

Paper Airplanes over the Washington Cathedral

by Jonathan Rickert

Viewed from a congregation's perspective, we choirboys could appear cherubic or even seraphic in our purple cassocks, white surplices, starched collars, and floppy black ties. In truth, however, especially away from our choir stalls, we could be anything but. While not all of our free-time activities were devilish in nature (e.g., we did play touch football and softball, among other harmless pursuits), many others were. At one time or another I can remember my fellow choristers throwing snowballs at moving cars and torpedoes (small, spherical fireworks that exploded with a loud bang upon striking a hard surface) at the outside walls of the Cathedral. Fighting, bullying younger boys, experiments with cigarette smoking, and stealing (unconsecrated) Communion wafers also occurred.

The choir director, Mr. Callaway, was not immune from pranks by his charges. Foreign objects, including a box turtle and a pencil, were placed on the strings of the piano in our rehearsal room, to "improve" the sound, and once three taxis were ordered by phone from different companies to pick him up just as a Sunday morning choir practice was about to begin. Misbehavior during the services themselves was not unknown. One of my classmates, Bob Ellinwood, donned a pair of heavy-rimmed glasses frames with an oversized nose and black mustache attached, a la Groucho Marx, for a brief time during a service, while choristers often fought off boredom during sermons playing games of tic-tac-toe and hangman on service programs.

One activity that we engaged in, though rarely, was actually beautiful. On days when the wind was blowing gustily from the north, usually in March or November, we knew that paper airplane weather had arrived. In those times, the Cathedral offices and stone arcade between them and the North Transept Porch had not been built, allowing the wind an unobstructed shot at the north outer wall of the Great Choir. As one faced the Cathedral from the north, the choir room was to the left and the North Transept to the right, creating a rough sort of wind tunnel. Once the wind hit that wall, it had nowhere to go but up. We would fold our paper planes into various configurations and try to get them airborne between gusts. Some would rise a few feet and then fall to earth, while others would circle higher before coming down.

Occasionally, however, a plane would have just the right design and would catch the wind at the perfect moment. Then it might be carried higher and higher, eventually disappearing onto or over the roof of the Cathedral, more than 100 feet above the ground. When we lost sight of such a plane, we would rush around to the south side of the Cathedral to see if it had made it over. In rare instances it had, which resulted in rejoicing all around. Even if such success involved a great deal of luck, we felt that we had accomplished something unusual, if not remarkable, when a plane crossed the roof and reached the south side of the Cathedral. A little like an astronaut setting foot on the moon.