The seminal moment in Mullane family history occurred on June 17, 1955, while we were stationed at Hickam Field in Hawaii. I was nine years old. Dad was now a flight engineer aboard C-97 and C-124 cargo aircraft of MATS, the Military Air Transport Service. He returned from a mission with a high fever and was admitted to Tripler Hospital. The diagnosis was polio. Dad, thirty-three years old, a vibrant 6-foot, 200-pound athletic man, would never walk again.

We remained in Hawaii for six months while he recovered. On New Year's Day 1956, the family was flown by Air Force hospital plane to Shepard AFB near my mom's parents in Wichita Falls, Texas. There, Dad's convalescence continued.

During this time my parents tried to shield us from the trauma they were experiencing and, for the most part, they were successful. I recall only two occasions when my dad's private hell was revealed to me. On one, he had taken my brothers and me on a car ride. A new Pontiac had been modified with hand controls so he could drive. He stopped at a store window, a man passed him a bottle, then he drove into the Texas prairie, parked, and drank. To this day whenever I smell bourbon I am taken back to this moment. He told us of Washing Machine Charlie and of paddling a native canoe to a submarine. But this time it was different. He was crying as he told the stories. I had never seen my dad cry and I couldn't understand why these great stories were making him sad now.

Finally, he tossed the bottle from the window and steered the car toward home, turning the drive into a carnival ride. He would race the car and then jam on the brakes so my brothers and I would tumble over the seats and come up giggling. Again and again he would accelerate and then skid to a stop. By some miracle we made it to my grandmother's house uninjured. Dad rose onto his braces and crutches and was singing an Irish ballad with a drunken slur as he slowly made his way up the sidewalk. He threw his crutches forward and dragged his useless legs behind. Yard by yard the rhythm took him toward the front door. Then my grandmother burst from the house and began to beat him with a broom, screaming that he was a drunk and should be damned for it. He tried to grab her weapon but missed and toppled onto the cement. I had never seen adults behave this way. My brothers and I began to cry. Neighbors rushed out to watch the spectacle. My mom was screaming. My grandmother, a teetotalist, strict German woman, was a demon from hell. In her mind there was no excuse for drunkenness, even if the drunk in question was struggling to come to grips with polio. Dad cursed and grabbed at her but his useless legs were an anchor. She easily kept out of his reach. The broom came down on his head and his glasses spun

off. She circled to his back where he couldn't defend himself and beat him some more. My mom herded my brothers and me inside so we wouldn't witness any more of the mayhem. We left Dad facedown on the sidewalk bawling like a child while my grandmother continued to punish him with the broom.

Several months later I caught another glimpse of how polio was torturing my dad. My mom was grocery shopping and as I wandered the aisles of the store I encountered a man showing a friend his artificial legs. I overheard him speaking: "Lost both my legs in the war." He punctuated the comment by rapping on each shin with a cane. I was fascinated at the freakishness of the injury and stared. The men separated, the veteran walking away with the aid of his cane and a hip-swinging gait. For a moment I was struck as still as Lot's wife. The man had no real legs but he was walking. I broke from my shock and ran after him. "Mister!" I called. He stopped. "Mister, how can you walk? You don't have any legs." He smiled at my innocence. "Son, a German mortar blew off my legs. The doctors strapped on these pretend legs." Again he slapped his cane against one of the limbs. It made a hollow sound.

I smiled. "Thanks, Mister."

I sprinted past my mom. "Where are you going, Mike?"

"I'm going to see Dad."

I ran to the parking lot and climbed into the front seat of the car and breathlessly explained to my father what I had seen. "Dad, there's a man in the store who doesn't have real legs. They got cut off in the war. The doctor gave him pretend legs. But he's walking!" I blurted out the news while wearing a huge smile.

My dad stared at me, total confusion written on his face. He didn't get it. He didn't understand the significance of what I had just discovered. But I would be the hero and explain it to him. "Dad, all you have to do is ask the doctor to cut off your legs and then he can give you pretend legs and you can walk again, just like that man in the store!"

Immediately tears welled in his eyes. He tried to smile. "Mike, thank you for that idea, but it's not my legs that are the problem. It's my nerves. The polio germs ate them up. Cutting off my legs wouldn't help me."

My face fell in crushing disappointment. I was certain I had stumbled on the secret to putting my father back on his feet. Dad hugged me and cried into my neck. I was so confused. I didn't understand germs or nerves. I only understood what my eyes had told me, that it was possible to walk without real legs.

"You go on and help your mom with the groceries."

I climbed from the car and walked backward a couple steps, staring at my dad. His head was resting on the steering wheel and he was sobbing.

