

# September 8th, 2001

By AWD

I had been looking forward to this date for more than a year. My friend Marty Mack and I had spent time in the cockpits of several Boeing 737s as a flight crew. He had sparked my interest in a float trip that he was planning down the Colorado River through the Grand Canyon.

Marty Mack is the kind of young man that most any man would like to emulate or at least try to. He had the physical ability to run a marathon and the imagination of Louis and Clark—an outdoorsman from end to end. The natural beauty and awesomeness of nature is the one thing that really excites him.

This trip was all his planning. He knew the boat company, the boat captain, the cook, and had invited each and every member of this group of at least fifteen or sixteen men. He allowed me to invite my old friend of more than forty years, Mark Clouch, another airline pilot who at that time was flying for Delta Airlines. The three of us were the only airline people on this trip. There were other guys much more interesting than us. There were two geologists, a jeweler, a businessman, a carpenter and other interesting guys. Everyone was congenial, and the common thread that bound them together was their love of nature and the outdoors. The majority were backpackers and hikers who enjoyed gazing at views that are seldom seen by the average person. Each of them might hike all day and climb thousands of feet just for a few minutes to gaze at the awesomeness of God's creation.

I have always taken the time to hike a good deal and thought of myself as a fit man. Boy was I wrong! I was the fattest and most out-of-shape of the bunch, but thankfully, they looked after me, and I made almost every hike.

My friend, Mark, has somehow maintained his health and a youthfulness that most guys our age envy. No extra weight on his body, therefore, he made all the hikes with physical ease.

The few months that Marty and I had flown together, we passed over the Grand Canyon several times. He was continually wetting my appetite for the future adventure. It seemed that he knew every nook and cranny of the Canyon. I was constantly requesting a Canyon tour from Los Angeles Air Traffic Control Center (ATCC) which they would allow if there wasn't conflicting traffic. I probably took too much liberty during these turns over the Canyon because I know that I wasted a lot of time and fuel doing them. I would make a 120 degree turn to the right of our course, then back to the left passing the original heading 120 to the left of course. That is a total of 360 degrees of turning. I probably wasted sometimes as much as five minutes over the Canyon. I never heard any complaining from the passengers. The contrary was heard. They all loved it. Just prior to starting the tour, Marty or I would make a few comments about the turns and the views to the passengers, but the rest of the time Marty was pointing out features that we would visit when we made our float trip.

I had already hiked the Canyon once by myself, down to the bottom on South Kiabab Trail and back to the top on the Bright Angel Trail. All in one day! I was an exhausted fellow when I reached the top. Then a couple years later, Mark and I made the same trip together. We started our decent around 0330 in the morning, and I remember slipping and falling on some ice that had frozen on the trail. It hurt my back a little, but we continued. As it turned out, I was fine. Again, we were physically trashed when we reached the car. But, I remember the feelings we both had as we looked down from the South Rim at the end

of that day. We felt like we had really accomplished something, and we had, but we were almost totally exhausted.

We shoved off from Lee's Ferry September 8, 2001 around eight or nine o'clock in the morning. The air was cool, dry and invigorating, the feeling of excitement was overwhelming. I had felt this kind of high before, and it's a feeling of euphoria that becomes addictive. To this day, I'm always on the look out for that feeling. The boat Captain was telling us the do's and don'ts of the trip. He talked about when's, where's and how's of disposing of our human waste, about future rapids we would encounter, hikes we would take, lunch stops we would make, sites we would see and made each of us feel at home and secure about his ability to keep us safe. The one and only girl on the trip was the swampier and cook. She was attractive in a way that only a true outdoorsman can fully appreciate. She had already made several trips down the River during that summer. However during these trips, she was the boat boss of an oar boat which contained only four or five guests. Each guest would paddle, and she would keep the boat right-side-up and headed in the right direction with her oars. Only in your dreams can you picture this. Remember the movie Wild River with Meryl Streep? Our cook may not have been quite as attractive as Meryl, but I'll bet she was a better boat-woman, and we all appreciated her. She made several of the hikes with us and was a pleasure to be around. The food was awesome, too.

