

Regarding a Plane Crash at Sugarloaf Ridge State Park, Sonoma County, California

by

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On December 10, 1964, people in the northern San Francisco Bay area awoke to overcast skies and approaching rain. In Santa Rosa, it got up to 58 degrees that day, after an overnight low of 40 degrees. A winter storm was moving in from the Pacific.

At the time, I was a 7th grader outside Atlanta, Georgia, and it was just another typical day for me. I don't remember much about that time, other than that I had recently obtained a Gibson Sunburst guitar, which I was learning to play, that I enjoyed going to the local theater to see the Japanese "*Godzilla*" movies, and that I had a crush on a cute brown-haired girl who sat in the front of my class. Otherwise, 1964 is a bit of a blur.

Now that I think about it, I do recall listening to Bobby Vinton singing "*Mr. Lonely*." I listened to it on my transistor radio and I believe I had the 45rpm record, too. "*Mr. Lonely*" was #3 on the charts that month and, for a while, it hit #1. The #2 song was The Beatles' "*I Feel Fine*." "*Come See about me*" by Diana Ross and the Supremes was number one on the charts. The night of December 10, the Beach Boys made their first appearance on the TV show, *Shindig*. They performed several of their new songs, including "*Little Saint Nick*," "*Johnny B. Goode*," and "*Monster Mash*." I loved watching *Shindig*. It was so different from most everything else on TV at the time.

The older crowd might have tuned in to either *The Mike Douglas Show* or *The Jimmy Dean Show* the night of December 10. Mike's guests were Frankie Lane, Dolores Grey, Carl B. Smith, author of "*Read and Succeed*," ventriloquist Willie Tyler and his dummy, Lester, and the Glenn Miller Band. The band performed "*Mack the Knife*," "*Your Cheatin' Heart*," and "*Hello Dolly*." Jimmy's guests included Ferlin Husky, Teresa Brewer, and saxophonist Boots Randolph.

That same day, Dr. Martin Luther King gave his Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech in Oslo and General Nguyen Khanh and his ruling military junta prepared to dissolve the High National Council in South Viet Nam. They enacted their coup five days later. That same year, the Viet Cong had taken control of much of the countryside and the situation was deteriorating for the general's forces. Perhaps for that reason, the U.S. was finalizing Operation Barrel Roll, its secret war in Laos, which began on December 14 and continued until 1973. By the end of December, 1964, there were 23,310 American military personnel on the ground in Viet Nam and 203 Americans had been killed in combat operations that year. As we all know, the numbers would increase dramatically the following year.

Meanwhile, Long Beach oilman, Clinton A. Petrie, age 48, landed his twin-engine Cessna 310 aircraft at the Nut Tree Airport in Vacaville for refueling (Figs. 1-2). Petrie had departed Long Beach a few hours earlier and was headed for Santa Rosa, where he was scheduled to pick up a couple of potential investors and fly them back to Long Beach. It was almost time to make payroll and Petrie and the oil company he owned were having a hard time making ends meet. With the money from some new investors in the company's account, the payroll could be made. So Clinton Petrie was on a mission to keep everything together.

When he departed Vacaville around 10:30 in the morning, Petrie radioed the airport in Santa Rosa. The controller who answered advised Petrie that the weather was deteriorating, what with the winter storm rolling in. Petrie was an experienced pilot, but, unfortunately, he was not instrument certified. In spite of the bad weather, Petrie continued on toward Santa Rosa, following a route that would take him over the Mayacama Mountains. At about 11:00 that morning, Petrie slammed his aircraft into the top of the ridge not far from where I now live, within Sugarloaf Ridge State Park. At the time, there was zero visibility on the ridge.

Although dozens of planes from the Civil Air Patrol were sent out to search for the crash site, it wasn't until after the weather had improved on December 12 that the remains of the plane were found. The following day, Petrie's 22-year old son, Roy, visited the crash site with investigators. Roy still has vivid memories of that day.

