

“John, would you like to go flying with me on the 25<sup>th</sup>,” the email read. “I am flying from Marco Island up to Lakeland to the UFO annual meeting.”

“Wow!” I whispered. Charles is one of my most interesting friends; but I didn’t realize he was so into the study of unidentified flying objects. Charles Strasser is a fellow Rotarian who spends his winters on Marco Island. When summer comes he migrates back to his home on the island of Jersey, in the English Channel just fourteen miles from the French coast. He has his own Piper Seneca II, a twin engine airplane, in which he flies all over Europe during the six months each year he resides across the pond. He often rents a Cessna 172 at Marco Island Airport during the winter months in order to stay current and to explore Florida. Quite often he invites me to fly with him. Charles is the youngest 85 years old gentleman I know.

I began reading the UFO invitation which was an attachment to the email. Oh! UFO doesn’t stand for Unidentified Flying Objects, but UNITED FLYING OCTAGENARIANS. I mused at my jumping to the wrong conclusion and read on. “Membership in United Flying Octogenarians is open to anyone who has flown a fixed wing or rotary wing, glider, sport or balloon aircraft as pilot in command at or after the age of 80”. This might be even more interesting. The invitation said guests of members are invited even if under 80 that they might “wait in the wings” for their turn to join.

On the appointed morning, I met Charles at the airport. It was a typical winter morning in southwest Florida; sixty degrees with a slight breeze, clear sky, and visibility unlimited. We pulled the airplane out of its hanger and made preparations for the one and a half hour flight to Lakeland Linder Regional Airport and this meeting of those who have had first hand witness to most of the entire aviation age. I could not wait to meet these amazing people.

It was a gorgeous flight north with smooth air, good visibility and a 15 knot tailwind. When we arrived in Lakeland we were taken by golf cart to the Hilton Garden Inn Hotel adjacent to the field. We entered the lobby and Charles introduced me to Don Newman, President of this nearly 1300 member organization. Don presently is an 89 year old V tail Bonanza owner and pilot and former B17 pilot and pilot instructor in the U S Army Air Corps. He was also Under Secretary of Health and Human Services under President Ronald Reagan and U. S. minister to the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO), under President H. W. Bush. Charles also introduced me to some of his other flying friends who loved flying and were members of UFO.

After a brief chat we walked into the dining room for lunch and an afternoon filled with programs pertaining to those who fly after 80. Charles and I sat at a table where five of the six people present were well into their 80’s and aviation had been a life long vocation as well as hobby for each. The lunch time conversation was about everything aviation and each of my fellow diners was an expert seemingly in all things aeronautic. One of our table mates spoke of a fellow member who reached his 100<sup>th</sup> birthday last November and is still flying his light sports airplane 100 hours a year. Another member told how he had been involved in a mid-air collision with another B17 over the Atlantic during World War II and how all crewmembers flying in both airplanes miraculously survived to fight another day. A discussion developed about a particular Merlin engine and each change that was made in the various models. Another who still teaches as a pilot instructor talked about his work with the “Flying Eagles”,



a program sponsored by the Experimental Aircraft Association. He spoke of the joy of flying young people on first flights to introduce America's youth to aviation. These were the most animated enthusiastic group of involved people I have met in a long time. The afternoon program was also fascinating. There was a discussion about a future fly-in to Spruce Creek which is a large fly-in housing community on the east coast of Florida. Later a speaker spoke about identifying the time to finally quit flying, and another talked about getting insurance to fly after 80. Another member led a discussion regarding the necessary steps in completing the new on line forms necessary to be sent over the internet before scheduling the required Federal Aviation Administration medical examination. Each speaker was dynamic and engaged and exuded his love of aviation.

On the flight back to Marco my thoughts were filled with admiration for these energetic and courageous men and women I had met in Lakeland that day. These people were very special and my heart goes out to each of them. And I will "wait in the wings" hoping that I also might be so fortunate as to some day become a UFO.

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*Ed Note:*

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