Getting Even.

Eventually.

S. Featherstone

Cenizas
Books
Acknowledgments.

There are too many people I would like to thank for inspiring me.

First and foremost I want to thank My Wonderful Wife Evie Einstein who has been a source of motivation and inspiration. Her love and support has kept me going through the good times and the bad.

My Great Mum Penny and my Dear Friend Sandra Burch who’s editing skills and patience I am eternally grateful for.

My Real Bush Pilot Friend Oscar Zepeda (Mr. Land-Anywhere). Without his stories, ideas and utter love of flying would have made this story impossible to write. Please be aware that all the approaches described are factual and are performed on a regular basis by Oscar.

And to a man who I could only aspire to become, My Father In-Law Dr. Hans E. Einstein.

A special thanks goes to Barbara and Steve Schapel for believing in this little venture!

AND LAST, BUT NOT LEAST

Thank you for taking the time to read these words. I hope you enjoy reading it as much as I enjoyed writing it!

Cover Design courtesy of:
Don Barnes – Cellar Ideas Inc. 408-265-5488
Cover Photo courtesy of: Addison Pemberton – Thanks!!
In memory of

*Gilberto Zepeda Luna*

And all our fellow pilots
who have gone before us.

"When once you have tasted flight, you will always walk with your eyes turned skyward, for there you have been and there you will always be."

Leonardo da Vinci
1452-1519.
Getting Even.

Eventually.

S. Featherstone
Chapter 1.
Am I Insane?

In a magical instant what was once a cumbersome ground vehicle became a graceful air vehicle. It really didn’t matter how many thousands of times Jake took off in an airplane under his own control it still excited him as much as the first time. He recognized that this could be said of very few things in life. Problems seemed to become insignificant and distant, almost in proportion to the altitude between himself and the surface of the earth. Cynics might equate his love of flight to escapism. You can call it what you like as long as it works.

Escape, the word kinda lingered in his mind. It was a powerful word with a strange unfamiliar connotation, traditionally criminal, possibly cowardly and in a way comforting. Jake McInnes certainly didn’t consider himself cowardly and as far as he was aware no one who knew him would describe him as such.

Based on the circumstances surrounding his departure Jake settled for criminally comforting as the best way to describe his escape in the stolen, or as he preferred to describe it, borrowed Cessna 185. If
things worked out the way he hoped, and he realized that things rarely worked out the way he hoped, no one would miss the old aluminum bird for a long time. Maybe never.

The soothing drone of the freshly overhauled engine before him and the easy feeling he always had when he was flying allowed his mind to wander farther and deeper than before. Jake continued to hash over the word. Escaping was exactly what he was doing. It wasn’t a real criminal escape, like in the movies, well not entirely. It was an escapade to a richer more fulfilling life, or so he hoped. He was getting away from a mediocre existence. At least that is what he had told himself as the plan began to take shape almost a year ago. For better or worse, but at the very least not more of the same. It had taken months of planning and meditating. Weighing the options and possibilities. After all, it had taken Jake many years to get into the trouble he had created for himself. Sure, you face the problems you create for yourself, but there comes a time to say, “I’m ready to put this, and everything else behind me and move ahead – good or bad”.

Maybe his privileged and comfortable middle class Southern California surfer dude upbringing, totally devoid of responsibility was partially to blame. Possibly if he had’ve been born a street smart Katmandu kid he wouldn’t have made so many dumb decisions and brought his life to the muddle it had been for most of his adult life.

Who knows, who gives a shit? This was his opportunity to start fresh. After all, he would still be doing what he loved most. Flying. And making a hell
of a lot more money for his efforts. Furthermore, this was really flying, not going around in circles at ridiculously low speeds fish finding, but bush flying in the Mexican Sierra. Hell, it sounded like some movie Humphrey Bogart or Jimmy Stewart should be in.

At 2 o’clock in the morning the brilliant stars generously shared the crisp clear air with Jake, Amber and the 1969 Cessna 185. Its new engine growling effortlessly as they climbed at 1200 feet per minute at 100 knots indicated airspeed. In ten minutes or so they would reach their cruising altitude of 9,500 feet for this particular direction of flight.

