

Two F-86 Sabre Jets

8th grade, 1960, Vista del Mar Grammar School, Gaviota, California – this was the first year that I attended school in the Gaviota area. New school, new friends, new adventures. All was new to me, but the highlight of my first days at Vista was to run out to the playground where a jet airplane was parked! A real one! To me everything was intact: cockpit, seat, all the instruments – everything. I never questioned whether or not it had an engine, but it was great fun to crawl up into the nose and scoot way back in! I soon found out that this plane was an authentic combat machine, an F-86 Sabre Jet. What memories!

Years later, both of my children had the opportunity to go to that same school and to climb all over that same plane, parked in the same school yard. However, the cockpit was locked; no kid could delve into the truly out-of-this world experience of “pretend piloting.” I suppose, over the years, after my time behind the stick, things had been pilfered, stolen, broken, or somehow just disappeared.

My experience in that special plane was the impetus, I’m sure, for me to later pursue and acquire my pilot’s license, which I did at the age of 22.

And then, after attending graduate school at Utah State University, it was time to seek real employment. Being an agriculture major and growing up around livestock (and now having the “flying” bug), I applied for what would be the perfect job – Livestock Manager on a ranch in northern California. The ranch manager interviewed me over the phone, and it all seemed to click. I flew to Sacramento where he picked me up in a Cesena 172. He picked me up in a PLANE! We flew to the ranch where I would be working, landed on a one-mile grass runway (I’m in heaven now!), and proceeded with a more formal interview. I was hired.

Being young and not very interested in politics, I probably did not seem over-enthused when I was told for whom I would be working – William Penn Patrick. I learned that this man was an ultra-conservative who ran against Ronald Reagan in the Republican primary for Governor of California. Mr. Patrick did not win that primary, obviously.

However, I found “Bill” Patrick to be an extremely personable person (I thought especially to me), and I found myself being offered rides in many of the planes that Bill owned and flew including a Ford Tri-Motor, a Stearman bi-plane, a stunt Citabria, a P-51 Mustang, and several others. I was able to hone my own flying skills by flying an Aeronca Champ, the Citabria, the Stearman (my favorite), and a Piper Tri-Pacer which I was part owner. This all took place on his Bill Patrick’s ranch, High Valley Ranch.

Patrick built a phenomenal house on the ranch. There he would entertain, hold business meetings, invite key personnel to stay, and maybe even sometimes relax.

At one rather informal staff meeting, I was invited (as Livestock Manager) to give a progress report on some projects. But that was not the most interesting thing (by far!) that came up in the meeting.

As well as Bill being able to fly every airplane he owned, he had a “chief” pilot who would fly many of the planes whenever needed. One such plane was an F-86 Sabre Jet just like the one that I use to play on at Vista del Mar Grammar School! When it was time for “Dick” to give his general aircraft report, he mentioned that before he could fly the F-86 again, he would need to replace a fairly small cover plate on the fuselage that had been lost or damaged (I really cannot remember the reason). My ears perked up

as I blurted out something like, "I know where there is an F-86!" After explaining my connection to the Vista del Mar F-86, the conversation switched to something else, and I did not hear anything again regarding the cover plate. BUT, the next time I went "home" to the Gaviota area, I made a slight side trip to the school where I discovered the cover plate missing on the jet sitting in the school yard!

A tragic event happened soon after the chief pilot installed the "new" cover plate onto the Sabre Jet. That same plane is the one that attempted to take off from the Sacramento Executive Airport in 1972, failed to do so, and crashed into the Farrell's Ice Cream Parlor killing 22 people. The pilot survived.

My time at High Valley Ranch was soon to come to an end. One day William Penn Patrick took me up in his P-51 Mustang taking off from the ranch's beautiful grass runway. I was squished into the rear jump seat, but I was thrilled to be flying at around 400 mph at 10' off the deck and then to be slammed back in my seat as he pulled the nose up to what seemed a trajectory straight to heaven!

.....The very next day, Bill took one of his executives up in the Mustang never to return. It was early in the morning and I was not feeling well and had stayed in bed. After being suddenly awakened with an undeniable feeling of supernatural intervention, I was "directed" to get on my motorcycle and was guided to the exact location of the crash. It was as though the wreckage had been there forever – no fire, no smoke, and no discernable remains. The only recognizable item I could identify was the four-bladed prop.

Gone—two lives, many livelihoods, a beautiful aircraft, lots of broken hearts, and my once-in-a-lifetime career. For me, it was back to the Gaviota area where, several times a month, I would pass that F-86 Sabre Jet sitting in the schoolyard and think of all the wonderful times and a few very tragic times.

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Mark Tautrim