

THE FLYING YEARS



I can't recall when I first became fascinated with aviation and airplanes, I do remember seeing them flying overhead when I was very small and imagining that the cross bars on telephone poles were low flying planes. My earliest recollection is going up with my dad to the balloon field in Arcadia during W.W.II. It was where the Santa Anita Race Track is now located and where they were training army signal corps. men to fly in tethered observation balloons. There were also some old Jenny biplanes in which they were training pilots. All I can really remember is that airplanes held a certain awe for me.

After the war, in the early twenties, barnstormers used to visit our area and land in empty fields around Alhambra. One such group took over an empty bean field three blocks from our house and the planes would come very low over our house on their way to landing. The outfit stayed at the field all summer and my dad would take me up with him on the weekends to watch the activities which included wing walking, parachute jumps and scenic rides along with some basic aerobatics, such as loops and barrel rolls.

One of the afternoons when we were up there a guy in puttees and a white shirt suggested he take Dad and me up for a pleasure flight. Dad gave in, and with me riding in his lap in the front cockpit of a Jenny, we had a short flight over our neighborhood. It was not until later that I learned from Pop that the pilot was the

famous American Ace, Eddie Rickenbocker. The complete story of this flight is featured in Issue 57 of The High Country magazine.

I remember drawing pictures of airplanes and nailing pieces of broken wood shingles together to resemble something like a plane and then running around the yard with them while imitating the sound of an engine. When I was nine years old mother subscribed to the American Boy magazine for me. The magazine had a section on rubber band powered model planes and gliders which got me started on building and flying model airplanes. They were built from scratch following the plans published in the magazine as there were no such thing as model plane kits on the market at that time.

Then, in 1927, Lindberg flew solo across the Atlantic Ocean and became a national hero. This feat greatly sparked my interest in aviation and flying which I still have to this day. As I grew older my modeling skill improved and I was soon building flying models that won a number of contests that I entered. This was fun and the next best thing to actually flying a real plane which experience was to come to me later in life. Mother had always forbidden me to go up in a plane so the rides I did take as a kid were always done on the sly. When I moved to Allentown Pennsylvania the opportunity to take flying lessons arrived in the form of a yellow Piper Cub on a grass field with a flight instructor who was a truck driver by vocation. I soon soloed and began logging the necessary hours to qualify for a private pilot license which I received in 1945.

Once I had my license I began taking Virginia and the children up with me in planes that I rented for the occasion. I also flew a lot of friends as well as Pop who made many flights with me. Our mom, however, would never go up with me. She was deathly afraid of flying machines. Phil Birkhahn also had his pilot license and he and I did a lot of flying together all over Southern California. I also took some of my co-workers

at Hughes Aircraft up for rides. When we moved to Puerto Rico I became Commanding Officer of the Ponce Squadron of the Puerto Rican wing of the Civil Air Patrol and had a military plane at my disposal. I also had the free use of three other planes owned by friends in Ponce. One was a Luscombe Silvaire and the other two were an Ercoupe and a Cessna 140. I did a lot of flying around the island both for fun and on official CAP business and Virginia and I used the Cessna for shopping trips to San Juan on the opposite side of the island.

When we sold the Caledonia I began shopping for a plane and found a mint condition Ercoupe at the Torrance Airport which was for sale by a young fellow on his way to Vietnam. He was asking \$3,000 for it but was in a hurry to sell and I took advantage of that and offered him \$2,600 cash on the spot which he gratefully accepted. The owner's pilot license had expired so I talked a local pilot at the airport to go up with me to check me and the plane out after which I took off for El Monte Airport near our home in Temple City. I then rented a tie down space that had just become available. The previous week the former occupant of that space had crashed his Navion into the bluff at the approach end to the runway at the airport on Catalina Island killing himself and his wife.

I did not like the circumstances under which I got the tie down space but they were at a premium and it was the only one available.

I flew a lot of hours taking family members and friends up for rides, including our grand children, Craig and Carrie. One time I flew them up to Apple Valley to visit the Roy Rogers Museum. Virginia and I made a number of flights to Catalina and I also flew there with Phil, Rich and Jim. On the way over about ten minutes from the airport I would get on the radio and order lunch, usually buffalo burgers and baked beans. They would then have the meal waiting for you when you landed. It was pretty neat.

Virginia and I took a number of cross country

trips that included one to the Carlsbad Caverns, one to New Orleans, a couple to Boise, Idaho, up to Solvang, over to Lake Havasu, a couple of trips to Las Vegas, to Bakersfield, Porterville and Woodlake and up and down the state. One Fourth of July night I flew the kids, Jim and John, over the fireworks display at the park in Arcadia so they could look down, instead of up, at the skyrockets. It was quite impressive.

I had taught Virginia how to fly the plane once in the air, but not takeoffs or landings. Later we attended the AOPA convention in Las Vegas where she took the Pinch Hitters course and learned to takeoff, land, navigate and use the radio. Later, after Evelyn and I were married, I taught her how to fly the plane, once in the air, and we went to the AOPA convention in Palm Springs where she also took the pinch hitters course. As a result, if I ever became incapacitated during a flight, they were capable of getting to an airport and safely on the ground.

One of the fun things Evelyn and I did was to fly up to the Moonlight Fly-in at Porterville where we slept under the wing of the plane after a night of partying and got up the next morning to watch the air show and to participate in some of the activities such as flour bombing, ribbon cutting and balloon bursting, all performed with our Ercoupe. It was Evelyn's first flight with me and we went up after dark and she did not know enough at that time to be scared or else she trusted me completely.

In May of 1973 I fulfilled a lifetime dream and flew the Ercoupe solo from coast to coast, a two week trip that took me to Florida, up the East Coast to New England and then back by way of the Great Lakes and Colorado. I visited friends and relatives along the way and often slept under the wing at small airports and crop dusting strips. It was an experience I will never forget, particularly the afternoon that I had to outrun a tornado in Nebraska. I barely made it by the skin of my teeth and beat it into the airport in Kearny where I and

the plane were quickly ushered into a hangar. The tornado passed one half mile north of the airport.

After we were married Evelyn treated me to a paint job on the plane and it looked like new when I picked it up at the paint shop in Corona. When we moved to Temecula I based the plane at Ryan Field in Hemet for about a year until the old Rancho California Airport, that had been closed, reopened for business at which time I got a tie down space in Temecula. The plane came in handy while we were publishing the Rancho News and I used it a lot to take aerial photos of local floods, fires, etc.

As we got busier in our various ventures I had less and less time to fly and finally sold the plane in September of 1979 for \$2,300 cash plus a kit to build a Weedhopper Ultralight plane. Today used Ercoupes sell for \$16,000. I never got around to completing the Weedhopper and traded it to the local Radio Shack owner for a 35 mm Pentax Camera outfit for Evelyn.

A review of my log books show I logged a total of 1,100 hours flight time I flew approximately 110,000 miles and probably spent several thousand dollars in fuel, maintenance, insurance, and tie down rentals. However, it was worth every penny of it and I would do it all over again if I had the chance. While at Hughes I got some time as co-pilot in the company twin engine Aero Commander and in actor Robert Cummins' V-Tailed Bonanza. In 32 years of active flying I logged time as pilot in command in 24 different makes and types of aircraft, both two and four passenger planes.

In recent years I have been getting a little time in Ultralight planes and hope to eventually build myself one. There are many fine kits on the market which are easy to build and fly.

As a final note on my flying years I wrote the following poem titled, "The Aging Pilot."