

TAKE IT or LEAVE IT...

By Jim Stiles



ARMANDO & PHILLIP & THE OSS

With the world changing rapidly around us and with war becoming almost commonplace, I remember a conversation from years ago. I'd wandered over to a favorite little town in New Mexico, whose name I won't reveal for fear that the literally dozens of people who read this paper will descend upon the village in monstrous hordes and ruin it. I was standing in front of the country store with my friend Pat Cooke and her 15 year old dog Sue, when two of her pals stopped by for a chat.

Their names were Phillip and Armando and they had driven up from the south to visit. Both gentlemen were in their 60s or early 70s at the time, and Phillip had recently been discharged from the hospital after suffering a serious stroke. For six months he had been unable to speak and some worried that he would never recover. It was apparent, however, that Phillip had indeed recovered, and was making up for lost time. While he shamelessly flirted with both Pat and the dog, his older brother Armando told me his life story. I swear this is what he said. The conversation went something like this...

"My brother and I are Basque, you know. We came from the Pyrenees before the second world war," Armando explained.

"Really," I said. "What did you do when you came over here?"

"Well," he replied, "I went to work for the OSS."

I knew what the OSS was---the Office of Strategic Services, the military intelligence agency during World War II. I know my WWII history pretty well, and since I also believe that in my last life I may have been the pilot of a B-24 Liberator in Europe that was shot down over Belgium in August 1944, I could converse fairly intelligently with him on the subject.

"The OSS?" I said. "Did you ever meet the director, Bill Donovan?"

"Wild Bill? Of course...I met with him several times in the President's office."

"The President's office? Which president do you mean?"

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"Why President Roosevelt's office. You see, Franklin Roosevelt was president during the--"

"I know he was president during the war," I interrupted. "You actually met President Roosevelt?"

"Yes, of course. He was a great man. Donovan was too...and tough. No man was tougher than Donovan."

"Well," I asked somewhat hesitantly, not knowing whether to believe a word of this, "what did you do for the OSS?"

"I was an agent," he explained casually.

"You were a spy?"

Armando shrugged. "I guess you could say that."

Stocky and balding with bushy white sideburns, I wondered if this man could really have pal'd around with the likes of FDR and "Wild Bill."

I decided that I believed every word he was saying.

I looked at Armando. He barely stood five and a half feet tall. Stocky and balding with bushy white sideburns, I wondered if this man could really have pal'd around with the likes of FDR and "Wild Bill." I decided that I believed every word he was saying.

"So where were you a spy?"

"Those were incredible times. Truly the future of our world was at stake. My partner and I were in pursuit of two German agents who were trying to get diamonds from South Africa to Germany via South America. The Germans needed the diamonds to make diamond bits...it's the only way you can machine parts for weaponry and the like. Do you follow me?"

I nodded.

"We caught up with them in Brazil, near Angel Falls." Armando put his ball cap on and pulled the brim down low over his eyes and looked up at the sky.

"It's going to be another hot day. Too damn hot for September," he observed keenly.

"Yes it is," I said, "but what happened next?"

"What do you mean?"

"The diamonds."

"Oh yes...OK. We had caught up with them in Brazil when they discovered we were following them... They killed my partner."

"Oh no...so they got away?"

"No," he replied grimly. "I killed both of them."

He waited for a moment; then he continued. "I killed one of them instantly, and I thought the other was dead too. But I turned my back on him and he shot me with a small gun that he had concealed. So I finished him off. I was seriously wounded, but, obviously, I survived."

I didn't know what to think. Just minutes before, Pat and I had been chatting about the weather and the remarkable good health of Sue the Dog. Now my new friend Armando had led me into the dark and violent world of the OSS and the incredible role he played in it. If I could believe him.

"Did you recover the diamonds?" I asked finally.

"Yes. And then I threw the Germans into the Amazon and fed them to the pirranahs."

"Oh," was all I could manage to say.

"And can you believe this? The British had a force down there, and when they learned what I had done, they arrested me for desecrating a dead person. Fortunately, Donovan came to my defense and got me off. Besides, I was able to prove that they were Nazi agents."

"How did you do that?" I was afraid to ask.



General William 'Wild Bill' Donovan... director of OSS in World War II

"All German spies had a small tattoo under their arm pit with a swastika and a serial number. Before I threw them in the Amazon, I got out my knife and I--"

"OK," I said. "I think I get the picture."

"I think those little patches are still in Washington somewhere. They don't throw anything away in military intelligence."

