

The Wild Blue Yonder

"Off we go into the wild blue yonder..." Those were the opening words of the Army Air Corps song. As a young man I was destined to spend quite a lot of time in the wild blue.

I signed up for the Civilian Pilot Training (CPT) program during WWII. It involved several levels of flight and ground school training. The program was designed to make available to the Army Air Corps a pool of pilot material.

I had to tell a little white lie in order to be accepted. I became, on paper at least, a high school graduate. Because of my Dad's poor health I had dropped out of school after the ninth grade and worked full time to help support the family. It is ironic that, as the CPT program developed, I became the math guru for the group of fifteen or so bona fide graduates.

In addition to the training, the program provided room and board plus transportation to and from the training sites. There was no stipend, which meant that at no time during the program did I have as much as two pennies to rub together.

Elementary Training

The first level of training was conducted at Enid, Oklahoma, my home town. In addition to ground school, we had about twenty hours of dual flight instruction and spent another twenty hours in solo flight. I found that I had an excellent aptitude for flying. I loved it, and it came easily and naturally to me.

Cross Country



The second level involved cross-country and night flying. We were quartered at a junior college in Tonkawa, Oklahoma, and the flight training was from nearby Blackwell. Again, it was a piece of cake, although there were some adventures. One night I was doing solo practice for spins and other maneuvers. I went into a spin and miscounted the number of revolutions. When I came out I was within ten or so miles of the home field, but I was totally disoriented. It was a frightening experience.

On another occasion, bad weather very late in the day caused me to make a forced landing in a

pasture. I spent the night as the guest of the farmer and his family. On my solo cross-country flights, I didn't always follow the rules. I would sometimes fly for miles at an altitude that required me to detour around oil derricks and to pull up when I came to a fence.

Aerobatics



Aerobatic flight training was conducted at the University of Arkansas. We moved up to higher horsepower planes and spent many hours in maneuvers such as snap rolls, slow rolls, loops, chandelles, and immelmans. I was a good student, and easily learned to execute the maneuvers.

On one memorable morning, I had an hour of dual instruction in loops and snap rolls. We landed, the instructor got out, and I went back up for a second hour to put this new knowledge into practice. All went well until the end of the hour. Just before my wheels touched down for landing, I lost my breakfast. I hit the throttle and went around again repeating the procedure on the second approach - and the third! By this time, the people on the ground were quite concerned for me, but I made it on the fourth approach. By far the worst part of the experience was being required to clean out the cockpit.

Instrument Flight

The last phase of CPT was training in instrument flight and radio range navigation. In Tulsa, Oklahoma I received twenty hours of simulated instrument in a Link Trainer plus another twenty hours in actual instrument flight. For the flight training, a green transparent plastic covered the cockpit windows, and red goggles were worn. I could see the instruments but nothing outside the cockpit. The very primitive, by today's standards, "needle, ball, and airspeed" allowed me to control the plane.

At the end of this program, we all went back to Enid to await a call to active duty. I soon received in the mail a pilot's license with a full instrument rating. It is interesting to note that before that time I had never driven a car.

Upon reporting for active duty at Sheppard Field, Texas I was introduced to *military logic*. When I failed a physical examination, I was told that I could not tolerate high altitudes. So... I was converted to a tail gunner on a B-26 bomber. I made it through 26 missions in a B-26 over France and Germany by the end of the war.

Six months later I was back home to begin the next chapter of my life.