“SoCal departure X-ray Alpha Tango Alpha Papa,” Jake said professionally.
“SoCal departure go ahead Tango Alpha Papa.” The response came back quickly since there weren’t many other planes to control.

“SoCal Tango Alpha Papa is departing Carlsbad Charlie Romeo Quebec at 1,200 feet, I’d like to open my flight plan.”

“Roger Tango Alpha Papa stand by. I’ll have a squawk for you in a moment.
Tango Alpha Papa squawk 5234, ident. Confirm your destination: Ciudad Obregon, Mexico.”

“That is correct for Alpha Papa.”
“Tango Alpha Papa climb and maintain 9,500 own navigation.”
“Alpha Papa.”

The Lycoming six-cylinder 540 cubic inch turbocharged engine stumbled slightly, he instinctively checked the engine monitor, all temperatures looked fine. Probably a speck of dirt or drop of water in the system. Better put the engine monitor on scan, it
would quickly show any bad trend. Amber, Jake's Australian shepherd snoozed unfazed, with the confidence of a dog with more flight time than many humans.

Few things in his life had been more exhilarating or had called to him as loudly as flying. He knew how fortunate he was to be privy to sights only pilots have the opportunity to see. Like now, at this moment in time, a full moon gently illuminated the ocean, creating unique lazy reflections off the ripples. Jake concentrated and tried to etch the beautiful Southern California coast into his mind, since it might be a very long time before he saw it again.

What may have been bright head beams from a few cars and trucks on the freeway flickered only dimly from his vantage point. It was unbelievable how this area had grown since he was a kid. There used to be so much empty space and now everything was overgrown with ridiculously expensive yet tiny housing.

"Tango Alpha Papa, fly heading zero three zero to avoid traffic. Same altitude descending at your 2 to 3 o'clock."

"Tango Alpha Papa willco, no joy on that traffic," he smiled, it would be a long, long time before he heard any traffic warnings where he was going.

Sure he was apprehensive. It was a manifestation of the uncertainty of what he was doing, the risks and not knowing what the future had in store. Sort of like when you soloed for the first time. It was a memory most pilots remember vividly. He remembered, as clearly as if it had happened yesterday. Ted had told him to pull to the side of the taxiway and let him out. Jake had turned and looked
at him with huge eyes and simply said. “Are you sure?” He hoped Ted would laugh and say it was a joke, but instead the reply came: “You’re ready. Do three touch and goes and we’ll call it a day.” Everything was fine for the first take off and then the overwhelming thought came to his mind, “Now I have to land this bitch.” In hindsight it wasn’t a huge ordeal, but at the moment it was huge. Now he realized just about anybody could make a half decent landing in a Cessna 150.

It would be a serious understatement to say that Jake McInnes had accomplished less in his life, thus far, than he had hoped for. It was evident to Jake that his father at his age, 45, had been much more successful than himself. But then, who in his right mind would want to live his father’s life? A claims adjuster for a transnational insurance company, pushing paper day after day in some windowless cubicle, in some high-rise. The only way to remember what the sun looked like was from the photograph on your desk or the mental image carried with you from last weekend’s barbeque.

Sure it was a safe, moderately well paying job with full family benefits; but that was it. Jake never belittled his dad’s life or what he did, he was simply saddened because it seemed a waste. No thrills, no excitement. Sure there were some exciting days, good and bad. You marry, you have kids, there are surprise birthday parties, maybe someday you’re involved in a car crash. But that was not the excitement he had in mind. It was the thrill of going out there and purposefully putting your balls on the line, for the whole bag of marbles, win or lose. But
you did it. In search of adventure, a unique experience, something no one can take from you. In a way, like the first time you got laid, the excitement and the jitters. You did it, it’s yours forever.

To make matters worse his father had lived a short life. Only fifty-two, seven more years than Jake was now, he had died of lung cancer. You only live once and you never know when your time will come and that was just a few of the reasons why Jake was hell bent on living his life as fully as possible.

