

I Remember Gene DeBruin

by Lee Gossett (Redding '57)

Gene and I first met in Seattle in the spring of 1961. The Alaska smokejumpers were told to report to Boeing Field where the Bureau of Land Management DC-3 would pick up the crew and fly us to Fairbanks. Memory tells me that there were about 16 of us gathered on that dreary May morning in the old terminal building. Many of us were returning Alaska jumpers and knew each other, but there were a couple of new jumpers on the roster in 1961. One of the new jumpers was Gene DeBruin (MSO-59), a quiet fellow about my size, 5' 8". As we were all shaking hands and renewing friendships around the cafe table, I remember the waitress coming over to take our orders. She then went to the next table to wait on the fellow seated there and he said, "I'm with those guys." I turned around, shook Gene's hand, and introduced myself and the other jumpers. That was my first time to meet Gene. Gene had jumped in Missoula prior to coming to Alaska and prior to that had been in the U.S. Air Force. He had attended the University in Missoula and graduated with, I think, a degree in forestry. I'm not sure what drew Gene to smokejumping, but perhaps attending the forestry school at the University had something to do with it. There were many jumpers there.

Our flight to Fairbanks took all day with at least two fuel stops. When we arrived at Fairbanks, a local newspaper photographer was there to greet us, and we all posed for a photo with the DC-3. Jerry DeBruin, Gene's brother, still has the newspaper article and photo taken that day in Fairbanks. Over the next day or so, after we had signed the employment papers, we started our refresher training that included the jump tower, letdowns and concluded with several practice jumps.

During the summer of 1961, a lot of jumpers were assigned to loft duty, which is where Gene and I started to get acquainted. My recollection of Gene was that of a quiet person who didn't have a lot to say at first. Gene and I would do our assigned duties or sit in the sun outside the loft and share our backgrounds. It was a good summer from the standpoint of a smokejumper. We had quite a number of fire jumps all across the interior of Alaska, and Gene and I had several fire jumps together. As the fire season drew to a close in late August, the Lower 48 was having a big fire bust. Some of us took an early-out to head south to catch a few more fire jumps before winter set in. I don't remember Gene coming south, and I think he elected to remain in Alaska until the fall rains.

Gene and I exchanged addresses and wrote each other during the winter of 1961-62. I returned to college at Southern Oregon in Ashland, and Gene went to work at Sun Valley in Idaho, where he may have worked in the bowling alley. Gene was an avid skier and, by working at the bowling alley may have received free lift tickets. I was only in college for a matter of weeks when I received notice from good old Uncle Sam that I was needed back in the Army Reserve for a 12-month hitch due to the Cuban missile crisis. My recall dashed all hopes of a season of smokejumping back in Alaska in 1962.

After a starving winter in Oregon, I returned to Alaska and met up with Gene again in May 1963. Gene had moved from being a "fire" smokejumper to being an "engineer" smokejumper. Several jumpers had shifted to engineer jumper status and were based out of Big Delta, about an hour drive east of Fairbanks. The engineer jumpers were assigned to jump into pre-designated spots and clear heliports, where helicopters could land to bring in survey crews and return the jumpers to Big Delta. The engineer jumpers would rack up a lot of jumps in a season, and we saw them every couple of weeks at the loft picking up a new supply of parachutes and leaving their used ones to be repacked. I would see Gene off and on all summer. We always found time to sit down and have a chat about what we had been doing.

As the season was drawing to a close my roommate and fellow squad leader, Gid Newton (CJ-55), was preparing to leave for Air America. Gid was very secretive about who he was going to work for and where. Lou Banta (CJ-51), our other roommate, and I pestered the hell out of Gid until he confessed as to just what he was up to and gave us the all important address for Air America in Washington D.C. Lou and I decided Gid was on to a good deal and we wanted a piece of the action. Before long Lou and I received our employment applications from Air America. We were very anxious for a new adventure. Gid, unfortunately, was only with Air America two weeks before he was killed in a C-46 rice drop in northwest Laos. The news was devastating to all of us back in Alaska. Within a couple of days of the news of Gid's death, Gene showed up at the loft and informed Lou and me that he, too, was heading for Laos with Air America. Lou and I had a long talk with Gene and told him we were to the processing stage with Air America and would, hopefully, be following in a short time. I saw Gene off at the Fairbanks International Airport on his departure for Laos. This would turn out to be the last time I would see my friend, Gene DeBruin.

I think Gene was with Air America about two months when he was shot down and captured in September 1963. Gene and I had corresponded and the last letter I received was postmarked the day he was shot down. Gene's letter mentioned that Lou Banta and I were processing and he was looking forward to seeing us in Laos soon as finally he had landed a job that made some real money. Lou Banta and I were all geared to go, and it was just a matter of time until we received the final word from Air America to head for Laos.

