

He Takes Flight: A Remembrance

Niels Cornelius Nielsen
June 25, 1914 - January 23, 2011

By Niels Nielsen



Niels C. Nielsen passed away at 4:00 AM on January 23, 2012 at his home in Fremont, California. His suffering is over, which is for the best, and mine is beginning, which is just the way these things work. But he had a damn good run and we should all be so lucky to live to be 97 years old.

He leaves behind a long, long trail of useful inventions that didn't cost much but which got the job done and put food on our table. He was the original McGyver, the one who taught me how to fix almost anything with a couple of pieces of handy junk and some ¼"-20 bolts. By example, he taught me how to squeeze another year of life out of a worn-out machine, be it either the Walker-Turner band saw now residing in my garage up in Oregon, or his own arthritic and lymphoma-riddled body.

He is the one who introduced me to the magic and adventure of airplanes. In his time, this too could be done on a shoestring budget. For his first solo cross-country flight in 1947, he navigated his way from a little grass airstrip at the corner of Blacow and Mowry to Fresno and landed at the wrong airport- an Army Air Force base a few miles from his intended destination. Before he could shut down the engine, he was met by a speeding jeep with a red light on top and a bunch of angry soldiers inside, to which he responded by simply pushing the throttle open again and flying off- a most practical and expedient solution. Plenty of runway and fuel left for that, and he knew that even a 40-horsepower J3 Cub can outrun a jeep.

My mom talked him out of flying Piper Cubs after the three of us kids were born, and the Starbucks in which I am writing this remembrance now occupies the grassy field where that J-3 Cub was hangared all those years ago. Nonetheless, Daddy was cleared for takeoff Monday morning just before sunrise, and pushed the throttle open one last time. His runway was full of potholes and cowflops and the tired engine was running rough, but now his wheels are up, and the bangs and bumps are all behind him.

Daddy has taken flight. That old grin that we all knew so well is back on his face once again as he climbs smoothly into a sunny sky. His course is set. He has a gas station road map in his lap, a pocket compass in his hand, an apple in his pocket, and not a care in the world.

Back on the ground, I stand here with my brother Paul and sister Anne and squint into the sun and wave him goodbye, and hope like hell that his navigation skills will get him to the landing strip where Mom has been waiting for him since November. She'll be pretty pissed if he winds up in Fresno.