

## The Flyboy

*There were old pilots and there were bold pilots.  
But no old, bold pilots, until...*

By Alfred Kildow

The sky overhead was suddenly crowded with piston-powered airplanes, old ones, a few nearly a century old. Their roar filled the senses.

It puzzled the old man, standing on the grass outside his suburban Dallas home. He looked quizzically at his neighbor, a younger man, maybe 75 or so, standing not far away on his own lawn.

"Commemorative Air Force," the neighbor said. "A bunch of old veterans flying around to celebrate Memorial Day."

The old man nodded, then said: "I used to fly, you know. Korean War." He pointed to a tight formation, four planes growling low over the subdivision. "Flew one of those. T-6. First plane I ever flew. First plane I was ever in. I'll never forget that old T-6..."

But the neighbor had turned away and gone inside. He had war stories of his own but never told them. He'd spent his entire army service in El Paso.

In the newspaper the old man learned that the flock of old planes had come from far and wide, gathering together nearby at the airport in Addison from which their pilots launched their tribute. A few days later he drove his 20-year-old Chevy over to see if any T-6s remained. To his delight, one did.

The old man strolled over to the T-6, walked all the way around it twice, then caressed the bright yellow-orange fuselage with his calloused hands, stepped back a few strides to continue admiring it.

"It's a T-6," a voice behind him said suddenly. "A trainer first used in World War II. You ever seen one before?"

The old man turned to face him and said, "Yeah, I have. Learned to fly in one, back in '49." He studied the man carefully, calculated he was no older than 50; maybe younger.

The old man stuck out a paw, introduced himself. Then added: "My buddies back in the day used to call me 'Motormouth.' Buddies in my squadron. Back then."

The younger man replied without emotion. "I own this plane. Bought it a couple years ago. Fly it when I have time, usually two or three times a month."

"When I flew it," the old man said, "we flew two or three times a day." He laughed as he said it, looked away, let his glance linger on the sturdy-looking monoplane, leaning back to rest on its tail wheel.

The two talked enough for the old man to learn that most of the time the T-6 just sat there at the airport, occasionally drawing wondering attention from passersby.

"I was about to go on a short hop about the area," the younger man said. "Want to ride along?"

The old man felt his heart leap. "Sure would. Been a long time since I flew this kinda bird. Any kind. Would feel mighty fine."

He climbed into the back seat on instructions from the owner, who said he'd do the flying, The old man would just ride along. After he managed to scramble into the back seat, he found it comfortingly familiar. On the seat was a parachute that also served as a cushion, just as he remembered. He strapped himself in automatically, pleased he remembered the process so easily. Studied the instrument panel, found it simple, easily understandable, much less complicated than the last panel he'd been required to scrutinize, sometimes urgently. More recently than in T-6 days but still a long-time ago.

He tugged the headset from where it hung on the rearview mirror, heard a crackly "read me?" in the earphones, pressed the mic close to his lips and gave it his best veteran response: "Uh (pause) roger."

The owner was effusive and generous, although the old man rated him only adequate as a pilot. He answered his many questions fully and directly. It seemed to the old man that just as he formulated a question the answer came to him, always a second or two before the younger man answered. Mostly his questions had to do with mixture and pitch. When to lean or enrich the gasoline to air mixture, how to position the pitch of the propeller, how to vary it for takeoff, cruising or landing. He'd once known all of that without thinking about it but the jet fighters he'd mostly flown had no reason for him to remember that nonsense. The jet fighter was just, an instructor had told him years ago, "a hole sucking air, then squirting it out back on fire."

The owner flew around the Dallas area for nearly an hour, mostly cruising along straight and level, taking in the scenery. "Want to take over the controls for a bit?" he asked over the intercom. "Hey, yeah," came the quick reply. "I mean, roger," he said with a thumb's up gesture that only he could see.

