

LIFE OF AN AVIATOR

SHORT STORIES

by
Robert Novell

Jimmy and the T'Ville Airport





Jimmy and the T'ville Airport

Part One

(Airplanes and Crop dusting)

Jimmy was a Carolina farm boy who grew up in a quiet farming community, sharing a bed with his two younger brothers, in a two-bedroom farmhouse. Jimmy loved his way of life, loved his family, but wanted more. He was not sure what “more” was but his yearning for something different was like a fire burning in his belly. Each night as he tried to sleep his thoughts would drift to a place unfamiliar to him. This place in time allowed him the freedom and independence that he secretly longed for, but where exactly did his thoughts take him? While Jimmy tried to sort out the emotions, and tame the flames, he grew ever more discontent and for sure, this fire burning inside him was growing ever more intense. He had to find a solution to this restless yearning that kept him awake at night -- but who would help? Who *could* help? Jimmy knew the answer and he had to think, and look, beyond the cotton fields he loved so much.

Jimmy was a small man at five foot six inches and one-hundred twenty pounds. Even his two younger brothers were taller, heavier, and more muscular; however, he was very much a man. His work on the farm had given him a physical tenacity that would surprise all who challenged the little blonde-haired

farm boy, and his brothers had learned long ago to take care with their words -- and especially any attempt to be the dominant male.

Jimmy also knew he thought differently from the other boys at school, but he did not know why. His thoughts always drifted toward the lives of people like the explorers Lewis and Clark, Bill Cody--- **Buffalo Bill** ---, and Charles Lindbergh---“**The Lone Eagle.**” Why was it that the accomplishments of Joe DiMaggio, Babe Ruth, and other stars of baseball, football, and Hollywood did not excite him? Was he out of step with reality? I think Jimmy knew for sure that he was a man in search of a road less traveled -- but where was that road? How would the cotton fields of the Carolinas be the starting point of a quest that would take him thousands of miles from home and bring him back again?

It was a Saturday morning and Jimmy awoke to find his father talking with a man he had never seen before. The man seemed to be selling chemicals for the cotton fields, but he was not sure. After the man left, Jimmy asked his dad about the man selling chemicals. Was it something new and better? “Not new exactly,” his father said, “just a different way of putting those chemicals on the field.” He is going to use an airplane. An airplane, ---That is the craziest thing I have ever heard. Well, I reckon we will see on Monday because he is going to land his airplane out front, then load up some of our chemicals, and then spray the 10 acres out back. There was a few moments of confusion before all of this sunk in for Jimmy, but after a moment or so of quiet reflection, Jimmy responded by asking his dad if he could stay home from school on Monday to be a part of this. Of course, his dad responded correctly by saying, “You will have to ask your mother about that” and suddenly Jimmy had this sinking feeling in his stomach because he knew what his mother was going to say. Time for plan “B” he thought.

On Sunday afternoon, it was time to execute plan “B,” so Jimmy was off to the barn to take care of some of his farm duties. About 30 minutes passed and Jimmy limped from the barn back to the house, proclaimed loudly -- so his mother would hear -- that he thought had sprained his ankle, and was having a hard time walking. Jimmy’s mother responded immediately by rushing to his side and demanded he go to the bed, lie down, and let her take a look. Jimmy

complied and when his mother took a look she stared at him and said, “Looks fine to me but rest for now and we will put some cold cloths around your ankle. I need to be sure you are ready for school tomorrow.” That was not exactly what he wanted to hear.

Monday morning came and Jimmy was ready. He limped slowly to the breakfast table, with the appropriate amount of moaning and facial distortions, and as was expected his mother stared him down and said, “I suppose you are going to tell me you need to stay home from school?” Jimmy’s younger brothers chimed in and said, “It’s not fair if you let Jimmy stay home and we have to go to school.” In typical southern fashion Jimmy’s mother responded by saying, “If you don’t want me to slap your face for telling me what I should do you better sit down, shut up, and eat your breakfast.” I think you can guess the outcome for Jimmy and his brothers.

It was about an hour later after Jimmy returned to his bed to rest per mom’s orders and his brothers had left for school, that Jimmy heard the airplane pass over the house. Jimmy immediately jumped from the bed, closed the bedroom door, and headed for the window. His father was already outside, and his mother was on her way to his side when the airplane landed. The pilot landed on the road in front of his house, taxied up the driveway, and then shut the engine down. A ground crew in a truck, which would handle the loading of the chemicals in to the aircraft’s hopper tank, as well as guide the pilot on each pass across the field being sprayed, followed the airplane. As everyone gathered close to the airplane, Jimmy knew he had to be a part of this. However, what would his mother do if he violated her orders to stay in the bed?

