

## Aviation Idol

It was a cold and windy winter day, just over two decades ago and I was tying down a well-worn Cessna 150 at the Mountain Grove (Missouri) Municipal Airport. It had been a frustrating hour of flight instruction. I was probably less than 10 hours into my training, and it just wasn't working. Try as I may, I simply couldn't make the little trainer do what I wanted. My instructor, Lloyd R. Darter is perhaps one of the best minds in aviation, but with a famously gruff and dour demeanor (at least until you get to know him). Lloyd had exited the airplane and hadn't said a word – he just walked away and disappeared into his office. I presumed he was disappointed with me. Actually there was nothing to say, as we both knew I had had a bad day. Just graduated from Mizzou, armed with a Finance Degree but not much else, I was spending every last dime I could earn learning to fly. But today it just didn't seem worth it – and I was considering throwing in the towel. While still tying down the obstinate little Cessna, it was Jerry Smith who sidled up next to me (perhaps he sensed my frustration as I jerked on the tie down ropes). We had been introduced once prior. In those days Jerry worked for 3M in their Stormscope Division and flew the shiniest airplane on the field, a beautiful F33 Bonanza. Locally, he was the big aviation man on campus.

“Well how ya doin, Tim”, Jerry drawled in his native Ozark accent. I was surprised he remembered my name.

“Not too good Jerry, it just isn't working. Maybe I'm just not cut out to be a pilot. I guess that is what Lloyd thinks”, I stammered.

“Naw, that ain't the case”, Jerry coaxed. “A couple more hours and it'll click - believe me it will. Hang in there. Cause if ya quit”, he paused with a twinkle in his eye, “Think of all the fun you're gonna miss!”.

Jerry's enthusiasm and attitude were infectious. Ten minutes later I heard the roar of a big Continental and Jerry swooped overhead in that beautiful Bonanza – off to see a customer in Texas he had said. Someday, I'm gonna be like him, I thought.

I would return to Mountain Grove, and shortly thereafter, as Jerry had predicted, “it clicked”. Lloyd persevered and got me my ticket, I bought a Beech Musketeer and did very little else for the next many months except fly. Now and then I would run into Jerry, and he was always his same cheery self, often sharing some pearl of aviation wisdom.

In 1990 the Musketeer and I moved to the East Coast for the first big job. Yet I maintained a connection to Jerry's world, as my parents lived in a nearby town and my soon to be wife was from Lake of the Ozarks. Several times a year we made the trip back to MO in the Musketeer, and Lloyd Darter continued to perform my annuals and most other maintenance work on the little Beechcraft (he is the best IA in the Midwest). On one of those early trips home, I ran into Jerry and he told me:

"You need an instrument rating for these long trips – actually if you are serious about flying ya gotta have an instrument rating".

He was right, of course, and by 1992 I had heeded his advice.

On another trip I caught Jerry and Lloyd closely inspecting the Bonanza for the exit point of a lightning strike Jerry had encountered while performing some thunderstorm research.

I asked him, "You don't really fly into thunderstorms, do you Jerry"? With a serious look, he replied, "I only stick one wing in and then pull it right back out. But you, young man, treat them like columns of concrete – give them a wide berth". Good advice, I have since tried to follow.

Another time while retrieving the Musketeer from its annual, Jerry landed in a P-Baron – back from a business trip. Within a half hour of pushing the Baron into a hangar, he was back at the airport with his young son preflighting an old Chief.

I walked over to him and asked, "Jerry, if you can fly that (pointing to the Baron hangar), why in the world do you want to fly this old Chief"? Jerry grinned real big and responded the obvious: "This is REAL FLYIN!"

Jerry Smith simply both loved and lived aviation – and it was a family affair.

The years slipped by and only rarely did I run into Jerry. Sometime around the mid-nineties we met yet again at the Mountain Grove fuel pump. I knew he had moved from 3M to BF Goodrich when they purchased the Stormscope Division. The dialogue went something like this:

"You still working for Goodrich?", I asked.

"Nope, a new company in KC", Jerry replied.

"What's the name?" I queried.

"Garmin", he replied.

"Never heard of them", I said.

