

## **Saving Howard for History**

by Jayne Bielak

“How much material is there?” the woman on the phone wanted to know, and when she got her reply, she felt compelled to ask just how the heck her informant had come to that conclusion.

To which he gave what will surely go down as one of the Best Answers Ever. “I used a tape measure, that’s how.”

The man who spoke these words into the receiver was cheerful, matter-of-fact. That’s how Glenn Stott is. Oh, and determined. That’s how Glenn is, too. Especially when he’s a man on a mission, as he was at that moment.

The woman on the other end of the line though - she was just incredulous. Patti Williams was sure Mr. Stott’s calculations were mistaken, at best, and at worst, crazy wrong. Because two hundred and fifty cubic feet of probably priceless historical materials..... no. They’d just have to send down one of their own to see about that.

And so began the saga of persistence, patience and loyalty that would culminate, at long last, in the preservation of late aviation photographer extraordinaire Howard Levy’s collection of amazing pictures and documents. Glenn’s estimate that day wasn’t absolutely accurate, but to everybody’s surprise (except his), it wasn’t all that far off, either. When the Smithsonian Institution’s meticulous archivists were done sorting, sifting and boxing, the documents donated by the Levy family came in at two hundred cubic feet - more than twice as large as the next largest collection ever acquired. That it could very well have ended up in a dumpster rather than the Smithsonian’s Archives Division in Maryland were it not for one man’s determination to see his friend’s life-work appreciated - well. That’s what this article is really all about.

So much of the story is happy that it’s probably best to just get the sad part out of the way right at the beginning.

It was a cold Sunday morning in January 2010, the 31st, when Glenn Stott kicked in the door of his old friend’s house, only to have his very worst fears confirmed. Howard had not been answering his phone for a few days, and Glenn had grown increasingly worried. Howard was prickly about his independence, though, and wouldn’t tolerate having anybody treat him like he couldn’t run his own show. Glenn knew that from personal experience. At a photoshoot in Delaware the previous spring, he had tried to lend his old buddy a hand climbing down from a jet after a particularly wild ride Howard had taken to photograph a Mig 21. All he’d gotten was a crabby ‘no’ for his efforts. Howard wouldn’t even hand over his camera to make the climb down a little easier. At eighty-eight, he was that kind of tough bird.

But independence be damned - this was too worrying. Days of Howard not answering his phone, and then the ultimate sign of bad things afoot - he didn’t show up at the airport on Sunday, like he usually did, to hang at the hangar with Claudio. Glenn didn’t feel like he needed an invitation. He was hoping Howard had just fallen, and maybe prompt medical attention might save him. His boot’s heel was the only key to the Levy residence that he had on him, and he used it. Too late.

Howard had already died, probably days before. Of course it’s not unusual to have eight-eight-year-old friends pass away, but that doesn’t make the loss any less sad. And

Glenn hadn't been expecting it. Just ten days earlier he'd gotten Howard a large-button phone to make it easier for him to reach 911 in an emergency, and he'd taken steps to make the house accessible when Howard used his walker. The latter was a necessary aid for a man whose bones were weakened by cancer, but still. It did seem like Howard Levy would be around for a while longer. That's what his friend hoped.

It wasn't to be.

So starts the next phase of the story; the part where Glenn Stott gets to re-write the definition of 'good friend.' Some people reading this may wonder why it was necessary to rearrange the old guy's house to make it possible for a walker to be used; you cannot understand the work that went into preserving Howard's legacy unless you understand that. Howard's house, from floor to ceiling, every room including the bathroom and the stairways, were jam-packed with boxes full of his work. Photos, magazines, negatives, awards - name it. If it was on paper and related to aviation, it was in Howard's house somewhere. 'Somewhere' being the operative word here. Much of it was neither catalogued nor organized, although Howard always claimed he could find anything if he needed to. It took up space, and lots of it. The navigable aisles had narrowed so that feet could pass through them - barely - but nothing wider. But Howard was neither a slob nor a hoarder. He did not save worthless junk or a hodge-podge of useless collections. Rather, he was an old-school photographer from the era when everything was on paper - and that took up space. The boxes and bags that would later wow the folks from the Smithsonian were the accumulated treasure of a career that spanned over seventy years, before there were databases, Smugmugs, or any of the other dozen ways we now keep from drowning in our memories.

