

February 21, 2018

Billy Graham

Billy Graham went home today. There must be one of the biggest celebrations in the history of Heaven going on now. I was 15 in the Summer of 1950 when, on a Sunday afternoon, my family took my younger brother and me from our home in Asheville to Ridgecrest, to hear Billy preach.

He was already a national figure, because his scheduled 3-week Los Angeles Crusade ran for 8 weeks in 1949, and William Randolph Hearst sent a telegram to all his newspapers that said, "puff Graham."

I had the pleasure of meeting Dr. Graham twice. The first time was in 1967 on the golf course at Tryall in Montego Bay, Jamaica. I was with a foursome, and my ex-Delta pilot roommate, Jimmy, was the head Golf Professional at Tryall. (That's a whole another story, because I played lots of golf with Jim, and I never saw him break 90. However, he was an excellent salesman.)

".....and when we checked in at the pro shop, we were told that Jimmy was giving a lesson on the practice range. I found him there giving a golf lesson to Billy Graham. Adam Gimble of department store fame was waiting for the next lesson. Jimmy introduced me to both of them, and we chatted for a couple of minutes....

.....On Sunday, August 25, 1968 I was flying Atlanta - Chicago O'Hare with a stop at Louisville. On letdown to Louisville, our horizontal stabilizer motor failed. Louisville didn't have jet ways, and we parked between a concourse and a house trailer that was being used as the temporary passenger lounge for the fixed base operator while construction was going on in the private airplane hangar. The gate agent came on board to tell the flight attendants that we had a celebrity passenger getting on. He told us it was Billy Graham who was going to Chicago to give the invocation at the opening of the Democratic National Convention the next day. I informed the agent that we would probably have a significant delay. It was unlikely that the stabilizer motor could be repaired, and we probably would need to get a new one on the next flight from Atlanta. He told me that Billy was standing in the concourse wearing a straw hat and sunglasses, and he had not been recognized.

I went in and introduced myself, and with no hesitation he informed me, 'that we had met the year before on the golf course in Jamaica.' He and I had a two and one half hour conversation before he retired to the FBO lounge, about one hundred yards from where we were parked.

Breakfast was being served, and there was plenty for the crew. One of the flight attendants came up (I think they were not called stewardesses anymore) about the time I was being served, and told me about a standby military half-fare passenger who was going to be bumped. He had a new baby that he had never seen, and he had already spent two days traveling from Panama. She was distressed about his situation, and asked if I couldn't do something to help him. I told her that of course I could, I was the captain, and I would take care of it just as soon as I finished my breakfast.

Dr. Graham had called for a Lear Jet from Executive Jet Aviation in Columbus. That is the company now known as Net Jets. His associate, Grady Wilson was the only person with him, so I knew there was room on the Lear. I walked over to the lounge and asked Billy if there was extra room on the plane, and he said yes, and jokingly offered me a seat. I explained the situation, and he was happy to help. I don't remember the soldier's name; I will call him Corporal Smith. I told Corporal Smith that I had alternate transportation for him, but I didn't tell him who it was with or what kind of plane. He walked across the ramp with me and I introduced him to Billy and Grady, and asked him if he would mind riding to Chicago with them in their Lear Jet. To say he was speechless is an understatement. Billy asked him where he lived, and Corporal Smith said he lived about halfway between Chicago and Milwaukee and would take a bus to the train station from ORD. Billy explained that the Yuppies were demonstrating in Chicago and the local buses and taxis were on strike, but that was not a problem, because 'a local businessman was meeting their flight with a large limousine, and they would drop him off at the train station.' Corporal Smith's duffle bag was already at ORD, and Delta ops took it over to Butler Aviation for him. I would love to have been a fly on the wall when that soldier told his family how he got home.

Dr. Graham asked for the address to write a good letter about the incident, and I told him I had dozens of good letters in my file, and rather than a letter, how about one of his autographed books. He sent a book and a nice letter to me."

This was 9 years before I became a believer, and I wasn't at all interested in reading Christian books. I never got around to reading Billy's book, and it has disappeared from my bookshelf. The person who borrowed it, and forgot to bring it back is probably on this mailing list. If you have ever been to my home, and if you have any of Billy Graham's books, check the inside front cover, and if you find a personal note to Gene, from Billy Graham....bring it back.