

## HELGA, ME AND THE MYSTERY IN THE MON

The Picture Of The Mitchell Bomber that crash-landed in the Monongahela River in 1956 is painted on the outside wall of Pittsburgh's history center. Driving up Smallman Street, the plane appears almost a story high with a wing-span wide as the building. If you were driving over the Homestead High-level Bridge that frigid January day in 1956 though, you could have seen the bomber for real thirty feet overhead, the left engine stalled and the right propeller ghosted at about 1,000 RPM. The pilot is fighting to make it to the county airport, but he is finally out of fuel and ditches 300 yards down river. The military flight plan has him headed to Harrisburg, two hundred miles away. Four airmen, including the pilot, crawl out on the wing and are rescued but two others drown in the freezing Mon. The River Rescue and Coast Guard spend two weeks looking for the

wreckage but call off the search in the icy waters after finding absolutely nothing, not a trace.

Nineteen fifty-six is the Cold War Era. Pittsburgh is ringed with Nike Missile sites people say to protect our steel mills from the Commies. Cars resemble rockets with tail fins and bumpers with protuberances like war heads. Even women's brassieres make their chests look like that. There is a song on the radio about guided missiles and love and our hero Rocketman, strides across the Saturday afternoon screen of our neighborhood theatre that everyone calls the Boom Boom. Rocketman's a real space-cowboy with a bucket-like headgear and an Electrolux vacuum cleaner like Fred's mother's strapped to his back, stuffed with sparklers, or so we theorized. With Fred's crew cut and his mother's assortment of neat tools, and the Electrolux pull-around, we sort of felt he could be our test pilot. We, Fred, Itchy and me, fancied ourselves as the Scientific Explorers.

By the summer vacation, a book is published: *The Incident That Could Have Killed Pittsburgh*. Still no a trace of the aircraft is found. Radio talk shows buzz, articles appear. Speculation has the plane flying secret cargo— an A-bomb, Amelia Earhart, Howard Hughes, Russian defectors, Vegas show girls. How can something big as a trolley car, its wingspan like Bigelow Boulevard, sink, be retrieved, cut up and be spirited away without a witness! We dropped the idea of Fred testing a rocket-powered personal flight module and voted to find the missing Air Force plane the summer of '56.

Our raft was ready on a hot, end-of-July day. You could smell the Hays slaughter house and creosote from the railroad ties we hopped over. We made the craft out of doors borrowed from Second Hand Charlie's Emporium. The boat looked like a quilt with large doors of different colors. Our two prize doors said, *Keep Out By Order of the*

*Commander* and *Ladies Room*. With Fred's mom's hand drill, we laced the edges, three wide by three long with aluminum wire from bundles of the *Post-Gazette* I delivered each morning at six. We found a tire pump in the trunk of a Hudson at our junkyard. Inner tubes, decorated with red rubber patches, were fastened to the underside. We carried our raft to the embankment, flipped it over and plopped it into the water, the *Ladies Room* and *Commander's* doors up. Clothes-line poles would serve to move us since they resembled poles of keel boats in the school book *Travel on Pittsburgh Rivers One Hundred Fifty Years Ago*.

We poled the shallow bottom, the poles working well as we trolled in and out of half-submerged trees near the shore looking for wreckage, searching for signs of the plane and dark cargo. As we moved into Glass Run Creek outflow, the poles pushed into a deeper mud bottom, and the raft spun us like a merry-go-round. We lost the poles not realizing the pictures in the history book at school were titled "Keel Boats". Our contrivance would have benefited from a keel and a rudder, and we were heading into the deepest, swiftest part of the river made more dangerous by storms our area had endured for a week.

Suddenly there was a muffled pop and bubbles began rising around Fred's door. Itchy, his red hair looking like he combed it with an egg beater, yelled, "Fred, did you cut the cheese?" We laughed. One of the patched tubes let go and Fred found his door sinking. He slid into the water managing to grab the door knob.

"The tube!" Fred shouted

"Smooth move, Ex Lax," I said

Then suddenly a river tow boat with nine barges, three by three, loaded with mountains of coal, appeared coming our way. Probably a million pounds of steel, coal and diesel engines. The pilot of the *Helen Z.* couldn't move out of the channel even if he saw us. Fred kicked and we paddled with our hands on each side to spin just past the leading-edge of a dark eternity. It seemed a long time till the barges and the hull of the river boat passed. We bobbed in the wake of the diesel engines and fumes and caught our breath as Itchy, our scientific mind, explained how the flexibility of the raft from our lacing the edges together helped work like a shock absorber and cushion the pounding of waves.

Now it was easy to imagine eternity for the B-25 Mitchell bomber. One theory had the plane being crushed into a ball by a tow of barges then pushed into the bottom of the river. If so, the ten-ton wreckage never showed up on sounding devices during the two weeks in January authorities conducted the search.