This was the last time he ever revealed to me or my siblings what must have been a titanic struggle to adapt to life without legs. But he did. Within a year he had returned to being the man I remembered before polio. His Washing Machine Charlie imitation got even better.

After several months of recovery in Texas my parents were faced with the decision of where to settle the family. Wichita Falls was not an option. It was an oil and cattle town with limited employment opportunities for the handicapped. And there was no thought given to returning to my dad's hometown, New York City. The vertical landscape there would make a wheelchair life difficult. So they picked Albuquerque, New Mexico, as their post-polio home. During our travels we had driven through the city a couple times and Mom and Dad had always liked it. There was a VA hospital, work opportunities, and a climate that made wheelchair life a little more tolerable.

Albuquerque was my last childhood move and I thank God for it. We were permanently in the west. No longer did we have to drive for days to reach the deserts and mountains we had all come to love. Now we could satisfy our collective need to see over the next horizon on a weekly basis. The fact my dad could not walk was hardly an impediment to our adventures. He had five boys and we could carry him and his wheelchair anywhere. And we did. We hefted him over steep and rugged terrain to an isolated lake and put him in my brother's canoe. We carried him across streams and along trails. We sat him in meadows to enjoy a sunset or the majesty of a distant thunderstorm.

In addition to the wheelchair-bearer duties, my dad's polio also turned us into bartenders and urine-dumpers. My dad was a 7-and-7 man and at the end of the day we would mix him a highball of Seagram's Seven whiskey and 7-Up. He trained each of us to pour two fingers of the liquor, add ice and then the soft drink. He also trained us to empty containers of his urine on road trips.

On one drink-making occasion, my little brother found an already opened bottle of 7-Up. He brought the drink to my dad, who tossed back a swallow. "Christ, Mark, how much whiskey did you put in this? It's really strong." My brother explained he had used a two-finger measurement, just like always. Only after Dad was down to slurping on the ice did the lightbulb come on. Earlier in the day, when nobody had been around, he had peed in an empty 7-Up bottle and left it on a table. He jerked the highball from his mouth and sniffed it like a dog at a hydrant. "Mark! Where did you find the 7-Up for my drink?"

"There was a bottle of it on the table."

“Jesus Christ! I’ve been drinking a 7-and-piss.” Moments later, with a fresh drink in his hand, Dad philosophically mused, “I guess if you have to drink urine, it’s best you drink your own.”

There was one item from my dad’s walking life that he adamantly refused to let polio take from him: his beloved toolbox. It came with us on every trip. In spite of past experience, Dad was convinced he would someday save us all from a serious car malfunction with his tools. He got his chance on a blistering day in June 1963. We were on a trip through a remote area of desert in northwest New Mexico. (The termremote will always be redundant in describing the venues of Mullane adventures.) The car began to surge. For a moment there would be acceleration, then coast, then acceleration. My dad frantically oscillated his accelerator hand control up and down, hoping to clear the problem. At this point most drivers would probably have exclaimed, “There’s something wrong with the car!” But it was impossible for my aviator father to avoid the lexicon of his prior life. “We’re losing power!” was his cry. It would not have surprised me in the least to have heard, “The goddamn Japs have got us. Feather number two!”

We coasted into the dirt parking area of a small adobe Indian trading post. Faded signs advertised turquoise jewelry, rugs, and other curios. A wooden porch provided the only shade within a hundred miles. A half dozen Indians sitting on chairs and several scruffy dogs lying on the planking had staked their claim to that shade. I recall how fascinated my brothers and I were by the fact the Indians were dressed like cowboys. They wore denim and boots and large western hats. My mom admonished us not to stare but we did nevertheless. The Indians were as still as carvings. Our clattering, sputtering arrival seemed invisible to them. They didn’t move, scratch, wave away a fly, or speak. They just sat on their chairs staring into the shimmering heat in utterly silent, regal repose.

My dad instantly diagnosed the car problem. “Balls! It’s the goddamn fuel pump.” For some strange reason, the testicular epithetballs was my dad’s favorite obscenity.

“Hugh, not in front of the children!” was my mother’s favorite response to his swearing. Hers was a cry I heard many, many times in my youth, but it never altered my dad’s vocabulary.

Dad locked his leg braces and rose onto his crutches. In spite of this strange sight, the six Indians remained as still as a Remington bronze. The station wagon, the jabbering kids, the man on crutches appeared no more remarkable to them than a dust devil.

Three of us boys joined my dad at the fender and popped the hood. “I’ll show you kids how to test the fuel pump.” For once we had the right tools and my dad leaned into the engine and began to work. He disconnected the output of the fuel pump. Then he

pulled the distributor wire. He explained his actions: “I’ll have Mom turn the key. The car won’t start because I’ve pulled the distributor wire. But the starter will turn the cam shaft, which will cause the fuel pump to operate. If it’s working, we should see gas from this hose.”

