

PERSONAL FLYING

I started the first paragraph of this story writing about my own flying, and some forty-some pages later, its time for me to begin. My first lesson occurred on March 9, 1983 at Houston Gulf Airport. Dave Henderson gave it to me in a Cessna 152. It took almost two years and 98.6 hours before I earned my Private Pilot's License on March 2, 1985. Actually, I had taken a check ride the previous December, but failed miserably, so had to go out and practice some more. The man who gave me the exam had also given Dr. Sally Ride, the first American woman in space, her check ride. I bet she passed it the first time. Oh, well! Sometimes I would be flying Cessnas and Pipers and enjoying my time alone in the cockpit while there were shuttle missions flying, thinking that while I was having fun, I imagined the astronauts wouldn't trade me places.



Piper Archer that I rented in New Zealand, 1986, enroute to Antarctica

Early in my flying years, I heard a couple of stories that I still think of often. When B.G. Smith, one of my co-workers, heard of a pilot with over 30,000 hours crashing into a mountain, he said, "Well, that goes to show you that the mountain had more time in the air than the pilot." The second story goes something like this: Two young pilots saw an old man pre-flighting an airplane. Very methodically, he moved his greasy thumbnail down every line item on the checklist, holding it there until he completed the specific task listed. The pilots joked that the old man would probably die before he reached the end of the checklist. One of the men working at the airport overheard the pilots, and told them he would like to introduce them to the old man, so they walked over to him. "Boys," said the workman, "I'd like you to meet my friend, Charles Lindbergh!"

About 1984 or so, Houston Gulf airport held a local air show with planes like those that fly in the Reno Air Races competing. I saw this gray-hair old man wearing a flight uniform with the Eighth Air Force patch from World War II on his shoulder, dragging behind him one of the racers. The plane looked like it only had a wingspan of twenty feet. As the old man walked closer, I realized that he was Deke Slayton, one of the original Mercury Seven astronauts.

In the early 1990s, my friend Bob Simle and I drove to Hempstead, where we each took a flight lesson in a glider. That was a lot of fun, and I really have a lot of respect for flying on updrafts created by thermals, and controlling the airplane without the aid of an engine. Somewhere, I have photos of this event,

and when I come across them when I'm looking for something else, I will come back and insert them into this story.

I should have joined the Bay Area Aero Club years sooner, but finally did it in November, 2001. When I first started flying in 1983 I joined the Gulf Coast Flying Club, but that folded, and I didn't join the Bay Area Aero Club because I didn't like their chief pilot. What a stupid reason. My loss, not theirs.

So how did I go from 1983 to the end of 2001 and only fly 189 hours? I don't know. There were some years I didn't even turn a prop. Other years I only flew ten or twelve hours total. As much as I love flying, I don't have a good answer, except I guess I spent my money going on other trips. Can't change the shoulda's, woulda's, and coulda's. Now, I am trying to make up for lost time. Between 1999 and 2001 I sort of started flying again, but only had a total of 25 hours during those three years. During that timeframe, on one of my solo flights in a Piper-140 out of Ellington, just as I passed through 1500 feet over the Kemah Bridge, I looked to my right and saw one of NASA's RB-57s at the same altitude. What a big airplane that is from about 1000-feet away!



DC3 in Alaska

In 1999, I was looking in Trade-A-Plane and saw an old DC-3 for sale here in Houston. This aircraft had been used as a Congressional plane during WWII, and President Roosevelt had even flown in it. Out of curiosity, I talked to the people selling it and sat in the cockpit and realized that I could learn to fly it, because there was nothing magic about the instruments. The seller wanted \$300,000 for it, and that included a spare engine. He pointed out the fourteen first class seats that were scattered out in the passenger compartment, and told me how this plane could be used to give people nostalgic flights around the world. I thought how if I learned to fly it, I could take it to Australia or Africa and provide two-week tours. I could fly as co-pilot if I picked up a multi-engine and an instrument rating. The next day I called the guy back and told him I couldn't afford it, without even going to the bank. Six months later, inside the premium back cover of the Smithsonian Air and Space magazine, some company was advertising flying tours around Africa in a DC-3. Another missed opportunity!

