

# Chapter 1

## **The Right Place at the Right Time**

**E**ver notice how sometimes what seems like the worst piece of bad luck can turn out to be the best thing that could possibly happen? That's the way it was for me in the spring of 1951. My name is Ted Huntley, and I had just completed my second year as a hotel administration and resort management student at the State College campus in Pullman, Washington. For the next three months, I was planning to forget about books and exams and concentrate on my first love—flying. I piled a semester's accumulation of “stuff” into my green, restored 1937 Chevy and headed back to Seattle for what I was sure would be my best summer ever. It was all I had been thinking about since Easter break.

All through high school and during summer and vacation breaks from college, I worked at my cousin Bob Munro's seaplane facility, Kenmore Air Harbor. Bob was only twenty-five when, shortly after World War II, he and two friends, Reg Collins and Jack Mines, started Kenmore, but he was well qualified to take on such a venture. After receiving his education in aircraft maintenance at the Boeing school in Oakland, California, Bob worked as a mechanic for Pan American World Airways and then as a ground-school instructor of mechanics.

As soon as I heard Bob was planning to start his flying business, I decided to ask him for a job. After all, I knew he was going to need plenty of muscle setting up the air harbor, with all the dredging and fill work that had to be done on the property. Although I was only

fifteen at the time and, admittedly, a little on the scrawny side, I was already more than six-feet (180-cm) tall and capable, at least in my mind, of doing a man's day's work. My plan was to offer to trade my labor for flying lessons.

I got my opportunity to plead my case during one of Bob's frequent visits to our home in Seahurst, Washington, although, as it turned out, it didn't take much pleading. My cousin Bob comes from hardy Scandinavian-Canadian stock, not a man to waste words or belabor decisions. He looked at me for a moment, then over at my mother. When she did not offer any objections, he said, "Well, yah—yah, you can do that."

Getting the job was easier than I had expected. Getting to work was another story. At fifteen, driving wasn't an option, and Seahurst, where I lived, is at the southern end of Seattle. Kenmore, where Bob had decided to open his new facility, is near Bothell, at the northern end of the city. The bus line was the Suburban Transportation System. I would get to the bus stop at five-thirty in the morning. This would get me to downtown Seattle at quarter to seven, where I would catch another bus for Bothell and get off at Kenmore, arriving at work at quarter after eight—fifteen minutes late. But no one ever complained.

After working all day, I would take the bus home, reaching Seahurst at a little after nine o'clock in the evening. I was paid the minimum wage, which in 1946 was forty cents an hour, so my bus fare consumed the greatest part of my salary. Fortunately, my mother, who saw my working and learning to fly as worthwhile endeavors, helped subsidize my venture.

The Kenmore Air Harbor was built on the site of a shingle mill, on a bog on the north end of Lake Washington. After I turned sixteen, one of my jobs was driving a truck across the highway up above, filling the truck bed with sand from a hillside, and driving back down and dumping the load off where we were constructing a seaplane ramp. Most of this was done in four-wheel drive because the road had been built on top of the shingle shavings, which were bogging down into the marshy ground.

Through Bob's efforts, the Seattle-based company on the shore of Lake Washington became the largest privately owned seaplane base in the world, with a staff today of more than seventy people. But, back in 1951, there was just Bob, his two partners and me. It is

a personal point of pride for me to think that I was Kenmore's first employee.

Driving a truck was just one of the things I learned while working weekends during school and full-time in the summer. I also learned how to repair airplanes, pump floats, wipe windshields, clean toilets and, finally, fly.

My love affair with flying, however, began long before Kenmore. I can remember the exact moment I decided I was going to be a pilot. It was in the winter of 1939. I was ten years old and my older brother, Jim, and I were on one of our traditional Sunday afternoon outings with my step-grandfather, Robert C. Levesque, in his 1937 electric-shift Hudson.

My step-grandfather, a quick, friendly French Canadian, used to spend every Sunday, his only day off, creating new adventures for us. This particular day, as frequently happened on these occasions, we ended up at Boeing Field. In those days, you could still drive right up to the field and stroll around the runway. The barnstormers were all lined up, trying to entice anyone with the courage, and five dollars, to take a spin with them. Naturally, I wanted to take them up on their offer, but not my grandfather. "Oh, no, boys! Oh, no," he would say. "We won't do that." Grandfather Levesque believed that it was important to make Jim and me aware of the latest technology. He just didn't trust it.

On this particular day, we had just finished looking at a Stinson Gullwing. The aircraft was sporting a fresh, two-tone green paint job, smartened up with a yellow pinstripe, wheel-pants and chrome-plated push rods. I thought that it was the most beautiful aircraft in the world, until I spotted the DC-3. It was coming in for a landing. I watched, awestruck, as the DC-3 touched down, swung around and came to a stop. As I looked up toward the cockpit, the pilot pulled the window back and smiled at me. It was in that split second that my lifelong love affair with flying was born.