"You will", Jerry replied with that same twinkle in his eye.

He was once again prophetic - as Garmin soon owned the avionics market.

Somewhere along the way, Lloyd told me Jerry had lost a son in a freak scuba diving accident. I never learned the details, we never discussed it, but I privately grieved for him from afar. I wondered if it was the same young boy I had seen flying with him in that Chief.

Living half a country apart, yet we still crossed paths. In 2003, after having a new Garmin panel installed in the Musketeer, my wife Tammy and I set out for Sun n Fun. On the way down one of the main knobs on my GNS 430 got sticky and then failed altogether. I couldn't have been more frustrated and disappointed. Upon arrival in Lakeland, I made a headlong dash to the Garmin tent to tell my tale of woe, never thinking of Jerry. My first contact with a Garmin Rep. didn't go to well, and soon I was reminding the rep. that I was ready for Garmin's "legendary service" as here I was stranded far from home with a (brand new) broken radio. My wife said I was getting loud. Then out of the crowd stepped a familiar face: Jerry Smith. "We'll get you taken care of Tim, right now", he commanded. In less than an hour, the good folks at Gulf Coast Avionics (located right on the field) were replacing my 430 with a brand new unit – treating us like royalty in the process. It was one of those rare occasions when I knew someone in the right place.

Not long afterwards, I was delighted when my wife Tammy decided to learn to fly, and even more delighted when shortly thereafter she launched her own aviation finance business. Aviation was becoming a bigger part of our lives, just as I had always hoped. For her new venture, I tried to introduce Tammy to everyone I knew in the business, including Jerry Smith. In fact, I had to be reintroduced to Jerry's son Scott, by now also working for Garmin, as Scott was that little boy I last saw all those years ago - preflighting a Chief with his Daddy. As always, Jerry was most gracious and he and Tammy hit it off immediately. They would talk business from time to time.

Although we didn't get back to the Ozarks quite so often these days, Tammy's new business took us to all the aviation trade shows and we actually saw more of Jerry over the past couple of years. The last time was in August at OSH. Having been there all week and not yet bumping into him, just before hooking up with my ride home in a friend's Mooney, I made a point of tracking Jerry down in the Garmin tent. He was there and as usual, took the time to visit a bit. I teased him about the new house I had heard he built at the Willow Springs (Missouri) Airport – his own hangar and all. He laughed, and said, "Well stop on by when your down to see your

folks – we'll take the Super D up and have some fun!...and be sure to bring Tammy along!". I promised we would stop by, and had intended to.

That is, until this past Wednesday morning when an e-mail popped up from Henrietta Christensen from Mountain Grove. There were no words (I'm sure Henny couldn't find them), just a URL link to a news story about a Cardinal crashing near Mena, AR. The lone fatality hadn't yet been confirmed, but the Cardinal was registered to Jerry L. Smith. I quickly dialed the Mountain Grove Airport, and knew in Lloyd's voice even before he confirmed the tragic news: Jerry Smith was dead.

Jerry Smith and I were not close enough for him to be a mentor (I would reserve that distinction for Lloyd and a few others over the years). Barely acquaintances, only brushing across each other's trail sporadically over twenty some years, Jerry was more of an idol to me. He was a guy who had an endless enthusiasm for aviation, made his living in the business – and loved every minute of it. I admired him deeply. Over the past few months, I finally graduated up to a Turbo-Bonanza, not all that different from the one that Jerry used to fly – and I had dreamed of - as he had swooped overhead that day. Tammy's been working on her instrument rating. I would have loved to share it all with Jerry at our next encounter, but now feel cheated that I won't get that chance.

I don't yet know how Jerry ended up on Rich Mountain that fateful afternoon, but I am certain he was faced with some unmanageable set of circumstances. It is some solace to know that he died doing what he loved, yet is still hurts. I'm sure Jerry never knew what those few encouraging words meant to me on that cold, blustery December day, yet I will always credit him as one of the positive influences that has helped make aviation the important part of my life it has become today. He undoubtedly inspired many others. And Jerry, it has been a lot of fun, and perhaps at least partly because of you, I didn't miss it. Thanks again, and rest in peace.

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