



## CHAPTER 1

# *Yellow Airplanes*

The horse clip-clopped along the highway to the strange sound of approaching engines, and the little Amish boy in the buggy craned his neck to scan the sky. He and his mother were making their way from Kidron, Ohio, to Orrville to see Dr. Kropf. As they approached the railroad tracks that angled across State Route 57, the little boy spotted the source of the unfamiliar sound—real airplanes! As he looked up, he saw not one but two yellow trainers flying overhead in formation.

In his excitement, he turned to his mother and exclaimed (in Pennsylvania Dutch, of course), “Mom! I saw a yellow airplane. It was *yellow!*”

Sometimes, I wonder if I really do remember this scene—I was that three-year-old—or if my “memory” only exists because my older siblings have talked so often about this. I think it is my own memory, though, because I can still see the huge steam engine belching smoke at the front of the train sitting there on the tracks. What an exciting day for this little boy!

This scene occurred during World War II. Since many products and raw materials were rationed at the time, these airplanes would have been part of the war effort and certainly not private or pleasure aircraft. They were most likely Stearman biplanes or possibly the military version of the Piper Cub that I now own.

## AN UNLIKELY PILOT

In 1945, when I was four years old, our family moved into the mountains of western Maryland. I have a few other memories of living in Ohio, but the image of those yellow airplanes that day flew straight into my three-year-old heart and stayed there. My fascination with flight had begun, and none of us ever imagined all the places airplanes would take me.



*My sister Betty and me at age 5 and 6.*

Airplanes have been a part of my life ever since, connecting all the years with that first memory. Even now, in retirement, as I look back at a career of 55-plus years of flying, there's still a little yellow airplane in my life. It waits for me in a hangar not far from my home. I bought it soon after my final retirement from flying jets and other complex airplanes, while my wife Judy and I were dealing with her cancer. We both agreed that I still needed to be able to have those cherished moments of

flight and the occasional alone time to refresh my soul during this stressful time.

But now, even though I will always love flying and have enjoyed so many years in aviation, I sense the time is fast approaching to finally surrender my “mechanical wings.”

The trail of more than 25 different types of airplanes that I've flown through the years is only that—a trail, something like mile-markers on my journey through life. Airplanes, and where they've taken me, are not the whole story. Nor is the story only about a bush pilot who ended up flying hi-tech jets.

The real story is about an amazing God who in His great love and mercy

chose to be intimately involved in my life in places and ways that I could not have imagined.

Dramatic events did occur and things have happened to me that could have ended my life. How did I get through five decades of flying—sometimes in high-risk areas—without ever having an accident? From a statistical point of view, I should not be here. Pilots with greater skills and vastly superior academic backgrounds have not survived long flying careers with similar risk factors. I have lost three pilot friends in aircraft accidents, all in bush country flying or in the high Arctic—the same places where I spent part of my career.

I share with many fellow aviators the love and passion in the words of the following sonnet written by John Gillespie Magee, a young pilot in WWII.

#### HIGH FLIGHT

Oh! I have slipped the surly bonds of earth  
And danced the skies on laughter-silvered wings.  
Sunward I've climbed, and joined the tumbling mirth  
Of sun-split clouds - and done a hundred things  
You have not dreamed of - wheeled and soared and swung  
High in the sunlit silence. Hov'ring there,  
I've chased the shouting wind along, and flung  
My eager craft through footless halls of air.

Up, up the long, delirious, burning blue  
I've topped the wind-swept heights with easy grace  
Where never lark or even eagle flew -  
And, while with silent lifting mind I've trod  
The high untrespassed sanctity of space,  
Put out my hand, and touched the face of God.

- John Gillespie Magee, Jr -