

40 Years in the Desert

Volume 5
Number 1

The Further Adventures of Matthew Saroff, Itinerant Engineer¹

We'll start with new contact information for the Saroff Brood™. We are now in the Dallas-Ft. Worth (DFW) area at 2320 Miriam Lane, Arlington, TX 76010. Our phone is (817)469-7660. My Email is msaroff@pobox.com, and Sharon's² Email is sindara@pobox.com.

For those of you who have not received this in over two years, I'm sorry about the delay³. For the first timers, this is a paean to irrational rants and copyright infringement⁴.

If, for reasons unfathomable to me, you have a burning desire to see previous issues of *40 Years*⁷, you can download them from my web page in Adobe Acrobat (PDF⁸) format at <http://www.pobox.com/~msaroff/40>. Eventually, the web page will explain why I do the this, how put this together, and what's with those freaky footnotes.

I try to get this out regularly, but I was distracted in 1996. Sharon² was pregnant, so I was busy making late night runs to the store looking for canned pineapple to assuage her cravings. I couldn't find a girl with normal cravings, like sardine sundaes⁹, where I could argue that you can't find them at 3:00am.¹⁰¹¹ Sharon had a baby, and I'm a daddy. On June 17, at 6:22pm CDT, Sharon² gave birth to Natalie Judith Saroff, 7 pounds 15¼ ounces and 20 inches long. She's a beautiful little girl, even if my **heartless** brother Stephen claims that babies look like Winston Churchill (untrue, see above). She's also a natural flirt, which is cute now, but in a few years, **I'LL BE IN HELL**.

Acknowledging the short attention spans resulting from TV, Rock & Roll, and a president with Alzheimer's¹², here's a run-down on what's happened since the last issue.

¹ Also now a contributor to the human gene pool.

² Love of my life, light of the cosmos, **SHE WHO MUST BE OBEYED**, my wife.

³ It's hard on me too. I have to fill up this issue with news of what is going on in my life. If I didn't have to cover two years worth of news, you would get authoritative opinions from a position of absolute ignorance™.

⁴ This is more risky than it sounds. You can kill hundreds if peaceful unarmed demonstrators and retain MFN status, but bootleg some CDs and some software, and Bill Clinton⁵ threatens you with trade sanctions.

⁵ A staunchly Republican friend of mine and I (lifelong Democrat) have a running argument on Clinton. He claims that Clinton is a Communist, and I claim that he is a Fascist. Interestingly enough, we see the same events as bolstering our arguments. The more we talk, the more I hope that we get a Republican like Bill Weld running against a classic (as opposed to new⁶) Democrat in the year 2000.

⁶ New Democrat, New Coke... Classic Democrat, Classic Coke. What do the first two have in common? They are both the misbegotten products of focus groups and marketing gimmicks gone horribly awry.

⁷ This is not as weird as you think. There have been hundreds hits on my "Bad Hair" web page.

⁸ Acrobat allows a document to look the same on all systems. The free reader is available at <http://www.adobe.com/prodindex/acrobat/readstep.html>. Software to create PDF files is rather dear, but there is a free conversion service at <http://www.babinszki.com/distiller/>, which is how I made my conversions.

⁹ Since she wasn't interested in sardine sundaes, she must be **herring impaired**.

¹⁰ Well, that's my story, and I'm sticking with it. **No way** am I going to admit that I was spending my time downloading pictures of musical instruments off the internet.

¹¹ It seems that anytime that someone wants to score some political points, they sound the alarm and call for legislation to protect the children from all the **Sax** and **Violins** on the 'net.

¹² Was I the only one who's first thought upon the news that Reagan had Alzheimer's was, "How can you tell?"

¹³ Formerly General Electric, which kind of would have made it a sort of transfer between companies¹⁴.

¹⁴ Formerly Lockheed Martin. It was sold to General Dynamics, so it's General Dynamics Defense Systems.