In January, 2002, I was planning on going to Alaska to learn to fly floatplanes. Alaska Float Ratings, out of Moose Pass, offered such a course flying in PA-18-150's, and one flies these Super Cubs with a stick, and not a ho-hum yoke. So I need to learn how to fly planes with a stick, which meant learning to fly a tail dragger. Texas Taildraggers, Inc. flies Citabrias, which are built similarly to the cubs. I drove out to their place one day, and was fortunate to have owner Joy Borden give me my first lesson in a Citabria. There definitely are different techniques for take offs and landings in a tail dragger as opposed to a nose-gear aircraft. Chris Hennington gave me some more Citabria lessons at Harvey and Rihn Aviation. Debbie, one of the owners, is a world champion five times over (I think) flying aerobatic airplanes.



Citabria, rented from Texas Taildraggers



Citabria, rented from Harvey & Rihn Aviation

During the same period, my friend Jim Gardner was trying to round up eight buyers for a World War II Stearman. At the time, I didn't even know what one looked like, but liked the idea of learning to fly an open-cockpit bi-plane. Tom Jenkins, one of my good friends and co-workers, and I tried to take a Cessna 172 to San Antonio in April of 2002 to fly a Stearman, but we encountered bad weather enroute and came back to Houston. Then, over Memorial Day weekend, I drove to Kingsbury Aerodrome to see some World War I vintage airplanes one day, and to fly the Stearman the next day at San Antonio. Ed Gunter gave me my first ride in a Stearman, and I have been hooked ever since. For me, they are too expensive to own, but I sure enjoy flying them. Later during the year I went to St. Louis twice and flew in Bob Kraemers's Stearman. He was named in an article in the November, 2002 issue of AOPA Pilot.



**Fokker D1 Tri-plane, like Red Baron used.
This plane is being rebuilt at Kingsbury
Vintage Aircraft Association.**

Jenny JN-4, Kingsbury Vintage Aircraft Museum, east of San Antonio, Texas



**Upper: Ryan PT-20 and Stearman PT-17
Left: Piper Cub, all three flown by
Harold Hubbell in WWII**



**PT-17 flown by Ed Gunter, Stinson Aviation,
San Antonio, Texas. This is the first Stearman
that I flew, in May, 2002.**



PT-17 owned by Bob Kraemer, owner of Riverbend Flying Service in St. Charles, Mo., near St. Louis. What a blast!

Just a few days before I completed this story, I received photos from Harold Hubbell, a very distant relative (and we are both related to Edwin Hubble, the astronomer for whom the Hubble Space Telescope is named). In the note that he included, he wrote, "Just so you don't think that I might have been pulling your leg about my interest in light planes, I dug out a few OLD shots with me in them! From years and years ago. The Piper Cup shot was in early days – on weekends I'd take the front seat and fly some of my sailor buddies around. It sure beat sitting behind some instructor! The Stearman shot is about a year later I guess (1945). And I was learning acrobatics then, wondering when a wing or two would fly off. Great tough airplane. The Ryan belonged to the school. Very peppy, and landed fast and hot!" I would be doing an injustice to this story if I didn't include the photos.

While walking around Kingsbury Aerodrome, I spotted the Stinson 108 Voyager with a For Sale sign in the window. That evening I called the owner, and the next day, after I flew the Stearman, had a short flight in the Stinson. Like the Stearman, I really wasn't familiar with a Stinson. The fabric fuselage had been replaced with aluminum and the original 150 HP Franklin engine had been replaced with a Lycoming 0435C, a 190 HP military engine made when the dinosaurs had wings, with a Hartzell two-bladed prop attached to it. There were no radios installed, but boy did that plane one year younger than me have a lot of power, and the owner made it fly so easily.



