



AMONG CLOUDS

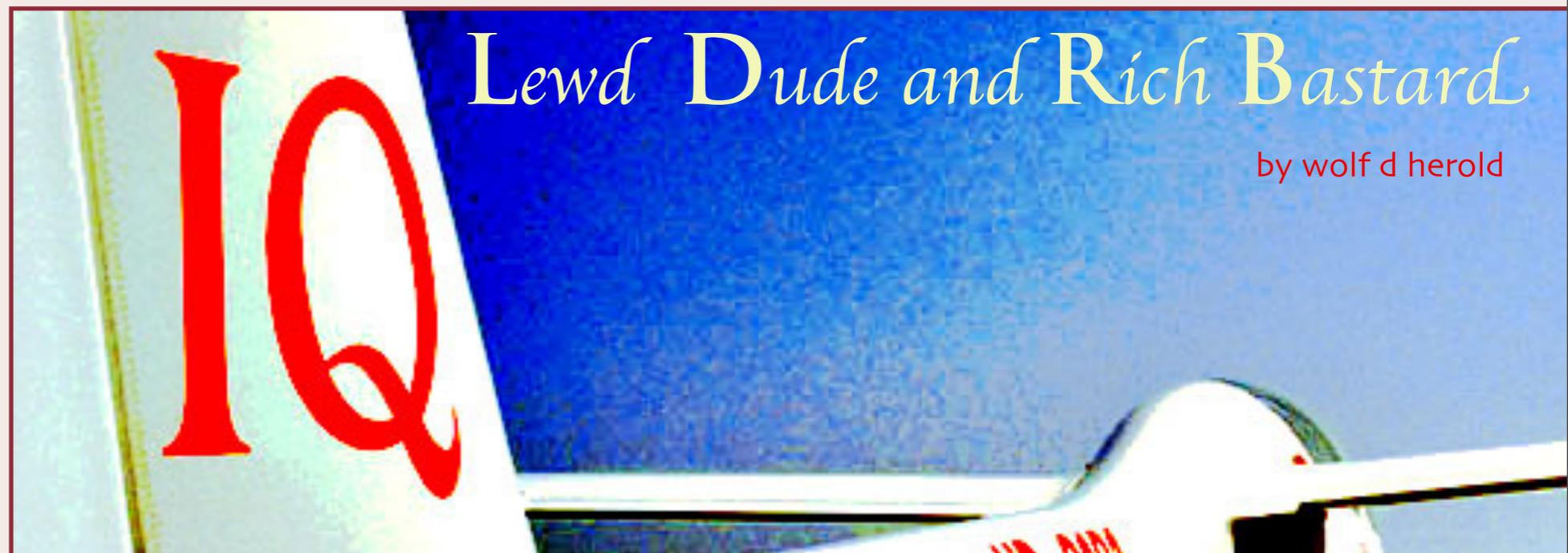
SOARING STORIES (2)

When we were kids we got our baby names and nicknames from parents, from relatives.

Later, at school, in the sports club, our class mates, friends, and team members came up with teasing names, fighting names, which sometimes hit a sore spot.

Now, out at the airfield, we stick a couple of letters to our planes, give them an identity, so that our fellow pilots know what to call us over the radio.

And, suddenly, those innocent letters morph into yet another sort of name, often with unexpected connotations.



Lewd Dude and Rich Bastard

by wolf d herold

In the water..



they are called *Seven Seas*, *Pegasus* or *Southern Cross*, on terra firma *Casa Mia*, *Mount Manor* or *Playa Bella*.

When the Livingstons, Johnsons or deButtes select names for their toys in the marina or their retreats on land they usually relay on proven role models. Fresh, creative ideas are rare, one stays with simple romantic clichés.

No problem.

In the air...



among glider pilots, naming conventions follow an even drier, duller semantic.

Ok, ok, every once in a while someone paints something like "**Little Prince**" on the fuselage, right below the canopy.

The idea behind that is not so much to prove literacy or project romanticism. It's all about having a reason for another party: the baptism of the club's newest ship.

And the faded "*Uncle Jimmy*" on the aged training two-seater only gives credit to the old painter who once sponsored a gallon of acrylic to give the tired wings a new coat of paint.

Otherwise nil, nada, zilch in the departments of imagination and poetry.

The old custom of personalizing a glider simply required one to stick two or three letters, numbers, or any combination thereof on the bottom of one wing and both sides of the vertical tail. In the late Paleolithic epoch of glider competitions, big characters were needed so they could be seen by jurors with binoculars at turnpoints. Today they occasionally help to identify a particular one in the fleet of all-white and long-winged craft and are used in communications over the radio.

"*Oskar Kilo* is still flying" you hear or "*Yankee Five* won the day" and you know that "**OK**" and "**Y5**" are talked about, in the official alphabet of the air waves.

Boring, really, but perhaps appropriate: I would hate to admit my failure to return to the airfield by a broadcast like:

"*Cloud Nine* landed safely in Reynolds patch 5 miles West" !