"No...no," I considered. "I suppose they don't."

Armando gazed down the main street of Pat's little town, a place that has barely changed since he chased Nazis in Brazil. "I was eager to get out of there and back home after all that," he said. "So when those Amazonian women captured me and held me pris-



(The Future)...that period of time in which our affairs prosper, our friends are true, and our happiness is assured.

---Ambrose Bierce

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oner for three months, I was very upset.”

The bubble popped. “OK Armando. You’ve gone too far. I’ve believed you up to now. I’ve actually believed every word you’ve said...Why, I don’t know. But Amazonian women? Come on!”

“You don’t believe me?” Armando looked wounded. “OK,” he said, shaking his head. “I will have to show you.”

He unbuttoned his shirt cuff and rolled up his sleeve. On his arm, starting near his shoulder and extending all the way to his wrists, I noticed the strangest scar I have ever seen. It spiraled all the way down his arm, wrapping it completely every couple of inches or so as it descended toward his hand.

“Do you see the scar?” he asked. “Do you see it?”

Once again, all I could do was nod.

“All German spies had a small tattoo under their arm pit with a swastika and a serial number. Before I threw them in the Amazon, I got out my knife and I--”

“That is from the leather restraints the Amazonian women put on me...for three months, they never took it off.”

Just then, Phillip poked his brother in the ribs and said, “It’s time to go, Armando. Let’s go.”

Armando shook my hand. “It has been a pleasure talking to you. We should get together again some time.”

“I’d like that,” I replied.

He took off his ball cap one more time to wipe the sweat from his brow. When he did, I noticed two deep scars on the top of his head, above where his hair line used to be.

“As long as you’re describing your scars to me, Armando...where did you get those two scars on the top of your head?”

Armando stroked them gently with his hand, as if it was helping to recall yet another adventure. “Oh yes...I remember these scars. They are from an operation. The doctors said they had to do it because I was too horny.”

“WHAT?” I cried.

“Goodbye, my friend,” he grinned and headed for the car.

“Wait a minute,” I yelled. “Was any of that the truth?”

“Believe me when I tell you...It was *all* the truth.”

Armando turned the key, the engine started, he put the car in gear, and roared onto Main Street, throwing gravel and a cloud of dust as he and Phillip made their grand exit.

Pat and Sue and I watched the car shrink in the distance. “What do you think, Pat? Was all that the honest-to-god truth?”

“Jim,” she said wisely, patting me on the shoulder, “never question the OSS.”

I decided she was right.

OLD FRIENDS...and checkered socks

Autumn is upon us, though a quick glance at my thermometer makes me doubt the date. Still there are telltale signs apart from the temperature that suggest summer’s gone. The sun rises at 5:57 AM on summer solstice day, now it’s cresting the eastern horizon more than an hour later. And of course, the light itself seems softer. That golden light.

It’s a time to reflect and to confront the relentless passing of time. And to remember past times and lost friends.



Chuck Miller at Balanced Rock in Arches NM. About 1956.

Last week, I was sad to hear that an old friend and long-time Zephyr supporter has died.

I met Chuck Miller, from Huntley, Illinois, more than 20 years ago. He was passing through Moab, picked up a copy of the Zephyr and found me at Marrooney’s Mexican cantina. Chuck had been coming to southeast Utah since the 1950s and was sure the surly ranger he once encountered at Arches in 1956 was Edward Abbey himself.

Over the years, Chuck offered me his unqualified friendship. His letters and emails always arrived when I needed them most. Once in a while, I’d get a package from him—an old geology book, maps of the Southwest. And always a kind word.



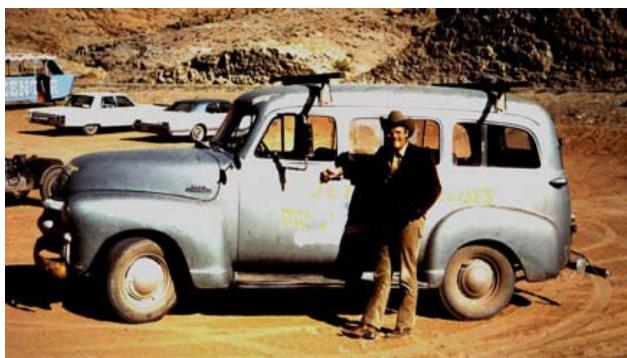
Chuck Miller

Chuck was worried about The Zephyr and me when I gave up the print version. But though he wasn’t wild about us going online, his support never wavered. He was a proud backbone member for years. In the last print edition I published a couple of his black & white images from Arches and the good old days.

