



By Mike Marcon

At first, he pushed the thought back in his mind.

The sun was hot on his shoulders and small rivulets of sweat broke from under the headband of his cap as he watched the Stearmans and the Fleets take off from the small grass strip.

Around him, sitting on the wooden benches that served as bleachers, were young children and their parents eating hot dogs and licking ice cream cones. Here and there were old people, some in wheelchairs, others pushing walkers; they had been brought from their nursing homes for the day to shield their eyes against the

brilliant August afternoon sun and to watch, and for some of them, perhaps, to relive their past days flying the antiques that now roared by in a five plane formation.

The all-volunteer air show, a take-off on the golden days of barnstorming, was held every Sunday afternoon during the summer, and it had been years since he had visited and paid his admission to watch the show and to wander through the sparse crowds it attracted.

Overhead, Piper Cubs and biplane relics, lovingly cared for during the cold months, blew white smoke from their exhausts as the pilots and crews re-enacted aerial ribbon cuts, flour sack bombings and wing walking.

There was even a parachute jump that took place to open the show that was accompanied by an off-pitch rendition of the national anthem sung by a young soloist from a local high school. It was all very hammy and entertaining. The taped calliope music playing from loud speakers gave the air show a circus atmosphere; the announcer stood on the airfield waving a red cane like a sideshow barker while wearing his white, skimmer hat, and he excitedly described the aerial maneuvers taking place in the warm, hazy sky above; he was doing his best to heighten an afternoon's excitement while attempting to take the crowd back to a 1929 summer.

But what got his gall was the parachute jump. There was nothing 1929 about it whatsoever. A single jumper riding in the front seat of a red-and-white Stearman exited high over the heads of the crowd as "Oh, say can you see..." was warbled badly, and the jumper fell to his canopy opening a few thousand feet above the ground. What blossomed open above was a square parachute. A yellow and blue, square parachute, a ram air. He grumbled to himself that if one was to go to all the trouble to put on an old-time air show, then at the very least, an old-time parachute, a round parachute should have been used.

Late in the afternoon, the air show ended, and the crowd melted away to their cars and vans and left a dusty trail out the front gate and onto the paved highway beyond. As he waited in line to leave, slowly inching forward to exit the airfield's grassy parking lot, the thought that he had been pushing back into his mind began to take a clearer, more commanding focus.

He could not announce to the world what he was about to do, but he could swear to secrecy the few people that he would invite to do it with him. There were many that he knew, hundreds around the world who might be interested. But he could not risk announcing it over his computer on a social website. It would attract the attention of the wrong people, namely, the people who enforced the rules that had held him back until now. As he drove the long trip back to his small airfield tucked away in the woods, he thought that the whole idea might be for naught.



He had purchased the airfield property seven years ago and had been told by the realtor that she had been told that the grass strip and the fields around it had once been used by a skydiving club on the week-ends. She walked him out to a small open field next to the dilapidated tin-roofed hangar and scuffed the dry hay and grass away with her foot. Beneath the detritus of mown clippings was a layer of small, brown river rock - pea gravel.

Back then, before he purchased the property, the realtor had also told him that the 40 acre parcel was previously owned by a very old man who had passed away. His family had insisted that the entire property be sold as it stood, that even the airplane and the tools stored in the hangar and the barn had to be included in the sale. They lived far away and had no interest in trying to sell the land and the equipment piecemeal.

Then the realtor led him over to the hangar and slid the door aside revealing an old Cessna 180 Skywagon, its paint peeling and its leading edges pitted. Was it flyable, he asked the realtor? She wasn't a pilot, and she said she knew nothing about airplanes. He could not quite believe his eyes. His last airplane was a 180 as well. The paint scheme was even the same color, green and white. Did the family know what was in the hangar, he asked?

