

# Airplane

This story begins when my brother Ted returned from service in the Army after the end of World War II. I was 16 years old at the time. From his earliest years, Ted had cultivated an enduring fascination with airplanes. He had built and flown gas-powered models throughout his teenage years—and I was usually around to help chase them down when he flew them. (Radio controls were the next thing to science fiction in those days.) Ted would have liked to qualify for flight training during the war, but he had lost most of the hearing in his left ear as the result of a childhood infection. So, he served in the infantry and, when he returned from overseas with some accumulated cash, he spent that cash purchasing a real airplane, a two-place 1946 Aeronca Chief. For a 16-year-old kid, having an older brother with his own airplane was a really cool deal.



Here is a photo of the plane, taken about a decade later with two of my kids posing with it.

He bought the plane at an airport in Waterloo and went there for flying lessons whenever he could spare the time. I often went with him and I can still recall the day he went for his first solo flight. He was a natural at the controls of an airplane. That day, I recalled being apprehensive as he turned into his final approach for his first solo landing. He was too high. But he simply slipped out of the turn to the proper elevation and brought it in for a perfect landing—like a veteran pilot rather than a guy with just a few hours of instruction. While he was taking instruction, he told me that he practiced flying that airplane every night in his sleep—so he actually had a lot more hours at the controls than his logbook showed.

It was only a short time until he had accumulated enough solo hours—and the required additional dual instruction—to receive his private license. Only then was I allowed to ride with him as a passenger—which I awaited with great anticipation. In fact, I was his primary passenger in those early years. He had moved the airplane from the Waterloo airport and rented tie-down space on a farm-field landing strip south of town where a guy named Jack Evans, recently back from the war, had established a one-airplane flying service. From that field we embarked on a multitude of adventures in the air over and around Waverly.

In those days, self-starters on small airplanes were rare. To start the engine, somebody had to stand in front of the plane and crank the propeller. Most often, I was the only one available for the job. However, I don't ever recall being afraid of doing it...and it was a pretty small price to pay for the privilege of riding right seat in those airborne excursions. My brother loved to fly—and he was an excellent pilot—so my opportunities for right-seat flight time were frequent...and always exciting. And, I'm sure he enjoyed showing his little brother what that little plane could do. He took me through stalls and spins, lectured me on air safety rules and frequently gave me the controls to build on the brief instruction I had had three years earlier in that Piper Cub in Burlington.

Because my flights with him were so frequent in those days—that is, before he met his future wife and began to spend more time with her—only a few incidents from those excursions remain firmly entrenched in my memory after all these years. Most occurred around Waverly,

although a couple of memorable cross-country trips are worth describing. One unforgettable local excursion occurred over the cemetery in Waverly and was accompanied by the only occasion in which I barfed in the airplane. To explain the circumstances of that occasion, I need to return briefly to the greenhouse business our family had acquired a couple of years earlier.

At that time, Memorial Day was a holiday that generated a very large portion of the annual business carried on at the greenhouse. Part of the reason for the large sales volume in the last week of May each year was the perpetual care of burial plots at the local cemetery. Families all over the country had relatives buried in that cemetery and they wanted flowers placed on the graves for Memorial Day—flowers that would remain in bloom throughout the summer. So, the greenhouse offered a service for these families, guaranteeing that an urn of flowers would be placed on the loved one's grave before Memorial Day each year and removed by the first frost that fall. The families owned the urns and we stored them over the winter.

With somewhere around a thousand urns to be placed on graves all over the cemetery in the day or two before May 30, somebody had to know how to locate where they were. George Lane, the cemetery sexton—and Dad's frequent cribbage adversary—knew where all the bodies were buried, but he was plenty busy himself with all the preparations for Memorial Day. So we needed an up-to-date map to send out with the crews that were delivering the urns, to give them an idea where to find each burial plot. Thus, Ted and I were sent up in his plane to take aerial photographs of the cemetery that could be reproduced and used as guides for the delivery crews.

The only camera we had at that time was an old, fold-up bellows Kodak that had been in the family for years and had been used to record all of us during our growing-up years. But it still took good pictures, so on a nice clear day in early spring, we took to the air and Ted circled over the south end of town while I concentrated on aiming the camera at the cemetery below. And therein was the problem. I had been through stalls and spins and rough air many times in that airplane without any effect on my stomach. But, concentrating on focusing that camera while the airplane was in a constant bank was more than my equilibrium could endure...and I lost my breakfast. The good news is that the pictures turned out OK and we used them for a number of years. It was also good news to my brother that I remembered his earlier warning never to barf out the window.

