

Message in a Bottle

Biographical Series on Tyler County Folks

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Lt. Col. Merrell Cecil Schriver – Communication Engineer

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Retired on the Hyatt Lake peninsula, just south of Warren, Ret. Lt. Colonel Merrell Cecil Schriver – Cecil to his friends – has calculated that it takes him exactly 45 seconds to get his fishing pole and start fishing from either his front or back door. The lake can be quickly accessed from both sides. He loves to fish with any of his five grandkids.

The Schrivens have finally settled down after a lifetime of moves, 23 to be exact.

Cecil met Elaine during their high school years, though they lived in separate towns. Cecil worked at an Esso gas station, and Elaine would ride around with a pair of her girlfriends who were twins.

“Pulling up in their old Hudson,” Cecil said, “they would ask for 42 cents of gas. With my employee discount, I could get gas for 15 cents a gallon, a real bargain.”

When Cecil found out that the guy Elaine was hanging around with was her brother, not her boyfriend, Cecil asked Elaine out. They dated in college a bit.

Finally, Cecil told her, “I am going into the Air Force in October. Do you want to get married before or after my basic training?”

Elaine said, “Before!”

That was July of 1966. This year they celebrate 46 years.

Advice? Elaine said, “Don’t give up so quickly.”

They were married at Lady of Mercy Catholic Church, Hillsboro, Texas, while Cecil was a Baptist. Elaine was raised Catholic, and he was confirmed in April of 1974 at Our Lady of the Pines Catholic Church, Woodville, and their church is still a big part of their lives.

Elaine collects crosses and has over a 100 of them decorating their home.

After Cecil graduated from Hillsboro High School, and a full year of college, he joined the Air Force. He served 40 years in the active and in the Air National Guard services. Cecil finished his Bachelor’s and Master’s degrees at Southwest Texas State University, now Texas State.



As soon as he said, “Texas State,” they both proudly said in harmony, “Our granddaughter goes there now!”

Neat.

Both their sons David and Ricky joined the Air Force, and because of Cecil’s rank and connections he was able to swear in both his sons at their respective inductions.

During their stay in Cheyenne, Wyoming, their son David was born. Cecil was a security systems electronic technician for the Minuteman Missile Program.

“The silos were built to survive a nuclear bomb, stronger than a bank vault,” said Cecil. “It took twenty minutes to get into the silos if you knew the procedures.”

The first of the three layers of security was a radar broken by opening the gate. One had two minutes to phone the commander of that particular ten-missile group. Authentication codes were verbally traded. Never written down.

Cecil recalled, “Built by Boeing from the ground up, we maintained the radio that picked up the signal from the flying command post that allowed the commander to remotely launch the missiles. Each missile had a nuclear warhead, often bigger than ten megatons. Later each missile would have multiple war heads, that is, each single missile had ten individual ten-megaton warheads.”

The atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima in WWII was only about 13-18 kilotons.

As the Vietnam War peaked, obviously, strategists did not send airmen with his security expertise into hazardous areas. They did not want Cecil to be captured.

So he was sent to Thule (thoo-lee) Air Base in Greenland, the Air Force’s most northern base, 750 miles north of the Arctic Circle. Thule’s high-powered radar provided early missile warning, and it has been continually updated.

From ancient times “Thule” meant any distant place and was the name for Iceland. Ultima Thule was the name for Greenland and also meant a far-off land or an unattainable goal.

Cecil remembers the very day received his Greenland orders, Friday the 13th, June, 1969, because that was the day their son David was born. They initially gave Cecil only two weeks. He persuaded them to allow him six weeks. Then – alone to Greenland. It was a tough year.

“Once a week, we got a morale call for five minutes,” Cecil said, and he had to pay for the long distance phone charges. But the Ham radio calls were free. He was a communications expert.

Elaine interjected, “I would keep forgetting to say ‘over’ on the radio.” Fond memories.

Cecil was in charge of South Mountain where all the air-traffic radio systems were controlled. Formerly a B-52 bomber base, Thule provided the northernmost landing strip for both military and scientific missions.

Thule living quarters were like meat lockers in reverse. Thickly insulated doors would lock them in. Their windows were like sea-ship portals with triple-pane glass, about three-four inches thick.

Their “Thule cooler” was the window in their living quarters. Just open it and set a drink outside on the ledge for a minute or two, and pull it in ice cold.

The Thule Base Alert System warned residents of four “Phase Conditions.” They did not have satellites that could see the weather coming; they depended upon weather buoys. There was little time to warn of a storm.

In Phase One, the orders were to “finish up and then hunker down.”

It got deadly. In a Phase Four warning, you stayed put where you were. Don’t even cross the street. Every building had three days of rations and a little radio.

At 85-plus degrees below zero and a wind of 90 mph, the wind chill could be 150-plus degrees BELOW zero! It was otherworldly. More deadly than the rattlers back in Texas.

During the winter they had to repaint the numbers identifying the buildings, sometimes two to three times a week. Icy snow blowing at 100 mph could blast the paint off the stainless steel walls of the buildings.

On the South Mountain radio building there was a large fifteen-foot star that lit up, called the “Thule Star.” During 24 hours of darkness (Oct. to March), one looked up to South Mountain. If the Thule Star was lit up, that meant it was night time in their part of the world. Similarly, the Thule “Christmas Tree” was made of heavy steel anchored to the ground. When it glowed, it was winter; when it was off, it was summer.

Next, he spent four wonderful years in Italy with his wife, made all the more special as devote Catholics. His fluent Italian that he learned in college helped as he supervised a Single Side Band high frequency radio site that communicated all over Europe. Their son Ricky was born in Italy.

“Every embassy in Europe was tied into a microwave system,” Cecil said. “And the Single Side Band was the backbone, often called the ‘backbone,’ as it was the backup for communications all over Europe. Same stuff that Ham radio operators use today, but with security coding.”

Cecil and Elaine have been on thirteen cruises, including Hawaii, Alaska, through the Panama Canal, and in September they will cruise to Cozumel, Belize, and Rotan.

Most of all, they have been involved in their church, from fund raisers to fixing water lines.

Cecil has been president of the Our Lady of the Pine’s men’s club, a member of the finance committee, and was on the Parish Council for six years.

Woodville local, Shandola Langham, said, “Love Cecil and Elaine. Cecil is the type of guy who will do anything for anyone. Great guy!”

Our Lady of the Pines Catholic Church is “like one big family,” Cecil said.

They love it.

Oh! – there is a grandchild with a pole, and off to fishing they go.

Settled at last. It’s a dream come true.