She sighed, saying that their attorney had sent her a bill of sale to it, telling her that they did not want the airplane and to assign its ownership to who ever bought the property. Then she said that it had become very apparent to her in the course of dealing with the family over the phone that they were only interested in selling the property as quickly as possible and getting the money for it. She

added that they were quite anxious to sell, and she thought that they would probably accept any reasonable offer.

As he considered the purchase, one of the many odd things about the property was that he could find no evidence of the airfield on the aerial sectionals, the aviation maps for the region. None. It was as if the airfield never existed or maybe it had just not been used for so long that that it was no longer mapped as an airfield. Another interesting thing about the property that caught his eye was that the airfield had been cared for. Its entire length had been mowed carefully; it seemed, on a regular basis. When asked about that, the realtor shrugged her shoulders and said that perhaps a neighbor kept it up, but she really did not know who cared for it.

He had long ago been forced to stop parachuting and flying by his declining health and convinced both himself and his wife that his only reason for buying the place was that once the old farmhouse was rehabilitated, it would be a fine place to live out their elder years, maybe raise a few chickens and one or two head of beef cattle. It would be a fine place, quiet and remote.

There was a padlocked room built into the far corner of the hangar and he had asked the realtor if she had a key to it. She said that the family did but, as yet, they had not sent it to her. She went on to say that the room was just a storage room full of old tools and some parachuting knick-knacks, and that the family had told her that it was fine with them if the lock was broken off. So he broke the lock off.

Again, he could not believe what he was seeing. Hanging on racks constructed of galvanized steel pipe were six sets of old parachute gear, complete rigs. There were four old, very worn, grey and olive drab B-4 containers each marked with a sewn on white tag, neatly lettered in black ink indicating what kind of parachute was packed inside. There were four "7-TU" canopies and two "Para Commanders." All but one of the reserve parachutes attached to the chest rings of the main harnesses were tagged as "T7A" and one was marked as a "Navy Conical." Each reserve had a mounted metal panel painted crinkle black, and in each panel there was mounted a Swiss stopwatch and a surplus aircraft altimeter.

Hanging neatly on another similar rack were six faded, black, double-zipper jumpsuits, six pairs of worn French jump boots and one very old and scuffed pair of Corcoran jump boots. Hanging by

their chin straps above the suits and boots were three old football helmets of various colors and three, scarred white Bell motorcycle helmets.

His mind was awirl with questions. How long had this gear been here? Who was the old man who had died? The realtor had given him the name before he actually closed on the property, and it did not register as someone he knew or had ever heard of. Did the gear all belong to him? Then he thought that the old man must have operated a small commercial skydiving center, not a club, at some point. But he could not be sure.



He leaned into the gear, getting his face close to it and he sniffed; it did not smell musty or rotted. In fact, the room seemed very dry to him. He had to see. He lifted one of the reserves from its hanger and pushed back the pack flaps far enough to expose some canopy material. He pulled enough of it out to be able to give it a small pop test and smell it, too. There seemed to be nothing wrong with it. It looked brand new to him.

Looking around the room further, there were many familiar pieces of parachute gear here and there. On one wall hanging from a nail were several main and reserve ripcords. On another nail were yellow static lines and a few pairs of goggles. On another nail hung kicker plates, an A3 pilot chute and two MA-1 pilot chutes. In a box shoved under a cabinet was box of neatly rolled and stacked yellow crepe paper wind drift indicators.

Who would leave all of this? Why was it still here? Everything in the room looked serviceable and ready to jump. It was like he had walked into some sort of gag. He thought to himself that maybe it was a set-up. Maybe old friends had somehow elaborately done this to screw with him. Then he thought to himself, *"Bullshit! Who would go to all this trouble just for a laugh or two?"*

Leaving the door to the room open, he turned and walked out to look the airplane over. The Hobbs meter showed 912 hours on it. Since what, he thought? He looked behind the seat and found a small canvas case with the registration papers and engine and airframe log books. It was a 1956 model. It had been given an annual inspection within the last year. The compression ratings

showed no weak cylinders. Its oil had been changed and there was nothing in the logs to indicate that it wasn't airworthy. The keys hung in the ignition switch. He flipped the master switch on and the battery showed good.

