



# Reflections

*Dedicated to preserving the history of a great airline.*



## Coffee & Conversation at the NWA History Centre

A new program was launched this summer at the NWA History Centre. **Coffee & Conversation** events are bringing great stories from featured speakers and audiences. The first, *Remembering Donald Nyrop*, was Saturday, June 11.

Hosted by Norm Midthun, NWA Captain, ret., this event became a tribute to the man who successfully led Northwest Airlines for 25 years, and who died November 16, 2010 at the age of 98. A capacity crowd shared colorful stories about Mr. Nyrop. Hosts and attendees wore vintage NWA uniforms and name badges. Nancy Nyrop Scherer brought family stories and photographs.

*Meet NWA Orient Route Pioneers*, the second **Coffee & Conversation** event, was Aug. 6. Hosted again by Norm Midthun, a really talented Emcee as well as an Orient Pioneer himself, this event featured stories, photographs and slides from many attendees who were part of NWA's new service across the Pacific beginning in 1947.

Joyce and Howie (Chris) Norvold, Phyllis Curry, Shirley Huskins, Lois Abbott and Bob Gibson all shared memories. Their stories ranged from MSP to Tokyo, with stops in Edmunton, Anchorage and Shemya Island, last outpost in the Aleutian chain. Layovers in Tokyo were remembered as though they were yesterday.



Next up is *"No Rules," what may be the true story of NWA pilot Al Johnson, as told by his son, Rick Seireeni*, at **Coffee & Conversation** on Thursday, Sept. 29, 1:00-3:00 p.m. To whet your appetite, read Rick's story beginning on page 4 of this Special Edition. Do you have Al Johnson stories to share? Both Rick and the audience would enjoy hearing them. Reserve your seat by calling Mary Fryer, 651-699-8833 or E-mail [mcfryer@q.com](mailto:mcfryer@q.com) To order DVDs of all events see page 11.

## *Remembering Donald Nyrop*

Saturday, June 11, 2011 NWA History Centre



*Marianne Blomquist, Mr. Nyrop's secretary*



*Norm Midtbun, NWA Captain, ret. & Nyrop's friend.*



*Mary Ann Gallagher, Bill Marchessault, Bob Reardon, Fay Kulenkamp & Maggie McMahon.*



*Tom Pokonosky,*



*Nancy Nyrop Scherer, Mr. Nyrop's daughter*



*Bob Reardon and Anne Billingsley Kerr*



*Norm Midtbun and Arnie Birnstengel*



*John Horn, former NWA president.  
and Bruce Kitt, NWAHC president.*



*Bryan Moon and Mavis Strandlie*

## Meet NWA Orient Route Pioneers

Saturday, August 6, 2011 NWA History Centre



*Pete Patzke, NWAHC founder, welcomes the crowd and tells his own pioneering stories*



*Norm Midthun - see caption page 12*



*Howie (Chris) Norvold and Joyce Rudquist Norvold*



*George Hamernick*



*l-r: Debby Huskins, Ken Bauman, Norm Midthun, Shirley Huskins, George Hamernick, Stanley Fukai*



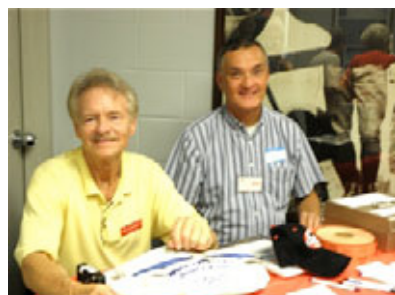
*Mike "Snuffy" and Nok Smith*



*John Peterson, Stanley Fukai and Peter Ropinski*



*Phyllis Curry*



*Bill Marchessault and Bob DuBert*



*Norm Midthun greets Joyce Rudquist Norvold and Howie "Chris" Norvold*



*Flo Dreyer and Susan Rostkoski*

## *“No Rules,” what may be the true story of NWA pilot Al Johnson, as told by his son, Rick Seireeni*

Reprinted from RNPA **Contrails**, February 2011. Hear more from Rick on Sept. 29, at the NWAHC

*Tokyo, early October 2010:*

It was a remarkably warm night given this late autumn, but not unexpected. Japan had just had one of its hottest summers on record, and an unseasonably warm fall was in the forecast. The Japanese have been preoccupied with China - feuding over remote islands and other rare earths. Maybe the hot weather is making everyone irritable. Most of them are at home tonight watching the endless repeats of nationalist rallies. I have just broken into the vacant lot up in Daikanyama next to the Hillside Terrace development. Well, it wasn't that dramatic. I just went around the side of a construction fence and found an unlocked gate behind a parked bicycle. This part of town is now considered the Beverly Hills of Tokyo and clears out early even without the news, so I just walked in.

