

Budge Brown, Dale Brown, Cleavage Creek Winery, Airplanes, and Jet Ski Racing:
A Non-Traditional Eulogy
By Peter Kilkus

I never met Budge Brown. I almost met Budge Brown – three times. I was invited to a public relations event several months ago at the newly opened tasting room at Cleavage Creek Winery in Pope Valley. Several weeks later I was invited to a “locals” night event at the winery. Unfortunately I was obsessed with skiing at the time and missed both events. I had scored my first senior (65+) season pass good at Northstar and Heavenly. I ended up skiing 22 times this season. I became part of a subculture of “mature skiers”. I skied with “seniors” and “super seniors” – 65, 70, 75, and even 80 years old!

The reason I mention this is that Budge Brown was a “super senior” in more ways than one. At 78 he never slowed down. Everyone I talked to in Pope Valley or around Lake Berryessa who had met him had only the best things to say about him. By all reports in the media surrounding this tragedy, he was an exceptional person.

I never met Budge Brown. But I had some strange connections to him. Interesting how coincidences, some sad, seem to occur every now and then.

Cleavage Creek Winery had just become a new advertiser in the Lake Berryessa News. When I had visited beautiful Cleavage Creek a few weeks ago to meet with Jean Varner, Director of Winery Operations, she said that Budge was around the winery somewhere, but again I didn't get a chance to meet him. Another missed opportunity.

Last week I read Dale Brown's latest thriller, which has many fascinating details about Civil Air Patrol activities in Nevada, including how they perform search and rescue operations. In the acknowledgments I saw the name Brad Spires, who was listed as Dale Brown's CAP mentor in becoming mission-pilot qualified in Minden, Nevada.

Brad is an old jet ski racing friend, as well as a Squadron Commander in the Civil Air Patrol. Brad's son, Blaine, and my son, Evan, had been jet ski racers together. I called Brad last Wednesday to congratulate him on appearing in a famous writer's novel and catch up. The next day I read about the tragedy of Budge Brown's plane going down after leaving the Minden airport for Tracy. It seems he took off at 3:30 PM - just before I called Brad Spires at 5 PM.

From news reports of the search I learned that Budge was the founder of the Manteca

Water Park. Coincidentally, Evan had visited that water park when he was a jet ski racing promoter as a possible jet ski racing venue.

Reports mentioned that the Civil Air Patrol was taking the lead in search and rescue so I emailed Brad who told me that the California Wing was running the search.

A story appeared later that day about Budge and Brad in which Brad describes Budge as one of his closest friends. He credited Brown with renewing his interest in flying in 2000.

“If you were a friend of Budge, there is nothing he would not do for you. He is just really a good man. He was finishing the winery at Cleavage Creek. The grand opening was two months ago. It was kind of the pinnacle of what he's been working on,” Spires said. “He's a very caring family man who had a small circle of very close friends. It's very special. If Budge shook your hand and looked you in the eye, that was the end of the discussion,” Spires said.

I also just learned that my friends, Jim Fresquez and Susan Meyer, owners of Rustridge Ranch and Winery were also close friends of Budge for years. Jim had actually flown with Budge and landed in Minden with him in bad weather! Jim and Susan attest to his excellence as a person, as well as a pilot. Pilots who knew him suspect he had a medical emergency since none of them question his skill as a pilot nor the quality of his aircraft.

Budge had the will and stamina to jump through the Napa County bureaucratic hoops to get Cleavage Creek Winery built. He was dedicated to making exceptional wines and to fighting breast cancer. The Cleavage Creek butterfly is a symbol of hope and metamorphosis. It represents the transformation made when those with breast cancer survive their struggles and go on to lead healthy lives.

Budge's son, Jeff, knows his father died doing something he loved. "He was happy up there. He loved that little airplane, it was challenging, it was fast, you had to be on top of your game and he flew it real well."

I never met Budge Brown. I almost met Budge Brown. I wish I had met Budge Brown. To me he is a classic “super senior” hero. We should all emulate his example and passion:

Live to Love Life!

