



**AOPA 2012  
SWEEPSTAKES**



# ‘I came for this’

The Husky handles a special delivery

**BY DAVE HIRSCHMAN**

**T**he date for the often-postponed flight to spread my stepfather's ashes above the Statue of Liberty was finally set for Sunday, November

6. Yet that morning, as every previous attempt, brought a complication.

My other planned flights for this special purpose had been scrubbed for weather, TFRs, and so many seemingly preordained last-minute glitches that I was beginning to question whether fate would ever allow it.

But this time the forecast was perfect, with a golden fall day and sunshine throughout the region; no TFRs; the

AOPA 2012 Sweepstakes Tougher Than a Tornado Husky ready to go; and my mom, Wilma Melville, on a visit to Maryland from her home in California, was willing to make the actual drop from the Husky's back seat.

The problem was me.

A stubborn head cold had kept my ears plugged for several days, and no amount of chicken soup, hot tea, orange juice, or nasal spray seemed to make a difference. The night before, grasping at straws, I had come up with what I hoped was a reasonable compromise: a much



The author's mom, Wilma Melville (above), spread the ashes (left) of her late husband over the Statue of Liberty.



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shorter flight to Annapolis, Maryland, where we could spread the ashes over the Chesapeake Bay near the U.S. Naval Academy. My stepfather, John Melville, was a Navy veteran of World War II and took great pride in his wartime service. Was that good enough?

Early Sunday morning, I ran the idea by my wife, Martha, and she rejected it out of hand.

"Look, John was a New Yorker," she said. "He grew up on the East Side. He went to Columbia University. He ran the New York Marathon. It's got to be the Statue of Liberty and New York Harbor or nothing. Nowhere else has that kind of connection to him and his life."

She didn't say it, but other questions—to which the answers were obvious—also sprang to mind: Would your stepfather have made an extra effort for you? Would he have been willing to tolerate some physical discomfort on your behalf? And hadn't you learned from him to do things right or not at all?

I took a double dose of Afrin and waited for my mom, who was still on Pacific time, to wake up. The Tornado

Husky could fly the entire route below 2,500 feet msl, so the relatively low altitudes would make flying tolerable, even for my stuffy head.

Mom met us in the kitchen at 8 a.m. wearing jeans and a jacket.

She's 78 years old, about five feet tall, pragmatic, unsentimental, and an absolute force of nature. She's a planner, and although she realizes that plans must sometimes change, she doesn't bend easily.

"So, are we going to do this thing or not?" she asked in her customary, non-nonsense way. "If we're going to go, we should go soon so it doesn't eat up the entire day."

I told her to collect her things, then slipped a small wooden box that contained the ashes of her husband of 33 years into my flight gear. On the short drive to Frederick Municipal Airport, I called flight service to confirm no TFRs had popped up. None had.

Mom, an instrument-rated private pilot, wanted to discuss the logistics of the ash drop. What was our airspeed going to be? (100 KIAS.) How low could we fly in the Hudson River VFR Corri-

dor? (1,000 feet.) How did the Tornado Husky's window open and close? And how could she make sure the ashes got out without giving her a face full of dust?

These were just the sort of practical matters that my stepfather, an aeronautical engineer with a cutting and ironic sense of humor, would have loved.

I remember one day when my brothers and I were young kids. He came back from a tough day of work at a California defense contractor and asked me to pour him a frosty glass of beer. Evidently, John and his coworkers had been trying for months to perfect a fighter weapons delivery system and, after many failed attempts, finally got it right on the test range. The pilot of the test aircraft was so elated he spontaneously performed a "victory roll" at low altitude, misjudged, and plunged into the ground in a fatal fireball. John said nothing of the pilot but, in true engineer style, felt the loss of information was tragic.

"All that data is gone," John, a lapsed Catholic, moaned in disbelief. "I'd like to propose a toast to the patron saint of lost data, for Chrissakes."



A gorgeous fall day with clear skies (and no TFRs) allowed this oft-postponed flight to finally be completed.

### Unanimous dislike

My mom was a divorced public school physical education teacher with four young sons when she and John met in the early 1970s.

My brothers and I were unanimous in our disdain for him at first. He was strict, sarcastic, and spoke with a New York accent that begged to be mocked. But his love for our mom was total, and that—over many years—outweighed our misgivings.

Mom was already a private pilot when they met, and she and John built a Rutan-designed VariEze in the late 1970s. Later, they had a one-fourth partnership in a V-tail Bonanza. She flew and he did the navigation and maintenance, and he was always amused that the vast majority of the people they met assumed he was the pilot.

