

More Franklin Park Stories
by Debby Rabold
Franklin Park Borough Historian
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SYNTHESIS

From an interview with and the writings of George R. Purifoy, Jr.

Noise. You can't imagine the cacophony of sound inside the hull of a small boat in a storm. The howl, sometimes scream of the wind in the rigging forms a background of white noise for sudden crashes, bangs, thumps and creaks as green water smashes on the deck and the contents of all the lockers scramble themselves in the bilges. How long can she take this kind of beating? Why am I doing this? I close my eyes and cover my ears with Jane's quilt and hold on!



More lightning, lots more. I can see it flicker and flash through the ports and hear the crash of thunder over the din of the boat noises and the storm. In between flashes it is pitch black in the cabin. I am still on the starboard settee, with my head about a foot from the stainless steel mast compression post, which rises vertically from the keel to the overhead, supporting the downward load created by the mast. The post is invisible in the darkness, but at times I put out my hand and grab the cool steel to hold myself on the bunk as the boat goes through its gyrations. Suddenly, I can see the compression post. It's glowing an eerie green. Like a green neon tube, it gets brighter and

brighter, so bright that I could read by it if I were holding a book. Then after about twenty seconds, poof, everything is again black. Wow! St. Elmo's Fire. I have seen it on and in my airplane during some bad weather and in the rigging of sailboats, but never inside like this. I wonder what it would have felt like if I had reached out and touched the post.

Now it's really getting wild. I don't know how hard the wind is blowing, but it is harder than I have ever been in and it's a good thing I can't see how high the waves are that crash regularly onto the boat. I don't want to go back outside, but I know I must. SYNTHESIS needs to be turned so she can run with the wind and waves instead of being battered by them.

Ancient Greek mariners were the first to write about the phenomenon known as St. Elmo's Fire. During thunderstorms, air molecules are torn apart in the electrically charged atmosphere, causing escaping gases to glow the same as neon lights. While appearing as a burning flame on the masts of ships and, with the advent of air travel, on wingtips and propellers, the glow is not hot and does not burn. As it most often appears near the end of a severe thunderstorm, the glow has often been regarded as a good omen.

[As a child growing up in the Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania suburb of Forest Hills, George Purifoy learned to sail on local lakes and the Gulf of Mexico. With dreams of becoming a pilot, the son of an electrical engineer enjoyed building model airplanes and devoured books on naval aviation.

Purifoy looked forward to fulfilling his life's ambition by enrolling in the Navy's V-5 aviation training program. For two years, he studied civil engineering at Lafayette College in eastern Pennsylvania before receiving nearly a year of naval flight training in Pensacola, Florida. Shortly before completing the program, however, nineteen-year-old Purifoy was called home to Forest Hills to care for his seriously ill parents. His only choice was to withdraw from the program and remain at home, during which time he completed his undergraduate studies at the University of Pittsburgh, earning a degree in geophysics.

Following the outbreak of war in Korea, Purifoy received a draft notice. Anxious to again fly, he visited the local naval recruiter who would have welcomed Purifoy back into the Navy, but with the stipulation that pilot training would need to be repeated...from the beginning. The same was true for the Air Force. Both wanted an experienced pilot, but neither had a category into which the former naval pilot easily fit. Because Air Force training lasted twelve months as opposed to the Navy's eighteen month program, Purifoy joined the Air Force where he was given the job of...installing telephones.]

On with the cold and soggy foul weather gear. Each wave crashes down on SYNTHESIS with the intent of breaking or rolling her. Hours pass. My fingers are numb and my left arm aches from the constant push and pull of the tiller. Here comes the dawn, its light enough to see things. The wind is still tearing the top off the waves. I think it was better when I couldn't see them.

[After four months of installing telephones and driving a mail truck, Purifoy was assigned to flight training and gunnery school, after which he deployed to Korea in May 1953 as a fighter pilot.]

I was in the 310 Fighter Bomber Squadron. If you were a fighter pilot, you had to fly a hundred missions before you could return home, so we fought like crazy for missions. One day I took three missions. We flew all of our missions down in the weeds fifty feet off the ground at 500 knots airspeed. I flew an F84. 706 was my plane. It carried two 1,000 pound bombs, eight rockets and six machine guns.

On my seventeenth mission, I was coming off target at the China border and got hit. We often came back with holes in the airplane and on that mission I was hit hard and really struggled to get back. It was a long way back to Taegu [air base]. I said to myself "OK, if you can get this plane and yourself back to Taegu in one reasonable piece, you can treat yourself to a solo trip across the Atlantic Ocean in your own boat before you're sixty years old." That was the deal.

My twenty-fifth and last mission was on the day the war ended, July 27, 1953. We were way up north bombing dams on the Yalu River, the dividing line

between China and Korea, when we got the radio call to come home, the war was over. The hell it was, they were still shooting. I climbed as high as I could with the plane struggling before I lost an engine. They shot at us all the way home.

