

Lessons *Learned*

Lighting the way with the Jimmie Allen Stearman

SARAH "PANCHO" WILSON



AT LE BOURGET FIELD IN PARIS at 10:22 p.m. on May 21, 1927, Charles Lindbergh landed the *Spirit of St. Louis* which had carried him more than 3,600 miles in 33.5 hours. The entire world cheered in unison as it saw some reflection of their hopes and

themselves in this tall, soft-spoken pilot, this everyman. Upon landing, his small silver plane, the *Spirit of St. Louis*, was torn apart by the crowds of people on the field that night, souvenir hunters wanting a memento.

Almost every ounce of fabric

was peeled off, handful by handful, and carried away by the men, women, and children wanting something to take home with them, something to connect them to the possibility of what flying could bring to their lives. There was no fear in the crowd on that day of any airplane in the world, only hope. Their tearing pieces of fabric wasn't vandalism; it was optimism. Most people only dream of what pilots have seen, the best they can do is grasp at pieces of fabric to help connect them to what we know.



Dudley Steele and Charles Lindbergh.



After Jim Busha's article came out in *EAA Sport Aviation*, I started to receive letters, pages overflowing with incredibly kind and thoughtful words. These letters came mostly from complete strangers, telling me they were a Jimmie Allen Flying Club member, or wanting to say they thought Kimball's restoration was a work of art, and some even shared stories of their own flying adventures. I was overwhelmed with how generous each email and letter was, and they taught me a very important lesson of how I should choose to look at my Speedmail.



Scene from Jimmie Allen's Paramount Picture "The Sky Parade"



JIM KOEPNICK



About a week after the article, I got an email forward from Jim from a well-known historian, John Underwood. It was a wonderful letter, chock-full of all sorts of history and it included one good-to-know fact about my plane, and one *great-to-know* fact. The good-to-know fact was that a Stearman 4E had cost \$16,000 not \$1,600, but mine had only cost Richfield \$12,500 because it was a Model 4C when it left the factory. Being horrible with numbers, I was not surprised that I had the math all wrong when I talked with Jim Busha originally. He forgives my blonde mistakes all the time.

Now the *great-to-know* fact was that Charles Lindbergh had made a single solo flight in my Stearman at Burbank Airport in California

on April 2, 1930, for 30 minutes. Mr. Underwood wrote that he had gleaned the actual flight records from fragments of information from Lindbergh's private papers at Yale University, while working with the Lindbergh family in the '90s, attempting to complete an accounting of all the aircraft that he had flown.

Mr. Underwood explained that it was a project that Lindbergh himself had initiated, not too long before he died. Learning that Charles Lindbergh had flown my plane was like being given the biggest and best surprise present ever, but when I examined it, I found a completely different gift wrapped inside John's news. It made me realize I am part of a much bigger community than my happy band of barnstormers and vintage fliers. While I love talking

about tailwheel flying and flocking with them in the summers all across the country, I have a responsibility to share my plane with a bigger world if I truly care about him. More personally, I need the world to care about my plane as much as I do, so someone will love him long after I'm gone.

Endangered Species

I read that pilots are currently less than 2 percent of the U.S. population, and have been in a decline or plateau since peaking in 1980. I am a woman ATP. I think that makes me about one hundredth of one percent of the U.S. population. It appears pilots are becoming a bit of an endangered species, perhaps much of our own making. *Licensed pilots are harder to teach than non-pilots how to fly.* This statement has

to be rightly attributed to my great friend and fellow instructor pilot Chuck Gardner. Of course he uses it mostly when complaining about having to un-teach nosewheel-trained pilots to fly the T-6 or P-51. He is correct, in that it is far easier to teach than to un-teach anyone, and Chuck knows from experience as he spent lots of time un-teaching me when I first got my PT-17.

I feel we're in a period of un-teaching ourselves about what we thought aviation would be by now. I hear a lot of hopeless words pouring out of pilots sitting in the shade of my Speedmail, and I understand their fear and uncertainty of who will be the future caretakers of our planes. I know there are many bigger brains working on a solution for reforesting a world of pilots.

But in my small world, one woman with one biplane, I choose to believe a solution starts with making a connection to what airplanes held to everyone in the world during the '20s and '30s, and reaching out beyond the aviation community to give it back to them.

Making Our Own History

While I loved researching the history of my Speedmail's restoration, and personally read mostly non-fiction, I am not a historian. If you are looking for more historic detail, please contact Walt House at the Kansas Aviation Museum (<http://www.kansasaviationmuseum.org/>) with questions or better yet visit their Jimmie Allen Flying Club exhibit to learn about the history of the original Flying Club and radio

series, *Air Adventures of Jimmie Allen*. Walt has helped so many learn about the history of their planes that I cannot speak highly enough of him, so give him a call. I believe the most important legacy of the original Flying Club was that oil companies like Richfield and Skelly saw an opportunity to sell their products, to tap into kids' imaginations and natural curiosity of flying things and where they could take them. They built a community of loyal brand buyers by letting kids play with airplanes, dream about adventures, and listen to stories about another kid named Jimmie Allen, so that they would coax their parents into their local service station to "filler-up" and do some shopping.

