

## Chapter Two

### **Southern Parachute Center & Leon**

One day, I traveled to Mobile, Alabama, to a grand gathering of nearly every southern jumper at what was known as a Council Meeting. Mostly, it was a chance to renew old friendships and drink a lot of beer.

At the bar, where the meeting took place, I met Prissy. A willow of a girl, nearly anorexic, she stood at the bar wearing welding gloves and holding an ocelot. Ocelots have nasty tempers and very long, sharp claws. Also known as Dwarf Leopards, the ocelot resembles a large housecat and was once hunted to near extinction because of their beautiful silky spotted coats.

Prissy was easy to chat with and it came up that I was looking for work. “Well,” she said, “we need somebody to train first jump students at the Center. But we can’t pay much.” I was such a gung-ho jumper, I said, “If you can give me a cot in a hanger, three meals a day and a little spending money, I’m there.” Turns out, I would be there for four years. We agreed I would start in a few days. I was giddy with the prospects.

A few days later, when my Greyhound bus rolled into Hammond, Louisiana, where Southern Parachute Center was located, Prissy was waiting there waving and this time, without the snarling cat. I slung my parachute over my shoulder and stepped out into the humidity of summer. A short drive in a VW bug and we reached the airport, which was impressive.

The airport, it turned out, was one of many built during World War II. When the war was over, the airports were often sold or leased to the local municipalities for one dollar. Its primary purpose had been to train the pilots and crews of B-24 Liberator bombers which were used worldwide but, in the main, over Europe. It was the primary bomber used in the raids at Ploesti. Ploesti was the vast German oil refinery located some 30 miles north of Bucharest, Romania.

The airport had three five thousand foot concrete runways laid out in a massive triangle connected by taxiways. As I walked onto the apron of the airport, a figure emerged from the cockpit of a small red-and-white airplane. I would ultimately use that same aircraft to log over four thousand hours of pilot-in-command time. But that day, I wasn’t yet a pilot. That was to come.

The figure materializing from the airplane was Leon, Prissy’s husband, partner and the driving force behind the Center. Leon was Cajun. He had little education but a huge, gregarious personality and thrust his hand forward to shake mine flashing a smile full of teeth -- almost Cheshire-like.

“Mike!” he said, as he pumped my hand, “Come on in, I’ve heard good things about you.” With that, he wheeled and starting walking towards the old airport terminal and lounge.

Once inside, I looked around at the walls and the green vinyl couches that lined the room. On every wall, there were old yellowed photos of ancient airplanes and a few newer pictures in black frames of various jumpers -- some I knew -- posing and grinning for the camera.

Hanging at the edges of the ceiling were many ragged pieces of colored cloth with hard-to-read writing on them like gay little flags. I pointed and asked, “What are those?”

“Oh!” said Leon, “In addition to skydiving, we also do flight instruction. Those are shirttails.”

He went on, “When we solo a new student pilot, he has to have his shirttail cut off. We then write his name and the date of his solo flight on them and hang them there. It’s an old flying custom.” To this day, I have never taken the time to find out where it originated. Mine would eventually hang there as well.

Leon, it would turn out, would prove himself to be a true one-of-a-kind. He spoke with a slight, very slight, Cajun accent that could disappear when he needed to speak with someone and he really wanted to impress them with his education. But he wasn’t educated.

He never got out of junior high from what I can tell. Yet, he was an idiot savant in many ways -- ‘mechanically gifted’ is a misnomer. Everything mechanical came to him easily, as if he had the entire Encyclopedia of Mechanics in his head. Nothing existed he could not fix, somehow. I do not know who taught him to fly, but it had to have been easy to do. He was a natural pilot.

Over the course of the years, I learned how to fly from him. His way of teaching me how to fly is best illustrated by this small example.

We had three airplanes at the Center. Two of them were used to haul jumpers. The first, the one I spent the most time flying, was a four place Cessna 170, a tail dragger. Meaning, it had a tail wheel rather than a nose gear.

The second was a Howard GDA-15P, a heavy six-place airplane -- a beast produced in the 1930s as an air ambulance and instrument trainer. Also a tail dragger, from the pilot’s seat you could not see over the nose, meaning you had to constantly be looking askew out the side windows to taxi. It was very tricky to taxi, take off and land.

The Howard's engine was a Pratt and Whitney R985, very powerful at 450 horsepower. The engine was hard to start, and when it did, it belched fire and blew large clouds of gray-bluish smoke out behind it. This airplane was a scary animal to me as a new pilot. It had very touchy brakes. Stomp on them a little too hard and the airplane would flip straight over onto its back.

It carried nearly 100 gallons of fuel in the belly tanks which you were literally sitting on top of. Landing it, to me, was a prayerful occasion. For a time, in the beginning, I was truly afraid it was going to kill me. I'd have nightmares about it.

But we needed it because it could carry as many as six jumpers as opposed to the 170 which could only carry three. It simply made more money. We charged jumpers by the altitude they wanted to go to -- the higher the altitude, the more free fall time. The Howard could also get them there much, much faster than the 170 which we mostly used for the students who jumped at lower altitudes.