From that day on, no matter where I was or what I was doing, whenever a plane passed overhead, I would stop and look up. Many were Boeing airplanes on experimental flights, including the 314 Flying Boat (a four-engine clipper), the Stratoliner, the B-17, and, during the war years, the Sea Ranger and an experimental fighter with counter-rotating props. I put together a scrapbook about pilots and airplanes for a Cub Scout project. For the next five years, I read

everything I could get my hands on about flying and dreamed of the day I would be the one behind the controls. I finally got my chance in the spring of 1946.

Being able to trade my labor for flying time was a tremendous opportunity. As I said, I was paid forty cents an hour. Flying time with an instructor in a sixty-five-horsepower Aeronca Champion cost twelve dollars an hour. That meant if I worked a ten-hour day, I could go flying for twenty minutes with a flight instructor.

I learned the importance of wind, and patience, early in my flying education. My first lesson came the day I took a parachute in for repair and Bob's partner and Kenmore's chief pilot, Jack Mines, agreed to fly me over to Lake Union where I could catch a bus to the service shop. He promised to give me my long-awaited first flying lesson on the way. You can imagine how excited I was.

We taxied out for our takeoff—but we never took off. There was no wind. Without wind, Jack couldn't get the Aeronca up on the step, an angled surface on the underside of a pontoon. With sufficient wind to propel him, a pilot can lift the nose of the plane slightly and, like a motorboat, skim across the surface of the water, gathering enough speed for a takeoff. If there isn't enough wind to get up on the step, the plane cannot take off. Unfortunately, I had to wait another whole week before I finally got that first lesson.

With my flying lessons limited to twenty minutes on weekends and school holidays, it took me a year to get the eight-and-a-half hours of dual instruction I needed to solo. My final instructor, an engineering student at the University of Washington and an Army Air Force veteran, signed me off on a beautiful April day in 1946. I was now free to fly alone and be solely responsible for the aircraft. To celebrate, my "friends" at Kenmore, in keeping with tradition, promptly threw me into Lake Washington.

I continued to trade my labor for flying time until, two years later, at the age of eighteen, I qualified for my commercial pilot's certificate. After that, I was paid to fly! By 1951, I was spending my college breaks working at Kenmore as a mechanic and flight instructor, fixing seaplanes and teaching people to fly. But this summer was going to be different.

In February, my cousin Bob and his partners had launched a new scheduled passenger service out of Kenmore, through the San Juan Islands to Bellingham, Washington. During my spring break in

March, Bob had let me fly the run for a week. It was glorious! Every morning I would climb into the cockpit of the company's Republic Seabee and fly passengers to Friday Harbor and across to Orcas, then on to the other islands. When we reached Bellingham, I would drive downtown, drop off my remaining incoming passengers and pick up any outgoing passengers. Back at the airport, I would load my passengers and take off once again over the San Juan Archipelago, with a turn at Friday Harbor, finally landing back in Seattle. I guess I did a satisfactory job that week because Bob promised me that I could take over from him as pilot for the commuter route when I returned to Kenmore for the summer.

My first morning back in Seattle I showed up for work early, eager to get started. I couldn't wait to get that Republic Seabee in the air. This was, after all, my first true commercial flying job, and with a scheduled airline. (Never mind that it had only one plane.) Bob delivered the bad news as soon as I arrived: the commuter service had been canceled.

"We just didn't get the passengers," he told me, "and we couldn't go on losing money, you understand?"

I understood, but that didn't make me feel any better. The dream I had coveted for the past three months had just gone up in smoke. My disappointment quickly turned into depression. The only antidote I knew for depression was work, so I put on my coveralls and headed for the hangar.

For the next two days, I moved around from one job to the next on automatic pilot, feeling sorry for myself. It's not that I didn't still enjoy working on the planes and teaching people to fly, but it's hard to muster up enthusiasm for an old routine when a promising new adventure has just been snatched from your grasp. Then, on my third day back, something happened that left no more time for self-pity.

Back in April, an Alaskan bush pilot named Nat Brown had contracted with Kenmore to put sixteen brand-new Super Cubs on floats. The first eight had been completed. Brown had already guided them and their pilots to Alaska. Now he was back for the next eight. He needed them in a hurry to fulfill a contract he had with the Coast and Geodetic Survey. My lost opportunity was quickly forgotten as we pulled out all stops to meet the pressing deadline.

Over the years, I had watched an impressive parade of Alaskan

bush pilots come through Kenmore. Men like Joe Crosson, who is probably the best known Alaskan bush pilot in the world, a reputation he gained not from his extraordinary record of rescues, but for a single act that moved a bereaved nation. He was the pilot who brought out the bodies of Will Rogers and Wiley Post after their fatal crash in Alaska. And there was Noel Wein, who went from barnstorming to bush flying. He transported everything from gold dust to malamutes in a territory that was still virtually unmapped, and he did it with few instruments, almost no communications and usually without benefit of a runway. He was the first pilot to fly round-trip between America and Asia, and the airline he founded, Wein Airlines, was the first to fly the Arctic route on a scheduled basis. There were also float-flying pioneers like Shell Simmons and Bob Ellis.

For years I had dreamed about following the trails these men had blazed. It was a “some day” kind of dream. That is, until I learned that one of the pilots Nat Brown had hired for his second group of Alaska-bound Cubs had backed out at the last minute.

