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An interview with Col. Walter J. Boyne, USAF (Ret.)

Boyne's career in flight, in print, and with the Smithsonian Air and Space Museum has been an ode to joy



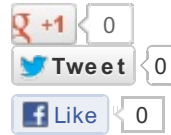
Written by: [Jan Tegler](#) on June 7, 2012

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Defense - Spring



The classic melody "Ode to Joy" from the final movement of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony

welled up in the mind of young Walter J. Boyne as he completed his first solo flight in 1952.

“You can’t imagine my elation,” Boyne remembers. “On the base to final of my first solo flight I was humming Beethoven’s ‘Ode to Joy.’ I couldn’t contain myself!”

Though Boyne would never say it himself, he is considered by many to be the dean of aviation writers, and one of the nation’s leading aerospace historians and commentators.

Enshrined in the [National Aviation Hall of Fame](#) in 2007, he began his writing career in 1962 while still an active Air Force pilot. Since then, he has authored 50 books and more than 1,000 magazine articles. He’s also one of the few writers to have had bestsellers on both the fiction and the nonfiction list of *The New York Times*.



Walter J. Boyne shown as a young pilot in the Air Force. USAF photo

That’s only part of Boyne’s story, however. He earned his wings and a commission in the U.S. Air Force in 1952, went on to fly the Boeing B-50, B-47, and B-52, and served in Vietnam as a C-47 instructor.

After leaving the Air Force in 1974 with more than 5,000 hours of flight time, Boyne joined the Smithsonian Institution’s [National Air and Space Museum](#) (NASM), first as a curator, then as acting director, and finally as director of the NASM from 1983 to 1986. During his tenure he re-energized the museum, founded the institution’s popular magazine *Air & Space*, transformed the neglected Silver Hill storage complex into a world-class restoration facility, and was a key advocate for the land the museum’s [Udvar-Hazy Center](#) now occupies.

In 1998, Boyne co-founded the aviation cable television channel Wingspan. So successful was the venture that it was purchased just one year later by the [Discovery Channel](#). Moreover, the channel spawned a wave of aviation programming on other networks.



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First F-35C Night Flight



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Novels, histories, and commentary continue to spring from Boyne's pen. He's currently taking a brief hiatus from writing, but is hardly inactive as he now serves as chairman of the board of the [National Aeronautic Association](#) (NAA).

Last but not least, Boyne has been a mentor to generations of aviation and defense writers (yours truly included), helping them to get off the ground. Though the melody from "Ode to Joy" may not have constantly echoed in his mind, there's little doubt that the delight and satisfaction Boyne found in his first solo flight has carried through a brilliant career.

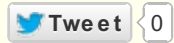
Here are some of Boyne's impressions about the world of aviation and his role in it. Let the music play on.

Jan Tegler: When did you see your first airplane and what was it?

Col. Walter J. Boyne, USAF (Ret.): The first airplane I ever saw was a crashed two-seat biplane with blood still in the cockpit. It was 1934 or 1935, so I must've been 5 or 6 years old. My father was the coroner for St. Clair County [Boyne grew up in East Saint Louis, Ill.] and had to go to the crash site to certify the deaths or whatever coroners do in those circumstances. I can still see the airplane in my mind but I couldn't identify it. It was probably unidentifiable after the crash. It was sitting in a three-quarter nose-down position. The left wing was peeled back and I was either lifted up or could climb up to the cockpit and see there was blood pooled in the bottom of it. That's obviously not the best way to be introduced to aviation!

I wasn't traumatized and at about the same time, an accident occurred at Parks Air College [founded by Oliver Parks in 1927, it became America's first federally certified school of aviation and contributed hugely to the Civilian Pilot Training program begun just before World War II]. Dad had to go there, of course, and I went along and met Oliver Parks. He showed me an airplane that he said was Amelia Earhart's. It was probably a [Lockheed] Vega. I was amazed to find that when you entered the fuselage, like all tail-draggers, it sloped upward to the cockpit. I guess Parks was probably the first historically prominent person I ever met in aviation.

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Laurie Nichols

7:41 PM June 11, 2012

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Laurie Nichols OM3
Troy Maine 04987



Chuck Oldham (Editor)

8:35 PM June 11, 2012

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