

A FLIGHT YOU'D NEVER FORGET

The flight lasted just a few minutes, but so many of the details are rich and vivid to me.

The wind was coming from the north not the south, which was unusual for that time of year. And my wheels made a distinct rumbling sound as they rolled across the rural Texas airstrip. I remember the smell of the warm engine oil, and how it drifted into the cockpit as I prepared to take off. There was also the smell of freshly cut grass in the air.

I have a clear recollection of how my body felt—this heightened sense of alertness—as I taxied to the end of the runway, went through my checklist, and got ready to go. And I recall the moment the plane lifted into the air and, just three minutes later, how I would need to return to the runway, intensely focused on the tasks at hand.

All these memories are with me still.

A pilot can take off and land thousands of times in his life, and so much of it feels like a speeding blur. But almost always, there is a particular flight that challenges a pilot or teaches or changes him, and every sensory moment of that experience remains in his head forever.

I have had a few unforgettable flights in my life, and they continue to live in my mind, conjuring up a host of emotions and reasons for reflection. One took me to New York's Hudson River on a cold January day in 2009. But before that, perhaps the most vivid was the one I've just described: my first solo flight, late on a Saturday afternoon at a grass airstrip in Sherman, Texas. It was June 3, 1967, and I was sixteen years old.

I hold on to this one, and a handful of others, as I look back on all the forces that molded me as a boy, as a man, and as a pilot. Both in the air and on the ground, I was shaped by many powerful lessons and experiences—and many people. I am grateful for all of them. It's as if these moments from my life were deposited in a bank until I needed them. As I worked to safely land Flight 1549 in the Hudson, almost subconsciously, I drew on those experiences.

For a few months when I was four years old, I wanted to be a policeman and then a fireman. By the time I was five, however, I knew exactly what I wanted to do with my life—and that was to fly.

I never wavered once this possibility came into my head. Or more precisely, came over my head, in the form of jet fighters that crisscrossed the sky above my childhood home outside Denison, Texas.

We lived by a lake on a sparse stretch of land nine miles north of Perrin Air Force Base. Because it was such a rural area, the jets flew pretty low, at about three thousand feet, and you could always hear them coming. My dad would give me his binoculars, and I loved looking into the distance, to the horizon, wondering what was out there. It fed my wanderlust. And in the case of the jets, what was out there was even more exciting because it was coming closer and closer at a very high rate of speed.

This was the 1950s, and those machines were a lot louder than today's fighters. Still, I never came across people in my part of North Texas who minded the noise. We had won World War II not long before, and the Air Force was a source of pride. It wasn't until decades later, when residents near air bases began talking about the noise, that pilots

felt the need to answer the complaints. They'd sport bumper stickers that said jet noise: the sound of freedom.

Every aspect of airplanes was fascinating—the different sounds they made, the way they looked, the physics that allowed them to rocket through the sky, and most of all, the men who controlled them with obvious mastery.

I built my first model airplane when I was six years old. It was a replica of Charles Lindbergh's *Spirit of St. Louis*. I read a lot about "Lucky Lindy" and understood that his flight across the Atlantic wasn't really about luck. He planned. He prepared. He endured. That's what made him heroic to me.

By 1962, when I was eleven years old, I was already reading every book and magazine I could find that talked about flying. That was also the year I took my first plane ride. My mom, a first-grade teacher, invited me to accompany her to a statewide PTA convention in Austin, and it was her first plane ride, too.

The airport, Dallas Love Field, was seventy-five miles south of our house, and when we got there, it seemed like a magical place filled with larger-than-life people. Pilots. Stewardesses. Well-dressed passengers with somewhere to go.

In the terminal, I stopped at the newly installed statue of a Texas Ranger. The plaque read one riot, one ranger, and told the apocryphal story of a small-town disturbance in the 1890s. A local sheriff had called for a company of rangers to stop the violence, and when only one ranger showed up, the townspeople were taken aback. They'd asked for help and now wondered if they were being denied. "How many riots do you have?" the ranger allegedly asked. "If y'all got just one, all you need is one ranger. I'll take care of it."

