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Thankful for strong “Whiskey”

It sounds like a scene from a movie: a pleasure flight in a private plane, sudden engine failure, smoke pouring into the cockpit. Only one hope for survival: an emergency landing on an island in the Bahamas. The pilot radios for help and steers his struggling plane for the runway. But on the approach, another plane taxis forward and seems intent on blocking the only path to safety.

In a movie, this might be entertaining, but this actually happened in July 1982 to Dick Fayssoux '45, son of legendary Christ School coach Richard “Fessor” Fayssoux '16. The story has attracted a lot of attention lately and is in the process of being developed for a TV documentary. But no movie can compare to the reality of facing death in a plane over the ocean.

The plane, a Cherokee Six, belonged to Dick Fayssoux. Its registration number was “November 3244 Whiskey” (N3244W): Dick called it “Whiskey” for short. He had learned a love of flying from his father, who had worked as an aircraft mechanic in World War I and had taken him out flying at the old Asheville airport near Burney Mountain (within walking distance of campus).

Fayssoux was on his way to a pilots’ reunion. He was joined by a business associate, Dempsey Clinard, a former Air Force lieutenant colonel who took turns at the controls. With them were their wives, Gene Fayssoux and Vi Clinard. The Fayssouxes had flown in the Bahamas many times: they did not expect this trip to be any different, and so far everything seemed normal. They had boarded

the plane two hours before, and were on their way from West Palm Beach to George Town, Exuma, Bahamas. “It was a gorgeous day,” Gene Fayssoux declares. “You’ll never believe how beautiful it was.” But as so often happens, trouble was brewing when they least expected it.

A Pilot’s Worst Nightmare

The first sign that something was wrong was the only sign they needed. During one of Clinard’s turns at the controls, smoke began filling the cockpit. He thought the problem could be electrical and made one radio call to Nassau before shutting everything off.

“When you have problems like that, you get it on the ground,” Clinard says. But where could the single-engine plane land? Norman’s Cay seemed the obvious choice: they were abeam of this tiny island, and it was the closest point. They had heard the place had something to do with drug smuggling, but the Fayssouxes had had a pleasant stay there in 1976, and anyway, they didn’t have many options.

After making an emergency call—without a response—to the Norman’s Cay unicom, Dempsey Clinard turned Whiskey inbound for Runway 03. Just then, when they thought they were home free, Clinard was troubled by the sight of a twin-engine plane sitting in the middle of the very runway they had hoped to use. At the same time, things were going from bad to worse aboard Whiskey. Heavy

blue smoke was now filling the cockpit, and when Clinard changed course to extend his flight path, hoping to give the other plane time to take off, the Cherokee Six's engine went out.

Whiskey was within gliding distance of the runway. But the other plane hadn't budged, and Clinard could give it no more room. It looked like they were out of options. Dick Fayssoux turned to his business partner: "We're not going to make it," he said. Clinard replied, "I know."

With Whiskey steadily losing momentum and altitude, Clinard aimed for the strip of grass beside the runway. Everyone in the plane braced for the landing, but they never made it to the island. Instead, the Cherokee Six hit the water, skipped once, and then came down hard on a coral rock ledge just below the runway threshold, ending up half-suspended over the blue island water. Dempsey and Vi Clinard lost consciousness, as did Dick Fayssoux; the impact broke two vertebrae in Gene Fayssoux's back. The plane was now inoperable even though the cabin was essentially intact. It seemed like things couldn't get any worse, and yet in the years following the crash the Fayssouxs discovered they had reason to be grateful.

Messing with Medellin

In fact, few who landed uninvited on Norman's Cay from 1978 to 1982 lived to tell about it. The island didn't just have "something to do" with drug-smuggling: it was a home and base of operations for Carlos Lehder, a notorious drug lord and member—along with the infamous Pablo Escobar—of the even more notorious Medellin cartel.

At that time, in 1982, the island had everything you might expect from a drug lord's lair. Airplane hangars where workers changed registration numbers nightly. Guard towers. Killer Dobermans. Crack labs. And hanging over everything was the fear that the

authorities—held off so long by bribery and the delicate relationship between the United States and the Bahamian government—might finally decide to take Lehder out. In an interview on "Frontline" in 2000, one of Lehder's henchmen made it clear: "The DEA was the greatest fear. That was the paranoia that kept the group well armed."

The paranoia extended to any stranger who might approach. The island was fortified by guard towers. Boats could be scared off if they came too close, or might simply "disappear." Some planes that had ventured too close to the island had simply been shot down. Other planes had flown close only to find the runway blocked by planes or even fuel trucks. And there are documented reports of crash victims being left to die.