The way Leon taught me to fly the Howard was simple in design. One day, just after I had received my Private Pilot's license, which, in those days, only required 40 hours of flight time, he came strolling out of the hanger and said, "Hey, Whip!" That was his nickname for me along with "Hotrod."

"Jerk the engine cover off of the Howard. We're gonna go play around."

He had previously given me some flight instruction in it over the course of about two hours of flying time. I had barely figured out what I was doing with it. I thought, "*Okay, more instruction.*" As we approached the airplane he said, "You take the yoke." "Yoke" being the flight controls.

That meant I was going to be in the pilot's seat -- flying. I shuddered. I really didn't feel ready yet and I was always on the verge of wetting my pants at the prospect of flying the Howard. The airplane I flew the most, the 170, I could handle very well.

He took the co-pilot's seat, the right seat, which really wasn't a seat. It was the frame the right seat was supposed to be mounted on. But that seat had been taken off the frame to accommodate more jumpers. So, he wasn't belted in. The belts went with the seat. He was just perched there, sitting next me on the right seat's mounting frame, grinning

Now, our pilot's seats in both airplanes always had an emergency parachute sitting in them, which we never put on unless we should need it, if say, a wing fell off. We just sat in the seat and used the parachute as a back cushion. We could always slip right into it, if we needed it, which we never did.

He then motioned to me to fire up the engine. I primed it several times, flipped the magnetos on and hit the starter button. The big engine barked a few times and it caught. With much blue smoke belching from its exhaust stack and the smell of burned fuel filling the cockpit, I watched as the various instruments flickered and came to life.

We sat there warming it up for a few minutes then Leon motioned to me to taxi out. So, I swallowed hard and pushed the throttle forward and tried to look brave. He was sitting there, and out of the corner of my eye, I could see he was flashing me the Cheshire grin, teeth and all.

I strained to see what little I could ahead as we rolled towards the runaway and the threshold. Once at the threshold, the start of the runway, I positioned the Howard for take-off, locked the brakes and brought the engine rpm up to do oil pressure and magneto checks.

That all looked good and with some hesitation I pushed the throttle full forward and released the brakes. A little way down the runway, the airspeed was coming up nicely and the tail lifted and I could see the horizon again. Breathing a small sigh of relief, I glanced at the airspeed and I eased the yoke back and we lifted off gently.

We were airborne, and I knew, at least, temporarily, the monster wasn't going to kill me yet. Flying it straight and level wasn't the problem. Leon instructed me to circle the airport at about two thousand feet. I was getting more comfortable now and leaned back some trying to just enjoy the flight.

After I reached altitude and circled the airport two or three times, Leon got right up in my face and yelled, "Lean forward." I did, without question. I usually did everything Leon told me to without question.

The next thing I know he has snatched the emergency rig out from behind me and he's putting it on. Now, he's leaning out the open door with his left hand in the air holding up two fingers and pointing left which means "Give me 10 degrees left rudder."

"*Oh, Christ!*," I thought, screaming in my head, "*He's getting out!*" I was right, and with a whoosh, he was gone and I was alone with the killer airplane. I was going to have to land it. There was no way around it. It was land it right or die. Period.

Leon would later tell me that he had known I had an unreasonable fear of the Howard. He figured that the best way to teach me to swim was just throw me in water and let things take their course. He also knew that I was a very good pilot and that I had just built the Howard up in my mind to be such a problem that if I didn't conquer it on my own, I was never going to get past it. So, he had given me the problem – I had to fix it.

I circled the airport once or twice more and started figuring to myself that he wouldn't have done that if he thought he was going to lose a pilot and one of his two primary income sources. We weren't rich, and over the four years I was there, we always lived hand-to-mouth. I took some comfort in that and eased the throttle back to descend.

I took my time. I did everything by the book. I started talking to myself. *“Power setting, right! Check airspeed. Flaps to slow the descent and speed, right! Fuel selector on the correct tank, right! Check airspeed again.”*

I wiped my hands on my pants leg several times and took a firm grip on the yoke and placed my hand perfectly on the throttle and checked my airspeed once more. The runway, all 5000 glimmering feet of it was stretched out ahead of me. Just as began my flare for the landing, out of the corner of my eye, I spied Leon squatting the high grass watching.

I went past him, and my wheels touched down on the runway with a two quick screeches. I rolled out to the end of the runway, swerving a little here and there, as the tail wheel lowered to the concrete. I had landed with little difficulty. I exhaled deeply and sat back some in the seat.

Once at the end of the runway, I gave her some throttle, leaned on one brake and spun her back in Leon's direction at the other end of the runway. I had landed the Howard solo with no help from anybody, and there was a huge smile on my face.

I taxied to the runway's end. Once there, I slowed, then stopped and Leon crawled in with his parachute bundled in his arms and he sat down on the floor in the back of the cabin. We didn't say anything. He was just giving me the Cheshire grin. There was nothing to say. I wasn't mad at him, just happy for me.

This was just beginning of an extraordinary education in many things at his hands.