

A COLLECTION OF SHORT AVIATION STORIES

By Courtney Watson, Johannesburg Light Plane Club, Baragwanath Airfield.
April 2013

A Gift of Wings

There is a bug that goes along with flying, something that drives you to spend all your money, and all of your weekends trying to imitate the birds. It is in those moments when you make yourself comfortable behind the controls, strap in, and slip away from the bonds of the earth that allow you to climb away from the torments and stresses of life, and be free to yourself. It is something that compels us all to fly and when we're on the ground, we yearn to be back up in the air. It is an elation that poets write about, but only pilots can understand.



Those moments are what get me through the working hours, and as the weekend approaches, I become as restless as a child. Before I know, it's Sunday and I'm pushing open the hangar doors to reveal that hallowed object inside. The Tiger Moth is resting quietly, but there seems to be an aura of excitement surrounding it, a sentiment that reveals the joy of someone about to play with his favourite toy.

It's always been this way for me, even though I've only been rated on the Tiger for less than a year, and the conglomeration of my enjoyment came on my first cross-country to Potchefstroom and the EAA Air Week.

A cross-country in this vintage biplane is very different to what I have previously been used to in a Cessna 150, and I think that is what made this such an experience. I think that this encounter brought me closer to what flying used to be. Navigation has changed dramatically from what the earlier pioneers of aviation were used to.

The progression of technology and practical innovations have introduced NDBs, VORs, ILSs, GPSs and transponders amongst the newer aircraft. Take those men and women that became the trailblazers for routes across the Atlantic in the 1920s, or the crews that piloted various flights around the world in the early aviation years.

Their remarkable journeys across oceans and deserts with only a creased and folded map as a companion evokes much inspiration. They would watch the curves of roads, rivers and railways beneath them and follow their trail to an eventual destination.

Flying was in its raw, natural elements. There were few comforts of the modern closed cockpits, the pilot being exposed to true flying, in my opinion, being closer to the birds than ever before. This is what I felt on my solo nav.



Before I begin my trip, though, there are a couple of pre-flight checks that need to be done in order to get ready. These end with the setting of my course on the compass. Although it's a bit out-dated, it is simple to use, and in many ways more practical than its modern counterparts. The compass is fitted horizontally on the bottom end of the dashboard and you kind of peer down into it to see in what direction you are travelling. It reminds me of something that would look a bit more at home in a ship, rather than an aircraft! The compass rose is set onto the heading, and then you just fly until "north" lines up with the parallel lines that are drawn along the glass face of the compass. It sort of incorporates a DI and a compass in one instrument and it is a pleasure to use once you understand how.

With a quick swing of the prop, the engine coughs to life and I make my way along the taxiway. Soon I'm lined up on the runway. I ease open the throttle, lift the tail, and let the physics of lift do all the rest. The staggered wings glint a bright yellow in the sunlight and it feels like the aircraft is flying itself as I turn onto my heading. The ground sweeps gently below, cinnamon-coloured fields rolling beneath the fuselage. I am free, but not for long as I get out the map and try to read the scribble of details amidst the vibration and flicking of the wind. I have to fold the map over a couple of times to stiffen it up against the wind's fingering breath. The map flaps a bit nevertheless but at least it's readable now. There's no space or time in the cosy, windswept cockpit to work out ground speeds and estimates, so "guesstimation" is the name of the game. This flying is a bit more of a primitive experience compared to modern flying, but it feels like a lot more of a challenge.

There is no inherent stability in the Tiger, so I constantly need to adjust for the wind with a gentle movement here and there on the stick. The map is still poised between the thumb and forefinger of my right hand, which incidentally is also holding the stick. With my left hand resting on the throttle, and the occasional glance towards the rev counter and airspeed indicator, I feel at home. This navigation is a relaxing experience as I watch mines, towns and lakes disappear beneath the wing. Putting "ground to picture" is all I really need to do. As I look out the side I see an arc of sacred Ibises drift over Boskop dam, and it's time to call up Potch.

After I've landed, and managed to come to a semi-controlled stop (which is the best that I can expect from an aircraft with no brakes), I take off the brown leather flying helmet and ask where to park. One of the youngest marshals peers into the cockpit, "How can you fly this, you're not old enough. It's only old people that fly these!" And I guess that just about sums it all up. Looking back on my brief trip, I think to myself that this is probably the closest I will ever get to flying like a bird. The musical drone of a Gypsy Major powering something that holds me high above the world and the rush of wind in my face is an elation that you cannot describe without experiencing it.

I feel that this sense has been lost to some extent in the progress of modern flight. Man began his quest trying only to mimic the birds and with the progress of technology it has led to the very lucrative business that is evident today. I think that it is important to stop and think every once and a while about how privileged and lucky we, as pilots, are to be able to indulge into one of the greatest joys that life has to offer. It reminds me of a poem by John Gillespie Magee, "High Flight". Read it and you'll understand what I mean and remember "The high, untrespassed sanctity of space" that is ours to indulge.



High Flight

Oh, I have slipped the surly bond of earth,
And danced the skies on laughter-silvered wings;
Sunward I've climbed and joined the tumbling mirth
Of sun-split clouds – and done a hundred things
You have not dreamt of – wheeled and soared and swung
High in the sunlit silence. Hov'ring there,
I've chased the shouting wind along and fling
My eager craft through footless halls of air.
Up, up the long delirious burning blue
I've topped the windswept heights with easy grace,
Where never lark or even eagle flew;
And, while with silent, lifting mind I've trod
The high untresspassed sanctity of space,
Put out my hand, and touched the face of God.

John Gillespie Magee.

The Not-So-Gentle Lady

A Harvard is by no means a gentle aeroplane. Everything is robust; forged from steel that is made to withstand any breaking force. In the cockpit, the rudder bar is thick and solid, and the control column is a meaty rod that you feel you need to grip with two hands to have control over.