I also saw another hero that day at the airport. I had been enthralled by the early Project Mercury space missions, so I was excited to spot a short, thin man walking through the terminal. He was wearing a suit, a tie, a hat, and his face was completely familiar to me. I recognized him from television as Lieutenant Colonel John “Shorty” Powers, the voice of Mission Control. I couldn’t bring myself to approach him, though. A guy who had all these astronauts to talk to didn’t need an eleven-year-old kid tugging at his jacket.

It was a cloudy day, a little rainy, and we walked out on the tarmac to climb a staircase onto our Braniff Airways flight, a Convair 440. My mom wore white gloves and a hat. I was in a sport coat and slacks. That’s how people traveled then. In their Sunday best.

Our seats were on the right side of the aircraft. My mom would have loved to look out the window, but she knew me. “You take the window seat,” she said, and even before the plane had moved an inch, my face was pressed against the glass, taking everything in.

As the plane sped down the runway and began to rise, I was wide-eyed. My first thought was that everything on the ground looked like a model railroad layout. My second thought was that I wanted this life in the air.

It took a few more years for me to return to the skies. When I was sixteen, I asked my dad if I could take flying lessons. He’d been a dental surgeon in the Navy during World War II. He had great respect for aviators, and he clearly saw my passion. Through a friend, he got the name of a crop-dusting pilot named L. T. Cook Jr., who had a landing strip on his property nearby.

Before World War II, Mr. Cook had been an instructor in the federal government's Civilian Pilot Training Program. At the time, isolationists didn't want the United States getting involved in the war in Europe. But President Roosevelt knew the United States was likely to enter the conflict and would need thousands of qualified pilots. Starting in 1939, veteran fliers such as Mr. Cook were charged with training civilians so they'd be ready when and if war was declared. The program was controversial at the time, but as things turned out, all of those prepared pilots helped the Allies win the war. Mr. Cook and pilot trainers like him were the unsung stateside heroes.

When I met him, he was in his late fifties, and a no-nonsense, all-business kind of man. Most of his time was spent crop dusting, but if he saw someone who seemed to have the smarts and temperament to fly, he'd take him on as a student.

I guess he liked the look of me well enough. I was this tall, quiet, earnest kid, and I was respectful because my parents had taught me to be deferential to my elders. I was also the classic introvert, and he wasn't a guy who needed much conversation. He saw I was serious about flying and that I had an obvious enthusiasm, despite my low-key demeanor. He said he'd charge me six dollars per hour for the airplane. That was the "wet rate" because it included fuel. For his time training me, he asked for another three dollars an hour. My parents paid for the airplane, so for a thirty-minute flight I owed him just \$1.50 for his instructor's fee. I paid for my share from money I earned in my job as a church janitor.

I have logbooks going back decades, covering thousands of flights. And in my first logbook, my very first entry was April 3, 1967, when Mr. Cook took me up for thirty minutes. We flew in a tandem two-seater, an Aeronca 7DC. It was a very basic propeller

airplane, built in the late 1940s. It didn't even have a radio. I had the controls in my hands from pretty much the first moment.

I sat in front, Mr. Cook sat in back with his own set of controls, and he did what pilots call "following you through." That meant he'd keep his hands hovering over his stick so he could instantly take command if I went astray with my stick. He shadowed my movements, shouting directions over the noise of the engine. As so many pilots did in the early years, he used a cardboard megaphone to aim the sound of his voice right in my ear. He spoke only when he needed to, and he rarely gave a compliment. Still, in the weeks that followed, I sensed that he thought I was catching on, and had the right instincts. I studied flying at home every night, too, taking a correspondence course that prepared me for the private pilot license written exam. Mr. Cook saw I was devoted.

Sometimes I'd arrive for a lesson and he wouldn't be there. So I'd drive into town because I knew exactly where to find him: drinking coffee at the local Dairy Queen. He'd finish his coffee, toss a tip on the table, and we'd go back to his strip.