Dark, overgrown, with bits of rubble here and there, this was the site of one of two Northwest crew compounds. Families were raised in these little pieces of America on the old Asakura-Meiji-era estate. They are both gone now, but not the memories. I came here well after midnight because I needed help - help from a father I never knew.

I've been coming to Japan for decades. My Tokyo partner and I share a brand consulting business. The two of us have been providing brand development and business consulting to many Japanese companies - Mitsubishi Bank, Kirin, and Uniglo, which is the Gap of Japan - but this was the first time we were asked to work on an airline. ANA and their investment partners are planning to launch a new low cost airline later this year - something like Southwest or JetBlue, but for Asia. At this point in our pitch, I was feeling uneasy. We were up against seven other much larger firms, and today's presentation had been met with stony silence.

I'm not a religious man, but I thought it wouldn't hurt if I asked my long dead father for a little help. After all, he hadn't been around much. He owed me something, didn't he? So tonight, I thought I'd ask the spirit world for a little help to win this contract. We needed it.

I heard he liked Four Roses. With a little cheap scotch sprinkled on the ground, I reached out to my biological father, Al Johnson, one of the original Northwest pilots stationed in Tokyo who I guessed had lived here on this site. He was, as I would soon discover, a character right out of pulp fiction.

The next day we got our news. We made the cut. It was now down to us and one other company. I was flabbergasted and more - this was the first time in 61 years that I actually felt a connection to Al. He was present in my life.

### *Everyone Knew Your Dad - Except His Kids*

This unlikely event is what set me on a quest to find out more about him. But where to start? That evening in my boutique hotel room across from Tokyo



*Al Johnson in his early 30s and Rick Seireeni  
at about the same age, but 30 years ago.*

Hands, I started tapping around Google and Ancestry.com - nothing but thousands of Albert Johnsons with the wrong details or no information at all. After a little break in the lobby where I noticed hoards of Chinese - the only people with money to travel these days - I found an Albert Johnson buried in Hibbing in 1958 that turned out to be the wrong guy. Then I tried "Northwest + History." I found the Northwest Airlines History Centre and a couple of contact names. An amazing Internet hunt ensued:

*October 8th*

*Pete:* My father was a pilot for Northwest and died in the late 50s. I didn't know him very well as my mother and father were divorced when I was very young, and he was married to another woman at the time of his death. I believe he was from Hibbing. My mother was a flight attendant for Northwest. He and my mother were among the very first crews flying into Tokyo after the war. They were both stationed there for a time. I'm trying to track down any information or possible pictures of him now that I have a family of my own.

Father's name: Al Johnson, captain, a.k.a. A.T. or Albert Thomas Johnson. Mother: Therese (Terry) McArthur.

*Continued next page*

Almost immediately, Pete Patzke wrote back:

"Rick - I slightly knew an Albert T. Johnson who flew for Northwest for about 20 years, from the mid 1940s into the 60s. He died in 1964. I was a manager in flight operations for most of those years. I'll dig into what records we may have at the History Centre and will also forward your request to RNPA, which is an association of retired NWA pilots. I'm sure someone in that group would have more info."

And did they. Dino Oliva, Gary Ferguson, Vic Britt, Neal Henderson and eventually Anne Kerr and other NWA flight crew jumped in with both feet to help. Pete suggest I contact Shigeaki Morita who was Flight Dispatcher for Northwest in Tokyo beginning in the early 50s. Morita-san was the much appreciated go-to guy before retiring. As I was still in Tokyo, I asked one of our Japanese-speaking staff members to contact Northwest (now Delta) operations, which led to a home phone number. My colleague spoke to his wife and then Morita was on the phone. "Sure, I knew your dad. Who didn't? Your dad was a legend. What do you want to know?"

"A legend? Really?" What did he do?"

Morita said there were many stories and thought for a second. He remembered that they were waiting for Al's flight to return from Seoul sometime in the early 50s when his plane went off the radar around Mount Fuji. Morita was still relatively new at his job and there was a war going on over in Korea. He dutifully called the Japanese Defense Forces to start looking for a downed airliner. About an hour later Al showed up having taken his passengers on an unscheduled sightseeing trip around the Japanese alps.

