our 1964 Yearbook, you can find with the 21<sup>st</sup> Cadet Squadron under-class pictures, a photo of Jack in an Air Force flight suit in front of the WACO. Financially, I was absolutely broke. Earlier, I contacted my brothers-in-law who were farmers in eastern Colorado and asked if they could employ me for a month. Fortunately, they said "Yes" and turned me over to my sisters to do house painting jobs for them. So, I went to eastern Colorado to earn some money to continue my flying while Frank and Jack readied the WACO for a trip to Atlanta, Jack's home, and Alexandria, Virginia, Frank's home. Their plan was to reverse their flight plan for the return and arrive in Fountain just prior to the start of the second summer training detail for the Class of 1967. Did they get permission from the Aero Club OIC to fly to Georgia, Virginia and return? No way!

After the test flights, Frank and Jack took-off in the WACO, N692JF, on their infamous trip to the East Coast. Note the WACO tail number, which was an original FAA number for this constructed-from-parts

WACO UPF-7; N692JF; stands for “N692JackFrank.” Regarding “692,” I won’t go there, but maybe it was a not-too-subtle message to the Aero Club OIC from Jack and Frank.

On their way, Frank and Jack had to make an emergency landing in a cotton field in Mississippi after the engine quit. Later, not knowing exactly where they were at one point and finding no water towers with a painted city name, they developed an ingenious new navigation aid. Frank wrote on a piece of paper, “Point to XXX, the name of a town where they were headed. They clipped the paper note to a ball-point pen, saw a person on the ground, made a low pass, and dropped the pen with clipped paper at the feet of the person on the ground. Fortunately, the person could read. He picked up the pen and paper, read the note, and pointed in the direction of the town. *Voila*,,,, Frank and Jack were back on course. Frank dropped Jack in Atlanta, as planned, and flew on to Virginia.

The WACO, like most biplanes, had the gas tank over the cockpit in the center section of the upper wing. The tanks were notorious for leaking. While in Virginia, Frank found a mechanic in Maryland who would fix the leak. On Sunday, July 7, 1963, Frank and a friend (Frank still had a student pilot license and was not authorized to carry passengers) flew the WACO from Alexandria, VA to Hagerstown, MD, about 70 miles, to get the tank repaired.

About 8:30 p.m. that evening, while it was still daylight, on the way back to Alexandria and over the Washington, D.C. area --Arlington, Virginia to be exact-- the engine failed. Frank first looked at the Potomac River to ditch the aircraft. Then he spied a football field, and turned toward it. “Nope,” the football field was too short! Then Frank saw a fairway of the Washington Golf and Country Club, an island of open space surrounded by dense residential development. All the golfers were in the Club House having a drink when they saw the biplane land. They immediately called the FAA. As the WACO was rolling to a stop, Frank yelled to his friend in the front seat “When I get the aircraft stopped, run for the woods!” In a very short time, the FAA officials and the press were on scene.

The local newspaper reporters had great fun with their articles. In the *Washington Journal Daily News*, July 8, 1963, a reporter writes that Frank finished the landing on the 7<sup>th</sup> fairway “without a divot,” and with headlines that read: “Air Force Fledgling Lands Gasless Plane at Golf Club.” This is the July 9, 1963 *Washington Post* article with headline:

#### **“Unexpected Hazard Lands on Fairway”**

“There was an extra hazard at the Washington Golf and Country Club yesterday. A single engine plane, piloted by a vacationing Air Force Academy cadet, landed on the seventh fairway Sunday evening.

Frank C. Packer, 20, a first classman at the academy, ran out of gas while en route from Hagerstown, Md. to Clinton, Md. [incorrect; en route to Alexandria, VA] and touched down on the golf course at about 8:30.

The plane was pushed yesterday into the rough to make way for the golfers --those who hit straight down the fairway, that is. Packer, meanwhile, visited with his parents who live at 810 15<sup>th</sup> St., Alexandria.”