1960 Cessna 182A flown to pick up the Stinson.



1947 Stinson 108-1 Voyager, my first plane! My red Ford F-250 4X4 truck is in the back.



Panel of Stinson 108-1, with new GPS-Comm

When I came back to Houston, I told Tom Jenkins, my elk-hunting buddy, about it. Tom is working on his license, and wanted to buy a tail dragger. So two weeks after I saw the plane, Tom and I, Carl Nepute, and Don Cooper flew a Cessna 182 to Zuehl airport, near San Antonio, to pick up the Stinson. I had been looking at buying an airplane for a while, but was thinking more of a Cessna 172 or a Beechcraft Musketeer or Sundowner. Next thing I know is that I have an airplane I don't even know how to fly, or at least take off and land. Tom and I put a radio with a built-in GPS receiver and a transponder in it, and we were good to go. Between me being a slow learner and the plane having maintenance problems, like I said earlier, it took nine months for me to solo it. But solo I did, and now I expect to fly it often and far. I am even hoping to take it to Alaska in about two years. Today, on March 30th, I flew it to Beaumont for an annual inspection, and Bob Simle flew over in a Cessna 152 to give me a ride home, then we flew to Jennings, La. for lunch, and back to Houston.



Matt Nelson & Tom Jenkins, proud new owners of the Stinson 108-1, June 9, 2002, Grinning like a mule eating burrs!

We bought the Stinson on June 8th; on June 11th I took off on Continental Airlines for Anchorage for the wonderful world of floatplane flying. Before I write about flying floats, I am going to digress. This was the eighth trip I had made to Alaska; on one of the trips Hawks Abbott (my old OIC in the Reserves), Brian Collier, Bob Simle, and I went on a fly-in fishing trip and none of us managed to

catch a single fish in five days. We are still being teased about that at work. But that's OK, because I know I have caught fish in Alaska. On another fly-in trip out of Fairbanks, I managed to catch several fish. Then there was the time in 1990 that I stood up in the boat and cast my line out, just as the friend whom I was with cast his line. Next thing you know, I have a hook in my head! I caught six salmon that day, and I was the only thing that my friend caught at all.

When I fly to Alaska in a couple of years, I imagine that Bob will fly the Zenith 801 that he is building, Tom and I will go in the Stinson, and Brian will go with Bob. If Hawks is nice to us, we might even squish him into one of the baggage compartments! Special for you, Captain Oozic!



Hawks Abbott, hoping to catch a fish.



Bob Simle and Brian Collier



Cessna float plane out of Fairbanks, 1995



I really can catch fish in Alaska!



Hook in my head, and I still caught fish.



Alaska Air Taxi's DCH-2 Beaver

A few months after our Alaska fishing trip, Hawks, Brian, and I met in Salt Lake City and drove to Kemmerer, Wyoming, where we went on a fish fossil dig at Ulrich's, a commercial place. I had been there in July, and found a palm leaf.

They didn't let me keep it. I was told I could buy it for about \$1000, and put \$20.00 down, but never paid anymore. The three of us did find several fish, but the one I like the best is one that the gallery was working on, capturing an instantaneous moment in time 60 million years ago when one fish began to eat another. While eating breakfast in Kemmerer, we met Linda and Joe Guice when we served the restaurant people coffee because the staff was busy. They invited us into their home, and are good people.



Fossil fish eating another one – I didn't find this one, but found the palm leaf on the right.



Alaska airplanes are among some of the most unique in the world. One can see planes of every description. Hawks and I saw the An-2 Colt, a Russian designed aircraft that served the communist countries for many years. I would still like to fly one around Mongolia sometime. Anyway, this same An-2 that Hawks and I saw is now at the bottom of the ocean at the North Pole. A year after we went to Alaska, the An-2 was taken to the Pole by Dick Rutan of Voyager II fame, along with four other people, and the plane fell through the ice. No one was hurt, and all managed to be rescued. On the tail of this plane there is the flag of the Explorer's Club, of which I am a member.



An-2 Colt in Anchorage, which later ended under the ice at the North Pole

Having flown as a passenger in float planes, and seeing others fly them, I finally decided that the Summer of 2002 was time for me to learn to fly floats. For months I had corresponded with Vern and Lura Kingsford, owners of Scenic Mountain Air / Alaska Float Ratings (www.alaskafloatratings.com) in Moose Pass, Alaska. Located between Anchorage and Seward, Moose Pass is a don't-blink-

as-you-drive-through-it place, but a great scenic town. Surrounded by lakes, it is even more beautiful from the air. The Kingsfords have five planes, four of which are on floats. I flew the two Super Cubs for my training, doing most of it in N7862P, although I did fly Vern's plane N917VK twice. For one week I stayed at Moose pass, trying to earn and learn my Single Engine Sea (float plane) rating. Instructors Norm and Will taught me the basics, such as normal water, rough water, and calm water take-offs and landings, step taxi and turns, plow taxi and turns, beaching and docking. My flying techniques weren't the best, but I enjoyed every exhilarating minute of my training.



