

FLYING LESSONS

By John S. Halbert

*"---There are old pilots, and there are bold pilots.
But there are NO old, bold pilots . . ."
---Aviation Maxim*

Summer, 1964:

Remembering my daddy's stories of his barnstorming days as an airplane pilot when he was just out of high school, I resolved to try to match his exploits. However, there was a slight complication: I didn't have a car. This meant that I would have to *walk* to and from the airport every time I went flying---unless I could talk daddy out of the Buick for a few hours. In any case, I figured I could ride the bus to school and to work, and, besides---flying an airplane would be a lot more fun than driving a car.

A few days later, when I showed up at the office of the flight school in the ancient and cramped airline terminal building at the Muscle Shoals Airport, at Muscle Shoals, Alabama, I introduced myself to Ray, thirty-something fellow who said he would be my instructor. Outside, we stepped across the concrete apron in the direction of a smallish, single-engined airplane.

"*That's* what we'll be flying?" It looked awfully tiny. "Where's the back seat?"

"It's a '*Piper Colt*' . . . it holds two people side-by-side---*it has no back seat.*" He pointed at numbers and letters on its side: "**4-6-0-2-Z**". "We'll use the call sign, 'Zero-Two-Zulu' when we call the control tower on the radio."

Ray explained that the first thing to do was to look around the outside of the airplane, a procedure known as the "pre-flight," or the "walk-around" inspection. He said to look for unusual things, such as leaking fuel or a low tire. This done, we climbed up into the cockpit and fastened our seat belts. Ray settled into the left seat, which I later learned was the traditional chief pilot's slot, and I took the right-hand seat. In front of both seats was a rectangular-shaped wheel that reminded me of an oddly-shaped automobile steering wheel, except it moved back-and-forth as well as it turned left-to-right. At my feet were two pedals, the same as before the other seat. Right away, I discovered that whatever happened to the wheel in front of me and to the pedals, also took place on the other side. "Dual-controls", Ray called the arrangement.

When we were strapped-in, he turned on an instrument labeled the "Gyro-Compass", that reacted with a rising whine as the needle swung around the dial to what I took to be the airplane's current heading on the ground in relation to the direction of "North". He twisted another knob, and the communications radio burst out with static.

Ray pushed open the window next to his seat and yelled, "Clear Prop!" then reached over and pulled a knob on the instrument panel. The engine reacted with a whine and the propeller in front of us started jerking around in a circle, at the same time making a sound like, '*Whuff! Whuff!*' All at once, the engine roared to life, enveloping the plane in a cloud of blue-gray smoke

that momentarily blew back past the windows as the engine settled down to a steady rumble.

After a scan of the instruments, Ray turned to me. "Let's get going!"

By this time, I was pretty excited, and we hadn't even yet moved.

Ray pushed the throttle knob forward, and with a burst of enthusiasm from the engine, the plane began to waddle down the apron toward the taxi-way.

Up to this point, I had only watched what Ray had been doing, but he called at me over the engine noise to grab hold of the wheel, place my feet on the pedals and to observe what he did and how it felt at the controls. My excitement turned to apprehension as I followed his instructions, but I was determined not to let him know this. I grasped my fingers around the wheel and my feet felt for the vibrating rudder pedals.

Out the taxiway, just aside the end of the runway, Ray swung the little Piper around, locked the brakes and pushed the throttle knob forward. As the engine raced faster and faster, the pointers swung around and stopped at what I guessed were the proper positions on their dials. Looking confident that the airplane was in good shape, he eased off the throttle, picked up the microphone and called the tower.

"Muscle Shoals Radio, this is Piper Colt Zero-Two-Zulu---over . . . "

There was static, then a clear voice crackled from a tiny loudspeaker over our heads. "Zero-Two-Zulu--Go ahead!"

Ray radioed that we planned a local "Visual Flight Rules" training flight, that I would soon come to know as a "V-F-R" flight.