Most aircraft have girls' names, but I don't think there is any one that would suit a Harvard. The aeroplane is just too, well, rugged. That is not to say that there is a real sense of beauty about the lines that the wings make as they join the fuselage or the flange of that round radial engine. It's just that a Harvard is anything but fragile. If I tried to translate it into female form, I think it would be a woman that looks like this:

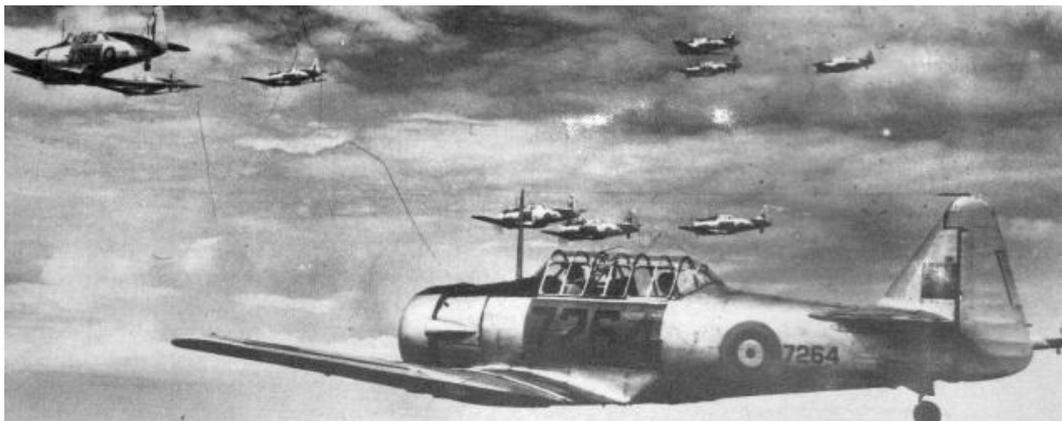
She lives on her own farm and is tanned by hours of ploughing fields. She drives her own tractor in the early morning, wearing nothing but a G-string with 9mm pistol tucked in the elastic. She would scrub up really nicely, but that shadow of a moustache just above her upper lip would definitely have to go. It's the sort of lady who would mother the likes of Bakkies Botha and Victor Matfield. She is tough, no nonsense and tells it just like it is.



The picture of this lady is quite vivid in my mind, but I seem to be grappling at straws when it comes down to putting a name to that face. My father-in-law gave me some help with this and came up with a bit more of a classical interpretation...Boadicea. She led a rebellion against the Romans in about 60 BC. Boadicea had red hair. It was described as a mass of "the tawniest hair" hanging to her waist. She was very tall, "in appearance almost terrifying" and had a fierce expression. Her voice was described as harsh, a voice destined to demand attention, to be heard above the din of battle.

It isn't much of a stretch to apply this description to a Harvard. If you just squint in your mind's eye a bit, both of these anecdotes seem to fit the aeroplane quite neatly. A Harvard is not like a Spitfire or Mosquito, whose delicate lines are definitely synonymous with a gentle, nurturing figure and gather names that are all prefaced with 'Lady'. Names like Lady Rosaline, Lady Josine or Evelyn cannot be emblazoned in the front of a Harvard. But I think Boadicea is quite good.

The reason I can make all of these sweeping claims is because in the middle of October, I went for my first ride in a Harvard, thanks to Ivan who flew her in to the first Old Birds at Baragwanath Day. Like many of you, I have always rushed outdoors to catch a glimpse of that distinct throaty radial as a Harvard flew overhead, and I've run my fingers along their wingtips when they have been parked at air shows, wondering what it would be like to fly such an inspiring aeroplane.



So going for a twenty minute flip in a Harvard was really like a dream come true for me. The grin on my face before and after the flight is enough to tell the story of how I felt. I fly a Tiger Moth and a small Cessna 140, so when the Harvard started up, the sense of power in front was vastly different to what I was used to. Even on the ground the Harvard felt like it wanted to take off. There is a lot of space in the cockpit, which is incidentally, devoid of anything that is without purpose. It is military, precise and rugged.

When we moved along the taxiway, the width of the tar seemed much smaller to what I was used to and it is interesting how your perspective can change in just an instant. The run-up was another change where the grunt from the Pratt and Whitney surged against the brakes...this aeroplane was really keen to climb into the skies.

I'm not going to bore you with the intricacies of the flight, because trying to put this experience into words might just ruin it. What I will do is write about the aerobatics that we did. I have always had an interest in flying at unusual attitudes, and with the help of the likes of Bob Hay, my Dad and others, I have had a bit of aerobatic dual in the Tiger Moth.

The Harvard, however, is a completely different kettle of fish. With the speed at which we entered the first loop, G force takes on a slightly different meaning, as I found my cheeks trying to touch my chin and my hands heavy to lift. The world turned upside down and looking backwards I saw the horizon reappear above me as we reached the top of the manoeuvre. Then the speed built up again and I tightened my stomach as the G's resurfaced once again. The sound of the engine was a throb coming from the front of the aircraft, but from where I was sitting, I didn't hear the characteristic clap of the propeller that you hear from the ground. I thought for an instant of how the sound is created by tips of the props nearing the speed of sound as they turned in front of the pistons, and as that thought disappeared, we edged up into a stall turn.



I watched the horizon turn perpendicular to the orange wingtip and gently we floated over the top. The aircraft arched sideways and gathered speed before levelling out. I couldn't stop grinning and the smile on my face speaks louder than the words on this page. Our final pattern in the sky was a barrel roll that turned the world upside down once again.