The King 155 comm. crackled to life awaking him from his thoughts. “X-ray Alpha Tango Alpha Papa contact LA center on 123.25”

“Tango Alpha Papa 123.25” Jake dialed in the new frequency, and flipped it over to the active and listened for a few seconds, making sure he didn’t interrupt someone else’s call. “X-ray Alpha Tango Alpha Papa 9,000 on my way to 9,500”

“Tango Alpha Papa confirm your destination as Ciudad Obregen this morning, and confirm you have international advisories.”

“Tango Alpha Papa confirms Ciudad Obregen and has international advisories, thanks.”

Jake looked at his King 89B GPS to see his time enroute to Ciudad Obregen. He didn’t want to arrive before 7am. If he did it would mean paying overtime to the controllers, even though they were certainly there already attending other traffic. Jake was aware that Mexico had a great deal more restrictions on flying than the US. Before take off, that is, because once you depart, with their limited radar coverage, you would virtually disappear until you reached your destination.
Settling in again he rechecked all his gauges, six egt's, six cht's, oil temp, pressure, amp meter, voltmeter, suction, fuel flow, and fuel level. Course was right on, 102 degrees, which included 5 for wind correction. Six minutes to KUMBA intersection which would put him on the edge of the restricted area over the Great Salton Sea.

Warmth from the engine, smooth clear night, the rhythmic purr from the big Lycoming quickly put Jake back into the trance he had just come out of. His mind drifted pleasantly to thoughts of Mazatlán. Only an hour and a half from Durango. It may be minus forty degrees in Fargo, North Dakota. Mazatlán would be a pleasant 87 degrees, with just the right tropical humidity. Gorgeous turistas would be looking for a good time during their getaway. He could already hear the lapping of the warm ocean, the rustling of the palapa overhead, the rich unique smell of the coconut oil baking on the back of the lovely girl he just had the pleasure of spreading it on. Her voluptuous round butt barely covered by a so-called bikini. It’s all he could do not to reach out and get himself in trouble. Within arms distance is a bucketful of ice, cold bottles of Pacifico beer protrude just above the rim, sand clings to the bottom of the bucket as it sweats in the heat. ‘Now I’ve gone too far, the last beer I had was eight months ago. Sober since then. It was and still is the most difficult thing I have ever done. The cravings are constant, it’s getting better but I still think about it every single day without fail.’

Jake reached over to his shoulder pocket and pulled out another Camel Light tearing off the filter, lighting it with the Zippo and inhaling deeply in one
very well choreographed motion. It wasn’t a shot of
good Don Julio Añejo Tequila, but it would do.

A slight shudder, followed by a little roll with a
change in pitch brought him back to the present.
‘Good. This will help me keep my mind off the booze.’

The Cessna 185 was just passing over the
highest portion of the 6,000 foot range, which divides
Southern California’s coastal section from its desert
interior. Just a little wind can create significant
updrafts and even worse downdrafts, but Jake knew
very well that on a night like tonight it wouldn’t be bad.
Just as he expected, as soon as it started it was gone,
replaced by glassy smooth skies.

This radical change had been 10 months in the
making. ‘Am I insane? I’ve asked myself this question
a thousand times, and I’ll probably keep asking until I
change the question to: Was I out of my mind? Or
maybe. What the hell were you thinking? Are all the
horror stories I have heard over the years about
Mexico true? My friend Omar swears they are not.
Neither my plane nor my radios will be stolen if I leave
them unattended for two minutes. I won’t be
kidnapped at gunpoint and forced to run drugs ‘al
norte’. So how do these stories and rumors get
started? It’s probably fear of the unknown and a great
excuse not to be adventurous.’

One of the great advantages about flying a 185
is that most drug runners don’t fly taildraggers for
some odd reason. They prefer the Cessna 206, 207,
and 182’s, which also happen to be the most
frequently stolen airplanes in the world. These aircraft
have good short unimproved runway characteristics
and a nose wheel which most ‘mules’ prefer. Another
consideration, it takes some practice to fly a tail dragger and many young drug runners just don’t have the time to invest in learning the nuances and complexity of a tail dragger, even if they do make a better bush plane. In fact a lot of runners die before getting any type of experience any way.