Someone in Their Corner

"[Lehder] just wanted them left there to die," says Heidi Novak, whose father Richard Novak lived on Norman's Cay at the time of the crash. "He didn't want his business disturbed." That the Fayssouxs and Clinards survived to tell the tale is a testament to the character of former college professor and marine Richard Novak—and a sign that time was running out for Carlos Lehder.

"I didn't realize I had been knocked out," Clinard recalls. But when he woke up, he said, "Get out before it catches on fire." Vi, who had been badly bruised by her seatbelt, got out first. Then the Fayssouxs emerged, helped by the natives. Dick had a broken jaw and shoulder, and Gene's back injuries would eventually require a two-month stay in the hospital. But as Clinard finally stepped out of the plane, the two couples' luck began to turn.

The Seneca—the plane that had caused the crash—had taken off just after they had hit the coral shelf. Gene, who had remained conscious the entire time, had heard it go. But now the plane returned. Within a short time Gene and Dick were put on the

Seneca and taken to a hospital. Vi flew with them to Nassau, but because there wasn't room for another passenger, Dempsey stayed behind to be tended by a "Dr. Novak," who helped in other ways as well, including retrieving what he could from the wrecked plane.

Why Lehder rescued the injured passengers still isn't clear. At the time it was almost completely shrouded in mystery. But as time goes by, the people on board Whiskey seem more and more fortunate. Richard Novak came to the island at about the same time Lehder did, and even after Lehder had run others off the island, Novak stayed. He and Lehder had "clicked" at first, and Lehder may have felt that Novak's dive shop gave the island some badly needed credibility. But as time went by, Novak took it upon himself to work to stop Lehder's drug trafficking. He used his diving skills to spy on and even sabotage Lehder's operations. He passed information on to the DEA and encouraged them to act. "He had no sense of danger," his daughter says.

Dick Fayssoux believes that Novak insisted Lehder help the victims of the crash. He had a strong case to make: he could remind Lehder that the drug lord's informants had warned him of an impending raid, and that the disappearance of some American tourists might bring more trouble than he wanted.

All the Fayssouxes know is nobody wanted to give them a straight answer about the incident. Bahamian authorities made it clear that they should keep silent. The U.S. Embassy said they had simply heard their transmission and told the people on Norman's Cay they wanted them back. And when Richard Novak attempted to visit them in the hospital, he was turned away. At any rate, the U.S. Government clearly knew what was up on the island, but never took it upon itself to warn tourists, boaters, and pilots away.

One More Hero

Even the Fayssouxes' story was untold until quite recently. But a local pilot and TV Journalist, MayCay Beeler, got them talking and heard the tale. She in turn contacted Heidi Novak and Sidney Kirkpatrick, the author of *Turning the Tide: One Man Against the Medellin Cartel*, a book about Richard Novak's struggle against Lehder. Kirkpatrick had known of the July 3, 1982, crash landing through his interviews with Dick Novak but had never been able to locate the Fayssouxes or the Clinards. He was delighted to be able to talk with Dick and Gene, because he was revising *Turning the Tide* for a planned reprinting.

Feeling a reunion was in order, Beeler arranged for the Fayssouxes to return to the island with her and to meet Kirkpatrick while they searched for Whiskey's remains. (The Clinards were unable to go because of health issues.) The island is now free of drug smugglers, and in 1991 Dale Harshbarger, an entrepreneur and pilot, bought the land next to the runway along with three villas Lehder had left in ruins. He has restored the villas and now rents two of them—including Richard Novak's, where Dick and Gene stayed on their return—as part of a small resort, MacDuff's of Norman's Cay.

Dick and Gene enjoyed revisiting the scene of their adventure. But the most emotional moment came when the Fayssouxes, along with Beeler, located the remains of their beloved Cherokee Six. Twenty-one years of exposure to the elements had taken their toll: all they could find was the twisted metal floor of what had been the aircraft's main cabin and a few twisted remains of control surfaces, one of which bore a placard identifying the remains as those of N3244W.

Dick Fayssoux is grateful for many things: grateful Whiskey did not catch fire on impact, grateful for Clinard's flying skills, and grateful to "God or some almighty power who takes care of fools."

But he and Gene are grateful for one more thing. Looking down at the twisted wreckage of Whiskey, at the very place she had been sitting on that July afternoon, Gene said, “She protected us in that crash.” Were it not for Whiskey’s strength and structural integrity, there might have been no story to tell.