[A drogue is an open basket attached to a nylon line and serves as an anchor when dropped overboard and dragged underwater, slowing the forward rush of a boat. After deploying a drogue during the height of the storm in the darkness of night, it was only in the breaking dawn that Purifoy discovered the line had caught onto a cleat, preventing the drogue from sinking into the water.]

It was easy to lift the line off the cleat and over she went. Hot dog, the brakes were on. What a wonderful feeling not rushing pell mell toward a cold swim.

After spending a year in Korea, I returned to the U.S. and was assigned to the S[trategic] A[ir] C[ommand] base in Great Falls, Montana. In fact, my first son was born there. They made me a SATCOM, which meant I had to evaluate every pilot by flying with him. I was busy and did a lot of flying. I lived off base and one evening, in 1955, we got an alert. "Get your tail out here." That was fairly common. So, I jumped into the car and said to Marilyn, who was pregnant at the time, "I've got to go. I don't know when I'll be back."

We had three squadrons and each squadron had sixteen planes. All the pilots were in a big group and the general got up and said, "Gentlemen, the United States is at war." Bases were calling in from all over the place. All of the pilots were combat ready. Each of us had an assigned target. We were all going to a different place. These were solo missions.

I was headed north. It was dark and snowing. Of course it was radio silent. There was nothing on the air. I kept running through all the frequencies and nobody was saying anything. There were forty some fighters. I was headed to Siberia. I was air born almost two hours [before being recalled and told this was a drill.]

Less than six months after returning [to the States] from Korea, I was temporarily sent to Japan. By the time I returned home, I was a squadron operations officer. We had transitioned to a supersonic plane, which was dangerous to fly. We lost several people and as operations officer, I had to visit the families and my wife had to help them pack to leave. My wife said she couldn't do it anymore, so we left the Air Force and returned to Pittsburgh in 1957. I went to graduate school at Pitt and became an engineering psychologist.

[A framed colored poster hangs on the wall of Purifoy's basement workshop. It shows Marilyn Monroe posing on the wing of an F-84, Purifoy's plane.]

In February 1954, actress and Playboy magazine centerfold Marilyn Monroe toured Korea with her new husband and baseball superstar Joe DiMaggio, performing in ten USO shows before 100,000 servicemen. Taegu's air base was the couple's last stop on the tour.]

Marilyn wanted to see what a fighter plane looked like. Someone remembered 706 had My Marilyn painted on the side [in honor of Purifoy's wife]. So they pulled the old bird out and everybody gathered around and was taking pictures.

Marilyn had questions about what was in the cockpit, so I climbed up, rolled back the canopy and explained the plane. She asked good questions and then said, "Is there any way I can get a ride in one of these things? You know, I really would like to have a ride."



I pointed out that the F-84 had only one seat, but that the squadron did have a two seat T-33, which I was qualified to fly. After she was cleared for the flight, I got her an oxygen mask and parachute and briefed her on using them. I did a walk around the plane and as I was ready to climb into the cockpit, our squadron commander Major Mac came along and said, "George, I don't usually do this, but I'm going to pull rank on you. I'm going to fly her." He told me I could strap her into the back seat. He cranked up the engine and off they went. They were only gone about twenty minutes. I know he didn't turn the plane upside down. I probably would have.

[Three sons, remarriage and an engineering career occupied civilian life. During those years, Purifoy continued to sail with his sons, never forgetting his dream of a solo Atlantic crossing. Such a feat would require a seaworthy vessel and the search began in 1980.

The Nor'Sea 27 was selected for its blue water capability as well as being easily transported. SYNTHESIS was built in a California factory in 1983 where Purifoy, a skilled cabinetmaker, designed and constructed the teak interior along with the exterior woodwork. The boat was then brought to Pittsburgh in 1984 where modifications were made over the next three years.

Testing was done on lakes before taking the twenty-seven foot boat into the Atlantic for offshore runs. In May 1987, SYNTHESIS was hauled to the Chesapeake Bay to begin a solo 700 mile ten day trip to Bermuda.]

The single handed sailor has a lot to do, not the least of which is to keep a careful lookout for other ships 24 hours a day. This is especially important when still relatively close to shore and when near or crossing shipping lanes. An ocean going commercial ship could run down a small yacht, sink it and never be aware that they hit anything. Staying clear of this danger requires that a careful check all around the horizon be made at least once an hour, day and night. Sleep soon becomes a very precious and coveted commodity!

[June 1988. After carefully testing both himself and his boat for three years, Purifoy was ready to realize his longtime dream of a solo Atlantic crossing. Loaded with forty-five gallons of diesel fuel and sixty-five gallons of fresh water, along with canned food, a life raft and an abandon ship bag, fifty-nine year old George R. Purifoy, Jr. began his seven month, 9,000 mile journey of a lifetime.



