

Whatley keeps learning long after Mines

By Shannon Sharkey

Mitch Whatley BSc Pet Eng '77 nearly forgot about his first semester at CSM. He was working at his father's drilling company when he realized he needed to be in Golden for the start of school in three days. Without a car and stuck in Utah's Lisbon Valley, Mitch's father, Leon, resolved to get his son off to college one way or another. Leon thought quickly and before Mitch knew it, he had hitched a ride with a mud engineer to the airport, was on a plane to Phoenix where he'd left his car, and finally was on the road to Golden. Before he left his dad behind, Mitch recalls, "We shook hands and that was that." Thus the beginning of higher education for Mitch, something he would make a life-long pursuit.

Choosing CSM over an Air Force Academy appointment and an Air Force ROTC scholarship to any university with the program, Mitch decided to study petroleum engineering, a family tradition. Mitch's father had established Whatley Drilling Company in 1952 and Mitch worked as a roughneck for his father during his summer vacations. "Having grown up in this environment, my decision to attend CSM and pursue petroleum engineering could not have been more natural," Mitch remembers.

Soon after graduation, Mitch began working as an associate drilling engineer for Marathon Oil Company in Louisiana. Eight years with Marathon had Mitch managing projects on land and sea, such as air drilling deep gas wells in Texas and deep-water exploration in the Gulf of Mexico. By the time Mitch turned 26, he had become the youngest district drilling engineer in the company's history. He was happy in his career at Marathon Oil. Yet a youthful interest and a ticking clock made him reexamine his goals.

Many years earlier as a junior in high school, Mitch began to seriously consider a job as an Air Force fighter pilot. His interest in the military sprouted from his respect for the principles the United States is founded on and his desire to protect those principles. Also, he says, he was confused by "the torrent of negative press the military received after Vietnam. I wondered whether the United States armed forces were as inept as the press made them out to be." These thoughts hounded Mitch as he inched closer to his 27th birthday; the Air Force does not accept pilot candidate applications after the age of 27 1/2.

As the age deadline approached, Mitch began meeting with Air Force recruiters and taking the necessary tests to be considered for a pilot slot. "I did not want to be 45 years old sitting in my office with any regrets about not pursuing my dreams. I knew I had to give it my best shot," Mitch recalls. His hard work was rewarded in 1982 with the realization of his dream: he became a fighter pilot for the Louisiana Air National Guard.

It was the beginning of 24 years, and counting, in the sky. Mitch's inaugural plane was the McDonnell-Douglas F-4 Phantom II and he soon learned that his unit had been selected to fly the F-15 Eagle. Ultimately, the opportunity to man the F-15 ended his career at Marathon Oil. Until this point, Mitch believed he could juggle both engineering and aviation. But the complexity of piloting the F-15 proved otherwise. He remembers deciding to give up engineering as the most difficult choice he has ever made. "That decision was driven solely by my immediate goal of mastering the F-15; I simply needed a more compatible profession to accomplish that goal." He found a more accommodating profession as a pilot in the commercial airline industry.



Whatley DRILLING CO.

... is a newcomer to the mining industry ... just under 20 years in operation in a field of numerous century-old companies. Yet this has proved to be an advantage for Whatley Drilling Company. To date, all challenges have been mastered ... even those that seemed at first impossible. Whatley Drilling Company has learned that there is no such word as "impossible" when it comes to mineral exploration or rotary and down-the-hole hammer drilling. Name the challenge - Whatley will take it.

LEON WHATLEY

In the field, in the shop or in the management conference room, Leon Whatley puts his 20-year experience consistently on the line. He learned about drilling the hard way ... starting in the plains country of Montana and moving back to the mountain ores of his native Colorado. He had an early understanding of land as a youngster on a cattle ranch in southwestern Colorado and studied it further at Colorado State University. This knowledge was refined in the field as his drilling company was organized.

Today, in Tucson, Arizona, copper capital of the world, Whatley heads an organization of two dozen rugged individualists, ready to explore and drill anywhere ... from below sea level to the highest mountain ranges.

EVAN WHATLEY

Supervising Whatley jobs in northern Nevada, Utah and California is Evan Whatley, who maintains his residence in Virginia, Nevada. Evan Whatley has been drilling superintendent for over ten years.