Cessna 185’s are still the workhorse of the Alaskan bush pilots. In terms of take off and landings it can outperform most of its counterparts, and if you add tundra tires, or skis, or floats, you can land just about anywhere. Maybe when they see the performance of Tango Alpha Papa they will be convinced and everyone will want one. Too bad they don’t make them anymore.

Billions of brilliant stars, a full moon, and the fact that it was a clear night allowed Jake to distinguish some faint features and silhouettes far below as California’s Imperial Valley and the Great Salton Sea lay off to the left almost two miles beneath the wings of the 185.

Even though he constantly questioned his decision, it would be safe to say he had made up his mind months ago. There was one certainty to all this. He wasn’t escaping life. He was recreating his life. And recreating it in a manner that he truly believed would be fulfilling. It had always saddened him to see how many people live their lives wishing and hoping for something. Something different, something exciting. The lottery maybe. Few take the bull by the horns and actually force a change. For many it’s a fleeting thought and then it’s back to driving to work on an ever more crowded freeway. Sure, most people have complicated lives, loaded with mounting
responsibilities like mortgages, kids in school, hobbies, friends and added all together, even if you'd like to make a drastic change, the task seems insurmountable. Jake didn't have such a complicated life. So eventually, he concluded that he didn't want to be sitting alone in some crappy old folks' home in Riverside, or even worse, as he took in that last breath of precious air and have the ultimate question pop into his dying mind, 'What would my life have been like if I had taken a chance and actually pursued my dream and gone bush piloting in Mexico? If nothing else I am determined never to ask myself that question.'

Jake's friend Omar Carrillo y Salas had painted a very exciting and tantalizing picture. He had been a bush pilot in his native state of Durango, Mexico since he was around fifteen. He specified 'around' because the determining factor was when he could reach the rudder pedals and see out the window with the assistance of only one pillow. (Who makes these rules anyway)? Of course his pilot's license showed him to be 18. Nobody really questioned this short 18 year old since there are a lot of short people in Mexico.

Twenty-four years of bush piloting. Omar was calm, collected and had a happy disposition towards life. He and Jake had met a couple of years ago when he was ferrying an airplane back to Mexico for one of his customers. The Centurion 210 he was flying started running very rough and landed at the nearest airport, which happened to be Palomar Airport KCRQ in Carlsbad, California.

Between Omar's limited English and Jake's baja-surfer/high school Spanish they managed to
understand one another. The magnetos where shot and he might as well replace the plugs and harness at the same time, so Jake had invited Omar to stay with him in his old aluminum Airstream. It was by no stretch of the imagination a palace, but it was home, it was comfortable and it almost had an ocean front view. It kept him dry during the few days that it rained and it kept him warm during those few winter months. Best of all it was paid for and in Southern California ‘Paid For’ isn’t in very many people’s vocabulary.

During Omar’s three day stay with Jake and Amber he told a dozen stories of his best flying exploits around the beautiful and breathtaking Mexican Sierra, the interesting characters, the cargo and the gold. Primarily, Omar flew gold bullion from Mineria San Patricio deep in the heart of the Sierra to Durango where he met up with an armored truck for its delivery to the bank. It was very treacherous flying, if you had an engine problem there were very few hospitable places to land. Mountain tops pushed ten thousand feet, while the canyons between each fell away in sheer cliffs three to four thousand feet deep. It would be virtually impossible to make a survivable forced landing in the area.

There are literally thousands of tiny little towns scattered around the countryside, they are so inaccessible even the poorest of people have no choice but to fly in or out. It’s either fly or expose yourself to five or six days of harsh dirt roads and who knows what else. Many of these people have never seen a city the size of Durango, which only has 350,000 inhabitants, let alone get on an airplane. In fact a great many indigenous people in the Mexican
Sierra don’t speak Spanish, they speak Indian dialects. Huichol, Cora, Mexicanero and Tepehuano among others.

Over the years Omar asked for Jake’s help in finding or checking aircraft for sale. This association eventually gave them the idea of doing some business together. Possibly an air taxi and cargo service, after all Omar had been in the business of managing and flying for that type of operation his entire life. The biggest problem would be amassing the amount of money necessary to buy an airplane outright and have enough change to make sure they could survive the startup. Credit was impossible in Mexico, with rates as high as 40% per annum you would have to be totally insane to even try.