By now our raft was way past the Hays slaughter house, the junkyard and Second-hand Charlie's. The *Helen Z.* seemed to pull us for a time like the pull a racecar exerts on the car behind. When we passed the intake of the city water system near Beck's Run, I could tell we were losing the draft of the *Helen Z.*'s wake and then it became clear why. She shifted to the north shore. A small river tug, fighting upriver, was passing on her left. That pilot and crew saw us and started waving and shouting encouragement. "Ahoy, mates!" They thought we knew what we were doing. I pumped my fist in the air and our fellow river travelers responded with a BLATTTTTTTT that rocked our ear drums. It was just like the train engineers and truckers blowing their air horns at us.

Actually, our river adventure started as most things in life start-- necessity. Like some brilliant people, Itchy didn't know how to keep his mouth shut, school, home, neighborhood. Itch happened to run a foul of two of the baddest characters on South Side, The Wolf Gang--Frankie Belicic and Wolfgang Von Sickle. Even guys out of high school steered clear of the pair. Frankie had shot his little finger off messing with the .38 his pap kept wrapped in a bar rag under the cash register in Belicic's Bar. Wolfgang had to work at our sad and failing theater enterprise, the Boom-Boom. His father was trying to keep it afloat, but TV antennas were sprouting like weeds on chimneys. Families sat in front of the television's warm glow like a fireplace all weekend. The father, Reinhardt, attempted to add a bit of old-world charm to the South Side enterprise. He made his son, and daughter, Helga, dress up in costumes on Saturdays and Sundays. Helga in a dirndl skirt and peasant blouse worthy of any beer hall in Munich. Wolfgang, on the other hand, wore a bell hop's costume as he escorted customers to their seats with a flashlight. The red velvet jacket and pants with a faux black silk stripe down the leg were silly, but his little pillbox hat made him look like a famous cigarette ad character. It was bad enough he had to escort three twelve-year-old knuckleheads to their seat. Itchy thanked him graciously and said in a perfect mock-British accent, "I say, old chap, could you fetch me a pack of Philip Morris, and be quick about it?" Wolfgang's acne turned from red to festering purple. He was the chained dog you tease after school. He looked like Howdy Doody but nobody dared laugh.

He had been to Thorn Hill and juvie at least twice. Any day the pair felt like going to school, they hopped a freight train to South Votech at the other end of South Side. In Print Shop II, they designed counterfeit streetcar passes to sell. They wore black engineer

boots with silver buckles and hung out at Ormsby Park at night drinking quarts of Iron City beer waiting for colored kids to come across the Twenty Second Street Bridge from The Hill. It was impossible to think of them playing basketball or any other sport but roll-the-drunk with those boots. Rumor had it, colored kids they chased would yell, "Never saw a honkey ghost that could run, anyway!" and Wolfgang would shout back in a winded voice, "Ve are not Hunkies, ve are Cherman", ignoring completely Belicic's name may have meant something like duck's blood soup in Slovak. Perhaps Wolfgang could have been different released from his father's Prussian discipline, and Nine-finger Frankie from an upbringing in a bar in front of Mill Gate Four entrance. That wasn't the case.

Itchy, our fellow sailor, was tall with carrot hair. He was easy to spot and hate. But the Wolf Gang were into inclusivity. They would take any or all of the Scientific Explorers. We had to spend our summer up-river away from the gang.

Now the Monongahela's current floated us by Hunky Hollow. We were almost in South Side and fiery steel mills menaced us on both shores. We passed till the river swung northward beyond the mills toward the Ohio River then floated out of the main current push, toward the shore. "It all has to do with force vectors and centrifugal forces..." "Shut up, Itchy" Fred said in his soaked jeans, and his squishy US Keds. We drifted faster toward the shore at the Twenty Second Street Bridge, our inner tube bottom brushing then snagging submerged trees, then only partially submerged, then we could grab branches gaily festooned with oily rags as if we were a trans-Atlantic liner coming into berth...

We left the raft tangled in debris lodged between the shore and the bridge abutment, crossed the tracks, walked through Camp Sterno/Wino and saw Tony the Wolf Dog running at us. Tony was sort of an anti-Lassie, and like the population of South Side, he was a mixture-- tail like a palm tree, long hind legs, brown and black stripes, wiry hair, small legs in front and a small head but floppy ears. Like a proper alley cat, no man could claim him, but Tony visited the butcher shops with sawdust and blood on the floor for hand-outs and slept at the hobo camp.

