

## Robie Hensley

When I was a youngster I entertained the dream of flying but I realized that the reality was so remote, yet it remained in my dreams. Years later, after I was married and had a family, that dream was still only that – a dream, a fantasy. Steve joined the U.S. Air Force in the mid 1960's and was training to be a pilot. After his mother's serious illness forced him to leave the service early, he continued to fly (locally) and eventually got his private pilot's license. One day Steve called me and asked if I wanted to fly with him down to Florida. Excited, I didn't hesitate to say, "yes!" Steve said to meet him at the Tusculum airport. When he arrived in a Cessna 172, I looked inside and saw that all the seats had been removed except his, which he needed to sit, in order to properly control the airplane in flight. He found a box for me to sit on beside him. We took off and flew in the direction of Florida and on the way there, I learned the reason of this mission. Steve had been contacted by a local funeral home to pick up a body at Palatka, Florida and to bring it back to Tennessee for burial. The body was in a bag. The deceased had been a very tall man. We pushed it back into the fuselage far enough for me to get my (box) seat back in place.

The weather was good for flying, and on the way back we stopped for fuel and Steve traded seats with me and he then sat on the box. We encountered a very stiff head wind that cut our ground speed considerably. At this time with no previous training at all, Steve let me hold the controls from time to time. I was really enjoying this! I thought I was in heaven, I was actually flying that plane. Soon it got dark and the stars all came out. After a long day of flying, Steve was getting tired and was dozing off now and then. So here I was, not knowing a thing about the compass or DG or altimeter, or artificial horizon. It was getting darker and I couldn't see the ground or any landmarks that I knew that I could depend on, so what would I do if Steve fell asleep? I had been noticing a bright star in the upper left corner of the windshield, which I decided that if I could keep it in the same position at all times, that way I could hold a course and altitude. This worked so well and I was satisfied with my first time navigating on my own. After some time later, Steve awoke and looked at the fuel gauge (I never thought of that). He calculated that with the head wind we wouldn't be able to reach Johnson City (TRI) which was our destination. Steve radioed the Asheville, NC airport and relayed to them that we were landing for some fuel.

When we arrived at the airport, the operator had gone home early to have dinner (it was Thanksgiving) with his family. Steve called the number posted by the fuel tanks and the man apologized but said he would not come back out to get fuel for us. However, later he called back, and said he would come after all because he thought we might try and go on anyway and run out of fuel. The guy that was getting fuel for was brought a step ladder over to the 172 wing and prepared to climb up there with the hose. Steve said, "here, let me help you with that" and then proceeded to fill the tanks himself. He later told me that he didn't want that fuel operator to see what they were carrying, since he didn't have a commercial license. He was supposed to have one of those, in order to get "paid" for flying. After topping off the tanks and leaving Asheville, we flew over the mountains toward Johnson City. The moon was bright, showing a cloud layer down below us. I was fascinated with what I saw out the window.

Just then I saw Steve doing something that I thought was unusual. He had throttled back and had the nose of the plane pointed downward. I said, "what are you doing?" He said, "look at that altimeter, in spite of me, this thing is still climbing like crazy." For the first time I looked at the altimeter and saw what it was telling us, that we were climbing higher and higher, whether we wanted to or not! Suddenly, the situation reversed, and the bottom was dropping out from under us. Steve gave it full throttle and was attempting to climb. The engine was going full power but we were still dropping like a rock! By this time, I was beginning to think that maybe this flying stuff isn't the fun I thought it was going to be. I still remember Steve's comment which I later thought was rather funny. He said, "if this keeps up, we may have to get rid of some dead weight." Before reaching the low clouds, we stabilized again and when the Tri-City airport came into view I was relieved to know that this night of flying experience was safely over. Someone met us and relieved us of our cargo. That was a Thanksgiving that we talked about for many years!