But why use such a private code at all? Doesn't every glider have its unique official registration, anyway?

"They sure do" explains Kurt, the one with **OK**, "but it's much faster to address your friend or competitor using a short call sign than a long N-number".

"When you need clearance to enter controlled airspace you have to give the controller the full rap. But that "November Two Two Bravo Lima" is way too long to alert the pilot ahead of you that you'll pass at his eleven o'clock high in five seconds".

Sounds plausible, but it's only part of the story - the pragmatic part.

I learned about the other part after I had gained enough experience to venture out beyond gliding range of the home airfield and started to participate in small, local contests. Out there pilots called each other by names like *Yankee Five* and *Charlie Tango*. It was a part of the sky which was largely unbounded, open, kind of an aerial sandbox for the adventurous and ambitious to hone their skills and play with their creativity. Out there those innocent call signs assumed a different character and suddenly turned into funny, revealing, sometimes stigmatizing nicknames.



"**Lame Duck**, position and altitude" I heard a voice ask and as the answer came I realized that **LD, Lima Delta**, had replied. I'm pretty sure that Len didn't think of that interpretation when he chose those two letters. Like a lot of his fellow flyers he had selected a call sign based on his initials, without much of a creative impetus. Based on his and his girlfriends initials, that is, as his friends soon found out. Later, over beer and pizza, this would tempt one or the other to tease him with questions like: "Bad flight today? in such a dynamite sky? Now who picked the wrong clouds, couldn't center properly, Len or Debbie?" This didn't bother Len much. However, when one of the junior pilots candidly called him "**Lewd Dude**" it bugged him, even though this interpretation hadn't found its way into the airwaves, yet.



At many airports I have heard these playful puns, lots of them in the USA. This might be a results of an American habit of squeezing everything described with more than one word into an acronym. Looking at it backwards, Americans are particularly well versed to come up with funny or ironic expansions of frequently used short codes. One bounced landing in front of the clubhouse jury and **Bravo Alpha** can turn into **Bad Approach**.

Usually, however, it takes more than one "bounce" until the clique has mustered enough scorn, irony or admiration to come up with a name that sticks.

Tony Lauck, one of the more ambitious pilots in Sugarbush, worked long and hard to establish his mnemonic reputation.

Just before, sometimes even during, a contest he often managed to fall prey to assorted mishaps. Once, while attaching the wings during assembly of his glider, the gear collapsed and the whole rig landed in the dirt. Another time he forgot to hook up the Pitot probe correctly and had to pull off tow to land because his instruments were indicating total nonsense. But because Tony also completed a couple of rather spectacular flights and thus enjoyed a certain authority among his peers nobody touched his **Tango Lima, TL**.

Until, that is, he grew impatient one last day of a regional competition. Homebase and victory in sight he decided to leave the last thermal early to save a couple of minutes on a tight final glide. Too tight a final glide as he and all the spectators soon realized.

Despite all efforts to conserve altitude he struck a tree top and got stuck on the next, less than a quarter mile before the runway. The glider slid halfway down the trunk of the poplar and ended up hanging nose down in the tree spreading its wings out nearly horizontally. From afar it looked like the poplar had sprouted a new limb. Tony was alright, but **TL** had instantly turned into **Tree Limb**.

Apparently this accident didn't change Tony's propensity to create challenging situations. A couple of years later it would afford him most likely the ultimate call sign.

Tony had decided to participate in the last contest of the season in Virginia. To get to the idyllic airfield in Newcastle one had two options: the shorter of the two required to cross a small stream through a ford which was impassable after even a modest amount of rain.



The other, a couple of miles longer, followed a rutted dirt road to a wooden bridge across the river. Tony went for the direct approach. No problem for tow vehicle and crew. The trailer, however, with its lower clearance had a mind of its own and began to float in the middle of the crossing. Slowly it turned into the current and pulled the big BMW around, too. With the help of lots of beer and the tractor from a neighbors farm the rig was finally rescued and delivered to the far shore.

"Too low!" was the dry remark of the savior when he looked on as the drenched trailer rolled onto dry land. Too low was the river bed, too low was Tony on that earlier tree landing. From now on **TL** would be **Tango** on a good day and **Too Low** on a bad one.



It is not always careless or heroic behavior around the airfield or in the sky that results in a re-christening of plane and/or pilot. Sometimes the ultimate adaptation of a call sign is the consequence of a rather innocent coincidence.

The bird of my friend David got his final name by virtue of a flash of inadvertent humor. David had bought his LS4 "**RB**" from Robbie Buck, son of Robert Buck, a pilot and author well known in American aviation circles. For the first couple of weeks David's friends called him *Roast Beef* not because of a prominent selection in David's eating habits but simply to avoid a mix-up with the other, the real "*Romeo Bravo*".

During the following winter Chris, David's partner in the glider, began a refurbishing project on the trailer and moved it into a big shop mostly used for truck repair and maintenance. One day a big, heavy truck driver shuffled over to check the strange contraption.

