

Ron Luther



Welcome Back, Mr. Catheter

*Man, I can't believe
I'm about as happy a man
as you can find!*

The rainy night Marine Corps Captain Ronald B. Luther trapped his F8-A Crusader on the flight deck of the *USS Independence*, the very night he blew a tire, flipped overboard, and sank by way of the ship's four-bladed propeller – a bronze monster mauling the sea at 96 revolutions per minute - he never imagined it would be catheters that would haul him to heaven, after all. Instead, "my last thoughts were about my family around the dinner table, as I knew I was about to die."

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Die and end up in Paradise is more like it, for not only was Luther miraculously spared a grisly end cut to ribbons (the *Independence's* propeller sliced through his plane's fuselage mere inches behind his ejection seat, thereby freeing him into the arms of rescue swimmers) but he has gone on to find more fun in life than any death-cheating flight into the drink can provide.

"Here I am, doing what I like to do, when and how I like to do it," says Luther, inventor of medical devices that continually

revolutionize patient care - catheters unlike any that have come before and that significantly up the ante of safety in use. "I am Mr. Catheter!" And being Mr. Catheter, he'll tell you, is no better mister to be in this life.

It might not have been so apparent back in 1962 when Luther, a photo and landing signal officer stationed at Cherry Point, North Carolina (flying F-8U-1Ps), experienced the horrific. After three successful "traps" (arrests) on the carrier in his Crusader, the fourth of the evening would be different. He recalls: "I had gone back up to the dog holding pattern and come down CCA (carrier controlled approach) breaking out about 600 feet, called the ball (optical landing system) to a slight high and fast. The deck was pitching and I met it with an angling four-wire. I felt the plane lurch port as a tire blew. I put on full power but to no avail."

With the plane hanging over the deck edge at a 30-degree...then 90-degree...then fully-inverted position as the hook slipped and let go, Luther popped the canopy a split-second before plane and pilot together fell eight stories

and into the path of the churning bronze monster. If it weren't for the miraculous fact that his helmet's oxygen not only kept the unconscious pilot alive but also filled his vest with enough buoyancy to float him to the surface after the Crusader's fuselage was sliced open, Luther would have sunk 600 fathoms - as did the plane. *Gomen nasai* (Japanese for "I'm sorry"), he called his skipper about its loss after being rescued by a plane guard destroyer that just happened to spot him with a searchlight and then was taken to months in sick bay. There, neurosurgeons wanted to amputate his left arm.

"I said, Screw you guys, just leave my arm alone," Luther says of the shoulder injury that saw him discharged from the service but today is 80 percent healed. The doctors did, and "I carried it in a sling or stuck it in my pocket for two years before I got some use back." Not that anyone really needs an arm at 100 percent to sell Butch Wax for the old Lucky Tiger men's cosmetics company, which is what Luther did next - a job that did not as yet make the highest

use of his university chemistry degree but which nonetheless gave the future entrepreneur an idea of his own potential.

"I tried to buy the company, " but in a manner its president found infuriating, laughs Luther today. "I took the wrong approach - told him I could run it a lot better than he. He said, I'm sorry you feel that way but I'm not selling and by the way, you're fired." Lucky Luther. Such a reversal of affairs only served to steer the inventor-to-be to American Hospital Supply,



The Inventor masterminds the Crusader.

manufacturers of medical devices. As general manager, the budding Mr. Catheter was sent to Georgia, then Mexico, and eventually to Great Britain. It was one sunny day in Mexico, while golfing with buddies who hole after hole bragged about the money they were raking-in off high-priced catheters, that it hit: the big idea.

"That is *unconscionable*," Luther recalls, appalled by their greed. "I'm going to go out and invent a catheter for lesser developed countries that'll put you guys out of business!" he threatened. And all had a good laugh, Luther's being last.

For almost 60 patents later and his first company, Luther Medical, sold for \$18 million, with new catheter-related inventions stacking-up for take-off in his imagination with speeds machs faster than any he used to experience on carrier decks, Luther today is proud that his conscience is reasonably free of the stains of greed that motivated his early competitors.

"I have a lot of impact on the medical community and the patients of the world and

that's the nice thing," says the father of three grown girls who has been married to "Pussycat," his wife Barbara for 48 years. "I'm turned on about 30 percent with a sense of altruism, and about 40 percent with a sense of accomplishment in getting a product to market." And? Oh, well, "the remaining percent is pure ego. Just doing it because I can do it."

Luther can do a lot. These days he may be flying his cherished Cessna 310 for business or to visit his daughters in Arizona, or losing himself in

the loop-de-loops of his copy of a 1930s biplane. "When I get real tense," he says, "I just go to the airport, roll that baby out, put in 40 minutes aerobatics - loops and spins and rolls and Cuban eights - and all my worries disappear." Or he may be playing a little cat and mouse with Pussycat: "I'm getting a Starduster home-built but my wife doesn't know it yet. We don't want to talk about that." Yet even in while in a spin, Luther seldom lets his passion for catheters wander far from his restless inventor's mind.

"Listen to this other idea!" he says, alight with so much genuine and infectious

enthusiasm it's impossible to believe this brainchild isn't his first instead of his, oh, 50-somethingth. "The world's best neonatal catheter. Braided. A great boon for premature babies."

Being a boon for babies is hardly something new for Luther, whose enduring enterprise continues to make him the darling of companies who sooner or later understand he's the man, the only man, when it comes to the medical device he considers "pretty damn simple" to invent but which no one else apparently can. His Crusader catheter, equipped with "wings" and with a shape reminiscent of its namesake plane, is so christened because in Luther's mind both share the distinction of being far ahead of their time. For instance, the people of "the \$18-mil deal" of 1999 don't seem so happy to have acquired Luther the company but not Luther the Catheter Man. "Now they're saying, Hey, we bought all these golden eggs but we missed the goose!" says the innovator, who is now being offered the licenses on some of those patents

F8-A Crusader and photo pilot Captain Ron Luther, USMC, before his fateful carrier accident.



Becton Dickenson snapped-up in the sale so he - and only he - can continue his work with them. "Holy cow! They're saying, Hey, Mr. Goose! How about taking back these eggs we need incubated here..." And make sure they're perfected enough for the marketplace? You got it. For therein lies the bottom-line bliss for this golden goose. "I'm most excited by bringing a product to fruition," says the man whose reputation is indeed a gilded thing he takes special pains to keep polished by remaining at the forefront of his field.

"I'm at the point where I don't have to prove anything to anybody any more," says Luther, who once upon a time sold five patents to Johnson &

Johnson that resulted in products that have sold...respectably? Try to the tune of 300 million, at "a buck-sixty" a pop. Like the inventor says of his undeniably successful inventive acumen, referring to himself, as is his quirky yet endearing habit, in the third person. "So once again, Luther comes along and he says, What am I going to attack?" Whatever it is, Mr. Catheter, if the past is any indication the world can be sure it will be an idea that begins a medical revolution, however it's styled.

Yes, says Ron Luther, "I am happy." A cat fancier whose beloved "Amelia Earhart" is one of several felines in the menagerie to sport an aviation-inspired name, Luther doesn't want for

much. "Don't need a boat. Got a good house. Got a good car. All the girls went to good colleges, two of 'em are married to multimillionaires," muses the man whose escape from a death by shredding has turned into a most enjoyable run full of purpose, meaning and the satisfaction of doing good. And until his Crusader 10, among the newest innovations of Luther Needlesafe Products, is distributed to make a difference in the lives of medical personnel and patients alike, the man of the Midas touch with catheters can't complain.

Well, he adds as a passionate afterthought, "I might need another airplane, but that'll be a small expense."