Kenai Lake (I think) in Alaska



I don't know the names of these lakes.



Harding Ice Fields, Alaska



Denali

We flew on and off Trail Lake, Grant Lake, Kenai Lake, Johnson Lake, and a couple of others. Emerald green water abounded; moose grazed near the edge of Trail Lake; the train between Seward and Anchorage rumbled across a bridge over the lake daily. They don't call it Moose Pass for nothing. One evening while I sat in the pilot's lounge, a mama moose and her calf ambled in front. One day Norm and I went to the Kenai and / or Harding Ice Fields, and it was as if I were flying over Antarctica again. I met other pilots taking the course, including a farmer in South Dakota, a dentist who lived in Anchorage, another man who made his living flying bush planes, and a few airline pilots that were also military officers whom had flown in Afghanistan a month after September 11th. The September, 2002 issue of AOPA Pilot has a story about Alaska Float Ratings.

One night while training I flew to Johnson Lake (I think that's the name of it) with Norm, he took off, and I camped by myself. Catching and cooking one fish for supper erased for me the memory of another Alaska fishing trip. I was absolutely alone, enjoying the serenity and solitude. About 2 AM I awoke from the sound of a beaver slapping his tail and building his (or her) den near my

campsite. Another day, Phil Thibodeau, one of Vern's instructors, and I took the C172 to Talkeetna, and then flew to 10,000-feet on the Southern side of Denali. That was some spectacular flying! Phil hadn't been there himself. On the return trip, we refueled at Talkeetna, and somebody asked us if we were the pilots who didn't seem to know where they were going. It happens!



Alaska Float Ratings two Super Cubs – Look at the grin on the guy sitting in the front seat (right), and the lake where he camped (left).



Vern Kingsford's C-172



Norm's champ, flown from Colorado

After flying with Alaska Float Ratings for a few days, and not being as proficient as I needed to be to pass the check ride for the Single Engine Sea rating, Vern suggested that I continue with my plans to fly elsewhere in Alaska, and then come back a week or so later. I had made arrangements to fly with Heidi or Richard Ruess, owners of Arctic Flyers at Anchorage's Lake Hood. Mr. Ruess told me the day I arrived that the water was too rough for my level of flying floats, and suggested I come back that evening. I guess he ought to know, since he had over 35,000 hours of flight experience. Once again that evening, the winds were too strong, so I came back the next day. They were booked at the

time, but in the mean time, I had made arrangements to fly a new Maule-7 on a demonstration ride. I don't remember the pilot's name, but he allowed me to take the controls after we took off from the land airfield bordering Lake Hood. That afternoon, I drove to Merrill Field, and practiced touch-and-goes in a Cessna-172, then drove back to Lake Hood, and flew with the son of the Maule-7 pilot in an Aeronica on floats. We flew across Cook Inlet, and went to some lake where we practiced rough water splash-and-dashes. This was the first time I had even done any landings flying from the right seat. Finally, the next morning I flew with Heidi Ruess in her husband's F-19 Taylorcraft. For some reason, her own T-Craft wasn't ready to fly. Flying on-and-off of busy Lake Hood is quite different than flying off the low traffic lakes that Vern uses. Heidi, like other instructors, told me that I really needed to learn to use the rudders better, especially since I showed them a photo of the Stinson.

After flying with Heidi, I drove to Fairbanks, sleeping in a rented van about thirty miles out. The following day I flew on and off the Tanana River with Mike Vivion in his Cessna 170B on floats. River landings and take-offs give a whole new perspective on flying floats, especially doing step turns on a curving river. After leaving Mike, I immediately drove across the field and flew in a Maule-5. I'm not sure about a fabric airplane, but from what I understand, the material used these days is quite good. That doesn't detract from the fun I have of flying a Maule or a Citabria or Champ.



