

# *The Last Summer*

*The Continuation of Midway Field*

## Preface

Winters always made Doc restless.

The cold air in the hangar hurt. It made his joints ache. His thin leather flight jacket became as cold as the air around it, and the jacket's thin silk lining did nothing to help.

Since he returned from last summer's flying, he had done all the necessary work to keep the old girl flying and there was little to do but small maintenance chores, keep the hangar swept and wait for spring. As he serviced the Jenny's engine, oil flowed slowly like thick syrup from the can into the Jenny's crankcase and that made Doc irritable and impatient. So, to calm himself, he decided to go sit in front of the heater and think.

In the corner of the hangar sat an electric heater creating a small radius of bare warmth. Sitting in front of it in the old vinyl recliner that Doc had rescued from the airport dumpster, psychologically somehow, the heater at least made him *feel* warmer. He sat staring at the glowing red coils of the heater, and his mind drifted, floating away to last summer's barnstorming. He leaned over to pick up a tattered and well-read copy of a flying magazine to idly flip through the pages as he remembered.

With a jolt that startled Doc, Oscar, the hangar cat and his constant companion, jumped without warning into Doc's lap. His daydreaming suddenly interrupted, and with his adrenalin settling, Doc ran his weathered hand across Oscar's back, and he felt the deep sawing of the cat's purr and he smiled. Oscar, feeling the heat from Doc's lap, circled once, laid down and tightly transformed himself into a sleek and shiny black ball, and he closed his eyes.

Doc continued to slowly pass his hand along the cat's back, occasionally pausing to rub an ear between his thumb and forefinger which only caused Oscar to deepen his rumbling purr. Doc looked at his hand as he smoothed the cat's coat and seeing that his skin appeared as crepe paper stretched across the veins and ligaments and his knuckles, Doc threw the magazine back onto the floor in dismay, and he leaned his head back into the recliner then slowly turned his head to one side to study the Jenny sitting still and quiet a few feet away.

From nose to tail, he looked along the taut linen covered surface of the ancient bi-plane, and he studied the glossy mustard color of *its* skin. He chuckled to himself thinking it ironic that an airplane introduced over 100 years ago should age better than he had. Now and then, his eye would stop here and there at a small crackled spot in the fabric, a little damage that might need a patch. But he wasn't ready to start doping and patching weak spots yet and figured that, soon, the weather would be warmer and that would be the time to tend to any dings.

Now and then, the heater fan motor would squeal softly and Doc looked back at it and was again transfixed by the red glow of the heater's spring-like coils. In his imagination, he began to gradually see the images of

campfires past. Sitting next to the nighttime fires he built to heat his meals and coffee during the barnstorming season were among his favorite places in the world to be, and would be the only place, if he discounted times spent climbing in and out of the summer's lazy, cottony, cumulus clouds, his goggles covered with a thin film of rocker grease, his hands on the stick and throttle of the Jenny.

The Jenny had a fuel range of a hundred miles or so to the tank-full, and many a day while searching for the next place to land, a place where he could hang his banner that advertised ten dollar rides in the sky, he would be forced to land early and find gas, given his propensity to lose track of time playing in and around the clouds and therefore losing track of his fuel consumption.

Barnstorming was dead. Doc knew that. But this coming summer, he would hang his sign out anyway.



Doc had a love affair with barnstorming. Many summers ago, he first took a bright yellow Piper Cub into the Midwest states, hopping field-to-field near the smaller towns and settlements where mostly beef cattle were fattened and corn, thousands upon thousands of green waving acres of it, grew. He would begin there by finding the right field and the odd farmer who would agree to let him hang his sign from fence post-to-fence post and use that empty field as a makeshift airport from which to give rides in the Cub to anyone willing to put forth the five dollars for a ten minute ride in and around the cotton white clouds above Iowa, Ohio and Nebraska.

Since his early days as young pilot, he could think of no finer way to use an airplane than to aimlessly wander

from small town to rural hamlet, to meet the people there, to write their stories and to camp under his wing nights. The flying magazines, now and then, bought and published his human interest pieces. Each year, by selling his stories, his saving account grew and grew until finally, he found the old Jenny.

The Jenny was “two holer,” meaning a two seat airplane, the pilot flying from the rear cockpit, the passenger riding up front. Built long ago to train fledgling pilots, its chief appeal to Doc was that it was an open cockpit, bi-wing airplane and it exuded aviation romance.

