

# The Holidays and “Home”

by Mark Sztanyo



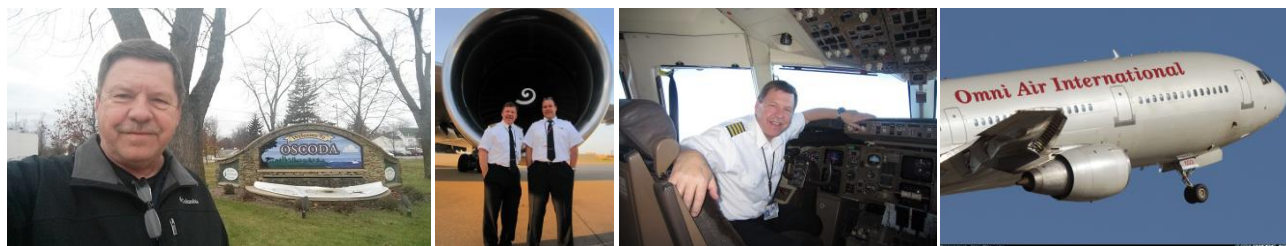
The Former Wurtsmith AB, Oscoda, MI

Each year, as we approach the Christmas season, thoughts wander towards life gone by and memories of those younger years around “home”. Its’ natural and its’ a good thing. We often travel in our mind’s eye but what makes the memory come alive is to actually visit where it happened. Combine that with the full assumption that a return to the old place would likely never be possible, and today, you have the formula for a very special one. It’s all happening because I’m returning to the place of a fond memory that was created over 47 years ago.

Growing up near a SAC Air Force base allowed a young man (along with his best friend) a lot of sky-gazing time. And we sure did that often enough, literally mesmerized by the huge Air Force B-52’s and KC135’s that were constantly flying the area. Later, with the help of family and friends, I started to follow a dream and flight trained at Iosco Co. airport, a few short miles south of Wurtsmith AB. Shortly after soloing, I would experience a real kick. This 16 year old student pilot would ask for *and receive* permission to fly a low pass down the length of the massive 8-26 runway at this SAC base. Since it was still an active military base, the controllers wouldn’t allow me to land there but they repeatedly allowed me, on several occasions, to fly my little Cessna 150 on a low pass. During these passes, I fell victim to a bad habit passed on to me by my dad. As he drove he would crane his neck sideways focused on whatever caught his fancy in the passing landscape instead of on the road ahead. Well, on my low passes I will admit, that I didn’t look forward all that much either, as my eyes were in awe of all the big military might that I was passing by on that gigantic concrete ramp. I can imagine what the

controllers thought. “Why this little propeller driven Cessna will take forever to span the length of the runway,” and if truth be told, it nearly did. This was my first most memorable flying thrill, and it comes back to me like it was yesterday.

Now, as my flying career is waning and winding down, I have a chance for a fun thing, to actually return home and fly off this same runway. Today, it won't be in a little Cessna though. Today we will pilot a Boeing 767 from Oscoda (formerly Wurtsmith) to Seattle. As I walk around the premises and climb aboard this beautiful silver steed, a flood of thoughts will pour through my mind. I'll think of the inspiration for all my sky-gazing actually led too. I'll think of the hundreds of airborne memories that we're all made in those “inexperienced” years. I'll think of the career at Delta and now with Omni that I have had the privilege to do. I'll think of the amount of time that has passed since an under 20 hour student pilot flew low passes here. I'll also think about how special it is to re-touch and re-connect with memories so closely related to what *once was*. But my thoughts will come full circle and I can assure you the most important thing of all will come to mind and that is..... home. There is no place like it. There is nothing to replace it in that spot of my heart. Yes, I agree that home is now where the heart is, but all of us had a childhood home that we found ourselves firmly planted in while in those growing years. Mine happens to bring about fond memories. I will further concede that flying has been an adventurous endeavor and I have loved it. But in the scheme of things this wonderful activity of flying was made *possible by* and *flowed out of* a place called home. Returning to my home's stomping grounds, in this fashion, is simply surreal. Today we will power up and begin our takeoff roll in a place that I have often dreamed about but thought inaccessible. Wow! Okay, I better snap out of all this pondering and get busy.....”Aaaa... BEFORE TAKE OFF CHECKLIST please!” And just like that we'll liftoff. I'll take a few deep breaths , just to I take it all in. I'll look out the window and focus below. And yes, as I do, I'll look down and I'll see it.....**home!**



Captain Mark Sztanyo grew up in Prescott, MI and graduated from Whittemore-Prescott HS in 1970. He started flight training at Iosco County Airport in 1968-69. Later Mark completed a career with Delta Air Lines and now flies for Omni Air International on a Boeing 767. Mark shares these thoughts because thinking about “home” is special and it is even more special during this time of year!