He could feel the pulsed vibration of the big radial engine when he grasped the stick, felt its familiar shape, tickled the trim tab button atop it, wiggled the trigger like scratching an itch, chuckling to himself, imagining the trigger was connected to something powerful, meaningful, knowing it wasn't.

He flew around for ten or fifteen minutes, cruising, mimicking the straight and level flying of the owner, risking only gentle turns, gradually heading further out into the western countryside, chatting amiably over the intercom with the younger man in the front seat. Over an area where there were few houses, the old man asked, "Mind if I try a chandelle?"

"What's a chandelle?"

"Oh, just a simple training maneuver. First one I learned as a cadet. They called it a 180-degree maximum performance climbing turn. Not a big deal. Just dive a bit to get some airspeed, power up, then turn and climb at the same time."

He had, of course, executed that same maneuver thousands of times over his years on active duty, not usually thinking about it or its name. With the power of "air on fire" it was just a routine way to turn around.

Before the owner could reply, the old man pressed the stick forward gently, added some power and let the airspeed build up. At 250 knots he pulled the stick back and pushed the throttle full forward at the same time. Rolling briskly into the turn he heard the younger man grunt as the G-load built up. The G-force didn't bother the old man. He'd tightened his gut with reflexive anticipation as he rolled the old T-6 into the steep climbing turn.

"I'll take it," he heard the owner command, hearing his frantic shout both in the earphones and over the subduing roar of the engines as he yanked the throttle back and took control. "That's too violent for an old airplane like this."

The old man in the back seat didn't think so but said nothing. The old bird had reacted just the way he'd expected it to. Smooth and precisely responsive, just as it had for him a few thousand flying hours before. A thousand years, it seemed to him.

They parted amiably enough, there on the tarmac at Addison air field. He rubbed his hands again over the metal fuselage, watched the tanker truck arrive and the gas boy refuel the plane. He stopped for a moment, alongside his car in the nearby parking lot, studied how the owner fastened down a canvas contraption to protect the Plexiglas cockpits of his T-6.

The old man started up his Chevy and headed for home. "Eighty," he said aloud. "That bird's 80 years old." He laughed at that. "And this old bird's 90. Two old friends."

It took him a month to get up the nerve. But early in the dark of morning the old man parked his Chevy again at the airport in Addison, something he had done in that same spot a handful of times since his ride in the T-6.

This time he got out of the car.

The old man walked purposefully to the T-6 and removed the canvas cover, folded it carefully, set it down near the fence. He yanked away the chocks that blocked the main landing gear, climbed up on the wing, then paused. He looked at the runway, it's lights gleaming in the distance. Too far, he thought.

A taxiway led from the T-6 to the runway. A hundred yards away, at least, he thought. The air was still. The tower closed. No one about.

In five minutes the old man had the T-6 in the air, rising from the taxiway, wheels and flaps pulled up before crossing over the runway. He flew low over the full expanse of the airport, building up speed. At 200 knots, chandelle! From south to north in less than a minute, then a gentle climbing turn to the west, leveling off at 5,000 feet with the rising sun reflecting in the rear view mirror. It was 8 o'clock and beneath him the land was brightening up, streets and buildings coming into view.

He looked about carefully, making sure no other aircraft were in the area. Unfolded his map, an old WAC chart of the West Texas area on which he'd made numerous notations.

The old man grinned, spoke aloud in a whisper:

"It may not work. They may catch me. But this sure is fun."

A half-hour later he circled over the little town of Haskell, picked out the schoolyard where hundreds of children milled about. He could see a group kicking a ball, others running haphazardly. Most looked up to the sky, expectantly, he told himself. He eased the throttle back, pointed the nose toward the schoolyard and went into a steep dive.

A quarter mile from the schoolyard he leveled off at 50 feet, pushed the throttle up and banked slightly, pointing the nose so that he passed just off to the side of the schoolyard. With the throttle wide open and the engine roaring the T-6 sped past the school at 250 knots. He looked over to the side and saw the children standing stock still, mouths agape, some running around excitedly, pointing at him.