During the summer of 1963 in Alaska, a Missoula jumper crew flew up to give us a hand with the fires. These crews were known as bumper crews and were called in if it looked like we were going to have more fires than the Alaska jumpers could handle. The Alaska and Missoula crews became

one and they were a great bunch of guys. Five or more of the Missoula jumpers from that Alaska bumper crew went on to work for Intermountain Aviation, out of Marana, Arizona, and the "Agency" after the fire season. One of the jumpers was Bruce Leheldt (MSO-54), a best friend since 1963. It was Bruce who first informed me of Gene's fate. We were talking on the phone and I mentioned Gene had said the Air America kicker thing was turning out to be a good deal. I remember there was a pause in the conversation. Bruce asked when I had heard from Gene, and I told him the date. Bruce went on to say that Gene had been shot down and captured, and they were awaiting word on his fate. This news was devastating as I had seen Gene off at the airport just 60 days prior. As I reflected on my conversation with

Bruce, I realized this was the third Alaska jumper I had known that had gone to Laos and never returned. The first was Dave Bevin (MSO-55), who I met in Alaska in 1960. Dave didn't return to Alaska in 1961 but went on to work as a kicker in Laos. He was killed on a C-46 rice drop along with two other smokejumpers, Darrel "Yogi" Eubanks (IDC-54) and John Lewis (MYC-53).

Lou Banta arrived in Vientiane, Laos, in late 1963 and I arrived in January 1964. As soon as I arrived in Vientiane, I asked about Gene, but there was no word on his fate. I think the first evidence of Gene being alive was in the famous photograph that surfaced several years later. Gene was pictured along with three Thai kickers and a Chinese radio operator. This photograph gave all of us a bit of a lift; at least we knew Gene was still alive. I was a kicker for all of 1964, trying to worm my way into a pilot's slot. Lacking the experience Air America required, I decided to leave, gain more flying experience and reapply as a pilot. I returned in late 1966 as a pilot for Air America, first in Saigon for five months and then on a reassignment to Vientiane. Shortly after arriving in Vientiane, I contacted Bob Herald (MSO-55), an ex-Alaskan smokejumper and now Chief Air Freight Specialist, or "Chief Kicker" as he was called. I'd known Bob in Alaska in 1960, and he was one of the early kickers with Air

America. Bob and I were fellow kickers in 1964. Unfortunately, he had no current news on Gene's fate.

Fast forward to 1969. I'm now flying for Continental Air Services, also based in Vientiane. One day a Braniff Airlines Boeing 707 landed at Vientiane. This was the first time an aircraft of this size had ever landed there and it caused quite a stir. I inquired as to why it had landed there and was told it had been chartered by a fellow named Ross Perot, a wealthy Texas businessman. The 707 was loaded with care boxes from family and friends back in the States that were, hopefully, to be delivered to American POWs held in North Vietnam. Upon hearing this, I darted home and put together a care package for Gene, on the off chance it might reach him. I remember putting in a Life Magazine along with tooth brush, tooth paste, soap and whatever else I could find. I gave my package to one of our managers and he in turn gave it to Ross Perot. The 707 was never allowed to fly on to Hanoi, so I have no idea what became of the care packages.

Somewhere along the way, I acquired the address of Jerry DeBruin, Gene's brother. Jerry and I started writing to each other and shared what little information each of us had on Gene's fate. Jerry came to Laos in 1971 and spent two weeks with us as a house guest. When I was flying during the day, my wife, Mary, would take Jerry around town to meet with the likes of the Pathet Lao, North Vietnamese and Russian diplomats in the hopes of obtaining information on the fate of his brother. The North Vietnamese and Russians listened to what Jerry had to say and informed him they had no knowledge of Gene. The Pathet Lao, on the other hand, opened a book and produced the same photo we had of Gene and the others taken in captivity. The Pathet Lao Colonel offered no further information on Gene's fate.

It wasn't until the prison escapes [became known] that we had any idea as to the fate of Gene and the others. Two of the prisoners actually made their way to freedom. One was U.S. Navy pilot Dieter Dengler, who was rescued after a number of days on the run. The other prisoner, one of the Thai kickers, was later captured and eventually freed from prison by a joint CIA/Lao Military assault. Phisit, or PI as we call him today, eventually returned to work for Air America in Udorn, Thailand, and was kind enough to hop a flight from Udorn to Vientiane and meet with Jerry and Mary in the

Air America restaurant. I was not able to attend the meeting as I was flying up country at the time.

I hope this will give you a glimpse into my relationship with Gene DeBruin. I have fond memories of a rather quiet guy, soft spoken, very honest and down to earth, with a snippet of a sense of humor, but most of all, my friend, and I miss him.