I remember wondering how pilots remain so responsible when flying these aircraft. If it were me, I would struggle to fight the urge to imagine that I was a World War Two Ace, and go about pretending to strafe lonely farm buildings and doing low fly pasts over railway stations. I think I would be a menace, my overactive imagination taking over the responsibilities that I hold as a pilot. I think that a conversion onto a Harvard must come with either a certificate of responsible flying or the talent of not getting caught doing fun, frowned upon aeronautics.

I felt like a hero even though I was just a passenger, and in those twenty minutes, I found myself falling in love with that brutish, no-nonsense Boadicea (but don't tell my wife). The images of the Harvard legacy all came together and I understood the romance that Air Force pilots have for this mark. She is truly a special aircraft.

Flying Today Reviewed

As a flying enthusiast, I find myself constantly looking up at the sky whenever I hear some sort of an aircraft flying over. Whether it is a Cessna 172, a Learjet or even a Boeing 747, I am equally drawn skyward by their distinctive noise that casts a shadow on the earth below. I feel somewhat isolated in this pursuit, however, as companions who rush outdoors and peer through squinted eyes at the sky are few.

What I fear is that flying is slowly losing its importance for the average person. For Joe Soap, flying is strictly for the purpose of getting as quickly as possible from one place to the next. It is a means to an end of traveling, and instead of being where the journey begins; it is a way of getting to the start of a journey.

And at this point I must stress that I am generalizing.

The pioneers of flight, however, sought a way of extracting a means of moving from one part of the world to the next with a relative ease, like we focus our pursuits in the present, but unlike us, they still appreciated what it meant to be aloft. They still flew close enough to the grips of the ground so that they could appreciate the clouds and sea and earth and sky around them. Being aloft was something that was treasured and respected.

Now, when one travels through the airwaves in a commercial jet or turboprop, most passengers are drawn immediately to the in-flight entertainment and close the blinds that cover their personal windows, eager for the journey to be over as quickly as possible. I was recently on a flight to the United States and noticed that there was only a very sparse community of passengers that dared look outside the window.

As we climbed out of O.R. Tambo, the 747 was faced with a brief smattering of an Autumn South African Landscape before it disappeared through a candy floss sky of virgin clouds. The view was simply breath-taking as I watched the breath of these clouds make the wing beside me invisible for a moment. It caught the light in streaks of gold that stretched like angelic fingers upwards and downwards. I was irritated that the window was positioned slightly behind me and my other option of a view hole in front of it was obscured by the seat in front of me.

How could all these other travellers be so oblivious to such beauty, though!

The positioning of these windows seemed to substantiate this feeling. They were purposeless as most passengers closed the blinds to keep out the light before we had even taken off. It was almost as if the designers of these huge transporters knew that windows would be one of the features superseded by the in-flight entertainment screen in the backrest of the seat in front. It was ironic that one of the features of this little screen was a camera that showed a view directly beneath the aircraft, and one could watch what was going on outside not through a window, as it really is, but through a digital projection of the outside world.

I felt sorry for those who missed out on the real flying outside. In my eyes their ignorance is not so bliss.

Perhaps this mind-set is endemic of our immediate gratification society where watching the outside is not as enthralling as watching someone else's world through a television screen. Perhaps it is easier to sit behind a computer screen and play a flight simulator instead of going out there and trying the real thing. Is the easy option the one more chosen?

No, I don't think so, that opinion is too prescriptive.

But it is the reason why the recreational side of flying needs to be nurtured now more than ever. The days of Piper Cubs and Tiger Moths being a tether which the Average Joe can hold on to and afford in their pursuit for achieving dreams of flying have disappeared. Let's face it, flying is expensive, and we must endeavour to source a means of attracting more people to this market. That is why places like Baragee are so important. They are places where flying at grassroots level is grown and enjoyed.

The majority of the population is unaware that there are people out there that sink every Rand they earn into a fiberglass or rag and tube homebuilt that nestles in their garage, just waiting to take flight. Unfortunately, however, these people are diminishing every year.

At Baragee, we have a core of pilots that are a throwback to the pioneers who knew aviation was something to be taken seriously because they too believe the sport is so special.

I read a book recently which puts it all into perspective. Graham Coster writes understandingly and poetically about this inspirational nature of air travel in his book, "Coursairville". This novel reveals the romance and symbolism in traveling with flying boats, but he also describes an account of Alan Cobham:

"But flying itself – what aeroplanes do – was in the inter-war era a constant process of time-shrinking. The race between nautical and aeronautical was joined on 26 February 1926, when the Union Castle ship, Windsor Castle,

steamed out of Cape Town, Southampton-bound, on the same day as the pioneering aviator Alan Cobham took off from there in his de Havilland biplane. Cobham was on his way home after having completed a survey flight from London. The simultaneity was coincidental but, once realized, the challenge was on for an aeroplane to be the first home” (Coster 2001: 83).

The aeroplane won, but can you imagine the thought of trudging the length of Africa in an open biplane, just to prove that air travel was something that should be taken seriously. Would Cobham have expected his flight to be materialized in literally hundreds of flights the length of that same continent with pin point accuracy and no attention given outside the window?

We know that recreational flying is diminishing, but is needed as a vital component to support commercial endeavours. We are all linked through the passions of flight. Flying is not just a hobby or just a job. Because without the spirit of recreational aviation, flying will never be the same.



Forever Flying

It's my birthday today, and even though I am still a youngster, I find that all of those things that used to irritate me as a kid about adults seem to be surfacing in my own consciousness. Instead of running around the garden with arms outstretched like a fighter plane and making 'dugga dugga dugga' noises at my brother, I feel the uncontrollable urge to watch the news every night to monitor the ever-increasing petrol prices or moan about an unscrupulous politician. I look back on how many Chappies I could buy with five cents or how misguided the media and television have become. Things were different "when I was about your age..."