"That was your dad. No rules," Morita added. "In those days, the Americans were calling the shots. They could do anything they wanted." Morita-san gave me the first third-person confirmation of similar stories my mother had told me; about smuggling gold out of Shanghai, about stealing a P-61 at Boeing Field for a joy ride, about ferrying supplies into Korea during that war under fire ... bits and pieces. I don't know why I didn't start looking into Al's life earlier. Maybe it was because I was adopted by my stepfather. He is the only father I have known and a good one - a solid, honest man who has always treated me as his son. Al, on the other hand, was never in the picture. And just when it seemed like my mother was ready to start talking about her colorful life, she developed Alzheimers and died a few years ago. I was left with one picture of Al, a single gold cufflink with the initials ATJ, a couple letters on NWA stationery, and his watch. That's it. I even had his date of death wrong. He died in 1964, not in the late 50s, but I do remember that day.

I had come home from school in Bellevue and my mom told me that my dad had died.

"Bob? Bob died?"

"No, your real dad, the pilot. He died."

Confused, she told me to put on my dress coat and clip-on tie.

She was going to take me to SeaTac to view the body, but then thought better of it. She left me with neighbors. My mother later told me that his death was a complete shock to everyone. I have come to find out that he died at a female friend's apartment in Seattle of a barbiturate overdose - like Marilyn Monroe. There was a little party going on, and Al complained of being

*Continued next page*

## **VOLUNTEER OPPORTUNITIES**

**Put your talent to work for the NWA History Centre!**

**Hosts/Hostesses needed during museum hours.**

**Call Wayne Snyder 952-698-4478**

**Story and photograph submissions for the newsletter.**

**Call Anne Kerr 612-865-5377**

**Help with many H.C. projects**  
**Call Bruce Kitt 952-698-4478**

### **Publisher**

**NWA History Centre**  
**8101 34th Avenue South**  
**Bloomington, MN 55425**  
**952-698-4478**

[www.wahistory.org](http://www.wahistory.org)

### **Board of Directors**

Bruce Kitt, President  
Pete Patzke, Treasurer  
Jerry Nielsen, V.P. Administration  
Wayne Snyder, V.P. Operations  
Mary Fryer, Secretary  
Al Carriveau, Director  
Dru Dunwoody, Director  
Jay Harrington, Director  
Bob Johnson, Director  
Fay Kulenkamp, Director  
Bill Marchessault, Director  
John Peterson, Director  
Susan Rostkoski, Director  
Anne Kerr, Editor  
Joan Lee, Assistant Editor

### **NWA History Center Hours**

**Monday through Friday**

**11:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.**

**Saturdays**

**9:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m.**

**Members:** *We'd like to hear from you! Have ideas of stories you'd like to see in your newsletter? Photos to share? Send to [editor@nwahistory.org](mailto:editor@nwahistory.org) or call Anne @ 612-865-5377.*



*Al & Terry Johnson's wedding. Attendants are NWA pilot G.B. Dunn and Mrs. Dunn.*

sleepy. He asked to lie down in the bedroom. They found him after midnight. The body was shipped to Hibbing, Minnesota, where he was born and where his first wife and children still lived. I spoke to the mortuary's current owner who looked up the old records. There was a family plot and the names of next of kin. There it was. Now I had two half brothers and one half sister, and maybe some aunts and uncles and cousins.

### *The Makings of a Good Book ... or Movie?*

Al seemed to be one of those characters that make a big impression on everyone they meet. Neal Henderson, a retired NWA pilot wrote, "I never met your father, although I would like to have met him. I heard more colorful stories about him from the early captains I flew with as I started my tour (34 years) with Northwest Airlines than any other pilot. His exploits would make a good book or movie. He was described to me as a high-energy person who lived life to the fullest. He boxed and liked to fight, challenging all comers, but would (and did on occasion) give other pilots the shirt on his back, and if they wouldn't take it he would beat them up, or attempt to."

Yes, I've since confirmed that he was a Golden Gloves boxer in his younger days and was also a track star at Hibbing High School, where he dated and later married his first wife, Bernadine, Berdie for short. His father - my newly discovered grandfather James- worked for the mines. Al had three sisters and three brothers.

Death seemed to haunt this family. Al's mother died of tuberculosis when he was a young man. His youngest sister drowned when she was 16 trying to save an older sister, who later died under mysterious circumstances in a Duluth asylum. I heard that Grandpa James cried and cried over the loss of young Lois, and again later when Al's body was shipped home. Two of Al's children committed suicide, also apparently drug related. Neal wrote, "I heard that (Al) died from suicide after a couple of attempts while still employed by Northwest Airlines."