With great effort, he and his wife pushed the airplane out of the hangar and he pulled the propeller through four times, then he crawled in the pilot's seat. There were no other seats in the cabin. The airplane had obviously been used as a jump airplane. Feeling at home in it, he primed it with a few strokes and holding the brakes, he turned the ignition switch to on and pulled the starter handle. The engine turned over sluggishly once or twice and it started blowing away a small hurricane of blue smoke from the oil that had gathered in the cylinders from being static so long.

He let the engine warm up a minute or two, then performed a magneto check. There was little rpm drop in either magneto. He then held the brakes firm and pushed the throttle fully forward. The engine's tachometer showed it was developing full power. He pulled the throttle back to idle and exercised the yoke left and right as he watched the ailerons rise and fall on each wing, and then flexed the elevator several times. The rudder pedals seemed to have the right amount of tension. The airplane seemed completely airworthy. With his wife standing off to one side, he reached down and shut the engine off and then turned the master off. For a long moment, as the propeller clacked to a stop, he leaned back in the seat and was filled with amazement.

That's when the thought first entered his head. He had even named the group.



He and his wife bought the property. A friend of his, a retired parachute rigger came by now and then and together they would get the old parachute gear out, inspect it and repack it, all the while promising that one day they would get it out and jump it. Then they would laugh and it never happened.

He bought a very expensive dehumidifier and kept the storage room dry and clean. Having the gear became a kind of comfort to him, a reminder of his days past when he was an active skydiver.

The airplane was a different story. In the beginning, after they bought the property, he flew it nearly every day. He lavished money on it. He washed it. He waxed it. Most days, he flew it with the right door off and left leaning against the hangar wall. Having the wind rush swirl around him as he flew was another cheering reminder of his past when he would fly jumpers between his skydiving.



But time was taking its toll on him as the glaucoma began to affect his vision. And there were the minor painful twinges in his chest that came during the night. Soon, a doctor had diagnosed mild angina and he began taking pills for it. He could still see to fly and make out the eye chart but never told his flight surgeon about it the angina, always seeing another doctor, in another town for his needs. Then, came the mandatory EKG, after his bi-annual flight physical turned up an abnormality when the doctor listened to his chest.



He was still thinking about the idea as drove home from the old time air show that evening. He laughed to himself thinking that maybe the idea was a form of delusional dementia. He had not flown the old 180 in two years, having parked her when the doctor told him that he could not renew his medical certificate. His heart had become too frail, his vision now more blurred. So the green and white Cessna had sat forlornly in the rusty tin hangar next to the barn gathering bird droppings on her wings along with a thick coat of dust on her windshield. He could not bear to sell her. So, every few weeks - or maybe a month might pass - he would go out to the hangar and try to start her, just to hear her run.

Lately though, the battery was weak, and he feared a few cylinders might have low compression, and all he could do was to just stand and look at her, her tires now low and squat.

In the storage room, still locked away, was the old parachute equipment. The B-4 containers with the orange and white gores, the T-7A reserve canopies packed in chest packs; the worn and scuffed French boots that were always a size or two too big for those who

might have rented them; the now faded black twin-zippered jumpsuits with patches sewn on the elbows and the plastic football helmets; it was all there, kept dry, and still useable just where he had left everything.



When he arrived home from the air show, the idea still played in his head. He kept saying to himself, *"You are either going to kill yourself or they are going to put you in jail for this."* But then another voice would argue, *"So what? You've lived 75 years. How much longer do you have?"* and he would laugh at himself.

He had not even so much as consumed a beer for several years. He had lived cautiously. Life had become a predictable routine of meals at the same time, endless hours reading Facebook posts, bedtime at the same time every night, taking his medicine without fail between his first and second cup of coffee right at seven every morning, watching his every step, so as not to fall and look foolish if the paramedics were called. He had lapsed into the comfortable routine of old age and that was nagging him. And, it was pissing him off.

