

# Virginia Aviation History Project



## The Cuban Adventure of Alvin Lefleur

by Linda Burdette

Never did Al LeFleur think that he would play a role in the United States' relationship with Cuba. Not that he hadn't had an adventurous life. He had always been interested in aviation. Even as a child in New York, he was fascinated by aircraft of any sort and a keen builder of model aircraft. He clearly remembers the Hindenburg flying over the Bronx; watching it eagerly until it was out of sight; and soon after seeing the smoke from the explosion and fire in Lakehurst, New Jersey. Undaunted by that incident, he later joined the U.S. Marines and in 1947, while stationed on Guam, he earned his pilot's license, training in an airplane similar to a Piper Cub although he doesn't remember the exact aircraft. He proudly explains that the largest airplane he has flown was a Beechcraft Model 18 Twin and he also has a few hours on a helicopter. After leaving the military, Al traveled often between New York and Florida, working as a golf pro and entertainer. One of his fond memories is playing the piano at the Palm Court in the New York City's Plaza Hotel.

And so in 1964 at age 33, he found himself settled in Miramar, Florida, with a lovely wife and two children. His Cessna 180 tail dragger, N1695C, was one of the first built in 1953 and, with the ability to take off in less than 100 feet, he could go just about

anywhere in it. He used it and a Citabria Airbatic to fly between New York, Florida, and South Carolina, all locations where he could work as a golf pro. During this time, Al had a good friend, Trevor Bruce Burns, from Saratoga, New York, a former bush pilot in Alaska, but in 1964 a salesman whose territory extended from New York to the Caribbean. Burns and LeFleur regularly flew together to the Florida Keys to play golf. During their flights they talked and joked about what to do in the case



**On the ramp at the Rancho Bayeros Airport outside Havana. L to R: Al Lefleur; Dr. Jose Marquez, the physician who treated Trevor Burns; Swiss Ambassador E.A. Stadelhofer; Minister for Foreign Affairs Raul Roa; Trevor Burns; E.A. Etter, Swiss Consul.**

of a water landing. Al had trained in this in the military, but in Guam the focus was on what to do

if you were in the water with sharks. The training included instruction to drop all jewelry; tread water; and if a shark approaches, go under water and give them a Bronx cheer. The noise and bubbles should startle the shark into retreating. The buddies couldn't have anticipated the usefulness of that conversation, but you could say that Al's big Cuban adventure began right then because without that information, Burns might not have survived the shark-infested waters of the Caribbean.

The ordeal for Trevor (Teddy) Burns began on Sunday, February 16, 1964. Burns had flown to Kingston, Jamaica, on a sales trip and departed in his 65 h.p. Taylorcraft for Corpus Christi, Texas, where he was scheduled to appear at an air show. The news reports of the day reflect that Burns' airplane ran out of fuel, but Lefleur scoffs at that. He says Teddy Burns would never have run out of fuel if not for the unexpected storm. In Jamaica, Burns checked the weather report provided by the British authorities and it was a beautiful day for a flight over the Caribbean. Except it wasn't. Contrary to the forecast, a typhoon blew up and Burns' fabric covered two-seater Taylorcraft was at the mercy of the storm. He fought his way through it but was blown off course and finally realized that he wouldn't have sufficient fuel to make land. The forced landing in the water caused the airplane's windshield to pop out, but Burns was uninjured and was able to get out of the aircraft with only his "Mae West" life jacket before the airplane sank in the deep waters. Burns shrugged off his shirt and slacks, put on the life jacket, and checked that his waterproof watch was still working. He was particularly concerned because at 43 years of age and 222 pounds, he wasn't the most athletic of men and certainly not a good swimmer. Nevertheless, prior to the crash, he had reckoned that he was about 85 miles from the coast of Cuba and at 2 p.m. that Sunday he began dog-paddling toward Cuba.