He drank a lot, but so did others. One person said that he had pain from a car accident. Maybe so, but his airline was transitioning to jets, and I found no mention of a jet rating in his FAA records. Was the now buttoned-up world of aviation leaving him behind? I reread one of the letters he wrote my mother in the early 50s. Writing from Spokane on a milk run, he seemed despondent over his career after the intoxicating thrill of those post-war years in the Orient, and that was 15 years before he died. The handwriting had the look of alcohol in it.

### *Addicted to Love*

Al was pretty lonely in the end according to Betty Stewart, a retired F/A who was probably his last serious girlfriend and who has been a joy to talk with. They had broken up just a few months before his death. He was married at the time to his fourth wife, a woman named Esther (Jill) Johnson from Australia. She may have been independently wealthy. She may have been older than him. They shared a home in Honolulu. Jill died in 2006, we think. An Esther Johnson was listed in Al's mortuary records as his wife but did not attend his funeral. Too many broken promises? Al certainly made an impression on the women in his life. He may have been the love of their lives, but not a man you could really live with.

My mother, who was quite a looker in her youth, jumped on a plane to Tokyo two days after I was born in July, 1949. She and Al married in 1947, but their relationship was already on the rocks. She was flying back to Tokyo to reconcile. When she got to the apartment they shared near Hibiya Park, there was another woman there making dinner.

Terry chased her out with Al's Army-issued 45 and then waited. There was a huge fight. She said she was a fly's breath from shooting him dead. She ran out of the apartment and onto the roof where she spent the night. Al went to the local police Koban to get help looking for her. I think it was during that long night that she decided to move on. She never fell for his entreaties after that. By 1950 he was married again to another flight attendant with another child on the way. That beautiful boy would be the second of his children to take his own life.



*Terry, Minneapolis, 1942*

*Continued next page*

Al's skirt chasing never stopped. Neal Henderson relayed a story he heard: "Late into a party in Seattle, he was making love to a gal under a bush in the backyard of the party house. His girlfriend at the time saw him and in a fit of anger stabbed him 14 times in the back with a steak knife. He never missed a stroke and was later taken to the hospital and survived."

My wife thinks he was addicted to love - the rush of being in love again, and again, and again.

### *Generous, Charming, Always Broke*

It wasn't just the women who were impressed by him - all of which seemed to have been stewardesses, the title used at the time. His fellow pilots have also been an endless source of stories delivered to me thanks to the RNPA email that Vic and the boys sent around to their membership. Some of these stories verge on the truly mythical, like the time Al piloted a plane out of Shemya in the midst of horrific crosswinds. The passengers and crew had been holed up in the infamous Northwest Hotel, a poorly insulated shack. They were freezing to death, and Al decided they had had enough. He wanted to get to Tokyo. He directed his flight engineer to apply differential throttle to the engines to keep the plane from flipping over. The engineer recalled focusing on nothing but a captain's shirtsleeve with a gold ATJ cufflink vibrating, hand straining on the yoke. Then the ground crew cut the cable holding the plane down and off they went like a lurching crab down the runway. A VIP passenger in the back literally shit in his pants. The guy had nothing to wear when they landed at Haneda, so Al gave him his pants. There was Al standing at the entrance to the flight deck in his jacket and underwear, smiling as the dumbstruck passengers disembarked.

Some pilots have told me that they were afraid to fly with him because they never knew what he was going to do next.

Anne Kerr, who authors a great blog about her days as a NWA flight attendant ([www.ladyskywriter.com](http://www.ladyskywriter.com)) has connected me with other F/As who flew with Al. One of those is Julie Elliot who recalled that when she was a rookie in the early 60s, her passengers were waiting to board a Seattle flight being flown by the very impressive looking Captain A.T. Johnson. He kept them waiting on the tarmac - chatting them up about his flying exploits in the 40s - until he had finished smoking his cigar. Many people have suggested that any other pilot would have been fired, but Al was being protected. One story concerned an NWA executive's son who had been

involved in a car accident in Japan in the 40s. A Japanese girl riding with the young man who may have been driving drunk, was killed. He survived. This would have gone badly for the boy, but Al knew people. He got the boy shipped home.

Al's generosity was well known. Pilots who got married were given exquisite gifts of oriental antiques. Anne Kerr told me that fellow F/A Phyllis Curry said she and her pilot husband Chuck were very good friends with Al. "They saw him a lot. She said Al was crazy about (my mom) Terry. When Phyllis and Chuck got married, Al gave them a wedding present. It was a rare Japanese "Blood Vase" inscribed "Fly Boy." He apparently ran an antique business out of his apartment at the NWA compound in Daikanyama. I also recall getting anonymous gifts as a child: a carved black ivory water buffalo; a red fat-bellied Buddha statue; and a miniature samurai sword that I managed to accidentally stab myself in the stomach with. There's that 'aura of suicide' again.