J. A. (JIM) ROSE

Now with Whatley Drilling Company since early 1968, he has been associated with oil and gas drilling for nearly a decade in Colorado, Utah and Arizona. Prior to specializing in drilling, Rose was an engineer for a major mud company. He studied business administration at Ouachita College, Arkansas, and lived in Grand Junction, Colorado, prior to moving to Tucson.

The entire service shop operation is under the joint direction of John Alton and Carl Robinson.



The switch to flying professionally and for the Air National Guard took Mitch to far-off destinations and offered thrilling and memorable experiences. He remained in the Guard until 1990 and still flies commercially. He is an international captain of a Boeing 737-800 with American Airlines based out of Dallas-Fort Worth International Airport. He usually stays in the western hemisphere, flying to Central America, the Caribbean, Mexico and northern countries in South America.

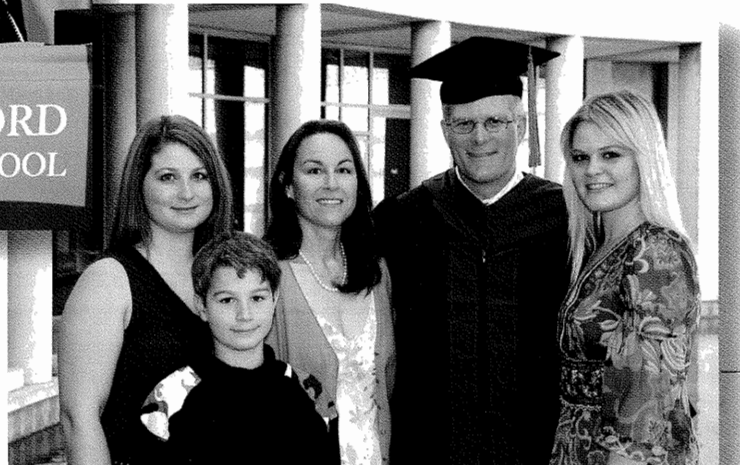
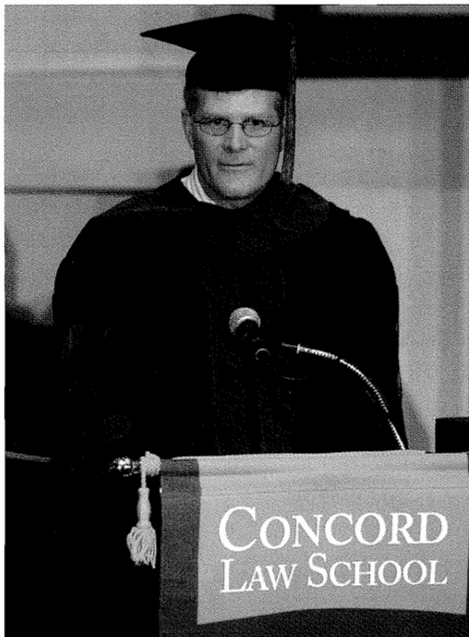


In 2001, amid countless hours in the sky, Mitch realized he still craved further educational advancement. Once again, Mitch was inspired by the origins of the American government and how it has evolved over time. He determined the best way to study this evolution was to attend law school. As a full-time airline pilot, Mitch needed to find a law school flexible enough to deal with his busy schedule. He found this in Concord Law School, the nation's first institution to offer a juris doctor degree online. He enrolled in January 2002. Despite the school's flexibility, acquiring a juris doctor was a daunting task. "For four years I studied every waking moment and read thousands of pages of law. I

carried books and flash cards everywhere I went. I studied on every layover."

Hitting the books paid off. Mitch recently passed the California Bar Exam and, last July, participated in an induction ceremony that officially recognized him as an attorney. Eventually Mitch would like to practice patent law, which taps the engineer in him. During a semester's exposure of patent law at Concord, he discovered, "the technical knowledge and engineering background required for patent law fit squarely within my areas of expertise and interest." Mitch explains that "a hard science or engineering degree is required to sit for the patent bar exam, so my Mines education will serve a purpose I did not foresee when I graduated."

From petroleum engineering to military and commercial aviation to patent law, Mitch Whatley has never stopped exercising his mind. He states, "As with many engineers, I have always been enamored with the question, 'Why?' For me, seeking the answer to that question cuts across many disciplines." It will be interesting to learn which discipline Mitch will explore next.



Shannon Sharkey, a recent graduate of the University of Colorado, is an intern for Mines magazine.