As I look back though, I wonder how I could never understand how adults were so cantankerous and why they always complained about the youth being too ill disciplined, the cost of food or the traffic on the way to work. Back then none of these things mattered to me. As long as I had my matchbox Ferrari (the red one which went faster) or the Spitfire model complete with misguided glue dribbles, I was fine. At six years old, I was no more interested in inflation than I was in Pamela from the blue group at the pre-primary.



Days were measured by the quality of an 'Airwolf' episode on TV or whether you could really defuse a nuclear bomb with a pen knife, some bubble gum and a yo-yo like MacGyver. Now I turn on the television and I'm disgusted by the amount of rubbish that is aired, mirroring the opinion of the adults when I was growing up.

There must be a point at which our youthful innocence is corrupted into adult pessimism and for the life of me I can't remember when that transition happened. If I could ever get to that junction I'd like to shake the former me into keeping away from that light.

No matter, though, we're all bound to turn into old farts at some point.

What I do remember, though, is my baptism into flying. I was lucky enough to come from an aviation family and when I think back on those swept winged bombing runs that I imagined as I ran around the garden, the landscape seemed to change to the airfield where we flew. That was where I had my first flip in my Dad's silver and blue Tiger Moth. Flicking through old photographs in family albums, that event always stood out. I remember feeling isolated in the front cockpit with the straps locking me into the seat and only just being able to peer outside towards the wingtip. When we took off, it felt as though I was master of the skies...no arms for wings here...this was the real deal. Gentle turns became ferocious wingovers in my 'Calvin and Hobbes' imagination. Subdued movements were thwart danger and I remember wondering what would happen if I had to bail out...

A few years after that flight, the Tiger was taken home for some maintenance and a bit of a rebuild, but that one experience crystallized a sense of anticipation until one day I could truly fly her on my own, with my own license.



It was all about flying back then and come to think of it, my kiddies infatuation with 'Airwolf' culminated at one of the Margate air shows, an event that has gained a mythical status amongst the aviation community. I remember clearly the yellow 'Airwolf' T-Shirt I was wearing and the excitement I felt as the theme tune from my favourite show played over the announcement speakers. I remember craning my head in all directions and the aerobatics that were happening in the pit of my stomach. I remember, finally, the image from the valley adjoining the airport, of a black shark of a helicopter that levitated towards us.

"Wow dad, check it's AIRWOLF!"

Air shows were always time well spent and Margate was always top of my list. Beach in the morning, watching flying in the afternoon, and I remember being absolutely astounded by the amount of aircraft that filled the place. Everything always seems bigger and better through childish eyes, but in this case, I think my astonishment was well-founded. I'm sure that I was told to keep away from the end of aeroplanes with the spinning things on them, and to stay close to my parents at all times, but in my memory things didn't quite plan out that way. Air shows were a chance for me to escape into my own imagination as I put myself into the shoes of the pilots. This imagination was uprooted from the show and transplanted into the winged warrior that terrorised my brother and friends going 'Neeeeeaaaw' in the garden.

And then there was the 'Old Lady' Routine. I think that is where my love for J-3 Cubs must have come from. These aeries in particular have a face - with doggy ears that are the cooling ducts over the exposed cylinders and the snoopy nose of a spinner. Even though I always knew what was going to happen in this routine, I was always captured by the moment, wondering how an old lady could fly from the back, without a pilot in the front with swoops and dives and spirals that seemed to chase the fire truck more than anything else!

And as I grow a bit older and become more cynical about the state of the world, as my elders did before me, the memories of flying and air shows are not in the least bit tarnished. They are part of the reason why flying is so important to me. I am lucky enough to have access to an aeroplane on a regular basis, and the night before a flight I still get those six-year-old Christmas Eve butterflies. I still have the same flying dreams that I had when I was a kid and I still count the days until I'm up in the air again. And when a flying day finally arrives and I strap into the cockpit, I sometimes catch myself going 'dagga dagga dagga' under my breath.



Since I was six years old, I waited to fly, and the culmination of my expectations would always be the first flight on my own, in the Tiger. She was rebuilt, given a new lick of paint, yellow and blue this time, and after some TLC it was back into the skies. We timed this one just right because it was not too long after I achieved my own PPL that she was flying again. I always saw my lessons in the Cessna 150 as a stepping stone towards a place in the pilot's seat of the Tiger Moth, and when I could fly her on my own, she did not disappoint. The photographs of my childhood imagination that had been catalogued and shelved came back to life when I sat in that biplane.

Yes, there are responsibilities that go along with flying, but at the same time, I think that some of the youthful romance is what keeps the sport alive. So when I think about inflation, politics and what I could buy with ten rand when I was a lightie, I am turning into a cantankerous old bastard, just like the rest of us. But flying dissolves all of that and at the end of the day, aeroplanes still go 'neeeauuw', even though I can tell the difference between a DC-4 'neeeauuw' and a Tiger Moth 'neeeauuw'. I still smile from start-up to shut-down and I still toss and turn with excitement when the weekend comes and I can go flying again.

It's this childhood innocence brought back to life that makes me run outside when I hear something fly overhead. It's when I take long drives along scenic mountain passes or next to the sea that, in my mind's eye, I can still see myself twisting and turning through the sky overhead and my imagination still grips a joystick with my right hand and kicks at rudder pedals with my feet.

At heart, I guess I will always be flying.

Mechanical Souls

There are two types of pilots. There are the mechanical, number-crunching, accountant type characters who are concerned with the cold, hard, analytical method of getting people and cargo from A to B. These are the career pilots, with gold bars striped across their shoulders, and the cool professionalism that comes with someone who holds the responsibility of taking packets of peanuts and weary travellers thousands of feet above the ground. They are important because, without this attitude, our own safety in flight would be compromised, and after all, flying is a job for them.

