



# Erwin Hulsewede

OCT 29, 1935 - JAN 7, 2023



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## Erwin Huelsewede

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**W**ith sadness I am here to share that Erwin "Swede" Huelsewede passed away after a long illness on January 7, 2023 at the age of 87. He was at home in Annapolis, Maryland with his wife Chris by his side.

How do you begin to tell of a fully lived life in just a few paragraphs? This life that Swede lived had more than its share of sorrow and challenges but was also filled abundantly with enough joy and adventure and escapades and humor to fill a large book! Even his earliest years held drama and tragedy. He was only five yrs old when the German Army invaded and occupied the Netherlands in 1940 where he was living with his parents and his older brother, with grandparents, aunts and uncles nearby. He was to live with a child's blurry memories of the tanks and soldiers and food shortages but clearer memories of his father being sent away to the Russian front. And very clear memories of the day before his ninth birthday when his mother died suddenly. More sharply etched still were the memories of he and his grandmother being seized by the Dutch government in 1944 when he was 9 because of a unwarranted suspicion of enemy collaboration and held in a camp for four months with little to eat and straw to sleep on. After being released, he and his brother who was 10 yrs older were forced to leave the country and were sent to Germany where eventually they were reunited with their father. Such a difficult start in life might make many a person into a cautious fearful or bitter soul but that was not Swede's way. Somehow instead it heightened his natural determination to experience the world and all that there was to see and discover.

To begin to capture his teen years is to simply share some of his jobs and adventures, starting with bakery assistant when he was 12 proudly hauling around 50 pound bags of flour to impress the owner. That was followed by a stint with a small traveling circus as a horse and elephant caretaker...and pooper scooper! At 18 he was a truck driver in Spain where he and his Romany girlfriend lived in a cave for awhile. At 19



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and by his own description quite naive and full of youthful bravado, he had a very brief career as a weapons smuggler from France into Morocco which resulted in a brief career as a member of a French road building gang from which he escaped through the desert, aided by a grateful Moroccan freedom fighter gang! Settling down a bit, he followed that by joining the merchant marines where he lied about being a cook's assistant so he could get hired. He was only told the cook was sick when he was shown to the galley where three live chickens were waiting! While traveling the seas around Africa for several years he graduated from culinary duties to becoming a skilled Morse code operator. This began the first steps of becoming a radio communicator which was later to serve him well. Eventually tiring of a shipboard life he found himself in Salt Lake City Utah where he married and continued with university classes started in Germany. In 1959, informed he was about to be drafted into the army, he instead enlisted in the US Air Force which was eager to have him because of his French language fluency which they needed in Viet Nam. He agreed to join but insisted that he be allowed to become a citizen first so that his wife and young son would be looked after should anything happen to him. His early military training saw him off to Georgia and then to Biloxi Mississippi. The southerners were not quite sure what to make of this tall gangly 24 year old with the Dutch accent and he found them to be just as exotic. The transition was easier to McChord AFB near Tacoma Washington where a second son was born and where he continued both his civilian and military education. In 1963 finally to Viet Nam where as a translator riding often in helicopters under fire he would experience all the horrors and challenges of a devastating war zone.

Challenging and scary though it was, it was the gateway to a 32 year odyssey with a career that was tailor made for him - traveling throughout the world which he relished and which made good use of his facility with languages and his innate ability to connect personally with just about anyone. As his career developed he had many adventures and escapades where he was able to find some common ground to solve a problem or ease the way, sometimes with a few words or a joke in any of the five languages he spoke. Viet Nam was followed by an assignment in air rescue in Prestwick Scotland for a year and then to various assignments around Germany where his language skills were put to good use. His European charm, quick wit and general ease made him popular both



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with his military crew members but also the dignitaries and high ranking civilian and military officials for whom his squadron provided transportation. He became highly skilled and provided essential worldwide communications for his distinguished passengers often flying on very sensitive missions with the President and Chancellor of Germany. At one point, his assignment to Wiesbaden Germany was extended by personal request from the Chancellor himself. He was able to establish good rapport with various embassy staffs and his expertise and finesse in obtaining visas sometimes on short notice and from Soviet Bloc countries saved the day many times which earned him much appreciation from his crew and passengers alike. In 1973 he returned to the United States joining the 98th Military Airlift Squadron at Andrews AFB outside Washington DC for four years where he continued with special category communications for high ranking VIP passengers as well as taking on the duties of flight examiner and scheduler. 1977 he returned to Germany stationed at Ramstein Air Base and then in 1981 once more to Andrews AFB joining the 1st MAS. Receiving promotions throughout these years he achieved the highest rank of Chief Master Sergeant while serving at Andrews with the 1st Military Airlift Squadron providing transportation for the White House, State Department and other essential government and military high ranking delegations. His schedule was vigorous and might see him on a White House advance mission to the Far East one week and on a Congressional Emergency Relief Commission journey to Ethiopia the next. In 1984 he became Squadron Chief of Communications and as such oversaw the rapid expansion of the unit requiring massive hiring, training and operations of up to 45 communication systems operators flying four aircraft types, including the new Air Force One in 1986. Despite the sometimes grueling schedule, Swede never lost his enthusiasm for jumping on a plane headed to anywhere. He took full advantage of all that this worldwide travel offered. On one trip to Paris, his most favorite of all cities, where he had a few days layover, he spent part of it just walking in and auditing classes in the Sorbonne as well as serving as willing tour guide around the city for his crewmates. His thirst for experiences and learning never quieted but the years took their toll. In 1991 after the 4th spinal surgery in 8 years, he retired. And after some recuperation he set out to find a new challenge.