Jack flew commercial to Virginia to help Frank remove the WACO wings and move the aircraft to an airport. The golf course management and the FAA would not allow them to fly the aircraft off the golf course. Frank and Jack flew the WACO to Atlanta. They arrived back at the Academy, via a commercial flight, just in the nick-of-time to start their duties with the summer training detail, leaving the WACO in Atlanta. Incidentally, Jack was Cadet Wing Commander, the highest-ranking cadet, for the second summer detail, while Frank was my Assistant Flight Commander.

During this summer training detail, all was quiet regarding the Aero Club OIC's order and the unapproved flights to the East Coast. Showing good humor, the BGen Robert W. Strong, Commandant of Cadets, send Frank the Washington, D.C. area newspaper clipping with a photo of Frank standing in front of the WACO on the golf course and an application for a gasoline credit card. I thought this was a "class act" on the General's part.

I roomed with Frank during the summer detail. I distinctively remember seeing the newspaper clipping that accompanied General Strong's note, with the photo of Frank standing in front of the WACO. When I went to the Library of Congress, many years later, to research newspaper articles associated with Frank's miraculous landing, I could not find the article with the photo.

When the 1963-64 academic year started, "Sh\_\_ hit the fan!" Frank and Jack faced a Class 3 Disciplinary Hearing that did not go well. The Aero Club OIC got his full-measure of revenge against these two Billy Mitchell-like cadets for their supposed insubordination, "How dare they fly an airplane without his expressed approval!" From about October 1963 to March/April 1964, Frank and Jack spent their weekends on class 3 confinements in their rooms, when they were not involved with varsity sports. To their great credit, they handled these disciplinary restrictions with grace, resolve and goodwill.

Sometime in September or October 1963, Jack's Dad and another Eastern Airline pilot flew the WACO from Atlanta to Fountain. I think that this was when the photos of the WACO and the Taylorcraft, N95193, accompanying this article were taken. The WACO in the photos looks great, a lot better than I recall. In October 1963, I had only one flight, with our instructor, in the WACO before we moved it to a former airdrome very near the south end of Peterson Field. The airdrome, actually a pasture, had a hanger to protect the WACO from the elements. Flush with money from my summer job, I regularly flew the Taylorcraft from the Fountain Airport and got my private license over the Christmas/New Years break, flying our civilian instructor's Cessna 170.

During the Christmas-New Years break, our instructor wanted to fly his son in an open-cockpit aircraft. On a day just after a 3-inch snow, we flew to the former airdrome where we kept the WACO. We prepared the WACO for flight. Our instructor and his son took-off, while I followed them in the instructor's Cessna 170. As I got airborne, I looked in front of me for the WACO, but could not find it. Quickly looking down to my left, I saw the WACO on the ground. The engine had quit just after take-off, and the aircraft went across a road and through a corral fence. The WACO's lower wings and landing gear were severely damaged, and the prop was bent. Fortunately, neither our instructor nor his son was hurt. I returned to the airdrome and landed. We hauled the WACO back to the hangar, and I called Frank and Jack with the bad news.

Jack and Frank returned early from their Christmas break, and we hauled WACO parts back to Vandenberg Hall. In addition, we removed the wings of the Taylorcraft to be recovered, hauling the Taylorcraft wings to a friend's garage in Colorado Springs. We didn't need a second set of aircraft wings visible in Vandenberg Hall. Our plan was to replace the wing-fabric with a new Ceconite material. On weekends, I did a lot of the work with the friend's guidance and help.

During confinements, Frank and Jack hauled WACO parts to their rooms where they did their repair work. Great credit is due to Larry Gunn, Jack's roommate and Ang Cappuccio, Frank's roommate for their tolerance, patience and goodwill. On Sunday evening after confinements, Frank and Jack's rooms were a complete mess. To add to Ang's misery, Frank learned to play the banjo while on confinements. Frank and Jack completed their disciplinary restrictions in March-April 1964. The Taylorcraft remained grounded until May 1964 when we re-assemble the Taylorcraft, painted it all silver, had it inspected and flight tested.

