



The B-17 used in the movie has been restored to its original WW II configuration and is on display at the Evergreen Aviation Museum in McMinnville, Oregon. (Courtesy T. Beltran)

They Flew To Save James Bond

by Tony Beltran (Idaho City '69)

It was 1966 and I was enjoying my last day and a half before I reported to Fort Bliss, Texas, for Army Basic Training. I was sitting in one of those old-style, opera house-sized theaters in El Paso watching the movie "Thunderball." It was the last few minutes of the movie, and 007 and a team of Navy SEALs had just dispatched the bad guys in an underwater battle.

The villain, a madman named Largo, escaped in his yacht. 007 climbed on board and kicks the stuffing out of the crew, while Bond's female interest (for the movie moment) spear-guns the villain. Bond and this love interest, Domino, jump overboard and the yacht hits some rocks and explodes.

Wow! Bond is in a pickle. He has quite a few miles to make it to shore and now has the added responsibility of this "Bond Girl" (as they were known in the 60s).

Not to worry, James – out of the clear blue, western sky comes an Intermountain Aviation B17.

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sky comes an Intermountain Aviation B17, rigged for personnel pickup with the Fulton Skyhook System. At the controls are pilot **Dave Schas** (MYC-48) with co-pilot Bob Zimmer.

The other four crewmen, manning various positions to execute the pickup, were **Bruce Lehfeldt** (MSO-54) in the nose, **Paul Tag** (MSO-60) on the winch (positioned in the compartment just forward of the Joe-hole), **Ken Hessel** (MYC-58) at the Joe-hole (the jump and observation hole in the floor of the B17) and **Gary Hannon** (MSO-60) in the tail. These former smokejumpers scooped James out of the ocean, allowing him to live to fight another day.

By my count, James Bond is now about 85 years old, living on Viagra, more than 50 multi-vitamins, and vodka martinis (shaken, not stirred). He would never have made it were it not for the fearless crew and pilots of the Skyhook B-17.

Now, as Paul Harvey used to say, "the rest of the story." First, let me say that in 1966, I didn't know this was an Intermountain Aviation venture. As I later learned, the Skyhook rigged B-17 and crew were simply leased to the movie producer to provide James with an avenue of escape from certain death. The twist

comes from the fact that the crew was told to avoid any media events that might occur, lest it slip out that, in some circles, Intermountain was said to have ties to the CIA.

Now, back at the movie set – a barge off Key Largo in the Florida Keys.

Okay, it wasn't really Sean Connery and Claudine Auger who got plucked out of the ocean by the B-17, but two life-sized dummies (Bond holding the woman in front of him) that were finally winched into the tail of the aircraft. "Finally," the dummies were onboard after multiple "reel them in, let them out, reel them in" commands from a chase plane that was filming the pickup.

Now here is where the real daring-do started: The plane, on its way back to West Palm Beach, Fla., declared an emergency. The right landing gear wouldn't come down. The four crewmembers located the hand crank and proceeded to manually lower the landing gear. This procedure took a while, but finally the gear locked into place.

By this time the dreaded news media had heard (via scanner) that a weird-looking B-17 was about to land at the West Palm Beach airport. (In 1965, any B-17 in the air would be an oddity, I think, not to mention one with a Skyhook yoke attached to its nose.)

Upon landing, the crewmen were directed to get the dummies out of the tail of the plane and make themselves scarce. They were more than happy to do this as media folks were beginning to show up on the ramp. Robert Fulton, inventor of the Skyhook system, was at the airport – fortunately – to head them off and field their questions as the crew disappeared.

Another point of interest, maybe, was the fact that Fulton flew a World War II P-51 fighter everywhere he went. It was sitting at the airport, also.

I was privileged to see an old, grainy 8-millimeter film of the event with the four smokejumpers – Hessel, Tag, Hannon and Lehfeldt – removing the dummies from the plane. When you first see the dummies in the film, just their bare legs are protruding from the tail of the aircraft. Only the upper half of the dummies could be winched into the plane because they were in a sitting position when picked up out of a raft.

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The dummies, clad only in scanty swimsuits, which you can't really see, look to be in an exotic Kama Sutra position to the wonderment of all. To people driv-

ing along the highway on the other side of the airport fence, one can only imagine what thoughts were going through their heads as they took a double take on the strange-looking B-17 with two sets of bare legs sticking out of the tail.

In fact, Ken said that there was a significant traffic jam developing over there by the time Mr. Fulton arrived to take on the media. In the film, the four crewmen all appear with big smiles as if minutes before they had not faced a serious landing emergency.

So, the airplane returned to its home base in Marana, Ariz., but the story doesn't end here. On the downwind leg of the approach into Marana, at night via Picacho Peak, a turbo charger, oil pan fire ignited on the right inboard engine.

The four crewmembers donned their parachutes, just in case. Ken surmises that people driving on Interstate 10 between Tucson and Phoenix must have had a great view of a ball of fire slowly descending into the desert – no doubt wondering what the hell that was!

