

BLESSINGS

by

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NONFICTION

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The enormity of the moment was lost on everyone, even me. The optometrist was amazed I had made it into the fourth grade with such poor vision. The new glasses I wore were a wonder and revealed a world that suddenly seemed so big and clear! I was ecstatic! Alas, it was to be short lived.

That evening my father sat me down at the dining table for a “talk”. For the life of me, I could not understand what I had done to get in enough trouble to warrant a “talk”, yet trouble had surely come.

My father was an Air Force pilot flying fighters at Ramstein Air Base in Germany. It was the height of the cold war, just a few months before the Cuban missile crisis and Dad was my hero. More than anything, I wanted to fly when I grew up. Our talk was akin to a death sentence, for Dad revealed to me that people who wore glasses could never fly airplanes. It was the first time he mentioned I could be an aeronautical engineer and at least build the airplanes even if I couldn't fly them. I wasn't interested. My life was over.

I hated the glasses. Already a loner due to teasing about being fat (“stocky” was the politically correct term then), now I was also “four eyed”. I constantly left the spectacles at home and was just as constantly booted out of class to go get them. I broke them, always accidentally, and “lost” them repeatedly but at least I could see now and, though definitely not a scholar, I had time to my self and my grades improved. What really kept me going though was books and model building. I read voraciously, usually about flying and flyers and I built plastic models of every kind of airplane I could get my hands on, military and civilian, and I built a

model of a black knight in full armor. Dad's unit in Germany was the 526th Fighter Interceptor Squadron and their emblem was a black knight. In my heart of hearts I still yearned to be a Black Knight, a fighter pilot, an aviator of any kind, really. I still wanted desperately to fly and I dreamed about it ALL the time. My mother was wonderfully aware of what went on with her brood and it was about this time that she began to tell me to keep dreaming and never give up on believing that I could do whatever I set my heart on. From her I received the blessing that in the face of unshakable faith the facts did not matter. Providence would provide a way.

We left Germany following sixth grade and ended up in Colorado Springs, Colorado where Dad was stationed at Ent Air Force Base, headquarters of Air Defense Command. I was thirteen years old.

One morning while looking at the newspaper, I saw a picture of a most remarkable aircraft, one I had not seen before. It was a sailplane, a glider, and the most beautiful thing I had ever seen with long, narrow wings and an amazingly sleek fuselage. The picture was part of an advertisement for introductory rides in this same machine at Black Forest Gliderport, a place not far from my home. I was enthralled and as soon as Dad got home, I showed him the ad. He was non-committal, but I was not to be deterred. Amazed at my own boldness, I pestered him unmercifully for the next several days. Finally, on a summer afternoon, he relented. He and I and my friend, Doug piled into the car and headed for Black Forest.

As we drove along the access road next to the runway, a Piper Super Cub took off towing that same sleek sailplane I had seen in the ad. It was a Schweizer 2-32 and more beautiful up close than in the photo. My stomach was doing somersaults and I was incapable of containing

my excitement! As soon as the car stopped, I threw open the door and vaulted inside the little building with the big red on white sign proclaiming GLIDER RIDES. Nearly out of breath, I skidded to a stop in front of a young man behind the counter and practically shouted that I was here for a ride! His stifled laugh became a big grin but before he could get a word out, Dad strode in and introduced himself. Time slowed to a crawl and occasionally tip toed backwards as I listened impatiently while Dad signed up for a ride to “see how the operation was run.” I nearly succumbed to anxiety as the young man explained they might not have time for all of us to ride, since it was coming on to evening and they could not fly after sundown.

We watched from behind a porch railing as the 2-32 glided silently to a landing and rolled to a stop, just a few feet from us. Two youngsters quickly turned the glider around and helped my father into the front seat while the instructor giving the ride briefed him on what to expect and then got into the back seat. The Super Cub taxied up and turned away from the glider while one of the young ground crew grabbed the tow rope and hooked it up. The canopy was closed, the wing raised and the slack came out of the tow rope. Then, the instructor in the glider moved the rudder side to side, the Cub pilot went to takeoff power and in a storm of noise and dust the glider accelerated down the runway and was gone.

I was a wreck. Feelings of excitement, disappointment, hope and futility sliced through my being like a scourge. Would Dad deem “the operation” to be acceptable? Would there be enough daylight for us to go? Would I actually get to sit in the front? Why did I care? I wore glasses and people who wear glasses can never fly airplanes. Doug was already inside reading a magazine. I went in too.

The young man behind the counter introduced himself as Robert Hect-Nielson. He asked if we were interested in joining their youth program and learning to fly. I almost sneered when I said, "I can't fly".

Robert asked, "Why not? Is there something wrong with you?"

"Yes!" I was almost yelling as I pointed to my face, which I knew he could clearly see. "I wear glasses!!!"

"Well, I wear glasses," he replied.

My heart stopped. "Do you fly?"

"Sure, I'm one of the instructors here."

I went outside. Tears flowed down my cheeks. My heart restarted and tried to beat its way out of my chest. The world took on a sharper, cleaner look and seemed much more joyful than it had for ages. I felt reborn and I decided right then that I would join that youth program and learn to fly gliders.

The 2-32 returned and Dad said we could go. Because of the lateness of the hour, the instructor removed the control stick from the back seat and both Doug and I squeezed in together for our ride. It didn't matter. I knew I would get plenty of front seat time.

