

# THE STORY OF MY LIFE

BY

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I am writing this essay at the request of Jim Rivere, my esteemed editor, who is kind enough to publish some of my essays in the *LaAviator* every week. I doubt that the events of my young life would be of any interest to anyone, but I always comply with the wishes of an editor, so here goes.

I'll spare you most of the details of my childhood, since this is strictly an account of the flying activities of yours truly, except that I do remember the lighting of the fuse, to coin a phrase: the initial impulse that got me started as a totally dedicated airplane nerd. My mother and I were visiting my grandparents one summer when I was about 4 or 5 years old. Somebody had thought of entertaining me by giving me a toy airplane. That was before the invention of plastic, believe it or not. It was a metal airplane that slightly resembled a Spartan Executive (Google it if you must.). I remember that it had a red fuselage and blue wings. How's that for an important, life-changing event stimulating long-term memory?

I flew the thing all over the place, taking off and landing on the couch, the tables, the chairs, and once in a while on the floor. I did vertical zooms and steep-banked turns, punctuated with the occasional loop and roll.

In later years, when I learned to read, I'd walk over to the library near my grandmother's house and check out a book that

had airplanes in it. I'd usually spend the rest of the day reading it, then would return it the next day and check out the next volume in the library's flying section. I actually spent several summers reading one of these flying books after another, and I never suffered a dull moment up there in Okmulgee, Oklahoma hanging out with the old folks.

I went through the phase of building and flying model planes and watching airplane movies... Many of you who might still be reading this have similar stories. I understand that my fascination with all things that fly through the air is somewhat common among folks who hang out at airports and read flying blogs. You can fill in the blanks where I may have left out any flying-related activity that occupied my early years.

I started my flying lessons on October 15, 1960, at the age of 17. I had just started college at Tulane University, and had a job that paid enough to buy me one flying lesson per week. In those days dual instruction in a brand-new Cessna 150 cost \$14/hr and solo time went for \$12. The flying school I attended was Poleman Aircraft, located where Landmark Aviation is now situated. My first flying instructor was named Henry Birmingham. Henry later moved on to greener pastures, and I was fortunate enough to be taken over by the boss instructor, Jean deJarnette, one of the best teachers I ever flew with.

I earned my wings in a little over two years. If you're interested in some of my adventures in those days, try reading my essays, *Luscombe Report #6* and *On the Importance of Solo* (soon to be published on this blog).

In subsequent years, I started getting some free time flying jumpers for Delta Skydivers Inc. down in Raceland, Louisiana.

After I had been at this for a couple of years, the members of that organization made the mistake of letting me make a jump, and I got hooked. After that I wanted to jump instead of flying the jump plane, so that wasn't a very good deal for the club. But I continued to be the head honcho pilot for the club, even when we got other pilots to fly.

The operation was somewhat marginal, since we were operating an old straight-tail, 145-horsepower six-banger Cessna 172 off an unpaved strip that was 1500 feet long, with trees beyond the end of the strip that made it necessary for the pilot, once airborne, to side-step over to the adjacent cane field that was less obstructed, until he had enough altitude to turn crosswind. I had the duty of checking pilots out for that operation, and this is where I got my feet a little bit wet in the area of instructing.

Later the club graduated to a clapped-out Cessna 180, and I had the strange experience of checking out a bunch of nosewheel pilots in this airplane, so that I could jump instead of flying. So that's how I got to be a tailwheel instructor, several years before I got my official flight instructor certificate.

Several years later, after squeaking through a Masters degree at LSU and learning that I was not cut out to be an academic scholar, I took a job with Spremich Enterprises Inc. at Lakefront Airport. At this time I had a private ticket and probably around 300 – 400 hours of flight time. I was the guy who ran the schedule and answered the telephone and made sure that there was gas in the planes and that the students were matched up with an instructor and an airplane when anybody had a lesson scheduled. This job took me about as far away

from academia as you can get, short of cutting grass or putting roofs on houses for a living. It was a good place to decompress following my stressful days in graduate school.

To cut to the chase, I started teaching some ground school and soon had the duty a couple of nights a week, running formal ground school classes. I made a little extra money and the boss liked my work. He offered to let me use the school airplanes to get my commercial and flight instructor tickets. So that's how, in the early '70s, I started making a living of sorts teaching people to fly.

