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Optimism is key for Shriner

By **Repps Hudson**

SPECIAL TO THE POST-DISPATCH

07/04/2008

In some ways, Doug Maxwell has lived the charmed life of an adventurer — and lived to tell some fascinating stories. In 1969, he was a drum major with the University of Kansas Marching Band when KU went to the Orange Bowl (and lost to Penn State, 15-14) the last time before this past January. Less than four years later, as an Air Force officer, he was flying hair-raising resupply missions to Israel during the Yom Kippur War in October 1973 at the same time Soviet transports were resupplying the Egyptians. They were crisscrossing each other in the eastern Mediterranean as Israel and Arab states battled on the ground and in fighter jets. And less than two years after that, Maxwell's C-141 Starlifter was flying Americans and Vietnamese out of Ton Son Nhut airport as North Vietnamese and Viet Cong communists tightened the noose around the South Vietnamese capital of Saigon in late April 1975. Today, Maxwell flies his own twin-engine Beechcraft Baron B55, visiting some of the 22 Shriners hospitals for children across the United States. As leader of the Shriners International for a one-year term, Maxwell is CEO of a nonprofit organization with a \$9 billion endowment. He was installed as imperial potentate this week as the Shriners met at America's Center.



Doug Maxwell
(Handout)

How did you get interested in flying?

Back in 1955, my father's friend was a stockbroker. He had a plane, and he called my dad and asked if we'd like to fly up to a place like Northwestern to see a football game. These were the days of radio navigation where you'd listen to "di-d-di-di" to home in on a station. They used to put a couple of pillows under the front seat for me.

Five Minutes With ... [Repps Hudson](#)
reppshudson@msn.com

Douglas E. Maxwell
Position: CEO, Maxwell Manufacturing Co.; imperial potentate, Shriners International

Age: 60

Career: Navigator, C-141 Starlifter, U.S. Air Force, 1969-1975, retired with rank of captain; started Maxwell Manufacturing Co. in 1975, which makes conveyors for supermarkets

Education: Bachelor of science in architectural engineering and finance, University of Kansas, 1969; MBA, financial analysis, Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, 1975

Personal: Lives in Chesterfield with his wife, Patricia; no children

Yesterday's most emailed

1. Tiny dog chews off Alton woman's toe
2. BOOOOO Jim Edmonds?
3. Fireworks abound at Busch
4. Nun's 'vision' seems clear: It will be the Cubs' year
5. Bernie Bits: Fawning over Edmonds was a Busch idea
6. Pujols reaches out to loved ones of student
7. E. coli high at Lake of Ozarks, state says
8. The ultimate birthday party planning guide
9. Dog chews off Alton woman's toe
10. Up Next: Cards vs. Cubs

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How did you get interested in becoming a Shriner?

My dad was a Shriner.

You were in the Air Force, weren't you?

I went to college and came back from the Air Force in 1975, with about 3,500 hours. That's a lot.

You were flying into Vietnam in a C-141?

We didn't have any camouflage. We were flying into a hot zone in a white and silver plane.

What was your mission?

Hauling in supplies and bringing out bodies (of dead Americans) or the injured. It was an exciting time. My wife was constantly worried that a chaplain would come driving up to our house and say, "Sorry, Mrs. Maxwell. Doug's not coming home."

I left as a captain. I always wondered: Would I have made general? I was making rank below the zone (ahead of schedule). But I am an engineer, and logic and the military don't equal each other.

What explains Shriners' behavior?

All Shriners are Freemasons, and Freemasonry's been around for nearly 600 years. It came out of Europe. In 1872 in New York City, a doctor and an actor said, "We love being Masons, but let's have some fun."

Shriners spread across America rapidly. In 10 years, the Shrine was coast to coast.

You have to be a good man to join this organization. If you have a bad history, you aren't coming in. And you've got to believe in a Supreme Being. You don't have to be a Christian. You can be Jewish or Muslim or Hindu.

Tell me more about the origins of the Shrine.

The Shrine started for fun. We went from 1872 until 1922 for just fun. Everything you've heard about us is correct: water balloons out the window, motorcycles through the lobby, the bands playing at all hours outside your hotel room. It was just a for-fun organization.

When 1922 came along, nobody was taking care of kids with polio. They were suffering badly. At a meeting like this, they said, "You know, we have to have more than just fun. Nobody's doing this (taking care of kids with polio). Why don't we try to do it?"

The Shriners passed the hat, built some buildings, went to some medical schools like Washington University and said, "Help us take care of these children, and we'll never charge anybody."

For the last 86 years, we have not charged anybody. We have a very big endowment of \$9 billion.

How did you acquire assets?



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The Shrine Circuses. Those fundraisers at one time were enough, because the doctors would donate their services. Once you build a building, it's built. Now we're building this new St. Louis Shriners Hospital, and it's going to cost \$170 million.

Do doctors who work for you get paid?

Now they do. We have to compete in the market. We have top-quality doctors. You can't have anything less in this litigious society.

Is it true that all Shriners are wealthy?

We have the full range. We have people who are service-station attendants. And we have people who own the business.

But aren't most pretty well off?

Not necessarily. Maybe you wanted to drive a go-cart, but your dad wouldn't let you. So now you join the Shrine. Wherever we can find a parade, we go.

What's the point? It's only men, right, having a good time?

Right.

Is it public relations, a way to call attention to yourselves?

Exactly. What happens in a parade? Reporters ask questions. We always get in that Shriners have been taking care of kids for 86 years, and we've never charged anybody. We'll get in that we have 22 hospitals taking care of kids with burns and spinals.

We men don't live as long as the ladies do. Our endowment fund comes from all these years of widows giving us gifts and bequests. We get a lot of estates. Annually, we get in the \$250 (million) to \$300 million range because they believe in us. Ninety-four cents of every dollar goes to taking care of kids.

I am the CEO of a \$9 billion corporation. I get my expenses reimbursed. I don't get paid a dollar for what I do.

Is this a full-time job?

Right now it is.

Do you think you'll ever see a Shriners hospital in Vietnam?

I don't know. My wife and I went to Vietnam in '05. I was there at the fall of Saigon. We were flying from Clark Air Base (in the Philippines). I have photos on my computer of some of our missions. It was so much chaos I stopped shooting pictures to help people up into the plane. I was there three days from the end, and my last flight out, we had 35 (Vietnamese) standing in the cockpit of a C-141. They had been approved by the (U.S.) Embassy.

You were just pulling people out.

Just back and forth, back and forth. As fast as we could get them off at Clark, we'd turn around and go back.

Tell me about your company.

When I got out of the Air Force in 1975, my father was a manufacturer's rep. He called on Hussmann Refrigeration. He said, "I think we have a chance to build some conveyors for Hussmann."

We started in my dad's basement. I traded my flight suit for a welding suit, and I started welding rollers. My wife, Pat, made parts. My mom and Pat did the books. We started Maxwell Manufacturing.

Dad and I were very hands-on: the customer's always right, make that your first concern. We always said, if you buy right, you sell right. I don't raise prices unless it's really necessary. We are now the third-largest builder of these conveyors in the United States.

You're a very versatile person. What's your philosophy of life?

I'm very much an optimist. I always look for the best in people. Things are going to get better.

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