Last December, I took a photograph atop Bald Mountain, near where Petrie's plane impacted the ridge (Fig. 3). A winter storm was rolling in from the Pacific and the conditions were deteriorating rapidly. The weather was almost identical to what Petrie had encountered 47 years earlier. As the visibility dropped quickly toward zero, I wondered if I'd be able to see the narrow track well enough to drive the 4WD John Deere Gator back down the mountain. It was getting late and I was cold and hungry. I had little choice but to go. Hunger is a strong motivation. Petrie was hungry, too, but in a much different way than me. He hungered for the funds necessary to keep his operations afloat. He must have felt that he had little choice but to continue on to Santa Rosa. And so he went, thus becoming part of the history of Sugarloaf Ridge State Park.

Clinton Petrie was born on February 24, 1916 in Monument, El Paso County, Colorado, and is buried there in the Monument Cemetery (Fig. 4). At the time of his death, Petrie was survived by his girlfriend, Judith, his ex-wife, Virginia, and their 22-year-old son, Clinton R. Petrie. Petrie's father was Roy V. Petrie (born in Iowa) and his mother was Nellie E. McShane (born in Colorado). In the 1920 census, Clinton Petrie is shown living in Colorado, but by the time of the 1930 census, he and his father had moved to Long Beach, California. That's where he grew up and lived for most of his life. As a young man, he worked in the oil fields in southern California. Later in life, he went into business for himself in the oil well drilling industry (cf. Anonymous 1964a).

On a fine spring day in April, 1940, 30-year old Virginia Petrie boarded the S.S. Klipfontein in San Francisco, bound for Rangoon, Burma. She was accompanied by her 10-year old daughter, Loa Ruth "Pinky Blackburn," Virginia's child from an earlier marriage. Virginia had married Clinton Petrie, a man seven years her junior, the previous summer, the day before he was set to sail to Asia on the S.S. *President Cleveland*.

Virginia and Clinton had a quickie wedding in Tijuana and then Clinton was off the very next day. He had taken a job with the Burmah Oil Company and was required to work a 6-month long probationary period in Burma before he could send for Virginia. Clinton sailed alone from San Francisco to Hong Kong, via Honolulu, on the *S.S. President Cleveland*, departing San Francisco on April 7, 1939 (Fig. 5). From Hong Kong, he made his way on to Rangoon.

As for Virginia, she was born on August 14, 1909 in Akron, Ohio. When she was 18, Virginia married a man named Blackburn. He was the owner of the local drugstore. They had a child together, a girl they named Loa Ruth, but known to her friends and family as "Pinky." A few years later, Virginia and Mr. Blackburn were divorced, and Virginia took Pinky to live in California.

Once in California, Virginia became an accomplished musician and singer on the radio and with the big bands in Hollywood. She also played the supper clubs in southern California. Virginia had been introduced to Clinton in 1938, by a cook at one of the clubs.

Clinton was enamored with Virginia from the start and he pursued her around the state. Virginia finally agreed to marry him after learning that he was bound for Asia. She had long dreamed of seeing that part of the world and thus it was in this excitement that she boarded the *S.S. Klipfontein* and sailed out of San Francisco Bay, with little Pinky in tow.

The *Klipfontein* was a freighter capable of holding 200 1st and 2nd class passengers in addition to freight (Fig. 6). It had been built in 1939 and chartered to the Java Pacific Line. Virginia chose to travel by freighter in order to visit more ports of call. The *Klipfontein* carried her to Honolulu, Iloilo, Bali, Batavia, Surabaya, Singapore, and, finally, Rangoon.

In May, while the *Klipfontein* was between Manila and the Dutch-East Indies, Virginia overheard the Dutch officers talking nervously and some crying. They were huddled around the ship's radio and just had received news that Holland had been overrun by German military forces. According to Virginia, the officers argued among themselves about what to do. Some wanted to dump the passengers in the Dutch East-Indies or otherwise return to Manila and drop them off there. Instead, they chose to stick to the original plan and continued on to Rangoon with all the ship's passengers, arriving there on June 13, 1940.

Two years later, with the Japanese Imperial Army overrunning Burma, Virginia and Clinton fled to Bombay (Mumbai) and awaited evacuation to the U.S. At the time, India was embroiled in political dissent and Mahatma Gandhi was calling for the country's independence from British control.

