

# ***Flying Lessons***

An excerpt from **Stories My Dog Told Me**  
by David Freemont McCready



It was an early fall morning when times were much less tenuous and less demanding when complexity hit me first. I remember that day; a day that has been lost in completeness, but retained as a compact event with obscure details factored out. Life is trouble, no matter how you try to spin your situation. Like a spin washer flinging its debris out of the way onto you, an unsuspecting passerby. We rationalize that we are in control making sense of it all...a notion best tempered by Robert Burns, the great Scottish poet, "The best laid plans of mice and men are subject to adjustment". I have seen icons fall. I have compared myself to the great ones when convenient. When trouble touched them, it somehow made my circumstances much better. I was stunned by the death of race driver, Dale Earnhart. His life was full of the stuff we all dream of achieving. So was the daring air adventure of Steve Fossett, who flew around the world in a hot air balloon... then later killed on a personal joy ride. The very things in which they were most accomplished led to their demise. Perhaps those of us who never reach the top of our potential are indeed fortunate. To this day, I still contemplate one great grand breakaway.

Entering my seventeenth year, I had honed my driving skills in my 1933 Chevy. We were joined at the waist. I was ready for any new self-indulgent transportation thrill. My dad was repairing a radio set in the basement when I asked him about airplanes and flying. He didn't respond with an intelligible sound but went about his intense examination of the radio. I threw the question out for a second time. Then in a hand-on-hip stare, he said, "It isn't safe, everyone who ever flew eventually died." The issue came up again after I learned from Phil, a saxophone player in my dance band, that flying lessons were only \$10. Phil and I had been searching for some excitement ever since our 16th birthday party. I had been driving my Chevy for about a year and figured myself as an expert on any relevant subject even remotely similar. Now this flying proposal of Phil's began to interest me. Phil pushed the issue about saving his money to buy an airplane—a fantasy by any stretch of the imagination.

My mother and dad had a deep negative opinion of Phil. He would come to my house and fill the conversation with outlandish exaggerations. "He's a spend-thrift," as my mother described him. "If he saved a few dollars, he would become impatient and spend it on junk—never accumulating enough money to get anything worthwhile". You can see that any scheme devised by Phil would not fly at my house. The parental lectures about life were stepped up in frequency and intensity every time Phil joined my band. My band performed at the YMCA, the city-project jobs and teen dances—anywhere we could earn a few dollars for three hours.

In 1951, a local flying veterans group formed a drinking and dancing club. These guys were home from the Second World War. They were daring men, having flown over enemy territory, engaged in air combat and survived near death on a daily basis. Fear of death had been erased from their minds. They were engaged in all sorts of dangerous activities with motorcycles, race cars and small airplanes. Through a connection with my dad, they hired my band to play every weekend at their club. We pretended to be Guy Lombardo, the present-day equivalent to the Rolling Stones. Phil got close to one of the pilots, Leader, who also worked at the local airport. Tipton Airport was anything but a classy place, grass runway with bumps and dust in the dry season and generally muddy year round. The hangar was derelict, missing windows, broken door... it resembled a toothless hillbilly hotel with petrol tanks poised outside like moonshine jugs to gravity-feed a brood of moth like creatures. Some with double wings, some with high wings, and some like miniature fighter planes. Tipton's runway was geographically placed between the prevailing winds and the local mountains. Every pilot using this port experienced white-knuckle, cross wind landings and tricky takeoffs on a regular basis.

Phil's new friend, Leader, invited us down to get a flying lesson a few weeks later. It was a Sunday morning. Leader was also the life of the party at the local air force club on Saturday night. There is an old saying about pilots: "There are old pilots and bold pilots, but no old, bold pilots." I didn't realize the significance of that until Sunday morning. Leader smelled like the bar sink at the club. I was chosen to be first to get the flying lesson. It was also my first chance to even touch an airplane. Leader figured me to be first since I was the bandleader and commanded some respect, a lingering discipline based upon his military training. I had never flown before. I had zero knowledge about how these things worked. Leader avoided ground school and simply said, "Jump in." We sat side by side in a very small airplane; I believe he called it, Chief. It smacked me how much everything had a familiar look to my father's Model A Ford. Everything looked remarkably like that old car that didn't fly. The focus of my attention was the fuel gauge. Like the Model A's, it sat directly in front of us outside the front window between my feet and a strange-looking engine.

