

## *Midway Field*

Descending towards Henderson field, he was suddenly enveloped by the gray gloom of a very fast moving up-slope fog. He had encountered only one fog like it before - as a young pilot - one that had rolled in quickly swallowing everything in its path as a roiling dust storm might. That fog had overtaken him so fast that in a matter of minutes he could barely see his hand in front of his face.

As before, the air became damp, very cold and gray. In mere seconds, Doc could see nothing ahead. Forced by the prop blast, droplets of moisture gathered in beading trails and ran in rivulets up his small windscreen gathering at the screen's top edge creating spraying showers that splashed back onto his face and goggles obscuring his vision. Vainly wiping at his goggles, Doc swallowed his panic as the world around him became a heavy, wet, dank blanket thrown over his cockpit blinding him.

Now, there was no visible horizon ahead, nothing but an ashen haze, no reference to his attitude and Doc quickly became disoriented. His antique biplane with its bare instrument panel had only a few instruments that would give him any indication of his attitude relative to the ground; there was an altimeter to tell him how high he was, an airspeed indicator to tell him how fast he was flying and a compass - nothing else. But years of flight experience instantly took over. He instinctively pushed the throttle forward hard to the stop while pulling the control stick back into his lap as he initiated a rapid climb. Hopefully, he could climb above the cloud tops and find sunlight, blue sky and a level horizon. With the engine roaring wide open, its valves clattering rapid-fire like a machine gun, his airplane clawed at the air as he rapidly gained what altitude he could from down within the valley slopes.



It all took place in the twitch of a second hand. The impact with the cliff face came with the fireball detonation of a bomb. The granite outcropping gave no quarter. There would be no survivor. The violence of the impact sprayed sharp, jagged shards of metal and wood and bone in every direction. It was sudden and final!

With whirring wings, chittering and screeching, flocks of quail and nesting birds, startled by the jarring noise on the rock face above, exploded skyward

from the branches and nests within the trees that carpeted the hollows. The cannonade thunder clap of the collision echoed away and away and away down through the rolling hills.



On the outcropping and slopes above, there was little recognizable left of the ancient biplane or her pilot - just a scattered heap of bits and pieces of mustard yellow fabric, torn flesh, jagged bone, leather, frayed wire and small trails of dark crimson that slowly oozed down the fractured rock sides like cold syrup. The remains of Doc's body were as a limp rag doll, its limbs twisted and draped over the sides of what remained of the cockpit.

## *Chapter Two*

Earlier in the day, Doc had eased the throttle forward and his old biplane jumped eagerly from the short grass strip at his home base airport located a mile inland from the waters of the Chesapeake Bay. In the front cockpit were Doc's backpack packed to bulging with clothes, along with his cook pots, a five gallon fuel can, food stores, his writing satchel and he was off again!

Once clear of the ground, Doc turned his head and checked below and behind his airplane for any other air traffic before dipping his wing to the right and rolling gently into a lazy level turn away from the sparkling chop of the bay's blue-grey water. He aimed the nose of his biplane to the west. Now, with the brilliant midday sun before him as his guide, he was flying towards the Great American Midwest to continue the adventures of last summer.

Once again, he thought to himself as he had all winter that he had been too long away from dewy nights spent under the stars in the company of whoever would sit with him at his evening campfires. Modern day barnstorming, a true anachronism, had gotten into his blood last summer when he had dared to see

if he could exist as the old barnstormers of the Twenties and Thirties might have. He was also hungry to see what he would learn again, what adventures would once again present themselves.

Now his airplane carried Doc over the fields below, a quilted landscape of early green corn and browning winter wheat patches laid out across the eastern Virginia coastal plain. With a mixture of haughty pity for the ground dwellers below and a heady lightness looking forward to the days and months to come, he looked beyond his wing tips far into the haze lining the horizon at the distant converging lanes of the concrete ribbons of interstate highways he was about to cross; he shook his head some uttering, "Tsk, tsk, tsk," to himself. The roads were clogged with endless opposite-moving sluggish packs of tractor-trailers, cars and buses and the scene slid away behind him. Doc wasn't necessarily the sort to make light of the misery of others', but under his breath he did force a high-pitched sniggering "heh-heh-heh!" And, with that, he grew more excited in his anticipation of the future. He turned his attention to the westward horizon ahead.

As he overflew small towns and hamlets along the way, Doc took note of the sameness of their court house squares, the parks and the common greens that surrounded them, the benches where old men sat indolently watching passers-by, the hallmark granite war monuments - testaments to the stupidity of humans who never learn - that stood upon them and out on the far horizon, he began to see settled in among the hills and valleys, the ever-present haze of the Blue Ridge Mountains.

The haze lay stilly in the hollows; a smoky layer spread across the forest floor like a rumpled comforter tossed into the air and allowed to settle over the treetops of the mountain valleys. Looking across the infinite range of peaks ahead, he thought to himself that must be what "forever" looks like. The hills and mountain tops were an endless ocean of crests and crowns, all varying shades of soft blue and green.

