

Stan Hardison **creator of** Fleagle

By Maj Wendy Hamilton, Langley AFB, Va.
Photos by TSgt Ben Bloker, Langley AFB, Va.

Still flying

Fleagle (fle'gull),

n. a bedraggled-feathered bird, son of a common loon and a ruddy duck from Pea Island, N.C.; a total screw-up; typically spotted in World War I flying cap and goggles.

Stan Hardison (stan' hard'i sun),

n. graduate of Ringling School of Art in Sarasota, Fla.; native of Newport, N.C.; Fleagle's real father.



The dictionary descriptions of Fleagle and Mr. Hardison do little to show how this unlikely pair became the ambassadors of Tactical Air Command's, now Air Combat Command's, safety program. They also do little to describe the tireless efforts of Mr. Hardison to keep penning Fleagle after 33 years.

Mr. Hardison, a Korean War veteran and talented commercial artist, became the art director for *TAC Attack*, *The Combat Edge's* predecessor, in 1966.

"A friend told me about the position, and I thought I'd throw

my name into the hat since it would bring me back closer to home." Mr. Hardison's home of Newport, N.C. is about 4 hours south of Langley AFB.

"I didn't even know it was a safety magazine when I interviewed for the job," said Mr. Hardison. "But, I figured it would be similar to other magazine work, but without advertisements."

He had no idea that he would stay with the magazine for 24 years as a civil service employee and create ACC's most memorable safety icon—Fleagle.

Fleagle started in June 1970 as a regular part of *TAC Attack*. Originally used as a caricature for a local newspaper's classified section in the 1960s, Fleagle eventually became an ambassador of safety after one of Mr. Hardison's friends, a lieutenant colonel flying courier service, flew into an anvil cloud on a trip to Bergstrom AFB, Texas. The friend had to make an emergency landing and wait for parts. Unfortunately, the

aircraft ferrying the parts faired no better when it too had to divert after sustaining damage from flying into another thunderstorm. About a week later when his friend made it home, he and Mr. Hardison had a little talk.

"I don't care what you do in this next issue of *TAC Attack*," his friend said, "just find some way to keep idiots like me from flying into a thundercloud."

Mr. Hardison thought of the previously unnamed bird he

had used in the newspaper, and Fleagle (flying+eagle) made his debut haphazardly penetrating a thunderstorm.

"He was supposed to be a one-time deal, but the letters to the editor poured in and as fate would have it I got another story idea the next month," said Mr. Hardison. "My brother, an F-105 instructor in Arizona, landed gear up when a student pulled the gear handle too soon. Bet you can never guess what Fleagle did in the July 1970 issue."

As Fleagle matured, Mr. Hardison had to make a few changes to Fleagle to better tell the safety story.

"I found as Fleagle became a regular feature he needed a few cosmetic changes like hands to help him get into more trouble. So, over a few issues his wings developed fingers," he said.

If you look at the first Fleagles and those of today you also will notice Fleagle got an incremental nose job.

"It was easier to draw expressions on his face with a shorter beak. So gradually I bobbed it!" said Mr. Hardison.

Other changes came as the magazine's scope changed. *TAC Attack* was originally focused on flying safety, but when weapons and ground safety were included, Fleagle kept up with the times finding new ways to hurt himself. For example, since he is a bird sporting World War I garb, he had a period-appropriate Tommy gun



Stan Hardison's first Fleagle, printed in *TAC Attack*, June 1970

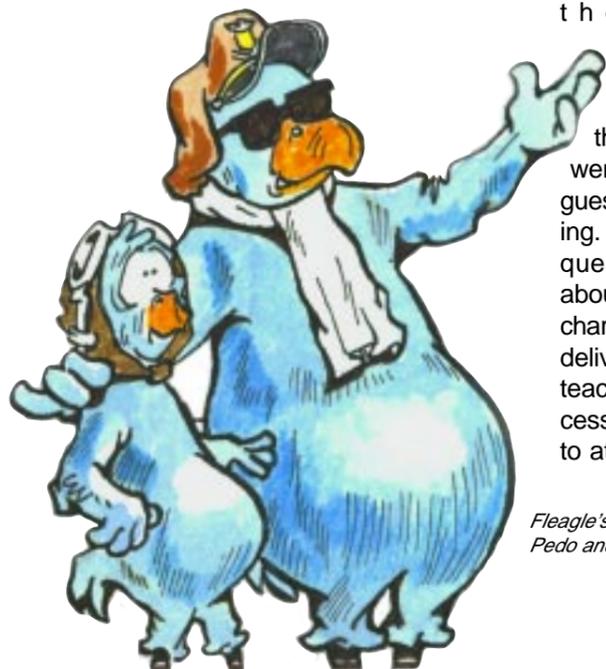


The most memorable Fleagle was this 1975 centerfold featuring Fleagle in the nude.

mounted in his claws to demonstrate unsafe weapons loading and handling.

