

Working for the FAA (1975–1980)

The first day I reported to Phillipsburg, Rudy, my new supervisor, asked, “What’s significant about this day?” I said, “It’s my first day with the FAA.” Rudy shook his head. “It’s the day Pearl Harbor was attacked in 1941!” He then introduced me to John, Bill, and Paul, my partners for the next two and a half years. Rudy was short with a medium build and always on the move. He never sat still, and he knew the systems we maintained inside and out. If anyone had a major system problem, Rudy was on their short list for a call.

He liked to joke around. Rudy was an outdoor enthusiast who loved to hunt and fish with his boys, and he often brought in freshly killed game and fish to serve us for lunch. Al, was the flight service station (FSS) supervisor, and disliked even the thought of eating wild game. Shortly after I arrived, Rudy ran into the flight service station, hollering for me to come with him. We hopped into his jeep and headed out. There was a huge turtle on the runway, and we lifted it into the back of the vehicle.

A week later, Rudy brought in homemade “vegetable beef soup.” The texture of the meat was different, smaller pieces of meat than you normally find in this type of soup, but it was excellent. After Al finished his last spoonful, Rudy asked, “How did you like the soup?” “The best ever,” Al replied. “That turtle we caught on the runway the other day really cooked up nice,” Rudy said. Al turned green and ran to the bathroom. He swore he would never eat another thing Rudy brought to the office.

Mary and the baby couldn’t get out and about during the first few weeks. I stayed at the Silent Night Home, a boarding house in Phillipsburg, renting one of their bedrooms for twenty dollars a week. All of the boarders shared a bathroom.

The two-story, five-bedroom Victorian residence was in the center of town. The owners were snowbirds who traveled to Florida during the winters and turned over operation of the home to a caretaker while they were away. I volunteered to help with shoveling the sidewalks and doing odd jobs for a 50 percent reduction in rent.

My initial training courses were at the FAA Academy in Oklahoma City. However, before attending, I had to pass several electronics and math bypass exams. Even though I seldom thought of it at the time, if I failed, I would be returning to Pittsburgh and looking for another job. If others could get through it, so could I.

Technicians were required to attend courses that could last up to three months or more. Most of the technical courses run from two to six weeks. FAA training receives accreditation from the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools.

Technicians (system specialists) must pass a formal course for each system they are assigned before they can work on the equipment back at their duty station. Once they complete the course, system specialists spend several months completing on-the-job training (OJT) while working with certified technicians to properly align and troubleshoot the system.

After completing OJT, specialists must pass a comprehensive system certification exam administered by a technician in depth (TID). Only after passing the certification exam can a specialist work independently on the system. During my thirty years with the FAA, I attended forty-nine courses, with seventeen at the academy, for seventy-two weeks of total training. This included sixteen weeks of instructor and management training at their Palm Coast center and other facilities.

Several weeks after reporting to Phillipsburg, I purchased a new 1975 dark-blue Chevy Vega for \$1,600. It was last year's leftover, stripped-down model with a stick shift, power steering, and little else. The payment was \$49 for thirty-six months, with \$300 down. Mary kept the AMC Hornet in Pittsburgh.

The first few months were difficult with Mary and DJ back in Pittsburgh and me living at the boarding house during the week and returning home on weekends. I had twenty dollars to live on after paying my rent, and that included gas for the car. They had a diner in town that served two eggs, toast, and coffee for seventy-five cents. You can't buy a cup of coffee for that today. I kept food and drinks in the flight service station refrigerator for lunch and sometimes dinner. Thankfully, before Mary arrived, Rudy had me over for dinner a number of times; his wife was an excellent cook.

Most of my free time was spent studying to master the required fundamentals and systems I would be working on. John Davis was a member of the local American Legion and sponsored my membership. I went there for dinner occasionally and met John several nights during the week to wind down after studying most of the night.

