THE Corsair AND I

PART TWO

HOW THE LIVES OF THE AUTHOR AND A GOODYEAR FG-1D WERE INTERTWINED OVER THE YEARS

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In 1968, after three-years of practicing dentistry, my suburban practice was doing well and expanding. I had already taken on a couple of associate dentists, my wife and I had begun our family with three children, and we were in a new home. However, wanting to fly Warbirds was constantly on my mind so it was time to get back into flying.

Signing up with a flight school at Midway, which by then had been abandoned by the major airlines for O'Hare, making that field the world's busiest airport, Midway was the perfect place to learn.

At that point, it was used mostly by one or two charter operators, maintenance and pilot instruction schools, and a couple of regional airlines. I took up flying where I left off in 1960 but instead of a Cub it was now an Alon Aircoupe. It was a neat little plane and, with its twin tails, and was named the "poor man's P-38."

I got my private license in that plane by the fall of 1968. I knew if I was to fly Warbirds, I needed more training so I went to work on my commercial. At that time, a minimum of 200-hrs flight time including instrument training and time in a "complex" plane with a constant speed prop and retractable gear were required so I joined a flying club based on the field. I transitioned to the required type, first a Mooney Mk. 20, then the Piper Arrow, and continued building time and learning various maneuvers and instrument flight. I took a ground school course and passed the FAA commercial written exam so that by December 1970 I was ready for the flight test and notified the local FAA office.

A middle-age check pilot was sent and I met him in one of the flight school's classrooms where the FAA man asked me some exam questions and then had me plan a flight from Chicago Midway to St. Louis Lambert Field. I got the proper weather briefing and, with that knowledge including the winds aloft, figured out the headings and route, and filed a flight plan. We then went out to the plane, did a preflight, got aboard, fired up, performed the proper radio procedures, got our takeoff clearance, and took off for St. Louis while activating the flight plan. After getting about 100-mi out and making all checkpoints using the proper radio navigation technique, the check pilot told me to cancel the flight plan and head for a nearby airport, which I did. What followed were directions to make various types of landings there — short field, soft field, and crosswind. Then I was directed to don the peripheral vision-blocking instrument hood, and using instruments alone, told to turn to various headings with standard rate turns while climbing and descending, and this was followed by what I always thought was fun — recoveries from unusual attitudes while flying blind. I was told to put my head down while the check pilot did various power on and off, climbing, turning, and diving maneuvers in an attempt to confuse me and then he told me to "take over." I'd lift my head and by the instruments alone immediately get the plane into level, controlled flight. Then, finally, I was given vectors to Midway and did an instrument approach, being told to remove the hood while on very short final.

After landing and shut down, I secured the plane and headed into the hangar with the check pilot who, other than giving directions during the entire 1.5-hr routine, said nothing. I just had to ask him, "Well, did I pass?" He responded, "Oh, you passed all right but I'm wondering why you want a commercial license. Are you planning on an airline career?"

I replied no, that I just wanted to be a better pilot because I had plans to fly WWII fighters. He then asked, "Are you going to get some T-6 time?"

The reason he asked was because in the late 1950s/early 1960s, as WWII fighters became available on the civilian market, some pilots thought that, heck, those were just another airplane, and were killing themselves along with some innocent folks. A high-powered Warbird was NOT just another airplane. They had idiosyncrasies not found in other birds.

After a series of fatal accidents, the FAA said enough and instituted a new policy that made a Letter of Authorization (LOA) necessary to legally fly any single-engine plane over 600-hp. This LOA was necessary to be legal in the aircraft and to be able to get insurance. To get the LOA, you either had to already have time in fighers or demonstrate ability to fly the T-6. In answer to the check pilot's question, I said that not only was I going to get time in a T-6, I was going to buy one and become real proficient before moving on to a Corsair/Mustang.

He then asked, "Who's going to check you out in the T-6?" I responded that I'd have to find someone. He said he had over 10,000-hrs in T-6s, that he was a Navy flight instructor in SNJs,

Although we are going a bit into the future, this photograph shows the author's Corsair after it had been purchased by The Fighter Collection and was being flown from Chino, California, to Houston, Texas, where it was shipped to England. The FG-1D was being flown by the late Rick Brickert and accompanied by the Planes of Fame Corsair. (M. O'Leary)