It seemed like an impossible dream. Omar had a very nice boss and more toys than most. His primary objective had always been to provide for the well-being, comfort and education he believed his eight year old daughter deserved. One day she would become a professional. A member of society to be admired, a success, and he was going to make sure he did everything to obtain this objective.

During one of Omar’s many visits, in particular one a year ago, Jake dropped a hint about possibly being interested in an extended visit to Durango. See how he liked it.

“Do you think I could get a flying job in Mexico?”

“Sure. The pay probably won’t be to your liking though,” Omar said matter of fact.

“Life is cheaper in Mexico, maybe I can make do.”
“Yeah, we would have some fun.” Omar thought of the implications of teaching Jake to bush pilot in the severe environment and without a full knowledge of Spanish. After all the last pilot he had trained for the challenges of bush flying was his younger brother Enrique and he had died a year and a half ago in an airplane accident. “You would have to get a Mexican pilots license. But that wouldn’t be a problem.”

“How about if I brought my own plane with me? That would probably help. We could both fly it.” Jake knew this would pique his friend’s interest.

Omar was now warming up to the idea. “You would have to register it in Mexico. You can’t work with a US plane in Mexico. As long as you are willing to register it in Mexico and pay the import duty, that would be great!”

Jake was also getting excited with the prospects. “Maybe we could start our own cargo and air taxi service? Would you be interested?”

Omar’s eyes lit up, “Of course I’d be interested!”

With these words the idea was hatched. Now all they needed was a good bush plane with no money down, zero interest and zero payments. Jake realized this was a bit of a tall order.

LA Center came loud over the radio jolting him from his thoughts. “X-ray Alpha Tango Alpha Papa you are about to depart United States airspace. Radar services are terminated. Squawk VFR. Suggest you contact Tijuana approach or Mexicali tower. Good night.”

“Thanks LA Center have a great morning. Switching to TJ approach.” And that was it. ‘Now I am
truly venturing into the unknown. I can’t honestly say that this is where my adventure begins because it really started when I found the noble steed I’m flying at this very moment.’ Jake reached into the shoulder pocket of his black military surplus flight jacket and extracted the crunched pack of camel lights. As always he tore off the filter and lit the remaining cigarette with his classic plain Zippo. At least that’s how the Zippo box that once contained it had described its contents. Jake could never remember who had told him it was the filter and not the tobacco that kills you. It made sense at the time and the custom had stuck. If nothing else it was kind of interesting to see the inquisitive looks from people as he performed his ritual.

“Mexicali tower, Xtra Alpha Tango Alpha Papa entering Mexican airspace at Calexico-Mexicali,” Jake said in Spanish. Might as well get started now.

“Tango Alpha Papa state departure point and destination.”

“Departure point is Carlsbad, California and destination is Ciudad Obregon.”

Smoking was one thing Jake was not about to quit. He had just kicked the hardest thing ever — booze. He wasn’t about to lose all his vices in one year. Hell! If he did, he might just as well become involved with some weird religious sect or join a monastery on a mountain top somewhere. God forbid!

Once he had made up his mind that he wanted a future in bush piloting around the Mexican Sierra, next question was, how do I get my hands on a good bush plane with no money? This would be the biggest dilemma. It had filled his mind for months on end. He
came up with a thousand hare-brained schemes. But sometimes the best solution is right under your nose and will work the best. Jake recalled the day he walked to the airport restroom, and an old Cessna 172 came into focus. The decrepit old airplane with its three flat tires had sat collecting dust for as long as he could remember. In fact, it had been there so long, he didn’t even notice it anymore. A paint scheme, which in its time would’ve probably been the rage was now bleached white by the sun.

Suddenly it hit him, he realized that every airport he had ever been to had one or two such airplanes, and for an airplane lover that was truly a sad thing to see. Most pilots believe an airplane, in some strange way, has a soul. If you aren’t going to use it, or worse, neglect it, then you don’t deserve it. Jake was torn by these thoughts but he had a need, a desperate need to try and make something of his life. Not just something mundane, something exciting, special. If somebody just didn’t care enough to take care of such a wonderful possession then they certainly didn’t deserve it. Period.