Chandelle! Then another turn and a dive for a second pass. Children waving, jumping up and down. He pulled up just short of the school and, not fully realizing what he was doing,

executed a perfect barrel roll. He circled back at 2,000 feet, waggled his wings, climbed back to 5,000 feet and resumed his trek to the west.

A half-hour later he repeated his airshow at the town of Seminole. It was morning recess, just as he'd calculated, and the schoolyard was full. His five-minute performance was clearly appreciated, at least by the children, whom he watched jumping up and down and waving, just like the kids at Haskell. His heart felt full.

Well before noon, right on his schedule, after two more performances, he landed at the airport just south of Roswell, New Mexico, taxied over to the row of private aircraft hangers. He pulled up to where an attendant was motioning to him, guiding him where to park. Alongside a fuel truck.

"Welcome, sir. Got your reservation. We'll fill you up quickly, like you asked."

The old man climbed down, stretched and accepted a boxed lunch from the attendant, tucked it under his arm.

"Well, sir, I hear you put on quite a show over there to the east," the attendant said. "Folks in the hanger were talking about it just a bit ago. Hope you didn't break any rules."

The old man smiled, said nothing, paid cash, climbed back into the cockpit. He watched the fuel cap screwed back on and looked off toward the tower. He stiffened. A police car was headed his way, seemed to him to be moving fast.

He fired up the engine, watched the attendant scurry away, a bewildered look on his face. Power on full, flaps at 20 degrees, he rolled down the tarmac pointed directly at the speeding police car. It swerved away at about the same instant the old man yanked the T-6 into the air, simultaneously pulling up the landing gear. He got a quick look at a terrified policeman glaring at him from the patrol car.

Much too close, he mused as he headed north, climbing again to 5,000 feet, his preferred cruising altitude. Too low to have to worry about airline traffic, high enough to escape unwanted scrutiny. But just in case, he turned east, flew along for a minute or two, then turned south, flew some more, turned back west, then north again, his intended course.

At Loco Hills Elementary the children were waiting for him. His flyby's had attracted attention. Same thing at Wickett, Crane and Barnhart. Late that afternoon he landed at the small airport near Marfa, spotted the attendant and taxied over to him, following his instructions to park inside the low metal hangar. He shut his engine down, watched the hangar doors close behind him.

"Well, sir, you sure got things stirred up," the coverall-clad, grease-covered attendant shouted up at him. "Welcome to Marfa."

Halfway across Texas, just outside Austin, an FAA official called the local FBI office. "Someone in an old airplane seems to be putting on shows for school kids all across Texas. Even into New Mexico. The kids seem to know he's coming. They turn out and cheer."

The FBI agent seemed uncertain. "The kids in any danger? He coming in too close, too low?"

"From what we've been able to learn from a couple of school principals the pilot is careful," the FAA agent replied. "Doesn't fly right over the school, but probably violates minimum altitude requirements."

"So, what's the crime here?"

"I think someone stole the plane. A police officer in Roswell, New Mexico, said he had a close call. The guy hurried up when he saw the patrol car, headed right at him on the tarmac. Had to swerve to avoid that propeller chopping through his car. And him, I reckon."

The FBI agent perked up: "You say New Mexico? If he stole the plane, that might make this a federal crime. You know, crossing a state line. I'll look into this."

He was silent for a long moment, then: "But tell me: you say the kids at these schools know he's coming. How do they know that?"

"Beats me. But so far his shows have only played for one day. Maybe they were coincidences. Don't know where he is now. Maybe landed in a cow pasture somewhere and is hunkered down for the night. I'll let you know if he pops up again tomorrow."

"One more question," the FBI agent said. "I don't see any reports of a stolen airplane anywhere in the area. Not anywhere in the country. So, why do you think it's stolen?"