Sponsors poured in and a movie, *Sky Parade*, was made, and eventually those kids grew up and younger ones started watching their air adventures on TV. The point is kids want to see and hear about other kids; they relate to their peers. They don't want to hear about us. If you believe as I do that history's greatest value is how we use it to connect to our present and learn from that connection, then you will see the obvious flight lesson here. We need to be very cautious in repeatedly reminding kids about our history, and we would be wiser in helping and encouraging them to make their own!

Lane of Light

Richfield was the first oil company to establish a separate department for aviation sales and service. They were already the "gasoline of power," on land and sea, and wanted to be first in the air as well. Some of the aircraft in Richfield Oil Company's fleet were a Fokker 10, Stearman C3B, Waco 10, Stearman Model 4, and a Northrop Delta – all flown in promotion of Richfield Aviation Products and the Rich-



Sarah "Pancho" Wilson

route for faster cars to transport people faster from here to there without stopping, and diverted people off the two lanes. At the same time, jet airliners introduced tourist class and were transporting people in pressurized tubes faster and higher above our world in the air than ever before. It seems that with all this rush to travel faster and farther,

an important human connection for travelers, to meet in villages under the light of a beacon, was lost. The towers were taken down and the "Lane of Light" was closed.

Caretakers

I have stood on airplane ramps for almost 20 years now as a professional pilot and I have never seen anyone but the pilot or maintenance crew walk up to a jet and pet it. The general public stands away, arms behind their backs, in awe of the engineering and just observes. But place a candy-colored, fabric-and-wood airplane next to a big jet on the same ramp, and everyone has to touch it. They cannot resist the connection, and my biplane's fabric, engine, and propeller are smeared with fingerprints always. This used to make me so mad, until I discovered it is the same reason strangers walk up and ask to pet your dog, or wiggle your baby's toes. It's the same reason the *Spirit of St. Louis* had to have the fuselage repaired and recovered at Le Bourget.

We touch things we relate to. We touch things we admire, that are beautiful or whimsical, that delight us or that we see our secret desires in. We can't help but pick up things we are connected to, even when we

can see them perfectly clear from arm's length. With my childlike obsession for touching, I have never wanted to touch a Learjet (and I flew them) or a Beechcraft King Air (I flew them too), unless I was pre-flying. I touch and kiss my Speedmail *Buddy* always.

If you are the caretaker of a vintage airplane, you hold a special tool. You have the power to reconnect everyone in the world to these planes because they see them as the handcrafted works of art each one is. Everyone who knows me says, "Sarah can't fix 'em; she just flies 'em"—wisely started by my good friend and A.I./wing builder/caretaker Jack McCloy.

I have no knowledge or talent to build anything, let alone something that flies. If you could see how someone like me looks at the skill and talent it takes to build or design these airplanes, you would see what we see in all of you. You're artisan builders of the air! The vintage and antique caretakers are the best aviation ambassadors on the planet because we've seen, felt, and smelled exactly what Lindbergh saw. We know how important these planes are.

But if these beautiful planes you make and fly are collected simply for the sake of collecting, and hidden away behind closed hangar doors, how can anyone see or touch the treasures our planes really are? Not to play on people's fears because there is already too much fear associated with flying, but sharing your planes with a bigger world than your local vintage flying circle of friends is a vital step in solving this problem. How can young people or any people care about these planes if they rarely get to see them, and more importantly why should they care?

Sorry if I disappoint *Vintage* read-

ers here. I am sure many of you want to hear about the story of my restoration and feel cheated in detail. I cannot write that story because my plane was restored by the Kimballs and their craftsman and it is their story, not mine to tell. I just helped them along with hundreds of other contributors, most notably Mirco Percorari, to build their masterpiece that I am lucky enough to fly. I can provide plenty of pictures for compensation, as they say it better than my words could anyway.

This story is a bit like the original Jimmie Allen Flying Club Flight Lessons. The original lessons were written with children's attention spans in mind, which suits me perfectly. Each flight lesson featured a picture and a short story about an important event in aviation. Then maybe a few lesson questions on the back page. So my picture of Charles Lindbergh and the story about what he taught me about my choice to be part of a larger community is my short story, but it needs a few questions to think about to end it properly.

As I am touring with the CAF B-29 Airpower tour from May through October this year to be part of a bigger community, I am perhaps more aware than most about the high price of operating our planes. Flying now behind a Pratt R985 is double the gas consumption of my PT-17's Continental W670, and I worry about finding gas money along with all of you this summer. So my questions to you are frugal ones.

What does it cost to pull your plane out of the hangar in the sunlight and invite neighbors and their children over for an afternoon open house?

What does it cost to contact your local school and ask if the art teacher, science teacher, or shop teacher would want to take a field day to draw or explore your plane and let the students play their music, and ask them what they think about airplanes and flying?

What does it cost to take pictures of your plane and tell its story on cards, emails, message boards, on Facebook or a free blog, and share it with everyone including your local newspaper?

What does it cost to sell parts and projects you will never use to others at a fair price on the condition they will use or build them, instead of stockpiling them? If you're particularly generous, you could donate them to great organizations like the Wathen Center at Flabob, California, or the 88 Charlies in Wisconsin so kids can learn your craft while you get a tax benefit.

What does it cost to talk to a kid or non-pilot at a fly-in or airport before you start talking with your fellow pilots?

The correct answer is the same to each question. It costs us nothing, but I believe it will cost us all a great deal if we don't start doing it right now.

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