

# How I decided not to quit my newspaper job

By Larry O'Connor  
staff writer

Somewhere over Ann Arbor, there's a stomach. If you find it, could you please return it. It's mine. Tony Bennett lost his heart in San Francisco, so why shouldn't I be entitled to misplace a piece of my anatomy once in awhile?

Perhaps I should explain. See, a couple of weeks ago a call came from Jan Shaffer, who is in charge of media relations for the Willow Run Air Show.

Shaffer said the Holiday Inn Aerobatic Team was coming to town. He wanted to know if someone from our paper would like to go along for an airplane ride.

I said, "Sure." First mistake. Maybe I should mention I have only flown once before.

That didn't dawn on me until I was at Willow Run Airport shaking hands with stunt pilot Randy Brooks.

The plane we were to ride in is a Pitts Special S-2 aircraft that is powered by 260 horsepower Avco Lycoming AE10-540-D4A5 engine. The Pitts Special has a top speed of 210 miles per hour and can climb 3,000 feet per second.

To the average Joe, it looks like a Volkswagen with wings.

FIRST THERE was the little matter of the waiver. We were in a hurry, so I signed it after scanning it over. I think it said something to the effect, "If injury or death should result from this ride, Holiday Inns and its subsidiaries are not liable to give you or your family free continental breakfast during their stay." Or something like that.

Brooks showed me how to carefully get into the small cockpit, which with the 90-degree plus temperatures, felt like somebody's armpit. There were seat belts on top of seat belts and straps on top of straps. Brooks happened to mention one of the harnesses was a parachute (reassuring thought).

"By the way, see that knob over there? Don't touch it, or we'll be in trouble," Brooks said. "Oh, and see those foot pedals underneath? Well, don't touch those or we'll really be in trouble."

"If a problem arises, I'll say bail out three times. OK," he added.

A little word about Brooks. He looks like the average All-American fellow, the kind who was probably your paperboy or a leader of the local Boy Scout troop. His voice sounds so reassuring. Like balling out is some physical exercise one should do before breakfast to strengthen his cardiovascular muscles.

The son of a test pilot, Brooks was born at Edwards Air Force Base. He is the youngest member of the Holiday Inn Aerobatic Team. Other members have served in the Air Force, mostly as fighter pilots.

AT LEAST with Brooks, I knew we weren't going to be dropping bombs on the University of Michigan or some Ann Arbor farmer.

When the plane hit the runway, there was nothing but blue sky. Before we knew it, we were hovering over Ypsilanti. Ypsilanti is a beautiful city — from 4,500 feet.

Things were coasting along just fine, flying in formation for awhile. Then a voice came over the radio.

"Hey Larry, do you want to break away from these guys so we can do some aerobatic maneuvers?" asked Brooks.

"Sure," I said. Second mistake. I get queasy even looking at ferris wheels — when they're not moving.

Before muttering any second thoughts, we were upside down. Then we did complete loops. Then we shot straight up in the air. Then we rapidly lost altitude.

The first loop was OK until we completed it. Then I realized something wasn't feeling right.

"How do you handle that one?" Brooks asked after one complete loop.

"Barely," I said.

"Yeah, it's thrilling. I know," he said.

Another thing about Brooks: He can't hear too well. Next to doing a belly slide on a carpet of razor blades, the last thing I wanted to do was do another loop.

BEFORE I knew it, though, the plane was flipping over like a beached carp. I noticed there was a white bag on my left. It was marked: For air sickness. "Naw," I thought. "Tough it out."

I began to look at the white bag more intently. My attention began to focus solely on it. All of a sudden I found my hand touching the bag. "Naw," I thought. "Tough it out."

Then Brooks decided to take a sharp curve, rapidly dropping a couple hundred feet. I dropped my face in the white bag and was doing my own maneuvers. My face, I'm sure, was as green as the color of the plane.

Finally, and mercifully, the plane made it back to Willow Run Airport.

**The Willow Run Air Show takes off Saturday and Sunday at Willow Run Airport, Ypsilanti. Call 482-8888 for information on showtimes, parking and tickets.**

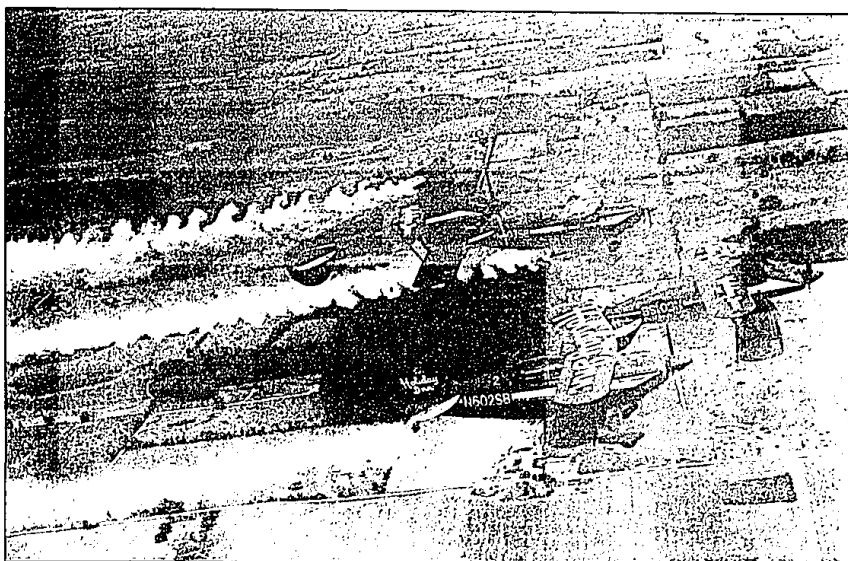
Brooks checked to see how I was doing. A smile came to his face (he was glad I made it to the bag).

"Larry, you just had what we call the white bag special," he said.

Oh, by the way, Brooks is also a comedian. Soon other pilots were coming over. One stuck out his hand. "You're a fighter pilot now," he said.

Yeah, sure. I can see it now. Just like Chuck Yeager, I'll wear a weathered bomber jacket and aviator glasses and do television commercials.

Except, instead of tooting the efficiency of auto parts, I'll be plugging Pepto Bismol.



ART EMANUEL/staff photographer

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