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The Best Corporate Hangar I Ever Saw

The appraisal assignment was to determine a value that the buyer, a FBO-heavy maintenance operation and the seller, a corporate flight department that was selling its assets, could use to determine the price of a corporate hangar facility. I had been told beforehand that this particular facility was a very nice example, and as I conducted the inspection with the flight department chief, I was continually struck by the well-conceived quality of the hangar, particularly the way that many small, but important details, had been carefully worked out before construction began.

The depth of the hangar was 100 feet, and the back wall was designed so it could be moved 50 feet rearward, so the hangar would have a 150 foot by 150 foot bay if required in the future, greatly expanding its capacity and utility. Input from maintenance personnel had assured that the lockers in the mechanics area were wide enough to accommodate toolboxes, and a blue stripe had been painted around the top of the white hangar walls so mechanics that were working on high tail surfaces would not be as likely to get vertigo, and fall off the scaffolding or mechanical lifts, as the flight department head told me he had seen happen when he was serving in the Navy as an attack pilot.

This was all impressive, for I had in the past appraised a number of high-end corporate hangars that had turned out to have many operational and practical shortcomings once they were put into service, despite the lavish (and expensive) upfront architectural component which had guided their construction. When I conveyed this to the gentleman, and offered my sincere compliments on a very nice job in conceptualization and planning, he deflected my praise, and gave others credit as well. Trying to learn as much as I could, I pressed him for details, and attempted to understand his methods so that one day if I ever got the chance, I might build as good a hangar. When he found he couldn't really tell me how he had developed some particular concept, he finally just said, “I had a long time to work on my thinking-skills when I was in prison.” I was taken aback. He seemed too All-American and clean-cut to have been caught flying a DC-3 full of marijuana. Since he had no qualms about telling me this, I asked him point-blank if he would elaborate.

I was correct in assuming that aviation might be involved, but the aircraft he was flying was a Douglas AD-1 attack aircraft. The term was seven and a half years, and the prison was the *Hanoi Hilton*. When someone tells you something of this magnitude, there is not much to say. So for once, I said nothing.

Fortunately for me, my tour guide was used to this, and had a well rehearsed (and funny) icebreaker as a follow up, and this allowed me to continue the conversation without embarrassing myself too seriously. Over lunch at the airport café that followed, and over many lunches and dinners through the years (I always tried to pick up the tab), I had the good fortune to hear my new friend detail how he and his fellow prisoners kept their minds intact, if not always their bodies. My friend, of course, liked to design houses and other structures. An Air Force Captain was building an airport, and another prisoner was building a Heathkit. Remember those. A home built stereo system for Type A personalities. All of this happened in their minds. "When I was in my cell, I had complete control. When I was out of my cell, I had no control whatsoever." he said.

Without a doubt, my favorite story was about the naval aviator from Louisiana whose job as a teenager was as a projectionist in a movie theater. He had seen virtually all of the popular films of the day hundreds of times as a result. On Thursday night, *Movie Night*, his fellow prisoners would form around him, and he would screen *Splendor in the Grass* or *Lawrence of Arabia* for them. If his voice held out, sometimes there was a double feature.

The dark side of life in the Hanoi Hilton was another story. As one of the early prisoners, before the North Vietnamese began to understand their value as political capital, my friend and his fellow captives were subject to inhuman treatment. It was hard to listen to him tell the tales, because he described it in such a matter-of-fact tone. To speak of it, however, gave my friend strength, and the larger meaning of freedom was a constant theme that ran through our discussions, and also formed the basis of his successful career as a motivational speaker, in addition to his aviation-related activities. One of his themes was that all humans have some capacity to endure the unthinkable, and that he was no Superman. "You are *all* stronger than you think you are," he said to his audiences.

The hangar was eventually sold, and later, after reverting to the airport, *The Best Corporate Hangar I Ever Saw* still functions as well as ever. My friend, Captain Edward A. Davis, didn't want to be a hero, although a lot of people correctly regarded him as one. He wanted to be an astronaut, which in 1962, was the most exciting job in the world for an Annapolis graduate and aspiring aviator. It didn't work out that way, of course, and after pancreatic cancer finally did what the North Vietnamese tried to do to him on a number of occasions, he was buried in Section 54, Site 3546 at Arlington National Cemetery in May of 2007.

There are few days that go by in my life where I don't ask myself whether "am I in my cell, or out of my cell?" It is my version of the ubiquitous *Serenity Prayer.* Most of the time, I am involved in some mundane experience such as standing in line at Motor

Vehicles. I hope that Ed is somewhere up there laughing at me for this one, for I know the score, the DMV isn't a true out-of-cell experience; my impatience (i.e. weakness) just makes it one. What's more important is what I do with my in-cell time, so I try not to waste brain cells, don't sweat the small stuff, and most important, appreciate my freedom knowing now as I do who picked up the tab for it.