

On Top of the World ©

By Connie J. Schlosberg

Ron Hoskinson recalls how he didn't have a great reputation coming on as program manager to the Thule Air Base, Greenland contract. He wears a short-sleeved khaki shirt, no tie, and casual slacks with Dockside shoes - Don Johnson-style - with no socks.

"I was already a horrible legend at Boeing in Wichita, Kansas," Hoskinson laughs. "I'm the guy that wrote up his own mother because she didn't follow directions properly." Not only did he write up his mother, he wrote up his father and sister, too, while working as a quality assurance inspector for the federal government. He explains, "Wichita doesn't have many places to work. Most people work at Boeing – my family included." Being diligent in his job, Hoskinson says Sunday dinners at the family farm weren't always pleasant.

For the past four years, the tall, curly brown-haired 48-year-old Hoskinson has quarterbacked one of the highest profile and costly – one billion dollars' worth - service contracts in the country. The Thule Base Maintenance contract is for operations and maintenance support at Thule Air Base, Greenland. Its mission is to provide early warning and attack assessment of ballistic missiles launches and tracking, telemetry and commanding of earth orbiting satellite vehicles. With that said, he isn't always the most finesse guy about it either, much to the chagrin of his bosses, colleagues, and Denmark's Greenland Contractors – the company the air force contracted to do the work.

Now, it's 6 a.m. on a Tuesday morning at Peterson Air Force Base, Colorado. Tucked away in a glass and brick building on the first floor through a labyrinth of cubicles, Hoskinson's desk resembles a paper battlefield, complete with toy soldiers strewn all over it. He's meeting - via video teleconference - with Thule Air Force Commander, Colonel Edward A. Fienga, and Denmark's Greenland Contractors' representative, Inge Builck. His two sidekicks, Nicole Felton, an attractive blonde intern, and Jim Huber, a hippie-looking retired sergeant, are sitting nearby. This morning's private meeting entails how to keep the airfield open all the time at Thule.

"Good morning Colonel Fienga. *God morgen* Ms. Builck," Hoskinson says.

Colonel Fienga bellows, "I'm a bit concerned about transporting cargo since it's still March. The weather has been unpredictable and we have one flight coming in and out of here on Wednesdays only. What's the prospect of moving anything by sea?"

"I know what you're saying, but we can only keep it open for 60 days in summer," Hoskinson replies as he bites into a blueberry bagel smothered in cream cheese. "I realize that we need to move cargo year round. There's only one seaport and one tug boat. But sir, remember, the bigger issue is the clean up of those waste barrels that we've been kicking down your hill. You know, the big pile of metal and about six or seven inches of dirt sitting next to it close to the shoreline." He turns his head away from the VTC smirking at Felton and Huber.

"How do you feel about this situation Ms. Builck?" asks Colonel Fienga.

Builck pauses for a moment and in her most impeccable English states, "Greenland is a little concerned about environmental issues. So is Denmark for that matter. I don't think this is – how do you say - an easy fix."

A staff sergeant interrupts Colonel Fienga and whispers something in his ears.

“Ron, I have an emergency. We’ll have to pick this one up next week.”

“Alright sir. See ya next time,” Hoskinson smirks again. “*Farvel* Ms. Builck.”

He disconnects the line and takes a few sips from his coffee mug with an air force insignia on it. Neither Greenland nor Denmark environmentalists are happy with this issue. Hoskinson’s job is to act as mediator between the air force and Danish officials.

“Of course, there was no resolution,” he says, “because that usually involves money and no one likes to talk about money. With the current fiscal budget, we don’t have any money to play with.”

Ron Hoskinson grew up in Wichita, also known as the “Air Capital of the World.” The oldest child of Ronald, an electrical engineer, and Francis, a factory worker, he was raised as a “conservative Republican Catholic” on a farm with two sisters and one brother. His father built and sold houses for his retirement nest egg. Ron and his brother worked as laborers, spending their weekends working for their dad.

When he was a child, Hoskinson picked truck driving as his future career, because he wanted to leave the dust bowl of Kansas. Instead, he joined the navy and stayed for four years as an aircraft mechanic, working on aircraft carriers. He had one of the most dangerous jobs of fielding planes. He says, “You risk getting sucked over, blown over, or run over.”

Back at his desk, he’s meeting again with Felton and Huber about budget cuts. It’s getting close to lunch time and no one is concentrating on numbers.