When the *USAT Brazil* departed Bombay, it had on board a crew of 266, and 864 passengers comprised of 3 Filipino musicians, 177 Chinese Army Cadets and officers (including pilots), and 684 civilians, primarily families leaving the war zone. Interestingly, Gregory "Pappy" Boyington of the "Flying Tigers" and U.S. Marine Corps "Black Sheep" Squadron (VMF-214) fame was one of those passengers (Fig. 7). Boyington, who would later win the Congressional Medal of Honor for his wartime

exploits in the Pacific theater, was returning to the U.S. in order to join the active service. Also aboard the *Brazil* were the survivors of the *S.S. Washingtonian*, an unarmed American merchant vessel that had been torpedoed in the Indian Ocean the month before. From Bombay, the *Brazil* sailed to Capetown, South Africa, where it picked up an additional 47 passengers, and then to Bermuda, where it picked up 252 construction workers, before arriving in New York on July 13, 1942. As it departed Bombay, under the command of Master Harry N. Sadler, the *Brazil* was stalked by Japanese submarines, one of which managed to torpedo and sink the ship behind the *Brazil*. As was true throughout its long service, though, the *Brazil* delivered its frightened passengers safely to their ports of destination.

The *S.S. Brazil* has a story just as interesting as those of its passengers (Fig. 8). The ship began service as the *S.S. Virginia* in 1928, as part of the Panama Pacific Line. The *Virginia* was renamed the *Brazil* in 1937. On December 6, 1941, the *S.S. Brazil* sailed out of Honolulu at 08:00, the last ship to leave the U.S. before Pearl Harbor was bombed. From Hawaii, the *Brazil* sailed to New York and then the South Atlantic with passengers on vacation. In 1942, the *S.S. Brazil* became a U.S. Army transport ship (USAT) for the War Shipping Administration. On March 19, 1942, the *USAT Brazil* sailed from Charleston, South Carolina with 4,000 U.S. troops from various Army units, bound for Karachi, India. It arrived in Karachi on May 12, two months before departing for New York with Clinton Petrie and Pappy Boyington. On November 16, 1942, the *Brazil* left Oran, French Algeria for Newport News, Virginia, transporting 4 officers and 40 ratings from a German U-boat. Following the war's end, the *USAT Brazil* was sent to the shipyards in New York to be reconverted to a luxury ocean liner. The Maritime Commission turned the operation of the *Brazil* over to the Moore-McCormick Lines in August, 1946. During the war, the *USAT Brazil* had transported an estimated 150,000 troops into harm's way, with only a few minor mishaps. Some of the most decorated combat units of the U.S. Army sailed to war on the *Brazil*, and, once there, fought in some of the war's most legendary engagements. Following the war, the *S.S. Brazil* would go on to transport thousands of happy tourists, primarily to and from South America. In 1964, the ship was sold for scrap, thus ending her many years on the high seas.

As if steamed out of Bombay, the *Brazil* set a dangerous course. Clinton and Virginia and the 800+ other passengers on the *Brazil* were confined to their quarters below deck. Virginia and Pinky shared a stateroom with 22 other women, all packed in like sardines. Virginia began to go stir crazy within the first few days of the voyage and decided that she needed an aversion. There were several pianos on board the ship, but Virginia soon discovered that they had all been virtually destroyed by the American soldiers transported to India prior to her evacuation. Not to be undone, Virginia found a fellow passenger with a harmonium. Virginia was in business! She went to the ship's enormous ballroom, which had so far been empty, and began playing. Clinton stood at her side, pumping the bellows. Virginia's soprano voice resonated like a bell in the cavernous room. By the time she had finished her first number, "Over the Rainbow," more than 100 people had joined her in the ballroom. Word swept the ship and within half an hour, the ballroom was filled with hundreds of men, women, and children. Virginia would go on to play and sing every night for the next six weeks and she would later say that these were the most satisfying concerts of her career. Given their fear of enemy submarines and sheer boredom, the passengers needed Virginia just as she needed them. It was a good marriage. One night, Clinton needed a break from pumping the harmonium's bellows. He saw a fellow in the

audience whom he had befriended at the card table earlier in the voyage. The man was wearing an AVG (American Volunteer Group) pilot's uniform. Clinton asked the man if he'd stand in for him at the bellows. The man agreed and spent the next hour pumping the bellows as Virginia played and sang. The man became a lifelong friend of Clinton and Virginia Petrie. He was from Coeur d'Alene, Idaho and his name was Greg Boyington.

