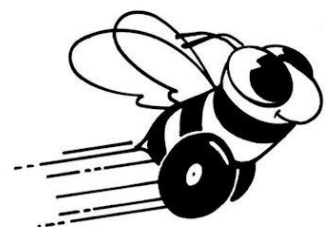


FLYING

THE STORY OF MY LIFE



by Robert H. Starr



High Flight

Oh, I have slipped the surly bonds of earth
And danced the skies on laughter-silvered wings;

Sunward I've climbed and joined the tumbling mirth
Of sun-split clouds--and done a hundred things—

I've topped the wind-swept heights with easy grace,
Where never lark, or even eagle, flew;

And, while with silent, lifting mind I've trod
The high, untrespassed sanctity of space;

I put out my hand and touched the face of God.

--From writings by Richard Bach

CHAPTER 1

From Models to Flying Lessons

I was born and raised on a farm just outside of Mason, Michigan. Our family had seven children, myself being the youngest. My father passed away when I was about six years-old. It was my oldest brother, Harley, who assumed the role of the father figure for our family. My first encounter with airplanes was a toy airplane that Harley had won at the Adams Theater in Mason. It was big enough for me to sit on and when I pushed the pedals, the wings went up and down. That toy, undoubtedly, sparked my interest in airplanes and flying. Thank you, Harley!

When I was about seven, I began building model airplanes. The picture below shows me surrounded by all of the models I built in the garage. I was about 12 when this photo was taken.



In 1937, at the age of 13, I took my first airplane ride. We took off from a hay field by the fair-grounds in Mason. My first flight was in a Waco Biplane flown by a famous aviator, Art Davis. Years later, around 1950, I flew one of my world's smallest airplanes at an air show in Phoenix, Arizona. What do know, Art Davis flew a Waco Biplane in the same show! What a thrill and a coincidence.

When I was about twelve years-old, I organized a model airplane club in Mason and made arrangements with a model supply shop in Lansing to sell model supplies from my home. I was intent on taking flying lessons, so I needed to make enough to cover my lessons. I went to many model airplane meets with my creations. A friend of mine, whose parents were fairly well off, decided he wanted to trade his original Edison Phonograph for one of my model planes. What a deal! I still have that Edison and all of the cylinders to this very day.



At the age of fifteen, I began taking flying lessons at the Capital City Airport in Lansing, Michigan. By the time I was 17, I had my private pilot certificate. I thought about doing some crop dusting to earn money and keep on building hours but then the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Hawaii happened.

World War II had begun for the US, so I went to Lansing, Michigan and passed the Aviation Cadet exam. I was accepted, even though I was only 17 years old. My mother, reluctantly, signed the release that enabled me to enter the service under age. I graduated from Army Air Force College at Allegheny. Then we were all called up for further flight training in Georgia and Florida. For a farm boy from rural Michigan, life just got really exciting. It appeared that eventually I'd be flying the P-51 Mustang if I passed the airman training program! I could hardly wait.



CHAPTER 2

WWII - Basic to Overseas

Going through the Cadet program was intensely interesting. There were three phases of flight training during WWII, primary, basic and advanced. I went through the primary training at Douglas, Georgia training in the PT-17.

From there I went to Cochran Field at Macon, Georgia. It was there I received instruction in the BT-13. I'll never forget my first flight. The instructor put me in the back seat of the BT-13. We flew to one of the auxiliary fields and landed. He told me to get out. We went over and sat down on a big log at the edge of the field.

I was sitting there trying to pay attention and wondering why we landed there. Then he said, "Mr. Starr, if you're lucky enough to get through this program, what would you like to fly?"

I said, "Sir, if I am lucky enough to get through this program, I would like to fly that new P-51 Mustang." He never said another word. We just flew back to the main field. I didn't know what to make of that rather serious meeting on the air field that day. I sure wanted to fly the P-51 though. The BT-13 was fun to fly, but I still had my eye on the prize.



Moving up! I made it through basic in good shape and went on to advanced training, where we flew the AT-6 Texan. This part of the training was at Spence Field in Moultrie, Georgia.

While in Moultris, Georgia my buddies and I frequented the local Army Air Corp recreation hall located on the 2nd floor of an elegant down town hotel. The main first floor lobby was always packed with Southerners sipping drinks, reading papers and smoking cigars. Well, we were a bit bored one afternoon and decided to play a little prank on the stuffy patrons in the lobby. We carefully caught a bunch of big flies, then glued a 3-inch-long rice paper strip to each fly's behind. All five of us crowded around the second-floor railing to watch the pandemonium. I opened the box containing all the flies and boy did we get a show. That lobby area quickly transformed from tranquillity into a three-ring circus! About 30 flies, all towing mini banners everywhere! Patrons and staff running here and there either trying to kill or avoid our flying circus. It was definitely worth the time and trouble to capture and outfit our little aviators.