About 90 minutes later, he saw his first sharks. Two large sharks, around 6 - 7 feet long, began circling him, coming to within three feet of him. Burns thought he was done for and began some serious praying. He admitted later that if the sharks at-

tacked, he planned to duck underwater and take in water to drown himself before he could be killed by the sharks. But he wasn't quite willing to give up without a fight. When they got close enough, he swiped at them with a penknife he was carrying and then went under the water and used Lefleur's Bronx cheer. Miraculously it worked and the two sharks left the area. As night fell, his spirits fell also and he found it very difficult to go on, until the wave he was on crested and he saw a light blinking in the far distance. He never knew exactly what that light was, but it gave him the courage and stamina to continue. He remembered President Kennedy's long swim in the Pacific during World War II and decided that if Kennedy could do it, he'd follow that lead. But he described this stage of his ordeal as a nightmare. In the dark water, he was never certain what was around him and all night he felt things brushing against him, sometimes feeling the wake and turbulence of something very large, and never knowing if the next seconds or minutes would bring his death.

When the sun came up on Monday morning, all he could see was water and he felt the last of his determination draining away. But about 8:30 a.m., again from the crest of a wave, he saw a thin dark line on the horizon and hoped against all hope that it was Cuba. Up to this point, the sea had been calm, but now the wind increased and the waters became choppy. It became harder to paddle against wind and tides. By now, the exposure, dehydration, and fatigue had taken an almost inhuman toll on Burns and he began suffering hallucinations, hearing people talk to him and, at one point, believing that a boat had found him and the people on it gave him a milkshake. As he went deeper into this state, he began to just drift along. The thing that woke him was a large shark heading straight for him. Although he was able to focus on the shark, he just didn't have the energy to take any action, just floating for an hour as the shark circled him and finally lost interest. After that, he began paddling again and finally at 5:30 p.m. on Monday, after almost 28 hours in the water, he reached the coral reef that he'd seen on the horizon. It took him an hour to get out of the water; muscle cramps in his legs and

arms wouldn't let him climb the reef and the waves kept knocking him against the coral, inflicting cuts and abrasions. He managed to get a few feet out of the water and collapsed. When he looked down, he couldn't see his body. At first, he thought it was another delusion, but then realized that his vision was obscured by thousands of sand crabs in the water and on the reef. He lay there all night, covered by the crabs, beyond caring or the ability to do anything more to save himself.

At 9:30 a.m. on Tuesday morning, a small Cuban patrol boat came to meet him with machine guns at the ready. As he had suspected, he was near Guano Key in Cuba. The Cuban Navy took him to a nearby lighthouse for first aid, water, and rest. But Burns quickly realized that the rescue was potentially as dangerous as the ocean. He endured 18 hours of questioning about his activities, asked repeatedly if he were with the CIA and what he was doing in Cuban waters. They took him to a hospital in Cienfuegos, Las Villas province, and he was treated for exposure, dehydration, and severe sunburn on the side of his body that faced the sun. He was eventually transferred to a hotel in Havana, the Habana Libre, formerly the Habana Hilton, and Dr. Jose Marquez, who claimed to be Fidel Castro's personal doctor, was assigned as his physician. Burns' story was printed in the Cuban newspapers and they were quite taken with his exploits, calling him "The Man Who Was Reborn." His recovery took two weeks and although the Cuban government reported that he was given complete freedom in the city, one must note that his injuries kept him from walking until three days before departure. However upon his return to the United States, he was full of compliments about his treatment at the Habana Libre stating that he was "treated swell all the way."

Nonetheless, Burns' stay in Cuba created a problem for the two governments. The United States and Cuba had not recognized each other for some years and the relations between the governments could be described as frosty at best. There were no means for Burns to return home and certainly Cuba would not sanction official transportation for him. The Swiss government agreed to act as go-between for

the two countries, but they were having a difficult time of it. For a while it looked as though the best solution they could arrange was for Burns to be transported home by the Mexican government, but that was going to take 2-3 months to arrange. Teddy Burns was recuperating in limbo and despite the current attitude of the Cuban government, he admitted that he "was in over his head" and wanted desperately to go home.

