

Sun 'n Fun Conjures Up Images of Father

In Flight USA

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Dear Dad,

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I'm standing out in a big airfield in Florida, looking at an Ercoupe.

Remember the Ercoupe? You had a model of one on the wall of the upstairs bedroom, the one you shared with your twin brother growing up. Your Ercoupe model was silver I remember, with the nose and the two little rudders black. It hung there pointing down the wall, among all the other wondrous models in that bedroom – the other small solid wood scale models, brightly colored, with insignias and letterings; the



larger rubber models, with their thin, structured, tissue-translucent wings and long, floppy propellers; and the big gas models in taut, color-faded silk, their clunky engines wrapped in oily rags. Standing in the short grass on this Florida airfield, looking at this Ercoupe, I can almost smell the soft combination of wood, fabric, and dope in that bedroom. And I'm wondering what you would be thinking if you were here looking too.

This big airfield, Dad, is in Lakeland, and the occasion is the Sun 'n Fun-EAA fly-in. I don't know if you ever heard of Sun 'n Fun. You did know about Oshkosh. You and your buddies John and Kingston were always going to go to Oshkosh. But you never got around to it. It was a long way from Louisiana. It was in August, when you and Mom always went to North Carolina. You should have gone though. I knew that the minute I drove onto this field.

I came down here to Sun 'n Fun with my EAA chapter friend Joe, who has been goading me the last two years. It took us sixteen hours over two days, spiraling down from Kentucky on I-75, from 50° spring rain

and mountain woods filled with dogwood and redbud to flat pastures, palm trees, and blue skies filled with puffy cumulus clouds. As we turned into the access road for the airport about noon, it didn't take but a glance for me to know that this scene was outside my experience. Rows on rows of light airplanes stretched across the field – Stearmans and Stinsons, old Beeches, Cessnas, Pipers, and Taylorcrafts. A line of Lake amphibians squatted with their pusher-propped pods above their wings. A big all-black PB-Y sat with its back to us. Off in the distance the noble but incongruously bright-yellow nose of a C-47 pointed skyward.

A C-47. Your airplane. The one you flew hundreds of hours in during the war, crisscrossing the country with cargo or important brass in back. But bright yellow? I had to go look at that airplane.

First though Joe and I had to set up our tent, where he always sets up, in the ultralight camping area, next to the couple from Canada in a motor home who also come down every year. Then we had to wander out among the stabled ranks of vintage planes. Joe flies a Cessna-140 and knows a lot of the 140 people who fly in. He was eager to renew old acquaintances.

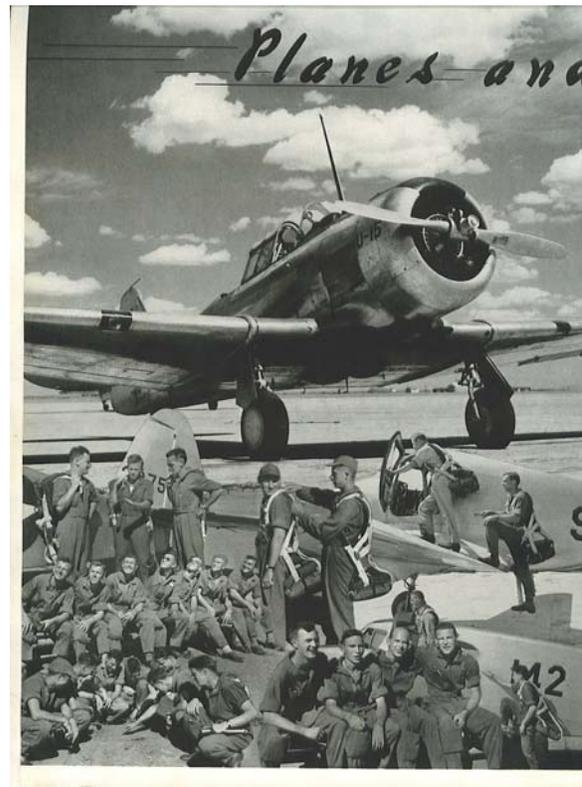
I stood around dazed while Joe roamed and chatted. Darn near every plane around me was a wonder. You remember, Dad, on family trips when we passed a little airport, you would want to go see if there were any old planes there? Well, here they were everywhere, their owners sitting under the wings in folding chairs or standing around chatting in small groups, like a cocktail party. They were more than happy for me to sidle up, take a close look at any part of the plane, ask questions, listen in on shoptalk.

I got a lump in my throat, Dad, the first time I went out among all those planes. These planes were new when you were young. They were the planes of your adolescent fantasies, the models on the walls of your bedroom. How I would have loved wandering among these planes with you, hearing you talk with their owners, maybe hearing fantasies and phantoms, parts of your youth that I never knew about.