John was about five years older than me, mild mannered, and a veteran. He had friends everywhere, and you couldn't find a more honest and good-hearted person to hang out with. He would give you the shirt off his back if you needed it and was generous to a fault, smart, and could do anything. He repaired cars, built his own home, and was an expert electronic system specialist. You always felt comfortable around John and his wife, Paulette. Whenever they had a party, they often invited us. They made us feel welcome and like family.

We are lucky in the short time we have on this earth to find a few really good friends. John was certainly one of mine.

I look back fondly on the time we spent in Tyrone, Pennsylvania. The first Christmas in town, John took Dennis Junior and me to the woods to pick out our Christmas trees. We spent an hour foraging through the forest on a cold, snowy day, looking for just the right ones. We cut them down and loaded them onto the bed of John's Ford pickup. On the trip home, Dennis Junior looked at the trees through the rear window. Halfway there, one of the trees fell out of the truck. Dennis Junior hollered for John to stop, and we recovered our bounty.

In March, we left for Oklahoma and stayed at the Railhead Apartments. They hosted an Easter egg hunt for the kids. Mary and DJ liked the adventure, living in a furnished apartment, going out to eat, and sightseeing around town. We enjoyed watching Junior experience new things.



Easter egg hunt, 1976

The first course I attended was Instrument Landing Systems (ILS)/Variable Omni Range (VOR) Principles, which consisted of three units, each one harder than the previous one.

A third of the class failed. I attended five Oklahoma City courses and sixteen weeks of formal training, and I completed several correspondence courses the first year.

1014 Cameron Avenue, Tyrone, PA (1976–1979)

On May 1, 1976, we signed a lease for a three-bedroom duplex at 1014 Cameron Avenue in Tyrone, Pennsylvania. I brought Mary and DJ to Tyrone several weeks earlier to look at apartments. One was next to the train tracks, and the other one was on Cameron Avenue a few blocks from downtown. John's mother lived in the duplex on Cameron Avenue and was relocating to South Carolina. The rent was eighty-five dollars a month, which was less than half of what we paid in Crafton.

We packed up and moved the first weekend in May. John and Roger, friends from the Air National Guard, helped load the U-Haul. When we arrived in Tyrone, John Davis brought three veterans from the American Legion to help us unload.

This was our sixth move since we married seven years earlier and my fourth employer.



DJ and friends sitting curbside on Cameron Avenue, 1976

The Phillipsburg airport was in the middle of the Black Moshannon State Park in central Pennsylvania. It was isolated and beautiful, with meandering streams, dense woods, roaming black bears, and all forms of wildlife. It was peaceful and a huge change from the city life we left. During lunch, Rudy often fished at one of the local streams, or we stopped in the middle of nowhere to eat our lunch. You could hear the wind rustling through the trees, interrupted by birds singing and water rushing through nearby streams. Most of the facilities I worked at were located in remote areas throughout central Pennsylvania.

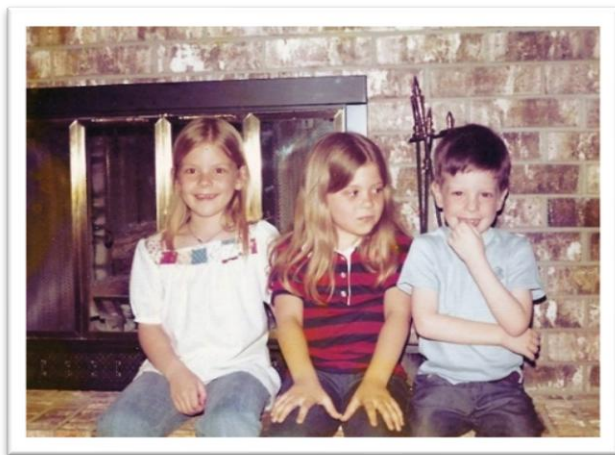
The individual attention Rudy, John, and Bill devoted to my training was unexpected and welcome. After attending the appropriate system course, I insisted on completing the scheduled maintenance under their supervision so I would be prepared for the pending system certification exams.

I learned so much from the guys in Phillipsburg, a lot more than electronics troubleshooting. They repaired facility buildings, serviced engines, wired buildings, replaced breaker panels, poured concrete, and built anything and everything imaginable. After my time there, I was prepared to do about anything I imagined! We had a great team that looked out for each other, and we became good friends.

