

## Sherry Hensley Babic

### Story # 2

#### Learning to Fly

In 1982 I moved from Knoxville back to Chuckey and was looking for some new interests to get involved in. Steve called me and wanted to know if I would be interested in going in together and buy a J3-cub from Wayne Gaddis. I had just sold my house and the timing was right, financially. Steve made all the arrangements and soon was teaching me to fly the 1946 Piper airplane. I loved it! The plane was yellow, with a bear-cub logo on the tail. I had flown with Steve many times and knew he was a talented pilot. He always managed to have access to a variety of planes, and sometimes, he and Dave and I would fly to Asheville, NC just to eat some great seafood in a restaurant near the airport there. Taking a flying trip with Steve was always an exciting time, some of the times I remember; Steve and me flying David Johnson to the Charlotte, NC airport and meeting Bill Cosby at the FBO, having an engine quit on us at Tri-City airport while he and Dave were practicing touch and go's in a twin engine plane, flying the Sea Bee to Lenior City and landing at Betty Lou's on the lake (we buzzed fishing boats along the way). Once when we were flying over the mountains, Steve pointed out a rainbow. I had never seen this from the air. It made a complete circle, and I felt special looking down on the round rainbow with Steve, like we were in a magic place. Steve was magic. He could fly anything, and was certified in everything there was to fly except hot air balloons and jets. I bet he could have done that too if he had more time. He once told me that hot air balloons were too slow and jets were too fast, and I believe that. He filled 10 logbooks over his flying career, and taught many, many people to fly, some of which now are airline captains and professional pilots.

Steve taught me to fly the J3 cub in the summer of 1982. After we learned some basics like how to land a tail dragger and cross wind landings, he turned my flying lessons over to dad, and had me fly with him and build up my time. Steve had taught dad to fly too, long ago after Steve received his instructors rating. He also taught Ted to fly, so I guess in our family – you didn't have a choice, you either learn to fly or else! But we all loved it, but I especially loved flying *with* Steve, for he showed me things and made me feel so confident and special in the sky. We really felt free and peaceful up there. When we flew the cub in warm weather, we always had the door open, to be closer to the feeling of really *flying*. To this day, I don't think much of a pilot who hasn't flown with the wind in their hair (and sometimes bugs in your teeth) as you fly with the door open so you can reach out and feel the airflow rushing by. Steve and I would come in from flying the cub with what he called, "cub hair" which occurs when flying with the door open. The wind would cause one side of your hair to be sticking straight up, but we didn't care, we loved it. Sometimes when we would be outside and hear a plane go over, Steve would look up, squint and say, "who is that – flying around up there in my sky?" If we were working on something, or just relaxing, 9

times out of 10 he could stand it no longer – and head off toward the airport. Many times I can remember some of Steve’s flying buddies that would buzz the house, looking for him, and in a pilot’s way – enticing him to come flying. He couldn’t stand it if they were up there flying and having fun without him. It was great when he and Ted worked out a deal whereas we could have access to the field across the road from our farm for our very own airstrip. Ted, Steve and I all lived on 12 acres along the river and that grass field was perfect for flying the cub and as Steve said many times to me, “grass is much more forgiving than pavement.” And that was true indeed.

By the end of that first summer we had the cub, dad felt like I was ready to solo. He told Steve I was ready to be checked out and signed off. Steve and I went to the Decker Farm grass strip not too far from Greeneville. After he landed, Steve turned the controls over to me and said, “OK – let’s see what you can do!” I lined up at the back of the field just like dad had taught me. Steve was sitting in the front seat, me in the back, and he said, “what are you waiting for? Let’s go!” I added full power to the 65hp engine. Our combined weight, plus the heat of that August afternoon made the cub respond slow and sloppy. It wasn’t a long field. Trees and river on one side, mountain and the Erwin highway on the other. In a J3, with the door open and no radios for communication, it’s easy to become quite hoarse because of all the yelling and “instructions” needed while flying. It was loud in there and there wasn’t enough room for him to turn around and talk to me, since the plane was narrow and made of fabric. Steve kept motioning me with the “thumbs-up” signal, and I thought he meant that I was doing a great job, but he was *trying* to tell me to TAKE OFF! I laugh at that now, but I’m sure he was a little nervous, seeing a barbed wire fence getting closer and closer at the end of the field. We finally lifted off, and I thought all was well as I went through my turns and circled back around to land the plane. When we landed, he shut off the engine and literally fell out of the plane trying to catch his breath and make me realize the seriousness of all my flying mistakes. He said, “you can’t fly like Robie – I want you to learn the *right* way” He didn’t mean that dad was a bad pilot, just that he sort of created his own “methods” for flying, and those methods weren’t exactly FAA approved. We had a quick ground-school lesson, sitting on the bank of the river and he instructed me by using a stick as a model plane. We went back to the plane, and tried again, this time getting our hand-signals coordinated before taking off. I did much better each time we went around and landed. After he felt confident in my abilities as a student-pilot, he said I could solo, and I was excited about telling dad that Steve said it was OK for me to solo the cub now. Dad thought Steve meant it was OK for *him* to solo me, so the next day, dad and I went back to Decker Farm and he soloed me in the cub. After I landed, Bill Decker came over and saw me get out of the plane and said, “that’s a girl flying that J3!” That made me beam with pride. Dad and I couldn’t wait to tell Steve that I had soloed, and dad cut off my shirttail (which is a ritual done to all new pilots who solo). Steve said, “WHAT???” He sounded surprised, and later we found out that he meant to say – that HE was ready to solo me. I’m not sure now if Steve was disappointed that he wasn’t there when his little sister finally

soload, or whether he was feeling left out. Regardless, we had many flying fun times together during the years.

I think that what Jim Estepp said about Steve being a great teacher is very true. He was a lot of things to many different people. How can I focus on one or two events that I had with my brother throughout the 46 years I knew him? It's impossible. Under all the stories and from all the people I have heard from in collecting these Steve Stories, lies the man we know as Steven Virgil Hensley. Known and loved by so many people, Steve was a wonderful father and husband as well as a favorite cousin to many in our large family. But above all, Steve was and remains, my mentor and teacher, for he taught me many lessons in life that I will remember forever. It's true that his tales and stories could fill a book, but he filled my heart with much more, he made me a better person.

I have been trying to put together some thoughts about Steve's last 6 months that he was alive, and it's actually too hard for me to do right now. I call those thoughts – "Six Months of Sunday's" because I spent my Sunday's with Steve. I wouldn't take a million dollars for those Sunday's spent with him. He continues to teach me and hopefully I can pass on some of the things I learned from him. To try and capture the essence that was Steve is virtually impossible, for he is a rainbow, glowing and shimmering full circle from above.