

For The Love Of 3492 Mike

It is a 14-year-old Piper PA-12. Sitting quietly on the flight line tugging at its ropes, the *Super Cruiser* looks old and a little shabby beside the new generation of glistening sky yachts. But there is a magic about 3492 Mike, a spark you just don't find in the 1961 model airplane.

Things haven't been the same since we signed the adoption papers.

In the beginning it had hailed. Ice had ripped through her elevators, rudder, and ailerons. Few buyers would have paid hard cash for the wounded bird, but my wife and I saw that the damage was superficial and that a real performer lurked beneath the tattered canvas dress. My wife and four sons took the plane apart.

Craig was small, and his little hands reached right through the fuselage tubing where bolts and nuts hold elevators to the controls. While

part had received. Neighborhood kids stared and gulped as Glynden explained that we were building "a real airplane." Our two dogs were attracted by the smell of dope and one of them must have got a real snootful because he hasn't been able to smell very much since. Dog hairs, of course, appeared mysteriously in the dope and on the fabric. Getting these hairs off the fabric added interest to our long hours in the storeroom.

When our work was approved by an A and P, we put the control surfaces back on and called a mechanic to give her a periodic. He took the airplane away. After several days he called to tell us that 3492 Mike needed some new fuel lines. It also turned out that these lines and fittings are no longer manufactured and cause a good deal of amusement at supply houses. After driving about 250 miles, I found the parts myself.

The day actually came when she was flyable. My wife and children stood and waved as I pushed the throttle wide open and 3492 Mike snarled down the runway. She lifted, and the plane and I were at home where we belonged. This had been a dream of mine since I was 10 years old, since the days I used to listen to Wiley Post and Arthur Oakley swap lies at the old airport near Ardmore, Okla. The first time I ever rode in a plane, a Curtiss *Robin*, I knew this was the place to be. It was a funny kind of dream. It stayed there through college, a war, through years when it was hard to make ends meet, but it stayed. And here I was 40 years old flying an old airplane that agreed with me about everything. I felt so good I hollered out loud. It was good to be alive. The Lycoming bellowed faithfully.

When I landed at Norman, the sun was going down. The next day I took the kids up. Three of them were strapped in the back seat. A PA-12 can lift nearly anything you can cram into it. They kept looking at me and grinning. This childish dream of mine needed no explanation as far as they were concerned. When we landed at a strange airport and piled out of it, it looked like the old circus act where clowns just keep on coming out of an old trick car.

Glynden had been up in a plane only once in her life. The day I gave her a ride, she showed signs of panic.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

"Quit showing off," she said.

The plane was in a gentle climb and indicating 80 m.p.h.

"You've slowed down. You've stopped," she hollered.

I pointed at the airspeed indicator. She shook her head and pointed at

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Author's three sons Kevin, Eric and Craig, pose with 3492 Mike between tornado warnings at Norman, Okla., airport. 'Plane-sitting' is a family occupation during such times

Photo by the author

*Piper PA-12 Super Cruiser is
only an adopted member
of the family, but
they haven't told her yet*

I was still talking about being careful, he had the job done. Lance, Eric, and Kevin worked on the ailerons. Yes, sir, this was their airplane, not just a little model that you glue together. Each little fist clutched a chunk of real airplane as we hauled it to our house in the car.

We spread the parts out on an old ping-pong table in the storeroom.

"What do we do now?" my wife, Glynden, asked.

"We buy stuff," I said prophetically.

We bought fabric, dope, needles, and twine. Lights burned late in our storeroom night after night.

We kept a chart on the wall showing how many coats of dope each

Love of 3492 Mike

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the ground. As far as her personal eyeballs were concerned, the airplane had stopped in midair. After all, the air-speed indicator was only a gadget.

Every spring, Oklahoma's gale winds produce tornadoes and bent airplanes. One morning we went out to see how 3492 Mike had made it through the night. The plane next to it was in two pieces, and the tail section had disappeared entirely but the *Super Cruiser* was intact. Many a night after that we sat up with 3492 Mike as the wind howled across the wings and struts. If the ropes were loose, her wheels actually lifted off the ground. You get to know an airplane pretty well when you hang onto a wing and grit your teeth and shut your eyes against wind and dust.

Hail is a merciless enemy. Not ordinary hail that comes out of a decent thunderstorm, but hail driven by winds that slash up to 80 m.p.h. and stab and disappear, leaving stricken planes and shredded windsocks. Houses disappear, too, during the spring tornado season. Oddly, we never have spent the night watching our house.

"What we need," I told Lance one day, "is a real cross-country. Suppose we could make it to Galveston?"

His eyes lighted up. "All the way to the Gulf?"

We got the Sectional maps out and plotted a course. We needed a Beaumont Sectional but couldn't find or buy one. So we plotted a dog-leg course that kept us on the map.

Four hours later we were over southeastern Texas, where check points thin out and civilization becomes a house in a clearing of the green forest that stretches to the horizon. Villages looked temporary and puny, and it was hard to find roads that appeared on the map. It didn't bother Lance. That green carpet was new and interesting, and he didn't understand that it could be lethal. Houston didn't appear on time. I checked my watch and estimated our airspeed again. The cabin seemed warm now. My shirt was wet with sweat. Off to the left, I saw smoke. Turning, I followed a road toward the smoke.

It was a large town. Nothing like this appeared on my map. And what an airport! Miles of concrete runways invited us to land. The dog-leg course hadn't worked out. Either drift or headwinds were deceiving us. We landed and taxied up to the hangar.

"Need some gas?" the line boy asked.

"Nope," I said. "But I would like to use your telephone directory for a minute."

I glanced at the name on the cover and pretended to look for a name. We were in Conroe, Tex. Lance and I grinned at each other. We had been right on course before I had turned. We climbed into the plane and flew south again. A sheet of water appeared off to our left. I looked at my watch. We barely had enough time for the return flight to Norman, Okla. Since we

didn't have money to spend the night in Galveston, we turned and headed home.

Below us, migrating birds swarmed down the flyway to the Gulf. At 5,000 feet we met a couple of individualists heading straight for the plane. At the last second, they turned. One of the birds, in a full vertical bank, looked back over his wing and honked in protest. We laughed. I can still see the expression on that bird's face. Hours later we landed in rain and darkness at Norman. The loyal Lycoming had done it again.

Then there was the time we were heading for Arkansas and ran into clouds near Tulsa. The stuff seemed to go right down to the deck. We made a 180° and landed on a small asphalt strip near Stroud. It was a Sunday morning. The boys and I sat down in a semi-circle on the asphalt.

"Let's have Sunday school," Eric said.

We talked about God and all the things we had to be thankful for. Insects hummed in the flowering weeds. The boys investigated some animal tracks that led to some bushes. The rabbit was not home that Sunday morning. When they returned to the plane, the sky had cleared. It was good to be alive.

Now I know she is only an airplane. Her skin is fabric, and her heart is iron. But we have been some places and seen some things. As I said in the beginning, things have not been the same since we signed the adoption papers. END

THE AUTHOR

Kenneth Lowe endeared himself to many PILOT readers with publication of his "Old Elmer," a tale of a man-size rabbit, in the May 1960 issue. A former sports editor, newscaster and public relations consultant, Lowe is now treasurer and part owner of the Lowe Construction Company of Oklahoma City. He resides with his family in Norman, Okla.

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