

ST. CLAIR COUNTY RESIDENT HAS LIVED LIFE AT FULL THROTTLE

Bobby Wood tells suspenseful tale of search for lost plane in South America

Bobby Wood is walking and talking as he takes me on a tour of Wood Performance, his motorcycle repair shop on U.S. 231 in Cropwell. The shop seems to go on forever with each corridor, room, and nook slammed full of memorabilia from a high-octane life lived at full throttle.

Born in Birmingham in 1941, Wood comes from a long line of entrepreneurs with an interest in things that go fast. His grandfather owned Wood Chevrolet for several decades while his father, Bob Wood Sr., owned and operated AeroMarine.

Now 83, Wood may have slowed down a little, but not by much. He can still be found working on Harley-Davidsons in his shop five days a week, and, on this day, Wood looks ready to jump on a chopper and ride into the sunset. Dressed in jeans, black riding shoes, a black t-shirt, a black leather motorcycle vest, with a silver cross dangling around his neck and a headful of silver hair, Wood looked like a cross between a Catholic missionary and the ghost of Sonny Barger.

The shop's walls are decorated with photos and news clippings from various stages of his remarkable life, including his days as a top-notch NHRA drag racer in the 1950s and 1960s and his years barnstorming across America as the team captain for the Coca-Cola Cavalcade of Stars drag racing team.

"We were like vagabonds," says Wood. "Coca-Cola hired me somewhere around '68 or '69. There were eight teams, and we traveled all over the country racing funny cars."

Also on display are reminders of his days as a pilot and owner of Air Unlimited,

a Cessna dealership, flight school, and FAA repair station in Opa-Locka, Florida, in the late 1970s and early '80s. It's during this phase that things took a strange and dangerous turn for Wood, as chronicled in his book Learjet 464 Juliet.

Wood spent more than 20 years writing the story of 464 Juliet by hand on legal pads before publishing his "nonfiction novel" in 2023 under his own publishing company, Runway Three Six Publishing. At the time I visited Wood Performance, he was preparing to give a talk to the Pell City Historical Society about his book, his obsession with the plane, and his near-death experiences trying to bring the plane back to the U.S. after three years stranded in the jungles of Colombia. Little did Wood know that the hunt for 464 Juliet would put him face-to-face with shady Colombian lawyers, savage drug runners, and corrupt politicians in the U.S. and Colombia. It would almost cost him his life.

The story begins in 1977 when Learjet N464J flew from Las Vegas, Nevada, to Santa Marta, Colombia, to rescue an American pilot, Bruce Allen, who had been severely injured in a plane crash. However, the crew of six on the mission to save Allen were detained, and their plane was confiscated by Colombian officials. Allen later died of his injuries.

Three years later, Wood was busy with his company, Air Unlimited, but always on the lookout for a great investment, when friend, employee, and Colombia native Raul Soto, told him about a potential oil find in a jungle village near Cartagena and encouraged him to invest. Intrigued, Wood traveled to Colombia to see for himself.

"I went out there to Cartagena, and, sure enough, out there in the jungle, there's this hole, maybe about eight or nine inches wide, and you can look down in there," Wood says. "That was the oil that



Loyd Mcintosh



Bobby Wood as a member of the Coca-Cola Cavalcade of Stars drag racing team



Wood in Columbia with LearJet N464J



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they used for cooking.”

The oil deal eventually sputtered, but during one of his trips to Colombia, a lawyer working on the deal who knew Wood appraised and purchased planes and suggested he look into the missing Learjet.

“He said ‘You know, we’ve got a lot of confiscated airplanes down here.’ I said ‘Well, take me around and show ‘em to me.’” says Wood. They hopped into the lawyer’s car and took off into the jungle well into drug smuggling territory. They eventually made their way to the Santa Marta airport and found what they were looking for — the missing Learjet N464J — in a terrible state of disrepair. “There it was. 464 Juliet, tires shot out in the mud.”

Background checks on the plane turned up tons of unreliable information, including from investigators at Lloyd’s of London, the plane’s insurer, who were under the impression the president of Colombia was using the plane instead of its real purpose — marijuana smuggling.

While Wood followed the proper legal channels to take possession of the plane, many corrupt officials and drug smugglers thought otherwise, making Wood’s attempts to repair the plane and fly back to the U.S. “a living hell.” At one point, he and a traveling companion, Carlos, were captured by heavily armed Colombians who demanded \$5,000 in cash for the plane’s radio.

“They put the guns right up to our heads. I figured they are going to kill us, because they do that down there. They’ll kill you for free.”

