

DAVIDSON COLLEGE

DAVIDSON, NORTH CAROLINA, 28036

DEPARTMENT OF MATHEMATICS

For reasons which I have forgotten, or perhaps never knew, my mother has been selected to serve as church historian for the year just past. Drunk with the power and prestige of this coveted position she has delegated to me the task of writing a brief article on William E. Thornton, the son of Mrs. Rosa Thornton and a member of the Faison Presbyterian Church. Mama's pretext for this assignment is that two months ago she sent me a clipping on William's latest invention. The obvious way out for me is to simply return the clipping, which I have fortunately saved, and let her use that. Furthermore, I can not write a brief article on William Thornton because he was my closest boyhood friend. Together we have shouted "Boarders away!" from the pitching deck of our frigate, have "rigged for silent running" in the tense atmosphere of our submerged submarine, and have dropped depth charges from our heeling destroyer. All three of the above vessels were constructed in William's backyard from the same basic lumber scraps, saw-horses, and bits of pipe. We were both nuts about the Navy. How he wound up in the Air Force and I in the Army is something of a mystery. But to go back to the beginning, the first thing that attracted me to William was that his initials spelled WET. Not many people have initials which spell something, you know. In addition to our seafaring adventures, William and I also participated in many church activities. We memorized the Shorter Catechism together and joined the church the same day. For some reason, William had not been baptized as an infant. Maybe he was too heavy for Miss Rosa to carry down front. I think he weighed about 15 pounds at birth. Anyhow, I vividly remember the water cascading down his nose when Mr. Jones baptized him as we stood before the congregation. Then

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there were his contributions to the Pioneers of the church. Like the night he rocked his chair through the front window of Miss Nina DeVane's living room.

It was in the seventh grade that I first discovered that William was (and is) a genius. He walked in one day and announced that we had all descended from monkeys. This surprised all of us, particularly Miss Faison, the teacher. He had been reading Darwins The Descent of Man. At this stage in our development I was reading Batman comic books; the originals that are now worth 50 dollars apiece if my mother had not thrown them away.

In high school William acquired the nickname of Bull Moose after a Paul Bunyanesque character in the Andy Gump comic strip. This was later shortened to Moose. The girls called him Moosey.

William put himself through college by coming home every weekend to work in his little shop where he serviced radio and television sets. He also managed to make the U.N.C. football squad even though he had not played in high school because Faison High had no team. William majored in Physics and went into the Air Force in 1952. The next three years he spent developing a scoring system for air-to-air missiles. You see, when fighter aircraft were propellor driven and armed with machineguns they used to tow a cloth cylinder behind a bomber and shoot at it for practice. But with jet aircraft firing missiles this procedure was most unsatisfactory. For instance, you might shoot down the tow plane. For the design of the new scoring system William was awarded the Legion of Merit in 1955.

He then went to work for an electronics lab in California where he continued