¹⁵ Loral Vought Systems¹⁶ was purchased by Lockheed Martin and became Lockheed Martin Vought Systems about 2 months after I got here, so I ended up working for the same company either way. Well, sort of.

¹⁶ Formerly the missiles and avionics portions of LTV Aerospace¹⁷.

¹⁷ Formerly Chance Vought Aircraft¹⁸.

¹⁸ The money in defense contracting is **NOT** in making weapons, it's printing all the **stationary** that has to be replaced after each merger. Sheesh!

¹⁹ Liquid propellant gives precise control of propellant, and trajectory. You can set the flight path to make counter battery fire more difficult, or fire a bunch of rounds at a target that arrive at the same time, spoiling the bad guy's day.

²⁰ A **Kollel** is a group or rabbis who are brought into a community to provide scholarship and teaching. It's kind of a Talmudic community college.

²¹ The **SCA** or Society for Creative Anachronism, is a Medieval recreation group. Briefly, people get together and play Medieval.

In January of '96, I had an embarrassment of riches, two job offers. One was as an engineer working on artillery with Lockheed Martin Defense Systems¹³ in Pittsfield, MA. The other was as a designer with Loral Vought Systems¹⁵ in Grand Prairie, TX on a surface to air missile.

The army was deciding between Lockheed's liquid propellant concept¹⁹, and a more conventional solid system. If they went with the solid propellant system, I would be gone. The army delayed it's decision, and I saw this as a bad sign, so I went to Texas. A few weeks later, the army went with solid propellant, and they laid off all the contractors in Pittsfield.

In March, I loaded up my Honda Accord, and headed south. My wife had contacted Bentzi Epstein, a rabbi at the Dallas Area Torah Association (DATA), a Kollel²⁰, and he generously allowed me to crash with his family while I found a place near where I would be working, Arlington, TX. It's about 20 miles from both Dallas and Ft. Worth.

Sharon² and I like DFW, though being a Washington Redskins fan in the area is odd. The standard cliché would be that I was in "Indian country", but the metaphor breaks down when a Redskins fan is surrounded by Cowboy fans.

We've been doing a lot of SCA²¹ stuff since we got here. There two groups in the area are Elfsea (FT. Worth) and Steppes (Dallas). Arlington is Elfsea, which is where we tend to play.



Picture of Natalie

Most editors are
failed writers, but so
are most writers

-Thomas Stearns Eliot (1888-1965)

Thoughts on GE Transportation Systems

Having left GE Transportation Systems (GETS), I have mixed feelings. Sharon² and I are glad to leave Erie²², but I enjoyed my work²³, and the people I worked with.

I am not sad to be rid of the upper management drones. In typical GE style, after shipping over 700 locomotives, almost **twice** the prior record, the president of GETS gave a speech. Basically he said, "Congratulations on our best year ever. I'm laying off anyone on the shop floor who was hired after 1978".

This is **not** proper recognition of a job well done. The people who do **real** work at GETS are capable and dedicated to making high grade products, but upper management, the spawn of Jack Welch²⁴, are "humanity challenged". These people, while regularly rotating around divisions so they won't see their employees as people, do a remarkable job of making productive staff utterly miserable.

People are unhappy, so they take early retirement²⁵, and people in the start of their careers wise up and move out.. Eventually, there won't be anyone at GE who knows how things work.

As I spend time at a place, it becomes more surreal. GE was no exception. I'm not sure if this is from becoming more aware, or if I have a "Kafka Field". A month before I left, a secretary was arrested at lunch and led away in handcuffs. She, and her college age son, were alleged to have intercepted credit card bills from work mail slots and used the numbers. When I heard of this, I started looking for signs that I might be turning into a cockroach.

Working in Aerospace

After years of trying to break into the field, I have a job in aerospace. I have done a fair amount of government work and military work, but this is definitely a different way of working.

