

An Easter Sunday Bailout Over Reno

By Pete Neumann, a/k/a "Spotted Owl" - 2025

I recently found the attached obituaries of Col. Bob ("Chukar") Spielman and Col. Vern ("Eagle") Frye of Reno. Both were avid glider (soaring) pilots who had previously led distinguished US Air Force flying careers. Vern Frye is prominently mentioned in Gen. Kenneth Bell's book, *"100 Missions North,"* an excellent book on the air war waged over North Vietnam, in 1966-7.

Vern flew F-105's on 106 combat missions (six more than required) over N. Vietnam and Bob flew about 60 missions there. Bob was late to that war because although he had been stationed in Fukuoka, Japan flying F-100s (and later F-105's) he was not deployed to Vietnam until a number of months after Vern Frye had already flown about 60 missions there and the air war was nearing an end. The Vietnam War ended before Bob got a chance to earn the last 40 of his goal of 100 combat missions. As described in *"100 Missions North,"* on each and every combat mission the odds of U.S. F-105 pilots returning alive to their bases in Thailand were about 50% -- equivalent to a flip of the coin every time they strapped into those F-105's pointing North.

After separating from the USAF, Vern resumed his favorite type of flying: glider soaring. He revived the Nevada Soaring Association which is based at Airsailing Gliderport, 18 miles northeast of Reno, which was created decades earlier by attorney and former Korean War pilot, Chuck Glattley of Reno.

Vern "Eagle" Frye and Bob "Chukar" Spielman were the spark plugs of the Reno glider soaring community. They had undergone survival training at the USAF Survival School at the Reno-Stead airport before deploying overseas. Chapter Two of *"100 Missions North"* has a humorous description of General Bell's own 20-day outdoor survival training in the mountains and desert of Northern Nevada. And the Reno-Stead (KRTS) terminal building has an interesting memorial wall with photos taken during the decades during which the survival school was in operation.

To stay busy in retirement, Vern accepted an offer to become general manager of a large and complex enterprise, The "Reno Livestock Events Center" which annually sponsors a number of rodeos, cattle and other animal auctions and other big events on a 43-acre complex in Reno which can seat more than 6,000 spectators. Vern's previous experience in operating and managing, as Commandant of the U.S. Temple Hof Air Base in Berlin, Germany, (one of his interesting assignments) demonstrated his managing skills. He was awarded the Silver Star and the Distinguished Flying Cross, by

the United States Air Force.

In his off-duty time from the Livestock Events Center, "Eagle" spent as much time as possible at Airsailing Gliderport, managing a fleet of 10 club gliders, two club tow planes, and a number of hangars, while acting as president of the Nevada Soaring Association with his dozens of active glider soaring members. He taught dozens of pilots to fly gliders safely.

Bob "Chukar" Spielman (after the Chukar Partridges that populate the high country of northern Nevada) was also an outstanding airman. He was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross and was the one of the highest rated fighter pilots to graduate from the Nellis Air Force Fighter Weapons School in Southern Nevada. After retiring from the USAF, Bob remained active in the Northern Nevada Air Guard (the "Nevada High Rollers") based at the KRNO airport, flying numerous aircraft on currency training missions. Chukar also flew for some years as an airline pilot for Western Airlines (later "Delta"). He succeeded Vern as president of Nevada Soaring Association at Airsailing, and like Vern, worked tirelessly to keep it successful.

On one windy Easter Sunday, Chukar had an unusual glider soaring flight that departed from Minden, NV (KMEV) flying north to an aerial turn-point in Southern Oregon, with a planned return to Minden. After the turn in Oregon, on the southerly return leg to Minden, nearing Reno the weather changed and the lift became spotty enough that Chukar decided to divert to Airsailing Gliderport, which lies northeast of Reno, and land his glider there, as it looked like he might not be able to make it to Minden which was 50 miles south of his position.

As he changed course direction to an easterly heading, he soared over the city of Reno. While doing so, Chukar's glider inadvertently entered a fast developing altocumulus cloud at about 12,000 feet altitude. Believing his glider would exit the other side of the cloud in only a few seconds he continued straight ahead, even though his glider was not equipped with the type of panel mounted instruments necessary to fly in clouds without becoming spatially disoriented, such as an artificial horizon or directional gyro-compass.