Now the problem would be to find the right airplane, and a 172 just wouldn’t cut it. A good bush plane would be a Cessna 185 or 180, a Pilatus Porter or maybe a Helio. Jake’s preference would be a Cessna 185. With his mind made up it was time to go searching. He decided that the best location to find a neglected airplane in good condition would be the desert. Between the heat and the bone-dry conditions it would be the best place to mothball a plane.

Jake’s boss allowed him to use the little Citabria with its huge underbelly fuel tank for his weekend
getaways. After all a good employee was hard to find, and especially one with Jake’s eyesight. He could spot a swordfish miles away. He had been the best fish spotter his boss had ever hired. It was a very tough job. Not only did you have to fly 14-hour days with only one refueling stop. But you had to piss in a coffee can while flying just above stall speed. To make matters worse, a few years back some competing boats that didn’t have their own airborne fish spotters would shoot at you! That really sucked! On one such occasion Jake didn’t notice that his fuel tank had been perforated and had run out of fuel. He ditched the plane right next to the fishing boat.

On the fourth weekend of his search for an abandoned plane he landed at Overton, Nevada, just outside of Las Vegas and came across a Cessna A185E. It was a really sorry sight, it looked even worse than the 172 at home but at that moment Jake decided this plane would be perfect, it was even equipped with an underbelly pod for extra cargo.

Jake waltzed into the manager’s office. Every single floorboard creaked as if it were about to give way. The manager was a caricature of himself, Walt Disney couldn’t have done better. In his late 80’s Hamish, a British expat, exRAF pilot had been the Overton Manager since the mid 50’s. His long well kept handlebar moustache and huge red pock marked nose were the first things one would focus on and it was very hard to tear your eyes away.

Hamish snapped to attention, and in a beautiful English accent said: “Will you be needing some fuel today Saaaaa?”
Jake bit the inside of his cheek. Amber sat down next to him and with her typical inquisitive look inspected her surroundings. He didn’t really need any but he could see the expectation in the old gentleman’s eyes. “Sure, I could do with a few gallons.”

“I’ll get right on it.”

“No need to hurry. I also wanted to ask you about the white and red 185 at the end of the last row of hangars. Do you know who owns it?” Jake tried his best to not sound too interested.

Hamish quickly looked through a set of yellowing index cards. “Let’s see. I believe its tail number is N54NE?”

“That’s right,” Jake helped.

“Ah yes right here. That plane hasn’t flown in over ten years. Nice old chap passed away and left it to his son. Awful shame isn’t it?” The manager got a longing look in his eye.

“Do you have a phone number or a name?”

“Let’s see. The number I have has been crossed out but I can provide you with an address. You know the son owns it now but he’s not a pilot. As a matter of fact, lots of people have asked about the plane. Seems he can’t bring himself to sell it since his father used to take him on camping trips when he was a lad. Awful shame to see it just rot away.”

“So the son hasn’t been out to see his plane in a long time then?” Jake asked.

“I’m quite sure he has never been out. According to my records he sent a check to cover five years worth of tie down fees. Still has two to go.”

“Well there’s no harm in asking if he’d consider selling, right?”
“Certainly Saaaa. Now, how about that fuel?”

It seemed that Jake had found his plane. His first reaction was to come back to the airport, do some quick fixes and get the hell out before anyone noticed. But on second thought that would only raise suspicion. Not only that, it could also be a very dangerous proposition. A hundred things could go wrong with an airplane that hadn't flown in who knows how many years. No. He'd calmly show up with tools and the parts he knew with certainty would be needed. Then he would rent a hangar and do a thorough annual inspection. It probably hadn't been fully inspected in ten years, maybe more!

A full month of fish spotting, day in day out, sitting on his keister. Flying a few hundred feet above the waves, no land in sight. Spot a nice big swordfish, slow the plane way down and circle it until the boat could catch up to harpoon it. And then it was off to search for another. It was a bumper month, the catch was good and Jake got a nice commission for every fish caught. Since it was the end of the season it would be a perfect time to go fix up the old 185 and give it a more dignified life.