“Wow,” Jimmy said as he walked up to where everyone was standing. “I was asleep until the noise of the airplane woke me up.” Jimmy looked at the pilot, extended his hand, and said, “Hi, I am Jimmy.” The pilot shook Jimmy’s hand and then Jimmy’s mother turned and said, “Young man, what are you doing out of your bed?” Jimmy’s mother gave him one of her looks as she waited for his answer. Well, I could not sleep after the noise of the airplane so I decided to exercise my ankle a little bit and see if I could walk the stiffness out. “Ten

minutes young man, and you better be back in that bed” and then Jimmy’s mother turned away to signal her acceptance of his presence.

The pilot was explaining how everything was going to work and when the ground crew moved away to gather up the chemicals for the job, Jimmy also drifted away to inspect the airplane. He was quite impressed with this machine. Not exactly, a farm tractor but he decided very quickly that this airborne tractor might be to his liking. This was the beginning of Jimmy’s love affair with aviation and this day would mark the beginning of that free-spirited quest that would take him away from the cotton fields in a way he could not begin to imagine.

School was out now, and even though Jimmy had lots of work on the farm, he convinced his father to let him work part-time for the pilot of the cropduster. Jimmy would wake up at 5:00 AM to get all of his chores done and by 10:00 in the morning, he was off to his part-time job. Now most would consider that it was appropriate to be paid for services provided but not Jimmy. Jimmy had a plan, and the plan was to learn to learn as much about airplanes, flying, and crop dusting he could. He felt that this was his destiny.

The week after Jimmy finished his commitment to the cropduster, he was off to the T’ville airport to see what kind of deal could be made with the owner/operator who everyone called Captain Bob. Jimmy had been told by the cropduster that maybe Captain Bob might have the need for some part-time help pumping gas, cleaning up the hangar, and taking care of cutting the grass on the airfield. Jimmy had a plan. Jimmy arrived early and introduced himself to Captain Bob, and his friends, and was immediately recognized as being the cropduster’s helper. Jimmy acknowledged he was indeed the helper, but his job had finished and he was in search of another. Captain Bob responded by saying, “Well I don’t really need any help right now, but I will let you know if things change.” “I will work for free,” Jimmy responded. There was a moment of silence – OK, maybe two moments -- and then Captain Bob asked why he wanted to do such a thing? “Well, you see sir, I know you teach people how to fly here and I want to be one of those people. Jimmy also added, “I want to be a cropduster when I finish high school, and I will graduate next year. I will work

really hard and the money I would get for my help can all be applied to your charges. “Well, I will have to think about that young fellow so come see me in a couple of days.” Jimmy thanked him, shook his hand, and the hands of his friends, and promised he would not regret having him as his helper. “I am a really good worker,” Jimmy said with a big smile.

A few days passed and Jimmy reappeared at the office of the T’ville airport. Captain Bob was not there so Jimmy decided to sweep up, and straighten up, a little while he waited. Captain Bob appeared about thirty minutes later, while Jimmy was still cleaning up, and was amazed that this young fellow would take on the task of cleaning up the office, and the ramp in front of the office, without being told or paid. “Well, I can see you are serious. When can you start?” said Captain Bob. Today is a good day sir. OK good, but I will pay you cash for your services and as you save up some money we will talk flight instruction. We can make it work if you really want it bad enough.

“What a year!” Jimmy thought, but he knew his quest had only just begun and there were many challenges ahead. However, this blond-headed farm boy was ready for whatever might come his way, and he always had a plan.

As Jimmy moved forward with his life’s plan, there were several setbacks. His first best plan for gaining experience was to join the Army. They were not in need of pilots, but it was possible that if he wanted to join the infantry, he could move laterally if a slot should open on the aviation side. Jimmy opted out of this proposal and moved ahead to his next plan. His old friend the cropduster would give him his chance, he hoped.

Part Two

(Jimmy’s Adventure of a Life Time)

Jimmy showed up at his old friend’s house the next week to sit down for a conversation about life and aviation. When he arrived, his old friend was on the front porch with two other fellows who were about to leave. They introduced themselves, as Jimmy smiled and extended his hand, and then they asked if he was a cropduster like his friend. Jimmy hesitated slightly and then said, “Yes sir,

this man, pointing to his friend, taught me everything he knows.” The two fellows responded by asking if he wanted a job. Jimmy maintained his composure, controlled his excitement, and stared directly at his friend and said, “I am ready for a new challenge. What do you have in mind?” One of the men responded, “We are going to follow the cotton crop south to Nicaragua and then come back north to California and work the rice fields before returning to the Carolinas in the spring.” Jimmy knew where California was, but not Nicaragua - he did not remember a state named Nicaragua. The other two fellows recognized Jimmy was a bit confused and they then explained in detail about the Central American country, the ferry flights across Mexico, Guatemala, and Salvador to get there, and then the return to California for the winter. Jimmy was all ears but had lost his ability to speak. His old friend joined in the conversation at this point and said, “Yea Jimmy, I wish I could go but with the family I need to stay a little closer to home. However, for you it is a perfect fit. You can see the world, make some money, and fly airplanes. What else in life could you ask for?” Jimmy responded, “I will take you up on your offer if you will have me,” and offered his hand to seal the deal. Funny how life can put you down one day and then the next day you are on top of the world. The four fellows shook hands and Jimmy’s new employer advised they would be in touch with more details. It would be a month or so before he would have to leave.

