

Bill Newsom

By Bob Adkisson

Bill A. Newsom, Jr., age 90, died November 19, 2020 in Florida.

In 1972, Bill was a founding member of TATC; he later became a Life Member of the club, was a real cornerstone in the construction of the Douglas Putman Cabin, and, once rental use began, for almost 10 years he was the first head of the Cabin Committee as well as the rental officer.

There are probably only a handful of us today in the club who remember Bill because many years ago, after he retired from his job at NASA Langley (in 1985), he spent several years dedicated to caring for his elderly mother, and then, with her passing, he moved away; leaving his beloved native town of Norfolk, he followed his heart south.

Twenty years an active club member, involved in every aspect of the TATC cabin, in 1992 Bill moved to the small town of Apopka, Florida (just north of Orlando), to live with his long time friend and fellow club member, Jacque Jenkins (Jacque, a former club president and life member, also played a pivotal role in the building of the club cabin but, after about 7 years of work she was drawn to Florida to be near her adult daughter and grandchildren. Jacque passed away in January, 2018).

There were 5 club members most involved in designing the club cabin, supervising the work, ordering materials, and spearheading other aspects of getting the cabin built, 5 core people that dedicated vast amounts of time and effort to see it through-- from just an idea to completion. These people were: Jacque and Bill, Harold and Margaret Crate, and Otey Shelton.

Bill was the last surviving member of this group, and with his passing a page in the history of the club is turned.

Every club member who visits and enjoys time at our club's wonderful stone cabin high on the side of a mountain in Nelson County owes these 5 people a debt of gratitude. They deserve to be well remembered and honored for all they contributed.



Bill Newsom - Construction of the Douglas Putman Memorial Cabin

I was fortunate enough to know and work with all 5 of these great club members-- all of them a generation older than me. I experienced many long hours of work with them at the cabin (and on our section of the Appalachian Trail), rode back and forth to the mountains with them countless times, shared meals and mud and bugs and all sorts of weather with them, had many adventures with them on many trails and rivers.

I was lucky, and at the time I knew I was lucky-- to have found the club and these people (and other club members) that were so kind and generous and adventurous, who let me share this corner of their world, accepted me with open arms. My life was made infinitely better for having known them. I thank them all.

Bill and I were very different people-- besides being 23 years apart in age-- but I remember many hours standing beside him at the mortar box, the two of us wielding long handled hoes, mixing mortar and filling 5 gallon buckets for Otey and the rock laying crew high up on the jury rigged scaffolding at each end of the cabin. He was a highly educated engineer who worked for NASA in the wind tunnels, doing all sorts of technical research on military aircraft design, while I was a long haired college drop-out who worked the night shift in a wine warehouse, saving money for my next big trip. One of us a rock solid conservative with all sorts of responsibilities, one a carefree liberal.

That was another great thing I noticed about the club and the work we did, how different people came together from all walks of life to rub shoulders and get the job done, building a community, sharing their love for it all.

Bill was also different from the other core group who came on almost every cabin weekend work trip in one very important aspect-- they were all recently retired (or, in Otey's case, self employed and semi-retired), while Bill still had to get up early every Monday morning, drive to Hampton and go to work. I remember him speaking up about that in the spring of 1982 when we put in a lot of extra time (I think we made the long drive to the cabin and back 4 weekends in a row that April, and on Sundays we even worked until about 2 in the afternoon) to get the cabin ready for the Dedication Ceremony early that May-- a Dedication attended by members of the Putman family and many invited guests.

Besides the cabin work trips with Bill and the others, there was one very memorable canoe trip-- in August of 1981 Jacque and the Crates organized a week-long paddle in Ontario's Algonquin Provincial Park, about 200 miles north of Toronto. There were 12 of us altogether, in 6 rental canoes, and we paddled and portaged about 75 miles through any number of lakes, rivers and bogs. The first day we saw a bear close up, on the shore of a lake, the 2nd day we passed by a huge moose feeding in a bog. I had never paddled on lakes or in such a wilderness before. I don't think Bill had either. There were times I thought he looked far out of his element or comfort zone, but he smiled and gritted his way through it.

I visited Bill and Jacque in Florida 4 times over the years, mailed them TATC calendars every December, wrote and spoke with them on the phone a few times a year. They kept up with club events, read their newsletters, came back to Virginia at least once to visit the cabin they'd both worked so hard to build.

I also mailed Bill a long newspaper article a few years ago, a series about the history of NASA Langley. After getting out of the military, he worked there from 1958 until 1985 and, though rarely speaking much about it, he was very proud of the job he did. He recently sent me photos of himself at work and wrote about some of the things he did there. I'm sure some of the work he did was classified. I include one or two photos that he sent, plus one of him at the trail club cabin.

The last thing I sent him was a recent article from the Virginian Pilot newspaper about the book and movie Hidden Figures, which of course is based on actual events that took place at NASA Langley. Turns out he had an at least passing acquaintance with one of the women featured in the film (the aspiring engineer Mary Jackson, played by actress Janelle Monae).

