

11/12/29

Flight Story

A grandfather's inspiration

TOM MATOWITZ

Like so many stories of flight, this one begins in May 1927. Charles Lindbergh's solo crossing of the Atlantic inspired many adventurous young people with the desire to fly. One of them was a 20-year-old resident of Cleveland, Ohio, named George K. Scott. He began taking lessons at a field located on Mayfield Road, operated by a local pilot named Kenneth Cole.

George trained in Swallows and Waco Nines and Tens, and soloed late that summer after 13 hours and 20 minutes of dual. This made him a slow starter by the standards of his day, but he began to fly more frequently and started to catch on faster. By the summer of 1929, he held Limited Commercial Pilot's Certificate No. 4888, and with less than 100 hours total time, he was instructing students himself. During the next 10 years he flew extensively, logging more than 2,000 hours by 1939. In the process, he owned or flew all the great light planes of that era. When he married in 1933, he and his new wife flew to Chicago in a Kinner Bird for their honeymoon. Subsequently he taught her how to fly in a Taylor Cub.

The reason for my interest in these people is simple. They were my grandparents, and although they couldn't have known it at the time, they were building the foundation for a love of flying that would last throughout my life. My grandfather's only child was a daughter who showed little interest in flying. I suspect he was pacing back and forth for a long time waiting for me.

I was born in the late 1950s and by that time my grandfather had been an active pilot for 30 years. Although I don't recall anyone consciously steering me in that direction, I can't remember a time in my life when I wasn't aware of, and fascinated by, airplanes. By the time I knew him, my grandfather was retired and living in a small town in western North Carolina. He had a friendship with the local FBO and was doing quite a bit of instructing. Very early in my life I began spending my childhood summers with him. I was so young the first time I flew with him that I have no conscious memory of it.

He was good company, a warm man with a good sense of humor, and great ability as a teacher. I think it would be fair to say his students loved him, and I knew of several who were still friendly with him decades after he taught them to fly. He was methodical and careful, and I trusted him completely. I never knew a moment of uneasiness

with him in an airplane.

The airplanes we flew then were rather run-of-the-mill Cessna products. They served a useful purpose, but there was nothing particularly romantic about them. What fascinated me were the old airplanes. He kept all his logbooks, and from time to time we would get them out and look through them together. I have them still; the oldest one is practically in tatters. I would sit on the arm of his easy chair and watch as he leafed through the pages. It seemed to me that every entry was the first line to an adventure story.

One of my favorites was a tale he told about a delivery flight involving a Bird biplane. He was in Nebraska, lost in bad weather and low on fuel. He was seriously considering using his parachute and jumping because he felt he couldn't make a safe forced landing under the prevailing conditions. Suddenly there was a break in the clouds beneath him and he found himself directly over an airport. He quickly landed just as the weather closed in again. He was met by a group of people who seemed very agitated. It seems he spoiled the dedication of the new municipal airport at Lincoln with his unscheduled landing. The plan was to have Charles Lindbergh land there first and be the principal speaker at a formal dinner. After some grumbling, someone pointed out that my grandfather, after all, was the first pilot to land there, so they might as well proceed with their dinner with Grandpa as the guest of honor. He sat at the head table in riding breeches and a leather jacket, surrounded by men in tuxedos. This is the best part—sometime in the course of the evening, Lindbergh called with his regrets, saying that the weather was too bad for him to attempt the flight!

There were many other stories, and I wish I could remember them all, but I cannot. My grandfather seemed indestructible, and as a little boy I was sure he would go on forever, so there would be time to learn the other stories later.

I was involved in one, though, that I remember vividly. In the summer of 1964 we flew from his home in North Carolina to Knoxville, Tennessee, to have a radio repaired. The shop that did this work usually had some sort of old airplane parked on the ramp. I remember a Fairchild 24, and a Gullwing Stinson that I marveled at because of its great size and radial engine. This particular day was something of a turning point for me. After hearing all these

stories about open cockpit biplanes, I was about to see one for the first time. We walked into the hangar and there stood a Stearman. It was a crop duster painted bright yellow and it clearly worked hard for a living. It was nothing like the flawless restored examples seen at air shows today.