Cross-country trips were less common, because we had to have a particular reason for making the trip—and a place to land when we got there. One such place was Mason City, IA, about 60 road miles northwest of Waverly. Our reason for going there related to the condition of my teeth. They were too big and there were too many of them, given the space available. So, at the age of 17, the local dentist determined that, with four wisdom teeth yet to make their appearance, something had to be done to avoid serious problems down the line. He recommended that I have several teeth removed and the remainder straightened by an orthodontist. The orthodontist my parents chose was in Mason City. So, every month or so for the next year, I had to arrive at Dr. Oldham's office to endure the abuses that only an orthodontist can inflict.

Most of the time I went by car, but although we now had sufficient rolling stock in the family to allow a vehicle to be absent for the required four to five hours, sometimes it worked out best for Ted to fly me there. He, of course, always jumped at the opportunity. Not only did he get a half day off of work, he got to spend it doing what he loved most—flying that airplane. And, of course, the trip by air cut the travel time almost in half. I don't recall now how I got to my appointments from the Mason City airport—possibly by taxi—but Ted remained at the

airport, where he was delighted to hobnob with local pilots while I endured Dr. Oldham's painful manipulations.

Perhaps our most memorable cross-country trip took place on a Sunday in May 1947. The trip itself was not so memorable as what happened at our destination. On that day, we journeyed to Burlington, IA, to visit our favorite aunt and uncle. I have related earlier tales of travels to visit them, most notably our June 1944 journey there in Ted's "new" 1935 Terraplane—and my 1943 adventure logging my first flight instruction in a Piper Cub at the local airport in Burlington. And, it was to that same airport we were headed this particular day.

We had been told that we had to arrive before noon, because the airport was being closed for an air show that was scheduled that Sunday afternoon. We landed there in plenty of time and Uncle Bob came to pick us up, as they no longer lived within walking distance of the airport. We always seemed to be very welcome at the Giles home, in part I expect because they had only daughters—no sons. They probably hadn't seen Ted since he got out of the Army the year before and I was a student—and athlete—at the high school from which they both had graduated about the time I was born. So, I'm sure we had a lot to talk about.

And that's what we were doing, over the dinner table, when the phone rang. I should probably mention that Uncle Bob had been the coroner in that county for many years. In those days, electing an undertaker to be the coroner was a common practice. And, this particular phone call had to do with his duties as coroner. But, when he returned to the table, it became clear that it was not a routine death that required his official attention that day. One of the Navy pilots in the air show had just crashed his airplane into a neighborhood next to the airport. He turned to us and said, "Cmon, I may need you," and headed for the door. We followed excitedly, a bit stunned and having no idea what to expect.

The police had begun to cordon off the area by the time we arrived at the crash scene, but chaos and confusion were apparent everywhere. However, a couple of unique circumstances had intervened to keep the area from being the scene of total devastation we had expected to find. Those circumstances, however, did not get included in the story that went out on the wire that day:

#### ***Plane Kills 2 Schoolboys Playing Ball***

*Burlington, Ia., May 18, (AP)---A navy pilot and two schoolboys were killed and six young persons seriously injured today when a fighter plane went out of control at an airshow and crashed on a school playground.*

*More than 3,500 persons at the airshow saw the Corsair fighter zoom low across the Municipal Airport during a mock formation raid. It went into a series of barrel rolls, then appeared to go out of control and crashed and burned on the school grounds where 14 youngsters were playing ball.*

*The dead schoolboys were identified as RONALD HAGEMEIER, 16, and RICHARD CHARLES GRANT, 14.*

*The navy declined to release the name of the pilot pending notification of next of kin.*

*The naval reserve air show was being staged by 35 planes from Lambert Field, St. Louis, to signal the opening of National Naval Reserve Week.*

*The crash occurred just 15 minutes after the show had opened with a low level simulated attack on the field. The spectators saw the plane go down behind a clump of trees north of the field. Then the smoke billowed up.*

*Cort Klein, city editor of the Burlington Hawkeye-Gazette, gave this*

*description of the crash:*

*The plane plowed through the backstop fence of the Perkins School Playground, hurtled across the ball diamond, and crashed into a tree at a street intersection. The pilot's mangled body was found at the base of the tree which had snapped off. Parts of it were 175 feet away.*

*The plane exploded and burned. A 5-year-old girl standing across the street was severely burned by sprays of gasoline. The school-boys killed and injured were hit by flying parts of the plane wreckage.*