Left: Maule-7 235 at Lake Hood
Right: Planes at Lake Hood's land airfield



Taylorcraft owned by Arctic Flyers at Lake Hood



Cessna 170B in Fairbanks

That night, I drove to an area near Denali and camped again in the van. I had thought about regular camping but my mosquito spray was about as

effective as one tank fighting the Chinese army – they just keep on coming. The next morning, on a spur-of-the-moment decision, I flew as a passenger with ERA Helicopters on a tour of Denali. It turns out that the pilot had worked for Vern Kingsford a year or two earlier. That was another breathtaking ride, and besides seeing the highest mountain on the North American continent, we also saw a few grizzly bears.



Maule-5 in Fairbanks, owned by Fairbanks Flight Train



Boeing 747 and taildraggers at Fairbanks



Regal Air DCH-2 Beaver

Back in Anchorage, I just couldn't resist going on another floatplane fishing trip. The kings were running, so I had to at least try. I signed up for a one-day trip with Regal Air and flew in the co-pilots seat of a Dehaviland DCH-2 Beaver. That just emphasized that sooner or later I would fly one. We flew to Lake Creek, about a mile from where Brian, Bob, Hawks, and I had been three years earlier. And I had the same kind of luck. When we landed, there were people waiting to take their king salmon back on the return flight. After all day with a guide, and no luck, when the plane came back at 4 PM, people in the next boat over started catching kings. But we couldn't wait, so we motored back to the waiting plane empty handed. To the king salmon with my name on it, perhaps not even hatched yet, one year you will be in my photographs and freezer until my friends and I make a meal of you!

The following day I drove back to Moose Pass, to take another lesson flying the Super Cubs. After waiting around all day, I finally had a chance to fly with Vern. I had wanted a chance to fly with him before I went for the Seaplane check ride, just to have an idea what he would have me do when he gave the actual check ride. For the second time, I sat in the front seat of Super Cub N917VK. We took off and headed to the same area that I had camped a week earlier. Vern started putting me through the paces, and I managed to show him that I had learned the basics of floatplane flying. But I messed up slightly when it came to docking, so as a result I didn't fly with him or his instructors anymore, and left without my SES rating. Oh, well! But I hold no grudges, and for several months wore a blue ball cap with the name of "Alaska Float Ratings" and an embroidery of Super Cub N917VK on the front.

I left Moose Pass a few minutes later and drove to Anchorage, where I stayed in a hotel room at Ace Hangars on Merrill Field. One of the best rooms I have ever stayed, with a view right over the airport! The next day, before I caught my flight back to Houston, I had a demonstration ride in a Husky on amphibians, in which we landed both on water and back on the concrete at Merrill Field. Then I flew with Marc Paine in a fairly new Cessna 172 for about an hour-and-a-half around the Anchorage area. Had I earned my floatplane rating, I could have had a lesson or two in the Widgeon, and this is something I had hoped for. Perhaps, another day! The Lake Renegade seen next to the Widgeon was parked next to the Husky, and is another type of plane I hope to fly someday.



Husky



New Cessna-172



Widgeon



Lake Renegade (I think)

For two weeks having been airborne one way or another every day of my trip, after piloting two Super Cubs, one Aeronica, one Taylorcraft, and one Cessna 170B, all on floats, plus three Cessna-72s, a Maule-5 and a Maule-7;

receiving a demonstration ride in a Husky, and riding as a passenger on a DCH-2 Beaver and a helicopter, my vacation and money ran out, so I had to head back to Houston. I logged twenty-seven hours during this wonder period of my life, saw friends like Dave, Jean, and Rachael Bieganski, and Dawn and Bill Caswell, where I had me a caribou roast, caught me a fish, and enjoyed the flying and beautiful scenery.

Back home in Texas I started learning to fly the Stinson with Don Cooper, and then later started flying with Carl Nepute. Carl knows every grass strip around, and we buzzed some of 'em. He used to own a Stearman, and now Don has part ownership of another one. I have learned a lot from these two guys, as well as from Jim Gardner. Jim bought a Cessna-120 about the same time Tom and I bought the Stinson, so I have had some time flying it. Carl signed me off to go solo in Cessnas 177 and 182, and now, I am also close to being able to fly a Champion by myself. Sometimes there were maintenance problems in the Stinson, such as the time the prop started slinging oil on the windshield right after take-off, and the cylinders had to be rebuilt – welcome to the world of airplane ownership - and once, Carl took over the controls of the Champ and we ended up stuck in the mud and had to have an ATV give us a tow! We both laugh about that one. But I finally learned to take-off and land a taildragger!