After seeing many a crewmember bringing home bags of the delectable Belgian waffles sold on the streets of Brussels, he decided to give in to his long held dream to one day have his own restaurant. What started out as an idea for a simple waffle shop just outside the back gates of Andrews AFB ended up as a full service restaurant full of schnitzels and various bratwursts and of course many varieties of Belgian waffles! Though his health ended the adventure too soon, there were dedicated customers who grieved the closing of this very special eating spot called, what else, The Flying Dutchman!



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After yet another extensive spinal surgery and recuperation he once again found himself looking around for what might come next. After some personal travel with his second wife Chris (back to Paris of course!), he spent some time considering possibilities. In 1992 on the suggestion of a friend, he began to volunteer for the George H.W. Bush presidential campaign at the Staff Secretary's office in Washington DC which led to a connection with several campaign coalition efforts including Military/Veteran. Sidelined for a while due to lung cancer surgery most likely due to his Agent Orange exposure in Viet Nam, he regained his health and in 1994 he became a volunteer at the Republican National Committee (RNC) working to support the Chairman and later served as Deputy Coalitions Director for the Dole presidential campaign and began to find his niche in creating a network of military and veterans coalitions for Dole nationwide. In 1997 he became State Coalitions Director for Jim Gilmore for Governor of Virginia and for his tireless work was granted the title of Military Aide de Camp with the rank of Lt. General which Swede was quite proud of. That same year he worked also on the campaign of Governor Christie Todd Whitman of New Jersey and various other campaigns around the country. In 1997-98 he worked for the RNC as National Director for Military and Veterans Coalitions. His many connections and friendships formed during these years lead him to be actively involved in the George Bush campaign for president in 2000. Knowing the untapped potential for votes found in the 1.5 million strong military absentee voters but not finding support from the RNC he took it upon himself to spend the time and money to acquire a huge military voter data base. It was through his urging that this voter base was eventually tapped by the Bush campaign and the 537 military absentee votes in Florida would make all the difference in bringing victory to Bush. Though he never received proper recognition for his efforts that ultimately saved the day, Swede remained proud of his accomplishment and contribution. Because of his work especially in California with Hon. Anthony Principi who became Secretary of the VA, Swede was offered a position as White House Liaison and Special Assistant to the Secretary. In the three years he worked at the VA he became a great friend and proponent to a variety of special groups whose interests and needs were often neglected in years before. He met and listened to and advocated for the needs of Hispanic veterans, Asian veterans, Native Americans and many others, giving them much assistance and recognition. In 2004 he left the VA but continued to be a champion to all veterans and their causes.

What Swede cared most about all of his life were the people he met. He made friends easily throughout his life and was fondly remembered by many. Even up to the last days of his life he loved nothing more than a phone call or personal visit and when he had them laughing it was a very good day. He was very grateful for those who kept in touch and valued each of you.



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He is survived by his wife Chris, his two sons Marc and Chris and his grandchildren Kim and Robert and now his new great grandson Moussa all of Bielefeld Germany. He will be very missed by his sisters and brothers in law and his nieces and nephews.



## Tribute Wall

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CH

**Chuck Hoepner** posted:

I have had the Honor of having Swede as my friend since 1972 when we both arrived at the 98th. So many places we went to and how many meals I fixed for him. Then working with he and Chris on The Flying Dutchman and as a fellow Board member for SAM Fox. I will miss my friend. Our prayers and Best Wishes for Chris and his family.Chuck.

May 10 at 1:08 PM

MI

**Miketedford** posted:

I had many trips with Swede from 1984 to 1988 when we were in the 1st Military Airlift Squadron flying C-135's. My first trip with Swede, we were alert launched to Moscow in March 1985 with an American Ambassador and SecState Staff when Cherneko died. Since he was fluent in so many languages, he was able to facilitate when we arrived in Moscow. I also had a trip to Berlin when it was still a divided city and we went from the West to the East across Checkpoint Charlie. As Swede could speak fluent German, he translated what everyone was saying, and made for a very interesting time. We also had a Far East trip all over the Pacific to Thailand, Hong Kong, Japan, and China plus too many more trips to list. He was a great tour guide and could talk to anyone. We kept in touch over the years and had some great visits and Sam Fox Reunions. RIP Swede!

May 10 at 7:29 AM

EC

**Ed Cotter** posted:

A beautiful and encompassing tribute to "El Sueco" by his lovely spouse Chris. What a life led and experiences that he had. It was my pleasure to know him from the mid seventies to the end of his time on planet earth. We shared many laughs together on both sides of the Ocean. Truly one of the most interesting individuals that I had the pleasure of knowing. Vaya Con Dios my dear friend and until we meet again...May God hold you in the palm of His hand....Happy Landings...Ed Cotter/Charleston, SC

May 5 at 11:08 AM

BC

**Bevcfager@Gmail.Com** May 20 at 4:04 PM

Chris we all loved Swede so much. And of course you! I was going to try & find some old photos to send to you but I didn't get to it. A lot has changed & it's hard to keep up sometimes. Of course I have been thinking of you since I heard you lost Swede. Love to you Chris. ❤️



# Memories only last if you share them

Join us in honoring Erwin by contributing to a collection of shared memories.



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