He gave me sixteen lessons over the next couple of months, each averaging thirty minutes in the air. By June 3, my total flying time added up to seven hours and twenty-five minutes. That day, he took me up for a flight, and after ten minutes of flying around, he tapped me on the shoulder.

"All right," he said. "Bring it in for a landing and taxi over to the hangar." I did as I was told, and when we got there, he hopped out of the plane. "OK," he said. "Take it up and land three times by yourself."

He didn't wish me luck. That wasn't his way. I'm not saying he was gruff or unfeeling. It's just that he was very matter-of-fact about things. He had obviously

decided: The kid's ready. Let him go. He expected I wouldn't fall out of the sky. I'd be OK.

These days, a boy couldn't get into the air alone so quickly. Airplanes are more complex. There are all sorts of requirements and insurance issues that have to be taken care of before someone flies solo. The air traffic control system is more complicated. And instructors may be more protective, worried and wary, too.

But that day, in the North Texas countryside, I didn't have to deal with air traffic control or complicated regulations. It was just me and the plane, and Mr. Cook, who was watching me from the ground.

Because the wind was coming from the north, I had to go to the opposite end of the runway so I could take off in that direction. That wasn't the usual direction, but I got my bearings and prepared to go.

The strip was lower at the south end and sloped uphill toward the north. And even though Mr. Cook had just mowed his grass strip, it wasn't as smooth as a paved runway or a putting green.

Alone at the end of an airstrip for the first time in my life, I checked the ignition and the oil pressure. I made sure the engine, rudder, elevator, and ailerons were working properly. I went through everything on my checklist. And as my hand tightened on the control stick, I took a breath, released the brakes, and began my takeoff. Mr. Cook had told me that I'd be leaving the ground more quickly than I was used to. The reason? The plane was now lighter with him not in it.

When this type of airplane heads down a runway and is ready to fly, it just lifts off. But when a new pilot is ready to fly alone, someone has to say so. That someone was

the laconic Mr. Cook, nodding there on the sidelines as I rose into the air while he grew smaller and smaller in the field below me. I was grateful to him.

Climbing to eight hundred feet above the ground, and then circling the field, I felt an exhilarating freedom. I also felt a certain mastery. After listening, watching, asking questions, and studying hard, I had achieved something. Here I was, alone in the air.

I don't think I was smiling about my good fortune. I was too busy concentrating to allow myself to smile. And I knew Mr. Cook was watching me from under his baseball cap, his head tilted upward. I wanted to look good for him, to do everything right. I didn't want him to have a long list of things to critique me about when I landed.

As I flew, it was as if I could hear his voice. *Use the rudder to keep the controls coordinated.* Even though he wasn't there in the airplane, his words were still with me.

I was too busy to do any sightseeing. I flew over a little pond, and the town of Sherman was off to my left. But my goal was not to enjoy the view. My goal was to do this well enough so that Mr. Cook would let me do it again.

He had instructed me to make the usual rectangular pattern around the landing strip, which took about three minutes in flight, so I could practice touching the runway, lifting back into the air, and then coming back around to do it again. I had to do this three times before coming in for a final landing.

My entire first solo experience was only nine minutes or so, but I knew it was a crucial first step. I'd done my reading: In 1903, Orville Wright's first flight had traveled a distance of forty yards, had risen twenty feet in the air, and had lasted just twelve seconds.

Mr. Cook greeted me when it was all over, and as I shut down the engine, he said I'd done what he'd asked. There was no "atta boy," but I knew I'd passed the test. He told me he'd be busy crop dusting in his other plane much of the summer, and so I might as well just keep taking his Aeronca up to practice on my own. We agreed that I could return every few days to hone my skills, alone in the sky, for six dollars per hour.

Now, at age fifty-eight, I have 19,700 hours of flying time under my belt. But I can trace my professional experience back to that afternoon. It was a turning point. Though I had less than eight hours in the air, Mr. Cook had given me confidence. He had given me permission to discover that I could get a plane safely into the air and then safely back to the ground. That first solo flight served as confirmation that this would be my livelihood, and my life.