What bothered him as much were the old friends he knew, the many who had begun jumping out of airplanes and flying them some 60 years ago, about the time that he had. On the social websites, he was frequently in contact with many of those who weren't yet dead as they relived their lives and immersed themselves in their lost youths, telling and re-telling the adventures and good times they had experienced all those years ago.

They seemed to live their lives vicariously on the computer now, trying to find something they had lost, as they had grown older while becoming fathers and grandfathers and trying to live up to what tradition had told them they should become across the jobs and careers and marriages, children and grandchildren. It seemed that every day as he read their words posted on the computer, he could palpably sense the regret of losing their youth, their longing for a freer and more exciting part of their lives that, to most of them seemed forever gone, only alive in the haze of memories and faded details.



It took him days to work up the courage to call his old friend, Buzz, out in Utah. Buzz had worked on the railroad for many years after they had last jumped together. They were close friends but the years and circumstances had pulled them apart. They spoke infrequently on the phone, and he chatted with Buzz now and then on the social media. In the old days, they were inseparable.

Down south, just after they had each gotten their pilot licenses, if the jumpers were few at the club, they delighted in the time they spent just wandering above the country together in a yellow Piper Cub and landing in farmers' fields.

The two had nearly lost their hard-earned pilot licenses when someone called the local sheriff with the N-number of the Cub. It seemed that someone was flying low, up and down the river, bombing fishermen in their boats with tomatoes and oranges. Their counter-alibis saved them but the fun was a source of a hilarious memory brought up nearly every time they spoke on the phone over the years.

He knew that if anyone in the entire world would be agreeable to take part in what he was thinking, it might be Buzz. Buzz's wife had passed a few years earlier, and they had no children, so he figured Buzz might have little to lose if things went south.



But before he would call Buzz, he would have to tell his wife something. She was nobody's fool. She would see him fiddling again with the airplane. She would see him repacking the old parachutes. She was going to ask questions. She would be suspicious. So he figured the best thing was to just be up front with her. He waited until what he thought would be the right time and across the kitchen table he laid it all out there for her.

She listened patiently to his every detail, his every reason. At first, the whole plan was laughable to her but she kept a straight face, a serious look in her eyes. Finally, as he expended every plausible reason, every made up every excuse he could manufacture, she leaned across the table, gently moved his coffee cup to the side and laid a hand on his and said, "We can't live

forever can we?" Then she rose from the kitchen table, turned her back to him as she walked into the kitchen, disappeared around the corner where he could not see her, dabbed her eyes with her apron, cleared her throat and said loudly, so he could hear her, "I wondered how long it would take you?"

"You mean you knew I would?" he said, turning his head towards the kitchen door.

"Yes. I could sense it in you."

"How?"

"I knew when you said you wanted to go off to the air show by yourself. I knew then, and I have known for a long time that you were going to do something like this. I just didn't know when."

"You're not angry?" he asked.

"No. Just a little afraid, that's all."

"You still love me?"

"More than any horny old 75 year old I know."

He rose from the table and walked into the kitchen and gave her a hug, then pulled away and looked into her face. "I love you, too!" he said.

"Now, go. Go play with that damned airplane. I've got muffins to bake."

He smiled at her with that wrinkled face of his, one lip slightly upturned, the look he always had when he was about to do something foolish as he opened the screen door to leave for the hangar.

"Wait!" she said with an urgent tone. "You know if you guys do this, you're going to be outlaws. You with no medical..."

"I know. Might even get caught and go to jail, too."

She laughed and said, "I'll bring you cookies and maybe a file."

He thought to himself as he pushed the screen door open wide, "I'll never live that long. Her words echoed in his head, *"We can't live forever can we?"*

He was heading for the hangar to air up the 180's tires and wait for the call from Buzz.

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