There I was, with my summer flying job gone. And there was Nat Brown, in desperate need of a pilot, although, admittedly, one with more experience than I had to offer. Looking back, I’m not sure how I found the courage to approach him. He was a gruff man, and his legendary reputation made him seem larger than life. Actually, at six feet and five inches (193 cm) and weighing in at about 275 pounds (124 kg), you might say Nat was larger than life. But my greatest fear—the one that almost stopped me—was that this crusty bear of a man, whom I held in such awe, would find my request laughable. I was, after all, just twenty years old and I had no bush experience. I couldn’t bear the thought of having him laugh at me. Still, I knew that an opportunity like this might never come again.

I finally located Nat in the hangar. He was checking out some of the newly installed floats.

“Excuse me, Mr. Brown.”

“Yeah, what is it, kid?”

“I understand you’re looking for a pilot.”

“That’s right. You know somebody?”

I took a deep breath and plunged in.

“Well, sir, I have about 500 hours of flying time, 400 of it on water and about 100 on land. And since my job flying here at

Kenmore this summer has sort of gone away, I sure would like to fly for you in Alaska.”

For what seemed like an eternity, Nat just stood there, staring at me. Finally, he said, “Well, I’ll think about it.”

Not for long, I thought to myself as he walked away. I knew he was scheduled to take off for Alaska with his pilots and eight Cubs first thing in the morning. This fact, if nothing else, was in my favor.

I watched him disappear into my cousin Bob’s office. It was only natural that he would check with him before making his decision. After all, Bob was my boss. Nat didn’t know that he was also my first cousin. I wasn’t sure, at this point, whether that would turn out to be an advantage or disadvantage.

In hindsight, I realized that I probably should have consulted Bob before approaching Nat. I had just put my cousin in an awkward position, not only professionally, but personally. If Bob recommended me for the job, and something happened to me while flying in Alaska, my mother might never forgive him. On the other hand, if he didn’t recommend me, especially after the commuter flying job fell through, he had to be thinking that I would never forgive him. I am not sure whether I would have or not.

There was no use waiting around, worrying about what was going on in Bob’s office. It was out of my hands now, so I went back to work. About fifteen minutes later, I felt a tap on my shoulder and turned to find Nat looking down at me.

“Okay, kid, you got it. Can you be ready by tomorrow morning?”

“You bet! What’ll I need?”

“A pair of hip boots, a warm leather jacket, a good sleeping bag and about three or four sets of underwear.” Later, my cousin Bob suggested that I add a Winchester 32 special rifle, some mosquito netting and a large supply of warm wool socks to the list.

“There’s just one other thing, Mr. Brown,” I called after him as he started to walk away.

“Nat.”

“Nat. I . . . I’ve never flown a Super Cub. Would it be all right if I took one up this afternoon so I’ll be ready to fly tomorrow?”

“Yeah, kid,” he chuckled. “I think that’s a real good idea.”

As it happened, the weather to the north turned bad and we didn’t leave the next day as scheduled. This gave me a chance to get about three or four hours of takeoffs, landings and slow flight under

my belt before we headed for Alaska. The Piper Super Cub had a 135-horsepower Avco Lycoming engine and was on 1400 floats. The float size refers to the weight the floats are designed to carry. If an airplane grosses 1,400 pounds (630 kg), the 1400 floats will sit halfway into the water when the plane is at full gross weight.

Nat's Cubs were actually licensed at 1,500 pounds (675 kg), but in 1951 they weren't making 1500 floats, so he had to settle for slightly undersized floats. During my practice flights, I found the undersized floats to be an advantage. With a light load the plane skipped over the water and virtually leapt into the air. Once I got to Alaska, however, I discovered that the undersized floats made taking off with a full load tricky. The plane tended to bury either its left or right float, depending on the direction of the wind.

The weather delay also gave me a chance to fly up and see my mother before I left for Alaska. At that time, I was staying with Bob, and she was living at a cousin's house at the end of Lake Sammamish, near Issaquah. If she had any misgivings about her twenty-year-old son heading out into the Alaskan wilderness, she never voiced them. Or, perhaps, in my enthusiasm over my unbelievably good luck, I just never heard them. I kissed her on the cheek, assured her that I would take good care of myself, promised to write and headed back to Kenmore to complete my preparations.

On the way back, I gave silent thanks for the cancellation of the commuter route. If my original dream had come true, that obligation would have made flying for Nat Brown impossible ... and I would have missed one of the greatest adventures of my life.

The Cubs, which had been flown to Kenmore directly from the factory in Lockhaven, Pennsylvania, had fewer than thirty hours on the log. They even smelled new. They had big red numbers painted on the side of the fuselage over a small maroon racing stripe that ran from the engine to the tail. The planes themselves were glacier gray, and the floats silver. This color combination, I discovered later, rendered them virtually invisible in the Arctic mist.

On May 15, two days behind schedule, the weather cleared sufficiently for us to take off. We packed our gear into our respective planes and lined up behind Nat's 115-horsepower yellow Super Cub. One by one, we took to the air and headed north.