The very sight of the Jenny bouncing across a grassy field, its engine clacking at idle, immediately conjured images of the classic, swashbuckling pilot of the Twenties and the Thirties. Once the airplane taxied to a stop, its wings still rocking gently, a dashing figure with a white silk scarf fluttering from the collar of his leather flight jacket, his skull helmet pulled tightly over his head, the chin straps dangling loosely, his tan Jodhpur pants and calf-high brown flying boots would emerge to the wing step, stand momentarily and then drop to the ground, bow to the small crowd and with a flourish, remove his helmet exposing a head of slicked back and shining black hair and underneath the thinnest pencil slash of a mustache riding above a flashing smile, the young pilot would smile, exposing the whitest of teeth. A scene from an old movie.

Doc sometimes had to pinch his lips to keep from laughing out loud when he remembered that that was the vision he held of himself in the early days. It amused him that, in many ways, he still saw himself as that dashing pilot. That is, until he looked at the creases of age on his face as he shaved in the mornings.

He spent two winters rebuilding the Jenny and restoring it to its heady days when it trained the war bound pilots. Then he sold the Cub and bought the scarf, the Jodhpur pants and the boots. And he followed his dreams and his plans: write in the winter, barnstorm in the summer.

For many summers then, as soon as the weather allowed, it was leave his home in Virginia and fly west. Follow his nose. He now rarely used maps. He knew where the riders had been before, where the pretty girls were after church on Sunday, where the kids on bicycles pedaled furiously ahead of trails of dust along dirt roads to find where the Jenny had set down after Doc had circled low over the small town and its central courthouse and the groomed green lawn where the old timers sat on park benches painted white and told lies under the watchful eye of a long-dead bronze war hero standing atop his marble base looking gallantly east.

Doc was chasing again the reluctant fat man who had to be helped into the front cockpit by manhandling a gelatinous behind with a heaving push to pile him into the front seat; he was wanting to see again the freckled blond teenager with pigtails wearing the flowered print dress demure shyly as he sold rides like a carnival barker; he needed to make his instant coffee in his blue splatter ware cup after heating the water in a battered aluminum pan; he needed to feel again the warmth of his sleeping bag warding off a late evening chill as he fell asleep reading Stienbeck by the circular pattern of pale light from his flashlight.

He knew that barnstorming was dead, save the odd air show in parts of the country, but those air shows weren't

really barnstorming. Barnstorming, what it was, was what he did.

It was circling a small town low as many times as it took to draw the barbershop customer out of the barber's chair and onto the sidewalk to look skyward still wearing the barber's apron; it was causing the two old ladies leaving the finery shoppe to look up and point into the air; it was seeing the Sheriff's deputy pull up next to the fence along the road and ask if you had a breakdown and waving a hand, "Thanks but no thanks!", to turn down a free ride you offered so you could get on the law's good side; it was occasionally being told to get that damn contraption out of my field by an irate land owner; other times it was being invited to the bounty of a supper provided by a farmer who let you use his field, and while his wife laid golden fried chicken and mounds of creamy mashed potatoes and the world's finest gravy in front of you, listening intently and patiently to the farmer as he regaled you with his memories of being a waist gunner on a B-17 over Germany many years ago.

He needed to land a little too hard in a bumpy field of dry dirt clods and break something and have to wait for two days as the part came in from Omaha and try not to fall in love with the brunette at the diner just down the road, knowing it would be easy, and it would forever change your life. It was turning down the one night stand offered now and then by a cocktail waitress's not-so-subtle innuendo as you drank a beer at the juke joint not far from where the Jenny was parked. It was telling tall tales about the places you'd been and maybe bragging a little overly about your fame as a writer and the feeling bad about it after someone had bought you a beer thinking they might impress someone notorious.

Barnstorming was never being bored. Ever. Even on those days when it was as hot as blazes and the air so still and humid that you could cut it with a knife, and no one flew or ventured away from their air conditioner. So all you did all day long was doze in the shade of a nearby tree or under the wing of the Jenny. It was lugging a full, five gallon gas can, your shoulder muscles burning from the weight, two miles down to the Sunoco station and back to refuel the Jenny. It was living on cheese Nabs, a pack of salted peanuts and a Coca-Cola because the can of beef stew in your cook box wasn't there like you thought it was. You had eaten it near Muncie somewhere and had forgotten to replace it. And the last thing the convenience store down the road sold was Dinty-Moore.

All these things weren't dead to Doc. But his age was catching up with him. Nevertheless, he decided that the sign had to be hung from the fence again. Maybe the arthritis in his knees or his failing vision would keep him grounded before long, and while he could still see well enough to fly, to avoid other airplanes and to land, he was going back. And spring was just around the corner. And summer skies would follow. He would fly the skies and write the stories of his adventures one more time. This time would be different though. He knew it might be the last summer.

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