Jake spent the first week scrounging all the items he knew he would need for the 185's annual. Tires, bearings, plugs, grease, oil, oil filter, and an array of other items. His tools would wait 'til last. The little old Toyota pickup was at its maximum capacity. He hoped it would make it the full 320 miles to Overton.

The desert was hot as can be, 120 degrees to be exact. Strange place the desert, millions of square miles virtually uninhabited covered with dirt, or at best
a shrub or two. Jake’s left arm and the side of his face were burned red and parched from the dryness. Amber sulked, with her full coat of fur she was not a happy camper.

Jake parked in the shade beside the manager’s office and walked around to the front of the old weathered building, Amber in tow. As he passed the office window he saw Hamish reclined in his old institutional green metal office chair, circa 1930, his feet resting upon the shabby old institutional gray metal desk. A floor fan whizzed frantically back and forth attempting to attenuate or at least disperse the violent heat. As Jake pushed the screen door open, it came in contact with the little bell. Hamish peered suspiciously through one disinterested eye and closed it again in hopes it was either a dream or whoever it was would go away.

Jake realized that the old man would probably prefer to continue sleeping but he hadn’t come all this way just to sit around. “Hi, I was here about a month ago looking at the old run down 185.”

“Hmmm,” Hamish replied still asleep.

“Well, as it turns out the son was willing to sell it to me.”

“Really?” This started to wake the old man from his rest.

“Do you have an empty hangar you could rent me for a month?”

“Sure, take #19. It’s at the end of the row where the 185 is now. We’ll talk about the price later.”

Despite their age the cracked old tires were still able to hold 35 lbs. of pressure without blowing. As Jake filled them he did turn his head away just in case.
He rolled the graceful old lady into her hangar and got down to business. First, every inspection panel was removed and placed into a baggy with its corresponding screws. There are few more frustrating things than to have a bunch of parts and not remembering where the hell they go. Next task, the interior, but that would have to wait for tomorrow morning.

Amber looked at him inquisitively as he placed the cot in the rear of the hangar. Jake could swear he saw a definite expression of “are you shitting me? We’re not sleeping in a hangar?” Money was tight, not that it had been plentiful at anytime. Anyway, sleeping in a hangar would be a big incentive to get things done and get on down to Mexico and start working. Sleep came quickly as the satisfaction of a days work towards his objective came to a close.

Morning appeared and so did the immediate need to find a cup of coffee, a couple of sandwiches for breakfast, lunch and dinner. Finally on the list was to find a state park where he could start his day with the 3 Sh’s. Amber seemed a bit put out by the situation, at eight years of age, she was slowing down a little and more than ever seemed to appreciate some comfort.

When the cowl came off, he noticed that instead of a Continental IO-520 he found a Lycoming TIO-540. The logbook confirmed the STC. SA2118NM. The first order of business was the removal of four birds’ nests. It appeared that many families of birds had lived under the protection of the old Cessna. The nests were so entwined in the engine that it took hours to remove them. Then of
course came the clean up which pretty much took the rest of the day. It was a task he was very happy to have behind him. He was literally up to his elbows in bird shit.

Even though they checked out, it wasn’t something he was willing to short change, Jake had just started replacing the Bendix magnetos, harness, and sparkplugs. As he gazed outside momentarily, he realized what a nice quiet airport this was. Maybe ten airplanes had arrived and departed during the whole day. No jets like Palomar, with their obnoxious auxiliary power units buzzing loudly all day. There wouldn’t be any traffic at night since there was no lighting system. As the sun dropped behind the barren hills to the West, it cast long playful purple shadows around the tiny valley. Amber suddenly gave off one of her low level warning growls and Hamish peered around the corner of the old rusty hangar door.

“Good evening. I just wanted to see how you were making out with the old bird. Don’t mean to interrupt or anything,” Hamish said tenuously.

“No, no, I was just about to call it a day,” Jake lied as he wiped his greasy hands.

“I don’t get much company here, and since my Suzy died a year or so ago it can get a little lonely you know.”