After USAFA Class of 1964 Graduation on June 3, Frank and Jack stayed in Colorado Springs to finish the WACO repair and reassembly. We divided our aircraft assets. Frank and Jack would take the WACO and go to UPT at Craig AFB, Selma, Alabama. I would take the Taylorcraft and attend UPT at Moody AFB, Valdosta, Georgia. We gave the Taylorcraft, N36324, destroyed at Pine Valley to Eddie Cizek, the Fountain friend.

In July 1964, work was progressing well on the WACO, and Frank was in a hurry to get back to Virginia and his girlfriend. I needed a way to get my Taylorcraft to South Georgia. Frank volunteered to fly my aircraft from Virginia to Atlanta later in the summer. So, Frank and I started our trip to the East Coast, his driving his Corvette and my flying the Taylorcraft. We planned to meet at airfields along the way for the night, sleeping in sleeping bags and using the airfields' fixed-base operations facilities. The first night, we stayed overnight in Phillipsburg, Nebraska, the second in Hannibal, Missouri, the third in Zanesville, Ohio. From Frederick, Maryland, Frank flew the last leg to Alexandria, Virginia, leaving me to deal with rush-hour traffic in Washington, D.C. In the meantime, Jack finished the assembly of the WACO, got it inspected, flight tested and flew the WACO to Atlanta.

After a short trip to Europe with Ang Cappuccio, returning to Colorado to pick up my car and checking-in at Moody AFB, I rejoined with my Taylorcraft in Atlanta in late August. Frank had flown the Taylorcraft to Atlanta and was in Atlanta for the weekend, but needed to go to Selma, for a quick trip and return to Atlanta. Over the Chattahoochee River between Atlanta and Selma, is a high-and-wide suspension bridge. Of course, the bridge was built to handle surface vehicle traffic. But it has been said by engineers, I don't believe it, but it has been said to have been said, that a secondary purpose of the bridge's construction was for aviators. --both going and coming....but that may be just an old pilot's tale!

From Atlanta, I, along with my classmate Dave Risher, flew the Taylorcraft to a farmer's small grass strip about 10 miles north of Moody AFB. In the coming months, I flew a great deal from this grass strip while at UPT, performing many spins, intentional dead-stick landings and other maneuvers. I sold the Taylorcraft, N95193, in April 1965 and started flying the T-34 with the Moody AFB Aero Club, having a little more money by then.

Frank and Jack took their WACO to Craig AFB. While attending UPT, they sold the WACO, rebuilt a Stearman PT-17 while attending UPT, selling the Stearman prior to UPT graduation. The stories of Frank's and Jack's search for Stearman parts are legendary among the Class 66-B at Craig AFB. After UPT graduation, F-102 check-out and transition to the F-104, Frank was rebuilding a second Stearman at the time of his fatal accident in the F-104.

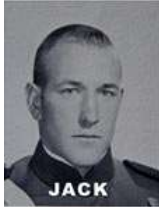
**Frank Coffee Packer:** --a very special person and extraordinarily, down-to-earth nice guy, with amazing talents-- Frank was intellectually, athletically and mechanically gifted. He was a prudent risk-taker and loved to fly. Frank's motto was, and he lived by it: "If anyone can do 'it,' I can learn to do 'it,' too."



Whatever the activity or endeavor was, Frank was absolutely confident he could learn to do "it" and master "it," as well. While at the Academy, he played centerfield on the varsity baseball team and was a varsity gymnast (trampoline). He was frequently on the Superintendent's List. On November 17, 1966, Frank died in an untimely and tragic F-104 accident at Homestead AFB, Florida, while on a routine intercept mission. His engine flamed-out in the base-turn to land. He was fatally injured in the ejection and parachute landing. The Air Force lost an extraordinarily talented officer whose future advancement to the highest levels of Air Force leadership, realistically, could only be imagined. It is with absolute conviction for those of us who knew Frank that he would have distinguished himself in aerial combat during the Vietnam War and in the field of aviation, had he lived longer.