After Mary arrived, John and I carpooled to work. The twenty-eight-mile commute from Tyrone to the airport took forty minutes, traveling through mostly state forests and long stretches of two-lane country roads. Most of the time, we parked our cars in Phillipsburg and picked up our assigned government vehicles for the day's work. We spent a good part of our day traveling to and from remote facilities.

On one of our trips to Oklahoma City, we took a detour to Topeka to visit our old friends, Judy and Jan. We stayed at

Judy's new home on the outskirts of Topeka and relaxed for a few days before heading south to school.



DJ with Judy's and Jan's daughters in Topeka, 1977

A year after moving to Tyrone, our landlord raised our rent to ninety dollars a month and apologized for the increase! We saved about a third of my take-home pay while in Tyrone even with only one of us working. When we finally returned to Pittsburgh, we had over \$11,000 saved for a down payment on a new home.

Around this time, we constantly went back and forth to Oklahoma City for anywhere from two to thirteen weeks to attend classes. The Hornet was too small to take all we needed on our trips. I traded in my Vega for a 1973 Chevy Impala, much to Mary's relief. Mary didn't like having a car she couldn't drive and our new Impala was an automatic.



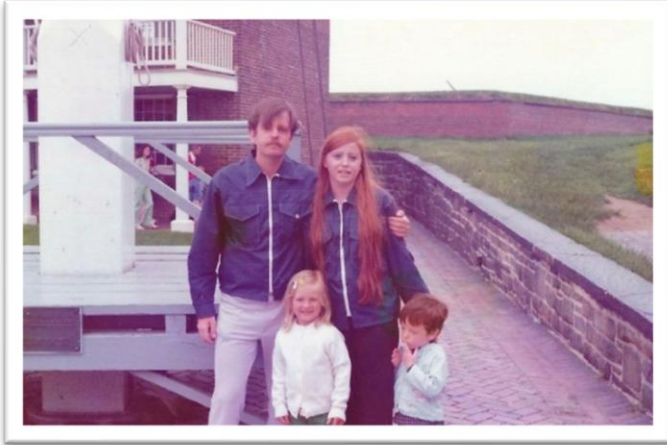
DJ in the driver's seat of our 1973 Chevy Impala

On our first trip to Oklahoma, the temperature topped one hundred degrees in the shade. You could fry an egg on the sidewalk. Sears installed air conditioning in our Chevy the second week we were there. It was worth every penny of the \$325 for the installation.

On weekends back in Tyrone, we walked downtown to visit Gardner's Candies and a local family restaurant. We enjoyed taking long drives in the remote countryside and occasionally attended dances and special events at the local American Legion with John and his wife. One evening, Mary twisted her ankle while going into the Legion and made the local news.

Our friends Dan and Arlene invited us to visit them in Maryland. I served with Dan in the Air Force, and we hadn't seen each other since I left the service five years earlier. We stayed at their home, and they took us on a tour of the Chesapeake Bay area, including the USS *Constellation* sailing ship in the harbor, the last sail-only warship designed and built by the U.S. Navy in 1854. It was enjoyable to get away and a change of pace from our hectic life. After the trip, Dan, Arlene, and

Michelle visited us in Tyrone for several days. We went to a nightclub in Altoona and several local attractions during their stay.



Visiting friends in Maryland, 1977
Dennis, Mary, Michelle Novak, and DJ

John and Paulette introduced us to the Coach Lite Diner outside of town. They served excellent home-cooked meals. We took Dennis Junior to State College twenty miles away to see *Star Wars* in June 1977, shortly after it was first released. DJ eventually enrolled at Penn State and graduated in 1994 with a bachelor's degree in accounting.

I quickly obtained communication system certifications at the flight service station, and by the end of my first year, I passed the instrument landing system (ILS) and runway visual range (RVR) certifications. Our duty station had a mix of older tube-type and new solid-state equipment, which doubled the schools I had to attend.