I started shivering. It was briskly cold that morning and the wind was blowing through the side window - door. Leader was smoking a cigarette and talking to one of the big wheels of the airport. He dashed his butt to the ground and jumped into the right side of the cockpit. I had noticed that the wings were on the top of this little airplane and it seemed the ground would be easy to touch if you stretched your arm out of the window. I was quickly told to hold on to the stick (wheel-like projection) between my legs and put my feet on the pedals. Leader must have forgotten something as he told me, "Hold on for a second." He got out and ran over to the big hangar. I continued to look over the cockpit. I wiggled the stick and pushed the pedals. It reminded me of the pedal car I had used in my grandmother's backyard. I put my hand out of the side window and felt the side door next to me. It felt thin and vulnerable like the skin from an Indian

drum. Hmm, I thought, very thin . . . actually fragile. Leader came back to the plane and asked me if I had \$5. I did, and I handed it over. He went back over to the hangar and again came back with a cigarette hanging from his lips. A new character came out of the hangar and opened a flap on the engine. He brought along a bottle of oil, which looked like a mason jar with a long metal spout. He carefully tried to pour the oil into the open hole, but most of the oil ran down over the side of the engine. His hands seemed to shake uncontrollably. I chalked it up to the chilly morning air along with the after effects of the mechanic's nightlife.

I had been sitting in the plane for about fifteen minutes when Leader stuck his last cigarette on the ground. "Ready? Here we go." Leader closed his paper-thin side door, put a seat belt over his lap, and told me to pick my belt up so it wouldn't get mixed up with the controls. I asked if I should put the belt on, "No, if we need them, we'll put them on." I started to remember what my father had said about flying. Sooner or later, all flyers will die. I said I was cold; he said we'll get some heat when we get her up. I watched him closely. He pushed the pedals and wobbled the stick. Leader did some other things I couldn't comprehend. Prayerfully, he pressed a button that caused the engine to struggle and shake the entire airplane, a slow semi-rotation of the prop. I can remember that my Chevy had a similar ailment that could be cured by connecting long cables to the battery and then connecting the other ends to another car. I couldn't imagine how you could connect two airplanes—I didn't have to. The oil delivery fellow backed an old truck out of the hangar, and you don't have to guess—it worked. The Chief started to clatter and sputter. Leader pushed a few more knobs and levers to smooth out the engine; my heart began to race faster than the engine.

Phil had been watching from the coffee room in the hangar. He waved at us while down the side road we bumped around till we got to the end of the runway painted with the number 270. I wanted to ask what the number meant, but my speech was impaired by a lump in my throat. We went through a little drill, revved the engine, pushed the brakes in and out while waiting for the plane in front of us to take off. Leader hadn't said a thing, and as I sat there, with a burst of vocal agony, I asked, "What's this plane made of?" The answer was not supportive: "Canvas and paint," he said. Just then he turned the plane onto the runway and gunned the motor... the vibration was stirring. The motion was very slow at first, and finally, Leader pointed at the speed gauge and said, "When it hits fifty, up we go"—and we did. I was fixed on the fuel gauge, a spindly wire bobbing up - down and around indicating about one-eighth full. It has been said that just before death, your entire life will flash before you. All I could focus on was the day I ran out of gas, a very rainy day. I had to walk about two miles to get gas for the Chevy. The airplane fuel gauge was close to empty and I knew we couldn't walk now. The shaking and shuttering seemed to last for hours. As we went higher, I could see some of the ground; the cars looked like toys as I stared down. Leader said, "Hold on." He turned the plane sideways to turn left. I could see my knee pressing on the canvas door. The wind pushed us back as the plane twisted and

fought to keep flying. Over the drone of the engine, I could hear my dad's words ringing in my ears.

I could feel the engine heat now and I began to smell something burning. No sooner had the smell permeated the cabin when smoke began pouring off the engine. My mind was paralyzed; seconds seemed like minutes—my entire body was petrified; my mouth was too dry to speak. An eerie sickness began to twist my stomach as we oscillated from a left turn into a steep climb.

