

Blue Yonder and Beyond

by Karen A. Patterson

“Come on, Karen, let’s fly!” Dave called out as he ran toward the pair of yellow Piper Cubs sitting peacefully like bright canaries on the tarmac. “Come on, hurry up, before it gets dark.”

“OK! OK! Be right there!” I answered dropping the sponge in the bucket I was using to wash a Cessna 182. I closed the door of the hangar and ran toward the Cubs.

The sun beat down on us and caused shimmering waves to rise from the asphalt of the Butler Airport located in the rolling hills of western Pennsylvania. I had been home from college for only a week and I was already into the invigorating routine of the airport life.

This was the second summer I had the opportunity to pursue my dream of being a pilot, flying both the small private planes and the larger charter aircraft as well. The airport was only a half mile from my house and when I could not find a job the previous summer, I drove myself and my parents crazy with boredom. My Dad, a World War II pilot, said, “Why don’t you keep busy up at the airport. Maybe you can get some type of job and at the same time learn to fly.”

That was all the encouragement I needed. After talking to the airport manager, Leo Frakas, I discovered the office jobs were filled, but I could refuel and help the maintenance crew with the planes. Leo said that if I had any extra time and there happened to be an instructor available, I could also start my flight training.

Though it would be expensive, my Dad said, “The desire to fly ran in the family and it would be worth it to carry on the legacy.” I was not sure what he was referring to, so I disregarded the comment.

Dave and I bounded into the front tandem seat of separate planes, hitched our seatbelts and yelled “Clear” to notify those in the area that we were about to engage our engines. In unison we both pushed the start-up buttons that activated the propellers and allowed the engines to kick in with a burst of power. We sat for a moment until the violent vibrations subsided and the engines began to idle smoothly. Giving it full power to get the light-weight planes moving and then gradually easing back, Dave pulled in front of me and we taxied to the end of the taxiway. He did his run-up first, checking the fuel mixture and each engine’s magnetos at 2200 RPMs, listening for misses or irregularities. After reducing the power, he gave me the thumbs up sign, pulled his plane onto the end of the runway, lined it up,

and let her roll.

I taxied my plane into position and started my run up. The roar of the engine was deafening, but exhilarating. Once on the runway, I checked that Dave had cleared. It was thrilling to take full control of the plane and lift off the ground long before the end of the runway. There was no danger of running out of runway, however, with a small craft like a Cub, but the larger birds, like the two-engine DC-3s, needed extra space especially if the weather was hot or if the take-off was in a higher elevation, like in the mountains.

I pushed the throttle all the way to the hilt, giving it full power, and gradually pulled the control stick back towards me in order to bring the plane off the ground. As I brought the nose up above the horizon, the plane sailed into the wide-open sky, causing my body to feel momentarily lighter in the cockpit. The rumbling of the wheels on the ground was replaced by a quiet stillness. Pulling the nose too high would cause the plane to stall, so I watched my angle of ascent and kept the wings steady, making a right turn until I exited the flight pattern. Squinting against the glaring sunlight, I reached into the breast pocket of my shirt for my sunglasses, which allowed me to clearly see the puffy mushroom shaped clouds hanging in the sky. The air was noiseless, except for the rhythmic humming of the engine, and I was immersed in a sea of tranquility.

I strained against the resistance of the air pushing my arm as I rested it on the window pane. With the cockpit open, the wind billowed my sleeveless shirt and blew my hair straight back as though I were in a wind tunnel. The older pilots recommended that we always wear helmets when flying the open cockpit planes, but it was too cumbersome and inhibiting, hampering the freedom I felt with the cool air beating against my hot face. Many of the old timers wore the classic pilot garb--silk scarves around their necks flapping wildly behind them along with a worn and wrinkled leather bomber jacket and wire-rimmed dark glasses. I felt the scarf was dangerous around whirling props and the leather jacket impractical in 85-degree temperatures and providing very little warmth in the winter. Besides, in a snug cockpit heavy clothes were constricting.

Ahead of me I saw a yellow speck that was Dave’s plane. I gradually caught up with him and gave him the okay sign, forming a circle with my thumb and index finger. Since the Cubs were not equipped with radios, we communicated with commonly understood hand signals. Dave motioned for me to go to his left as he went right. This was his signal for a maneuver called “Turns About a Point.”