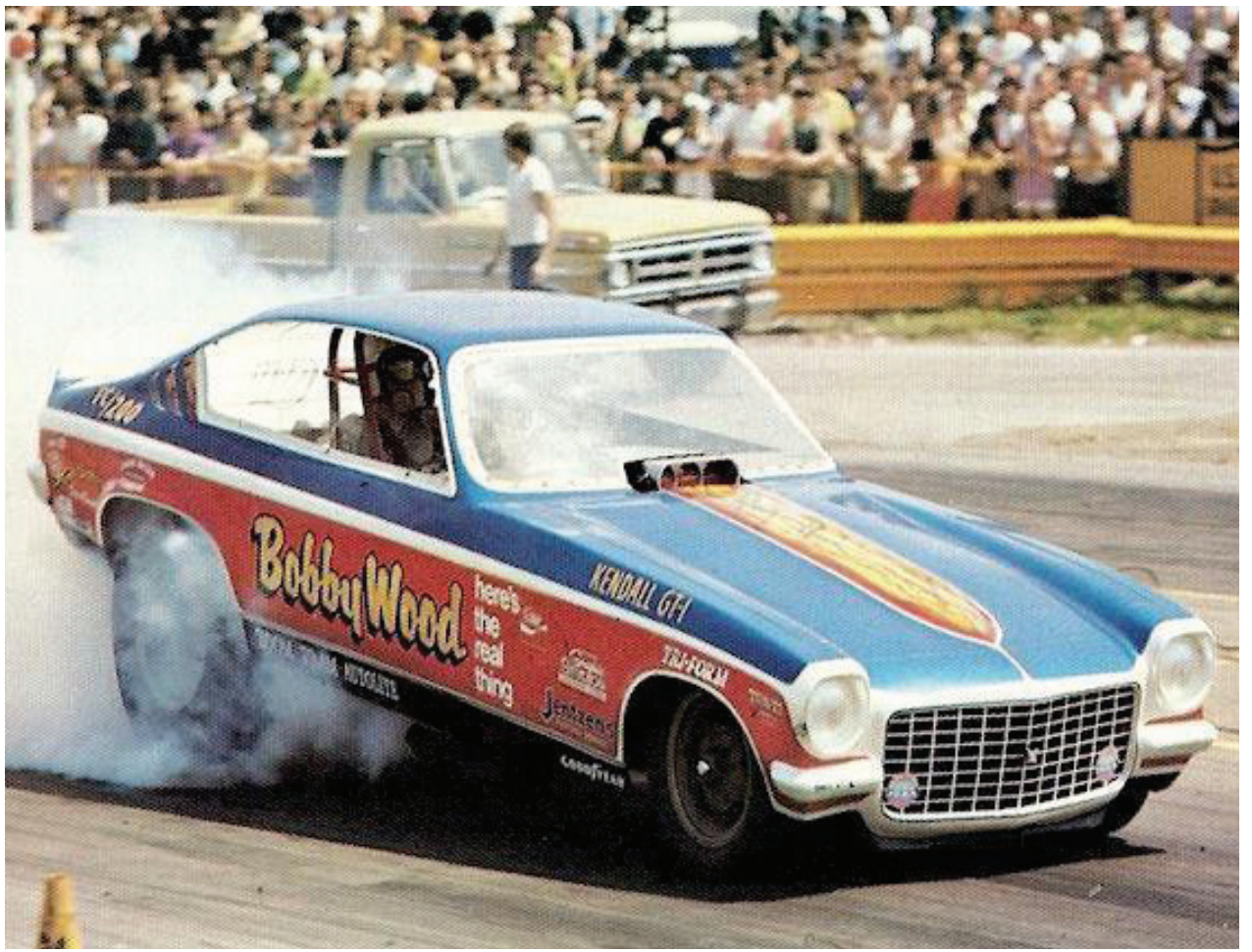
Wood said he looked out at the ocean and figured that would be his final resting place and his family would never know what happened to him. At that moment, he jumped up and shouted ‘No policia’ until he was able to negotiate

with his captors. “They finally put their guns down, and we settled for 1,500 bucks,” Wood says. “That’s how things are in Colombia.”

Eventually, Wood overcame the myriad of dangerous obstacles, flying the plane out of Colombia without working instrument panels, island-hopping his way across the Caribbean using only a whiskey compass and his intuition. A man with strong Christian convictions, Wood said he gives 100 percent of the credit to God for getting him out of harm’s way while in Colombia.

“I’ll be honest with you, if I hadn’t had my guardian angel with me and God working, I could have never made it,” Wood said. “I give it all to God more than anything else.”

To learn more about Wood and to purchase a copy of his book, visit 464juliet.com.



WHERE YOUR HEALTH MATTERS MOST



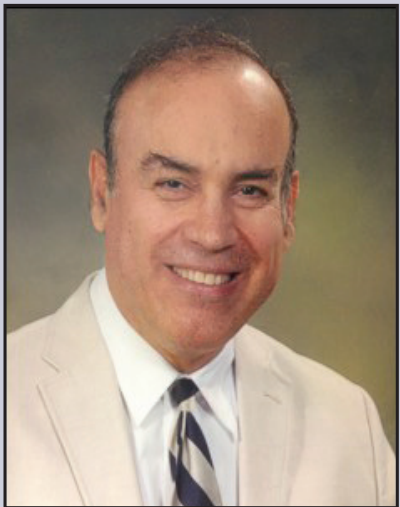
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