“Well come on in and I’ll show you the progress. There’s still a helluva lot of work to do, but I was kinda expecting that. Especially since she hasn’t flown in so many years.” Jake wanted to get him thinking about airplanes and not his deceased wife. “You look like a pilot to me! What do you fly?”
Hamish perked up. “From time to time I’ll fly a little Piper Cub. I shouldn’t really. My medical was revoked years ago.” As he spoke he fondly stroked the plane’s Hartzell propeller. “Back in World War II I flew Spitfires with a fighter squadron stationed at Biggin Hill. Those were some exciting yet terrifying days.” Hamish’s eyes grew distant in remembrance.

“Why don’t you have a seat, there’s a lawn chair over there. Soda?” Jake didn’t wait for an answer, handed him a cold diet Sprite and sat down on an old 10-gallon paint can.

“Thank you.” Hamish took the Sprite, pulled the rickety old lawn chair a little closer and got comfortable. He reached into his back pocket pulled out a silver flask. “May I offer you a taste of my finest single blend scotch?”

“Had to quit it. Unfortunately.”

“I respect a man that knows his limits,” Hamish said with a very dignified hand salute.

Jake pulled out his pack of Camel lights and offered one to Hamish.

“Thanks, but I quit over thirty years ago.”

“I respect that. But speaking quite frankly. There’s no way in hell it’s gonna kill ya now!” Jake said as he tore of the filter and lit up. “Please continue,” Jake loved hearing stories from the old timers. The old man took a deep breath, “Oh there really isn’t much to tell. It’s a long time ago now. It was an electrifying time to live! There was so much going on. You lived every single day to the fullest, simply because it could easily be your last. In fact I gave a few fellow pilots their last day. I’m certain their thoughts were very similar to ours, just in a different
language. But they had the same fears, and desires to return to their families, girlfriends…” Hamish stroked Ambers’ ears…”dogs.”

“But then in the blink of an eye it’s your turn. My squadron was returning from a mission escorting bombers over Germany. We were over France and heading back from an uneventful sortie. The setting sun was in our eyes. I can still remember that gorgeous colorful sunset to this day, but that’s all. None of us saw them coming, they descended upon us blasting. My Spitfire burst into flames, and to make matters worse a huge bullet from a Messerschmitt ripped through my thigh. I honestly have no idea how I made it out,” Hamish stopped talking momentarily as the images rolled by in his brain.

“What happened next?” Jake asked, feeling like a kid.

“Two of us were gunned down that afternoon. My wingman wasn’t as lucky, he went in with his plane. When I set down my wounded leg snapped, I can’t describe the excruciating pain.”

Jake winced and scrunched his face as the imaginary pain went through his own thigh.

“Somehow I gathered my chute and rolled myself into the marsh on the edge of a canal. All night I could hear the krauts looking for me, I was lucky they didn’t have dogs. The freezing water and the buoyancy helped ease the pain of my broken leg. Luck smiled in my direction one more time, the French farmers who found me the following morning were part of the Resistance. A family nursed me for months, they had no medicine to offer, except for red wine. I
drank gallons of it. As you can imagine I haven’t touched a drop since!”

Hamish took another long swig from his flask. Jake took the opportunity to light up another Camel.

“Despite my closeness to the coast and the English Channel, there was no way to make it back to England to continue fighting the war. My leg was so messed up, as you can see. I’ve never been able to walk without limping. So I wound up staying for a year and a half, part of ’44 and ’45 till the war ended. I farmed along side my French family. Wonderful people.”

“When the war ended I went back home only to find that my fiancée had given up waiting for me and had married my best friend. When I visited them she was already pregnant. Really can’t blame them.”

“Oh man that sucks!” The words just seem to pop out of Jake’s mouth.

“So at twenty three years of age I decided to make my way to America. Land of opportunity is how the Americans I had met described it. They spoke of its grandeur, I just had to see it for myself. After all, I figured, if I don’t like it I could always return to England.

“My original idea was to be a crop duster, or something airplane related. That’s what I knew how to do. Bad thing is every other pilot had the same idea. So I joined a flying circus and started making my way out West. I worked primarily as a wing walker,” Hamish said this very matter of fact. “And let me tell you, wing walking with the limp left over from my fighting days was no easy feat!”