After I turned, I looked down at the earth below and saw the grid pattern of deep green and dull brown squares representing plots of land so common in Pennsylvania. My father’s words echoed in my mind: “. . . the desire

to fly ran in the family.” Of course it did. He had flown in Europe during World War II, less than 25 years before, over land that looked much like what was below me. As a B-24 Liberator pilot, he was only 20 years old, a year older than I, and had the immense responsibility of commanding a heavy bomber.

I could barely imagine what he must have felt as he crossed the English Channel to drop his payload somewhere in Germany. He described his job as the best way to fight a war. From his vantage point, he would only see the bombs explode in fire balls below him and never have to see the casualties that resulted. He said he felt removed from the action unless his plane took flak, and still, it seemed to him an impersonal war. He was grateful for not being in the trenches engaged in hand-to-hand combat until the fateful day that he was shot down and taken prisoner by the Germans.

Within each square, whether in Pennsylvania or in Germany, as Dad described it, there were miniature houses, barns and roads with black spots that were grazing sheep, cows and horses. When I flew I could imagine how Dad zeroed in on his target, and with the bomb bay doors opened, let his cargo plummet to earth. This required unerring focus as did the “Turns About a Point” maneuver. In both instances, the pilot had to control the craft and choose a point on the ground.

In my case during a training flight, I had to carefully lower one wing and revolve on a designated point, at the same time keeping the lowered wing stable. This is a crucial maneuver in coordinating the aileron and rudder to keep the plane in a consistently steep bank, not veering left or right, up or down. From this odd sideways angle, it also made the world seem cockeyed.

Dave performed the procedure at the same time choosing a separate point and eventually gave me the signal to pull out by flashing his thumb pointing upwards. I gradually decreased my bank angle and leveled my wings so they were even once again with the horizon.

Dave came up behind me. I could see him simulating a machine gun, Red Baron Style. He was imitating the famed World War I flying ace, Manfred von Richthofen, who was known for his persistence in pursuing the enemy. I banked to the right to get away from him, but he stayed on my tail. I banked left, but he still stayed with me. There was no way to shake him except with an unexpected maneuver.

I pushed the stick straight forward into a steep dive, watching the altimeter drop quickly from 3200 to 2400 feet, and as an added measure banked the plane sharply to the right to make sure I had lost him. Once I leveled the plane and maintained my altitude, I looked around to see if I could give him a little of his own medicine. There he was still cruising at about 3000 feet and seemingly unaware that I was below and behind him. Essentially, I

was in his blind spot, creeping up ever closer. When he finally saw me, it was too late. I stayed on his tail like a coon dog and he could not shake me no matter what he did.

Suddenly I felt a loss of power and glanced down at my fuel gauge. I was dangerously low and realized I had forgotten to check my fuel level before take-off, just assuming the plane was full. I had been busy washing planes all day and didn’t realize this one was sitting on the tarmac waiting to be refueled. I pulled up beside Dave and crossed my neck in a cutting motion with my thumb, which indicated I needed fuel. Regretfully, our little game was over for the day.

We reentered the flight pattern; this time with me leading. On my down wind leg, I checked gauges, corrected my heading and turned onto final approach. I always loved to see the runway stretched out like a ribbon before me, but it was at this crucial point I had to judge my airspeed versus any crosswind that could blow me off course, cause me to be too low or, in extreme cases, catch a wing and turn the plane over. I was coming in fast and high so I gave it two notches of flaps, turned slightly into the wind, and shortened the throttle by a half inch. I held the nose tight and when I felt the front wheels touch the ground, I gently lowered the tail wheel. The plane bumped a little, but I was down. The old timers said that, “Any landing you walk away from is a good landing.”

I taxied, parked by the fuel pumps and switched off the key. As I climbed out of my “bomber,” Dave pulled up beside me.

“Good job, Captain. You avoided my shells and blasted me out of the air, just like the Red Baron would have. That’s one for your side,” he laughed.

“Just one?” I asked. “I think I’m ahead, but someday you might know what you’re doing enough to get even,” I teased, knowing that he had clocked more hours in the cockpit than I had and was a much more skilled pilot. He had been around planes all his life since his father was a charter pilot for a local company. Dave had not only been a dear friend, but a flying buddy for the past two years and had taught me how to handle the plane and how to relax at the wheel, not letting distractions draw my focus from my responsibilities as a pilot.

This exercise allowed me to practice putting the plane through its paces, and having fun was secondary. Both of us realized that flying was serious business and my oversight of not checking the fuel gauge before take-off could have had serious repercussions.