As he flew low over mountains, sometimes skirting the ridges, and just for fun, swooping down into the valleys, Doc's attention would occasionally be drawn to the cocked eye of a leathery face, partially hidden beneath a frayed straw hat, that of a man hunched atop an ancient Ford tractor pulling a disc harrow leading dusty trails across a small section of ground; or the billowing skirt of a woman hoeing a ragged patch of hard-scrabble rock-pocked dirt that passed for a garden; or perhaps a young girl hanging white sheets on a sagging clothesline outside of one of the scattered clapboard, shot-gun shacks that dotted the

hillsides here and there. The small boxy, tumbledown houses, most of which were painted slap-dash white, seemed to cling to the steep hillsides tenaciously grasping the edges of the dirt roads - more wagon ruts than anything else - that wound about the slopes. Outside of a few of them were a scattering of rangy tan hounds lounging on front steps and porches passively watching scatterings of chickens scratching at the stripped dirt. And there, a slight, barefoot child looking skyward, wearing nothing but faded blue overalls, one hand shielding his eyes against the sunlight. And there, a child stopped playing with a bare-ribbed dog and waved at him enthusiastically. Doc would look down, laugh and waggle his wings "Hello!"



Doc added power to begin a shallow climb over higher peaks and he wondered to himself, as he had in advance of the previous summer's barnstorming, if the residents living near his destination - the mid-western cow lots and infinitely out-stretched flat fields of Kansas, Nebraska, southern Illinois and Ohio - if they were now too jaded, too used to the thousands of airplanes that crisscrossed their skies day and night? Was the romance of aviation gone for them? Or did they still hold fascination in their hearts for the romantic lure of the open cockpit, the harshness of a clattering-popping engine? Would they, once again, as they did last summer, part with a few dollars in return for a chance to take a ten minute ride up in a cool diamond-blue sky? It was the same futile concern he'd had before last summer's flying.

After all, he half-chided himself, is there a child alive, or even a cynical adult who can resist the sight of a old-time airplane bouncing to a landing in an empty wheat field in the middle of Nowhere, U.S.A.? And, who doesn't want to talk to the actual brave and dashing pilot of such an old-fashioned biplane with the words, "Airplane Rides!" painted in large red letters along the fabric of its fuselage. Would they not hear a calliope and brass band play a circus march distantly as a debonair pilot such as himself cuts a jaunty figure leaping to the ground, his silk flying scarf fluttering in the breeze behind him, a toothy ear-to-ear grin on his face, rocker box grease faintly staining his cheeks, as he greets all those in attendance with an exuberant shout of "What's up, everyone! Ready to fly?" Who could resist all of that? He laughed at himself in a child-like high-pitched giggle and the rushing wind muted the laugh.



The first summer selling and flying rides in and out of scattered fields had become an infatuation for him. Now, he pined to return to it with an intense

nostalgia. In his first off-season back home, even the faintest whiff of wood smoke from a winter's chimney would bring a flood of fond memories back to him; thoughts of the warmth of an evening's campfire after a day's flying; thoughts about the time spent sitting cross-legged next to the fire's crackling orange flames idly watching threads of smoke curl upward carrying the embers into the star-flecked sky; reminisces of the shadowy silhouette of his airplane sitting parked, at rest, darkly outlined against the glow of the orange sun setting low in a purple evening sky.

He smiled when he reminisced about picking blades of grass out of his coffee cup or letting the odd hapless ant floating on the coffee's surface crawl aboard his finger - then insuring to carefully allow it to attach itself to a dandelion's leaf nearby - as he counted out the crumpled five and one dollar bills that had been haplessly stuffed into his blue jean pockets; fares from the day's passengers. The money never amounted to much, maybe \$20 or \$30 on a good day after fuel had been bought or dinner paid for in some homey roadside café. It did not matter.

Those were extraordinary times, especially when there was good conversation with a local who stayed behind after a day's flying with whom the coffee was shared, stories were spun, jokes were told and secrets were imparted.

Sometimes, after a day's flying, it might be an elderly man who stayed behind, just lonely for some company since his wife had passed. Other times, it might be a few young ladies with nothing better to do on a Saturday night than to hang out at the fire's edge and with the flame's reflection dancing in their sparkling eyes, ask questions about the places he'd been or if he had met anyone famous. Now and then, someone would question what they were going to do with the rest of their life or if he thought they might find love or their fortune if they lived in a big city.

Many nights, once by himself, he would lie on his back, his head cradled in his hands, warm in his sleeping bag, and he would look deep into the night sky slightly bemused, and he wondered if he should just go ahead and become a psychoanalyst. Then he would chuckle aloud.

But, many other nights, no visitors appeared and it was just him, the floating ant, the blades of grass and the sparkling sky with its stars shining, flashing like bits of glitter floating in a dark pool. Some nights, perhaps, there might be sporadic, muffled thunder from the far off erupting flashes of distant lightning dancing across the tops of billowing thunderstorm clouds that lay along a dusky horizon. He looked forward to summer nights spent under the

impromptu shelter of his airplane wing, snug in his sleeping bag as a passing evening shower thrummed the taunt fabric above his head and raindrops softly pattered the ground around him. The thoughts of it all and going back to it were as exciting and comfortable as returning home at the end of a long journey.



The Midwestern fields lay hours ahead of him now, and he settled in, unwrapped an egg salad sandwich to eat and let his airplane carry him back. He was going barnstorming again! He was deliriously happy.