Being a flight instructor is generally considered to be the first rung on a career ladder for pilots. I never climbed up to the second rung, unlike most of my fellow teachers. I found out I liked the work and was pretty good at it. And flying charter and photo hops bored me out of my mind. That's how a guy with a Master's degree happened to spend six years working for five bucks an hour, teaching in a V.A. approved program. At five bucks an hour, I had to fly more than a thousand hours a year to make a basic living, and these were the days of double-digit inflation, if you may be old enough to remember the '70s.

One day my Volkswagen Beetle went into the shop for some maintenance, and I discovered that I didn't have enough money to pay the bill when it came time to pick up my car. What was wrong with that picture?

So I gave my notice and went out to look for a job. I ended up accepting employment as a highschool teacher, keeping a private practice going on the side (for the heady sum of ten bucks an hour) teaching people to fly. You've really gotta be in

dire economic straits to take up teaching to improve your income!

About that time, two of the examiners in the area, Rudy Spremich and Harry Graham, retired and the guys at the GADO (the old name for what we now call the FSDO) found themselves in need of a new designated examiner. Both of the retirees mentioned my name, and I had maintained a pretty good working relationship with the GADO guys, so they offered me the job.

That's how I joined classroom teaching and pilot examining into a combined occupation that rendered a basic living wage, for the first time in my life. I continued my mini-career as an examiner for 26 years, after I found out that I actually got a lot of positive support from the FAA guys. For all of the mythology that surrounds government drone bureaucrats, I must say that I never saw a bunch of guys more dedicated to their mission of promoting flight safety than this group of professional inspectors, working hard at helping people to be safe and effective pilots. And I can never remember a time when they were not supportive of me, helping me to be a successful examiner.

In 1998, I decided to retire from the classroom to have more time to work on the Great American Novel (*The Quotidian Time Traveler*, if you're interested), and a couple of years later I decided to give up my designation in favor of going back to teaching. I thought I might accept one private and one instrument student at a time, just to keep my hand in, but when people found out that I was back in the instructing business, they started ringing my phone, and I have kept a fairly active practice

going as an unaffiliated, Part 61 flight instructor for the last ten years or so.

When I finished the novel (Is anyone out there interested in publishing it? It has a lot of neat flying scenes in it.) I got serious about writing essays about my experiences as a pilot, a flight instructor, and an examiner, illustrating my theories about flying safety. I thought I might have a thing or two to add to the mix, hoping to give my fellow pilots and flight instructors some food for thought. If you have been reading my stuff, you can see that I believe in going back to basics, and often spend time stating the obvious, in the promotion of flight safety. (Example: *carry enough gas to keep the engine running until the end of your flight.*) It seems to me that I see many accidents and unfortunate incidents befall amateur pilots because they sometimes lose sight of such obvious considerations.

If anybody's interested, I hold all of the airplane ratings except for the multiengine sea. I just made eighteen thousand hours of total flying time, with just over two hundred dual received and about eight thousand hours of instruction given. These days it's kind of embarrassing to put much of this time in my logbook, since most of it is spent sitting on my duff in the right seat, watching somebody else doing the flying. I also spend a fair amount of time sitting on my duff in the left seat watching my HAL 9000 computer fly the Cessna 182 I own in partnership with four other pilots. In my jumping days, I made about 650 freefall jumps, which, by today's standards, makes me a mid-time amateur. But I started jumping in 1964, using military surplus parachuting gear that we had to modify ourselves for sport jumping. I gave it up about the time the Para Commander gave way to the "square" chutes in vogue today.

I also have commercial privileges in gliders, although I haven't been up in a sailplane for over twenty years. I have one ride in a hot-air balloon, a 20-minute trip down a mountain under a para-glider, and have been promised a ride in an F-15 by one of my students who is a retired general in the Louisiana National Guard, and who has some juice down at the Naval Air Station. I'll believe it when I see it, but a guy can dream. I have around twelve hours in helicopters, and I won't exaggerate the experience to say that I was ever in control of one of these strange machines. Let's call it hanging on for dear life.

I'm seventy years old, and the day when I blow my medical is probably coming up on the horizon. I don't think I'll ever look back and feel that I didn't get in enough flying for one lifetime. These days I find myself spending less time in the air and more in front of the word processor. Time does not hang heavy on my hands.