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I had started flying in 1967, the summer after my freshman year in college. I loved the job of refueling and washing planes. Even though it was a demanding job, it kept me close to the action. When I was not washing

planes, I was looking for an opportunity to catch a ride flying right seat with one of the airport's regular pilots. Many flew charters, mostly on the East Coast, and I liked another set of eyes and hands in the cockpit, so I was able to get valuable flight experience in twin engines, like the Piper Aztec, or the DC-3, my favorite, which was known as the Gooney Bird. This was also one of the planes my father flew during his early training and after a few hours in the cockpit, I understood why he liked it. It was easy to handle despite its massive size.

Introduced in the 1930s as one of the first commercial passenger planes, the DC-3 was a 21-passenger workhorse that had two powerful 1200 horsepower engines and cruised at 230 miles per hour. The most challenging aspect I found flying this plane was that it was a "taildragger." In other words, it had a small landing wheel on the tail, which meant it had to land level on the front wheels located under the wings and after touchdown, when the tail was gently lowered, the cockpit was elevated high in the air. From the pilot or copilot's seat, this angle limited visibility of the ground beneath the plane.

Often I was fortunate enough to catch a ride with a charter pilot, which assured that the day would be long and eventful. Sometimes we would eat breakfast in the Pittsburgh airport, have lunch in Toronto where we picked up passengers, and eat dinner in Myrtle Beach where we delivered them. On occasion, if it was late, we would stay overnight, all expenses paid, until the next morning when we would return to Pittsburgh.

One particular flight, when I was still a novice, I copiloted a charter Aztec with Steve Lowery who was the pilot in command. After hours of flying, Steve asked me to land at our destination airport while he talked with the two passengers on board. I contacted the control tower, was briefed on the designated runway and adjusted my heading. I entered the landing pattern and as I lined up the runway on my final approach, I noticed a number of people and trucks gathering along side the runway. I thought it was most unusual, but I chalked it up to southern hospitality. Steve suddenly realized that I was about to land at the Myrtle Beach Air Force Base not too far from our intended destination, the Grand Strand Airport. Those gathering people were military personnel and they were going to nab us upon touchdown and probably haul us off to jail. Steve turned the radio to the Base's frequency and we both received a reprimand that we would not soon forget. We aborted the landing and headed over to the correct airport just a few miles away where we landed without incident. I had to wonder if my father had ever done anything so absentminded.

During these trips, the only crew on board was usually the pilot and me, and any down time, such as waiting for passengers, gave us the chance to

analyze the plane's capabilities, inspect its records, and review navigational procedures. Flying with many of the commercial pilots based at the Butler airport gave me an edge with my training that some of the other students did not have.

A couple of my instructors were old-time barnstormers who actually flew stunts through barns and under bridges. One pilot, Captain Bill McGown, had performed in air shows doing aerobatics not only in the Piper Cub, but in a variety of bi-planes. Once he casually described a rather dangerous routine involving a female wing-walker.

"I had this pretty young lady, you see, that I worked with. Well, we'd take off with her in the cockpit, backseat, and when we got up to about 900 or 1000 feet then she'd climb out there onto the wing," he explained in his deep gravelly voice. "She'd hold onto the special handles riveted to the plane so that the strong cold air wouldn't blow her clear off the plane. One day she came pretty damn close to fallin'. The wind was fierce and she lost her grip. Just by sheer luck, she caught the plane's guy wires in her hands. I slowed the plane down some, but I couldn't grab her cuz I was flyin'. When I got her back on the ground, that sweet young thing just up and quit on the spot, saying something about fearin' for her life. Can you imagine? I thought she had more guts and gumption than that... she just didn't have the spirit for adventure, I reckon."

Those were the days when the "spirit of adventure" could kill you pretty quickly. Captain McGowan, however, was fortunate and died years later safe in his bed.

As one of the only female pilots in our region, the general attitude toward women piloting a plane had not changed much in the 30 years between the time Amelia Earhart took her final flight and I started my flying adventures. This famous aviatrix had to overcome deep-seated discrimination before she was accepted as a legitimate and capable pilot. Surprisingly, she was asked to only ride in the planes that set some of the records attributed to her, while male pilots actually did the flying. When she refused to continue the charade, she was given her own government-funded, customized plane--an Electra--and in it she made history. She was blazing the trail so women could freely fly the skies in the future, and I personally benefited from her determination and persistence.