On July 20, 2002, the thirty-third anniversary of the first manned lunar landing, I drove to Lake Palestine, Texas, and flew with Danny Duggan in his Cessna-170B on floats. He has since sold the plane, but he has a hangar near the lake, and had one of the best setups for planes that I have ever seen. I hope I haven't taken my last ride with Danny, but he is talking about giving more instruction in floats planes, so I think I will have the chance to go up with him again.

A few days later I traveled to Oshkosh, Wis. for the annual air show there, probably the biggest, at least for general aviation. It rained some of the time while I was there, and I was more concerned about my cameras, so I didn't really take many photographs, and the ones I did take I wasn't all that happy with. Besides, right now I don't know where they are, anyway. It is just as well, because if I started inserting Oshkosh airplane photos here, this story would be ten times longer, and there is not enough money in the world to develop all the film it would take to photograph each airplane, and I haven't switched to digital photography yet.



Balloon ride, Jackson, Wyoming 2003



Eagle and Uncle Sam, JSC, 2003



Liberty Balloon JSC, 2003



Shuttle Balloon, JSC, 2000

In the Fall, Karoline and I stayed for a few days near the Wyoming Tetons, where we saw several elk, one of my favorite animals. They are so majestic! I surprised her with a hot air balloon ride. She had never been on one before. Shortly after the launch, the pilot said he was going to go over a pond so we could see the reflections of the Tetons in the water. He didn't say anything about dragging the bottom of the balloon on the water's surface! Karoline was impressed, and the pilot tried to pass it off as an everyday occurrence as he rapidly turned on the propane jets. We even saw elk from the balloon. We have traveled to the Albuquerque Balloon Fiesta for the past four years, and taking photos of them is like trying to take photos of all the roses in a botanical garden. I am not inserting Albuquerque balloon photos in this story, because like the airplanes at Oshkosh, it would go on forever. However, the Johnson Space Center also has an annual Lunar Balloon Festival, so I have included some of the photos taken there.

The urge to fly a DCH-2 Beaver on floats never left, so in November, I flew to Seattle and took a lesson from Kenmore Air that lasted over an hour in one of these planes. This is one of the best and easiest planes I have ever flown. I love flying my Stinson, but I could sure enjoy making my living flying the DCH-2. While I was in Seattle, I also flew a 1946 Stinson with Jim Chrysler, owner of Seattle Seaplanes. We flew twice, and once again, I thoroughly loved flying a floatplane. I haven't done it since, but hope to this coming Summer.



Matt and DCH-2 Beaver, Kenmore Air, Seattle, 2003 – love that plane!



1946 Stinson, Seattle Seaplanes, 2003



Two DCH-2 Beavers

Several months ago, I gave Hawks Abbott a phone call, and his wife Judi answered. He was outside, so she asked me if I would come up with an idea for a place he and I could go for his fiftieth birthday in Feb., 2003. In December, I hit upon the idea of going back to Jackson, Wyoming, to see the elk at the National Elk Refuge. Judi managed to surprise him, and due to the way the tickets worked out, Hawks actually flew to Houston from Washington, D. C. and then he and I were on the same Continental flight into Jackson. The day we landed the clouds partially blocked the Tetons, but we could see them quite well when we rented a Cessna-172 with an instructor and flew around the Gros Ventre Mountains which are East of the Tetons. Mike Baker, the instructor, is a young man that is planning on flying in Africa as a missionary. I admire him. We saw buffalo, moose, elk, a lone wolf, and a bald eagle. The second day we were there we rode on a wagon to the elk refuge, during the beginning of a snowstorm. The next day, there was a snowstorm closing the airports in Washington, D. C. so we went to the airport early to check on flights. On the way back to Jackson, we passed a herd of migrating elk that numbered into the thousands. They were about one half mile away, but we saw the lead bull elk and the straggling cow about forty-five minutes later. What a sight! Not a bad way to end my first trip of 2003. On the previous page is a photo of stained glass that Karoline and Michelle have made me. Karoline thought that the stained glass elk doesn't go well with the shuttle, the balloon, and the two airplanes. I told her that I loved seeing elk as much as I do airplanes, so I think the stained glass all go together just fine.



