

Flying is a skill, of course, like riding a bicycle, one that can be learned by anyone of modest intelligence and physical gifts who has the ability to take instruction. But when truly mastered and the aircraft becomes a part of you, an extension of your physical abilities, then flying is an art. And by happy coincidence, this mastery of the skill can occur with any airplane—any craft that leaves the ground—if the pilot will only work at it long enough and hard enough.

I don't have anywhere near that skill level yet in the *Cannibal Queen*. Maybe by the end of the summer I'll get a taste of it again. I had it once, back in my twenties when I flew A-6 Intruders for Uncle Sam. After a thousand hours or so I could really fly that machine, make it do precisely what I wanted it to do in any flight regime. I could hold altitude like the altimeter needle was glued to the dial, nail an airspeed, bring the plane right to the edge of the stall and hold her there with whatever power setting I chose. I could feather it onto the runway or plant it, as I chose, where I chose, with whatever sink rate I chose. I could *fly* that airplane.

That is the feeling I want again. Flying is the only skill in life I have ever mastered to that degree of proficiency. Some musicians have that level of skill, as do champion racecar drivers, motorcycle riders, golfers, tennis players, and so on. It *can* be acquired if one works hard and has a little bit of talent.

David and I got a room at an establishment on South Topeka Avenue that I often stayed in when I was in the Naval Reserve and commanded a reserve unit here. I like Topeka. Although it's the capital of Kansas, it's really just a small town on the eastern plains. It has lots of neat little houses owned by working Americans and lots of older cars and comfortable, tree-lined streets. There are also a couple of good barbecue places where the prices are very reasonable.

The following morning at 8 A.M. the clouds were low and dark. A thunderstorm loomed to the northwest. And this was the day a professional photographer would take our picture. We had arranged to meet at a small, private grass field to the north of town, so David and I prepared the Stearman for flight and took off. As we flew north over the west side of the city the clouds ahead looked nasty.

“Rain,” David announced.

“Terrific.”

We go into it at a thousand feet. Visibility drops somewhat but not too much. And we stay relatively dry in the open cockpit, which is nicer.

The field is right where the sectional has it spotted, so I drop down for a low pass to look it over. A mudhole with standing water is about 500 feet from the approach end, and there is another at midfield. The taxi areas in front of the one tee-hanger look like quagmires. I make another pass and then head southeast for Billard Field.

Billard belongs to the city of Topeka and has a non-federal control tower. It is small in comparison to the faded grandeur of Forbes and has a really neat little terminal that houses the FBO and a restaurant that serves decent coffee and hamburgers, although the person who wrote the menu gave the sandwiches names like Baron Burger and Cherokee Favorite. We order breakfast in the restaurant and settle in to wait. I suspect the photographer will go out to the grass field and then come here when he discovers we aren't there. And that is what happens.

Luckily the storm bypasses Billard. The photographer, David Zlotky, snaps away. Soon David and I are back in the airplane while Zlotky waits with his camera beside the runway. I plan for a dozen landings unless he waves me in sooner.

The landings are fun. I come in high and slip the plane some, do some wheel landings, some full stall, really work at flying the *Queen*. Like a fine horse, she responds to every twitch of the controls, absolutely obedient, seemingly trying to please the man with the reins. This quality is what made the Stearman such a fine trainer.

If only I were better at it. But I guess if competence came too easily it wouldn't be worth much.

Here we come on base leg, intentionally high and five miles-per-hour fast, carrying a smidgen too much power. Wind off the left side, with maybe five knots crosswind component. On final, still high and fast. I crank in a ton of right rudder and apply left stick. She comes down like a brick in the slip.

Now! Straighten her out, little right rudder for the crosswind, power just so, glide angle okay... coming down nicely... begin the flare by reducing power and pulling the stick back while the rudder is adjusted and more left aileron is applied. Correct for burbling air and shifting wind, increase the back stick, watch the nose... and she touches down slightly tail first. The mains fall a good six inches. Darn!

I let her slow while working the rudder to hold her straight.

