



**FRANK ROSENSTEIN** in his favorite Learjet, 1970.

# CAPTAIN MIDNIGHT

## MEMORIES OF MY FAVORITE MENTOR

**M**ost of us remember someone we idolized as a kid, someone we aspired to be when we grew up. For my brother, Alan, and me, it was Frank Rosenstein, corporate pilot.

Back then, we joined my dad every Saturday at Chicago’s DuPage County Airport to fly, polish his airplane, and jaw with his pilot buddies over lunch. Prominent among them was Frank Rosenstein. As a professional pilot among pleasure flyers, when he talked flying everyone else listened. Although not a big man, Mr. Rosenstein projected quiet power with his large presence and mischievous grin. Gentlemanly and reserved, he personified “speak softly and carry a big stick.” But what captivated Alan and me was how he treated two impressionable young kids.

“Hi, men!” Mr. Rosenstein would greet us, grasping our hands in his burly palm. When you’re 10 and 12 years old, being addressed like that by a man’s man is a big deal. To us, he smilingly referred to himself as Captain Midnight, after the pilot hero of a long-ago radio show. Of course we kids couldn’t imagine any other Captain Midnight. To this day, Alan sports the moniker on his license plate and e-mail address. More important, Mr. Rosenstein proved that you could be an adult and still be cool.

Back when most grownups drove finned behemoths, Mr. Rosenstein bought a sporty Ford Mustang when they first came out. His wasn’t flashy; his was a plain white notchback with standard trim and hubcaps. But our first ride in that car following Saturday lunch was one we’d never forget. I can still picture Alan’s grin as we squealed and roared past a big Chrysler 300 on Illinois 64. Only then did we learn that although most early Mustangs came with six-cylinder engines, Mr. Rosenstein had special-ordered his with a race-tuned high-performance V-8. But that hardly compared to our next adventure.

At the time, Mr. Rosenstein flew a massive piston-powered Aero Commander. Impressive as that airplane was, Mr. Rosenstein announced one Saturday his

upgrade to some new airplane called a Learjet. After regaling us about the Lear 23’s now legendary fighter-jet handling and performance, he invited us for the equivalent of a lunar rocket ride—a Lear flight to Omaha.

Alan and I still reminisce with our sister, Leslie, about being flattened into our seats on takeoff, and ogling the Lear’s spinning altimeter during climbout. Thrilling as it was, Mr. R’s grin from the cockpit suggested he was having even more fun than we were. Could anything be cooler than piloting? No wonder Alan and I followed in his footsteps.

Years later Leslie admitted to a childhood crush. “Mr. R seemed like a teenager hanging around with the older folks. But daring as he was, you always felt safe in his presence. You felt braver just being around him.” Although a lady-charmer, Mr. Rosenstein doted on his wife, Jo; he boasted to anyone who’d listen of courting her until finally she consented to marry him. He made no secret that Jo was the great prize of his life.

Hooked on flight from childhood, Mr. Rosenstein served in the Army Air Corps during World War II. During the next 30 years he logged some 15,000 flight hours and 3 million accident-free miles, advanced to chief pilot, and flew for several Learjet ad campaigns.

A hint of sadness clouded Mr. Rosenstein’s demeanor after he lost his pilot medical certificate, but that didn’t diminish

### TRAVEL LOG: DUPAGE (DPA)

**Runways:** 02L/20R; 02R/20L; 10/28; 15/33  
**Longest paved runway:** 7,571 feet

**Elevation:** 759 feet  
**Air traffic control tower:** 24 hours a day, seven days a week

**Location:** 29 miles west of Chicago  
**Phone:** 630-584-2211

---

his spirit. He took up gliders, and made the newspaper for piloting a girder-like Breezy to Cape Cod with some buddies “for lobster.” Upon retiring, he taught inner-city kids flying to improve their math skills.

By then, my little brother was Mr. Rosenstein’s cardiologist. “Prior to heart bypass surgery, Frank asked about visiting family in Atlanta for the weekend,” remembers Alan. “I said, ‘That should be OK; just take it easy.’ On surgery morning I learned that he’d ridden the 1,500-mile trip on his motorcycle!”

Recently, shortly after Mr. Rosenstein enjoyed his first hot-air balloon flight, he passed away at age 89. Along with the sad news, his daughter, Nancy, shared memories with me.

“I recall once as a kid, dad’s boss let him drop mom and me in Goldsboro, North Carolina. In those simpler days I often stood between the Lear’s cockpit seats during landing...and that runway was *short* based on how quickly the airport boundary fence was approaching. Dad cranked her down at the end of the runway, spun her around, pulled up on the tarmac, and everybody in that little airport walked out cheering and clapping.”

Then Nancy turned serious.

“When it was just us in the jet, dad would sometimes take us low and tip a wing for some great view: waving prairie grasses; the night stars and the moon; fireworks from the air. Those flights gave me a profound gratitude for this Earth. Other times, we’d sit and watch migratory birds. Dad always said you’d be a better pilot if you just watched how the birds flew: ‘After all, they had wings first.’”

Frank Rosenstein didn’t win any medals I’m aware of, nor lead charges or vanquish bad guys. But if heroes can be defined by inspiring those around them, he certainly was one.

“Hi, men!” Mr. Rosenstein, you proved that kids can be men, and men can be kids. It was an unforgettable lesson from an unforgettable man. Fly safely, Captain Midnight! 🕒

---

 Visit Greg Brown's website ([www.gregbrownflyingcarpet.com](http://www.gregbrownflyingcarpet.com)).