Within two months I got a paper route (the only job I could hold at 13) and had the fifty dollars needed to join the youth program. Dad was impressed with my resolve and agreed to pay the ten dollar monthly dues. The club had a deal for the youngsters that if we would work as ground crew, the club training glider, a Schweizer 2-22, and volunteer instructors were made

available for us at no extra charge. I worked 12-14 hours many days for three or four six minute flights. It was worth it.

Robert Hect-Nielson was my first instructor. He was a college student just working at Black Forest for the summer, and after a few flights he went back to school and I never saw him again. He will probably never know that one summer day in his youth he was responsible for the resurrection of another human being. By bestowing on me the blessing of truth, he restored my life and for that I will never forget him.

I soloed the next June, a few months after my fourteenth birthday. My instructor then was Dale Cavanaugh, the Manager of Flight Standards for United Airlines in Denver. His son and I are the same age and Dale was teaching us both to fly. When I asked him about career opportunities in aviation, he allowed that since I wore glasses, I could never fly for the airlines, but there were many other opportunities in training, charter and corporate flying. Hmmm. Maybe I could work as a pilot.

My passion for flying consumed increasing amounts of time and energy. After ninth grade football, I never again played sports in school. Instead, I worked. Paper routes, cafeterias, construction cleanup, gas stations, grocery stores, truck body shops, surveying, machine shops, aircraft refueling, whatever it took to pay for more flight training. At sixteen I soloed in powered airplanes and got my Private pilot's license at eighteen. At nineteen I almost killed myself in a serious glider crash and was laid up for nearly a year, but was flying again before I turned twenty one. Following my Dad's advice (for once), I graduated college with a BS in Aerospace Engineering (barely, but I graduated) and worked for four years in the aerospace

industry. That provided the wherewithal to get my commercial, instrument and multi-engine ratings and to start working part-time as a flight instructor. It also attracted something into my life I had never planned for; a wife who was more than happy to join a nice, safe, stable engineer in making a life and family.

Then, in 1978, Congress passed the airline deregulation act. In the turmoil that ensued, hundreds of new airlines started up and over the years many of them failed, as did some of the old, well established carriers, but one small change occurred that had a major impact on me.

Many of those airlines started hiring pilots who wore glasses.

In 1979 I was working for Boeing in Seattle. A friend, George Konrad, had just gotten a job flying for a small commuter airline in Coeure d' Alene, Idaho. I asked him to put in a good word for me with the Chief Pilot and he did, telling me that the Chief Pilot was expecting my call. That was wonderful, except the Chief Pilot, whose name was Gary Sanders, forgot to tell his secretary to add me to the contact list. Her name was Pam and her job was to protect her boss from unwanted intrusions into his busy day. She was unconquerable. After two weeks of laying siege to her well defended gates, I was beside myself with frustration and my lovely bride had had a belly full. One evening about nine, I was once again grouching about the intractability of SOME women when a wooden spoon smacked smartly into my ear followed by a high volume request to cogitate on the likely whereabouts of the Chief Pilot of a new airline at nine o'clock on a weeknight. Instantly realizing where I would be if in his shoes, I called his office and.....he answered!

Though the ensuing conversation and subsequent events rate a story of their own, suffice it to say that I got my first airline job flying copilot on Swearingen Metroliners in Idaho. It seems like only yesterday.

Now I sit here reminiscing about an aviation career that spans forty six years. Today I am privileged to fly as Captain on Boeing 747-400 freighters in operations all over the world. With the blessings of Providence, I have six years left before the terrestrial powers will clip my airline wings through the mechanism of mandatory retirement. Perhaps I will go all the way. Perhaps I will choose to hang up my hat a bit early. That lovely bride of a nice, safe, stable engineer has endured 34 years of constant separation and the perverse reality of wanderer's wives that disaster only strikes when the man of the house is in Hong Kong or Sydney or London. She deserves a reprieve. Yet, the Siren's song is still loud and clear and I am not yet bound firmly to the mast.

Of the eight boys in the youth program at Black Forest at the time I was there, one was killed in a glider crash within the year and three went on to other things, but the four of us that stayed through solo all went on to fly for the major airlines. Considering how few airline pilots there are in the world (under 200,000), that is astounding. It seems that Black Forest bestowed blessings on at least four young aviators.

One definition of blessing is something promoting or contributing to happiness, well-being, or prosperity. That being so, blessings may not always make one happy at the moment they are bestowed. My father's blessing was the suggestion that I become an engineer, a thing I did not want. Though he was wrong about not being able to fly with glasses, it was and still is a widespread belief. His suggestion about engineering was related to his admiration of Kelly

Johnson and the amazing aircraft that emerged from the Lockheed Skunkworks, something he was aware of in the 1960's, but could not share with me because it was classified. It was also his way of trying to help me overcome what he knew was a serious blow to my dream of flight. Though I was not interested, I followed his advice (truly, about the only time) in order to make the money I needed to pursue flight training. The amazing thing to me now is to look back and realize that every one of the nine jobs I got with various airlines was because I was a pilot AND an engineer. It set me apart in an extremely competitive pursuit. It contributed to my happiness, well being and prosperity. It was a blessing and that is one of the purposes of fatherhood; to bestow blessings upon ones children. I pray I am as successful with my kids as he was with me.

In one of his books, I believe Robert Fulghum made a reference to God thinking that doing good for others and never realizing it is such a great thing that He gave all of us that ability. Could it be that God has faith in us to bless our fellows? If so, I offer now a prayer of thanks for Dad, Mom, Robert, Dale, George, Gary, my long suffering spouse and the multitude of others who have blessed my life, perhaps without ever realizing it and I hope I have blessed a few as well, maybe even with this story. Dream big, work hard, expect blessings.