Then there is the other type of pilot, the romantic. This is the sort of person that sees an aircraft not as a series of steel tubes vacuum packed in fabric with an engine bolted to the front, but rather as a living, breathing machine. When they climb into their plane, it is not a series of nuts and bolts; it is a phoenix, which comes alive when the hanger doors are opened, and dies again when they are closed. It is something that rises from the ashes the moment we start the engine and begins to breathe with the fire of moving pistons and articulating control surfaces. This is a machine that has a soul and a heart.

But this idea doesn't hold true for all aeroplanes. Those hardy tin cans, which you often see tied down outside flying schools, abandoned to the elements, do not hold this same sort of character, this personality. They are moulds of the same, part of a production line that have been bred for a specific purpose and do not retain any sort of individual separation, besides their registration. They look the same as well, Cessna 150, Cessna 172, Cessna 152; each standing at attention, bravely anticipating what the next student will ultimately try to throw at them.

They remind me of a military regiment, emotionless, hard, cold and expressionless.

But one day, there is a gap in the line, and one of these soldiers has gone missing. Someone has hunted it down, and made it their own. This is where the aircraft goes through a change. From the time it feels the warmth and shelter of a hangar, it begins to resonate with its own sense of identity. It gets a cover to keep out the dust, perhaps, or a polish, and provides a new sense of amusement to the owner and his or her friends and family. It is the source of smiles and laughter, and carefree patterns in the sky. Its purpose is no longer methodical and sometimes abusive; and slowly from somewhere, this plane begins to develop its own soul.

If you have your own aircraft, you'll understand what I mean. It's the reason why some of our 'toys' are christened with names that somehow suit their personality, and the same reason why they are spoken to in quiet whispers when no one is around. It is the reason why we thank them for their loyalty after a particularly good sortie around the airfield, and sometimes, we get the sense that a good landing is not because of the pilot, because of us, but because of how we have treated the aeroplane. It has been given to us, as a gift.

And some planes have more of a soul than others. Some even have universal souls. You have all seen a picture or perhaps a movie clip of a spitfire. In your mind's eye, you might have the sort of picture that I have – the sleek elliptical wings cutting the air like a samurai sword as it banks close to the ground. You can almost hear the Merlin engine screaming against mountings as it picks up speed. The plane echoes with energy and power and beauty. The wings flex against the G-Forces as the spitfire twists level and then gulps up high for an aileron roll. The sun glints from the cockpit, where the occupant is almost forgotten and it seems as if the airplane is flying of its own accord. The world tumbles inverted, and then spins level again. And just like that, with a gentle wing wag, the spitfire disappears from sight.

How can something as perfect, as beautiful, as inspiring as that, not have a soul? And what cascades through my thoughts even more, is how can a mere mortal have designed something so pure?

SpaceShipOne finds itself in the same class. Not so much because of what she looks like (although it embodies what a space ship should look like) but rather as a testimony to human ingenuity and performance. It is the sort of aircraft that kids would draw with crayons, trying to emulate the sleek lines of space and speed and wonder. And, amazingly it is here, in reality. She will always remain as an icon of the Aerial Endeavour. SpaceShipOne would definitely have a girl's name, something smooth and sensuous. It strikes something into the heart of the imagination of small boys who always wanted to fly. It is a huge step forward to combat the huge step back that grounding Concorde may have produced. It stands up for progress, and is a slap in the face for the 'nanny society' which seems to have evolved around us. Putting Concorde out to pasture can be equated with man discovering the wheel, and then destroying it because someone's foot was run over by it. SpaceShipOne was inventing a new and better wheel. It was brought about by mind-expanding ideas, lateral thought, and the spirit of spit and string aviation. Who would have thought that going into space with a stick and rudder controlled by the pilot himself would be achievable? I am at a loss for words when I read about that team and that experience...all I can say is that my imagination clicks over with a faster beat because of that inspiration.

So in our overly cautious paradigm, we will still be able to nurture the boy's imagination within ourselves with the continuing advent of red tape and health and safety, because of something like SpaceShipOne. I should not be concerned that we could get to the point where elastic band aircraft are deemed dangerous in the hands of

youngsters, or where sport aviation is strangled because of too many insurance implications because it won't be? It won't because of people like Burt Rutan and Mike Melvill. Spit and string aviation will always be a reality in the future because it is too precious to lose. And we will be able to own or have a share in our own aircraft, complete with heart and soul.

Boyhood dreams that are reflected in films like Stephen Spielberg's 'Empire of the Sun' are rekindled by these endeavours. Do you remember the part where a Mustang performs a low fly-past amidst the shouting of a bowled-over boy? That moment is burnt into my memory, because it's part of why I wanted to fly in the first place, and I, for one, don't want to lose that innocence that goes along with my own sky-bound experiences. In this film, the boy screams with enthusiasm, 'P-51 Mustang, Ferrari of the skies, whoooooo'. He wishes he could be and can probably even see himself in that plane, free. He has given the craft a name, something fierce, war-like, but beautiful. It has a label which a thirteen-year-old would think strikes fear into the hearts of all. It has a soul, a life, and the Mustang is equated to a person in his terms.

He will be this second type of pilot.

These are the figures that we cannot afford to lose, the grassroots men and women, which are actually just bigger versions of the girls and boys whose imaginations are always turned upwards. It is the pilot that sees aeroplanes as companions, as friends, and evokes a personality within them. They are the grown up versions of boys with balsa wood models, that can see themselves cutting the sky into ribbons as they twirl their favourite planes with a flick of the wrist as they run in their gardens. They are the same people who stop what they are doing and can't help themselves but to glance up when an aeroplane flies overhead. They are the ones who constantly watch the sky, and instead of seeing blue and white, see themselves with stick in one hand and throttle in the other, swimming about in it. They visualize themselves flying around mountains and skimming the sea when they are on holiday.