Pilot Schas told the crew not to worry: "Boys, hang tough. We're going to make it." They could all see the runway lights at the Intermountain base and know it was only minutes until they were on the ground – one way or another. At this point, jumping was not an option because of altitude, and if the truth were known, nobody was too anxious to jump into that cactus country at night, anyway.

In an interview about these white-knuckle events, Ken told me that as soon as the plane touched down and slowed on roll out, he was determined to exit the aircraft thru the Joe-hole. The plane, with the engine still burning brightly, landed safely. Ken, sitting on the edge of the Joe-hole watching the tarmac pass under his dangling feet, grossly underestimated the speed of the roll out and left the aircraft way too soon.

This serious miscalculation, of course, resulted in him being launched 10 or 20 feet through the air on contact with the pavement – kinda like a tennis ball being served up. As it turned out, the launch was probably a fortunate thing as it got him clear of the tail wheel – a risk that had occurred to him, but apparently had no effect on his decision-making.

Miraculously – thanks to a tried-and-true Allen roll of all Allen rolls, and a lot of luck – he came to a stop unscathed, and was on his feet in time to see Hannon exit the aircraft through the crew door on the right rear side of the fuselage. This exit also resulted in a pretty fair catapult, according to Ken, but one not nearly as spectacular as his. The bottom line – nobody got hurt.

When the plane finally rolled to a stop, who should appear out of the night in a pickup truck but Intermountain CEO Gar Thorsrud (MSO-46). Gar and

sidekick Roland "Andy" Andersen (MSO-52) arrived on the scene with a flight-line fire extinguisher, and with the help of the rest of the crew – who also lost no time exiting the aircraft in various ways – put the fire out. Thus ended the rescue mission of 007.

In retrospect, it's interesting that this movie stunt was conducted in one take and conducted no differ-

ently than a "real world" mission. In today's movie world, computer graphics depict what is seen as too dangerous or too expensive to create "real world."

To the pilots and recovery crew of the B-17 during the summer of 1965, it was demonstrated once again that the Fulton Skyhook was a viable rescue system. What an adventure! 🍷



Odds and Ends



by Chuck Sheley

Congratulations and thanks to **Bill Long** (CJ-55), **Bob Smee** (MSO-68), and **Steve Anderson** (MSO-63) who just became our latest Life Member(s). Thanks to the Redding Reunion Committee who honored **Bob Kersh** (Assoc.) and **Dick Tracy** (MSO-53) with Life Memberships for their contribution to smokejumping in Region 5.

A summary of an article originally published in the Whittier (Calif.) *Daily News*, Oct. 12, 2010: Despite serving as a smokejumper for only one season, **Rachel Smith** (MSO-00) is extremely well-versed in firefighting protocol ... having been fighting fires since age 17.

She's so well-versed that she created a non-profit organization, Firescaping, which provides resources to communities interested in protecting property from wildfire. She offers free information about local fire-safe councils and home preparation on its website, www.firescaping.org.

Smith's efforts got the attention of the National Fire Protection Agency, which invited her to join a committee to develop professional wildland firefighter standards. Those standards are model codes adopted by fire agencies worldwide and are set for publication in 2012.

Currently, Smith makes a monthly commute to the University of California in Berkeley, where she's studying for a doctorate in environmental science, policy and management.

Smith – also a fire ecologist – researches ways to reduce fire threats in communities. She also facilitates meetings to help those at risk of fire in their area to get informed, prepared and involved.

"Whether you're short on time or are on a tight budget, there are plenty of things you can do to



prepare your home for wildfire," Smith said.

Karl Brauneis (MSO-77): "Hi Chuck, outstanding editorial! You nailed it. Wyoming is a right-to-work state, so many of our kids are just plain tough. I would put some of our 14-year old cowboys up against anyone. Last year we went to the Mountain West Conference Track & Field Championships in Fort Collins, Colorado, to watch Keith run. After the meet my wife and daughter went to the mall and shopped. I walked around the place and observed. The kids were beyond fat. Those kind of kids need to miss meals and starve before the light will ever come on."

Gayle Morrison (Associate): "I just signed a book contract with Texas Tech University for *Hog's Exit*, the story about **Jerry Daniels** (MSO-58). You know it's been a LONG time in the making. The book won't be available until spring 2012, so you'll have to wait another year to see it."

John Culbertson (FBX-69): "Your *Sounding Off from the Editor* was the best ever. This piece transcends all management concepts in the natural resource agencies, Department of Labor, and Department of Education combined. It should be read on the floor of the Senate and in Congress. I hope there is some way that this piece can move up the line to a point where it might have some effect on the agencies. My hat is off to you for a fine editorial."

On August 5, 2008, the crash of a Carson Helicopters Sikorsky S-61N killed nine firefighters being flown from the Iron Complex Fires. In news reports being released today (12/8/10), the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) said that "Carson intentionally altered documents to exaggerate the helicopter's performance capabilities in order to win a Forest Service contract." The board said that the helicopter weighed