He then called for my mom to start the car. I was so proud of my dad. How many other fathers could do roadside maintenance like this in the middle of the desert? And my dad was doing it on crutches and braces.

As pride swelled my soul, gas began to squirt from the output line of the pump and spray across the hot engine. A vapor of fuel immediately enveloped us. With a gratifying grunt my dad proclaimed, “The fuel pump’s okay.” As he was stating the obvious, I noted a blue spark coming from the distributor wire and flashing to the steel of the engine block. It made atick, tick, tick sound. I was just about to comment on this spark when an explosion flashed under the hood. KA-BOOM! The fuel vapor had combined with the surrounding air to form an explosive pocket. The spark from the disconnected distributor wire had provided an ignition source. We had just become all too intimate participants in the first test of a fuel-air weapon. Four decades later, the air force would develop just such a weapon for use against terrorists hiding in caves. The press ballyhooed the device.Nothing like it has ever been developed, they crowed. Not exactly. Let history now show my dad was the first to test such a weapon. He did it under the hood of a 1956 Pontiac station wagon at the Teec Nos Pos trading post in northwest New Mexico on June 14, 1963. It worked.

My brothers and I stumbled backward with blasted eardrums and flash-blinded eyes. The smell of burned hair wafted in the breeze. My dad, unable to retreat because of his braces, had fallen straight backward like a cleanly felled tree. He was now a cartoon character with a blackened face and the few remaining hairs on his bald pate burned to cinders. The engine block was on fire. My mom worked furiously to get my youngest brothers and sister and the dogs away from the burning car.

On the trading post porch, the previously lethargic dogs were on their feet barking madly. And the response of the Indians? They roared with laughter. I mean fall-on-the-floor, breath-stealing, tear-welling laughter. Jabbering in their native tongue they pointed at the white man’s folly as if it were a free fireworks show (which it was) and laughed and laughed and laughed.

My dad finally recovered enough to hear the laughter and understand its source. He rolled onto his stomach and made a valiant attempt to crawl to the nearest Indian, no doubt to kill him with his bare hands. John Wayne, leading a silver screen cavalry charge, had never looked as fierce. Thank God, at that moment, Dad couldn’t walk for he certainly would have ended up in prison for manslaughter. Finally, he braced himself on one forearm, shot out an upraised middle finger, and roared, “Shove it up your ass, you bastards!” Even the great cry of “balls” didn’t fit this affront.

Over the barking dogs I again heard my mom's plaintive cry, "Hugh, not in front of the children."

Even near-death experiences like this did nothing to dampen my enthusiasm for family trips into the great emptiness of New Mexico. It was an emptiness that pulled the sky closer. I could climbthrough the clouds and sit on a mountain peak and look down and imagine I was in a jet skimming over the white. I would lie in a meadow and watch thunderstorms build over the Sangre de Cristo Mountains and dream of someday soaring between the canyons of vapor.

But it was the New Mexican night skies that most captured my imagination. I needed only to step into my backyard to be in space. Unlike the light-polluted, haze-shrouded heavens that had domed our previous homes, Albuquerque's sky was dry and stygian in its blackness. On one occasion, my grandmother visiting from New York City stood with me looking at the night sky and commented, "You won't be able to see any stars tonight, Mike. It's cloudy."

I was baffled by her comment since to my eye the sky was spotlessly clear. "Grandma," I had said, "there are no clouds. It's clear."

"Oh, Mike, sure there are…a long one that goes clear across the sky." And her hand swept from horizon to horizon. Then I realized she was referring to the Milky Way. The edge view of our galaxy was a fog of stars, a "cloud" to the unpracticed observer.

My dad taught me how to take time exposures of the night sky. I would set one of his cameras in the desert and open its aperture and let the turn of the Earth trace the starlight onto film. Later, with the developed photos in hand, I would marvel at the circles of varying brightness and color the stars had inscribed about Polaris. Occasionally I would catch the streak of a shooting star, a recording that would excite me as much as if I had found buried treasure.

Above Albuquerque the stars and planets blazed with a clarity I had never seen before. They seemed soaccessible. With the help of a small Sears telescope and my imagination I traveled this sky on a nightly basis. I would stare at the crescent of Venus and the red circle of Mars and count the brightest moons of Jupiter. The thrill of those observations was no less than what Galileo must certainly have experienced. When a wire-thin sketch of moon was part of the fresco, I would train my telescope on it and imagine I was walking its deeply shadowed craters and mountains. When meteor showers were predicted I would drag a sleeping bag into the desert and lie awake to watch their flashes of fire and pray that one would miraculously land nearby.

But another night sight was soon to thrill me even more.