Maule-7 Turbine at airport in Jackson, Wyoming. Great shot of plane and Tetons! Used by permission from Mr. Jeremy Ainsworth



Tetons, 2002



Tetons, 2001



Stained glass that Karoline and Michelle have made.



Elk on refuge during snowstorm, Jackson, Wyo. Feb. 2003

Back home in Bacliff, Texas, I keep flying as much as possible. One of the air traffic controllers told me that the Stinson's encoding altimeter / transponder read 3300 feet, although the altimeter inside the plane said I was at 5500 feet. After the annual inspection was complete, Tom, Jim Gardner, and I flew to Beaumont in a Cessna-172 to pick up the Stinson, and Tom and Jim brought it back to Houston. That same day I took it up, and my ground speed on the GPS receiver said I was traveling over 900 knots! A couple of days later, Jim followed me in his Cessna-120 to Galveston to have avionics work done. The man at the shop said the encoder read -2000 feet below sea level. I have often heard it said to trust your instruments, but somehow, flying Mach 1 at 2000 feet below the surface sounds like the Stinson is a rocket mole!

Jim flew the Stinson when I took the photograph on the cover of this story. His passenger was Quincy Bush, a teenager whom I have been working with for a couple of years in the Big Brother program. This was Quincy's first ever plane ride. Jim also was the pilot in his C-120 when a friend of his flying a Pitts took the photo of it.



Jim Gardner's C-120

In my years of flying on airplanes, I have flown over mountains, canyons, volcanoes, oceans, New York City and the World Trade Center and Statue of Liberty, the St. Louis arch, the Houston Astrodome, Monument Valley, the Tetons, Mt. Rushmore, the Golden Gate Bridge, the Grand Canyon, volcanoes in South America, Mt. Fuji in Japan, Denali in Alaska, gone to Russia and to Florida to see space launches and to China where I saw the Great Wall and to Mongolia where I saw men using trained eagles to hunt, traveled to Antarctica eight times and the South Pole ten times, seen the Sydney Opera House from the air, countless farms and deserts, managed to hit all seven continents and all fifty states, and I could go on forever. These pages that I have written are of memories that have been influenced by aviation.

“We contrive to make the invisible air support us, we relinquish the security of feet on the ground because flying is demanding, delightful, beautiful: because we love it. Very few of us are actually crazy, and nearly all of us manage the risks as well as we can, but we all willingly trade some of our security for the immeasurable beauty of the sky.” - Paul J. Sampson



Grand Canyon photos

On the last weekend of April I flew the Stinson to Dallas by myself. It was the longest cross-country trip I had ever flown solo. I can become quite accustomed to this kind of lifestyle. When I landed at Redbird Airport, I taxied to one of the aviation outfits, where a line boy directed me to park the plane next to the double doors of the lobby. I had previously reserved a rental car; five minutes after engine shutdown I drove away. Once back in Houston, I taxied to my hangar, opened the doors, and drove my red Ford F-250 pickup out so I could park the plane. What a way to travel!

There comes a time to shut up, so that's what I'm going to do. My next big adventure is to go to British Columbia in June and take a mountain flying course,

and then spend another week in Alaska again. Hopefully, I can fly floatplanes while there. Next year, I hope to fly solo in the African bush for a couple of weeks. The next version of this story should have details of these flying adventures. Hope you have liked this one.

Camyrn is now over a month old. In the photo taken when she was a month old, she was wearing the airplane shirt that I bought her. I bought her another outfit that says, "World Traveler", but it's too big for her. Maybe when she grows into it, I can make those words come true for her! If not then, perhaps some other day.

Thank you God for all the flying and good things You have given me, and God Speed to all of you.

Matthew A. Nelson, Esq., STS-144, New Grandpa, and Stinson owner and pilot



Camyrn at age one month, with airplane on her shirt