I think it was a case of love at first sight. I was enthralled, and circled the airplane several times. There it all was, the radial engine, polished landing and flying wires, taut fabric covering, windscreens, struts, and a distinctive smell I later would always associate with old airplanes. I was seven, and too little to see into the cockpit, so Grandpa picked me up. No one had made any effort to interior decorate it to resemble a car. It was as functional as a steam locomotive. There was a control stick, the first one I ever saw, and a throttle quadrant on the left. The steel tube structure was plainly visible and there was a helmet and goggles draped over the stick. He pointed all this out and then lowered me gently to the floor. I walked around the plane several more times and then asked Grandpa to pick me up again so I could see into the cockpit once more. He laughed and said, "I don't think it's changed in the last five minutes. Come on, let's go get a hamburger." We started to walk away, but I stopped in the open door for a last look and vowed that I would fly one myself one day.

I never dreamt how much time and effort it would take to achieve that goal.

In the meantime, these idyllic summers continued. Any kid worth his salt clamored for the end of the school year, but I did more than most, since it meant an immediate departure for the mountains and three months of almost daily flying.

The town where my grandfather lived was Bryson City, North Carolina. His best friend was the town doctor, Harold L. Bacon, known universally as "Doc." Well, almost universally, since I was sternly lectured by Grandpa never to address him as anything other than Dr. Bacon. I'm sure he himself wouldn't have minded a bit had I called him "Doc" since he was a man of great warmth and dealt on easy terms with every level of the small town's social strata. He was a skilled pilot himself, almost exactly Grandpa's age, and shared many adventures with us on the ground and in the air. He did a lot to reinforce my love of flying. His enthusiasm for it was almost childlike. Grandpa and I would stop by his office in the early



UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
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STUDENT PILOT'S PERMIT

Issued to George K. Scott
this 16th day of Sept.
Dungan Smith Airways Inc.

, 19 28, for student instruction with
at Cleveland Airport
Cleveland, Ohio

Unless sooner suspended or revoked, this permit expires Sept. 15, 1929

DESCRIPTION OF STUDENT PILOT:
Age 22
Weight 142
Height 5'10"
Color of hair Brown
Color of eyes Brown
(OVER)

STUDENT PILOT'S PERMIT NO. 4366

Student Pilot's Signature _____



My grandfather warms up the engine in his Swallow, circa 1928.

afternoon to ask if he wanted to fly with us later that day. He would usually say, "Let's go right now!" and exit through a side door, leaving a waiting room filled with patients.

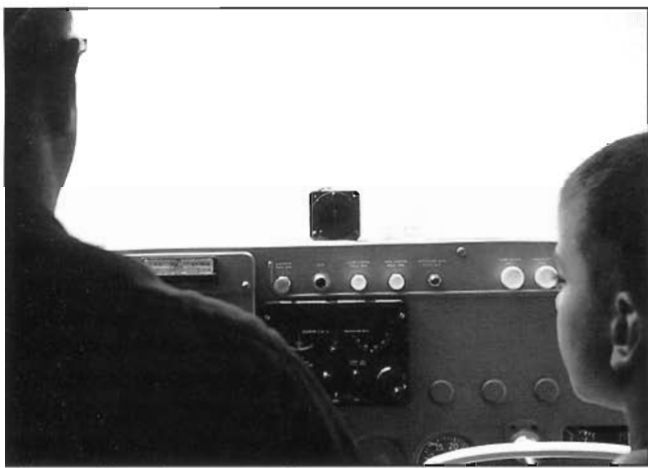
I don't know if he ever knew this, but Dr. Bacon received what was probably the greatest compliment my grandfather ever gave anyone. For decades, literally, we were strictly ordered by Grandpa never to fly with any other pilot. The only exception ever granted was airline travel. Very late in his life, Grandpa said he felt we would be perfectly safe flying with Dr. Bacon, the only time he conceded this about another pilot in almost 50 years of flying.

As I said, he himself was cautious. Once in the early 1950s he took my father with him on a trip to Indianapolis in his Bonanza. They were returning and had nearly reached Toledo. There was some apparent bad weather to the east between them and their destination of Cleveland. To my dad's unpracticed eye it didn't appear all that threatening, and he was surprised when Grandpa briskly announced that he was aborting the flight and landing in Toledo. Dad turned to him and asked, "Can't you get through that?" His reply was priceless—"Maybe." He explained that he didn't see any point in subjecting them or the airplane to any unnecessary risk when he could easily get a ride to Toledo the next day to recover the aircraft. They took the bus home.