Ah, the phantoms. I thought a lot about phantoms as I wandered out into the warbird area later that day and the next. Your flying in WWII is something we never talked about. There was an unspoken constraint, even though you stayed in the Air Force until I was ten, in 1955. I do know about the C-47. You talked about that airplane some, talked about how much you liked its lines, appreciated its dependable performance. Mom has told me stories about conditions you flew in. She described “the worst flight” – a

thunderstorm over the Rockies, a balky engine, three generals in the back. Even now, twelve years since you’ve been gone, when she wakes up on a gray day full of rain and wind she will think, “Roger would say, ‘I’m glad I don’t have to fly in this weather.’”

I was headed over to the bright yellow C-47 when I spied right across from it on the wide taxiway another phantom, a squat, twin-engine, bob-nosed number. I recognized it from the photo you had over the drafting board in your office. The plane in the photo was in flight, coming at the camera, a sky full of cumulus in the background. “Cessna T-50 ‘Bobcat’” said the caption I read for 20 years. “Over Altus, Oklahoma.”



Altus was where you did your multi-engine training. I didn’t know much more until we cleaned out Mother’s house last year, when she moved to a retirement community. Off a high shelf came a thin yearbook. “Army Air Force Training Command” rises in relief from the tawny cover, under an eagle

standing on a bed of arrows. Above the eagle, in color, a blue shield emblazoned with a red-lighted torch appears over the motto, UT VIRI VOLENT – So That Men May Fly. “Published 1943” the book says in the inside page, “By and for the Officers and Enlisted Personnel of Altus Army Air Field.”

This treasured relic of a time in your life I know nothing about contains photos and statements from everybody in the Army Air Forces chain of command, from General Hap Arnold on down to the nurses in the hospital on the Altus base. There is even an all-black squadron in the very back of the book, Tuskegee airmen, I presume. Your picture is on page 60, among the student officers of Aviation Cadets Class 43-I. A collage of “Planes and Their Fliers,” precedes the mug shots, comradely knots of jump-suited and parachuted student pilots standing in, around, and on a bevy of T-50s. Everybody is smiling. It looks like great fun.



I wonder what you would be thinking, looking up at this T-50, here today in Florida. Front wheels on the taxiway, tail wheel in the grass, it stands resolute, mustard yellow with black nose, cowls, and leading edges. Behind it I see a side luggage hatch open, the owner in a t-shirt shaving with a cordless electric razor. How much incongruity would there be with your memories?

However much for the T-50, I cannot even begin to imagine what you would think about the C-47 across the taxiway. It is absolutely glistening yellow. (The nice lady attending it said the paint job cost \$50,000 and used all the Piper Cub Yellow then available in the whole country.) With a big, stylized white “D” in a red circle on its tail and white-on-red “Duggy” scripted across the whole bottom center of the wings, with the nose transformed into the classic yellow smiley-face, it is a far cry from the dented and dingy olive drab of the active duty examples I have seen in the old *Air Trails* magazines you had. “The Smile in the Sky,” this C-47 says on one side. I suppose it’s a great use for a fine old airplane – as a youth outreach platform for the National Aviation Hall of Fame. (The “Duggy” is for Donald Douglas, as in Douglas Aircraft.) Still, what would seeing it mean to someone who risked his life in wartime during hundreds of hours in a similar cockpit?

I know you would have liked the T-6s. You had a lot of hours in those, including after the war when we were stationed in Puerto Rico. I remember your stories about all-day island-hopping sorties around the Caribbean with your fellow officers, returning at the end of the day with rear seats laden with mahogany and rattan. You would talk about flying so low you could see schools of barracuda in the water.

Here you could have seen a whole squadron of T-6s making slow passes over the field in various formations, with that drone of multiple big piston engines that I myself have never heard before except in movies. And the Aeroshell aerobatics team – six red-orange

and white T-6s flying big, smoke-streaming arcs and loops, absolutely filling the sky with that complex roar and snarl of big engines driving big props under maneuvering loads. They give me goosebumps every time I see them. Did you ever loop a T-6?

There are P-51s here too, a line of them painted in various military and air race configurations along the warbird taxiway. Some fly every day. I know your twin brother was shot down in one over France in 1944, flying bomber support for D-Day. Mom has told me the two weeks he was listed as “missing and presumed dead” was the worst time in your life, worse even than when you knew he was cold, hungry, and sick in a POW camp. He made a scale model of his aircraft right after he got back to the states, configured the cockpit just as it was when he took the flak that brought him down, and stuck the model in a box in the grandparents’ attic for thirty years. I got to see it at his funeral.

You didn’t talk much about P-51s. The P-38 was your favorite fighter. There is actually a P-38 here, one with a legendary history, recovered from the Greenland ice cap. I remember your saying you could have bought a brand new P-38 for \$500 right after the war was over. You’d get a faraway look and scowl about engine maintenance and fuel consumption, and the better things you had to do with \$500 back then, with a family and a post-war life to build. What would you have thought as “Glacier Girl” made her high speed passes low over the runway and pulled up into that absolutely distinctive silhouette?

So many things about you, Dad, I’ll never know. But I know you would have loved Sun ‘n Fun. I love being here with you here in memory, with an intensity I have rarely felt since you died. I’ll see you here next year.

Love,
Roger III