I was set to work on issues of navalizing the **VT-I** surface to air missile, part of the **Crotale**²⁶ **NG** short-range air defense system manufactured and sold by **Tomson CSF** of France.

I've learned something: don't trade with people who think Jerry Lewis is a genius. It is said that the French are continually

battering down **open** doors. This is not far from the truth., but I could be called an ingrate for complaining about French ineptitude, as this has in resulted in my current employment.

In addition to **VT-I**, I have done work on a rapid deployment (C-130 Transportable) launcher for the PAC-3 (Patriot Advanced Capability-3²⁷) surface to air missile and with resolving issues with the heat rejection system²⁹ on the international space station.

For this job, I had to get a secret clearance. Fear for America's safety, I am cleared³⁰. I haven't worked with anything classified, but I've *handled* secret material that contained non-classified material that I've had to review.

Aerospace is more regimented than other industries. Design,

analysis and manufacturing are very separate. The expectation is that you pass your work to other areas, as opposed to following a design down the shop floor, or doing envelope³¹ calculations for stress analysis. It's a chore to get used to working this way.

There is very little in the way of meaningful mass-production. Even on "production" items, there are so many changes that things are nearly hand made, which explains why things are so costly in aerospace.

This is not to say that I don't enjoy my work. This spring, I flew on the company plane down to Camden, Arkansas for some rocket motor tests.

Camden isn't much, what isn't swamp is bunkers and blockhouses, and the social pinnacle of Camden is the WalMart, but when you get paid to shoot off rocket motors, I call it a good

day. It's even more fun than crashing locomotives.

Fighting and Armor and SCA Stuff

In the last issue of **40 Years**, the Summer of '95, I was about to go to the Pennsic War³⁷, the largest SCA event every year. I described it as a medieval slum, which seems even more apropos now, because in 1995, Pennsic discovered **slumlords**.

My general impressions of Pennsic: **hot and unpleasant**. The definitive quote for Pennsic was, "I'm so chafed."

Our camp site was moved from next to a lake with trees to the middle of a large, flat, and dusty plain called "The Serengeti"

He slipped the size nine onto the customer's foot, "And how does that feel sir?"
Brian gritted his teeth silently. He had to get out. And soon. Or else he would go stark raving mad.
He felt his pager begin buzzing. Excusing himself, he checked the display.
"4455". YES! The signal! Trying to be nonchalant, he told his assistant to mind the counter, he was going back to check stock.
The next 15 minutes would be the most important moments of his career.
Everything had to go down **exactly** as planned. The gas grenade, the minivan, the waiting inflatable raft.
Soon. He could taste it. Soon, the job at Florsheim would be **his**.³²

-Anthony Garcia

²² AKA, the "Mistake by the Lake"

²³ Locomotives are really fun to work on, and engineer and choo choo train just seem to go together.

²⁴ "Neutron Jack" because the people are gone and the buildings remain. I hope that all of his ilk are hung by their tongues for a few of days before being lined sold into slavery in Chad, where they will work mining salt.

²⁵ When I went to work at GETS, I realized that there were 4 people who were critical to getting work done. If they had vanished, it would have been a month before a locomotive would roll out. While I was there, three of these people took early retirement, and in at least two of those cases, it was because they were sick of their managers.

²⁶ Crotale is French for Rattlesnake.

²⁷ This is a misnomer. PAC-3 is **totally different** from the Patriot's that under-performed against Scuds in the Gulf War. It was developed from Vought's **ERINT**. PAC-3 is to hit-to-kill, and is smaller and faster than it's predecessor.²⁸

²⁸ Basically, it comes down to politics. It's easier to sell Congress an upgrade than it is to sell a new, system.

²⁹ Basically a high tech radiator that unfolds after deployment like a bizarre cross between a road map and a transformer robot

³⁰ If they approved of me, one wonders what other scum and villainy have been cleared. It's a good thing that I never got that party card.

³¹ Quick and dirty simplified calculations. So named because they can be done on the back of an envelope.