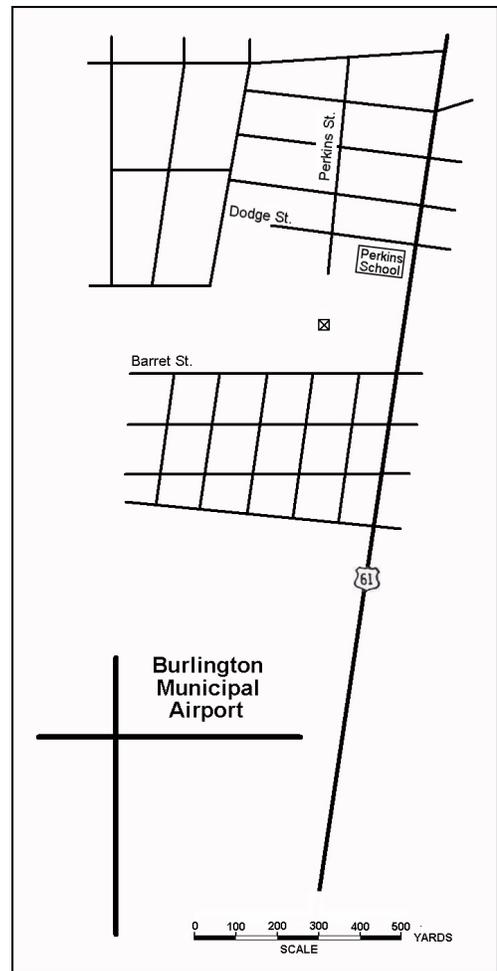
*Several nearby houses also were damaged by flying debris. Wreckage was scattered over four blocks.*

What the wire service account didn't elaborate was why it was that a ten thousand pound fighter plane, traveling at an estimated 300 miles per hour could go down headed directly toward children playing in a schoolyard and produce only two fatalities on the ground and minimal damage to property in the surrounding residential area.

From what I remember being told that day, the airplane was on its back when it hit the ground. Its initial impact was in a cultivated farm field that separated the school and another neighborhood by about 200 yards. The map on the right shows the area in which the accident occurred. It should have been expected that a plane traveling that fast would have plowed a furrow right through the schoolyard and into the houses behind it, causing a major disaster—but it didn't. Why? Being privileged to walk freely around the restricted area that day, I had the opportunity to discover the likely answer.

What I found, right in the middle of the farm field, was a concrete foundation that had possibly once been the base for a windmill. I also found, in the plowed surface of the field, an ever-widening, ever-deepening furrow—which had probably been made by the canopy of the airplane—and which was leading directly toward that block of concrete. My assumption at the time was that this seemingly insignificant block of concrete had saved the day for residents of that neighborhood—and, particularly, most of the children playing in the schoolyard. If that airplane had not crashed into that foundation—and had it not disintegrated in the process—the results would have been very different.

The location of that concrete foundation is shown on the map as a small square with an "x" in it. The other good fortune the neighborhood experienced that day was the heading of the airplane at the time of impact. You will notice on the map that debris heading north from that point of impact would be traveling mostly right down Perkins Street. In fact, according to reports in the local Burlington newspaper, that's where most of the debris was found—some of it four blocks up the street. There was, of course, damage to



some houses (one piece of the engine smashed through the kitchen of one house facing the schoolyard, just after the family had finished eating dinner there) but considering the potential for major destruction, neighborhood homes emerged relatively unscathed.

However, I was not on the crash site that day to locate pieces of the airplane. I was there to help find pieces of the pilot. If, as I surmised—that the furrow I found leading up to the concrete foundation had been made by the canopy of the aircraft—then the trauma to the pilot would have been horrendous...and it was. Uncle Bob instructed us before we got to the site that we were not to touch anything we found if we considered that it might be a body part. We were simply to identify and mark it. There were a lot of them. I found pieces of bone no bigger than a dime. The most memorable discovery was an arm, hanging by the elbow on a tree branch some 15 feet in the air.

However, our usefulness as assistants to the coroner that day came to an end well before he had completed his work on the site. We had to be back in Waverly before dark and it was a trip of somewhat over two hours. Fortunately, we didn't need a ride to the Burlington airport. It was only a short walk from where we were working.

I don't recall anything about our conversation on the way home, but I can only imagine what transpired between a 17-year-old and a 20-year-old after an experience like that. When we arrived in Waverly, we probably would have needed a lift back to town. There was no phone at the strip, so we would use a tried and true method to let our parent know we were home and needed a ride—buzzing the greenhouse. It worked every time.