Lucky for me, I had no problem getting through advanced training and graduated in May 1944. Fortunately, got the heck out of Moultris, and none too soon. I was getting restless and bored way too often.

From there I went to Tipton, Georgia, where I earned ten hours in P-40's. P-51 training was within my grasp.

Next up was my assignment into fighter training at Punta Gorda, Florida. There I was able to rack up 60 hours flying time in the P-40s. They then moved us over to Venice Airbase, Florida. Here I chalked up 20 hours in the P-51. I couldn't have been happier. We were now ready to go overseas into combat.



CHAPTER 3

Not England, but India.

Our call to duty notification arrived on February 11, 1943. We were being sent to India. I would have preferred to go to England to fly in the Eighth or Ninth Airforce. But orders are just that and I signed on willingly, so off I went to India.

We boarded a C-54 at Miami Beach and took off in an easterly direction. About half way into the flight, the captain who was in charge of us, broke out the orders and told us that our next stop was going to be Karachi, India.

I spent the next two months In Karachi India helping to check out some of the Chinese pilots that had been trained back in the United States. We were checking them out in the P-51 which they had not as yet flown. Photos below are of the graduating classes of Chinese cadets. I'm on the far right of the group. Next one down is a picture of my buddy Campbell and I when we built some model airplanes in our spare time while at Karachi.



Then I was transferred from Karachi, India to Kunming, China, where I was assigned to the 311th F-530 Fighter Squadron of the Fourteenth Airforce, also known as the Flying Tigers. When we arrived at Kunming, we were all personally greeted by General Chennault. At this point I was assigned to the fighter field at Sian, which was the US' furthest north airbase. I flew a number of recon and bombing missions against the Japanese while stationed in Sian. Below is me in the cockpit of a P-51 D during my tour of duty in Sian, China. Next down, is me in front of the barracks in Kunming, China.





CHAPTER 4

Chinese Hospitality & First Parachute Jump

One morning a few of us received orders to fly down to Karachi, India. Our assignment was to bring back some of the new P-51 fighters to be put into service in Sian. We were on our way back to Sian when we encountered some rough weather.

We were flying at about 35,000 feet, just above the overcast. There was nothing but mountainous terrain below. My oxygen regulator stuck on full open and I couldn't get it stopped. I realized that I had only a few minutes of oxygen left, so I immediately radioed the Flight Commander. I explained that I was unable to repair the oxygen regulator. My only option was to descend below the cloud ceiling. I started down, knowing the overcast was obscuring the mountains below.

I let down into the cloud ceiling straight ahead and finally came out of the overcast between two tall mountains. I continued to dodge the mountains until I was almost out of fuel. Even though P-51s are single place fighters, I felt as though someone else was with me that day -- as though I wasn't alone.

I decided to bail out at about a thousand feet above ground level. My parachute opened hard. I swung twice then landed at the edge of a small canal. I ran over to dry ground and started gathering up my parachute. Almost immediately there were Chinese men surrounding me. They took me down to their little village, to the "head man's house".

I didn't realize until then that I had lost my flight jacket, which I had stuffed under my parachute harness. When I bailed out, the wind must have wiped it away.

About this time another Chinese local came in the room. He had spent some time in Shanghai, where they did speak Mandarin. He and I were talking with the help of my little book of Chinese phrases when another man entered the room. He was pointing to his chest with his right and left hand. I wasn't sure what he wanted.

As cadets, we had been told it was customary among the Chinese villagers to arrange female companionship for any visiting men. The Chinese thought of this practice as a common courtesy. That's exactly what I thought he was going to do. I looked through my little book and showed the man from Shanghai that I was a happily married man. He told this to the other man, but he continued to point at his chest. Just then another Chinese man came in with my flight jacket in hand. I was relieved to understand that they had been talking about my flight jacket as they were making gestures on their chests.

On one side of the front of the jacket I had a 14th Airforce patch and on the other a large yellow scorpion patch. I was sure happy to see that flight jacket. It had been a long day and I was tired. The head man offered me a bed for the night, which I gladly accepted. All of the sheets and covers on it were silk.



They awakened me early the next morning. There was a sampan waiting for me out on the canal. The head man pointed at the 45-caliber pistol that I had over my shoulder and pointed to himself; so, I took the pistol off and gave it to him.