³² I got this off the Internet and came across this³³, and figured that this **HAD** to go into **40 Years**

³³ Ken Johnson saw an Internet job posting for a shoe store manager requiring **4 years experience** in the position. He asked the question: What is this about? Is someone working at a shoe store one day and they suddenly realize, "This sucks like a thousand Hoovers all going at once. I'm going to quit and go to work for some **OTHER** shoe store." I liked Mr. Garcia's Gibsonsque response, so I'm using it with their permission.³⁴

³⁴ Both these individuals, for accomplishments in wit and sarcasm, have been added to the list of people receiving **40 Years in the Desert**. It's not much, but hey, they are now published essayists.³⁵

³⁵ It's my policy that anyone who contributes something to, or who I mention by name in, **40 Years in the Desert** will receive a copy of the rag.³⁶

³⁶ This doesn't apply to public figures like Clinton and Reagan, as they have to prove malice or reckless disregard for the truth to sue me.

³⁷ Pennsic is a two week camping event held every year in the Pittsburgh, PA area. It's the largest SCA event held every year.

In addition to ineptitude, space allocation was made on the basis of political considerations.

The people running Pennsic that year (it rotates yearly) had a dual plan of screwing things up **and** being unpleasant. They made policy changes, distributed them in language that would cross a tax lawyer's eyes, and replied to requests for clarification with, "I'm the Autocrat³⁸, and if you don't like it, don't come." Rudeness rebounds and amplifies, so by Pennsic, about **10,000 people** were edgy and cross³⁹.

The bright side to this was that the lead autocrat had to quit with three weeks to go, citing work pressures⁴⁰. This meant that I didn't **lock him into a porta-john and roll him down the hill**, which would have gotten me in trouble.

Notwithstanding the heat and Midrealm Boobies⁴⁶ I had a blast fighting. Unlike the previous year, where I spent most of my time in reserve⁴⁷, I was in the thick of it more often. I didn't kill anyone, but I got three assists, where I hooked an opponents shield with mine, and a pole arm behind me finished him off⁴⁸.

Luckily, there is more to the SCA than Pennsic⁴⁹, and the bulk of my experiences with the SCA have been pleasant.

If I sent you the first issue of *40 Years in the Desert*, you may recall that I had a pattern cut out for a new suit of armor on a laser cutter. Well, I've finally assembled the pieces. It's working OK, but next time, there are some fixes that I want to make⁵⁰.

I heat blued the armor, but I'm having rust problems. If anyone out there has any suggestions on how best to keep my armor from rusting much more, I'd appreciate suggestions.

The weirdest thing about my armor is that this Fall, it got me a *Sable Thistle*⁵¹, an Ansteorran⁵² arts award, from the King⁵³. Sharon² also got a *Sable Thistle* for a bead necklace, which should surprise no one.

Those of you who saw me fight when I was up north may recall a couple things: **I really** stunk on ice, and I fought with a small round shield. Things have changed.

I am using a large (2' x 3') *Scutum*⁵⁴ that is lighter than my old 22" round "hubcap"⁵⁵, and I'm practicing regularly, and getting advice. I've advanced to mediocre, a giant leap forward.

I'm having more fun fighting: This Spring, at a peasant's tourney, where peasant tools were used as weapons, I did pretty well with plowshare and pruning hook.. This fall, I fought in a "Swiss 5"⁵⁶ tournament. I won 2 of 5 bouts, which is a lot better



Some People Videotape the Delivery, We Found a Sketch Artist

than **anyone** would have expected just a year ago. I would say that the thing that I need to work on the most right now is how to handle the evil, vile mutants⁵⁷ I seem to run into all too often.

Much the improvement in my fighting is from changing from an Escrima⁵⁹ stance, where the "sword" is carried over the shoulder pointing down, to a boxing stance, where the "sword" is carried in front of the shoulder pointed up. The larger shield has helped a lot too. When I stay in the proper stance, I'm covered, where in my previous stance and shield, I would be open.

