After nearly 50 years in the cockpit, planning for that final flight is a bitter-sweet thought, but eventually we all reach TBO. But what’s the best way to do it?

By all accounts, Joe Anderson had a remarkably successful military career, most of which was in the cockpit of fighters or attack aircraft. Receiving an appointment to the U.S. Naval Academy is a huge deal, especially for a kid from Detroit, but to get it with a baseball slot is even better. There, he met – and later married – his Annapolis sweetheart, Marcia . It didn’t hurt Joe’s chances of graduation that Marcia was the daughter of a USN Captain, stationed at the Academy, either. Graduating with the class of 1968, Joe was commissioned as a 2nd Lt. in the U.S. Marines. He and Marcia then embarked on the adventure of a lifetime, heading for Quantico, Virginia, and other exotic Marine stations all over the world, raising two fine daughters along the way. Exotic may be a slight exaggeration.

Joe attended flight school at the height of the Vietnam war and a U.S. Navy training slot was not available, so he received his flight training, courtesy of the US Air Force. With his Air Force wings, he transitioned to F-4 “Phantoms.” Wearing Air Force pilot wings, on a Marine base, Joe was certainly a stand out from the crowd. Joe didn’t fully earn his wings of gold until he completed the additional required training for a Naval Aviator - most importantly carrier qualification. He remains one of the handful of Naval Aviators awarded BOTH USAF and USN wings.

A true Naval Aviator, he was then sent to Viet Nam, where he flew 219 combat missions in the F-4. Then, an opportunity presented itself to transition to the new AV-8A “Harrier” as it entered service. He volunteered, never having even seen a Harrier, so it was back to the U.S. This was the beginning of the second love affair of his life, Marcia being the first.

Joe had his first Harrier flight in 1973, without the benefit of a two-seat trainer. Just hop in it and go, after some ground school from an experienced instructor, who had a whopping 6 hours of experience. Their training aid was a throttle quadrant salvaged from a wreck, attached to a coffee table in the ready room.

The first hops were simple, at least in concept. Just line up facing down the runway, give it full power for a few seconds, and try to stop in 8,000 feet. Then, do it again. Now, you’re ready to fly.

The early days of the Marine Harriers are full of stories, similar to this, as the Marines took a foreign airplane and adapted it to the Marine Corps’ way of close air support. A new concept airplane to be sure, but it was of no value, unless the Marines could use it as a weapon. They landed on roads and ships, and operated frequently from austere sites, some were VERY austere, leading to the development of the On Board Oxygen Generating System (OBOGS), which is in common use today. The Harrier could do it all. Land anywhere, add fuel and bombs and go to it. But we needed test pilots to work on the next version of the “Harrier” – the AV-8B, which was the AV-8A specially tailored for the Marines.

Joe was clearly one of the expert pioneers of VSTOL flight, and became of the very few test pilots to evaluate improvements the Marines wanted. The test bed was the YAV-8B. This early flight test version was a hybrid - using an AV-8A fuselage mated to a newly-designed, super-critical wing, with additional fuel and additional hard points for weapons. Only a handful of people actually flew this variant, but the best parts were folded into the AV-8B, including the larger wing and upgraded weapons systems. That was in the early 1980’s. The AV-8B is now completing its long and illustrious career with the Marines, being replaced by the F-35B STOVL variant of the Joint Strike Fighter. Joe was heavily involved, operationally and with flight test, every step of the way.

Throughout his 33 year career, Joe held leadership positions at every level, from the aviation detachment, to the Squadron, the Marine Air Group, and ultimately the Marine Aircraft Wing, retiring with the rank of Major General (two stars). After retirement, he had planned to just leave his flight boots in the closet, never to be worn again. Although flying was a major part of his life, his days of flying military jets had come to an end. Or so he thought.

In 2005, a chance meeting led Joe to long-time friend and former squadronmate, Art Nalls, also a retired Marine Aviator and former Harrier test pilot. Art had two airplanes flying on the airshow circuit, and invited Joe to come along on a cross country to Cherry Point, NC. They’d see an old mutual friend and maybe get some ‘dog fighting’ in along the way. Joe accepted the invitation.

Joe and Art flew in an L-39 “Albatros” for this flight. Joe says, “I got the aviation fever!” After several years of not flying, he felt right at home at the controls. Art set the hook…

“Why not join us? You’d be a perfect fit and an easy checkout for this type of flying.”

Joe accepted and as a token of being a team player, offered to foot the bill for the L-39 fuel. According to Joe, when he saw the credit card bill, the aviation fever broke.

Art explained that this flying is a business, with revenue and expenses. We’re not in the military anymore. We pay for fuel, brakes, spares and everything else. The aim is to fly when someone else is paying the bills. And for the past 12 years, that’s what they’ve tried to do.

It was no accident that Art invited Joe to join him. He had already set his sights on purchasing a surplus British Sea Harrier, intending to get it flying and operate it on the airshow circuit in the U.S. No easy task, since no one had ever done it. Joe was one of the few people who didn’t laugh at this proposition, and knew the airplane insides and out.

By 2006 the Harrier was in the U.S. and by 2007 had its first flight. There were some learning objectives, operating a former military jet in civilian airspace, but together, they developed a system that works. Over the next 12 years, they worked together as a team. When Joe was flying, Art was the LSO, and vice versa. They both were low-altitude aerobatic qualified in both the L-39 and the Harrier, and could be used as interchangeable parts. Art was always the primary pilot, but Joe was ready, willing, and able as a more than capable back-up, if needed. They performed for 10 years together.

In 2017, Joe was suffering from arthritis in his feet, more and more. His body was telling him loud and clear, that his flying days were coming to an end. He notified Art that he intended to have surgery in September and that would be the end of his Harrier flying.

So with only a few short weeks left, how to plan for one, special flight to wrap a career? The opportunity came when Art and Joe ferried the L-39 and Harrier to the Dover, AFB airshow last weekend. Dover, was only 71 miles from their home base, the weather was perfect, the airplanes were perfect, and Dover agreed to properly ‘wet down’ the General when he landed in the Harrier. It was all lining up, exactly as planned.

To top it off, the airshow airboss challenged all the participants in the show to arrive as close as possible to their PPR times. The challenge was there!

Art removed his own name from the canopy and had Joe’s name applied to the Harrier, along with 2 red stars for his military rank. They took off on time to meet their planned PPR touchdown, but found themselves with a few extra minutes. Since fuel wasn’t an issue and the weather was perfect, why not take a short sight-seeting trip down the coast?

With the wonders of GPS, they turned inbound when the ETE matched their time on target. Joe touched down 31 seconds, off from his PPR time. No other acts were even close, so with his final Harrier flight, Joe won a bottle of 18 -year old scotch from the airboss.

To top all that off, the crash crew obliged Joe with a complementary pressure wash of the Harrier as he exited the runway.

All in all, it was a spectacular flight and a grand way to put this chapter of Harrier flying behind him. He completes his flying career having flown over 60 different types of aircraft, nearly 5,000 total flight hours, with over 2,500 in NINE different Harrier variants. He is member of the Society of Experimental Test Pilots and one of the prestigious “Golden Eagles.”

Although he won’t likely fly single-seat jets again, he will always be one of the very best aviators ever to earn Naval Aviator wings of gold and a true icon of Naval Aviation. And yes, the wings are gold for a reason.