Six days out of New York, en route to Portugal, seventy mph winds and twenty-five foot waves threatened SYNTHESIS' survival, but through skill and determination, Purifoy rode out the storm with new found confidence in both himself and his boat.

The Azores were his first destination. There he met a sailing friend who accompanied him on the next leg of the journey to Portugal. Navigating by sextant, Purifoy was delighted that the sheer cliffs of Cape Saint Vincent were "exactly where they should be." The site was especially meaningful to Purifoy because it was where Christopher Columbus studied navigation nearly 500 years earlier and where Purifoy's wife Jane was waiting to greet him. After enjoying a brief reunion in Portugal, the Purifoy's again said their goodbyes before returning home, albeit by different routes.

Purifoy would follow a southern route, sailing first to Madeira off the African coast then to the Canary Islands where he met a friend who had helped build SYNTHESIS. Planning to make a non-stop trip to Cape Canaveral, Florida, the men set sail November 6, expecting their journey to take between forty and forty-five days.]

Another beautiful day, but very light winds. We need the trades! Wind stayed light all day-frustrating. Worry about having enough food and water. Going so slow, it's easy to imagine 60-70 days at sea. Several small whales passed us last night.

Only made 42km yesterday! Will never get home at this rate. Have potatoes for two more meals...both of us are down because of slow progress. Got to get the trades! We washed the diesel oil off us as best we could and I made Thanksgiving dinner- chicken and wine sauce over rice with green beans and a bottle of red wine. Good!

Both of us disgusted at light wind and little progress. We'll see how things work out. Pea soup and crackers for supper. Not much wind all night.

Grey morning. Storm cells all around. Keep getting hit with wind and rain, then a lull and we don't go anywhere. Cooked last batch of pancakes. Used last egg.

Sun out, good wind. Moving well. Out here, we see nothing for days and days...Finally got our dolphins. A pod of about 30-40 little ones came up and played around the boat for about an hour. Figured we have another 1430 miles to the channel [then] another 320 to Canaveral. This will be the slowest crossing on record!

Only 66km yesterday! At this rate, I figure we will hit the Gulf Stream on Christmas. We should then make Canaveral on the 28th. Wish we could do better.

Hit the forecast cold front. It's a wild ride. Taking some seas aboard. Window by galley leaking.

Wind increased about dawn. Good run-95 miles! Have been worried about food. Starting December 10, we will go to two meals/day. Wind held. Made good time, but rough ride. About 0900 we hit serious squall. We bashed and crashed in the rain for a while. Will have cup-o-soup for breakfast.

The night started out flat calm, then with a slight wind out of the NW, allowing us to sail a little westerly. It was beautiful when I went off watch at 0200- full moon, flat sea, light wind. I woke to a full gale, hard rain and rising seas at 0500...ten foot seas ahead, but at least we are moving in the right direction. Yesterday, only 36 miles.

In late PM, large freighter came toward our stern. I got him on VHF and explained we were 39 days out of Las Palmas and short of food - could they drop us a little. Operator said he'd ask captain. They steamed right by us and would not respond on VHF - so much for seafaring tradition. [Later] I saw a ship headed right for our port beam. I got light on and radio on. He did not turn for a long while - I had to call several times - no response. Got Claude up, just in case. Finally, he turned and went behind us - but no radio contact.

We are moving fast, but taking a good beating! Took a bunch of waves in cockpit. Boat rolling violently.

Seas huge and white capping. Rotten day all around. Deck pump not working. Hot dogs with ketchup and mustard for breakfast.

Had last contact with Transatlantic Maritime Mobile Net. They do a great, great job and benefit many cruising yachtsmen. E wind blew hard all day and most of the night - really flying along. Weather forecasts begin to look OK for dash to Canaveral. Must take advantage of E wind in crossing the Gulf Stream. Beautiful night. Listened to Christmas music all night from many U. S. stations. Getting anxious. If our fast pace keeps up, we might get in Christmas night!

Wind softened with dawn. Seem to be making good time. Cooked a whole can of lunchmeat for breakfast - plus coco. Looks like food is going to work out. Too early to tell how our fuel is doing. Motored all day and night. The wind went absolutely flat until after dark - then got a very slight breeze. At this rate, we will

be in tomorrow easy [Christmas Eve]. Wish I were with Jane. I am so very lucky to have her for my wife. Beautiful night. Clouds all gone - almost a full moon. Not many other ships. Lights on the coast. Pretty. Radio playing Christmas music.

Merry Christmas! Cool, clear, dewy morning. Got a little breeze and we are now motor sailing. Cooked big pot of oatmeal and used our last liter of milk for coco, which took the last of our sugar. Talk about cutting things short. We can see the buildings of Coco Beach and the Kennedy Space Center on the horizon, so we are getting there.

[The SYNTHESIS arrived in Cape Canaveral, Florida on Christmas Day 1988, having fulfilled one man's lifetime dream.]