Besides his physical changes, Fleagle's friends changed over the years as well. When bombers came under ACC control, Tiny — read any heavy driver — and Pedo — read any fast jet driver — replaced his original friends Rob and Griff.

Now that he was so well known in print, Fleagle was ready to take his safety show on the road.



Fleagle's friends Pedo and Tiny

"Everyone is always interested in how I draw Fleagle," says Mr. Hardison. "In fact, they could care less about hearing me talk about safety. That's how I got involved taking Fleagle and our safety concerns to bases."

Mr. Hardison was asked to paint some pictures for the Flying Tiger squadron, then an A-10 unit at England AFB, La. The commander asked him to personally deliver the paintings so they could recognize him for his work. On the drive over to the base theater, the commander asked him, "What are you going to say today?" Mr. Hardison wasn't prepared to say anything, and as the conversation went on, he realized he was the guest speaker for the safety meeting. On stage he noticed the only questions he was asked were about Fleagle. So, he got a flip chart, started drawing Fleagle, and delivering a safety message. The teaching method was a great success. From then on, they traveled to at least one base each month

addressing safety topics while Mr. Hardison drew Fleagle.

Perhaps that's another reason why Fleagle's been so popular and effective. He is a fun way to deliver a not-so-fun topic. Humor can get us to think about and remember safety messages so we don't become the next "mishap pilot/ground crew/weapons handler...."

The Fleagle phenomenon was a springboard for other safety initiatives as well. One of the initiatives was the ACC Chief of Safety's "Fleaglegram." Essentially, it was a notepad from his desk to the field addressing important topics. Just having the name Fleagle on it made it

more likely to be read. Fleagle also became part of the awards program recognizing the best in accident prevention and the worst. The "Fleagle Salute" went out to all candidates for safety awards, and the "Fleagle Fanny Feather of Fate" went out to individuals who escaped serious injury but whose gross buffoonery was an

example to keep others from repeating the same actions. One can still find the "Fleagle Salutes" every month in the safety awards section of the *The Combat Edge*.

Fleagle has been such a success that Mr. Hardison couldn't resist the offer to keep drawing Fleagle even though he officially retired in 1990 and moved with his wife Shirley back to her hometown of Kinston, N.C. He contacts *The Combat Edge* editorial staff monthly to keep Fleagle's antics current and relevant to the magazine's theme.

When asked if Fleagle will ever get it right, Mr. Hardison emphatically replied, "No! He may come close, but he just can't. I plan to keep drawing Fleagle as long as I'm physically able, and he doesn't cut into my golf time. He's too much fun to quit."

Mr. Hardison is still amazed that such a woeful critter as Fleagle could make such a lasting impression.

"He's not pretty, you wouldn't pin him up on your wall, and you definitely don't want to do what he does. Maybe he's popular be-

cause we want to root for the underdog," said Mr. Hardison.

Every month we hope Fleagle will get it right this time. He doesn't, and sometimes his accidents touch too close to home eliciting the response, "Ouch! That could have been me."

Whatever the reason for his popularity, his message remains simple and unchanged — it is possible to prevent accidents.

When asked if he has seen any change in how we approach safety issues, Mr. Hardison said that during his tenure at *TAC Attack* from 1966 to 1990, safety focused on reducing accident statistics by explaining why an accident happened. The limitation of this method is it only addresses accidents which are similar in circumstances.

"We should have a system to stop any kind of accident before it occurs," according to Mr. Hardison.

Fortunately, many others in the safety community shared this

thought, and today we have Operational Risk Management (ORM). While many of ORM's principles stem from years of accident studies, its basic premise is that someone else shouldn't have to get hurt to teach us not to do it. It's a truly proactive program designed to heed the individual circumstances

Safety lessons come from the most unlikely sources ...

of the situation and stop the accident chain before it begins. But if ORM fails, we still have Fleagle to show us the wrong way and hopefully keep us from repeating his mistakes.

Safety lessons come from the most unlikely sources — like a commercial artist from North Carolina and an absolute screw-up bird. We at *The Combat Edge* salute Mr. Hardison and Fleagle for 33 years of keeping us safe and making us ever mindful of that important safety message — it is possible to prevent accidents. We hope the next 33 years of Fleagle will be as successful! ▶



Stan's most favorite strip was this 1977 Fleagle featuring Johnny Hart's B.C. characters. It gave Stan a chance to work with another great cartoonist.