There have also received a lot of advice and practice from a lot of people who have a pretty good idea about how this works. Until recently⁶⁰, I've been fighting 1-2 times a week.

³⁸ **Autocrat**: The person running an event in the SCA. See also: Sucker.

³⁹ To be somewhat fair, heat indices topped 100 degrees, which might have had something to do with this. Notice of course that is only **somewhat** fair, as I've stuck it in small print.

⁴⁰ For at least the **fourth** time in recent memory.⁴¹

⁴¹ It should be noted that this idiot has a Pelican⁴² from the Midrealm⁴³ for signing up for major commitments and then bailing out. Apparently, that's what constitutes service above and beyond there.

⁴² The *Pelican* is the highest accolade that can be granted one for service in the SCA.

⁴³ The SCA is organized⁴⁴ into administrative units called kingdoms. The head of state is King, who is selected by trail of arms⁴⁶ and rules for 6 months. The Midrealm is most of the upper Midwest and parts of central Canada.

⁴⁴ SCA...Organized...Yeah, right...

⁴⁵ People hit each other over the heads with sticks. The last one standing is the king. There is honor, glory and a fair amount of politics involved too, as falling down is voluntary.

⁴⁶ A close relative to the Dodo, unfortunately, it shows no signs of extinction.

⁴⁷ I actually took a nap during a battle in 1994.

⁴⁸ There is this **absolutely exquisite** moment that occurs when you do this, and he suddenly realizes that all he can do is wait for death from above. The look on someone's face at that moment is truly prize.

⁴⁹ Which would be a good lesson for the citizens of the East Kingdom (the mid-Atlantic states, New England, and eastern Canada) to learn. They start planning for the next Pennsic when the previous one ends.

⁵⁰ If you're not interested in armoring, this is kind of dull. Basically, I had to modify (cut back) the shoulders for improved mobility, and beat on them some for fit. The wire tie system I used, while serviceable, and a lot less of a pain to assemble than **solid** rivets, is not as nice as the two piece rivets that are used with leather (you can pick them up at any Tandy Leather), which go together just about as fast, and are far more becoming, and they don't fray.

⁵¹ This is a fairly low level arts award for a specific work, as opposed to a higher level award, that would be given for overall skill and contributions to the craft. A person can get multiple *Sable Thistles*.

⁵² Ansteorra is Oklahoma, and Texas, except for that little bit of Texas that is in the Mountain time zone around El Paso.

⁵³ Proving that once again, that the king always gets the **BEST** stuff to smoke.

⁵⁴ It's a rectangular shield. The Romans used the Scutum too, but their shields were a center grip with a single handle mounted in the center (kind of like a garbage can lid), and mine is strapped to my forearm.

⁵⁵ I still fight with the old round shield occasionally, it's not as effective, but it's a lot more fun in some ways.

⁵⁶ The format for a "Swiss 5" is: You fights five rounds. In each round, you use a different weapon form. After that, the people with the best records become the finalists, and the finals determine the ultimate victor.

⁵⁷ You know, those left handed **scum**⁵⁸. You gotta watch out for them.

⁵⁸ Of course, I don't call them scum out loud. I married one of those evil vile mutant left handed scum, and she has a mean left hook.

⁵⁹ Escrima is a Philippine stick fighting. Magellan, and most of his crew, were killed in the Philippines by people using Escrima. It's impressive when you realize that people in metal armor were killed by people with wooden sticks.

⁶⁰ Meaning until Natalie was born. Kids have a knack for cutting into one's free time and leisure activities.

I've also had the chance to work with a legend, Duke⁶¹ Inman McMoore, who is arguably the best fighter in the SCA. He has regular practices in his back yard, and I have dropped by a few times, and gotten some very useful advice⁶³.