The first lunch stop was probably eight or ten miles down the river. Mark and I grabbed our fishing poles and started to fish. The water was crystal clear, and if you were high enough above the water you could see the rainbow trout everywhere. Catching one was no problem, and we caught and released more than a few. Now that is fun! Makes me high just thinking about it. Who need drugs to get high with memories like these.

The sights and sounds and smells of this place trumped any other purposeful effort to feel better. You just can't beat God's Nature. This was the last week that boats were allowed to begin a trip down the river, the weather had already begun to cool, and life was pleasant and good. There is something about the camaraderie among men, and the openness of the outdoors that is difficult to explain. One must live it to really understand it. All of us were in Hog Heaven!

On the first night, Mark and I had placed our cots near to each other on a sandy beach with the river not more than 50 feet away. The river was deep and fast moving but not roaring as it does in the shallower rapids where it can become almost deafening. We talked a little about the constant site of Airliners passing overhead as we were in a very tall and narrow part of the Canyon, and what those crewmembers were doing at that moment. It seemed that one with its strobe lights flashing would pop from one side to the other about every five to ten minutes.

When dawn appeared, we were up and ready for another day filled with beautiful sites, the adventures of riding huge rapids and a few miles of hiking. Breakfast was served, and everyone pitched in on the cleanup and loading the boat with our gear.

The evenings and the mornings of the 9th and 10th were similar. Great weather and airliners over-head ever five to ten minutes.

I asked the boat captain what would happen should one of us get ill or break a leg or something, and he explained that he would call for a medical helicopter. They would come and rescue us, at our expense of course. I asked how would he do that as there were no telephones in the Canyon, and our cells phones were worthless down here. Come to find out, that he had a radio that he could use to call any airliner overhead because he knew the frequencies used by airliners to communicate with the Los Angeles Air Traffic Control Center. The airliner would advise ATCC, and ATCC would send the chopper.

Little did I know, nor suspect, until the night of the 11th that there were no more airliners in the sky to call. Should one of us have needed medical assistance after the 11th, we would have been out of luck. We would have to have make do with what we had to make do with. I don't know what we had in the way of medical supplies because, thankfully, we never needed them. I suppose that he might have called one of the military aircraft that must have been somewhere around there. Maybe that would have worked. Who knows? Most military aircraft operate on different frequencies.

We spent a lot of time hiking which everyone enjoyed. There were a few with blisters, but blisters didn't stop anyone.

One day, we hiked up the rocky and often narrow trail along Tapeats Creek, took a left turn at Thunder River and hiked up to Thunder Cave where Thunder Springs comes out of the side of the North Rim. This is an unexpectedly beautiful place in the middle of tall pinnacles of brown, dry dirt and dusty, canyon walls. It is a grotto of shaded vegetation where several pools of crystal clear water slowly flow from one to another until reaching the Creek itself. This water fell from waterfall after waterfall and joined with other tributaries on its way to the Colorado River. This was one of the most beautiful and secluded places I have ever visited, but the day wasn't over yet.

We departed Thunder Springs after lunch with a well deserved and desired rest. It had been an uphill battle to get there. We filled all the water containers that we had and headed for Surprise Valley. This was a desolate patch of desert and in the summer months could be very hot and unforgiving. Marty told us when we were sitting at Thunder Springs to drink water excessively because Surprise Valley would be very hot. I remember he said to us, "Drink water until you have to pee ever few minutes because Surprise Valley's heat has taken more than a few lives mostly because of dehydration—the heat can be horrendous."

Surprise Valley was a hotspot, but according to Marty, the day we were there it was much cooler than the summer months, and I was thankful for that. It was a short climb to Surprise Valley. After passing through it we started back down toward the River via foot trail that eventually led us to Deer Spring which is another oasis of lush vegetation and pools of cool clear water. We experienced beautiful sites of the Canyon down below, more roaring water falls, and narrows where you had to wade in the creek to get where you were going. We made many stops along the way to soak in the cool clear water or to rinse off under a waterfall. This is a glorious way to spend a day, and a beautiful place to spend it. It probably was my once-in-a-life-time trip, but maybe not. I would do it again in a heartbeat if things happen to fall in place. It was worth every cent that I spent, and I recommend it for any and everyone who loves to observe the beauty of God's Creation. I get high just thinking about it.

