

ROBERT GRYPHON

Software wiz dreaming in sci-fi

Early retirement was short-lived for this CEO who still felt passion for being in business

BY STEVE TANNER

Consummate entrepreneur Robert Gryphon, who recently came out of retirement to found San Mateo-based startup Airframe Business Software Inc., has been too engrossed in software and too busy getting rich at it to pursue his earlier dream of writing science fiction.

He hasn't had time to write since committing himself to technology — though says he might return to it eventually — but Gryphon achieved more before his 30th birthday than most business people do in a lifetime.

Gryphon worked as an independent software consultant, held an 18-month contract job with Microsoft Corp. in Redmond, Wash., wrote technology reviews and founded one company that eventually was sold for billions. Then he retired to Lake Tahoe at the ripe old age of 30.

That lasted all of one month. He said he quickly became bored and restless; so he invested in everything from laundromats to restaurants to feature films, founded some small companies and now finds himself back at the helm of a software startup.

"It's kind of hard to work so hard for so long at something and then just suddenly stop," Gryphon said. "Life can be pretty boring. How much TV can you watch? How many hobbies can you spend time on?"

One of his hobbies was, and still is, music. Gryphon plays guitar, bass and keyboards, and he occasionally records music in his home studio.

Gryphon is self-assured without appearing arrogant, displays an air of independence, sports a goatee and snakeskin cowboy boots, and speaks with the wisdom of accomplished executives twice his age.

To say Gryphon just had good timing, as many other entrepreneurs did in the late 1990s and into 2000, would ignore his ability to scale steep learning curves quickly.

Gryphon skipped high school and entered Hawaii Pacific University in 1983 at age 13, where his dad was a professor and eventually the school's dean. He tested into the university with uncommonly high marks and graduated Magna cum Laude in 1987 at the age of 16.

Gryphon said his family had reservations about the quality of secondary education in Hawaii and that private school was out of reach for his middle-class family, so they decided to send him straight to college instead.

Gryphon's interests ranged from psychology to creative writing to computers. He originally wanted to pursue a triple-major with all three disciplines, he said, but settled for a computer science degree. However, he came close to completing the requirements for an English degree.

"I'm a writer and have been for quite a while," Gryphon said. "But I had to pick a major that was business-oriented."

Gryphon figured that since writing came naturally to him, an English degree wouldn't necessarily help him get his foot in the door of a publisher, whereas a computer science degree definitely would open some doors.

A year into his studies, Gryphon already had designed several software programs. And by the age of 21, he had completed his master's degree in information systems.

He then moved to Seattle, as life on the island made him feel claustrophobic, he said. He worked a few jobs as a software engineer, including a short stint with Microsoft in project management and database design. All the while, he acted as a freelance writer for magazines such as Data Base Advisor (now e-Business Advisor) and InfoWorld (now Internet World).

His true literary passion was science fiction. He still imagined himself penning short stories and novels for a living, but the technology reviews and articles he wrote at least kept him involved with the craft. Still, he nearly switched careers at this point, after just a couple of years working professionally in the tech industry.

"I wanted to move from writing articles to writing short stories; and I actually did write [and submit] a few," Gryphon said. "I didn't sell a single one, but I got close. I didn't really pursue it because I made a [crucial] decision."

InfoWorld flew Gryphon to San Mateo for a hardware review in

1993. He didn't know anyone in the area besides Rob Loughan, the senior sales representative for Scopus Technology Inc., who had tried to recruit Gryphon when the two met in Washington a couple of years earlier. So Gryphon called him up, since he had some time to kill.

Loughan — who now runs mobile software startup Dextera Inc. in Bothell, Wash., which was created around one of Gryphon's software designs — invited him up to his office. Upon Gryphon's arrival, the first thing Loughan did was to ask him if he wanted a job.

Gryphon had already turned down an earlier offer by Loughan, but this time he reconsidered and accepted an engineering job, he said.

"I thought I would get a little shack in the woods out by Port Angeles or Port Townsend up in Washington and just write," Gryphon said. "But I decided to move to [the Bay Area] and go into software versus pursuing my goal of becoming a writer."

His new goal, at that point, was to make enough money in Silicon Valley — this was the mid-1990s run-up to the dot-com bubble, after all — to finance his writing ambitions. But he got hooked on the idea and never revisited the idea of a writing career, he said.

A colleague who first worked with Gryphon at Scopus, in the mid-1990s, said he had no doubts that Gryphon had found his niche.

"When I met [Gryphon] at Scopus, I already could see the entrepreneurial side of him," said Oliver Delemr, Airframe's vice president of product marketing

and a former Scopus engineer. "He always would look at what could be done differently and wasn't afraid to break the rules when it made sense."

It didn't take long before Gryphon got the entrepreneurial itch.

In 1997, he co-founded Octane Software Inc. around a new software platform he developed for business applications. By 2000, San Mateo-based Octane was 300 employees strong and preparing for an initial public offering. But E.piphany Inc. acquired Octane for a staggering \$3.2 billion in E.piphany stock.

Gryphon suddenly was rich. He moved to Incline Village, a small town along Lake Tahoe, and attempted to retire. Now he's at it again, this time with Airframe, which is on the verge of closing its first round of institutional funding. Gryphon said Airframe's Web-based software is used by businesses, on a subscription basis, for administrative tasks such as scheduling, product management and shipping.

The young tech veteran still lives in Tahoe, but drives to the Bay Area at least once a week. Airframe also has an office near his home.

He hasn't completely ruled it out as a future pursuit, but Gryphon said he does not regret abandoning his writing ambitions for now.

"One of these years I might do some writing, but it's not really important to me as something to pursue," Gryphon said. "I like what I'm doing."

Steve Tanner is a Biz Ink reporter. You

bio

Robert Gryphon

Title/Company: Founder and CEO/Airframe Business Software Inc.

Age: 34

Birthplace: Missoula, Montana

Residence: Incline Village, Nevada

Education: Bachelor of Science in computer science, 1987; Master of Science in information systems, 1991; both from Hawaii Pacific University

Family: No time for one yet

Hidden talent: Writing music on my Macintosh-based Digital Performer home studio

Worst fad you got caught up in: Fast food

Most influential book: "Atlas Shrugged" by Ayn Rand

How long is your commute? Five minutes or four hours, depending on which office I'm working in that week [Incline Village, Nevada is the five minute commute. San Mateo is the four hour commute.]

Favorite mode of travel: 2004 Harley-Davidson Screaming Eagle Electric-Glide

Favorite video game: Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic

Sports: do you watch or play? Neither. I don't even know the rules to any sports. I used to take Shaolin Kung Fu.

What you listened to 20 years ago: Rush, Devo

Craziest thing you've ever done: A 2-week hitchhiking trip 17 years ago

Most adventurous act: A trip to Antarctica with one week of advance planning

Snow or sun? Clouds and rain — I don't live long enough in Seattle

Favorite room of the house: The room with three computers, four monitors, nine guitars, four basses, a keyboard, a full music studio, satellite TV, surround sound and a couch.

