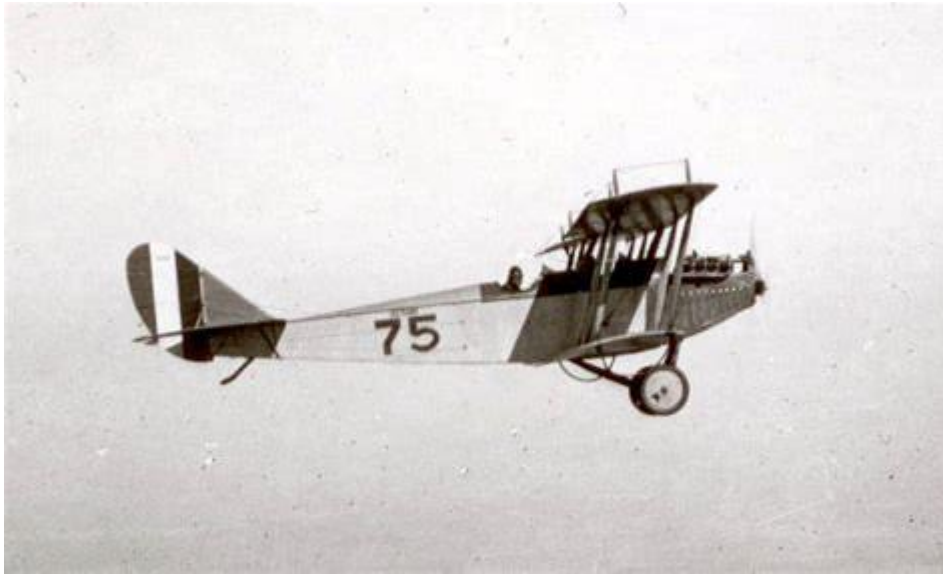


Clem



Gordon's early years were marked by scenes of drama and finally violence when his father, a sailor, returned from deployment one afternoon to find a strange man walking through the living room buck naked.

As the bell announced the end of the school day, Principal Nelson popped her head into the classroom and led Gordon to her office where Police Chief Harrison was waiting.

"Your Uncle Joe is on the way down from Bakersfield. You'll be going home with him," the Chief explained in the reassuring manner that people in his profession mastered early in their careers.

Uncle Joe arrived an hour and a half later, a little shaken by the trip over the twisting Grapevine highway separating the fertile San Joaquin Valley from the Los Angeles Basin. Principal Nelson took Gordon out front while Uncle Joe and Chief Harrison

discussed the situation, after which, Joew took Gordon's hand and led him to his mud-splattered pickup truck for the trip north.

Uncle Joe accepted life with the same stoicism he accepted the loss of crops to locust, or so too the bonanza of a bumper harvest of oat hay. God's will was, after all God's will and everything else was shoveling sand against the tide, an image he favored when explaining the tenets of his pragmatic faith to the other deacons of the Calvary Baptist Church who gathered at Scotty's Corner on Saturday afternoon to assess the concordance of scripture with life in the southeastern San Joaquin Valley.

Aunt Claire was even more pragmatic, relying on broom, boiling water, Ivory Soap, and a simmering stew pot to hold all demons at bay. As a result, her house was safe except for the telephone that hung on the wall in the front hall. If she had her way, it would live in the mailbox, but her husband was adamant about its being there so it stayed, two rings signaling the intrusion she so much dreaded, particularly on dark days when Joe was gone.

Gordon's clearest memory of life on the farm was a loud knocking sound coming from beyond the tree line separating his uncle's farm from the Nakano's up the road. The racket rose violently in pitch and drama until at last a disheveled biplane hove into view. Suddenly, a series of sharp backfires shocked the morning air and the cacophony sputtered then stopped.

For an instant there was no perceptible change. Then the creature rolled up steeply, pointing a wing in Gordon's direction before arcing around in a precipitous descent,

emitting a soft whistle as it turned nose-on to the chest-high oat-stand lashed far over by the brutish March wind.

The strange apparition landed with a solid *crump*, skittering and plunging headlong into the engulfing growth. Disappearing now and again for several seconds at a time, it finally came to rest at the end of a trail strewn with trampled stems. It sat there silent, proud, aloof; altogether magic; a creature from another time and place.

Gordon found himself running toward the plane, heedless of any possible consequence, unaware he had witnessed a flying feat of the very highest order accomplished by a pilot who had been rendered nearly blind by the gush of boiling-hot oil that blanketed his windscreen and goggles. Nor was the assault entirely superficial as the steaming tar clung to everything in its way scouring livid purple and red lesions on the pilot's face and throat.