The tower controller responded with numbers and degrees of heading which I didn't understand, but which seemed to satisfy Ray. He nodded, stowed the microphone in a slot underneath the instrument panel, and looked out of the plane, at the same time directing me to scan the view on my side as he swung the aircraft around in place, steering the front wheel with the foot pedals. Everything was clear all around, so Ray maneuvered the small aircraft into takeoff position, pulled on the brake lever, and once more reached for the throttle.

His hand moved the lever forward and, with the brakes locked, the engine revolutions increased until I thought the airplane would shake apart. Scanning the instruments one more time with the engine roaring at full power, he released the brakes and Zero-Two-Zulu leaped forward. In a few seconds, we were racing fifty---then sixty---miles an hour down the runway. The plane began to yaw from side-to-side, the wheels felt lighter on the pavement, and I could feel the wings tugging the Piper upward. At seventy miles an hour, Ray eased back on the wheel and the ground fell away underneath us. As we continued to climb, the end of the runway slid past below and behind the airplane.

Over the roar of the engine, Ray shouted at me to get a *REALLY* good grip on the wheel in front of me and to make sure my feet were on the pedals. I nodded, and he motioned for me to fly the airplane! I watched as he took his hands and feet off the controls. I was piloting an airplane!

"Push the left pedal down just a bit, and at the same time turn the wheel slightly to the left," Ray called out. I did as I was told, and the Colt responded with an easy left turn. Ray motioned for me to do the same thing with the right pedal and the wheel, and the plane banked around in a lazy right turn. After a few more left turns and right turns, I realized that maneuvering an airplane in midair was not really all that difficult. For an hour, we flew around while I got the feel of the airplane, including setting the plane for level flight using the trim tabs that were controlled by a crank over the top of the windshield.

My real education in flying an airplane came in the second hour of the lesson. Our gyrations

in the sky gradually brought us back closer to the airport at an altitude of about a thousand feet.

Ray issued a series of instructions, and I lined up the plane with the runway. "Okay . . . turn on the 'carburetor heat' to 'high,' and ease off on the throttle---"

The plane began to sink.

"More throttle!" Ray yelled.

I pushed the throttle lever forward, which caused the engine to increase its revolutions, and in a few seconds, the plane leveled off. He told me to ease back on the throttle again and set up a glide slope that would bring us over the end of the runway about a hundred feet off the ground.

Right away, it became obvious that landing an airplane was a *MUCH* trickier proposition than making lazy turns in the air. "You're doing fine!" Ray shouted, and sure enough, a couple of minutes later, we swept over the end of the runway.

"Okay---now!" He motioned. "Cut the throttle! Pull back on the wheel!"

I tugged on the throttle lever with my left hand; at the same time I hauled back on the control wheel with my right hand, and a moment later, with a swish and a thump, the tires settled onto the concrete. I had landed the airplane!

Ray's strident voice cut over the engine noise. "Full throttle! Take off!"

I shoved the throttle lever all the way forward, the engine roared anew and the aircraft began rolling faster.

"Watch where you're going!" We were drifting toward the right edge of the runway as we raced along! "A little left pedal!" I touched the foot-pedal and the small ship eased back on course down the middle of the runway, gaining speed all the time. "Takeoff speed is seventy! Watch the airspeed indicator!" With a momentary stab of panic, I scanned the instruments, at the same time trying to remember where the dial was. About the time I found it, there came that bouncy, airy feeling of the wheels becoming lighter and lighter on the pavement as our speed increased. The indicator showed that we had reached takeoff speed.

"Rotate! Pull back!" With both hands on the wheel, I drew the control toward me, and suddenly, the bouncing of the wheels ceased and the pavement dropped away. That's when I learned the meaning of the word, "Rotate"---when you pull back on the control wheel that lowers the tail and lifts the nose of the plane, causing the main landing wheels leave the ground. It sounded pretty cool: "Rotate!"

We spent the remainder of the two-hour lesson making touch-and-go landings, as they were called. "

Before I realized it, the session was over, and I taxied the Piper up to the ramp and cut the engine. Ray turned to me with a grin. "You're a natural pilot!"