The pilot in them is always flying.

No to the West Wind

It has finally got to the point where I think the only way to vent my frustration is to write it all down. So, here goes.

It's Sunday afternoon, the day that has, for as long as I can remember, been reserved for the most hallowed of activities, flying. This in itself is rather good, except for one tiny detail. This detail is something that foreshadows such activity, like one of those foreboding cartoon monsters that lurk in the shadows over the bed, arms outstretched, threatening to cause whatever malicious damage it can.

This is the monster that has preceded my frustration, and comes in one, simple, frequently used, four-letter word. And I'm not talking about the kind of word that you utter after receiving the bill for an MPI, I'm talking about the wind.

As I said, it's Sunday morning. I wake up, and the first thing I do is open the curtains and look towards a tree for any sort of dead give-away that might show the wind. It's calm, and immediately my hopes rise, but why wouldn't they, because at half past seven in the morning, there is no wind. For me, premonitions of scooting across the sky, flirting with the clouds or the childlike 'up to no good' idea of a flyby, flash through my mind. It's flying time.

As the day progresses, the wind begins to pick up, flicking leaves against their stems and whipping up dust from the dry winter ground. But never fear, the intrepid aviator that I am is not daunted, my unfailing optimism will not fail me. For some reason I hold onto the idea that today is going to be great. I believe, for some unknown reason, that fate, destiny, whatever you want to call it is on my side. The wind is only a temporary setback. The Gods will understand how keen I am to strap myself into the cockpit and take to the skies, so surely it will not stop me. Yip, that wind is going to be dying down any minute. As soon as pack my flying gear into the car, the air will cease to breathe, and calm will prevail. It has to happen (eternal optimist).

The day draws on, and is complimented by the steady progress of the wind. What was merely toying with the tiniest of twigs, is now shaking thick limbs of trees in the same way that one sees someone trying to shake some sense into someone who is bordering on hysterical.

Still I am optimistic.

Any time now.

But the wind does not stop, but before I am beaten, I convince myself that this area is the only place being subjected to such windy torment. Didn't that lecturer who did my PPL mention something about some sort of 'undefined specifically located weather zones known as banshee crop circle things that will localize in very small areas? Some sort of opposite to the eye of a hurricane type of thing'. Yip, I'm sure that's what's going on here. The weather at the airport will be fine. No problem there.

I toy with phoning the met, but decide that there is probably no need. It'll be fine at the airfield.

I get into the old Land Rover, and find myself being pushed about the highway by some sort of invisible force. It feels like it could be gusts of wind. No, can't be. I'm sure I just need to get the wheel alignment sorted out. That must be the problem. I focus straight ahead, concentrating on the road, trying to ignore the trees bending towards the ground in my peripheral vision.

I turn off onto the dirt access road that will lead me to the airfield. The long grass that lines this route is being thrown backwards, glazed in a mist of dust from the road. Still I am the optimist. I'm sure it must just be the lack of aerodynamics of my car that is making the air around me turbulent, thus picking up dust and bending the grass. I see a plover (affectionately known as a runway bird), fighting a strong headwind and not really moving at all. I think to myself, the wind isn't that strong, the bird just needs to flap more frequently, increase its thrust (you would think he knew this by now).

My blind optimism, however, is beginning to fail me as I round the final corner before the field, and see not one hangar open. I try to convince myself that they'll be there later or the rest of my flying friends have flown away for lunch somewhere, and not told me about it. I know that this isn't quite possible, though, as I glance across at the windsock. It's hauling itself into a perfectly straight cone-shape, perpendicular to the ground.

Crosswind.

I feel my frustration begin to get the better of me, but say to myself, 'I just need to wait until the late afternoon. It'll be calmer then, and besides, I couldn't fly last week because of the crosswind, so the chances of this happening this week as well are minute'. I open the hangar, cheerful in my open-minded assessment of things. I won't be daunted, and anyway, this will be a good time to get the Tiger really nice and clean before I go flying.

I spend the next couple of hours just about getting blown off my feet, and have to tie down the aeroplane while I give her a good, well-earned wash. I glance every so often at the windsock, and it lets me down every time. I gaze longingly at our spotless Tiger Moth, trying to will the wind to stop. There are a few beers in the back of the car, but I can't have one of those yet, I'm going to be flying soon.

Anyway, to cut an already long story short, the sun goes down. The aeroplane is back in the hangar. And I am left on my own, jumping up and down and cursing the west wind. 'Ode to the West Wind' my hat! Whoever created this bain of my flying life deserves to be shot! So, I compose myself, and head home. I'm sober, which is probably a good thing, but if I knew how this was all going to turn out I wouldn't be.

And then a thought crosses my mind. There's always next Sunday. Only six more days until the weekend, yay!

On Wings of Nostalgia

I was flicking through a flurry of old flying photographs and listening to 'war stories' from pilots that grew up in an age both similar to ours, and at the same time vastly different. Either way, they always bring about a unique sense of nostalgia. We hear these tales of an age gone by in the airfield pub which is littered with show memorabilia, old U/S parts and perhaps the remnants of an old propeller mounted on the wall or a wooden bar with the inscription 'eight hours from bottle to throttle' carved upon it.

No matter where these places are, they always seem to resonate with the whispered voices of pilots. They float through the air like ghosts, each one reminiscing of the past. Some of the stories that you hear first-hand stand out like the sound of a Harvard doing a flypast, and when I think of that imparted knowledge, it seems like the past was a far cry from our present and future.

I wonder how aviation enthusiasts will react to the stories, which we, in turn, are making up through our subconscious experiences of the glory of flight. I look back on photographs from when I was six or seven, playing naively amongst scrapped Harvard parts.