Meanwhile, back in Miramar, Florida, the close-knit pilot community was very concerned about one of its own being stuck in Cuba. Ever the brash young pilot, Al began to talk with others about flying to Cuba and liberating his buddy from the Cubans. Well, the Cuban community in Miami was mostly anti-Castro and the word apparently got around about the imprisoned American and his friends who wanted him back. Al's recollection is that he "couldn't see any reason not to do it" and so the Miramar pilots and the Cuban underground in Miami began discussing ways to accomplish just that. So you can imagine Al's shock when, late one night, there was a knock on his door and two black-suited short-haired obviously-government types were standing there and wanted to speak with him. Al's first thought was that his plan had been discovered and he was probably in big trouble for even thinking of this far-fetched rescue. However the agents weren't there to arrest him; they wanted his help!

With all the publicity surrounding Burns' situation in Cuba, and the apparent difficulty of getting him returned via normal channels, the CIA had decided to get involved. One could also speculate that they saw it as a great opportunity for a little intelligence gathering and Al Lefleur offered the perfect opportunity. The CIA said they would not only make it possible for him to fly to Cuba to pick up Burns, but they would provide a straight shot in an airplane and all the assistance he needed. Lefleur quickly agreed and two days later, went to the CIA offices in Miami where he met with a State Department representative and was given a passport which specifically allowed one and only one round-trip to Cuba



Al Lefleur in front of his collage telling about his Cuban adventure.

and expired on March 22, 1964. His wife, Beverly, was totally in support of his efforts and offered to accompany him as co-pilot, but her request was denied by the both governments. The CIA representatives gave him a small German camera with which he was to take as many pictures as possible in Cuba. Al also submitted his flight plan to the FAA but was still waiting on the actual dates.

At first, the mission was kept strictly quiet. Plans were for him to leave in the dark on Sunday, February 23 and to avoid any publicity at all. But they received word that Burns, only five days from his rescue from the coral reef, was still too sick to travel and the trip had to be canceled.

The second attempt was scheduled for the following Thursday, February 27. Al was scheduled to depart at 4 a.m. that morning but although he had requested permission to land in Cuba from the Swiss Ambassador to Cuba, E.A. Stadelhofer, hour after hour passed until Al got the word five minutes before departure time that Cuba had sent a message stating "landing clearance has not been given by the proper authorities" and that his arrival in Cuba would be treated as a "violation of Cuban law

and visa requirements." Sorely disappointed a second time, Al headed home. However, that experience resulted in two major changes to the overall plans. First, it seems that the Cuban government contacted Stadelhofer, who contacted the State Department, who finally contacted Al at 4 a.m. and the message had taken hours to be delivered. This frustrated both Stadelhofer and the Cubans to the point that they resolved to communicate directly with Al in the future. Second, the Cuban government ran the news item in their newspapers and TVs, so the U.S. government decided to lift the secrecy on the mission and newspapers began reporting on Al's attempts to fly to Cuba.

Finally, March 1, 1964, rolled around and Al once again found himself at the airport waiting for permission to land in Cuba. This time he didn't wait for any verification through official government channels. Al remembers that he got the call personally from Raul Castro (Fidel Castro's brother and now the head of government in Cuba.) He does point out that most of his communication with the Cuban government was through the Swiss diplomats in the country, all of whom, according to Al, inexplicably had Cuban names! Dressed in his best suit ("it just seemed the thing to do since I was representing my country"), Al departed Miramar and refueled in the Keys before heading for Cuba. He wanted sufficient fuel to complete the entire trip, no matter what happened, without refueling, because he was a little concerned that the Cubans were being "too nice" and he taped the gas tanks of the airplane to ensure that no one tampered with the quantity or quality of the fuel.

Departing the Keys, Al pointed his Cessna 180 toward Cuba. The weather was not good and the little Cessna 180 spent a lot of its time crabbing against the wind. Al had no reliable maps and flew solely with dead reckoning; he relied on the white

caps to tell him which way the wind was blowing. He was flying at 500 feet or lower and so was out of radio contact for almost the entire trip. The reason? Well, the fighter jets from the two countries played a major role in that decision. He could have remained in radio contact if he had flown at 8,000 or 9,000 feet, but he knew he'd be a "sitting duck" if there were any misunderstanding with the armed jets. So he flew at 500 feet so that in case of trouble, he could more easily "pancake" into the water.