Back inside the aluminum terminal building, when he told me I would be spending as much time in a classroom as in the air. I was starting to understand that there was a lot more to becoming a licensed pilot, than just doing a survivable job of taking off and landing an airplane. Classroom sessions, known as "ground school," promised to be a grueling curriculum of flight theory, rules, regulations, navigation, and government tests.

Elated by the afternoon's adventure, I bounded out of the terminal building and tossed my logbook onto the back seat of daddy's Buick that I had borrowed for my first lesson---a luxury I suspected I was not likely to enjoy very often.

Sure enough, a few days later, for my second flying lesson, I had to walk all the way out to the airport which was the first time I had ever seen up-close the aborted land venture of the 1920's "Detroit Park" project. It was part of the local folklore about how Henry Ford and Thomas Edison in those days had planned to build big factories at Muscle Shoals to build Ford cars. The

two had visited the area several times, planning a seventy-five-mile-long city along the Tennessee river to be called, "Detroit Park" with a development company to handle land sales and construction of the city and the industrial plants. But the Federal Government had stepped-in at the last moment and took over the land that the industrialists had planned for their projects and the ventures fell-through. Hiking along, I observed close-up the carefully-crafted streets, sidewalks and fire hydrants that were still out there in the fields, although there were no buildings or people anywhere in sight. By that time, the hydrants had been there for almost forty years and had accumulated a layer of rust, but otherwise looked solid. Here and there iron lampposts still stood tall and upright with most of the glass globes in the light fixtures still intact. As I walked through the area, I could see that the concrete streets and sidewalks, along with the curbs and gutters were in remarkably good condition; as orderly as when they had been originally laid-out. The only jarring note was the tangled growth of weeds that overran nearly all the lots.

Making my way out Second Street Road, leaving the deserted streets behind, I could see in the distance the old yellow brick "Detroit Park Building" that we had watched perform a strange optical illusion many times as we had driven to the airport when I was a youngster. Driving toward it, for many miles the structure had seemed to always stay off in the distance, until all at once it would pop-up full-sized right in front of us.

When I got there---the first time I had actually seen it up-close---on impulse, I walked completely around it and studied in detail the dignified-looking structure that had so intrigued me over the years. I could see that the brick veneer and stonework were as solid as new---whoever had built the structure had really put a lot of care and effort into it. Standing alongside it, I was struck by its quiet solitude. As no one lived near the isolated intersection, only infrequently did a vehicle come along. The only recurring sound was a faint, distant rumble of traffic somewhere---probably miles away. Even though it was a peaceful place, the overall mood was one of melancholy loneliness. I peered through the big picture windows into the building's interior. It was empty. The only evidence that there had ever been any human life in the place at all was an antique-looking soft drink bottle that stood upright on the floor next to the far wall. The inside of the structure looked solid and dry, which meant the building had remained remarkably intact ever since it had been built--when was it? I walked around to the cornerstone and read the inscription: "1925" was the year the sculpted letters said it was constructed.

Once more, I wondered who owned it and whether it could still be put to some kind of use. It seemed a shame to waste such a fine, solid, defiant old structure that had been crafted with such wonderful integrity decades ago. I remembered how, as a youngster riding with the family out to the airport and passing by it, I had had fantasies of owning it. Even later, I had tried to find out to whom it belonged, but nothing had ever come of it.

At length, I resumed my trek to the airport for the flying lesson. When I arrived, Ray told me we would be flying higher and farther than last time.

After I took off the plane from the runway, he told me to push the throttle forward to full power. We began a long climb that went on for some minutes and took us out over the countryside. By the time he told me to level off, we were over seven-thousand feet above the ground. As we had been performing our previous flying exercises at about twelve-hundred feet, the difference was startling. From this height, everything down below looked a world in miniature---like a gigantic model railroad. Inside the plane, it got noticeably cooler, even though it was mid-summer Ray reminded me to turn on the carburetor heat, which would prevent ice crystals from forming in the fuel system. We spent the rest of the hour doing high-altitude (for the

little airplane) maneuvers.