I was too young to realize this wasn't going to last forever. As I was nearly old enough to begin formal flying lessons in earnest, his health began to fail. I was

able to log several flights with him as a student, and I remember how serious and demanding he was as an instructor. He held himself to very high standards and expected me to meet them without hesitation, something I found very daunting as a youngster. It all ended abruptly when heart disease caused the permanent loss of his medical. For a time we deluded ourselves that his health would improve and we would continue as planned, but it didn't turn out that way. I see now that after so many years, the loss of his ability to fly must have broken his heart, although he never said so. He died very early on a morning in May when I was a senior in high school.

That was another turning point. For the moment, I thought my involvement in flying was over. It was never inexpensive, and I was to start college in the fall. To put this in perspective, the airport in the town where I lived charged \$12 an hour for dual in an Aeronca Champ that summer, while my college expenses would be based on fees of \$7 per credit hour. Anyway, two unexpected things happened. First, we lived on acreage, and owned horses. I used our old Ford tractor to pull a wagonload of manure out into a field to dump it. I stood on top of the wagon, intent on what I was doing, and was startled when an ancient airplane materialized directly over my head. It was a heavily wire braced two-bay, open cockpit biplane with a long wingspan. It took no notice of me, but flew to the southeast at a low altitude and a slow airspeed. To this day, I'm not sure what it was, but it sure made me think. I watched it until it disappeared.



THOMAS G. MATOWITZ, SR.

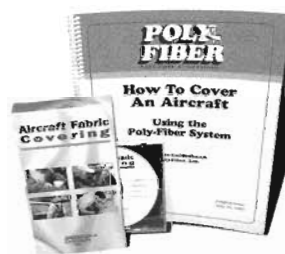
I'm paying close attention to my grandfather's flying as we flew in 1964.

The thing that really did it was a chance remark from a co-worker. I worked for a greenhouse, an extension of a part-time job I held throughout high school. One of the women employed there, Esther, was in her early 20s. We were eating lunch together one day, and she mentioned she was going to learn how to skydive at an airport roughly 15 miles west of us in Grafton. Skydiving never interested me all that much, but she got my attention when she said there were two open cockpit biplanes based at the field. I asked her for more details, but she couldn't really provide any. She said that if I would pick her up that evening after she ate dinner and got cleaned up, she would be glad to ride out there with me and show me around. She was true to her word. Several hours later I found myself looking through a window into a hangar with two Stearmans. It was the first time I had seen one on the ground since the episode in Knoxville more than 10 years earlier. No one was around and there seemed to be no way of getting a better look at the airplanes. Just then the property owner arrived, and Esther introduced us. After a brief conversation, he invited me back the following day when the men who owned the biplanes would be present, and almost certainly fly them. He thought there was a pretty good chance one of them would give me a ride. Esther and I got in my car and started for home. Somehow I found the nerve to ask her if she would like to go to a movie with me and she eagerly said yes. So, I now found myself officially out on a date with this beautiful woman who was five years older than I. It had only been weeks since I graduated, but I suddenly felt very far from high school.

When the next day dawned, it was beautiful and I lost no time driving to the airport where I quickly found Esther and walked with her over to the hangar. She was looking her best, and with her at my side, I had no trouble attracting the attention of the pilots, one of whom quickly asked me if my "girlfriend" would like a ride in the Stearman. To my chagrin, she smiled and announced that she certainly would and

was soon strapped in and trundling across the grass as the airplane maneuvered into position for takeoff. This was not exactly what I had in mind, but I thought I better be patient and see what developed. The airplane returned 20 minutes later. Esther got out, stood on the wingwalk for a moment thanking the pilot, and then jumped lightly to the ground. One of the men who helped her get into the airplane in the first place accompanied her as she approached me. He said to me, "If you'd like to go up, we'll be glad to take you for a ride." I very nonchalantly said yes, and walked to the airplane. After a rather perfunctory briefing, I was in the front cockpit, strapped in and ready to go. I wore a borrowed helmet and goggles and could hardly believe where I was. There were no headsets, so the airplane was much louder than I was used to, but I didn't mind. Finally, the preliminaries were over and it was time to fly. The engine accelerated to full power, and the airplane began to roll. The tail came up, and a moment later we were flying. The visibility from the open cockpit, the engine noise, the slipstream, the changing sound of the wind in the wires, all these things kind of overwhelmed me, but the experience exceeded my expectations, and I felt sure I saw Grandpa's hand in it somehow.

Continued next month . . .



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