DJ's first day of school in Tyrone, Pennsylvania
Mary, Jo Ann, and Dennis Jr.

Within the first year, I was promoted to the GS-856-9 grade and a year after that to the GS-856-11 full performance level. My annual salary was now 60 percent higher than what I was earning with the Air National Guard just two years earlier.

About a year into our stay, I purchased a used four-wheel drive Scout for winter travel; it was ten years old, and I paid \$500. When we left Tyrone two years later, I sold the jeep to James, one of the engineers at the main office. He kept it running for the next twenty-five years, eventually taking the motor out of the vehicle to use on his farm.

Eighteen months after arriving in town, we woke up to a loud explosion. We looked outside to find a milk truck lying on its side. Our Chevy Impala had been pushed to the other side of the street, and the right front fender was crushed. The milk

truck lost its breaks and barreled down the hill into three cars. Fortunately, our Chevy stopped the truck from careening into our porch and front living room window.



Milk truck crashed into our Chevy Impala

In May 1977, I flew to Oklahoma for a two-week course. Mary stayed home with our son; we returned from a previous school not long before. A week into the course, Mary announced she was pregnant with our second child and about six weeks along!

A technician position was advertised for the Allegheny County Airport just south of Pittsburgh in October 1977. I applied, and several weeks later, Rich, the airport supervisor, called and asked me to come to Pittsburgh for an interview. Mary was seven months pregnant, and we all drove to Pittsburgh and stayed the night with her sister.

The airport had circular dark oak seats in the lobby, similar to those typically found at early twentieth-century train stations—uncomfortable and without padding. Mary and DJ sat in the lobby for over two hours while Rich grilled me on my work experience and took me on a tour of the facility. We

returned home, and a week later, they informed me I was selected for the position. I had to report by no later than December 15. Mary was due in early January, and I had to turn the offer down. I couldn't relocate with a baby on the way.

Rich canceled the announcement and decided not to fill the position until I could relocate to Pittsburgh.

Sabrina Ruth Damp was born on January 12, 1978, a welcome addition to our family. The weather that week was horrible; we had three feet of snow on the ground, and our cars were buried. The Scout got us to the hospital on time. That year, the National Guard was called in to remove snow from the streets.

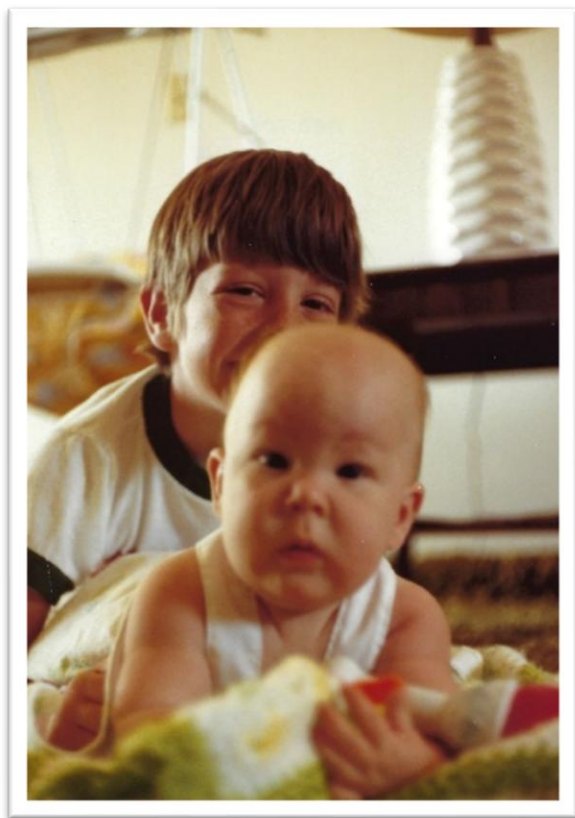


Sabrina with DJ and Mary in Tyrone

Rich reissued the job announcement in early March 1978. I applied and was selected for the position later that month. My start date was June 4, 1978. Our seventh move was now on the horizon.