One of his stewardess friends recalled that Al had hailed down the crew car leaving the compound for Haneda. He had missed his ride earlier that morning. He piled in with the rest and asked if they wouldn't mind taking a brief detour. Al directed the driver to a very sketchy part of town. The car pulled over and Al hurried through a small doorway only to emerge minutes later with his jacket defensively wrapped around his fist. He was fending off several very angry Japanese thugs wielding knives. Back in the car, no one said a thing. This was just business as usual for A. T. Johnson.



*Terry McArthur (facing camera) working the galley*

*Continued next page*

Former F/A Kelly Cohn told me that Al had a gun shot wound in his chest. I have a letter to my Mother from him while recuperating in a Tokyo hospital in 1948 from who knows what.

Retired F/A Julie Elliot relayed the following from her friend Betty Stewart, the same Betty Stewart that dated Al toward the end: "Betty told me a funny story about Al showing some people on Shemya a gun. Al put three holes in the ceiling. People were sort of alarmed because now the rain would come into the house. Al thought he could fix it by putting three holes in the floor so it would drain out. I don't think Betty could have made this up."

Kelly told me they had a layover in Seattle and were hungry. They went down to the local grocery store. Out of sight, Al stuffed a big carrot down his pants. He walked up to her and put her hand on his crotch. "What do you think of that?"

"I've known better," she said dryly. She knew his tricks.

Another pilot, Norman Hilson, who was stationed with Al in Tokyo in the 40s, told fellow pilot Arthur Daniel the following story, "We were walking down the street in Tokyo and a G.I. came along with \$5 in his hand. He said "Five dollars to the man who can whip me." Al punched the guy, grabbed the five, and didn't even miss a step." And that was the other thing. Al was constantly broke. He'd come into money, sometimes lots of money, and then it would be gone.

### *Leaving Children Behind Like Some People Leave Their Keys at the Restaurant*

Al had three children before marrying my mother. He was married two more times, four in all, and had at least one more son after me. By the middle of last November, I already understood that this boy and one of the boys from the first marriage had died - but two known siblings remained. I hired an ancestry expert, a kind of private detective, to track them down. Just before Christmas, I got an email from Susan Morrow: "I may have found Sheila, Albert's daughter." She turned out to be a defense attorney living in Pennsylvania, and I was able to locate her through a poetry group that she was a member of. I called the group's editor, "Do you by any chance know a Sheila, the attorney?"

"Who wants to know?"

"Well I think I may be her brother. Did she grow up in Hibbing and have a dad who flew for Northwest?" Bingo. Sheila turned out to be this lady's neighbor. A few

minutes later I was talking to a sister I never knew I had. She's the sharp one of the family. We've been exchanging information ever since. I've learned of a brother living in Wisconsin and all about the Johnson family, living and dead.

Sadly, I've read letters posted by Al to Sheila when she was very young making wild promises. In one, he promises to fly her to Hawaii. Of course, it never happens. In another, he explains that he is finally posted in a warm climate - Manilla - and will be back very soon, in about 18 months. I wonder if he realized that a week is an eternity for a child. In one of his letters to my mom, he's not sure about the spelling of my name, "It's Ricky, isn't it?" If he was alive today, I'd soundly kick his butt and then give him a hug, What were you thinking?

And then I remembered. He had intercepted me coming home from school when I was 7 or 8. He asked me if I wanted to drive his Corvette. I think he was living in the Shorewood Apartments on Mercer Island. I remember sitting on his lap pretending to steer the car. He had his uniform on. I was impressed. My mother was not amused.

Funny how just one incident can affect a young mind. I picked up my private when I was 17. If I had had you guys (RNPA) as mentors, I'd be writing this from the inside and not the outside. I drifted away from aviation and toward a career in design. But anyone interested can take my son under his/her wings. He's shown a definite interest at 10 years old. They will still need pilots to drive those super wide-body planes being developed by MIT.

### *Where is the Northwest Gold?*

In all my imagination, I never expected my pilgrimage to the NWA compound to turn into this - a four-fold increase in the size of my family - and it hardly stops here.