I got into the sampan which was covered with sliding hatches. There were two Chinese men operating the oars. They moved it along pretty good. I spent two days riding and walking with them before we got to a little town called Ningpoo. I ate a lot of oranges, a fruit grown in that area, and equator bars which I had in the backpack of my parachute. Upon arriving in Ningpoo, I was turned over to a Chinese officer who contacted my base in Sian.

I waited for about three days and finally two L-5s flew over the village and landed outside of town. The Chinese officer put me in a truck and drove to the waiting planes. There were several English and French missionaries stationed by the air field where the L-5s had landed. The missionaries invited everybody in for lunch. We enjoyed swapping stories with them about life in China. Time to go though and they waved good bye as we took off for our home base back in Sian, China.



I still have part of the parachute, the rip cord, and my flight jacket. I'm amazed that it still fits me perfectly. I was in still Sian when they dropped the Atomic bombs on Japan. We didn't know what they were when we heard about it, but we were sure glad that they had dropped them because the Army had plans to transfer us out to the coast of China where we'd be flying against the islands of Japan. That would have been a rough tour. A lot of us would not have survived such duty. I am so thankful that we ended the war with Japan.

CHAPTER 5

Going back home

After the war was over, I returned to Mason, Michigan. I started flying on the GI Bill to get my flight instructor rating. I instructed flying for a couple of years. Then I became the operations manager at the Mason airport in 1946.

A few months later, my brother Harley and I bought a surplus PT-19 at Jackson, Michigan. I went down to Jackson and flew it home. What a plane! Harley had a flair for painting. He painted the whole nose of the PT-19 to look like the shark nose on a P-40. We did a lot of flying in that airplane. We had some great times.

I flew a lot of parachute jumpers up to altitude to make their jumps. I really had no desire to leap out of a perfectly good airplane a second time. But one Saturday afternoon, on a dare, a good friend of mine, Bart Smith flew me up to a couple thousand feet. I bailed out of the back seat and made my second parachute jump. I showed him! Bart and I had built models together as young boys, and both of us had gone through flight training for the Army Air Corp. He flew B-17s in Europe. He had some pretty wild stories from the war. Good times, I miss Bart.

The photo below is from an air show at the Mason airport during my earlier days as airport manager. It shows our custom painted PT-19 in the lower, right corner. Harley was really proud of that paint job.



CHAPTER 6

Just Flying Around

I flew my mother to Danville, Illinois. She said "the back seat of the PT-19 was as comfy as could be". I stopped to refuel in Indiana. We stayed most of that time with my Aunt Julie and Uncle Will Hackman. My mother's maiden name was Fannie Hackman. My mother and I certainly enjoyed the trips that we made to Illinois and back in the PT-19.

I also flew her to visit my Aunt Emi and Uncle Oscar Thomas. They owned a farm in Rossville, Illinois. We landed on one of their unploughed fields. While visiting with them, we were introduced to a cousin named Gene Hackman, the father of the famous movie star by the same name. Will and Julie visited with Audrey and I after we were married. We sure enjoyed their company.

My brother Roy was a crew chief on P-47s in England and France during the war. He had a lot of interesting stories to tell. Didn't we all! It seems that flying runs in the Starr family.

CHAPTER 7

The First and Only Love of My Life

In 1948, I met a young lady who enjoyed flying. Audrey and I, flew to several dawn patrols in Michigan. In the Spring I asked Audrey Mae Snider to marry me. She accepted. WHEW! Boy I'm a lucky guy.

We were married in May 21, 1949 in the Catholic Church in Lansing, Michigan. We had two children named Robert and Robin. My dearest Audrey passed away in 2002. Our son, Robert passed away in 2005. Our daughter Robin lives in Cave Creek, Arizona. Robin has been bitten by the aviation bug too. She's a sport parachute jumper instructor and has a private pilot's license. She has definitely got the Starr aviation gene in her blood too.



CHAPTER 8

Crop Dusting and Sky Baby

In about 1950 I met a man that had built a little airplane which he called the "World's Smallest". I was the only test pilot who was able to fly it successfully. Not long after that, I moved my family to California.

In the meantime, I began teaching myself how to crop dust, while I was working for Northrup and Lockheed as an aircraft mechanic. In my spare time, I decided to help build and be the test pilot on the Sky Baby project, which was the world's smallest airplane according to record books in 1950.

I flew Sky Baby at the Detroit Air show in 1952. However, as fun as it was, to be a co-builder and pilot of Sky Baby, problems developed between myself and my partner. My name failed to be mentioned in much of the publicity surrounding the success of the project. It was at this point I decided to go my own way. I knew I could build and fly a superior plane that would take all the records. Adios to Stits.

I took this picture of my wife, Audrey, and "Sky Baby" back in 1954.