The U.S. military sent F104's from Homestead Air Base to accompany him to the edge of U.S. territorial waters. Al chuckles when he describes the jets flying with their noses up and tails down, trying vainly to slow to his air-speed. The F104's left him as soon as he got well outside U.S. airspace, probably not anxious to meet up with the Cuban MIG's coming out to greet him. For about 10-15 minutes, Al was alone over the water, but once he entered Cuban airspace, he was greeted by the MIG's. He had no contact with the MIG's; the radios and radio frequencies were not compatible and Al knew that he wouldn't be able to speak Russian which was no doubt the pilots' language. He was more comfortable after the MIG pilots checked him out and departed into the distance. He noted on the trip he flew over Raul Castro's "castle" where the Cuban government had held many prisoners from the Bay of Pigs invasion and sadly realized that some were reputed still to be there at the time.

Finally he reached his destination, Rancho Bayeros Airport, just outside Havana. (Rancho Bayeros is now Cuba's main international airport, Jose Marti Airport.) Upon landing, he noticed the terminal and runway and numerous military transport airplane parked alongside. There he met Dr. Marquez, Cuban Foreign Minister Raul Roa, and Second Minister of Foreign Affairs M. Perez. But the best of all was his reunion with Trevor Burns, who still had trouble walking but was anxious to get home to his wife and 11-month-old son. Al was in Cuba

about 6 hours and treated very well. He was invited into the lounge for a drink (no word as to whether he accepted; he was after all the Pilot-In-Command of the return flight.) He pulled out his little German camera and the Cubans were initially leery but warmed up when he asked them to pose with Burns for some pictures. (He later gave the camera to the CIA who kept most of the pictures. The remainder are in a frame on the wall of Al's office.)

Finally it was noon and time for Al and Burns to depart Cuba. Burns traveled with two boxes of Cuban cigars and presents for his wife and son. He reported that one box of the cigars was given to him by Dr. Marquez and was intended for then-Governor Nelson Rockefeller. Dr. Marquez apparently knew that Rockefeller planned a Presidential campaign and felt "that the political situation would change for the better for the world under Rockefeller." This story hit the newspapers in the U.S. with a couple of anecdotes. First, Governor Rockefeller revealed to reporters that he was certain they were fine cigars, but he didn't smoke. Second, the story received such wide press along with the description of Dr. Marquez and "Castro's personal physician" that Fidel Castro felt compelled to explain that the cigars were not a present from him. He issued a press release stating that while Dr. Marquez was an excellent doctor, he was not Castro's personal physician and any gift to Rockefeller was on his own initiative.

The return trip was uneventful although stressful. Al was concerned about this stage of the mission since if the Cubans had tampered with his air-



plane, it would cause trouble now. But when they entered U.S. airspace, they were welcomed by their buddies in the F104's and both men knew the trip was going to be a success. Upon landing at the airport in Key West, Burns immediately got out of the airplane and kissed the asphalt tarmac. Then he had to repeat the kiss twice for the benefit of the waiting photographers. On Monday, the picture was a major feature in newspapers across the U.S.

Following their return, Burns spent a few additional days in Florida recovering; then the two did 15 or 20 flights, visiting with the Washington government officials who had sanctioned the trip, and delivering the Cuban gifts to the politicians. He eventually dropped Burns off at his Syracuse home. On March 16, 1964, Burns appeared on *To Tell the Truth*, hosted by Gary Moore. While Burns was on stage, Al waited in the wings and was part of the "reveal" when the game participants were told about Burns' trip to Cuba.

The two friends eventually lost contact. Al believes that Trevor Burns became a Vice President of an aircraft firm in the Midwest. In the 1970's, Al moved to Richmond, Virginia, and owned a tavern called "Big Al's." Now 82, Al works at Parker Piano Outlet in Lightfoot, tickling the ivories and sharing stories with customers. Mementos of his remark-

able life surround his workspace. He is particularly proud of the notes he has from former golf clients, including President Bill Clinton. But a large collage of pictures and newspaper clippings from his Cuban adventure has pride of place right behind his desk.

One of the most remarkable facets of this story is that Al received no compensation from the government for his efforts. All costs associated with the flight came from his pocket or from the many others who supported him. But Al doesn't complain about that. He points out "It's just the kind of thing you do for others when they need help."

#### Sources:

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