The second hour of the day's lesson was in a ground-school classroom. Ray was the instructor, and there were several other new student pilots in the class.

When the session was over, I was surprised to discover my father waiting outside in his Buick. "Going my way?" he grinned. ". . . Thought you might want to *ride* home instead of walking!"

Daddy reminded me the late-afternoon airliner would be arriving in a few minutes--would I like to see it? And so, for one more time, he and I parked by the fence at the end of the runway and watched the big airplane swoop down and land on the concrete strip. Just as in the old days, the pilot cut his left engine and taxied the last leg to the terminal with one propeller stopped. In a few minutes, he roared back over our car just as the big airplanes had done so long ago when we had had the old Dodge.

It was a nice gesture from my father---I believe he got as much enjoyment out of it as I did.

He asked me how my flying lessons were coming along, and I told him what we had been doing up there in the sky with the Piper Colt. Both of us had now flown airplanes from the same airfield, and now that the airliner had used the same runway that both of us had flown from as part of our own flying lessons, all our common flight experiences had come full-circle.

Daddy seemed to be convinced that I was serious about aviation, as he let me use the car the next time I went flying. It was a good thing that he did---the next session was to be an exhausting one.

After Ray and I took off in the Colt, we headed northeast across the river toward Shoals Creek. A golf course, formerly a flying field, was situated on a jutting peninsula on the Tennessee River, that was about two miles wide at that point. The airstrip had been planted with grass and was now part of the golf course fairway. However, from the air, the outlines of the runway were still visible. To my surprise, when I suggested that we do a touch-and-go at "Skypark", which was the name of the golf course, Ray agreed. I brought the plane in over the water and set down right-smack-in-the-middle of a *golf tournament!* As we came in straight toward them, we could see people running in all directions, dragging their golf carts to get out of our way! After I touched-down on the grass, I immediately had to go to full power to clear a row of trees at the far end of the fairway strip! We barely made it over the treetops.

"Zero-Two-Zulu's" landing that day in the summer of 1964 was the very last one ever made at Skypark, as our notoriety caused a ban on all future airplane landings on the golf course. (The place where the fairways once jutted out into the Tennessee river is now a residential development.)

Zooming up and away from the golf games, we headed out over the countryside for some advanced aerial maneuvers. Climbing up to our now-familiar seven-thousand feet, Ray pointed at a mile-long, lazy-looking white cloud floating up ahead. "Fly into that cloud!" he shouted over the engine noise. I moved the controls and Zero-Two-Zulu nosed into the towering, fluffy mass. "Watch the artificial horizon! That's the only way you'll be able to keep the plane level!"

But I was so excited about being swallowed-up by the cloud, I forgot to look at the vital instrument that indicated which direction was up and which direction was down in relation to the airplane. As we emerged from the cloud a minute later, I looked down to check the ground---*but it wasn't there!* I looked up, and---above us---was the countryside! While we were inside the cloud, the Piper had turned completely upside-down and was now flying bottoms-up! With a shout, Ray grabbed the controls and *c-a-r-e-f-u-l-l-y* maneuvered us back onto level flight.

At the airfield, a few minutes later, whimpering, Ray knelt and kissed the ground. I

wondered if the gesture was genuine, or he was just being melodramatic, until he told me the Piper's wings could have ripped off!

After the next flying lesson, Ray took me to the control tower, where I met the Flight Service Station men of the Federal Aviation Administration. Their glassed-in command position was perched atop one of two identical masonry structures at the front corners of the Federal Hangar, an enormous 1930's-era black-metal-and-stone-edifice housing government aircraft. One tower was the domain of the flight controllers who also maintained the local weather station. The other was vacant. The people who worked there told me about the ground-control electronics. Ray said that weather figured greatly in aviation.

