

Steve Hensley

Steve was a friend and mentor to me, just like many others who shared a common love of airplanes and aviation. The first time I met Steve, I had just graduated from College, and had bought a small homebuilt airplane. I knew the basics of flying, but needed an instructor to give me lessons in flying an airplane with a tailwheel. Steve had an Aeronca Champ at his disposal, so we agreed to meet up at the Greeneville airport for some training.

When my dad and I drove up to the hangar at Greeneville, out in front were a man and a woman in a long embrace. I remember my dad giving me this sideways glance as we pulled up. We got out, and made our introductions to Steve, and his wife Julie.

We pulled the Champ out of the hanger, and away we went. I was expecting to stay in the pattern at the airport for landing practice, but no. We climbed out, higher and higher. We probably got to 5000', which is pretty high for local practice, especially landing practice. Steve was flying from the rear, so I couldn't see what he was doing. Finally, he said, "OK, here we go." With that, the side window slid open, and he tossed out a roll of toilet paper. The airplane pitched over, and we dived and circled toward the earth as Steve cut the ribbon of paper again and again. He was just laughing like crazy as we went. We made our way back to the airport for the landing practice, but I was pretty green from all the maneuvering. Steve eventually got me up-to-speed, and it was the start of our friendship.

Steve really liked to drop things from airplanes. Pumpkins, Pizza, VCRs, you name it. Mostly, just to see them hit the ground! One day he called me and asked if I had time to go flying. I met him out at the airport with my plane, and he loaded up, carrying a couple of pizzas. We flew up to the mountains in Virginia, where he somehow found his church youth group, out on a hike. He had a little parachute rigged up, and tossed the package out the window. We circled to see the kids run to retrieve the pizzas, and headed home. Steve could come up with crazy adventures like this on a whim. It only took a hint or suggestion, and he was off and running.

Steve would fly anybody's airplane that he had keys for. Heck, he even had a little box with about 50 different ignition keys that we would sort through until we found one that would fit. One of the airplanes he liked to fly was a Mooney Mite which I shared a hangar with for a time. This particular airplane is a very small production craft. It was just a single seat plane, with a low wing and retractable landing gear. It was notable because it was very efficient and would go pretty darn fast on low horsepower. The owner was a doctor from Johnson City. They never flew it, and I liked to sit in it (with the hangar doors closed) and imagine that I was flying it. Steve did the maintenance on it, so he theoretically had permission to fly it.

A memory that I can still see in my mind is of Steve flying that Mooney Mite at Greeneville airport. There is a big wide gully between the main runway and the taxiway, just in front of the hangars. The gully was probably 50' wide, 20' deep, and around 800' long. Most of the time there was vegetation growing up in it, but occasionally the County would trim it all back. This particular day when I arrived Steve was already buzzing around the airport. He came around for what looked like would be a normal low pass. When he got to the end of the gully, the airplane nosed down, and went completely out of sight to us at the hangars. You could still hear the engine, but the airplane was just gone. After a few seconds, he popped up and out of the gully at the other end, and continued with his pass down the length of the runway. I can still see it today.

Steve was about as generous with his time and knowledge as anyone I have ever known. He helped me get started with mechanic work, and encouraged me to get my FAA Mechanic License. He was my necessary sponsor for the license. He helped me work on my airplanes and never charged much. Most of us sport pilots are operating on a shoestring budget, and Steve was the go-to guy for folks like us. When I needed a retractable gear airplane for a checkride, Steve made a call to his friend Tank, and got me permission to use his plane. All I had to do was replace the gas I burned! Steve had friends in all places and positions.

Steve was an educator, and I think he felt he could recognize potential in people, and would do whatever he could to foster growth and provide encouragement. One day around lunchtime I was visiting with Steve at the airport. In the course of our conversation I mentioned that I wasn't too happy with my Engineering career path, and that I hoped to someday have a small business of my own. Without a word of explanation Steve stopped what he was doing, and pulled the hangar doors shut. He said "Come on" and motioned to me to climb in his junker car that was parked there. I did, and we left. I had no idea where we were going, or for what purpose. We rode to a local business that I wasn't familiar with. We got out and Steve and I went right inside, where he introduced me to an older gentleman, the owner of the business. Steve explained that I was an Engineer, and that I wanted to be in business for myself. The gentleman and I spoke and developed our own friendship over time. It was Steve's Father-in-Law, Jim Dye (Julie's dad.) That was just like Steve: He'd stop what he was doing to offer help, or make an introduction, or whatever he thought he could do to better a person's situation. I am not the only one to have been privy to his generosity. I am thankful for the time I spent with Steve, and hope that I can do the same for others that he did for me.

Tom Flaglor
8/24/09