When word came to me via his son that Chuck was gone, the loss was tempered by the knowledge that he’d left on his terms, happy and engaged to the end. As WC Fields once said, “The ranks are thinning.”

End of an era.

This summer, I finally learned how to use a slide scanner that I bought a couple years ago. My first scans were of old color transparencies by Bill Benge. Many of you know that Bill lived in Moab for more than 30 years, served as Grand County’s attorney for almost that long, was the author of the Zephyr’s ‘Willie Flocko’s Country Kitchen,’ and was my best friend.



Bill Benge, working for Tex in 1973.

Bill passed away suddenly on Friday, October 20, 2006. While his health had been troubling him for years, he had never been as happy as he was that past summer. Bill was in an especially expansive mood when he came by my house in Monticello on the previous Tuesday morning. He was in town for a court hearing and was dressed to the nines (if you knew Bill, you knew his taste in men’s fashion knew no limits. His tie collection alone, if placed end to end, might reach France. No comment on his seersucker suit).

On this day, he arrived in pin-striped navy-blue; a neon tie adorned his neck. All of that I could handle. But when he sat down to chat, he exposed a pair of white and black checkered socks that I thought crossed the line.

“What the hell are those?” I asked.

Bill beamed proudly, “These are my Indianapolis 500 checkered flag socks. I’m quite proud of them.”

“My god, they’re awful Bill,” I complained. “They’re almost as scary as your orange jalapeno socks.”

“There’s nothing scary about these socks,” he replied indignantly.

“And you’re wearing them to court? Judge Ander-

son will never tolerate it. You’re already on shaky ground with Lyle over your outrageous ties. Aren’t you pushing the limit?”

Bill laughed. “Lyle understands me. I think secretly he wants to wear checkered socks too.”

Bill beamed proudly, “These are my Indianapolis 500 checkered flag socks. I’m quite proud of them.” “My god, they’re awful Bill,” I complained. “They’re almost as scary as your orange jalapeno socks.”

“Well maybe,” I said, “but this is San Juan County. These people are conservatives and represent the moral backbone of the country...This kind of deviant behavior could cause trouble!”

“Well,” Flocko said, rising from his chair, “I’ll just have to take my chances.”

Bill headed out the door and as he passed, the smell of his aftershave lingered. It was Karl Lagerfeld.

Willie Flocko and his high priced colognes, I smiled to myself. I watched him climb into his Audi Quatro and drive away. I never saw him again.

Later I became the executor of his estate and I spent much of the next year sifting through and eventually distributing Bill’s personal effects. I started wearing some of his colorful socks and the orange jalapenos became my favorites. But I couldn’t find the checkered socks. I became obsessed with them and I searched everywhere but I could not find a trace. How could they have vanished?

But recently, years later, I was rummaging through my own sock drawer. Way at the back, buried under my holey reserve socks, I spotted something fuzzy and strange. I’d seen these furry little beasts before but had never examined them closely. I remembered that they had been Bill’s and I could never understand why a man with such impeccable taste in footwear would wear such a garment.

I held the socks in my hand and examined them again carefully. And then...and then it was almost as if I could hear my old pal talking into my ear. The words came slowly. He said...

“They’re turned inside-out, you bonehead. THOSE are my checkered socks.”

“Well, I’ll be damned,” I said out loud. After almost four years, Bill’s checkered socks had returned to life. And in a way, so had Bill.

I think about Willie Flocko every day. I miss his sarcastic wit and our lively conversations. I miss his quiet support in hard times. I even miss that damn seersucker suit. But at least I don’t have to miss his checkered socks anymore.



Inside out... and vice versa.

A NOTE ABOUT A MISSING STORY...

This issue was to include a story called, “The Brilliance, Banality and Brutality of *facebook*.” It’s a confusing place to be these days. I’ve found old friends and made new ones on FB and I think the *Zephyr* page is helping us find new readers.

But facebook can also be banal, tedious, embarrassing and sometimes cruel. Specifically and very recently, I came under personal attack from two people I barely know (one of them I’ve never met). They fabricated some remarkable lies and posted them on facebook pages read by thousands. I had no idea what to do and still don’t, though many others have intervened on my behalf, for which I am very grateful.

But, you know, it’s Autumn, my life otherwise is perfect these days, and I think I’ll deal with these idiots some other time.

Enjoy the fall colors.