

Peter P. Strunk

While driving through his favorite part of Arizona, the White Mountains, an impaired driver crossed the center line and hit head-on the car Pete was driving. He died a few hours later on April 11, 2003. His ashes will be scattered in Hawaii, where he had been based for several years while flying for Northwest Airlines. Pete was a 747 first officer who loved and lived to fly.

That love of flying began as a boy and grew as he did, first in building model planes and then rockets he could launch. He often rode his bike to the airport to watch the planes take off. The second date with his high school sweetheart ended up at the end of the runway so he could explain the aerodynamics of flying, and she married him anyway. With his appointment to USAFA, his dreams of flying actually took wing when he joined the flying club and earned his private pilot's license, followed by an instrument rating. After graduating in 1975 with a degree in physics, he set off for pilot training at Webb AFB in Big Spring, Texas, and then received an assignment to Luke AFB where he completed F-4 training. A brief 18-month stay at Nellis AFB flying the F-4 preceded an assignment to Sembach AB in Germany. Although initially disappointed with an OV-10 assignment, he would later say that the Sembach years were the best of his time in the Air Force. An F-15, however, was waiting in the wings, and Pete moved on to more training at Luke and then two more years at Holloman AFB in New Mexico.

Pete moved into the civilian sector in 1985, working for Garrett Pneumatics System Division in Phoenix, Ariz. as a project engineer. He also joined the Air National Guard and then later changed to a Reserve position as an Air Force Academy Liaison Officer, traveling to high schools around Arizona to counsel students interested in attending the Academy. To keep his feet "off" the ground, he became a light plane instructor at Falcon Field Airport in Mesa. Four years later he applied to Northwest Airlines and was hired in 1989. During his career at Northwest, Pete flew the DC-9, the 727, and finally the 747-200, first out of Alaska and then Hawaii. One of his favorite jobs at Northwest was as an instructor, which combined Pete's flying skills with his love of teaching others to fly. He also shared this love of flying by speaking to elementary students about both the science of flight and careers in living. Intense discussions were a favorite pastime of Pete. On long layovers, during lengthy trans-Pacific flights, and while relaxing on the patio at home, he would often carry on conversations about mathematical and scientific concepts he had read about. His family often teased him about the fact that he read math books "for fun," but Kathe, his wife of 28 years, enjoyed getting the condensed account of the books he read. Pete loved learning, was a voracious reader, and an avid PBS fan. After being on reserve in Hawaii and Alaska and experiencing their natural splendor, he developed a passionate interest in the environment and was involved in various aspects of protecting the places he wanted to see preserved for future generations.

Pete was proudest of his three daughters and their successes as emerging adults. All honors college students/graduates, Pete took great joy in their intellectual accomplishments as well as their dedication to helping others. Emily works in development for a non-profit organization in Washington D. C., Elisabeth is a graduate student at the University of Michigan, and Elaine will transfer to Michigan State in the fall. He was excited to finally have a male (especially one who loved math and science) join the family when Elisabeth married Matt last year. Aside from his love of learning, Pete inspired his family with a love of travel and a compassionate global perspective. He was a man of uncompromising honor and integrity, and yet amazingly unpretentious, His fellow pilots describe him as “a genuine professional, a great stick and throttle pilot, and a true gentleman. He will be missed by all those who knew him — he was one of the good guys.” (Pete’s wife and daughter)