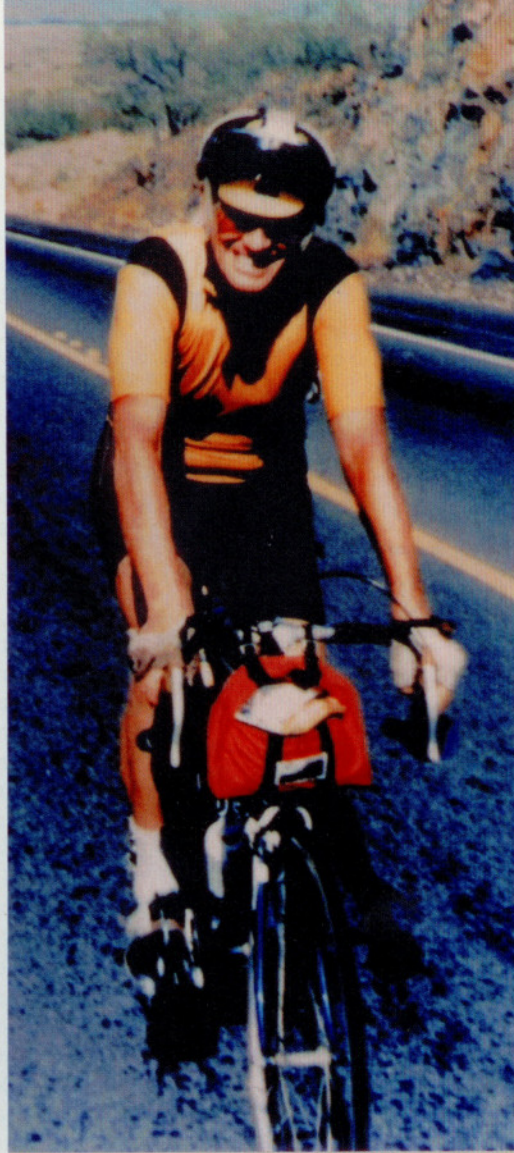
A child of the Great Depression, John never had the luxury of indulging in athletics during his youth. But when he retired, he pursued endurance sports with determination and astonishing results. He completed his first Ironman triathlon at age 63 and his last in Kona, Hawaii, at age 74. He also set age-group records in distance swimming and the 50-mile run. While other athletes monitored their diets closely, he munched Twinkies and Oreos.

He was totally supportive of his stepsons' flying ambitions, and never more proud than the day he pinned on my younger brother Harry's Navy wings.

John died of cancer at 82, and family members were all given decorative boxes containing some of his ashes. I had kept mine in an out-of-the-way dresser drawer ever since. I took the box on several flying trips thinking that I'd have a chance to drop the contents over the Statue of Liberty, but that never happened. The well-traveled ashes had always returned home with me—until now.

### A thankless job

Mom strapped into the back seat of the Tornado Husky, propped up on an extra cushion, and I handed her a Garmin GPSMAP 696 on a kneeboard to keep her



Aerospace engineer John Melville discovered endurance sports during retirement and participated in multiple Ironman triathlons. The last (above) was in Kona, Hawaii, in 2004.

## His love for our mom was total and that—over many years—outweighed our misgivings.

occupied during the 90-minute flight to New York City. She stowed the box of ashes in the front seatback.

"Sometimes you want to hold onto them and sometimes you want to let them go," she said in a rare philosophical moment a few minutes after we took off. "Personally, I wanted them gone a long time ago. I spread them in the garden at home."

Another brother distributed his share in Hawaii, site of John's Ironman struggles and triumphs. Between New York, California, and Hawaii, the key places in his life all would be represented.

Mom had the New York Terminal Area Chart spread out on her lap as we approached the city's towering skyline. I had been concerned that air traffic on a gorgeous Sunday afternoon would be high, but it turned out to be quite man-

ageable at the time we arrived. We flew north over the Verrazano bridge, the *USS Intrepid*, and other New York City landmarks—all the way to the George Washington Bridge—before making a 180-degree turn to the south.

"The Freedom Tower looks incredible," my mom said as we went by the upper floors still under construction above us. "John would really like seeing that, although he'd wonder why the hell it's taking so long."

On our way south, we overflew Ellis Island, the place where John's ancestors (as well as our own) first landed in the United States. At 1,000 feet over the Statue of Liberty, a cool, swirling wind indicated Mom had slid the Tornado Husky's left side window open. A moment later, we both said a silent prayer as she released the ashes.

## In the corridor

A trip through the Hudson River VFR corridor provides an awe-inspiring, close-up look at one of the world's most vibrant cities—and the rules are easy to follow and printed on the New York Terminal Area Chart.

Regulations for dropping objects from aircraft are also simple to comply with. FAR 91.15 allows pilots to drop things “so long as reasonable precautions are taken to avoid injury or damage to persons or property.” —DH

As the ashes fanned out in the slipstream and dropped to the surface of the bustling, windswept harbor, I imagine that John would have been touched by our final effort in his memory. Perhaps it was his Irish ancestry that gave him a soft spot for ceremony, personal expression, and remembrance. And the combination of freedom and flying that the Statue of Liberty and the Tornado Husky represent would have been irresistible to him.

Being a stepdad is surely one of the most difficult and thankless jobs ever invented. My brothers and I did our best to make sure John's assignment was as trying and strenuous as we could make it.

It had taken a needlessly long time for me to deliver his ashes to this place where they belonged. But I suspect that he'd have to agree that, finally, Mom and I had done it right. Like the rising tower at Ground Zero, the result is worth the wait.

When we landed back in Maryland and pushed the Tornado Husky into its hangar, I hugged Mom and thanked her for participating in this special delivery. What a lucky coincidence that she had been in Maryland visiting her grandkids when all the variables finally came together for this special flight.

She smiled wryly and informed me it hadn't been a coincidence at all. It turns out Ms. Pragmatism had travelled all the way across the country for the sole purpose of taking part in this aerial salute. She would return home to California on an airliner the very next day.

“You know, I came for this,” she said in her quiet, firm way. “Visiting you and your family is a bonus—but I actually came here for this.”

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*Email the author at [dave.hirschman@aopa.org](mailto:dave.hirschman@aopa.org).*