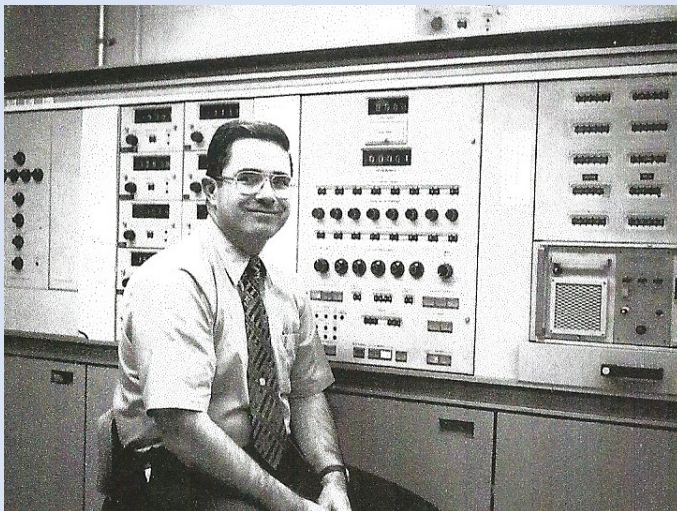
I was informed of Bill's death by one of his long time, loyal neighbors, a woman who he'd asked to be the executor of his will (I believe I briefly met her on one of my last visits). She said Bill was doing well right up till the end, bothered only by poor circulation in his legs that kept him from getting out much. The cause of death was heart failure (nothing COVID-19 related). His last wish was to be buried in Norfolk, in a family plot alongside his mother and father. She sent me a copy of the obituary he wrote for himself, which I include here:

"Newsom, Willian A, Jr. Age 90. Died Nov. 19, 2020. He was a native of Norfolk, Virginia and the son of William A. Newsom and Lucy Russell Newsom. After graduation from M.F. Maury High School and Virginia Polytechnic Institute, he was recruited to be employed at the Langley Research Center of NACA which in 1958 was merged with other technical facilities to form NASA. His work at LRC was the study of Dynamic Stability and Controllability using the Free-Flight-Model Technique. During his period of employment, the configurations studied varied from unique designs of STOL and VTOL ideas to the development of all military designs such as the F-4, F-14, F-15, F-16 and F-18 fighter planes as well as the B-1 and B-2 bombing planes.

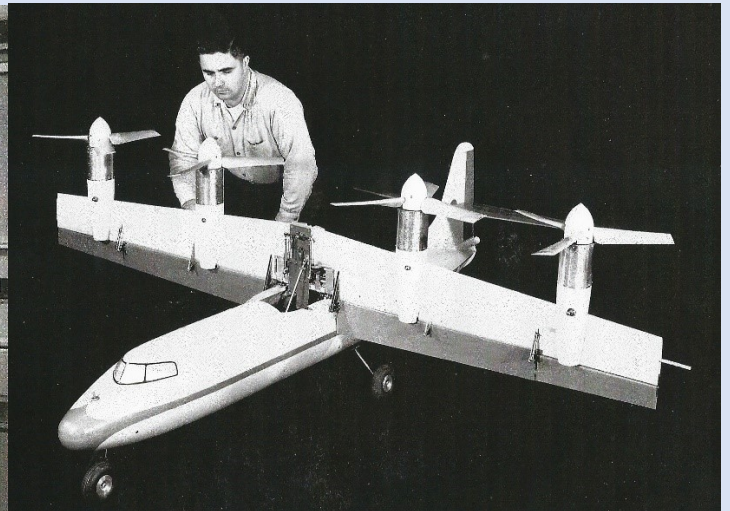
His military service consisted of 5 years as an Aviation Ordnanceman while a member of VMF-233 U.S.M.C.R. and 2 years as a member of the faculty of the Artillery School U.S. Army [the latter assignment was at Fort Sill, OK] He was a charter member of the Tidewater Appalachian Trail Club and a Life Member of the N.R.A. with a primary interest in long-range rifle marksmanship.

He was preceded in death by his beloved younger sister Carolyn N. Ferris of Yorktown, Virginia."

One final thing I remember Bill telling me when I visited him in Florida: he grew up in what sounded like a neighborhood of modest homes in Norfolk, along Killam Ave. just east of Hampton Blvd, near what is now an ever-expanding part of ODU. He told me how, as a teenager, in the mid to late 1940's, he'd carry his hunting rifle onto a city bus, ride to South Norfolk, transfer to another bus going into some rural part of Chesapeake, then spend the day alone in the woods and fields, hunting or target shooting. At day's end he'd ride the bus back home. Neither he, the bus drivers, or apparently the passengers thought twice about a teenager carrying a rifle on the bus. But, years later, to me he marveled about such a thing not raising a single eyebrow, being perfectly acceptable.



Bill Newsom - Wind-Tunnel Jockey



Bill Newsom - 1957 - First Project