Years later, Clinton became a pilot himself. He often flew potential investors back and forth between California and Las Vegas, where he would wine and dine them at the Sands Hotel, his unofficial "office" (Fig. 9) Petrie enjoyed Las Vegas and the gambling it offered him. According to his son, Clinton can even be seen sitting at a card table in the background of a scene in the 1956 MGM musical comedy, "Meet Me in Las Vegas" (Fig. 10). According to the NTSB accident brief, Petrie had 342 hours of flight time in the Cessna 310. That indicates that he was a fairly experienced pilot, but he was not instrument rated. If he had been instrument rated, he might have avoided his fatal accident on December 10, 1964, when he piloted his Cessna 310 into bad weather and crashed hard against the ridge separating the Napa Valley from the Valley of the Moon (Anonymous 1964b-f, 1965) (Fig. 11). By then, Clinton and Virginia had long separated. Virginia died on November 20, 1987, in Farmington, New Mexico and is buried in West Side District Cemetery in Taft, Kern County, California.

At the time of his death, Clinton and Virginia had a 22-year-old son, Clinton Roy Petrie. Roy was in flight school at the time of his dad's death and often worked for Clinton. Roy visited the crash site on December 13, 1964 with law enforcement authorities, and helped make a positive identification of his dad's aircraft. He still has vivid memories of what he saw there. According to Roy, Clinton A. Petrie was over \$250,000 in debt at the time of his death. Roy had registered for the draft in 1960 and, in 1963, claimed conscientious objector status. Roy was in U.S. court over his classification until 1966 and, in the court documents, he cited his dad's death as a reason why he couldn't afford to be drafted at the time. Clinton Roy Petrie is also known as "Captain Bob." He writes under a pen name, Roy McShane (McShane is his father's mother's maiden name). He has written several books on aviation, including a trilogy of novels, *Hwelte* (2002), *Hwelte: The Mustang* (2004) and *Hwelte: The Soviet SST* (2006). Roy worked as a commercial airline pilot for Singapore Airlines and is now retired and living in Phuket, Thailand. Much of the information found in this report was obtained from him. These family insights help to complete the picture that is offered by the various bits and pieces of a wrecked aircraft, still perched precariously upon the ridge (Fig. 12).¹

References Cited

Anonymous

1964a Oilmen Snapping Up Northwest Ohio Land Rights. *The Blade*, March 12, p. 1. Toledo, Ohio.

1964b SR-Bound Plane Hunted. *Press Democrat*, December 11, p. 6A. Santa Rosa, California.

¹ The crash site is located near a transmission line in the vicinity of Gray Pine and Brushy Peak Trails, within Sugarloaf Ridge State Park. I plan to locate the site within the next few months, in order to better document it.

- 1964c L.B. Oilman Missing in Small Plane. *Press Telegram*. December 12, p. A-1. Long Beach, California.
- 1964d L.B. Flier Object of Air Search. *Independent*, December 12, p. A-1. Long Beach, California.
- 1964e Air Crash Kills L.B. Oil Exec. *Independent Press Telegram*, December 13, p. A-1. Long Beach, California.
- 1964f Missing Pilot Found Dead. *Press Democrat*, December 13, p. 1A. Santa Rosa.
- 1965 Rule on Area Air Crashes Cause. *Independent Press Telegram*, June 30, p. A-2. Long Beach, California.



Figure 1. Clinton A. Petrie. This photo appeared on page 1 of the December 12, 1964 issue of the Long Beach Press Telegram. According to Clinton's son, Roy, this was his father's passport photo.



Figure 2. A Cessna 310 Similar to the One that Clinton Petrie Crashed on December 10, 1964.



Figure 3. Looking West from Atop Bald Mountain, December 29, 2011
(Photo by the author).



Figure 4. Headstone of Clinton A. Petrie, Monument, Colorado.



Figure 5. The *S.S. President Cleveland*.

