

Bicycle Thief

By Ned Humphreys, Bombardiers, Inc.

In a file cabinet in the office of Bombardiers, Inc. there is a Big Spring (Texas) bombardier school memory book for class 44-4 which won its wings 18 March 1944.

As one thumbs through the book he will find a written notation under the photograph of cadet Roger S. Johnson reading "Student of instructor E.C. Ned Humphreys, Jr." Nothing exciting about that! But further research of the name Roger Stanley Johnson reveals plenty of other exciting events documented in dozens of other publications, photographs and documents. Hastily scanning and summarizing his recorded accomplishments produces a listing reading something like this:

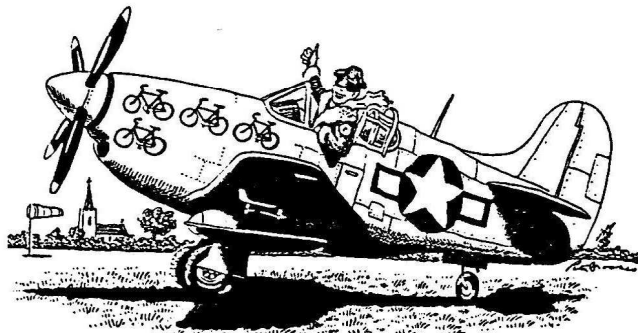
Born in St. Paul, Minnesota on 29 April 1924; enlisted in the AAF cadet program at age 18; became a bombardier lieutenant on 18 March 1944; flew 36 missions from Polebrook, England with the 608th Bomb Squadron of the 351st Bomb Group, 7 of which were as navigator (most of his missions were flown in a B-17 with nose name "The Lucky Jewell"); completed his tour 1 February 1946; chose to leave the Army Air Force and entered University of Minnesota premedicine school; received a BA in 1947, B.S. in 1948, M.B. In 1960, M.D. in 1951, Master of Science in Surgery in 1963; and finally, a law degree from Southern Methodist University in 1991 at age 67. "Rog", as he is best known to friends and family, achieved the most unexpected notoriety however, when he could no longer endure the pangs of nearly fifty years of remorse for once having pilfered a bicycle while stationed in England.

The story, as printed, had sliding degrees of accuracy but all told of him earning a couple of rest and recuperation days off in 1944.

He journeyed the 20 miles from Polebrook airfield to London and, as a loner, met some fine English folks who swept him up in their family and group activities.

On his last day, somewhat later than planned, Rog pulled himself away from the fun and partying, sorted out the several transportation transfers he would have to

make and headed for the base. He anticipated arrival in plenty of time to be present at any briefing and subsequent preparation for that day's mission should his crew be scheduled



to fly. He was acutely aware if he didn't show up for one of these pre-mission preparations he would be considered absent without leave (AWOL)!

At midnight he learned he had missed the 'last bus' and was still some 18 miles from base. Undaunted, but scared of possible repercussions, he set out, first trotting then walking, in an attempt to be back on base between 3 and 4 A.M. when he knew operational actions would begin.

At 3 A.M. he became panicky when he realized that there was no way he could make it on foot! At that moment he saw an unlocked bike leaning against a fence outside an unlit home! Feeling that God had presented him this opportunity and with all intention of returning and paying for use of the bike, Rog mounted the vehicle and quickly pedaled into the darkness of the pre-dawn.

Upon arrival at Polebrook Airfield, Rog learned that his fears were well-founded; he was assigned to fly as navigator on a mixed crew that day! He flew his mission as briefed but found that trip was another story to be separately told.

When the mission was successfully completed, Rog went to the site where he had parked the pilfered bike, but alas, found it missing! Although he searched high and low there was no trace of his missing bicycle to be found.

Rog went on to complete his required

number of missions and returned home. He, however, carried a heavy heart and the burden of guilt with the knowledge that he had stolen someone's bike! This remorse remained with him for over 48 years until he decided to do something about it.

From an English bicycle manufacturing company— Raleigh—our bombardier, now Doctor Johnson, ordered 100 bicycles which were to be given in May of 1992 to an equal number of children between the ages of 5 and 13 who lived in or around Polebrook village. Only 93 such qualified youngsters could be found and Rog paid \$19,000 for the bikes and to have his or her name inscribed on their new bicycle.

The bicycles were given to their new owners in a ceremony conducted in the middle of Polebrook Runway from which Rog had lifted many times during his combat tour. It was later learned that those children whose new bikes replaced an older one, pooled and sold the old ones with all proceeds going to charity!

Dr. Johnson became the idol of England with his "bicycle payback". Religious leaders heaped praise upon him for his generosity and display of a conscience. The London Times's writer Bernard Levin wrote, in the 2 July 1992 edition, of the charm (represented) by an airman determined to make amends 50 years after a theft. The Times staff artist converted Rog to the image of a thumbs-up fighter pilot, parked him in the cockpit of a P-51 Mustang, painted five symbolic bicycles on the nose section to graphically support the glowing article written by Levin!

C. Gregg Petersmeyer Assistant to President Bush and Director of the White House Points of Light Office, wrote Dr. Johnson on 9 October 1992, saying I applaud you for your devotion to the people of Polebrook, and commend you for your efforts".

Rog's wife of 39 years Marilyn died early in 1992 from cancer.

Rog, a life supporting member of the Bombardiers, Inc., currently resides in Irving, Texas.