In the 1960s, while I was working on my license, I flew my solo cross-country flights to airfields in western and central Pennsylvania. Legally the trip had to be a minimum of fifty miles from my home base at Butler Airport. Instructors favored their own students and competition was tough. Bets were placed on which students would be back from their cross-country flights on time, who would be late and who would get lost. Since I was the

only female student, odds were high on my getting lost. The other students and instructors alike assumed that if I did make it back I would at least be late and would more than likely need to be “rescued.” After all, they assumed that women could neither fly a plane nor read a map since that was traditionally a “man’s job.”

Much to their chagrin, time and again I rolled my little Cessna down the runway at the approximate time I was scheduled to return according to my flight plan. I was often met with an icy reception as I confidently exited my plane. Occasionally, I heard a quiet, hesitant “‘Atta Boy!” A reminder that it was still a man’s world. As I closed my flight plan and checked my plane in, nervous instructors were waiting to hear from their students who were late and no doubt lost. Sometimes there were frantic calls from the air asking for instructions as to how to get back to the airport.

What my flying buddies didn’t know is that I loved to read maps, both air and ground, and had developed a knack for it. I enjoyed selecting a spot on the map and making my way there either by car or plane with very few detours. For me, flying was just an extension of driving and since I knew most of western Pennsylvania like I knew my own name, I was rarely lost. This drove my skeptics wild with wonder and envy . . . and I loved it.

Navigational instruments were very basic in those pre-computer days. Before sophisticated equipment like the Loran and the GPS (global positioning satellite), most planes were equipped with a compass, a VOR (very high frequency omni range) radio indicator, and an ADF (automatic direction finder) to hone in on a signal from a non-directional beacon on the ground. All were instruments that helped the pilot find his or her way in the sky. A transponder, on the other hand, helped air traffic controllers locate the plane. Surprisingly, not much had changed in 30 years because these were the very same instruments that Ms. Earhart herself used.

Picking out pilotage points to follow on the ground was a popular method of finding direction combined with the use of charts and aerial maps that identified the names of cities, mountains, lakes and waterways. If visibility was clear, flying along roads, rivers and streams worked quite well.

Radio communications and standard operating procedures were necessary back then, but were not very refined. A flight plan was required if the weather limited visibility and the pilot was forced to fly on instruments, which was and still is considered flying IFR (Instrument Flight Rules). A call into the area control center before and after the flight, to open and close the plan, was mandatory. But if visibility was more than three miles, there was no need for a flight plan and the pilot could fly VFR (Visual Flight Rules), thus making it unnecessary to check in with the control center. Eventually, the FAA (Federal Aviation Agency) tightened its restrictions as

air traffic increased.

Flying instilled in me a spirit of adventure and the freedom to go anywhere. The challenge of mastering the plane, knowing its capabilities and limitations, and learning navigational techniques gave me self-confidence in a field where very few women had entered. The sense of power and control was at times intoxicating. At other times, however, it was quite humbling.

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One particular day I spent buzzing around solo in a low-winged Piper Cherokee enjoying the serenity of the expansive blue skies. With little traffic in the area of my small uncontrolled airport, I was shooting landings and take-offs, a process of landing and taking off in continuous succession.

As I lifted my plane off the runway in what was intended to be my last take-off for the day, I was no more than 300 feet above the ground when I saw a plane take off from the rarely used perpendicular grass runway. The last thing I saw was his nose heading for the belly of my craft. I panicked and pulled my nose as high as I could without stalling, giving it as much power as I could muster out of that plane. I prayed and waited for the inevitable impact. The summer heat in the plane intensified and my skin stuck to the leather seat. Beads of sweat rolled down my face and drenched my shirt.

Time seemed to be suspended as the excruciating moments went by, but there was no impact. I never saw him pass out from under me on the other side and, in fact, never saw him again. Badly shaken and hardly able to regain control of myself, I realized that the crash I had just avoided would still occur if I didn’t pull myself together and fly the plane. I gripped the wheel, cleared my mind and tried to remember how to land. Fortunately, the downwind leg was a long stretch and while I checked over my instruments, and kept an eye out for the phantom pilot, I calmed down. By the time I turned onto my final approach, I was focused on getting my plane down safely. With no crosswind, it gently glided onto the runway.

When I parked, my hands were shaking so badly I could hardly turn off the engine. As I entered the pilot’s lounge, there was much talk about the near collision. Someone had already reported the flier to the FAA and a number of the pilots told me that I was in the right, that the man was not watching where he was going and had just barely missed me. Fortunately, he had or I could have been “dead right.”