My sister Sheila, other pilots and F/As, girlfriends and wives have all hinted at smuggling and gun running. Some of the older pilots have said this is a myth that has been floating around NWA for decades, but others believe the stories are based in fact. I can tell you this, my mother told me flat out that she



*Al and Terry in Shanghai, 1948*

*Continued next page*

and Al were involved in gold smuggling out of Shanghai prior to 1949. Some of the details were echoed by one of Al's ex-wives. Sheila told me that Al was involved in gun running to South America. All of this makes sense when you think about it. In China before the fall of Shanghai, the country's wealth and cultural patronage was being emptied out via the Yangtze River.

As the wealthy were escaping Mao's conquest and the Nationalist blockade, many turned to airline and shipping personnel to get themselves and their loot out of China. My partner, who is ethnic Chinese but grew up in Japan, has told me that this is how his father got their family money out of China - in this case via BOAC. One story told by Neal Henderson with many variations has it that pilots complained that they could not trim one of the NWA planes. On inspection in Seattle, gold was found in the wingtip.

The story my mother told me and that has been retold by others has it that a fixer named Jimmy Ling was connecting wealthy Chinese refugees with NWA personnel. My mother told me that Jimmy would bring gold over to the Peace Hotel where NWA staff laid over.

My mother would go through customs carrying two or three gold bars. Foreign airline crews were not checked by Chiang Kai-Shek's troops. Vic Britt described a story told to him by Ken Bennett and Terry Marsh. "Ken and Terry said that when the Reds were closing in on Shanghai (in May of 1949) they woke the crew in the middle of the night. They packed up an airplane with all the NWA people and the Northwest "gold" and flew to Tokyo with no flight plan at 200 feet so no one could pick them up. He said your dad got away with a lot of things after that, which would have gotten anyone else fired - and it was probably because of what he did that last night in Shanghai. It was the last "round eye" flight out of China for a long time."

So, did Al Johnson fly the last plane out of Shanghai? Jimmy Ling, who owned a textile company and was associated with Chinese gangsters, like the infamous Big Ears Du, was subsequently stabbed to death. If gold had been diverted, then Jimmy might have taken the fall.

An even more provocative story has it that three planes flew millions of dollars in gold out of Shanghai only to be diverted via Tokyo, Shemya and Anchorage to a destination in Utah where the gold was delivered to who knows who. I don't have permission to tell you the source of this story, but it was someone very close to Al. Her fear? Some of the other flight crew died under mysterious circumstances shortly after.

The gun running story also makes sense. America was supporting many right wing regimes in Central and

South America. Anyone with connections to Washington and the CIA could have called on pilots, like Al Johnson, to do a little side work, which may explain why Al occasionally came into large amounts of money. This is where fact and fiction make a fabulous cocktail. I was hoping to interview Donald Nyrop, the former president of Northwest and director of the CAB, about these stories. The RNPA guys were trying to set this up, but sadly he died before it could happen. I really should have started this research earlier.

### *A Pilot's Pilot*

The other day, a long awaited batch of FAA documents arrived in a plain manila envelope. I had to jump through hoops to get them. They contained a record of Al Johnson's certifications - most of them fuzzy Xerox copies. He started flying in 1941 at a local Hibbing airport. According to a Hibbing native and fellow pilot, he probably took advantage of the government's free pilot training program at the time. One of my new nephews told me Al got in trouble flying upside down over the giant Hibbing mine pit. Between 1941 and 1942, he obtained his multi-engine, instrument, commercial and transport licenses. He failed one test, re-took it three months later and passed. I assume he went to work for Northwest in the northern region under a war contract with the ATC. I think this is where he met my mother, who told me she also flew into Canada and Alaska along the treacherous Alcan highway route. I believe he received his command certificate for DC3s in Manila in '49. By 1958, he had about 15,000 PIC hours - on the record. Off the record, who knows?

Al was certainly a character, pro and con. Fellow pilots may have had to sober him up after a bender, but he was a hell of a pilot. Peter Jenkins recalled a comment from his father Reg Jenkins, who was among other things Vice President, Orient Region and an early Director of Operations for Tokyo and Shanghai. "He would always say that your dad was one of the best natural pilots he'd ever known." Peter, who grew up in Tokyo and knew Al, was kind enough to let me retell his story, which I've edited for brevity.