“Hey Ron. What’s the deal with that Twinkie on your desk?” Felton asks, flipping her hair. “I’ve been here a year and you never eat it. Is it the same one?”

Huber interjects, "He's had that Twinkie there since I've known him. Back to 1995.

Ron, tell her why you have it."

"That's my experiment," Hoskinson muses.

"What experiment?" Nicole asks.

"Years ago, I heard that if there is a nuclear war - the only things to survive will be cockroaches and Twinkies. So I decided to take a Twinkie and just leave it on my desk," Ron shouts "The friggin' damn thing is still soft as shit and butter yellow. Go figure." Heads pop up from cubicles like gophers popping out of their holes.

Felton proclaims, "I'm not eating Twinkies anymore."

"That was my conclusion," Hoskinson laughs.

Hoskinson has the mannerisms of someone who is cavalier about life. When you talk to him his eyes shift around like he's looking for some mischief. He's always ready to play. He laughs often and talks quickly. Sometimes it's hard to keep up with what he's saying.

Although he is a fun loving prankster, he has a passion for keeping things honest as Felton puts it. "Ron cares a lot about how the Thule contract operates. He will go to great lengths to make sure of it." She continues, "He hates being organized but he'll never shun responsibility."

Hoskinson started the 21st Program Management Office which monitors all defense contracts on the base and at geographically separated units, such as Thule. Currently, they are working with the Office of the Secretary of Defense to obtain approval on changing the current contract. They want to convert two contractor positions back to the military. "It will take an act of Congress to get that approved, but Ron will challenge

them. He isn't afraid to stand up to Pentagon officials. I've watched him do it to his boss's dismay. I can't say the same for other people I have interned for," Felton says.

Huber confirms Felton's statements. He says, "He's the nicest guy in the world, but don't cross him. You've heard the story about his mother. If he'd write her up, he'd write anyone up." Most people who have worked with him will say he's the kind of guy who will give you the shirt off of his back. "He comes across as a hard ass – well more like a smart ass - but he keeps a box of Tootsie pops at his desk for any kids that may come to visit." Huber says.

He lives alone in a rustic cabin, which resembles a bachelor pad in Woodland Park, about twenty miles north of Colorado Springs. It's around dusk and Hoskinson is in his galley-shaped kitchen preparing dinner: Danish stew, a recipe from a lady he met in Copenhagen. He has a long-distance relationship with a woman in Washington D.C., but that's all he'll say about her. "That's probably the best way for me to retain a partnership with a woman," he says.

In addition to program management, the twice-divorced Hoskinson keeps busy with his 17-year-old son Stewart and his Boy Scouts' troop where he is a troop leader. A gourmet cook, he prefers to talk about his latest gadget that he bought at Williams Sonoma. "It's not that I love to cook. It's that I love to eat really well," Hoskinson laughs holding his paunchy stomach. "As I'm sure you can see."

He even takes his cooking talents on camping trips up in the Rocky Mountains with the Boy Scouts. He brings a Dutch oven to cook in. Hoskinson says as his eyes light up, "I showed the boys how to make Black Forest cheesecake. It has a brownie bottom

and then cherries spread on top. Then, I make the white chocolate cream cheese filling. I put chocolate mousse on top.”

They have cooking contests and he always wins. So is that what Boy Scouts do on camping trips, learn how to cook? Ron laughs, “Well, we hike together and learn how to do things as teams. Team work is the essence of Boy Scouting - really.”

Ron continues speaking fast with hands in the air like a conductor at a symphony. “You know something. The Boy Scouts mean more to me than my job. I’ve watched many boys grow into men. I wouldn’t have volunteered for 15 years if I didn’t. Just the other day, I was in Home Depot and some college-aged kid approached me. He’s like waving and shouting to me ‘Hey Mr. H. How are you doing?’ He came running over and shook my hand. The kid went on, ‘I just wanted to thank you for everything you taught me. It’s really helped me adjust to college life.’”

Hoskinson never thought he would hear that. “It made me feel good. I work with these clowns - high ranking officials and dignitaries each day, working with millions of tax dollars.” Ron scrunches up his nose and scoffs, “However, in the end, when I retire and walk out the door - shit - nobody will remember that. Having some kid tell me that his life is better because of me, that’s what makes my life worth while.”