"He isn't waving," David tells me, so I smoothly advance the throttle and mixture and lift the tail. 50... 60... 65, and we're off to do it again!

I like flying. I like getting up early in the morning and looking out the window at the sky, the feeling of the breeze on my face as I preflight the airplane, the look and smell and feel of the airplane. I like anticipating the flight to come and imagining how it will be. I like thinking about it afterward. I like everything about flying.

The next morning we fly south from Topeka through a sunny sky dotted with scattered puffy clouds. As soon as David takes over the controls he tells me, “The airspeed’s a hundred miles an hour.”

“We’re in an updraft. The aircraft is actually descending in a column of rising air, so it goes faster. We’ll be out of it in a bit.”

We soon are. Now we enter a downdraft. Our airspeed decays and we start a descent. I tell David to pull back more on the stick. He does and our airspeed falls to 80. A little thermal activity has a big effect on your airspeed when you don’t have much to play with.

David tells me from the front cockpit, “This is the only way to travel.” This comment draws a wide grin from his old man. The boy feels the magic too.

Soon Yates Center looms into view. The grass airport is easy to spot—the grass appears short and there is an ag sprayer parked at one end. No hangars or other buildings.

I make a pass over the field and study the windsock. Now a left downwind and power back, airspeed at 80. We touch down in as nice a landing as I have made in a while and taxi to the end of the field, up a gentle incline, to where the ag plane is parked.

The ag pilot is pumping chemicals into his plane from two big tanks mounted on a trailer. We get acquainted and study the windsock. The wind is out of the southwest, about eight knots. “We’ve been waiting to see if this wind is gonna hold,” he tells me. “Been trying to spray the weeds in this pasture west of here for two days.”

After a bit he decides to give it a try. He climbs up into the Cessna Ag Truck and straps in. The engine comes to life with a rumble and he taxis away without preliminaries, his prop blast raising a cloud of clippings from the fairway-short grass.

In a few moments the Ag Truck comes over the swell in the runway at full throttle climbing gently. He’s got a load on that plane.

He levels at 50 feet or so above the ground and lays the plane into a right turn, then levels the wings heading west. He is soon out of sight.

I sit on a rail and talk to the pilot's son, a boy of sixteen or seventeen. "Nice plane you got there," he says, nodding at the *Queen*. In a moment he continues, "We got a plane, an Aeronca. Rebuilt her last year. Painted her three colors." He looks me in the eye and grins shyly. "That's hard to do, you know, putting on three colors. We had a heck of a time getting it right. But she looks real good now."

The sun on my back is very pleasant, as is the smell of cut grass carried on the warm Kansas breeze under this blue June sky. I sit soaking it in as the young man tells us of his Aeronca and how she flies. The windsock is steady. The smoke from my pipe rides away on the breeze.

Sitting in the grass, caressed by the sun and wind, the *Queen* patiently waits. The sun gleams on her polished prop.

It is difficult for us today to imagine the excitement that our grandparents and great-grandparents felt the first time they saw an airplane fly, actually saw the miracle performed.

That this insubstantial stuff we call air would actually support the weight of a heavy machine—well, the thing defied reason.

You read about the flights and the daredevil flyers in the newspapers and magazines, but when your chance came to see the miracle with your own eyes, it was probably at a field much like this—a pasture on the edge of town. And the plane was much like the *Queen*, an open-cockpit affair with two wooden wings and fabric stretched taut. If you were lucky you got a chance to touch it, which didn't strengthen your faith. Canvas? Linen? Stretched over a framework of wooden ribs?

And then it happened. For every person there was that moment when the wheels of the double-decked fabric contraption

lifted out of the grass. The spokes spun slower and slower as the machine continued to accelerate and climb.

*It flies—my God, it flies! And I have lived to see it.*

I have never tired of it. Airplanes taking off have fascinated me ever since I can remember.

With David in the front cockpit and me in the rear, the *Cannibal Queen* performs the miracle yet again. She lifts her wheels from the grass and soars on the Kansas wind.