No. Howard printed them out, and kept them all. To an average person, it must have looked like a mess, but to Glenn Stott and the experts he all but dragged over to the Levy residence to inspect the collection, it was photographic gold. (The Levy family, Howard's nieces and son-in-law, also deserve much credit for not taking the easy way out when faced with the prospect of clearing the accumulation prior to selling the house. They might not have known, exactly, what the value of the stuff was - who would? - but they were wise enough to let professionals make that decision, and generous enough to donate the materials when they were told what it was worth.)

Although the Howard Levy collection eventually ended up in the best possible home - the Smithsonian Institution - that wasn't the only place Glenn Stott contacted about accepting the materials. He wanted written assurances that the collection would never be absorbed or sold so he contacted many aviation museums. Executive Director Shea Oakley from the New Jersey Aviation Hall of Fame and Museum was the first to come down to have a look. When Glenn saw his reaction to the photos, he teased him a bit. "Lean back a little, would you? You of all people ought to know better than to drool on the artifacts!"

As well as anyone might who knew a thing or two about airplanes. Liberated from the haphazard stacks of shopping bags and cardboard boxes was nothing less than aviation history. Of course, you might expect a guy like Howard Levy, who'd had Stanley Kubrick as his assistant, to have had some pretty high-toned subjects in his portfolio - and you'd be right. Pictures of the young Howard Hughes were in there, as well as Jimmy Doolittle, Igor Sikorsky, and Frank Hawks. And they were just some of

the luminaries whose images tumbled out of Howard Levy's casual storage. The real stars were the photos of rare one of a kind aircraft prototypes, now-famous airports when they were mere dirt landing-strips, and even the "Quonset hut in a field" that later became the mighty Northrop Grumman Corporation. Pictures of planes in use behind what was then the Iron Curtain (exchanged at air shows like baseball cards) were found in there, too, and research materials - reams of it.

Because Howard was nothing if not the consummate professional. He never went to a shoot 'cold', never failed to do the tedious legwork and careful checking that made both his photography and writing sought-after. Some of us may have forgotten how hard that was back in the days before google was a verb. But it was that attention to detail, and that real love of aviation, that put him at the top of his field.

Time caught up with him, though, even with Glenn doing the best he could to drag Howard into the twenty-first century. Brilliant as the photographer was, he was a film guy of the old school, not one for digital databases. The man who had sold his first picture of a "flying machine" (his choice of word) for a buck-fifty to a magazine during the Great Depression, was flummoxed by the new technology. Editors would call and request certain shots, demanding that they be transmitted within twenty-four hours by internet, and Howard hadn't a clue how to go about it. He needed time to shuffle through the boxes, locate the picture or negative, and, with help, scan, retouch, and send it. His methods weren't fast enough to suit the young editors, and it was frustrating, but there, too, Glenn, an IT specialist in his day job, helped his friend reach across generations as much as possible to keep his career going. It must have worked, because Howard's last assignment was the Eagles' Nest photo shoot in 2009, just three months before he died.

In some ways, the two men made an unlikely pair. Glenn Stott is a former C130 Search and Rescue pilot with the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF), who flew UN missions over Ethiopia to aid in the famine relief efforts, and racked up thousands of hours doing maintenance test flying so risky that he admitted, "Sometimes I felt like I was rolling the dice when I took off." Howard Levy never flew an airplane in his life. (He explained, reasonably, that you "can't shoot and fly at the same time", so he left the flying to the other guys, and just did what he was did best at - the pictures.) But the two of them were drawn together by their love of flying machines and photography, and probably also by something much deeper and more elemental. Both have, or in Howard's case had, a basic decency and personal fineness that no doubt contributed to the solidity of their friendship more than any shared interest could have.

At the ceremony this May in which Howard Levy was inducted into the New Jersey Aviation Hall of Fame, a beautifully assembled binder was passed around. It contained page after page of glowing tributes to Howard from a veritable Who's Who of aviation personalities, as well as friends and people to whom he was mentor, and photocopies of the numerous awards and distinctions bestowed on Howard in his lifetime, all carefully preserved in heavy plastic sheathing. A formidable collection of documents. Impressive indeed. A great deal of time and effort, and a kind of relentless determination to let the facts be known, surely must have gone into compiling that collection of documents.

I don't have to tell you who did it, do I? Of course not.

Everybody should have a friend like him.