**MARINE AVIATOR TRIBUTE**

**As we get older and we experience the loss of old friends, we begin to realize that maybe us ‘bullet-proof’ Marines won't live forever, are not so bullet-proof anymore. We ponder… if I was gone tomorrow, did I say what I wanted to my Marine Brothers. The answer was no! Hence, the following few random thoughts.**

**When people ask me if I miss flying, I always say something like – “Yes! I miss the flying because when you are flying, you are totally-focused on the task-at-hand. It’s like nothing else you will ever do (almost). But then I always say “However, I miss the Squadron and the guys even more than I miss the flying.” Why you might ask?**

**"They were a bunch of aggressive, wise ass, cocky, insulting, sarcastic bastards in smelly flight-suits who thought a funny thing to do was to fart and see if they could clear a room. They drank too much, they chased women, they flew when they shouldn’t, they laughed too loud and thought they owned the sky, the Bar, and generally thought they could do everything better than the next guy. Nothing was funnier than trying to screw with a buddy and see how pissed-off they would get. They flew planes and helos that leaked, that smoked, that broke, that couldn’t turn, that burned fuel too fast, that never had auto pilots or radars, and with systems that were archaic next to today’s new-generation aircraft. All true!**

**But a little closer look might show that every guy in the room was sneaky smart and damn competent and brutally handsome! They hated to lose or fail to accomplish the mission and seldom did. They were the laziest guys on the planet until challenged and then they would do anything to win. They would fly with wing-tips overlapped at night through the worst weather with only a little red light to hold on to, knowing that their Flight Lead would get them on the ground safely. They would fight in the air knowing the greatest risk and fear was that another fighter would arrive at the same six o’clock at the same time they did. They would fly in harm’s way and act nonchalant as if to challenge the ‘grim reaper’.**

**The RIOs and Copilots would fly with another Pilot in all weather conditions, at speeds up to 600 knots so low there would be dust-trails. Or fight at slow, slow airspeeds at an altitude that meant if the airplane stalled, they would not be recovering. Then they would call the pilot a dumb shit, laugh, and go up again the next day and do it all over again. We dove at the ground and pressed the target to get the job done. Some paid a dear price. We belonged to famous Marine Squadrons heralding from WW II and Korea, and we created bonds that will never break.**

**When we went to another base, we were the best Squadron on the base as soon as we landed. Often we were not welcomed back. When we went into a Bar we owned the Bar (even if it was a No Name Bar). We were lucky to have the Best of the Best in the Marine Corps. We knew it and so did others. We found jobs, lost jobs, got married, got divorced, moved, went broke, got rich, broke something and the only thing you could really count on was if you really needed help, a fellow Marine Aviator would have your back.**

**I miss the call signs, nick names, and the stories behind them. I miss the ‘getting lit-up’ in a bar full of my buddies and watching the incredible, unbelievable things that were happening. I miss the Kangaroo Courts and the victims’ poor aim when trying to hit a Judge. I miss the Roach eating contests and the ALMAR Fart Offs. I miss the Mess Nights where an Aviator would cut a candelabra’s candles ‘in-half’ with his dull sword, and where Generals’ introductions were routinely screwed-up. I miss the Plane Captains saluting as you taxied out the flight line. I miss the lighting of the Afterburners, if you had them, especially at night. I miss the going straight-up and straight-down. I miss the cross countries. I miss the dice games at the bar for drinks. I miss listening to bull shit stories while drinking and laughing till my eyes watered.**

**I miss three-man lifts. I miss the dreadful Choir. I miss Yuma ‘nacho-eating contests’ along with hotly fought Buffarillo contests. I miss naps in the ready room with a room full of pilots working-up new tricks to torment the sleeper. I miss flying upside down in the Grand Canyon, and hearing about flying so low that boats were blown over. I miss coming into the break Hot and looking over and seeing three wingmen ‘tucked-in tight’ ready to make the troops on the ground proud. I miss belches that could be heard in neighboring states. I miss putting on ad hoc Air Shows that might be over someone’s home or farm in far-away towns. I miss Slut Cruises.**

**Finally I miss hearing “DEAD BUG” being called out at the bar, and seeing and hearing a room of men hit-the-deck with drinks spilling and chairs being knocked over as they rolled in the beer and kicked their legs in the air, followed closely by a Not Politically Correct ‘Tap-Dancing and Singing’ spectacle that couldn’t help but make you grin and order another round!**

**I am a lucky guy and have lived a great life! One thing I know is that I was part of a special, really-talented bunch of guys doing something dangerous and doing it better than most. Flying the most beautiful, ugly, noisy, solid aircraft ever built. Supported by Marines committed to making sure we came home again! Being prepared to fly and fight and die for America. Having a clear mission. Having fun.**

**We ‘box-out’ the bad memories most of the time, but never the hallowed memories of our fallen comrades. We are often amazed at how good war-stories never let the truth interfere and they get better with age. We are lucky bastards to be able to walk into a Ready Room or a Bar and have men we respect and love shout out our names, our call signs, and know that this is truly where we belong. We are Marine Aviators. We are the Few and the Proud.**