One memory stands out clearly in my mind of sitting in the wingless and engineless ruin of one of these aeroplanes and pretending to fly. Would people regard this incident, which seemed just like any part of everyday life at the time with awe in the future? Would they be inspired by knowing that in the past, there were cavernous, rust hangars packed with the twisted spars, ribs and engine parts of de Havilland Tiger Moths, North American Harvards and Piper J-3 Cubs?

It is with naivety that we live from one moment to the next, and only realize their significance with the privilege of reflection and hindsight many years on. Will we regard a Douglas DC-4 or a de Havilland Chipmunk doing an expected flypast at an air show of the present as something of a shrine to aviation in the future? These aircraft are the material that makes this sport worthwhile. They are the treasures that we need to preserve through not only memory, but also the aircraft themselves. I do not mean that aircraft should become museum pieces, although there is a place for that as well. What I am arguing is that if we are to preserve the aviation heritage that is rich in our memories, we must continue to enjoy the sound of a de Havilland engine flying overhead. We must cherish the sight of a Harvard performing an avalanche amidst a rush of smoke or a Hunter rolling into a Dairy Turn. All of these things are what makes aviation in this country unique, and I am happy to see that so much interest has been and will continue to be taken in these old relics.

I was paging through one of those coffee table books that I am sure you have all seen at one point or another, and I guess that this book is what created this spark that has somehow inked the pages of this paper. It is written by John Ilsley, entitled, "In Southern Skies", and if you have not already paged through this book, then do yourself a favour and sit down with a cup of coffee, and read it. When I looked through it, I saw photographs of aircraft and places that have long since disappeared. Black and white images adorned the pages like fragments from an old film in which I had not seen the start and thus could not understand the whole plot. There were pictures of the old Baragwanath Airfield, the hub of yesteryear aviation. DH Moths and smiling faces stare back at me from these pictures, and the only memory I have of that same airfield is the edge of an old tar runway that sticks out from our Johannesburg suburbia.

I have often flown over this piece of land, looking out for the faded white numbers of all that is left from the past. I am sure you have also mistakenly flown over that piece of land and thought the same things. It is a pity to see a place of the past whose memories are immortalized only in old photographs and flying stories.

These thoughts got me thinking further and wondering about the moments in World War II, which are romanticised by film and looked on with bittersweet recollections by those who were there. It was not uncommon (or so I have been told) to see squadrons of Spitfires and Hurricanes clipping hedges and fields with the roar of their Rolls Royce Engines, on the way to battle. I was fortunate enough to witness a re-enactment of this spectacle a few years ago at Duxford in England. I saw the largest post-war formation of Spitfires with sixteen aircraft in toll. It was a moment that I shall not forget as the deafening growl of Merlins beat the sky above me and a neat pocket of magnificent flying warriors sliced through the blue. In the horror of war did this image create the same twang of awe? Was it something that was cherished and nurtured, or was it forgotten along with memories. The past is something that we look upon fondly, but also something that gains deeper significance as time passes.

We need to hold onto those moments, and talk and write and photograph them. Because each one of us in our own right is part of South Africa's flying history. We each pilot our own 'Spitfire', be it a Cessna 172 or a Super Cub, into the stories of the future.

The Language of Flight

"...a lonely impulse of delight brought to this tumult in the clouds" William Butler Yeats

Flying is unique to the individual. It is endemic to each one of us. We present our own fears, our own hopes and our own dreams in that one moment when we grip lightly onto the control column and feel the vibrations of the air around us. With one hand on the throttle we gently nurse the engine to life, cradling the creature made of fabric and tin beneath our two hands, and escape the reality, which our world has conformed us, becoming our true selves, whispering towards our individuality.

Flying in its amateur and sporting capabilities offers something which little else is able to give us. We are able to escape the fears of what was and what is, to the realm of what can be. Flying is something that we each do with our own unique, original characteristics. Not one of us flies with the same flare, with the same eloquence. We can all escape the bonds of earth, yes, but the reason behind that escape moulds our airborne experiences into something that can only be understood by the individual. Let me explain.

When you start up whatever craft you call your own, you find a reason that lies behind the premise of pleasure, and that moment motivates you to the euphoria that is offered by such an experience. Learning to fly is just a stepping stone to that junction of aviation in which we become part of something much greater than ourselves, and yet something so intrinsic to ourselves. We become part of the legacy that has been written before us, and add our own chapter of our experiences of becoming free in the skies.



How many times have you crept among the clouds and found that all of your earth-bound problems slowly fade beneath you. Flying slips into the moment of soaring above the highest peaks and drifting among the sanctities of the great blue yonder. We leave our problems behind and move closer to a world that is only encapsulated in our dreams. It is why we fly. It is the passion behind it all.



Each one of us approaches the miracle of flight in a different way. It is the thing that makes each one of us smile, whether it is pulling off a perfect three pointer, or feeling the slipstream buffet the wingtips of your craft after an ideal loop. I read an article that was written last year in 'African Pilot' that articulated the mystery and sanctity of opening a hanger door, to find that aircraft that is enshrined in almost a religious air. It is that same feeling that is engrossed in flight.

Too often all of this is missed in the rustle of everyday life, but that moment of navigating amongst the slipstream of lift, allows all of that to disappear. We must ask ourselves why man intended to fly in the first place, and that reason is the same explanation that holds us in awe of this feat to this day. It is not something that makes us want to mimic the birds; it is something that makes us feel we can be birds in our own right.