Thanks to the prominently placed and very picturesque logo of the manufacturer he quickly grasped that it was used to transport gliders. The big "**RB**" painted on both sides of the trailer remained a mystery to him, however. "You know, it's something like a competition number like they have in the Indy- or NASCAR-races" explained Chris. "We use it to call the gliders in flight over the radio". Mister heavyweight pushed his baseball cap back and began to think. Then he hooked his thumbs in the suspenders and, with the light of an aha-moment in his eyes, answered: "Ahhh, *Rich Baaasted*, eh?".

When Chris told the "RB story" during the next club meeting everybody turned immediately into that trucker and tried to imitate the "Rich Baaasted" in the most authentic Vermont dialect. No wonder that after such a collective practice session the new meaning of **RB** became the official call sign.



I myself - or my plane - have also benefited from an inspired brain-wave of an American glider pilot.

"**One Echo**", 1E, sprayed in designer font on the vertical stabilizer of my ASW22, identified the big bird. I had no idea about its intended message. Was it the first glider of Erwin, the previous owner? Unlikely, I think.

Perhaps he wanted a combination which allowed for easy and quick change, into 1F or 1L for example, should he encounter a competitor with the same identification? Whatever - it didn't matter to me. A digit and a letter, that sounded pretty blunt, business-like and wasn't likely to provoke a slanted interpretation, I thought - and I was right. In the air I was and remained simply "**One Echo**".



Then I moved to Colorado for a one year sabbatical. For my club-mates in the Soaring Society of Boulder "**One Echo**" was new, short, easy to remember, and easy to pronounce. No reason to change anything. During socializing with club members I committed no noticeable faux pas. In the air, in the pattern that is, under everybody's observation, I flew like I was supposed to and was fortunate enough to avoid any "bad approach" or incident of "too low". No hint, no opportunity, no temptation to add a different twist to **1E**.

The fact that I was usually the last one to land in the evening, who was soaring along routes different from the often practiced "milk runs", made my new friends curious. However, or fortunately, it didn't spark an irresistible idea for a special label.



This flash of genius struck a still unknown fellow soarer who joined my boomer thermal far away from the pattern in Boulder. A sky full of bustling energy, full of crisp cumuli and my curiosity for new routes had me lured far to the South. Blanca Peak, highest summit in the Sangre de Cristo range, was going to be my first turnpoint. I needed about three thousand feet more altitude to safely round 'Blanca' when I stumbled into a monster thermal. Wings flapped and bended in steep circles while I tried with kicks of full aileron to hold the '22 in the core of the storm which hurled me upwards.

Then suddenly a crackling noise in the radio:
"Glider above the Sangres, call sign and altitude?"
I was startled.

Instantly I turned my eyes from the needle of the Vario which hovered above the 10kts mark. Had my concentrating on the climb made me give up on checking the airspace around me? Did I miss another glider near by?

A quick scan: there was nobody - not in front, not behind, not left nor right. The sky above the Rockies was as empty as ever. Then I saw a white flash way below: wings in the sun, then a tiny silhouette racing across a snow patch.

"**One Echo** at 17 thousand over Music Mountain" I replied after that moment of shock.

"What type of glider is that? Open Class?"

"Yeah, I fly an ASW 22"

"Wow, those long, elegant wings against sky and clouds, beautiful!"

And then, after a couple of seconds: "You should be **One Eagle**, not **One Echo** - or better: you are **Lone Eagle!**"

Bingo, that's it!

For the sole other pilot roaming this corner of the vast sky above Colorado me and my bird were not only one eagle, but the only one, the lone one!

And that's exactly the way I felt. By trusting a hidden instinct I had covered the 160 miles in barely two hours.

A few circles in the strongest lift, fast cruising by lining up the best looking clouds, the first leg had gone by entirely without effort, in perfect harmony with the forces of Nature. That must be the way an eagle flies, I thought.

It was one of these days when nothing can disturb a natural rhythm. The unexpected encounter hadn't changed anything, the metamorphosis from ***One Echo*** to ***Lone Eagle*** failed to make me 'too' aware of how I should be flying.

No stress at all by trying to follow the path of the eagle, no conscious desire to mimic its style, everything remained in perfect flow.

It was a long flight and once more I landed late.

Fortunately two other die-hards were still out on the field and helped me push 1E off the runway. Of course, they wanted to know where I had been and I wanted to tell them about the new, true 'name' of my bird.

"Wow, there you are in best company" offered Colin an hour later in the local pub. "Charles Lindbergh was also called 'Lone Eagle' ".

Well, I'll never be quite that 'lone' as C.L. during his 34 hours across the Atlantic, but having him as namesake might be quite inspiring.



That's it - soaring story 2 !

Now please tell me how you liked it, what you missed, what you want to read about next time.

And don't forget to visit my blog every once in a while, there will be more to read from "Among Clouds"...

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