"Here's my best guess," FAA agent replied. "No flight plan has been filed and this is highly unusual behavior. It's an old airplane, a trainer of some sort, according to those who've seen it. The pilot paid cash for gas at Roswell. I'm thinking the owner of the plane doesn't yet know it's stolen. If I learn more, I'll let you know. Just consider this a head's up."

The old man was up early from the cot the Marfa attendant had set up for him, ate what was left of yesterday's sandwich and began tinkering with his airplane, walking all around it, checking, inspecting. "Three sixty walkaround," he mused, remembering. Then wondered how he'd get the hangar door open, how he'd back the plane out onto the tarmac.

"Mornin' sir!" a friendly voice shouted. A friendly voice emanating from a still-greasy overall clad attendant. The man was carrying two of Starbuck's best.

When the T-6 had been towed onto the tarmac and gassed up, and the old man was comfortably strapped in, the attendant climbed up onto the wing alongside the cockpit, smiled, and said:

"The whole town will be following you today. How many shows you got planned?"

The old man scanned the wrinkled WAC chart on his lap, counted carefully, replied with a tired-sounding laugh: "Six in the morning, six in the afternoon. If..."

"If, what?"

"If they don't catch me."

By midmorning, the FAA agent was on the phone again with the FBI agent. "He's at it again. Buzzed three schools already. Very elusive. No one knows where he is now. I'm asking the Air National Guard to see if they can track him. But they won't be able to get into the air until tomorrow."

"Don't see any reports of a stolen plane yet," FBI replied.

"No, so he's holed up somewhere, probably getting fuel. I can't figure out where or how," FAA commented.

Halfway through his afternoon menu the old man saw a helicopter flying nearby, moving in alongside. He noticed it was painted gaudily, saw the words "KSAT-News 12" spelled out along the cabin. "Hah," he said, "TV. I better smile and wave." He did, then banked sharply away, pushed up the power, left the TV copter far behind.

The late afternoon crowds were bigger than before and the old man wasn't sure whether that was because the schools where he performed had more students, or whether local citizens were joining in. Either way, he was pleased.

That night he flew back to his safe haven in Marfa. The attendant was better dressed this time, took him in his car to the bar at the Hotel Paisano. The bar was packed and when he walked in with the airport attendant he was greeted with cheers. A man approached him, applauding, stuck out a hand.

"I'm the mayor. What you're doing is so great. Is that your own, personal airplane?"

"No," the old man replied with a straight face. "I stole it."

Everyone laughed, everyone drank and as the old man wobbled out to the attendant's car, he said: "Reminds me of the club at K2 in Korea. Drank a lot every night. Chased away the willies. Got up every morning after, early, flew two, sometimes three missions. Hard stuff. The heavy drinking seemed to help some. Took the edge off."

The crowds across Texas were huge that day and the old man, tired as he was from all that flying, was exhilarated. But he was also thankful it was his finale. He planned to turn himself in at day's end, back in Addison. Face the music.

FAA called FBI gleefully. "We got it," he shouted into the phone. "We'll get him today."

"What do you mean?" FBI asked. "How do we get him? And for what?"

FAA fairly giggled. "It's on Facebook. The whole schedule for today — except for midday when, if we haven't nailed him by then, he'll be getting gas."

"So how'd you figure that out?" FBI asked.

"Well, it helps to have a teen-aged daughter. She was all excited last night, talking about the airshow guy at dinner. Knew all about him. Knows who he is. Says all her friends are following him. Says he has more than a million 'likes,' whatever that is."

With two shows yet to go that afternoon, the old man wasn't particularly surprised when a pair of F-16 jet fighters pulled up and flanked him. He gave them a thumbs up, got one back. He could see the jets were staggering at his 200-knot cruising speed.

The pilot to his left gestured, pointing down. "They want me to land," the old man exclaimed to himself. He pointed to his own head, shook it side by side vigorously. The jet pilot pointed down again.