We found an affordable Ryan home plan in South Park, not far from the county airport. Existing homes at that time were considerably more expensive; we purchased a small three-bedroom, two-bath ranch for \$47,900. Construction completion was scheduled for December 1978 and the bank insisted that our credit cards and any small loans had to be paid off before our closing. That was a challenge, but we did it.

Fortunately, the government paid the majority of our relocation expenses, including closing costs on our new home and additional time off for the move.



Sabrina at one month old with her brother

Mary stayed in Tyrone until we closed on our new home, and I commuted back and forth on weekends. Fortunately, I was scheduled for a thirteen-week TACAN course in Oklahoma City from April through July 18, and my family came along.



Our beautiful Sabrina at two months old

Before leaving for Oklahoma, we asked Mary Jean and Danny Cuddyre, my cousin and her husband, to be Sabrina's godparents. They came to Tyrone for the baptism at Saint Mat-theu's Catholic Church on April 2, 1978, and spent several days with us before we left for Oklahoma City.

Out of all of my cousins, Mary Jean and I were the closest. I saw little of my other cousins while growing up except for occasional family gatherings. Mary Jean and I came from similar backgrounds; our mothers talked frequently and visited each other when we were growing up. We stayed in contact through-out life. She was and still is smart and good-hearted,

she loved and cared dearly for her mother, and later in life, she tenderly cared for her sick husband. A great choice for godparents.



Mary Jean and Danny holding Sabrina



Sabrina's baptism in Tyrone, Pennsylvania, April 2, 1978

Our car was packed full for the Oklahoma trip, including a car top carrier to hold all we needed. I also took my military gear since I was still a member of the Air National Guard and had to attend monthly weekend drills in Oklahoma City while away. Dennis Junior completed first grade in Oklahoma City.

The first furnished apartment we rented had soft mattresses, and Mary's back gave out a week into the trip. We moved to another apartment complex with firm mattresses; Dennis Junior helped with household chores and the baby while she recovered.

DJ adjusted well to school in Oklahoma City, and he attended Sunday school at a local Baptist church even though we were Catholic. Most of the kids in the apartment complex attended that Sunday school, and it gave them activities to look forward to on the weekend.

On June 4, I received permanent change-of-station (PCS) orders, transferring my duty station to the Allegheny County

Airport in Pittsburgh upon my return. The new assignment had additional complex systems to maintain, including an air traffic control tower.

Almost half of the TACAN class failed and was sent home early. Mary had several of my classmates over for steak dinners on two occasions. They kindly offered to drive me to work so I could leave my car for her and the kids while I was at school. Attending classes in Oklahoma was similar to serving in the military to a certain degree. We were all away from home, and we pulled together to get through the class. If someone had trouble, we formed study groups to help them better understand the course material.

I was relieved to get back to Tyrone after class ended. I was still a member of the Air National Guard, and since I had PCS orders, I arranged to stay at the military barracks in Pittsburgh when I commuted back and forth to Tyrone. It only cost a few dollars a night and was free on drill weekends. Our new home was completed in early December 1978. My vacation time combined with the additional time off for our PCS move gave me sufficient time to tie up loose ends in Tyrone and pack for the move. I also crashed at my sister-in-law's apartment in Crafton for a week until we closed on our new home.

During my two and a half years at Phillipsburg, I completed eleven courses, twenty-six weeks of training at the Oklahoma academy, and seven weeks of directed study correspondence courses.

The 1978 oil crisis drove up gasoline prices across the country. After returning from our trip, I traded our Hornet for a Chrysler Horizon to save on gas. We used the new car for shorter trips to Oklahoma City.

From late July until we moved to South Park in December, Mary was on her own in Tyrone with two small children during

the week. She took care of everything while I was away, including doing much of the packing for our pending move. I came home late Friday night and left early Monday morning to go back to Pittsburgh. She never complained. She had a new-born and a six-year-old to contend with, and she took care of everything else. Fortunately, I had leave on the books and extended my weekends at home whenever I could. Plus, my new supervisor often let me leave for home early on Fridays.