



August 1, 2010

Revelations abound from a thousand feet

"Oh, I have slipped the surly bonds of earth, and danced the skies on laughter-silvered wings," the caller began. "Sunward I've climbed, and joined the tumbling mirth of sun-split clouds."

It was Dave Burch, of course. Who else? When he calls with an invitation to go flying, he'll begin the conversation by reciting the opening lines of "High Flight," the hauntingly beautiful sonnet written by 19-year-old fighter pilot John Magee just weeks before his death in World War II.

Dave works as an engineer for Channel 4 (WDIV) in Detroit and lives just up the road from me in Grant Township. His big brother, Dick, lives across the way and has rescued me from snow drifts on numerous occasions in the past 11 years.

Eleven years is also how long Dave has been flying ultralights. His Pegasus trike is basically an oversized kite with engine and propeller.

"It's as close to the Wright brothers as you can get," Dave says.

Pretty much. Pegasus flies with a 37-foot fabric-covered wing. The Wright boys made their first powered flight in 1903 in The Flyer, a glorified glider with a 40-foot wingspan.

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A FEW HUNDRED feet can make all of the difference in one's view of the world.

At 300 or 400 feet, your perspective of the lay of the land begins to shift. Riddles are solved; mysteries explained. You get a clearer understanding of how things fit together.

If you're driving a car on Pine Grove Avenue, for example, side streets such as Stone or 10th go off at angles and appear out of kilter. From the air, Pine Grove is the anomaly, a slash in the street grid.

Michigan's easternmost point juts from the edge of downtown Port Huron. On the ground, this fact can be taken on faith.

Get up to two or three thousand feet, and it becomes as apparent as the wart on a witch's nose. The St. Clair River curls off to the southwest while Lake Huron's shoreline retreats to the northwest.

DAVE CREDITS his love of flying to the late Stew Spencer, a former presidential pilot who returned home to Port Huron in the 1960s after retiring from the Air Force.

Dave and Allen Spencer, one of Stew's sons, were boyhood pals. They were introduced to flying by a man who knew the skies the way a farmer knows his fields.

After years of flying fixed-wing aircraft, Dave was invited to go up in an ultralight. He was hooked.

"There's nothing else like it," he says.

No need to elaborate. There is nothing else like it. With dangling feet and outstretched arms, I could not help but pretend to be a bird – a hawk or an eagle, too, not some chickadee – held aloft by the unseen sinews of the wind.

WE FLEW out of the county airport near Marysville at about 7:30 Tuesday evening, an hour when the sun is riding low and the winds are beginning to settle.

Dave flew first to Port Huron Township, where friends knew to look for us. Mary and Frank Davenport, along with great-granddaughter Halle, waved from their driveway on Campau Avenue.

Next up were the ball fields behind Fort Gratiot Middle School, where the softball team from North Street United Methodist was playing a Church League game with its Methodist brethren from Marysville.

My wife waved from a lawn chair on the sidelines while son Patrick, who was catching, coped with the distraction of his old man buzzing the outfield. The umpire, Jim Whymer, called a strike.

Clearly, the pitch was high and outside. Jeez, Jim.

PEGASUS carried us north to Lakeport to look in on my granddaughters -- Sidney, Kearsley and Siri -- who as it turned out were at the 4-H Fair in Goodells.

No problem. Dave's wife works with the 4-H, and the fair was on our itinerary as well.

The trip up the lakeshore offered an opportunity to marvel at the beauty of Lake Huron, which might be confused for the Caribbean on a mellow evening in late July.

Cotton-ball clouds ambled across a sky the color of an angel's eyes -- a Dutch angel, at any rate, or maybe a Swede. The lake stretched off into the distance, a turquoise sea.

On closer examination, the waters weren't a single shade but a thousand hues, from powder blue to a bruised purple just short of black.

In a similar way, the land was green in all of its subtlety, a color of sublime variations, just as humanity is one composed of many.

Seen from the air, we live in a woodland park. Yes, there are familiar landmarks -- the Blue Water Bridge, the rivers, the expressways -- but mostly there are the trees.

Port Huron is a city of shade. So is Sarnia. So are their suburbs. Here and there, the green is smudged with a Chemical Valley or mall parking lot.

Before leaving the airfield, I had a chance to chat with Jim Frye, who grew up on West Water Street in the days before suburban subdivisions.

Jim is a longtime pilot who knows the lay of the land as well as anyone. He described the Port Huron State Game Area as the last remaining forest of any size between Toledo and the tip of the Thumb.

At roughly 10 square miles, the game area is larger than its namesake city, and the unbroken forest also includes the wooded bluffs and dark ravines of privately owned Wingford Farms.

WE SOARED over this forest en route to Goodells, where the colored lights of the carnival rides drew us like moths to the marquee.

The fairgrounds bustled. A tractor pull had filled the stands of Rimrock Crater, and growling diesels were just audible above the drone of Pegasus' 80-horsepower engine.

Dave circled the fairgrounds while the setting sun -- an ember, a peach -- melted into the horizon. In the fading light, we raced the locomotive of a freight train as it thundered through Goodells.

We returned to the airfield in the gloaming. The pale lights of the sister cities -- Sarnia, Port Huron, Point Edward, Marysville, Corunna, St. Clair -- merged into a single cluster. Borders disappeared. Boundaries evaporated.

On the ground, there would be worrisome news -- the war, the economy, the borderline slander of political discourse.

From the air, there was only a truth -- we live amid beauty. My God, my God, how lucky we are.

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