The old man throttled back, dropped a bit of flaps, slowed down to 90 knots. The jets peeled off. Way too slow for them. He watched them circle above him, then had a thought. He stretched down to the radio receiver and, sure enough, there was a setting for the emergency channel, "Guard."

"Hey, F-16s, T-6 guy here, do you read?"

"Roger, T-6. They want you to land now."

"No way, 16. I got two shows left and the kids are waiting. You'll have to shoot me down to make me miss those shows."

"Roger, T-6. We know who you are and what you've been doing. If you land back at Addison like you say, you'll have an escort all the way. We'll be a bit above you, say at 20,000 feet or so. We'll track you on radar."

"Roger, 16. My show will go on just as scheduled. And I'll land at Addison right on my ETA. Seventeen hundred hours.

Roger, T-6. We'll try to keep you safe. You do the same."

The old man didn't bother to reply. He switched his radio to the Addison tower frequency and completed his scheduled shows, marveling at the dense crowds at both elementary schools. Felt good, battled a lump that began to form in his throat.

Five miles out from the Dallas-Fort Worth area half a dozen helicopters and several fixed-wing aircraft clustered about him. He ran a hand through his patchy gray hair. I'm on the 5 o'clock news, he thought. A surprise. "Wonder what other surprises await me."

He called Addison tower and was cleared for immediate landing. Approaching the airport on downwind leg at 1,200 feet he was amazed to see vast crowds of people clogging the streets, bringing traffic to a standstill. He slid the canopy open, felt the rush of wind, wished he had goggles.

He turned base leg and radioed as though he was still in training, or landing at K2: "Addison. T-6 turning base, gear down and locked."

He heard a chuckle from the tower and a terse, "you're cleared to land."

A "follow me" jeep guided him toward the tarmac but had to stop short. The crowd was beginning to push through a thin line of beleaguered Addison police. Two police officers climbed up onto the wing as he shut the engine off.

"You're under arrest, sir," one said. Then added: "I'm really sorry, sir. You're a hero. To me, anyway. And my kids. But I have my orders."

They climbed down together and the old man put his hands behind him for handcuffing.

"No way, sir. No cuffs from me."

They walked toward the crowded tarmac for a few paces and then the crowd burst through. He felt himself hoisted to the shoulders of two strong men and heard for the first time the cheers and shouts of the crowd.

He felt like Lindberg in Paris. But only for a brief moment. Then came the reckoning. He was carried through the crowd, then set down before a very officious looking trio: the chief of police, a man in a business suit and a familiar-looking, very serious face. He recognized him.

"You stole my airplane," the man said, his somber look beginning to crack.

The police chief cut in quickly: "The charge is theft of an airplane, taking it across state lines and using it for unlawful, unlicensed air shows."

The old man noticed for the first time the cameras and the microphones pointed his way.

Business suit spoke up: "I'm the attorney general here to formally charge you with these crimes. However...."

"However," the owner of the T-6 said softly, "I would have to sign the complaint. And I won't. On condition."

"And that might be?"

"You gotta let me see and touch your distinguished flying cross, the one you got after you flew your 150th mission and shot down your third Mig. Then you have to teach me that chandelle maneuver and show me how to fly this thing." He embraced the old man.

The cameras and microphones pushed closer.

"I can't do that," the old man replied. "I've made my last flight."

"And it was a doozy," the police chief said.

Soon it was all over. There was a press conference, flashing cameras, more cheering crowds. The chief himself drove him home in his old Chevy. His neighbors stood in their front yards, clapping.

He saw his 75-year-old neighbor standing on his lawn next door, wooden-faced. "I used to fly, you know," the old man said to his younger neighbor.

The man turned his back and walked inside without a word.

Alfred Kildow was a jet fighter pilot a very long time ago during the Korean War. He lives and writes in Dallas. His novel "Fallout: remains of an atomic war," describes a mission he didn't fly, thankfully.