I can't remember exactly when, but someone heard from someone else who wasn't with our party that some airliner had crashed into a building in NYC. What a horrible thought for the three of us airline pilots who were in and out of all three major airports that served the Big Apple almost monthly. Therefore, at first we blew it off as some sort of mischievous river rumor, but why would people who like to do what we like to do start a rumor like that? There had to be some truth here. We mentally refused to think about it, and it wasn't mentioned again until we took another hike up the Havasu Creek the next day. Mark and I fished the whole way, catch and release of course. Meg had hiked to Mooney Falls and was on her way back to the boat when we met her at Beaver Falls. We met another group there who had hiked down from Supai, AZ and they confirmed our fears about what had taken place on the East Coast in triplicate.

We just couldn't fathom what had happened. It put a slight damper on the joy of this trip. When I heard that both World Trade Center buildings were completely down, I couldn't believe it. I had been on top of one of them with Ashley, my daughter, just a year or so earlier. Now they were no more.

Another night or two on the River, and we had completed over two hundred and thirty miles of some of the most beautiful sites ever seen by man or woman.

The Boat Company provided us transportation back to Lee's Ferry via a not very 'air conditioned' older, large Suburban. The air conditioner worked, but there were more than several of us and the van was very crowded once we each took a seat .

We came out of the Canyon near the town of Peach Springs, Arizona at a place called Diamond Canyon at the confluence of Diamond Creek and the Colorado River. It was a rough and bumpy ride up the dusty road to Peach Springs. Upon our arrival at the first convenience store, we loaded up on junk food and newspapers. There wasn't a lot of chatter for an hour or so as everyone was captivated by what they were reading. Photograph after photograph of the devastation and destruction in New York City and Washington, DC. How could people be so deliberately cruel to other human beings? The driver drove on in silence as we were stunned by what we were reading.

Mark and I had made arrangements to have someone drive his car to Flagstaff so that we wouldn't have to go all the way to Lee's Ferry before we started back down the hill to Phoenix. This was a savings of a few hours on the road for us.

We had lunch and said our goodbyes in the parking lot of a Wal-Mart store in Flagstaff. In about three hours, Mark would be home and I would be back at my Crash Pad in Tempe. We cranked up the cell phones and talked to loved ones. They had stories to tell about what they had been going through for the past three days. Poor Linda, my wife, had driven all over Texas and Oklahoma to retrieve her children. At the time Andy was a flight attendant for Southwest Airlines. He and L'lana, his wife, had been in Houston. L'lana was to travel home on the 11th, and Andy had a early departure. He was caught in the Midland Odessa Regional Airport, and L'lana was stuck in Houston when all Air traffic was grounded due to what happened on the East Coast. Linda drove all the way across Texas and partway across Oklahoma a couple of times before she got her kids safely at home.

Life changed drastically for airline pilots and all other airline employees on the 11th day of September 2001. I didn't like many of the changes, and now I'm thankful that I don't fly airliners any more. It is not because I'm afraid of being hijacked or commandeered by some terrorist—it's because of the off-the-chart stupidity of some of the knee jerk, reactionary government programs. It's like no one in the government is thinking except those power brokers who can't pass up an opportunity to apply what power they have acquired. Now, we have spent billions and haven't accomplished very much. The real devastation that was accomplished by the Saudi Terrorists was not the murder of more than two thousand human beings, although that was horrible. The real devastation is what it caused our government to do and is still doing. We as a nation were weakened by fear, and it shows. We have behaved like a bunch of cowards running to the government to calm our every little fear.

Fear is a primary tool used by those who wish to enslave us. And, it is working. But, that is a whole other story.