Leader broke the silence and told me an airplane that quits flying will go into a stall. I didn't question that—I just accepted the notation and shook my head. My vocal cords were under seizure. Leader said, "Put that seat belt on. I want to show you a stall." I began fumbling, and before I could finish, the plane seemed to slow down with the nose high and the wings wobbled... then the end of the world... Leader pushed the stick forward—the plane pointed straight down like an arrow after a sparrow. Nothing in my sixteen years of life ever approached this—my father's words rang and rang in my ears; then as if grasped by God, the plane's nose began to rise and we went back to a steep climb. We continued to climb, then leveled off—the smoke had stopped. The fuel gauge still read one-eighth full and my hands were dripping with sweat. My mind erased the balance of the lesson.

Experiences like this are never erased by time. Speaking of time, about ten years later that old urge began to push my sobering first flight lesson into oblivion. I couldn't resist the conversations my friends were having about their wonderful flying experiences. "I'm going to learn to fly". About 25 miles from my home was an airport that advertised flying lessons. I had finished my sales call early one afternoon just as I passed the road to the airport. "Today's the day", I thought, I drove up to the reception area in front of the main hanger, took a deep breath, and walked right in. Between two partially repaired plane, a large man, chewing on a pipe, said, "What can I do for ya son?" My voice hadn't recovered from my last flying lesson ten years ago, but I managed - "Wan't learn to fly". "You came to the right place". My vocal cords began to relax as we strolled around the hanger picking up old rags, tools and pans of oil - it reminded me of Mr. Painter's blacksmith barn without sparks. "Come over here - learn a little more about ya son". I detected an English accent, "How's your health? You look quite fit". "Here's the way we go about it"... he went into a show and tell about the need to learn the flight rules, safety procedures and the absolute necessity of preflight procedures. "Let's go out here and go over this old Cub, show you what I mean". The Cub resembled the Chief right down to the canvas painted wings and oily old chunk of engine sticking out in front, and yes, that fuel gauge right up front. "Be careful you don't trip over dat tie down rope". I already had while inspecting the wings for any sign of metallic support. Going back to the hanger I was watching a plane getting ready to land or crash. It hit the runway and then decided to take off again. What was that all about? In the rear of the hanger was a coffee area with prominently posted licenses, official documents, and

pictures of smiling pilots. "Here's what it's going to cost and after you learn to fly you'll take a test and get your license." It all sounded reasonable.

I was just about to agree to the plan when he said, "I got to take care of this incoming plane. It's my wife; she's the instructor". Wife, instructor, all thoughts became tangled in a web of contemplation elevating my state of mental paralysis... a woman instructor... no way. Within 30 seconds I was in my car headed for home. No woman could possibly be safe to fly with. Look what happened to Amelia... A few miles down the road it suddenly struck me that another airport, where my friend kept his plane, was only a mile away. Half in shock, I drove up an old lane into large grassy area with five small planes perched along its edge. My friend, Art, was under his Skylane. A conversation ensued. He said, "When you gonna learn to fly?" I answered in haste asking him if anyone here taught flying. "You got to meet Vince. He got me flying and he just got a new Cherokee. Our conversation was interrupted by a little VW Bug driving up. "That's Vince." "Hey Vince, here's a new student for you". Vince had arrived with another acquaintance of mine - there was an immediate social empowering group, clan, gathering, like a pride of lions... I was in.

As things settled down I finished my log book beginners' entries and Vince said, "We're going to get you up right now. Here comes the Cherokee" The Cherokee pulled up right in front of the gas pump and as I looked over the new shiny plane, my confidence level soared like the stock market on steroids. I thought seeing a girl learning to fly minimized my lingering fear. A young girl, at that, looking about eighteen got out of the plane and came over to us. Vince said, "This is Cynthia, she's going to be your instructor today." I couldn't believe this was happening, thinking it a joke cooked up by my buddies... before I could react Cynthia said, "Come over here, I'll show you how to gas her up". It had arrived that one grand breakaway in daring being carried out *with fear* of all impending consequence. There was no room for my conversational input. She spouted off all sorts of details about the Cherokee. "See that number on the side, 6972W, "Got to know that when you're on the radio... always identify yourself... Ok, lets go, you get in first". I recalled that same message from Leader, "Ok you get in first"...and My Dad, "Sooner or later all pilots die" I did learn to fly with Vince and Cynthia's help. I'll spare the details for later which all point to life's learning to fly experiences being repeated again and again.