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Flying at the Old Huntsville Airport

By

Judy and M.D. Smith

I started my flying lessons in 1965 at the old Huntsville airport. My father in Birmingham had said he planned to take a flying lesson that weekend, and I thought that was a keen idea. I took mine and had a great time, only to find out later that my father “chickened out” and didn’t go. It was a year before he took his first lesson and was also as hooked as I had gotten the first time. By then, I had my student license with about twenty hours of flying under my belt, first in Cessna 172’s and later in a Piper Colt as Huntsville Aviation bought Rocket City Air on the old airport. I didn’t like the Piper colt that was a fabric covered steel framed airplane that landed more like a rock than the gentle glide of the Cessna 172’s. So I financed my first airplane, a 1956 Cessna 172, tail number N6935A, for \$5,000.00 with the First National Bank (now Regions) on Madison Street. It got me my private license and was a great bird to own, but after a year I was training in a twin engine Piper Apache, so I sold the Cessna for the same \$5,000.00 that I paid for it.

My father continued his lessons in Birmingham and by the time he was flying solo and later got his private pilot’s license, he bought the first company Cessna 172 and named it the Aerial News Hound and had WNUE and WAAY painted on either side of the tail. (See Photo).



The old airport layout was a fairly long 5,200 foot main runway 18/36 on which airplanes landed either North or South, depending on the wind. If you landed on 18, heading South, you

came in at about 200 feet over Montgomery Wards department store. Airlines usually landed in that direction because it had an ILS (Instrument Landing System) approach and the middle marker radio beacon was located on the roof of Montgomery Wards. That was a thrill for a pilot to come in for a landing in the clouds and break out just as they passed over Wards at 200 feet altitude. You didn’t want to get too low for sure. The other landing on 36 didn’t have an instrument approach and you also faced a granite wall from the rock quarry that would stop you suddenly if you came in too low there. City fathers wisely decided for the sake of future airline expansion, to move to our current Carl T. Jones Jetport in the county. In 1967 when the airport moved, airlines were beginning to use jets in Huntsville, and anything less than a mile long, was a really tight landing and there was no room to expand the runway in either direction. The new airport



runways are over 2 miles long. But for the Southern Airways Martin 404 aircraft, the old airport was just fine.

There was a shorter cross runway at an angle which was 5/23, but it didn't have a parallel taxi way and you had to taxi on the runway itself to take off or after landing. It was used mostly for private aircraft and I remember when training in 1966 for my multi-engine rating in a Piper Apache, coming in for final approach over the high power lines on Airport Road (where the big shopping centers are today) and landing on 23 to practice shorter field landings and to avoid the traffic pattern of the commercial airlines on 18/36. My multi-engine instructor was Bob Wise, and more about Bob from Judy a bit later.

By May of 1967 I had gotten my multi-engine and instrument ratings, and we all were flying from the new Jetport where most of my instrument work was done in a Piper Cherokee 140 with instructor Grady Thrasher.

I got checked out in a twin engine Piper Aztec some time later took my father, my wife and my mother on a great flying trip to Nassau in 1967. It was an absolutely fabulous trip in the rented Aztec from Huntsville Aviation. We did have a bit of a weather problem coming home and after dodging thunderstorms much of the day, we landed at Tallahassee on the edge of one storm that was ending and just before another came across the field. Judy and my mother were the most disturbed by that instrument landing I did, and frankly they stressed me out a whole lot more than the weather did. As I was making my approach, she and my mother were in the back seat and Judy was screaming out, "oh, we are gonna be killed, we're gonna be killed." At the same time she was holding a brown raincoat over her head, for whatever good that was going to do. I had to holler back for them to shut up or that might come true as I had my hands full with the IFR approach. I made a perfect landing and taxied to the ramp just before the second thunderstorm hit the field. I remember hitting the motel bed in Tallahassee that evening at 7:00 p.m. and went to sleep spread eagle on the bed and didn't wake up for dinner. My father was sold on the big, twin-engined Aztec and bought a brand new one shortly after that trip.

Well, that bit of a stressful trip convinced Judy that she needed to be qualified to fly and land an airplane should I ever get incapacitated when just the two of us were on a trip and she decided to take flying lessons.

Here the story really gets interesting.

Judy Learns To Fly (Judy's Story)

I guess I started flying lessons backwards. After the trip to Nassau, I knew that if I ever went up in another small plane, by golly, I wanted to know how to land it. So I started

flying lessons from instructor Bob Wise. I felt free as a bird while flying and in no time had soloed. I got my solo flying plaque with the date on it, August 7, 1967.

I remember I would call the tower after I had descended to 1500 feet (800 feet above the ground) for clearance to land. If the person in the tower said that a Southern Airways flight was ahead of me, I'd ask him to please divert the other plane to go around and let me land first. The tower always complied with my wishes. I guess I had a convincing voice.

I continued to fly, but I guess I can upset most anyone at times and my instructor, Bob, would holler out things like "pull up" or "slow down" or whatever he felt I needed to do. It made me very nervous and took a lot of the fun out of flying. I also remember when we'd be turning base or final for the runway, I'd use landmarks, like the big church on Airport road as my point where I'd turn to final. Bob wanted me to use the instruments and references to the runway, knowing that at other airports, I would not have such convenient landmarks, but I'd still use what worked for me. Sometimes when landing, Bob would jerk the control horn and over ride my steering to pull the nose up or down. I'd have done just fine, but he was not so sure and didn't want to take chances. This didn't do a whole lot for my confidence.

M.D. had been taking instrument lessons from Grady Thrasher, a kindly old southern gentleman with a very mild manner. He was most patient. I started taking from him, and loved flying a whole lot better. By then, we were all flying at the new airport.

When M.D. wouldn't baby sit for a lesson, I'd drop the kids off fifteen minutes before Sunday School and they could stay through church in the nursery. That was just long enough for me to head to the airport for a quiet, peaceful, serene flight.

Several months later, I tried to contact Bob for old time's sake since I had not seen him at the airport for a long time. I was told that after he had finished giving me flying lessons, he decided to quit being a flight instructor and became a psychiatrist. I guess I could confuse and frustrate most anyone. I never was sure exactly why he quit instructing, but I believe I had something to do with it.

"M.D., get the plane gassed up, I'm ready to fly!"