

Tim Thickstun NROTC '72

Missing Movement (My Excellent Rose Bowl Odyssey)

In late 1968, while attending college at Ohio State I decided to travel to see the fabulous OSU Buckeyes play in the Rose Bowl in Pasadena on New Year's Day of 1969.

Since I was a poor college kid it would have been too expensive for me to pay my way there and back. I was, however, enrolled as a midshipman in the Navy ROTC at OSU. This gave me the ability to travel "Space-A" on Navy and Air Force airplanes. Space-A meant that, if an airplane that could hold extra bodies was going someplace, I could tag along like a hitch hiker.

Down at Lockbourne Air Force Base (now renamed Rickenbacker) I managed to get a hop on an Air Force KC135 aerial tanker. Most of the insides of an aerial tanker are full of seats rather than fuel by the way. I took off from Ohio safely fastened in my seat.

We had barely left the ground when the left outboard engine failed. This was not a good sign but not super concerning since we still had three others. We were going to go a long way though so the pilot decided to turn back and get a better airplane. He did a big loop right back onto the runway.

We stopped, parked, and the pilot opened the cockpit door and said "Well, this one's broke, let's try the next one". We left the airplane and walked to the next KC135... surprisingly, not everyone on board was as trusting (naive) as me and decided to stay in Columbus and maybe buy a ticket someplace.

We got on the next plane, taxied, and this one actually worked a lot better than the first one. We winged our way west toward California and the Rose Bowl. The pilot and crew, however, seemed to be more interested a little gambling and R&R so they called the tower at Nellis AFB in Las Vegas and reported "engine trouble".

We landed at Nellis AFB just outside Las Vegas and were told to return to the base the first thing in the morning. Nellis, at that time, was separated from Vegas by a strip of desert so I thumbed a jeep ride to the Golden Nugget Casino on the Strip. I wore a coat and tie since dress codes were much more formal then.

I was too young to gamble, of course, so I did anyway and the people taking my money didn't seem to care.

The next morning, I went back to Nellis, got back on the plane and flew to Orange County Airport near Pasadena. I attended the game and I seem to recall that USC lost – a glorious day in Pasadena!

Just before the game, however, the Air Traffic Controller's Union held a "sick-out" (Same as a strike but they couldn't call it a strike because striking was prohibited by their contract). Sick ATC's meant that my return flight from Orange County Airport was cancelled. I checked on tickets back to Columbus at regular fares but, they were full price, and I didn't have that kind of money. I decided to try another military flight.

My only relative in California was my Uncle Keith in San Francisco, so, I caught a Greyhound Bus from LA to San Francisco. Uncle Keith had a lot more information than I did about bases in California.

We called several air bases and decided that my best shot at a flight was from Sacramento where there were three air bases in a relatively small area. I took another bus, this time to McClellan AFB, where I waited three days while passing bad checks at the Officer's Club on base so I could have actual food. I spent my days waiting in the passenger terminal at the flight line.

On the third day a Navy DC-3 two engine prop plane agreed to take me with them to Florida. Florida was at least on the right side of the country.

The plane had only landed at McClellan due to an oil leak in an engine that they wanted to check out. They checked it, I got aboard, and we flew away.

I got to sit on a couch in the airplane! It had seat belts. The Navy crews over the years had evidently customized their airplane a bit.



DC-3

After takeoff I looked out the window and saw oil streaming out of the engine on the right side of the aircraft. One of the air crew came by to look out the window on a routine check. I commented on the oil leak and how bad it looked to me. He replied “Bad! That’s the good engine!” I decided not to look out the left side of the plane. He didn’t seem too concerned. We stopped a couple times on the way to Florida to refuel (and probably get more oil) and spent a really long time in the air. A new DC-3 could cruise at 207 miles per hour and this airplane was NOT new. I got on the airplane in the afternoon in Sacramento and had a box breakfast during a stop at Davis-Monthan AFB in Arizona. After a few more stops we finally got to Florida.

In Florida I got off the plane and entered the terminal and told them I wanted to go “Anywhere North”. They said that there was a plane taxiing right now going to DC. The sailor at the terminal ran out on the taxiway and flagged the plane down to let me on board. I was so tired by then that I don’t remember what kind of plane it was. It was going in the right direction and that was enough.

We landed at Andrews AFB in DC where I took a DC city bus to the bus station. I recall that people on the streets pelted the bus with bottles because the driver wouldn’t let them on without a ticket. Welcome to our Nation’s Capital.

At the Greyhound station, since I was in my Midshipman uniform (required for travel on a military aircraft), the Greyhound ticket clerk said “I know where you’re going” and shoved a ticket at me – to the Naval Academy in Annapolis! Wrong direction! I explained that I was going to Columbus. I finally got the right ticket.

I finally made it back to Columbus. Winter Quarter at OSU had started two days before. I was called in to the NROTC Lieutenant’s office where I was informed that I had “Missed Movement” – a Navy term that means you missed your ship leaving port and are in deep trouble.

I explained my entire Odyssey to the Lieutenant and about my lack of funds for a full-fare ticket.

He said “Why didn’t you wire for the money?”

I know that he meant that I should have gotten it from my parents, but instead I said “I didn’t think you would send it to me, Sir!”

He did a startled look and responded “Get the hell out of my office.”

That was the end of it and I didn’t hear from him again on the subject.