Now the problem at hand was how this one-hundred-hour pilot, who had never flown beyond the limits of the Carolinas, was going to find his way to Nicaragua and then back again. Jimmy asked his old friend what he should do. Time to go see Captain Bob and tell him you are in over your head and need his help. He will understand because we have all been there. Still, Jimmy knew he would have to do his best to get ready but would also need to get some maps from these fellows because Captain Bob probably did not have what Jimmy needed. Jimmy shook his old friend’s hand, thanked him for his support, and was off and running to see Captain Bob.

Two weeks had passed now, and Jimmy had spent all of his free time with Captain Bob trying to prepare himself for the task. Turns out Captain Bob had done a lot of flying out west and had even flown into Mexico. The plan, as it

stood now, was for Jimmy to pick up an airplane in Houston, Texas and proceed south along the coast, cut across Guatemala, and then south to Nicaragua. Lots of big mountains where he was going, but that was not his biggest problem he would face. Where to get gas was the challenge at hand. With the help and political connections of his new employer, Jimmy developed a plan.

Jimmy survived the summer in Nicaragua and his time in California, but after his first season on the road, and away from his family, he was ready to go home. The Carolina farm boy was homesick, but he knew that he had found his road less traveled and the flames that had kept him awake at night were under control for now.

The story I have related to you in this chapter is true. Jimmy worked the cotton fields of Nicaragua and the rice fields of California for almost ten years. He even found a little time to help his friend, the cropduster, enjoy some time off with his family by taking over his schedule. His friend tried to pay Jimmy, but Jimmy would have none of that. Jimmy knew his success in life was made possible by the cropduster and he would forever show his gratitude by being more than just the hired help. He was his best friend for life and, as they say down south, he would always be beholden to him.

I met Jimmy after he had bought out Captain Bob's interest in the T'ville airport. Turns out that Jimmy was not only a Carolina farm boy turned aviator, but he was also a shrewd businessman as well. He had saved his money from his work out west and down south, bought out Captain Bob's interest in the airport, bought Captain Bob's Stearman, and bought himself a J-3 cub to instruct in.

Part Three

(My Adventure Begins)

It was a Sunday afternoon when I met Jimmy. I was in search of someone to teach me how to fly and when I arrived at the T'ville airport, Jimmy was just taking off with a student. The only problem was that the wind was blowing so

hard that after they lifted off and climbed to around three-hundred feet, the airplane seemed to come to a standstill. I stood there, totally amazed, at what was happening and then to my disbelief the airplane began going backwards. As the wind blew, the little airplane back across the beginning of the runway Jimmy put the Cub in to a slide slip and made a normal landing. After Jimmy had parked the airplane and sent his student home, I walked over and introduced myself. Jimmy's blonde hair was grey now, but there was a sparkle in his eyes that was warm and inviting. "Howdy," he said as he extended his hand. "My name is Jimmy. What is yours? Kind of windy today let's step inside and I will buy you a cup of coffee."

We talked for almost two hours that day as Jimmy explained the plan he had in mind for me. The only issue I had was money which would force me off in a different direction; however, that was OK as long as I could achieve my goals. I spent the weekends working with Jimmy, was able to fly a little but never enough to get my license. So, I mostly listened to Jimmy's stories, asked lots of questions, and I was always on the lookout for an opportunity that would help me pay for my dream.

It has been some time -- maybe twenty years -- since Jimmy and I shared time at the T'ville airport so some of my memories may be a little cloudy and since Jimmy is not of this earth now giving him a call is out of the question. However, the essence of who Jimmy was has been accurately documented and he was a true aviator.

The hours I spent at the T'ville airport were some of the best times of my life and as long as I live, I will always remember Jimmy's lessons on the correct way to hand prop a Cub, his love of people, airplanes, and instructing, and the following words that he always used at every opportunity:

"Flying is supposed to be fun. Keep it simple and enjoy the moment."

An interesting footnote to this story is that had the boll weevil not devastated the cotton fields of the U.S., and elsewhere, Jimmy may have never found his road less traveled, and you would not be flying on Delta Airlines. Delta got its

start as Huff Daland Duster, a simple crop-dusting corporation based in Monroe, Louisiana. So, the next time you are sitting in the back of a Delta airliner I want you to think about Jimmy. He and Delta Airlines owe their success to the boll weevil.



(The Infamous Boo Weevil)