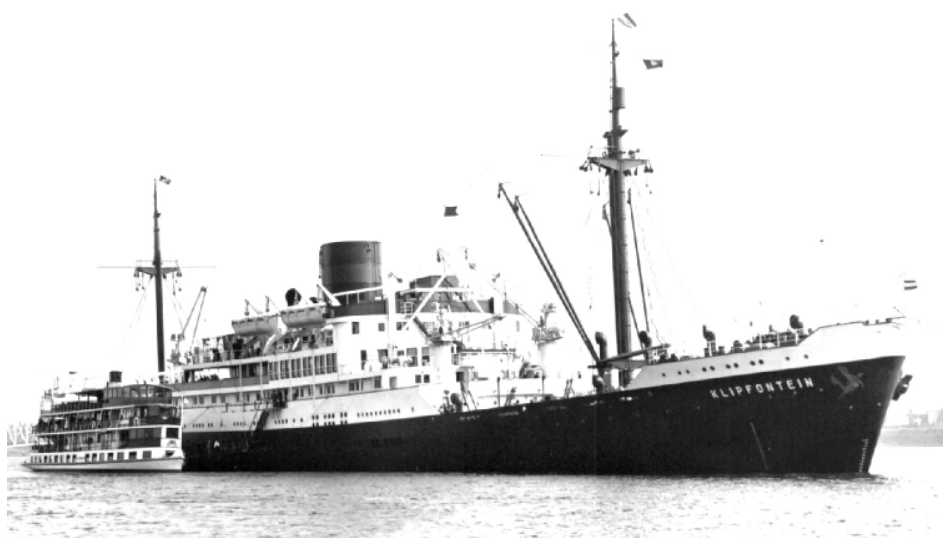
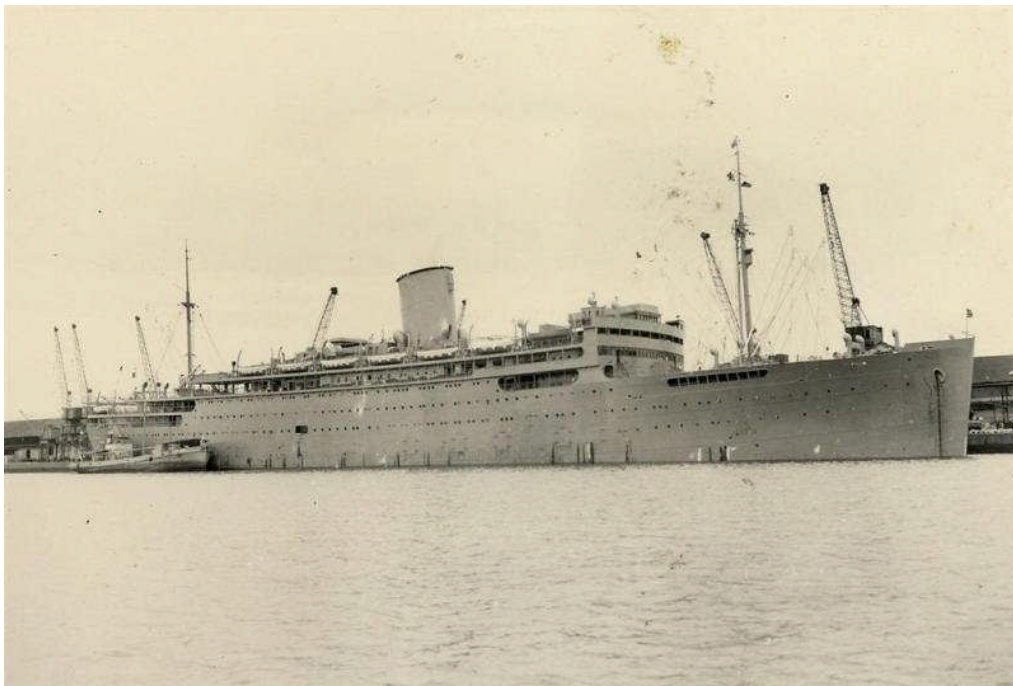


Figure 6. The *S.S. Klipfontein*, c. 1939.



Figure 7. Gregory "Pappy" Boyington.



USAT Brazil circa 1941 Operated by Moore-McCormack Lines.

Figure 8. The S.S. *Brazil*, c. 1941.



Figure 9. The Sands Hotel, Las Vegas, Nevada, c. 1960s.



Figure 10. Scene from *Meet Me in Las Vegas*, the MGM Musical Comedy from 1956.



Figure 11. Approximate Location of Clinton Petrie's Crash on December 10, 1964. Photo Looking North into Napa Valley. The Summit of Bald Mountain is Just Out of the Photo to the Left.



Figure 12. Aircraft Debris Still Visible at the Site of Clinton Petrie's Crash Site (Photo by State Park staff, June, 1991).