

# **OBSERVATIONS FROM THE FLIGHTDECK**

- LIFE LESSONS LEARNED THROUGH AVIATION -

*by Jerry Tobias*

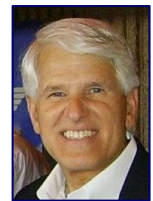
*"I applied my heart to what I observed and learned a lesson from what I saw."*

*Proverbs 24:32*



## **A MINERAL WELLS MOMENT**

### ***...THE DANGEROUS INFLUENCE OF SELF***



I have been fascinated with aviation since my youth. My father flew Hellcats off of aircraft carriers during World War II, but then returned to the farm and never flew again. Even though I never knew him as a pilot, his stories always intrigued and inspired me. It was respect for my father and awe of his past that led me to finally take a five dollar introductory flight during my senior year of college (five dollars went a lot further in 1966!).

I will never forget those thirty minutes in Cessna N3915J. It was a beautiful fall day, and the air was cool, clear and calm. I will never know how I would have responded if it had been hot and turbulent, but on that particular day, the conditions were absolutely perfect. As a result, I was completely and irreversibly hooked, and began taking flying lessons as soon as time and money allowed.

I flew my first student pilot solo cross-country flight in a Cessna 150 in July of 1967. After successfully completing that trip, I eagerly prepared for my second solo cross-country. Although these flights were intended to be basic procedure and navigation practice, I learned an even more important lesson on my second trip.

The first leg was uneventful. I departed Hartlee Field in Denton, Texas, and flew south to Waco. The weather was perfect, and I was glad to have the opportunity to put my newly acquired skills to use. I had a quick bite of lunch at the airport in Waco, and then took a few minutes to just sit and enjoy the experience.

The next leg was from Waco to Mineral Wells, Texas. My plan was to stop there and refuel for the last leg back to Denton. Everything on the cross-country portion of this second leg also went well.

At the appropriate time, I contacted the Mineral Wells Control Tower and received instructions to enter a right visual downwind for a landing to the south. I descended to traffic pattern altitude, made a text-book-perfect 45° entry to the downwind leg, and reported "Cessna N8195F, right downwind."

The Tower told me to "continue," and said that they did not yet have me in sight. I continued the downwind leg and was at a point just past mid-field when the Tower abruptly and tersely called "Cessna N8195F, I have you in sight now on a LEFT downwind. There are numerous helicopters in your vicinity. *Continue with caution*, and call LEFT base!"

I immediately realized my mistake. The Tower was correct: I had entered the wrong downwind on the wrong side of the airport, and was now directly over the U. S. Army helicopter training base that was located on that side of the field. And, there *were* numerous helicopters in my vicinity, just as the Tower had said.

I don't recall what color that Cessna was actually painted, but it felt like it was bright, bright orange! I was sure that most of Mineral Wells - and certainly everyone at the airport - had seen my mistake and now waited for me to land so they could get a glimpse of the brainless pilot in my airplane.

That fear led to a decision that reflected both a flaw in my character and a serious lack of sound judgment. When I called "LEFT base," I requested a touch-and-go landing instead of a full stop. In that "Mineral Wells moment," I reasoned that having less-than-planned fuel on board was better than the humiliation that I knew was waiting for me on the ground.

After the touch-and-go landing, I departed the traffic pattern and turned toward the east. About halfway back to Denton, however, my pride and the resulting desire to hide my blunder were displaced by a combination of reality and fear. It began to look like I might not have enough fuel to make it to Denton. I really didn't know how accurate the fuel gauges were, but both the left

wing and right wing tanks were indicating uncomfortably low quantities. At that point, I actually began looking for suitable forced landing sites.

I anxiously flew on, knowing that - if necessary - I would just have to make an emergency landing wherever I could. As I got closer to Denton, however, I began to think that I might just be able to get by with all of this if I could make it back to Hartlee Field. That thought led me to over-fly Denton Municipal Airport (on the southwest side of town) and continue overhead Denton to Hartlee Field, which was on the northeast side of town.

By the grace of God, I did not run out of fuel over Denton. It still bothers me, though, to think about what might have happened if I had. Instead, I landed safely at Hartlee Field, parked the airplane, and told no one of my incredible stupidity.

Entering the wrong downwind at Mineral Wells, although dangerous in this case, was an honest, student pilot mistake. Not stopping for fuel, though, was an extremely bad, pride-driven decision. And not stopping on the west side of Denton was immeasurably worse.

Pride, I've learned since, is rooted in self. It often takes one of two forms. The first is the obvious "notice me" variety. This kind of pride produces both questionable behavior and over-achievement, as the motive behind it is an inordinate desire to be observed, liked and/or appreciated.

The other form of pride is the "*don't* notice me" variety. This version is probably more dangerous, as its motivation is usually fear: fear of being embarrassed, thought less of, or humiliated. Left unchecked, this fear overpowers all concerns about consequences, which is why I was more worried about what the people in Mineral Wells thought of me than I was about my fuel status. This same thinking, of course, led me to make a series of dangerously bad decisions.

This incident occurred at a time when I knew little about flying and even less about life. I was very fortunate that the flight ended the way that it did. In the final analysis, though, it was one of my most beneficial early training flights, as it provided a very sobering lesson: "*Take care, lest pride (or anger, or fear, or other products of self) overcometh you and ruineth your day!*"

THE BOTTOM LINE? Motives govern thoughts, thoughts govern decisions, and decisions govern actions. We must, therefore, weigh our motives carefully. For whom do we really live? What really guides our lives?

There are, after all, only two possible answers. We either live for self, focused on now, or we live for God and for those among whom we've been set or sent, focused on eternity. The first option leads to pride, insecurity, fear, deception, loneliness and (as with my fuel tanks) potential emptiness. The second, though, leads to humility, right relationships, contentment and a life *filled* with incredible purpose and peace...even in the midst of serious trials and uncertainty. ■

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