

Commentary

Flying Carpet

Raise The Flying Carpet

"Clive Cussler!" I said. "He writes the Dirk Pitt novels, like *Raise the Titanic* and *Inca Gold*. And he discovered the Confederate submarine, *Hunley*."

"That's right," said Penny Porter, director of Tucson's Society of Southwestern Authors writers conference. "After our original keynote canceled for next week, Clive graciously agreed to speak on short notice. You're still coming, right?"

"Wouldn't miss it!" I said. "And I can't wait to hear Clive Cussler speak. But Penny, why are you phoning *me*?"

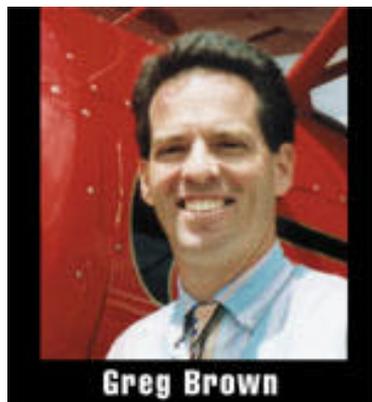
"Because we have a problem," said Penny. "Clive has agreed to present, but he must get home by five o'clock for another engagement. Would you bring him with you in the *Flying Carpet*? He lives nearby and you'd easily be back before five, right?"

"Spend the day with a famous author?" I replied. "You bet!" Even my wife, Jean, was excited. Upon hearing the news, she changed her tune from "boring writers conference" to "you're not going without me!"

With 17 *New York Times* best sellers under his belt and 120 million books in print, Clive Cussler lives adventures as exciting as those of his fictional hero, Dirk Pitt. He chases lost shipwrecks. Among some 60 vessels he has found are the Civil War *Hunley*, first submarine to sink a ship in battle; *Carpathia*, rescuer of *Titanic*'s survivors; and Robert de LaSalle's seventeenth-century ship of exploration, *L'Aimable*.

Upon phoning to arrange his travel, I learned that Cussler has aviation blood, too, having served as a C-97 (Boeing Stratocruiser) flight engineer during the Korean War. My excitement grew as he shared stories about 15-hour round-engine cargo flights from Hawaii to Japan. What's more, his shipwreck-hunting partner and *Sea Hunters* coauthor, Craig Dirgo, would be joining us for the flight to Tucson.

Cussler is a tall man with graying hair and a warm handshake. Although



I'd described our single-engine Cessna in advance, he appeared surprised to find the *Flying Carpet* nestled uncomfortably between corporate jets, like a gnat among eagles. But any concerns were forgotten after takeoff from Scottsdale Airport, when he and Dirgo watched jets land beneath us at Phoenix Sky Harbor Airport.

Sky Harbor - with these passengers on board the name brought to mind ships - and shipwrecks! I could scarcely contain myself until we had departed congested airspace. When I did raise the topic, Cussler and Dirgo seemed glad to talk about it.

One assumes that navies of experts would be required to find lost ships, but it turns out that on their expeditions Cussler and Dirgo command just a few people and a rented boat. Months of research are required before exploration begins; then it takes a lucky combination of skill and dogged persistence to find ships that have been lost for decades or centuries.

The search for a lost Confederate blockade runner, for example, was fruitless until Cussler determined that methods for reckoning latitude and longitude had changed slightly following the Civil War. After applying that correction to 150-year-old charts, he found the wreck. It seemed odd for a moment, discussing Confederate shipwrecks over the Arizona desert, but then our windshield filled with Picacho Peak, site of the westernmost battle of the Civil War. Funny how history ties things together.

Cussler next turned from ships to the search for a mysterious locomotive. Lost in a Colorado river, it simply couldn't be found. How, the men wondered, could a locomotive disappear from beneath the bridge where it fell? Clever sleuthing turned up a 100-year-old insurance scam. It turned out that after collecting payment, the owners had secretly salvaged the wrecked locomotive for use under a different name.

I almost dropped my chart when the team brought up their latest project, an aerial mystery. Only days before his 1927 trans-Atlantic flight, Charles A. Lindbergh learned that two World War I flying heroes, Charles Nungesser and François Coli, had departed Paris for New York in their Levasseur biplane, *L'Oiseau Blanc*.

Lindbergh thought he'd lost the race, but as it turned out, Nungesser and Coli disappeared without a trace, and the rest is history. Many historians think that *L'Oiseau Blanc* went down off the coast of France, but Cussler believes it successfully crossed the Atlantic and crashed in the United States. Finding it would rewrite history.

By now we were approaching Tucson, and Dirgo asked if we might circle "the boneyard," that monstrous graveyard at Davis-Monthan Air Force Base where old military airplanes go to die. "It's in one of my books," said Dirgo, "and I want to see that I've described it properly."

"Circle as long as you like," offered Tucson Approach when asked, so the four of us ogled neat rows of fighters, bombers, and transports. Try as we might, however, we couldn't locate a single C-97 from Cussler's Air Force days. "Too old even for the junkyard," he said as we banked toward Tucson International Airport.

Soon the famous author was entralling writers at the conference. But for Jean and me the adventure was only half over; on the flight home we learned how a master conceives fiction, and where Dirk Pitt got his name (after the author's young son). We circled Cussler's house before

landing, and afterwards he even honored me with a compliment on my piloting.

But on this trip I was in a sense just a lucky passenger - on a captivating journey through history piloted by a master storyteller. Of course that's exactly why Clive Cussler is so successful, though Jean and I did agree on the way home never to become the subject of one of his books. For much as we enjoyed participating in a very minor Clive Cussler adventure, we just didn't like the sound of *Raise the Flying Carpet*.

By Greg Brown

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