I climb into my antiquated craft. Goggles pressed tightly against my head and the whip of air buffeting my jacket from the propeller. I push the rudder bar to line up with the runway, and with my left hand, move that comforting and familiar grip on the throttle forwards. The aircraft gathers speed and the tail slowly lifts up. Still there is more acceleration, and as the air rushes quickly over the wings, sucking them upwards, the wheels no longer touch the ground. I am airborne. I look out the side of the cockpit to watch my shadow become smaller and smaller and it never ceases to lift my mood. That moment of becoming free of the earth, free of the confines of gravity keeps the smile in my eyes. The earth and the difficulties associated with that place seem to slip away into obscurity and I am alone to the sound of the air and the engine. I am free to myself. The aircraft is cosy and familiar, almost to the point where I don't have to think to turn or glide or climb. It almost feels as if I have sprouted these wings miraculously from my shoulder blades, and it is I that am able to create this poetry in the skies.

This is what flying is all about and it is the freedom that such a feat is able to give us as a gift.



We are not alone in our endeavours in the clouds, but linked by this experience that makes us unique and individual in our flying. We each hold a special point of momentum, whether it is performing formation aerobatics in a Harvard, or the Sunday afternoon flip in a de Havilland Tiger Moth. It is the moment that makes us whole, and forms the point where we can face the earth again, by escaping it in the wonder of flight.

If you are not sure what I am talking about. Just bear this memory in the back of your mind the next time you slip into the confines of your cockpit and take to the skies. I am sure that in that moment, it will all make sense, and you will realize how to cherish this brotherhood of flying.



The R1,000.00 Hamburger

I'm a teacher, and we just finished the term. So, after packing up my books, pencils and red pens, I dashed home, picked up the airfield paraphernalia and decided to head out to Baragee. For the whole morning, I had been staring out of the window, watching the cloudless blue without a breath of wind, and every time I heard an aeroplane drove overhead, there was a pang of jealousy.

No matter, class was over and now it was my turn.

I still get butterflies in my stomach driving out to the airfield; anticipating whether the weather would hold, who else would be out there, and hoping I could impress myself with my flying abilities. It's strange how, even after a week of not being behind the controls, you second guess yourself and wonder if by some fluke or mistake, you would have lost the touch.

Now, I must admit that the reasons why I decided to go flying were two-fold. Firstly, I couldn't waste a day of this sort of perfection, and secondly, I was going to head across to Krugersdorp to try and get the word out about a lunch time get together in the following two weeks at Baragwanath. I thought that if I went to some of the neighbouring airfields, I might be able to encourage some more flying types to join our get-together and entice them to spend the R500.00 or R1,000.00 of fuel in joining us.

You see, the flying fraternity is a closely woven one and although each one of us enjoys to blast around our local field on a Saturday or Sunday afternoon, it's always good to have an opportunity where we can meet up, get all sentimental about each other's aeries, and kick an imaginary rudder or heave over an imaginary stick while we hangar talk.

So, after I pre-flighted, noted the non-existent wind and wound over the prop, I found myself trundling down the runway and turning out towards Krugersdorp. Upon arrival, I did a runway inspection and a fast, high angled pull out. I can't resist arriving in style when I get to another airfield, and I hope it's because, well, it's a whole lot of fun, not just an announcement of my arrival.

My landing was a three pointer, right on the numbers, and I felt my chest suck up with a bit of self-pride – apparently I still had it (my next landing would probably show me whose boss – just to shake out this cockiness).

After parking the little Cessna 140 and shutting her engine down, I took a stroll to see who was around. In the corner of an opened hangar, the yellow wings of a Tiger Moth caught my eye and I headed off for a closer look. There were in fact two Tigers in the hangar along with an Aeronca and a Citabria. From the open hangar opposite, I heard some voices, so I decided to introduce myself. As I moved inside, the whiff of fabric dope and engine oil caught my senses. Bits and pieces of countless nameless aircraft were packed from wall to wall, each one waiting to be resurrected from whatever unfortunate incident brought it there. The voice belonged to one of the local Krugersdorp characters who was rummaging through old aircraft parts. We had a chat and when I told him about the up-and-coming lunch, his eyes lit up with the affirmation of attending.

We said our farewells, and I continued my stroll around the airfield, making my way down to the end of the grass runway. When I was half way there, a white bakkie caught up with me, and another familiar face offered me a lift. The first thing he said was "Saw you arrive, very nice flypast, I really need to get into the air..."



And that's what's so special about pilots. We all feel part of a kindred spirit, each one envious of the guy who is up in the air while they are stuck on the ground.

He showed me around his hangar and we wandered around yet another Tiger as well as a few Cubs and some home-builts. Overhead we heard a twin approach, low level and both of us watched in silence as he came in on finals, touched down, and then opened up for a second circuit.

I mentioned the get together for lunch to my friend and his eyes lit up as well.

At this point I must explain the reason for this enthusiasm for a get together. A few weeks back one of our friends at Baragee decided to initiate a lunch time braai – open invitation to anyone. Come in an aeroplane and you were entitled to a free Prego roll. A small incentive to make up for the price of fuel getting to and from Baragwanath.

We had about twenty-off aeroplanes come through for lunch, and by all accounts, it was a huge success. We had some amazing aircraft, a few choppers and a really wonderful grassroots flying atmosphere.

So, we thought that why not make it a monthly event, and this time it was my turn to spread the word and organize it all.

But back to the story.

Before I left Krugersdorp, I was feeling a bit peckish and so I headed into the clubhouse to see what I could scrounge. Luckily there was a woman tending the bar, so I ordered a coke. The kitchen was still open, so I ordered my own R500.00 hamburger. Munching the thick, oily patty, I thought about the whole day's events.

A few hours ago I was staring out of a window, wishing I could be in the sky and here I was, the glow of a half an hour flight in my smile. It would have cost me about R350.00 (these 85 hp Cessna's are cheap to run) to get in the air, chat to some mates, see some interesting aeries and have a hamburger and coke.

What a bargain!

When I had to leave, I had been asked to do a flypast along the grass runway, so after take-off, I made a huge teardrop in the sky and headed over the grass, wagging my wings to say goodbye.

Two figures were waving back from the ground.