**Jackson Lynn Hudson:** --a natural leader with a brilliant mind and immense talent-- Jack “over-flowed” with realist and practical ideas about civilian light aircraft and flying. He had an unusually precise ability to analyze flight situations allowing him to safely fly his aircraft through many difficult situations. His



situational awareness and inflight analysis were uncanny. He was a brilliant mechanic, gifted, and able to work on all parts of an aircraft, including the engines, as well as the air frames. Jack was “the reincarnation” of the 1920s aviators who flew and maintained their own aircraft. He led the maintenance and repair of the Packer/Hudson/Lacey aircraft fleet. He loved the roar of the radial, reciprocating gasoline engine. For Jack, life couldn’t get any better than flying behind a powerful radial engine. After UPT graduation, he flew the F-104 at Eglin AFB, Florida, but it wasn’t long before he volunteered to fly the venerable

A-1E aircraft in combat during the Vietnam War. Jack, flying the A-1E with its huge, powerful radial engine, was involved in Special Operations and Search and Rescue. In my mind, every moment of Jack’s previous flying experiences led to a combat mission on October 6, 1969 when he heroically rescued over 48 friendly forces and 8 American crew members. These friendly forces and Americans were trapped in the Laotian jungle by an enemy force between 400 – 600 fighters. With his multiple precision attacks and after repeated exposure to heavy enemy ground gun fire, Jack neutralized the enemy forces, allowing the rescue of the friendly force and the Americans. After the rescue, Jack was shot down, but quickly rescued. For his courageous action, Jack was awarded the Air Force Cross, the second highest medal our Country can bestow for valor. Jack Hudson, was the right man, flying the right aircraft, for that moment! In November 2023, Jack was inducted into the Georgia Military Veterans Hall of Fame for his valor on October 6, 1969.

To illustrate Jack’s versatility and enormous talent, let me share this: Late during our Second-Class year, Jack and I were talking, and he mentioned that he thought that he ought to participate in a varsity sport of some sort, since Frank and I were on varsity teams. So, in his First-Class year, Jack joined the varsity pistol team. In one year, he achieved Second Team All-American.

Jack resigned from the Air Force in 1971. For the remainder of his professional aviation career, he flew with Delta Airlines. In addition to flying regular airline flights as Captain, he served as Training Officer on several aircraft and later as MD-11 Fleet Manager. He unexpectedly passed away in March 2002 after suffering a heart attack.

*(If the reader ever happens to be in the Atlanta Airport area and sees a street sign or drives-on “Perry J Hudson Parkway,” note that this Parkway is named after Jack’s father, a former Georgia State Senator, a former Mayor of Hapeville, Georgia, and the Eastern Airline Captain who flew the WACO from Atlanta to Fountain in the fall of 1963.)*

**Keith Nathan Lacey II (Nick):** I am enormously honored and privileged to have had the extraordinary, unique experience to learn to fly with Frank and Jack, two great Americans, Patriots and Warriors. By the time I entered UPT, I had accumulated 175 flying hours and a wealth of flying experiences. This



flight experience was a huge boost for me during UPT. I am forever grateful to Frank and Jack for this association. I would not have made it to UPT without their help. After UPT, I flew the F-105 and flew 100 missions over North Vietnam in 1966, the height of Campaign Rolling Thunder. I was awarded the Silver Star for a mission on August 18, 1966 when my flight of four F-105s dodged 8 Surface-to-Air missiles from two different sites. Ron Bliss ’64 was #2 in the flight, and I was #4. I attacked one of the SAM sites, destroying it with two 2,000-pound bombs. I had a second combat tour in Southeast Asia in 1975 flying the A-7D in the Close Air Support and Search and Rescue roles. I remained in the Air Force, retiring in 1990 at the rank of Colonel. Along the way, I had terrific assignments that allowed me to do many very interesting things that I could not have imagined while a cadet at the Academy.