*"On the night of the flight in question, there was a large, bad typhoon passing over Tokyo and outward on the route they would have to pass through. The visibility on the ramp and across the field looked pretty grim, with high winds and gusts driving heavy rains sideways in sheets. My Dad was concerned that the flying conditions were getting pretty marginal.*

*After reviewing the flight plan and the weather reports with the meteorologist on duty, Al's decision was to go. (Northwest was the only airline that had its own meteorology department, and prided itself that their own weather data and*

*Continued next page*

---

*analysis was consistently better than the official weather reports issued by the US Air Force in those days.)*

*At the time an airport expansion program was under way. Apparently the airport authorities assumed that the construction activity had been suspended due to the awful weather and for that very same reason the folks in the tower could not see beyond the active runway that the work that night, had, in fact, continued.*

*When all the passengers had boarded and the loading of mail, baggage and freight was completed, Al taxied the Douglas DC-4 out to the threshold to cycle his controls and run up his engines. He was completely unaware of the construction activity*

*Everything looked good from the cockpit, and Al was cleared for takeoff. The DC-4 rolled down the runway through the driving rain and gathered speed. About this time a dump truck had just finished loading, and its driver and his assistants decided to take a shortcut from the construction site to a landfill area . . . directly across the middle of the active runway. The construction crew figured that flights were shut down for the duration of the typhoon, and they could get more work done as they had the field all to themselves."*

*(Isn't this what causes accidents, mutual assumptions?)*

*"By the time Al had spotted the truck through the gloom and rain, it was too late. He was somewhere between V-1 (the speed at which he could abort the take-off and safely stop within the remaining runway) and V-2 (the speed at which the plane was rated to climb.) There was a split second to react, and even the right and timely reaction was likely to be fatal under the best of circumstances . . . yet Al got her rotated and somehow very gently climbing ever so slightly . . . on a knife edge between a flat-out stall if he rushed it . . . and smashing into the dump truck if he couldn't get the old gal to climb.*

*The first my Dad knew of all this was when Al in a calm voice over the radio explained what had happened and requested clearance to land again immediately. With all the routine thumps, groans and whines of the take-off - wheel struts coming up into the wells, flaps retracting, and engines roaring - the rest of the flight crew figured they were home free, and miraculously so. Even the dump truck driver later told the authorities that he was completely unaware that there was a plane behind him until he was overwhelmed by the glare of its landing lights and the roar of engines as it passed, in his words, "very low."*

*But Al felt something about the controls didn't feel quite right as he climbed out from the field and thus decided to return to Haneda to have maintenance give it a thorough going over. This was despite the fact that landing under those deteriorating weather conditions would be no easy matter even if the plane was not damaged.*

*My Dad said Al made the landing look incredibly smooth and gentle despite the awful conditions . . . and a*

good thing he did. On inspection the mechanics noticed a long indented scrape on the belly of the fuselage just between the wings. There were no gaping holes or fluid leaks, so they didn't think the damage looked that bad to them, but due to Al's insistence, they began pulling skin panels to see what lurked beneath. What they then discovered was a crack in the main box section of the wing spar. If Al had continued flying, they said, the wings would have sooner or later (and probably sooner, given the turbulence of the storm) simply broken off in flight or on touchdown."

Peter commented, "That was the Al Johnson I remember most. He was a pilot's pilot when he was at the controls in the cockpit."

### *A Few Words About Mommy*

And just so you don't think Al deserves all the glory, my mother had quite a history of her own. Terry McArthur was raised in France, born to a Scottish-American father from Olympia, Washington and a French mother. James McArthur had remained in France after his service as an army officer in WWI and became the director of the International Harvester factory in Wasquehal, near the Belgium border. Terry and her sisters were raised in a Brussels convent, the custom of the time. My grandfather loved adventure and once took the family on a car trip to Egypt. Yes, by car.

When the Germans invaded in 1939, my mother's family boarded one of the last ships out of the continent, the SS Washington - loaded mostly with Jewish refugees. There were big American flags painted on the side to ward off German U-boats. America had not yet entered the war, but the passengers slept in their life-jackets nonetheless. Her family relocated to Louisville, Kentucky, home to International Harvester. That is where she graduated from high school. As the war in Europe was coming to a close, the family was planning to return to their little town in dreary northeastern France. Not Terry. She had seen America and wanted to stay. She moved to Minnesota where she trained to become an airline stewardess. Anne Kerr has miraculously found a picture of my mother receiving her NWA wings in a hotel ceremony. She was known to fellow F/As as the cute one with the French accent. Terry's flying career was cut short by her pregnancy, and she eventually wound up in Los Angeles working for Northwest as a ticket agent. She put me in a boarding school. From there we moved to Seattle where she met my Dad who gave me a secure upbringing.

A few years ago, as Mom's memory was fading, she would cup my face in her hands and tell me that I looked just like Al. "The stories, the stories," she would tell me, but it has come to you to fill in those details

*Continued next page*

## A Big Thank You

In these days of the Internet, finding a biological parent is not such big news. What is news, for me at least, is discovering the intense camaraderie among the flight crews of Northwest Airlines. We're losing the older guys and gals, who were contemporaries of my father, but the younger ones are running with the ball - archiving memories and sharing stories.