I didn't completely focus on it at the time, but I realize now that my entrance into the world of piloting was very traditional. This is how people had learned to fly since the beginning: an older, veteran pilot teaching the basics to a youngster from a grass strip under an open sky.

I look back and appreciate very much that I was a lucky young man. It was a wonderful start.

No one else in my high school was interested in being a pilot, so I was alone in my pursuit. I had friends, but a lot of the other kids saw me as this shy, studious, serious boy always reading flight manuals and heading out to the airstrip. I was not easily outgoing. I was more comfortable in a cockpit.

In some ways, I grew up fast on that airstrip, learning things that helped me see the possibilities in life, and the great risks.

One day, when I got out to Mr. Cook's hangar, I noticed a Piper Tri-Pacer, painted white with red trim, crumpled on the field at the north end of the runway. Mr. Cook told me the story. A friend of his was bringing the Tri-Pacer in for a landing, approaching the airstrip, and he had to cross over U.S. 82. He didn't realize until it was too late that there were twenty-foot-high power lines stretched along the highway. He pulled up the nose of the plane to clear the wires, but that action caused him to slow down and lose lift. His plane slammed down nose-first into the ground, and he died instantly.

No one had come yet to collect the wrecked plane, and so there it still sat at the end of the airstrip. I walked a quarter mile up to it and looked inside at the blood-splattered cockpit. In those days, airplanes had only lap belts, not shoulder harnesses, and I figured that his head must have hit the instrument panel with great violence. I tried to visualize how it all might have happened—his effort to avoid the power lines, his loss of speed, the awful impact. I forced myself to look in the cockpit, to study it. It would have been easier to look away, but I didn't.

It was a pretty sobering moment for a sixteen-year-old, and it made quite an impression on me. I realized that flying a plane meant not making mistakes. You had to maintain control of everything. You had to look out for the wires, the birds, the trees, the fog, while monitoring everything in the cockpit. You had to be vigilant and alert. It was equally important to know what was possible and what was not. One simple mistake could mean death.

I processed all this, but that sad scene didn't give me pause. I vowed to learn all there was to know to minimize the risks.

I knew I never wanted to be a hot dog—that could get me killed—but I did make my own fun. I'd tell my parents and younger sister to step outside our home at an appointed time, and then I'd fly over and waggle the wings up and down to say hello to them. We lived in such a sparsely populated area that regulations allowed me to fly as low as five hundred feet above the house. My family couldn't exactly see my face, but they could see me waving at them.

By October 1968, after seventy hours in the air, I was ready to try for a private pilot certificate, which required a “check ride” with an FAA examiner. I passed, which allowed me to fly with a passenger.

I thought the honor of first passenger ought to go to my mother, and my logbook shows I took her for a ride on October 29, 1968, the day after I got my certificate. I put a simple little star next to the flight data in the logbook; a small acknowledgment of a special moment. It was the 1960s equivalent of an e-mailed smiley face.

My mom didn't seem nervous that day, just proud. As I helped her into the back seat and strapped her in, I described the sounds she would hear, what we'd see, how her stomach might feel. The upside of my being so serious, I guess, is that I struck people as responsible and able. I wasn't a flouter of rules. And so my mom had confidence in me. She just sat back, her life in my hands, with no urge to be a back-seat driver. She let me chauffeur her around in the sky, and when we landed, she hugged me.

The possibility of having passengers opened up a new world, and after I took my sister, my dad, and my grandparents for a ride, I found the courage to ask someone else.

Her name was Carole, and she was a cute, slender girl with brown hair and glasses. We went to Denison High together, and we were also in our church choir. I had a crush on her, and I liked to think she had noticed me, too. There are girls who are good-looking and know it, and have the luxury of getting by on their beauty. Carole was attractive, yet she didn't carry herself like those girls. Even though she wasn't overtly outgoing, she had an open, friendly manner that just drew people in.

