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You're Going to Marry an Artist?  
or  
Having Your Cake and Eating It Too!

by Peggy Ferris

When Keith and I decided to get married my father's comments were exactly what you would expect. He asked, "how can an artist earn a living?" I'm sure my father was also thinking that Keith and I came from very different backgrounds and that there would be need for much compromise. Mine was the stable life of living in one house, growing up with the same friends, having a father who went off to the office everyday and brought home a regular paycheck. Keith, on the other hand, was from a military family who were moving every year or so with roots in no particular place.

Keith was determined to be an aviation artist and absorbed everything possible about aviation, airplanes, and military history. My involvement with aviation up to that point was the "Sunday afternoon ride with the family out to watch the airplanes at Lambert Field." I knew the difference between the fuselage and the wing and that was about it. I knew even less about art. Keith already had a substantial collection of photos and articles and I expected that I would have to pass an aircraft recognition test before we took the marriage vows.

Our involvement was with the artists and their families from the studio where Keith worked as the production manager

on the Air Force Publications account responsible for producing art for training manuals. We were among a group of young artists, all trying to learn as much as they could while struggling to make a living. Our big break came when Keith relinquished that job and did all of the drawings for one of the manuals. This gave us a chance to earn some extra money and when the Air Force closed the Publications unit the studio lost the account and Keith lost his aviation client.

With a few hundred dollars in our pocket we made (to me) the drastic decision (against the advice of many caring friends and co-workers) to make the big move to a part of the country that could support a free lance aviation artist.

We headed East in a quest for the advertising agencies and corporate headquarters of many future aviation clients. We arrived with one daughter and some furnishings with no place to live, no job and knowing one person, only slightly.

We ended up on Long Island where we found a house whose rent we felt we could afford and Keith began calling on aviation clients. The jobs were small, the hours late and the billing just enough to allow us to get by.

We soon faced another major decision. An advertising agency that had been the source of some free lance

work called Keith in one day and offered him a JOB as an account executive. The salary was about four times what we had been earning, plus all the usual amenities (health insurance, vacation, holidays, etc.) and additional free lance jobs. He came home and we discussed the pros and cons for a few minutes and decided to decline the offer. Having remembered that we came East with the goal of his becoming a successful free lance aviation artist there was no way he could accept a steady job. That would have gotten in the way of what he really wanted to do.

We were learning what the word "patience" means. Add to that the word "faith" and we knew we could endure. It wasn't easy, but as things began to fall our way, it was certainly a comfortable feeling to know that we were building something that we considered very special to us.

Our son arrived on the scene and then my father came to visit us. I think he really wanted to see how we were doing. He no sooner arrived than Keith received a call to go into NYC to pick up a small job that was due the next morning. So Dad went along and that evening after dinner Keith went to his then tiny studio and the rest of us went to bed. The next morning he and Dad were off to deliver the art and that probably relieved my fathers anxiety somewhat to know that one can earn much more money than he expected from art.

There were other instances that we laugh about now. When our daughter went to kindergarten and was asked what her Daddy does for a living she stood up and said: "My Daddy doesn't do anything, he just stays home and draws airplanes." That made the rounds of the school and the neighborhood in short order. Nancy was correct.

As the client list continued to grow, and art work was appearing regularly in print, Keith became a member of the Society of Illustrators. He found himself involved in the Air Force Art Program. This was the opportunity which put him back with airplanes and the Air Force which he missed so much. I was to learn that it involved trips that took him away from the board. This meant that for short periods of time the painting stopped and so did the income. I fell back on that word patience. I knew I couldn't tell him not to be involved. After all, specializing in aviation art, his exposure to the mission, people and machines furthered his knowledge and allowed him keep up with technology. The Air Force paintings are done during additional non-revenue time in the studio. Keith has devoted an average of six weeks a year of his time to this program for the past twenty eight years. The program gave him his first opportunity to do large paintings in addition to the advertising illustration which provided our living.

In the meantime, I was teaching school, raising children



and trying to help Keith as best I could. Working at home has its advantages and its disadvantages. You don't have to commute, but there is always the battle with one's self-discipline in the competition for time. Neighbors and friends often stop by to see what you are doing and the telephone rings continually. In addition, the correspondence seems to grow with the career. In advertising, jobs always have had a short deadline and working nights, holidays and week-ends was the norm. Those are things that one must accept with a free lance career.

To have at one's fingertips a library, a reference file of drawings, photographs and clippings and a slide file are a must for the aviation artist. The more complete the studio reference sources, the less time spent away from the board and studio looking for material before starting on the job and the more consistently accurate the resulting art work.

I wish I had a nickle for every clipping I've clipped and every slide that I've filed. (On second thought, let's make that a dollar for each.) Keith has well over 35,000 slides in his collection for which I have devised a very rapid retrieval system. He also has 58 file drawers and thousand of books and magazines. His models, trophies, plaques, certificates, etc. have spilled into the rest of the house and my bowling trophies are now in the attic.

My father became a widower for the second time and came to live with his aviation artist son-in-law. By this time Dad had changed his whole perception and was Keith's biggest fan. He also kept me company while Keith went off to work in Washington, DC while painting his first mural, the B-17 "Fortresses Under Fire" at the National Air and Space Museum.

When the second mural came along at NASM, "The Evolution of Jet Aviation", I took a leave of absence from teaching and moved to D.C. with Keith because I realized what an exciting time I had missed before. Instead of returning to the classroom I retired and remained at home to help run the business which, by this time, involved more than the creation of paintings.

I was free of a teaching contract and could travel with Keith from time to time. He often jokes about the time many years ago when we visited his parent's house at Scott Air Force Base, and he took me to see three F-86s take off. I was very uncomfortable with all the noise, to the point that I considered it frightening. I am reported to have said, "fella, if you ever so much as get near one of those things, you've had it." (Famous last words!) Since that time I have often found myself sitting in mission briefings, and out on the flight line to launch and recover Keith for many of his 300 plus hours in jet fighters. I guess I made a

commitment when we moved East and decided I wanted to be involved too. Or maybe it was the old adage which says it's better to join 'em than to fight 'em.

I have thought it is good to know your husband's work and good for the children to understand what their father does. With the studio at home, the children were involved and Keith could watch the children grow up. I can understand other wives who don't want to be involved in their husband's work. They probably have the opportunity to do more things that they want to do. But that mode doesn't fit me and Keith has been pleased that I am willing to do so much to help him. After all these years, I've learned a considerable amount about aviation, airplanes, the military and the people we have to deal with. I can handle most of the correspondence, phone calls, scheduling of trips, exhibitions of paintings, sales of lithographic prints, etc. All of these take time and I am able to free Keith to work on paintings, writing, aircraft paint schemes, speaking engagements, etc.

For many years Keith has been chairman of the Society of Illustrators Government Services Committee. I do most of the calling and corresponding for the SI's Air Force Art Program and the Coast Guard Illustration Program once Keith has identified the participating artists.

Another organization to which we have given much time and effort is the American Society of Aviation Artists. We worked for a good two years to develop a set of bylaws and join the other founders in agreement before setting out to look for members. Establishment of ASAA has been another commitment of time, effort and energy, but it has been rewarding to see ASAA progress.

We feel that aviation art has been good to us and we would like others to be able to enjoy its rewards.

Looking back on our life, I suppose we could have picked a secure profession which would have allowed that steady paycheck, with insurance, vacations and more money, but it would probably not have offered near the enjoyment, the excitement, nor allowed us to do the things that we have been able to do. Is this called having your cake and eating it too? If so, then we are up to our ears in cake!