

Flying With Dad



When I was a kid, my dad was a pilot. Prior to World War II he participated in an Army-sponsored air cadet program, and then when the war began he enlisted in formal flight training for the purpose of becoming an Army Air Corps instructor. It was during the later part of his enlistment that I got my first flying experience, although it didn't result in getting off the ground. Dad took me out to a local airport and put me in the front seat of a Stearman biplane. This was the same plane that he had trained in for the Army so I assume he wanted to show me how much fun it was to go flying in it. I was dressed in my little flying suit complete with leather helmet and goggles (see photo). It was supposed to be a wonderful and memorable occasion, with my father in the back cockpit, positively beaming with pride. However, as soon as the engine started up I went into total panic (I was only four years old) and started to scream. I wanted out of the plane—right now! I'm sure that was a big disappointment for Dad, but later on he had lots of opportunities to take me flying.

Unfortunately, after a year or so Dad dropped out of this program and suddenly found himself demoted to the status of ordinary enlisted man, assigned first to fixing aircraft radios in Madison, Wisconsin, and then repairing plywood gliders somewhere in the Texas panhandle. When the war ended, he tried to pursue a career in aviation by building a small airport just outside Laurel, the nearest small town to our family farm in Nebraska. He eventually failed, but the effort proved to be one of the seminal influences in my life. From it I developed a life-long fear of flying.

Dad's airport was built on a leased pasture just outside of town. Since the farmer still grazed cows on the land, it was totally fenced. As a result, Dad had to build a wooden bridge to get himself and his customers onto the field. The "airport" consisted of two single-plane aluminum hangers, a ground cable for tie-downs of guest planes and an elevated gasoline tank. Of course, it also had a pole with a windsock so flyers could see the wind direction on the ground.



The pasture was long and somewhat narrow, with a highway bordering one side and a deep creek bed bordering the other. Later, some years after my dad sold the airport to another courageous young man, a tornado came along and swept the entire airport--hangers, planes and all--into the creek bed. Fortunately, there were no such mishaps during my dad's stewardship.

My dad was very fond of what would probably be called "bush" flying nowadays, which is to say that he liked to land his plane just about everywhere except airports. With me

uncomfortably strapped down in the back seat of his J3 Piper Cub or PA11, we landed in just about every place imaginable, and not always without mishap.

Dad flew from our farm to his airport every morning, thereby becoming one of the nation's first air commuters. The only problem with this arrangement is that none of the fields on our farm were long enough to permit a normal takeoff. Therefore, Dad had to



use "short takeoff" procedures. This meant backing into a corner of the pasture, locking the brakes and giving the engine enough throttle to raise the tail off the ground. At the critical moment, he would release the brakes and keep the engine on full throttle, hoping that he would gain enough altitude to clear the fence at the other end of the pasture. One morning, he tried this with his PA11, a Cub that

featured twin wing tanks. As he was about to clear the fence, the propeller stopped dead and the plane descended rapidly into the hog sty on the other side of the fence. After a very short roll through the muck, he emerged from an aircraft that was covered from stem to stern with hog manure. It seems that he forgot to switch from the empty wing tank to the full one.

On another occasion, with me in the back seat, Dad was flying out to visit a farmer friend. It was his usual practice to land on a pasture just behind the farmhouse but, for safety's sake, he always circled the pasture a couple times at low altitude just to make sure that the field was okay for landing. Then he made a normal approach and set the plane down. As soon as the front tires touched the ground, Dad knew that he had made a big mistake. The farmer had just plowed and harrowed the field, and planted some crop on it that looked like pastureland from the air. [Since the soil was now very loose, Dad could not give the engine lots of throttle and take off. We were stuck to the ground.] As he continued his landing and let the tail down, the tail wheel snapped off in the soft ground and sent the plane into wild, swerving turns. Fortunately, Dad kept the plane from flipping over and no further damage was done, except to my self-confidence as a passenger.

Dad loved doing aerobatics, while my idea of flying was to keep the plane as straight and level as possible. I never knew when we would be doing aerobatics. On any flight, at any moment, he might announce that we were going to do some type of maneuver, usually a spin. The only time I enjoyed fancy flying was when we went manure-pile hopping. This involved flying very low to the ground and buzzing the large stockpiles of manure that farmers would build. Especially during the summer when it was warm, a flight over one of these mounds would cause the light plane to jump and then rapidly descend, providing a brief period of zero gravity.



Dad's "business" was mainly selling flying lessons. He made a little money from selling gas and an occasional overnight tie-down fee, but lessons were the primary source of income. The problem with lessons, however, was that virtually all his customers were farmers, and most of them had no intention of getting a pilot's license. Since few farmers bothered to get a driver's license, why should they bother getting a flying license? As a result, most of them would take lessons just long enough to learn how to take off and land. After that they'd leave and Dad wouldn't see them again until they landed at his airport with a new airplane, sans pilot's license.

Eventually, Dad had to acknowledge that the brave new age of aviation had yet to arrive. He sold the airport and the farm, and we moved to Portland, Oregon, where he enrolled in a Dale Carnegie business school, hoping, no doubt, to become more successful in business. But that was not to be. For the rest of his life, Dad worked for other people.

His last flights occurred after we had moved to Anaheim, California. He occasionally rented Piper Cubs at the Orange County Airport, now known as John Wayne Airport. On his first venture out of Orange County Airport, he demonstrated his lack of familiarity with the requirements of major airports. On his approach to the field he emulated perfectly the landing pattern he had seen posted before takeoff. Unfortunately, he had failed to notice the scale and cut off about twenty other planes in the required pattern several miles further from the airport than he was. Needless to say, he received a royal tongue-lashing from the tower people after landing. Soon thereafter, unfortunately, he lost his medical certificate and was never again to fly, at least not as the pilot.

As a lasting legacy of dad's flying, I'll fly only on large commercial airliners and even on those I'm not exactly comfortable. Of course, most of my discomfort stems from the tiny little seats. At 6' 2," 300 pounds and 24" wide, I don't fit very well in coach, and I can't afford first class. But I'll never forget my days flying with Dad, no matter how frightened I might have been. It was wonderful to see him at his manly best, with yellow aviator glasses and big-billed baseball hat, demonstrating his always-very-high level of skill as a pilot. No matter how scared I might have been, I had to admit that Dad was one hell of a pilot.