CHAPTER 9

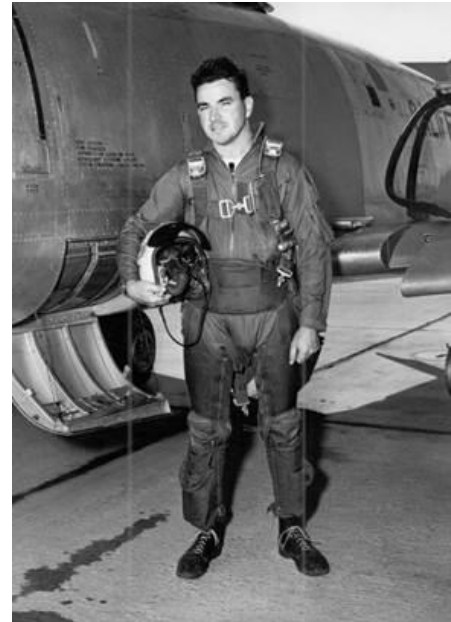
UFO's and Active Duty

In 1954, I began flying in the California Air National Guard. We were flying the P-51-H, and later on, the F-86 Sabre Jet. The F-86 is the finest plane that I have ever flown.

While flying with the Air Guard, I became aware that I could spend a year on active duty with the Air Defense Mission. Air Defense controlled the radar stations on the islands off the coast of Southern California. They were responsible for monitoring any non-commercial air traffic in the area.

I had been a firm believer in UFOs since World War II and seriously hoped that I would get to see at least one. One day we were scrambled to investigate a bogie that a radar operator indicated was sitting stationary at about 50,000 ft above Los Angeles. My wing man and I headed for it at full throttle going through 37,000 ft. We both had it in sight. It was a cigar shaped object with no visible means of propulsion. In a flash the UFO left us behind as if we were backing up. I had several experiences with chasing UFO's during my time with the Guard on active duty. I'm now a firm believer that we are not the only intelligent life in this universe.

In 1954 I was presented with a certificate of membership in the "Mach Buster's Club" by North American Aircraft for having flown the F-86 Sabre Jet faster than the speed of sound. That aircraft was pure power and it was a thrill to have flown it.



CHAPTER 10 The Guinness Book World's Smallest Piloted Airplane

In 1955, I moved my family to Tempe, Arizona, where I met a man named Orville Lloyd. He was designing and starting to build an experimental two-place biplane. He called it Liberty Sport. I helped him build it and did the flight testing on it. I enjoyed working on that project with him. Orville lived in Mesa, Arizona, but eventually moved to Salt Lake City, Utah. I heard that he built another bi-plane after Liberty Sport. When liberty sport project was done, I turned my attentions back onto building my own projects once again.

I had already decided to build a smaller airplane than the current record holder, Sky Baby. I was the co-builder and the only test pilot that ever flew Sky Baby successfully without cracking it up. My partner on this project back in 1950 didn't have the skills to fly it. He was only a builder. From my personal experience of flying JR and Sky Baby, I knew what had to be done to create a lighter, safer, and more dynamic airframe.

25 years later, in 1980, I finally began building the next world's smallest airplane in my garage in Tempe Arizona. I called my new project the Bumble Bee I and the garage was dubbed 'the skunk works'. Skunk Works was the name given to a secret R&D team at Lockheed Aircraft Corp. back in the 1950's.



The flight of... **The Bumble Bees**

At first glance, most engineers and professional pilots make the same statement, "I don't believe it can fly". Both Bumble Bees flew well, although they were a challenge for Mr. Starr to fly. They still were aerodynamically sound.