When Gordon arrived, the pilot was still struggling to extricate himself from his harness and parachute, thrashing back and forth in impotence, muttering great oaths, adding a satanic element to the excitement of the event.

That there were tears in the fabric; tatters at the wings' trailing edges; chunks missing from the propeller blade; and large areas where the red and black paint was peeled back exposing patches of dirty white linen mattered not an iota to Gordon. The heat-blackened oil smear streaking aft from the cowling seemed beautiful and somehow appropriate. Even the squat, swarthy apparition who leaped angrily from the cockpit and whirled to hurl still more invective in the direction of the smoking behemoth belonged to the scene. For sure it was spectacular, but to Gordon it was even more. It was holy.

Gordon led the pilot--Clem was his name--back to the house, set to explode in his eagerness to explain the stirring events to Aunt Claire. But his excitement was too great, confusing the dear lady and elevating her normal state of dither to near-panic.

Recognizing the onset of hysteria, Clem apologized for the commotion and asked if he might use the phone to call his brother for help. Uncle Joe was in Bakersfield at the bank explaining why he needed more time to repay his seed loan so Claire was at odds whether to let the oil-stained stranger into the house, but when she saw the severity of Clem's burns and her better instincts took charge.

By sundown, Uncle Joe had returned, Clem's brother had arrived with a pickup truck full of tools and parts, Gordon had pitched his tent in the field beside the airplane, and a degree of normalcy had returned to the farm.

During the week it took to repair the airplane, Gordon burned every detail of the design and execution into his memory, noting such features as the laminations in the wooden spars, the rigging of the control surfaces; attachment and tensioning of the landing gear bungees; and the layout and construction of the engine.

He spent hours in both the front and rear cockpits staring at the instruments and imagining their readouts in flight. Clem showed him how to move the controls to perform different maneuvers, teaching him to coordinate the actions of the various surfaces and hammering into him the value of smoothness and precision. At night they sat up late picking out Spring constellations and telling each other their dreams. As their trust for one another ripened, Clem began to share the knowledge of flying that gave purpose and meaning to his life.

"She's like a fine lady," he explained, demonstrating the relationship between pressures and displacements of the airplane's controls. "You've got to be gentle but firm. That way she knows you care, but also that she's safe in your hands."

Gordon was no more surprised to learn that the airplane was a *she* any more than he was surprised that her name was Stella. "Stella means star," Clem explained, knowing that Gordon would understand and treasure the significance as he did, hesitant yet relieved to share his second greatest secret with another human.

The other secret, one that he would take to his grave shortly, was that he was dying of cancer brought about by mustard gas that cut short his flying days in World War I. The injury had controlled his life from the moment of his release from the hospital in 1919, ruling out any attachment with another person, man, woman, or child. Even his brother, who had contacted the doctors during Clem's convalescence and knew of the prognosis, had been unable to re-forge the links of their earlier days.

Now fifteen years later, Clem was to come as close to another human being as ever he had or would and he found himself filled with longings and emotions that Gordon sensed but couldn't understand. It made no difference as the essence of their bond was the plane.

The engine was finished and tested but the airplane remained in its tracks. Clem re-swaged the elevator cables and with Gordon's help carefully set their tension to factory values. The ailerons and rudder were trimmed, and after the brake cylinders were rebuilt Clem decided there was more to do.

The entire airplane was cleaned and the peeled areas doped and painted. The flying wires maintaining the relationship between the wings and fuselage were carefully tuned using a piano key. Gordon blended out the scratches in the windscreen while Clem cut and fit new rubber fuel lines, and even Aunt Claire got into the act by repairing the seat bucket and patching several snags in Clem's parachute. Finally, as Gordon and Clem both had come to dread, there was nothing else left to be done.

Uncle Joe, his tractor washed for the occasion, towed the airplane to the county road along the West side of the farm where he solemnly presented Clem with a case of oil. Aunt Claire packed sandwiches and two jars of peach preserves for the trip, and school let out early so the students could witness the event.

Sheriff Graves positioned deputies at both ends of the road to keep the takeoff area clear, and when at last all had been said or done, Gordon and Clem shook hands stiffly beside the idling plane and Clem departed.

The airplane circled once to dip its wings in salute then headed North into a freshening gale, carrying with it Gordon's dreams for the future.

After the last whisper from its engine and propeller disappeared into the great valley's hush, Uncle Joe took Gordon's small hand in his and led the way back to the present.