One of these is Gary Ferguson, who wrote, "Although Al wasn't a military pilot, he was undoubtedly influenced by those post-war pilots he knew. One has to remember that piloting in the post-war era was accomplished in large part by the survivors who had watched some 37,000 fellow pilots die in training accidents and countless others in accidents and combat.

"Flying was a risky business then and the young ones who were doing it in Al's timeframe considered themselves survivors and 'bulletproof.' Some of those young military pilots had learned that survival and efficiency sometimes meant that some rules were there to be broken." Al Johnson certainly took his chances and broke his share of the rules.



Rosie Stein (L) and Jerry Rudquist, pinning wings on Therese McArthur at the Nicollet Hotel, Minneapolis - probably 1945.

In one of his few remaining letters to my mother shortly after their divorce, Al Johnson wrote,

*March 12, 1950, postmarked from Portland, Oregon on Northwest Airlines, Route of the Stratocruisers, airmail stationery.*

*"My Dear Terry,*

*Enclosed is a check for \$50 to help things along in L.A. I left Mpls last night an hour before Don Jones was killed in that crash - sure was a bad deal, but definitely not a wing falling off. Guess Don just got too low. I fly every day from now on - practically - being a junior captain has its drawbacks.*

*Hope you and Ricky are in the pink. No sickness. I wish you the best of luck too.*

*LS ever, Al"*

For his surviving children, Sheila, Jim and myself, Al Johnson will always be our tragically romantic father. We miss you. ➔

A huge thanks to Jim Anderson, Warren Avenson, Bob Bartholomay, Ken Bennett, Vic Britt, Kelly Cohn, Phyllis (and Chuck) Curry, Arthur Daniel, Dick Dodge, Julie Elliot, Gary Ferguson, Jac Flemming, Marie Force, Phil Hallin, Neal Henderson, Peter Jenkins, Dennis P. Johnson, Anne Kerr (author of *Fujiyama Trays & Oshibori Towels*), Joe Kimm, Dick Smith, Terry and Spence Marsh, Joyce Rudquist Norvold (and Jerry Rudquist), Dino Oliva, Pete Patzke, Joe Pehoushek, Bonnie Russell, Betty Stewart . . . and, of course, to my newfound sister and brother and the Johnson family.

Copyright 2010 Richard Seireeni, All rights reserved. Reproduction by permission. The author may be contacted at [rseireeni@brandarchitect.com](mailto:rseireeni@brandarchitect.com), if you wish to add to the story.



## Coffee & Conversation at the NWA History Centre

*Dedicated to preserving the history of a great airline*

### DVDs of these popular events now available!

*Remembering Donald Nyrop*, June 11, 2011 \$20 plus \$3 S&H

*Meet NWA Orient Route Pioneers*, Aug. 6, 2011 \$20 plus \$3 S&H

*"No Rules,"* Rick Seireeni, Sept. 29, 2011 Available at special pre-event price of \$15 plus \$3 S&H

**Call Mary 651-699-8833 or stop at the NWA History Centre Gift Shop to order your copies.**





8101 34th Avenue South  
Bloomington, MN 55425



*Norm Midthun with his  
1947 metal suitcase made  
from a Japanese Zero fighter*

**Join us for our Third Coffee & Conversation Event:**

*"No Rules," what may be the true story of NWA pilot Al Johnson,  
as told by his son, Rick Seireeni*



*Rick's dad, Al T. Johnson  
NWA Captain*

Thursday, September 29, 2011

1:00 - 3:00 p.m.

NWA History Centre

8101 34th Avenue South

Bloomington, MN 55425

**Space is limited . . .  
send your \$5 check today!**



*Rick's mom, Terry McArthur  
NWA Stewardess*

Rick Seireeni will be at the NWA History Centre in person, telling his compelling story of how the NWA H.C. and RNPA helped him discover his father, NWA Captain Al Johnson, whom he had scarcely known. Rick's mom, Therese (Terry) McArthur, was a stewardess with NWA, and she and Al divorced when Rick was very young. Read his incredible story, reprinted inside from **Contrails** ~ and bring your own Al Johnson stories or photographs to share with Rick and other museum guests. Don't miss this! But if you must, call Mary to reserve a DVD of the event for the pre-program price of \$15 *plus* \$3 shipping and handling, if necessary.

**R.S.V.P. to Mary Fryer at 651-699-8833 or E-mail [mcfryer@q.com](mailto:mcfryer@q.com)**