

FOUR BY AIR

About two o'clock on a Friday afternoon I answered the phone with a slightly bored business-like answer, expecting to hear from a City of Dallas department or an employee with another intractable personnel problem for me to address.

"Hey, it's Don," the voice answered. "Want to go pheasant hunting?"

Awaking from my paperwork slumber I replied, "Sure, when are you going?"

"Leaving in three hours from Love Field. Can you get there in time?"

"Where are you going?"

"Tulia, Texas. I'll fill you in later."

After a quick call to my wife, I zoomed home, got my hunting stuff, and sped toward the airport. I had little idea of what was about to happen, but I was excited to be going. I'd never been pheasant hunting and I really needed a weekend away from my usual life.

I arrived at the airport with a few minutes to spare and found my way to the section where the private planes do business. After finding Don we located the small chartered plane that was to take us pheasant-hunting. The other two hunters arrived, fellows that Don knew but I did not, and the four of us loaded up while the pilot did his pre-flight tests. In minutes we were airborne and on our way to west Texas.

When we reached flight altitude, I learned more about why we were going pheasant hunting. In 1975, at the Veterans Administration Hospital in Dallas, a team of four doctors performed open-heart surgery on a wealthy west Texas oil man, a WWII veteran named Marvin. Before the surgery, Marvin promised the doctors that if he lived he would take them all pheasant hunting. It had been two years since the surgery and only one of the four doctors who operated on the oil man was still working at the VA Hospital or even still practicing medicine in Dallas. That surgeon was my friend Don. Marvin had insisted that four doctors make the trip, so Don found two other VA surgeons to fill in, assuming that Marvin wouldn't remember who operated on him. Having run out of options for a fourth surgeon, Don invited me.

Here I was, a middle-level bureaucrat whose closest thing to medical experience was removing splinters from my hands, suddenly the recipient of an all-expenses-paid

pheasant hunting trip, and I was to play the role of a heart surgeon who had helped save a WWII soldier's life.

The conversation turned to hunting, sports, and telling jokes until we were approaching the air strip at Tulia, Texas, which is about halfway between Amarillo and Lubbock, sixty miles east of the New Mexico state line. At that point I insisted that we talk about our plan for answering questions that might come up in conversation with the grateful man. The other doctors were not concerned about playing their parts well. At least they were real surgeons. We agreed that I would do as little talking as possible when the topic of the surgery came up and Don would take the lead since he was the only one of us who actually knew Marvin. If I had to answer a direct question I was to give a general answer and the other doctors would cover for me. No one was worried at all except me.

After we landed, a fierce west Texas wind slammed the airplane door shut with a sharp snap and almost blew me over. We fought the onslaught to remove our gear from the cargo hold and then started walking toward the field house. We'd taken only a few steps when two, shiny-clean vehicles whipped up beside us. The oil man's sons, both in their twenties, jumped out of the vehicles, packed our gear in a fancy blue pick-up truck, and opened the doors of a beautiful white Cadillac sedan sporting off-road tires. In a jiffy we were speeding along a rural highway looking at open space on both sides of the road as far we could see. Suddenly the driver braked, turned off the highway, and pulled up in front of a Mexican restaurant as the sun was beginning to set. I noticed that the lights were on inside, but the outside signs were off. Inside, we met Marvin for a big dinner and celebration.

From the moment we entered the little restaurant and for the rest of the trip we were treated like celebrities every step of the way. It turned out that Marvin had reserved the restaurant exclusively for our party. Obviously he was very grateful for the extra years he was enjoying with his repaired heart and he was going to be darn sure we enjoyed every minute as much as he did.

Don introduced us as VA surgeons and we dug into the feast that had been prepared for us. For the next three hours we were served every kind of Mexican food I had every heard of and some I hadn't. Waiters appeared to keep plates and glasses full.

Conversation, along with the food, wine, and beer, flowed along like we'd all been friends for a lifetime. Stories of hunting, misadventures, and heart surgery made for a lively conversation, and I laughed so much my cheeks hurt.

Posing as a surgeon turned out to be kind of fun. It reminded me of the old television game show "What's My Line," where two impostors sat with the subject of the show, maybe an author or a mountain climber ... something unusual, and all three attempted to convince the panelists that they were the "real" person.

"Dr. Temple," Marvin raised his wine glass and looked at me. "What's your specialty?"

My face turned red as I considered how to answer. Fortunately my mouth was full of food and I pointed to my mouth.

Don spoke. "Temple's an anesthesiologist." Then he grinned and added, "He almost couldn't bring you back." Marvin laughed and everyone joined him.

A few minutes before the end of our evening together, a short woman with jet black hair appeared. Marvin stood, put his big hand on her slight shoulder, and introduced her as his wife, Maria. Then Marvin sat back down and Maria stood behind him, looking at each surgeon one at a time.

The room fell silent, and then she spoke in a quiet voice, "I want to thank each of you for giving my Marvin these extra years."

She placed her hand over her heart and continued.

"He's a wonderful man and we're all blessed by what you did to save his life."

Tears rolled down the faces of the doctors, Marvin, Maria, and their sons as a flood of gratefulness saturated the room and everyone in it.

After a quiet moment Marvin stood, raised his wine glass and said, "To Don and his team. The gift of life."

After the incredible feast, the sons drove us to the ranch where they had individual rooms made up and our gear already stored. We got our morning instructions and turned in for the night, stuffed, tired, and excited about the day of hunting ahead.

Before dawn we were served a giant breakfast of eggs, sausage, biscuits, gravy, coffee and juices. By now it was becoming clear to me why Marvin had needed open-

heart surgery. These folks ate like there was no tomorrow. Soon we were loaded in pickup trucks and on our way to the hunt.

In a half-hour we arrived at the hunting spot, sprawling fields of harvested corn with a jumble of broken stalks and leftovers about a foot high covering the ground in perfect rows. We joined others, altogether about fifteen hunters, plus our guide and helpers. In broken English, the guide explained the hunting strategy and we were lined up about ten yards apart in a straight line at the end of the enormous field. At the signal, the hunters started walking slowly across the field taking care to stay in a straight line like members of a marching band. The crop remnants were easy to walk over. I wondered how pheasants, which are fairly large birds, about 24" high, could be invisible to us until we walked up on them and they flushed.

After the row of hunters had moved about thirty yards the first few pheasants sprung from hiding and flew directly away from us. As they flew, usually one or two at a time, the hunters who were closest took shots while the rest of us stopped and waited for the shooting to finish. Then the whole line of hunters walked on kicking up more birds every few yards. By the time we had walked the first field the group had killed ten. The downed birds were recovered by the helpers and put in the pickup trucks, then we moved on to the next field. The limit was two male birds per hunter so the guides kept count and we kept hunting until the group limit was reached.

I had never been on a hunting trip with a guide before nor had I ever hunted pheasants. They fly in a straight line, rising gradually as they build up speed. They make a rather large target and take several seconds to get going fast. Although it takes some degree of shooting skill it is far easier to hit a pheasant than a flying duck, quail, or dove which is mostly what I hunted as a boy growing up in Louisiana. If you ever saw "American Sportsman," a television show about hunting, you have some idea of how we were treated. Someone else did all the work; all the guests did was walk and shoot. After the hunt the helpers cleaned the birds and packed them in dry ice for our flight home.

Later that afternoon we were winging our way back to Big D with sore shoulders, full stomachs, the memory of a great hunting trip, and the heartfelt thanks of an older west Texas oil man and his family. It didn't really matter that only one of us actually

helped prolong his life, or that one of us was not even a surgeon. Marvin had paid back his debt of gratitude just as he promised two years before. All was as it should be.