Through the years, I gained a greater respect for flying and took it more seriously, especially after I experienced the loss of a few friends due to mistakes, oversights or arrogance. I learned that despite whatever situation occurred, it was best to always follow the rules for the benefit of everyone’s safety.

A pal from the airport, Joe Wilkins, demonstrated this lesson the hard way. After a night of drinking at a local bar, he wanted to impress his wife and friend with an aerial view of the Butler area. At some point, though, Joe either became confused or miscalculated his altitude and air speed, and all three people paid the ultimate price for the oversight. He had obviously forgotten the rule of “Eight hours from bottle to throttle.”

A good friend and experienced pilot, Pete Weise, miscalculated a landing one night in bad weather. During a driving rain storm, with the runway lights barely visible, he ran the plane into the ground 25 feet off the end of the runway, killing him on impact.

A family member, Bill Dresbach, who was a seasoned pilot, took off in his sturdy homemade aircraft on a bright sunny central Ohio day in perfect flying weather. Shortly after he was in the air, he banked severely to the right. The plane suddenly and unexpectedly rolled over and crashed nose first, killing him immediately. Whether it was an oversight, poor judgment, or the condition of the plane before the flight, no one will ever know. Some speculated that maybe he had had a heart attack even though he appeared fine all afternoon while he socialized with fellow pilots at an air show.

The reality of a potentially fatal accident is always with me, especially after knowing people who have gone down. The awareness that even competent and accomplished pilots can have accidents is important, but it does not paralyze me with fear because the risk I take is worth it.

Flying is more than just the power of controlling a large piece of machinery. It has become an integral part of my spirit that has stayed with me for life. From my first flight at the age of thirteen, I developed a natural feel for the plane, and later after I completed flight training, the plane had become an extension of myself. With each flight, we are a team working together as one entity.

I feel perfectly comfortable sitting in the pilot's seat and running the plane through its paces, easily manipulating it in any direction and engaging in challenging maneuvers. It takes a firm but sensitive touch to control a plane, similar to controlling a horse. Both will respond with the right direction and guidance, patience and persistence.

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As sometimes happens, life interfered with my flying pursuits. Priorities shifted and my attention turned to finishing college, raising children and getting divorced. Many years went by and flying remained a distant memory until I accepted a new job and moved to a small Ohio town in the summer of 1985 where, surprisingly, flying was a popular pastime at the two uncontrolled airports in the area.

On a crisp fall afternoon, after years away from the controls, I slipped

into the pilot's seat of a Cessna 182 and renewed my love affair. Like a hand in a glove, it was a perfect fit and I savored every minute of the flight. Some of the technicalities were rusty, but my good friend and hand-picked instructor, Val Mowery, helped refresh my memory and perfect my technique.

Through Val and another friend, John Patterson, who was also an accomplished pilot with multiple certifications, I was able to build up much needed flying hours and regain my confidence. No more playing out Red Baron tactics in the air. John and I gave new meaning to restaurant-hopping by flying his Piper Arrow to various airport eateries in the tri-state area over the weekends. We eventually made our partnership permanent by getting married and have been co-piloting ever since.

When I returned to flying in the mid 1980s, I found that much had changed. The FAA restrictions had tightened up considerably and flight procedures and communications had become much more rigid. Twenty years earlier I could fly the countryside and never talk to another living soul until I landed, but the new communications regulations directed that a pilot had to check in at certain points along the flight path. This was foreign to me and I felt intimidated talking on the radio with the various control towers and regional control centers. Their garbled messages were incomprehensible until I finally got the hang of the type of information they were supposed to give me and anticipated their instructions. In time and with practice, I became comfortable with the new procedures and realized that expanded communications with the increased traffic and additional student pilots in the air were reasonable and improved safety for everyone in the cockpits across the country.

The one change I welcomed was that women were more widely accepted as pilots and their numbers had increased dramatically since I first started to fly. There was even a handful of female traffic controllers and female commercial pilots, which was an indicator of what the future would hold.

Flying later in life also brought into clearer focus my own mortality. Mindfulness, diligence and caution played a bigger part in my life especially when dealing with the unpredictable factors of flying, factors such as the fickle and ever-changing weather patterns that get pilots into trouble before they realize it. Mother Nature's idiosyncrasies can often play havoc with the best laid plans.