No girl had ever expressed much interest in my experiences as a pilot. This was long before the movie *Top Gun*, and in any case, I wasn't Tom Cruise. Besides, flying was an abstract thing. No one saw me doing it. It's not like I caught winning touchdown passes and had my picture in the local paper. Everything I did was out of view and high in the sky. If I mentioned flying to girls, they never seemed hugely impressed. It sometimes felt like they were bored with the conversation. Or maybe I wasn't able to find the right words to convey the majesty of it.

In any case, I decided to see if I could interest Carole. She was quiet— similar to me in that way—and so it was often difficult keeping conversations going with her. When I asked her if she'd like to go flying with me, I had no expectations. Even if she wanted to go, I figured her parents wouldn't allow it. But she asked them, and they agreed to let her go on a forty-five-minute trip across the Arkansas and Poteau rivers to Fort Smith, Arkansas.

This was my effort at a date, and I was pretty thrilled that it was going to happen. Looking back, it's remarkable that her mom and dad said yes. In essence, they were allowing a boy, not yet eighteen years old, to take their underage daughter across state lines. In a light airplane, no less.

And so we went. It was a clear, cold day with smooth air and good visibility. You could see for miles in any direction. Airplanes are noisy, so it's hard to converse. I'd yell, "That's the Red River down there," and she'd yell back, "What?" and I'd repeat myself. But I was so happy to have her aboard.

We flew in a Cessna 150 I'd rented for two hours. This was a very small airplane, with room only for two people, sitting side by side. The whole cabin was just three feet wide, and so my right leg was touching her left leg. There was no other way to do it.

Picture me, seventeen years old, with this pretty girl next to me, her leg touching mine for two hours, my arm rubbing against her arm. I could smell her perfume, or maybe it was her shampoo. Once in a while she'd lean over me to look at the sights out my window, her hair brushing against my arm. It was a new experience for me, realizing that flying could be such a sensual experience.

Was it hard for me to concentrate on the controls? No. I guess that was just another example of how a pilot has to learn to compartmentalize. I was completely aware of Carole, but I was also on task and responsible. I wanted to woo her, but my most important job was to keep her safe.

Not much came of our relationship, but that flight—sitting so close to her, shouting out landmarks of the Texas countryside, taking her to lunch at the Fort Smith airport—well, it's just a sweet, warm memory.

A pilot can have thousands of takeoffs and landings, most of them unremarkable. Certain ones, though, he never forgets.

The last time I was out at L. T. Cook's airstrip was in the late 1970s. I had lost touch with him in the early eighties, and I later learned he had cancer, and had several tumors removed from his neck and jaw. Some people speculated that his illness was a result of all the crop-dusting chemicals he sprayed every day. He died in 2001.

After my emergency landing of US Airways Flight 1549 in the Hudson River, I got thousands of e-mails and letters from people expressing gratitude for what my crew and I did to save all 155 people on board. In one stack of mail, I was thrilled to discover a note from Mr. Cook's widow, whom I hadn't heard from in years. Her words lifted my spirits. "L.T. wouldn't be surprised," she wrote, "but he certainly would be pleased and proud."

In many ways, all my mentors, heroes, and loved ones—those who taught me and encouraged me and saw the possibilities in me—were with me in the cockpit of Flight 1549. We had lost both engines. It was a dire situation, but there were lessons people had instilled in me that served me well. Mr. Cook's lessons were a part of what guided me on that five-minute flight. He was the consummate stick-and-rudder man, and that day over New York was certainly a stick-and-rudder day.

I've done a lot of thinking since then about all the special people who mattered to me, about the hundreds of books on flying that I've studied, about the tragedies I've witnessed again and again as a military pilot, about the adventures and setbacks in my airline career, about the romance of flying, and about the long-ago memories.

I've come to realize that my journey to the Hudson River didn't begin at LaGuardia Airport. It began decades before, in my childhood home, on Mr. Cook's grass

airfield, in the skies over North Texas, in the California home I now share with my wife, Lorrie, and our two daughters, and on all the jets I've flown toward the horizon.

Flight 1549 wasn't just a five-minute journey. My entire life led me safely to that river.

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