In my next lesson I learned just how big a factor that weather could be. Once more, I trooped along the familiar sidewalks out Second Street Road. But after a couple of hours of walking, about the time I reached the airfield, a rainstorm blew in and we had to cancel the day's planned flight---a big disappointment, as Ray had scheduled another two-hour session. I had no choice but to walk back home in rain showers that gave me a thorough soaking.

That episode started me thinking again about priorities. It was obvious that I faced many more walking trips to the airport before I could obtain my pilot's license. In addition, it was a never-ending hassle having to arrange transportation to get to work and to everywhere else. To further complicate matters, my social life depended on Daddy's Buick, which created a lot of awkward situations. And my second year of commuting to college loomed ahead of me.

I called Ray on the telephone and broke the news to him: I was going to have to give up the flying lessons. "Just temporary," I explained, but I was sure from the disappointed tone of his voice that he suspected I probably wouldn't be resuming flying anytime soon, if ever.

It was a tough, but necessary decision. As much as I enjoyed flying, with school upcoming, I needed a car---no question about that. Flying lessons had been an enjoyable, though expensive pursuit, but the real world dictated that I had to have my own transportation.

I explained my decision to Daddy, who also understood. "That was the same reason I didn't get my license, either," he told me, "I had to get a car because my new job right out of high school was so far from home."

A few months later, I saw Ray at the airport. He told me that Zero-Two-Zulu had come to a sad end not long after I had stopped my flying lessons. Another student pilot had run it out of gas and crashed the plane in a field where it was destroyed. The news left me feeling sad, because I remembered that little airplane with something bordering on affection. It had carried me into the skies to adventures I would never forget. Ray and I reminisced about landing on the golf course and flying upside-down. He chuckled when I reminded him of the time on takeoff when I purposely held the airplane on the runway until the last fifty feet--then flew just over the top of the fence at the end of the strip. I told him of the airliner that had nearly run through us and our car that time long ago. For the first time I told him why I had flown out over the cotton field only a few feet above the ground and had hop-scotched across Second Street Road. "I was just curious to find out how the view was for the people in the airliner, that time. Nothing personal!"

Ray told me he thought I had played a trick on him, and was glad I had not had a seizure, or something. He went on that he wished I had kept-up my flying lessons, as I had been a promising student pilot, he said, even though I had not finished the course.

But I had needed a car, and that was that.

Sometime not long afterward, driving out Second Street Road, I discovered that the old yellow-brick-and stone "Detroit Park Building" was no longer there! All that remained was an empty lot and some odds-and-ends wreckage. It must have just happened. I pulled my car to the

edge of the road and got out. I stepped over to a pile of bricks and some other materials that was shoved aside. Ruttled tracks on the ground were mute testimony of the trucks that had hauled away the remains of the structure. As I idly kicked at a pile of tinder-wood, I noticed something glint in the sunshine. I got down on my knees and pulled back a board to reveal an old bottle. *The antique soft drink bottle!* It was the same glass container I had seen standing inside the building the day I had walked to the airport for a flying lesson! If I couldn't own the building, I figured I could at least have a souvenir of it.

I stood and looked at the silent rubble of the old building, reflecting that it was a sad ending to a venerable structure that had signified failure, and yet in its own way had stood in stalwart defiance of all the odds for so long. With the building now gone, the drive to the airport just wouldn't be the same.

Yet, there were signs that its legacy would somehow live on. While "Muscle Shoals", as the town was now called, continued to grow, builders and developers would make use of the streets, sidewalks, sewers, water lines, light standards and fire hydrants that had been the aborted "Detroit Park" story. In a few years, modern houses would take over the vacant lots and the promise of a bigger city could again become possible.

While I stood contemplating all this, I heard a droning sound that soon became louder. Looking up, I spotted a small plane flying overhead toward the airport. Squinting, I thought there was something familiar about it---with a start of realization I saw that *it was a Piper Colt!* "Zero-Two-Zulu" was now gone forever, but there was something comforting about again seeing an airplane just like it in flying condition..

I grasped the old bottle, and with one last look-around at the now-barren corner where the "Detroit Park Building" had stood for so long, I got back into my car and drove off.