So, what were the positive outcomes of this unauthorized, cadet-led, flight training program at the USAFA? First, each of us gained immense flight experience from our flying while at the Academy, preparing us extremely well for UPT. Second, we were all 'top three' UPT graduates. Jack was first in Class 66-B at Craig AFB, with Frank being second. I was third in my Class 66-B at Moody AFB. Our class sizes were a little over 50 student pilots, each. We each received highly coveted aircraft assignments following UPT. Third, our flight training endeavor produced two highly decorated USAF combat pilots. No doubt had Frank lived, he would have been also a highly decorated combat pilot. Jack's combat medals include: The Air Force Cross, two Distinguished Flying Crosses and twelve Air Medals. My combat medals include: The Silver Star, one Distinguished Flying Cross and twelve Air Medals. Jack's photo and the citation of his Air Force Cross award are in the Plaza of Heroes at the Southeast Asia Memorial Pavilion on the Academy grounds. My name is listed twice on plaques on the outside wall of the Pavilion. The last positive outcome of our endeavor is that it may have spurred that Academy leadership to build a better, cadet-focused Aero Club quickly and to accelerate the establishment of the superb cadet Airmanship Program of flight training and parachute training programs the Academy has today. Our Class of '64 classmates Joel Aronoff, Jay Kelley, Stu McCurdy and JJ Davis and Pete Johnson ('66) organized the USAFA Sky Diving activities, initially using a Boulder, Colorado parachute training facility. Thus, reinforcing the truism that, "If the Academy bureaucracy doesn't do it, the Cadets will!"

Regarding our fight with the Academy bureaucracy: my thoughts about the cadet flying restrictions are mixed. On the one hand, I see the point that the Air Force had a lot of money invested in its cadets. There is no doubt, that the Academy leadership understood the risks of flying and likely had former friends, colleagues, and acquaintances killed in aircraft accidents. They knew that cadets sometimes do "dumb things." Accordingly, reasonable restrictions likely were seen as being in the cadets' and the Air Force's best interests. On the other hand, the restrictions of 1961 - 1964, look to me today like "abuse of control." It is easier to say "no," reducing both professional and physical risk. "You can't fly this aircraft without my approval," notwithstanding the fact that the aircraft were purchased, built and flown with cadet money and on cadet free time. The Air Force surely would not have treated an Airman from Lowry AFB, Denver, or a Lieutenant from Ent AFB, Colorado Springs, under similar circumstances, with these restrictions and disciplinary actions. So why the harsh treatment for Academy cadets? The mixed reactions to our flying, among the AOCs indicates to me that several of them viewed the issue with considerable empathy, thinking, "I probably would do the same thing, if I were in their shoes." The Academy leadership most probably saw the need to move quickly to improve cadet flying through the Aero Club, to fill the gap until the well-funded and structured Cadet Airmanship Program began, some years later. It is worth noting that the fast expansion of the Aero Club, as shown in the Academy yearbooks from 1961-64, was at least partly due to our "unauthorized activities." However, if there is one, unmistakable legacy of the Packer/Hudson/Lacey USAFA Flight Training Program for the Cadet Wing, it is this: in 1961, the Regulation for Cadet Flying was about 6 total pages, by 1964, that Regulation was roughly one-and-a-half inches thick, single-spaced with words on both sides of a sheet of paper!

Oh yes, we lost our law suit against the Air Force for, what we felt was an illegal order, and for damages. Had we had the legal representation, at the level of competence that our classmates later achieved in their professional legal careers, we would have won,,,,,,hands-down!

*(Author's Note: I used only my Flight Log Book as reference. Regrettably, I was unable to acquire Frank's and Jack's Flight Log Books for this story.)*