Now Back to Sharon's² Labor and Natalie's Birth

Her labor woke me at 4:30am, and as per doctor's instructions, Sharon² walked and drank to see if it was false labor. At 5:30 her water broke, so we headed for the hospital.

This was a surprise, as Sharon² had seen the doctor that day, and he had said that he didn't see much in the way of progress. He said that he'd discuss whether or not he needed to induce labor when he saw her next week. Natalie had other ideas.

Sharon² is more familiar with that part of Dallas, so she gave directions until I realized that it is **not** smart to get directions from someone in active labor.⁶⁴ We got to the delivery room at 7:30.

Sharon² was completely effaced and dilated to about 2 cm. An hour later, she was at 6 cm, and she was completely dilated at 1:00. things progressed rapidly, and the labor, unfortunately back labor⁶⁵, was so intense that Sharon's² blood pressure spiked. At about 11:30am, she got an epidural⁶⁶. This made things easier on her, and on me, as I had spent most of the time holding an ice pack to her posterior to ease her labor pains

After she dilated, the labor slowed down. She pushed when contractions came every 15 minutes. She had time to watch her favorite soap on TV between contractions.

This Spot
Left for
Mailing
Sticker

At 5:00pm, Dr. Millstein, her OB/GYN, told us he was worried about how the labor was progressing. There was no fetal distress, but the baby was not coming out. He discussed the things that might cause this, and said that if things didn't progress in a about an hour, we'd go from the delivery room to one of the surgical theaters, and he would go with a forceps delivery or a cesarean.

Well, things didn't progress, so at 6:00pm, we were in a surgery area, I was wearing a paper gown and mask, and Dr.

Millstein and a bevy of people and medical equipment there room too. Natalie was a forceps delivery, but she came out just fine, though she was a bit bruised⁶⁷, probably from the labor

Since her birth, Natalie has progressed rapidly. She is over 17 pounds and over 28 inches long at 6 months. She was sleeping through the night by three months⁶⁸

Sharon² has had very little problem losing weight following the birth. She was at her pre-pregnancy weight in two months, and now she weight less than she did when we got married. This is yet another reason why it's good to breast feed⁶⁹.

That's about it for now, but stay tuned for the further adventures of *Matthew Saroff, Itinerant Engineer*.



If After All This, If I Didn't Include a Baby Picture, It Would be Kind of Lame

⁶¹ In the SCA, the term is applied to a **Duke**, which is someone who has been King at least twice⁶².

⁶² In Inman's case, it's **SIX** times that he's won crown, or at least it was when I wrote this. One of his nicknames is, "the once and every other King".

⁶³ I would also like to thank Mistress Stella Silvana, ML, for the her help. She shows me when I'm screw up and fall back into old habits, with a quick word and a solid **thwack!** to some part of my body. She don't fight like no girl.

⁶⁴ We trained for labor using the Bradley method. This natural childbirth method focuses on the woman being is relaxed and aware of what is going on during labor. Lamaze focuses on rote memorized breathing.

⁶⁵ About 2/3 of the time, the baby comes out facing toward the mother's spine. Since a baby's face is soft and squishy, this is a good thing. Back labor is when the baby comes out facing toward the navel, so the hard back of the head is pushing on the spine. Sharon² described back labor feeling like a cross between hit in the back in the pickax and a power drill.

⁶⁶ This is a sort of spinal block anesthesia. The anesthetic is put into the fluid sack surrounding the spinal cord (the Epidura, hence the name) as opposed to injecting directly into the spinal cord, as in the case of the classic spinal block.

⁶⁷ OK, she looked like she had come in second in a boxing match. She had one eye that was swollen and puffy for a few days, and she came out purple (it went away in about 5 minutes), which is normal for a newborn.

⁶⁸ I was sleeping through the night at 3 days.

⁶⁹ From my perspective, the best reason is that it's 3:45am, and the baby is hungry, and I can say, "Gee; I'd like to help dear, but I just don't have the equipment."

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