I learned this lesson during a trip with John one night. Shortly after taking off from the Butler Airport following a visit with my family, we were in the “soup,” a pilot's term for thick, vaporous fog. Visibility was less than a quarter mile on the ground, or as the old fly boys used to say, “It was so bad, you could barely see the wings from the window.”

As certified instrument pilots, we had filed the mandatory IFR flight plan and checked in with the Pittsburgh Control Tower. As we climbed through the dense fog we were enveloped in darkness and a storm that was bound to get worse. We felt like we were wrapped up in a pile of sheets in an unlit room and could find no way to get out. The only light we had was the warm glow of the cockpit lights.

We relied on our instruments to take us the 320 miles to Columbus, Ohio, along with the expert direction of air traffic controllers, as we contacted each control center along the way. They kept track of our progress by watching our slow-moving blip on their radar screens and providing us with regular weather and traffic updates. Their garbled talk was welcomed company in the lonely cockpit, and it was with their guidance and our knowledge that we made it home without incident.

When a pilot is in the clouds, not knowing which way is up or down, he or she cannot rely on equilibrium alone as an indicator of direction or even stability of the plane because often that “feeling” is inaccurate. The motion of diving or climbing is imperceptible when sitting in the cockpit.

This theory was proven to me during instrument training when a long-brimmed metal hood was placed firmly on my head shielding my vision from anything outside the windshield. I was forced to focus on the instrument panel and fly using only instruments. Until I learned the function of the bank and turn indicator, the attitude indicator and the altimeter, my training as a pilot was incomplete. These are the main instruments that indicate both the position of the plane as it cuts through the air and especially the wings in relationship to the earth’s horizon. This knowledge can be a lifesaver.

It is thought that John Kennedy, Jr. was not familiar enough with the instruments on that fateful night when he crashed, killing his wife, sister-in-law and himself. He was flying at night over the ocean with no visible horizon to guide him and in bad weather: the worst possible combination of flying conditions. He had limited experience with instrument flight, possibly became disoriented and most likely did not know he was diving the plane directly into the ocean until it was too late.

Intense hands-on flying experience, extensive ground school training, knowing the instruments and the ability to read the plane are essential elements for a successful pilot. But even with this background and hundreds of flight hours, pilots have gone down because of unforeseen circumstances.

At dusk one evening, John and I were flying at about 5000 feet, heading to our favorite restaurant in Muncie, Indiana from Columbus, Ohio, when a sudden thunderstorm blew up into our path. Usually, finding an alternative

route is the best diversionary tactic under such conditions, but the storm path was so wide, we could not get around it. We chose instead to fly a direct route through the storm and take our chances. Heavy rain and hail pelted our windshield so hard it felt like we were a target in a shooting gallery. Lightning flashed all around us, illuminating the sky and the cockpit at the same time. Rain and oil from the engine streaked over the wings and blew onto the windshield, obscuring what little visibility we had left. The radios crackled with the noise of flight controllers’ voices barking commands and tail numbers of other planes also battling the storm.

Our plane floated in the air as though it were swinging on a hammock suspended between two invisible points in the sky. It pitched forward causing us to lose altitude and skidded sideways, yawing back and forth, causing us to lose our heading. The compass spun like a top and the numbers on the altimeter changed rapidly. It was all that we could do to keep the craft in the air and barely under control.

As quickly as the storm overtook us, it was over. We suddenly emerged and flew into clear sky after almost an hour of being battered about like a cat’s toy. The shift of conditions was like day and night. I had been so tense from focusing on the instrument panel that I had a throbbing headache and my eyes were blurry. But the gleaming metal of the plane in the sudden sunlight was a welcome sight. We had made it, and I must admit that I was scared, really scared. Not afraid enough to give up flying, but afraid enough to keep closer track of weather forecasts, especially just prior to departure.

Despite the close calls and near disasters, I still enjoy flying, but I have often wondered what scared my adventuresome father so much that he quit piloting altogether when he returned home from the war. He did, however, feel comfortable on both commercial and private planes as long as someone else was “doing the driving.” He was also pleased that I had become such a devoted pilot. I recall him standing by when I completed my first solo flight. The instructor stepped out of the plane and allowed me to take it around the pattern myself. After I finished my go-around, my father gave me a hug and said, “Flying does run in the family and you’ve kept the legacy alive.”

My father has since passed on, and I am settling into middle age, but the one desire I have is that when I reach the end of this life, I want to float out as gently as a plane soaring into the highest reaches of the sky, fading into the Blue Yonder where I may once again be with my father in the Great Beyond.