Almost immediately after being enveloped by the zero-visibility cloud, Bob heard a loud "pop" like a gunshot, and observed that his glider's left wing was no longer attached to the airplane.

As he contemplated this development, Bob heard a second "pop," as his right wing also departed for parts unknown.

Being fresh out of wings, Chukar jettisoned the glider's canopy and bailed out. This being his first parachute event, he did not immediately find the "D-ring"(ripcord handle), which had come loose from its elastic holder during his scramble to climb out of the falling cockpit. That ripcord handle was dangling down by his left knee as he free-fell. The resulting delay in deploying his parachute canopy resulted in an exhilarating free fall of thousands of feet, while Chukar intently searched for his ripcord handle. When he finally located it he tugged hard to deploy the canopy, which opened when he was only about 1,000 to 1,500 feet above Mother Earth, which had been "coming up" to meet him at an alarming rate of 180 feet per second.

When the canopy opened, Chukar and his parachute were almost directly over the Circus-Circus hotel casino in the heart of downtown Reno. Worse, the easterly winds aloft were drifting his canopy downwind at an alarming speed, probably 25 knots or more, as it descended. Chukar immediately saw that although he would likely miss the top of the Circus-Circus hotel that he was passing over, he was headed for a landing on the open-topped (6th floor) of the adjacent high rise St. Mary's parking building. That was the good news.

The bad news was that because the 6th floor was open-topped, with only a 3-foot high parapet around it, it was more than likely that immediately upon touching down, Bob would be swept right over the low parapet by the very fast easterly wind, but with his canopy now deflated. This would, in turn, result in Bob falling six floors to the ground, without the benefit of a parachute.

At that realization, Chukar made a brilliant and life-changing decision: he instantly steered his rapidly descending canopy directly into a 70-foot high steel light pole that was anchored to the top floor of the open-topped parking garage. Chukar aimed for the light pole, and his timing was perfect: just seconds before he would otherwise have landed on the concrete, open floor of the parking building, his parachute canopy snagged the steel tower, which immediately collapsed it and stopped it (and Chukar) abruptly -- leaving Chukar swinging in the wind, dangling from his parachute harness suspended, with his feet about 12 feet above the concrete deck.

Bob could never have freed himself from his parachute harness because his whole body weight made it impossible to unlatch the emergency "capewell" buckles that connect the parachute harness to its canopy's 28 suspension lines. And this also meant that he would also be unable to release the main parachute harness buckle, which (even had it been possible) would have caused him to fall 10 or 12 feet to the pavement below.

As Chukar was swinging in the wind dangling from his collapsed canopy which itself was snagged on the light pole, contemplating his next move, he heard a loud voice from directly underneath his feet saying: "Hey Bob, what the hell are you doing up there?"

That voice turned out to be from an old friend of 25 years, a senior Reno Police Department officer who had been dispatched to the top floor of the St. Mary's parking building to investigate reports of "something weird hanging from a tall light pole." Chukar recognized his friend, the officer, and asked him to help him get down. The RPD officer then climbed upon the cement base of the light pole, and positioned his own body directly underneath Bob, so that Bob's feet could rest on the shoulders of the officer and relieve the load on the parachute rig. This allowed Bob to release himself from his parachute, and the officer to grasp him and lower him gently to the pavement below. The parachute remained hanging from the light pole, but without Bob in its harness.

Bob's daughter (a physician) soon arrived at the scene. Bob argued against going to a hospital but his daughter insisted, and he spent a day or two in hospital where he learned that among other injuries, he had sustained a fractured clavicle.

Several months later, Chukar returned to soaring gliders and in the ensuing years flew dozens of glider soaring flights out of Airsailing and Minden, Nevada. He also continued to serve as a part time tow plane pilot at Airsailing Gliderport, launching gliders.

Bob was well known and highly respected by the aviation community in Northern Nevada. The FAA, which investigated the incident, cleared him of any violations of Federal Aviation Regulations.

Chukar passed away of natural causes several years later, in 2018, about one year after his friend Eagle had passed away. Both Eagle and Chukar were fond of saying that as enjoyable as flying fighter jets was, they found that flying gliders with no motors was always more fun. Plus, nobody was shooting at them!

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