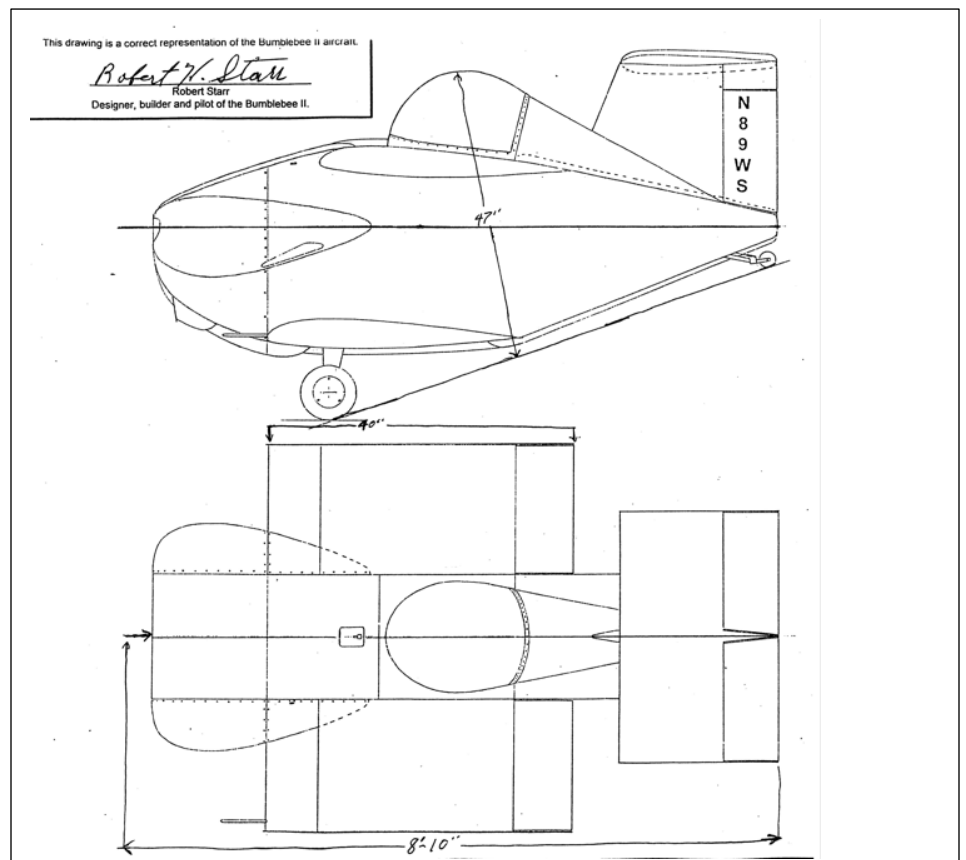
SPECIFICATIONS:

Bumble Bee I

Wing Span: 6 ft. 6 in.
 length: 9 ft. 4 in.
 Cruising Speed: 150 MPH
 Top Speed: 180 MPH
 Stalling Speed: 75 KTS.
 Gross Weight: 756 Obl.
 Engine: C-85
 Fuel Capacity: 3 gal.

Bumble Bee II

Wing Span: 5 ft. 6 in.
 length: 8 ft. 10 in.
 Cruising Speed: 150 MPH
 Top Speed: 190 MPH
 Stalling Speed: 75 KTS.
 Empty Weight: 396 Obl.
 Engine: C-85
 Fuel Capacity: 3 gal.



After numerous test flights, I flew it for the record in 1984. It was quite a challenge to fly, but even at the age of 60, I still had the edge. I had named it the Bumble Bee I, and appropriately so, for nature's bumble bee doesn't have enough wing area to fly, but it has never been told this, so it proceeds to fly anyway. At last, the world record was mine!

In 1986, Len Clements, who was a reporter and a helicopter pilot for Channel Ten here in Phoenix, flew down to Marana, Arizona, where with the help of my son Bob, I had been testing the Bumble Bee I. Len and his crew shot some tape of me flying the little machine. I've got lots of great footage on tape of me flying the Bumble Bee. I applied to Guinness Book for the title, supplied the necessary proof and got it.

The original Bumble Bee I had an empty weight of 520 pounds. I knew I would be able to improve on my first record, so in 1988, I built and successfully flew an even smaller and lighter (only 396 pounds) airplane named the Bumble Bee II. It still holds "The World's Smallest Biplane" record in the Guinness World Book of Records as of 2022. Unfortunately, during one of the flights of the Bumble Bee II, the engine failed on the downwind leg and I crash landed. The plane was totalled and I spent some time in the hospital but fortunately recovered. The Bumble Bee I is on permanent display at the Pima Air and Space Museum in Tucson, Arizona.

At present, 2007, I have logged over fifteen thousand hours of stick time. Thousands of this was done crop dusting and flying for the military. I have been lucky enough to have flown everything from the world's smallest planes to the F-86 Sabre Jet.

Flying has enriched my life in so many ways. I am thankful to of had a family that supported me and my flying activities through the years. Life has been good. Robert H. Starr (1924 – 2009)



Robert Starr and Bumble Bee Weblinks:

Home page: <http://worldssmallestairplane.com/blog/>

You Tube Channel: [Bumble Bee II, The Guinness Book Records Holder World's Smallest Manned Biplane. - YouTube](#)

Pima Air and Space Museum: [STARR BUMBLE BEE - Pima Air & Space](#)

Wikipedia Bumble Bee site: [Starr Bumble Bee II - Wikipedia](#)

Wikipedia Robert H. Starr site: [Robert H. Starr - Wikipedia](#)



Robert H. Starr
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