I had a dream that the Wolf Dog and Rocketman left Itchy and me stuck in quicksand as Helga polkaed by with a cut of roast beef. Wolfgang's sister, a few years out of high school, was a different story from Wolfgang. She'd sneak us in the Saturday movie if we didn't have enough money. She took all the time in the world with me at the candy counter, saying, "You would like some Ju Ju Beads, or Good & Plentys or a Milky Way, perhaps yes?" She wore her blonde hair in pigtails, the right bigger and longer than the left, and she had a gap between her front teeth. Her freckles reminded me of stars in a night sky. When I watched her at the orange and blue neon lit candy counter, she was the perfect woman, though at twelve, I couldn't name that feeling. My mom said don't worry sometimes a dream is just a dream.

The hobos must have filled Tony's drinking bowl with Mister Twister to give him his once-in-a-while bath. The palm-tree tail was wagging and his ears were up but friendly. He trotted right along with us heading past a scrap yard, a bar, Ormsby Rec Center basketball court and the Carnegie Library. This was the right omen for the marooned Explorers, especially for Itchy. The Ormsby Day Parade was too.

John Ormsby fought alongside Washington and got the land after the Revolutionary War. Now, all the churches, the bars, the fraternal organizations like the Polish Falcons, the G.B.U., the Slovak Sokol Club, the Serbian Club had floats. It was a rare day on South Side when churches and bars were empty—the ratio of prayers to drinkers would have made the Guinness book if anybody gave a darn.

The dense crowd in front of us parted like someone cut a bad one. It was Tony's mean presence. We followed him up the library steps beside the reviewing stand. There were multi-colored skirts and boots and petticoats flashing. We smelled kielbasa, pigs in the blanket, sauerkraut, heard balalaikas and button box accordions and oomph pa pa tubas. People gathered early in the morning with kitchen chairs and umbrellas, and here we were! Tony's presence ticketed us to a prime view. For a while he sat docile on his haunches like the RCA Victor phonograph dog. That was until the commercial floats started and a Ford flat-bed motored up the street toward the reviewing stand. Tony stood, bared his teeth and a strong guttural sound erupted.

At the wheel of the F-250 was Reinhardt, owner of the movie theater. Behind the cab on the float was Rocketman and a Red Coat soldier and at the end of the bed was Helga in her dirndl skirt but now supposed to be someone like Sarah Ormsby from South Side's Revolutionary War past, sweeping the end of the float like a frontier maiden. Itchy shouted, "Look, it's Broom Hilda!" Old man Ormsby had named streets after his daughters Jane, Mary and Sarah. It was strange to think of a space cowboy rescuing Sarah Ormsby but no weirder, I guess, than losing track of that B-25 bomber in the river.



Tony bounded down the steps, and leaped up onto the bed. He went after Wolfgang's bum. You knew it was Helga's brother because the engineer boots were just covered with aluminum foil and jeans sprayed silver with T&T Hardware paint.

Itchy shouted to Fred about his mom's vacuum cleaner on Rocketman's back. Fred started to say, "No, it's your momma..." But then he got what Itchy meant. Wolfgang had stolen our idea for a personal flight module.

Rocketman hit a hidden button and clouds of white smoke came pouring out of the bottom of the vacuum cleaner with a few sparks and a poop, poop-like popping. The Wolf Dog backed off but held his ground and a piece of Wolfgang's Levi's in his teeth. Helga moved in and with a swing worthy of Caz Zabinski going for center field at Quarry Field, she let go at Wolf Dog. About the same time, old man Von Sickle saw the smoke and commotion then jumped out of the cab of the truck with a huge red fire extinguisher. He pulled the pin and sprayed the float. Tony ducked and Helga connected with Rocketman's bottom. Frankie and the pooch jumped out of the smoke and fog, off the float and retreated into the crowd.

Everybody cheered like heck.

Later the Scientific Explores regrouped near the brewery and agreed we were probably off the hook with the Wolf Gang. Itchy explained their rocket was working with a spark plug, a dry cell, some wire, a switch, and some lighter fluid. The invention was meant for show, not go. I thought Tony the Wolf Dog jumped up to protect Helga, but Itch said, "Naw, his Mister Twister high just wore off, probably." Fred was worried about his new, ruined Keds. We wished him good luck at home and to check his momma's Electrolux was still safe. The Explorers split up.

Walking through the door at home I was thinking my mom would ask what I did today. It would be easier to say, "Not much." But my mom put the potato masher on the sink board, brushed a lock of her dark hair from her forehead, looked at me for a long minute. "Wash your hands after you change your clothes then set the table for dinner before your father gets home."

They never did find the crashed Mitchell Bomber, but years later and miles down-river in the Ohio, a piece of plastic turned up that authorities claimed *might possibly* be part of a cockpit. Anyway, back then there were more mysteries calling to us. Pymatuning Lake where ducks were supposed to walk on fish, there was a train that disappeared under J& L Mill every day and, of course, Jimmy No face haunting the lover's lane called China Wall. But for me, even as I grew into manhood, there was something else, too. There was the aura of a woman like Helga that appeared to me and disappeared like the flickering of the lights bulbs in the marquee of the movie theatre in the South Side night.