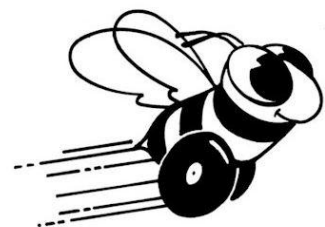


# FLYING

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 Airplane Modeling to Flying Lessons*

I was born in 1924 and raised on a farm just outside of Mason, Michigan - where the winters were long, the chores were longer, and entertainment required a bit of creativity (and occasionally, questionable judgment). There were seven of us kids in the family, and as the youngest, I quickly learned two important skills: how to stay out of the way and how to make my own fun.

My father passed away when I was about six years old, and from that point on, my oldest brother, Harley, stepped in as the de facto head of the household. He handled the responsibility with quiet strength - and, as it turns out, a knack for shaping my future in ways he probably didn't intend.

My first real encounter with aviation came not from a runway, but from the Adams Theater, where Harley won a toy airplane. This wasn't your average toy - it was big enough for me to sit on, and when I worked the pedals, the wings flapped up and down like I was trying to taxi straight into history. To me, it might as well have been a fighter plane. That contraption lit a spark that never quite went out. So, thank you, Harley - you probably thought you won a prize, but you actually launched a lifelong obsession.

By the time I was about seven, I had graduated from "pilot" of a pedal-powered aircraft to builder of model airplanes. The family garage became my workshop, my laboratory, and occasionally my disaster zone. I built model after model, each one a little better - and sometimes a little more structurally questionable - than the last.

There's a photo of me at around twelve years old, proudly surrounded by my growing fleet of models, all carefully arranged (for once) and captured by Harley. Looking back, that picture says it all: I wasn't just building airplanes - I was already figuring out how to chase them into the sky.



**Robert** working on model airplanes in the basement at the age of 12.

## CHAPTER 2

### *First Flights and Fair Trades*

In 1937, at the ripe old age of thirteen - an age when most kids are still perfecting the art of doing as little as possible - I took my first airplane ride. We launched from a hay field near the fairgrounds in Mason, which, if you ask me, is about as authentic an airstrip as you can get. No control tower, no paved runway - just a good patch of ground and a healthy dose of confidence.

The aircraft was a Waco biplane, and at the controls was none other than aviator Art Davis. At the time, I knew I was doing something special. What I didn't know was that aviation has a funny way of bringing things full circle.

Fast forward to around 1950, when I was flying one of my "world's smallest airplanes" at an air show in Phoenix, Arizona. And who should be there, flying in the very same show? Art Davis - again in a Waco biplane. Same type of airplane, same pilot, and now I was the one putting on a show. If that's not a coincidence, it's at least a good plot twist.

But long before I was flying anything full-sized, I was already figuring out how to fund the habit. Around age twelve, I organized a model airplane club in Mason - part passion project, part early business venture. I even struck a deal with a model supply shop in Lansing to sell parts right out of my home. You might say I was running a small aviation empire... headquartered somewhere between the kitchen table and the garage.

My goal was simple: make enough money to pay for flying lessons. So, I built models, sold supplies, and took my creations to every model airplane meet I could find. Somewhere along the way, I discovered that enthusiasm - and a decent-looking model - can be a pretty strong currency.

Case in point: a friend of mine, whose family was doing quite well for themselves, decided he wanted one of my model airplanes badly enough to trade his original Edison Phonograph for it. Now that's what I call negotiating from a position of strength. I made the trade, of course - and I still have that Edison phonograph and every one of its cylinders to this day. Not bad for a kid who just wanted to fly.



## CHAPTER 3

### *From Farm Fields to Flight School*

At fifteen, while most kids were still negotiating curfews, I was negotiating crosswinds. I began taking flying lessons at Capital City Airport - a place that quickly became my second home, though with fewer chores and considerably better views. By seventeen, I had earned my private pilot certificate, which felt like being handed the keys to the sky... along with a healthy respect for gravity.

Naturally, I started thinking like any young pilot with ambition and an empty wallet: crop dusting. It seemed like a practical way to build flight hours and make a living - flying low, fast, and just a little bit dusty. But history had other plans.

Then came the Japanese Attack on Pearl Harbor.

With that single event, everything changed. World War II was underway for the United States, and my future shifted from hayfields to combat training almost overnight. I headed to Lansing, passed the Aviation Cadet exam, and - despite being only seventeen - was accepted into the program. My mother, with understandable hesitation, signed the release that allowed me to enlist underage. I suspect she had mixed feelings about her youngest son trading farm life for flight training in wartime.

I went on to graduate from Army Air Force College at Allegheny Army Air Field, after which we were promptly shipped south for advanced flight training in Georgia and Florida. For a farm boy from rural Michigan, this was about as far from familiar as it gets - and I was loving every minute of it.

There was also a little incentive dangling at the end of the runway: the possibility of flying the legendary P-51 Mustang. All I had to do was pass the airman training program. No pressure, right?

Let's just say I was highly motivated - and not just because I'd already gotten used to the idea of flying.



## CHAPTER 4

### *Basic Training to Overseas Assignment in WW II*

Going through the Aviation Cadet program was many things - intense, demanding, occasionally humbling - but never boring. Training in those days came in three neat phases: primary, basic, and advanced. "Neat," of course, being a generous term for a process designed to see if you could fly, think, and stay calm while doing both at the same time.

My primary training took place in Douglas, Georgia, where I got my hands on the trusty Boeing-Stearman PT-17. It was a fine machine for learning - rugged, forgiving, and just temperamental enough to keep you honest. In other words, it was the perfect introduction to military flying.

From there, I moved on to Cochran Field in Macon, Georgia for basic training, where the aircraft of choice was the Vultee BT-13 Valiant. The BT-13 had a personality all its own. It didn't just fly - it made sure you knew you were flying.

I'll never forget my first flight in that airplane. The instructor put me in the back seat, which is a polite way of saying I had a great view and absolutely no control over my destiny. We flew out to one of the auxiliary fields and landed. So far, so good. Then he told me to get out.

We walked over and sat down on a large log at the edge of the field. I was doing my best to look attentive while quietly wondering if I had already done something terribly wrong. After a moment, he turned to me and said, "Mr. Starr, if you're lucky enough to get through this program, what would you like to fly?"

Now, this felt like a question with consequences. I gave it the respect it deserved and answered, "Sir, if I am lucky enough to get through this program, I would like to fly that new P-51 Mustang."

He didn't say another word. We got back in the airplane, flew to the main field, and that was the end of the conversation. No encouragement, no correction - just silence. To this day, I'm not entirely sure if that was approval, disapproval, or simply his way of saving breath.

What I did know was this: the BT-13 was a fine airplane, and I enjoyed flying it - but my eyes were firmly fixed on the prize P-51.



Moving up in the world - or at least up in horsepower - I made it through basic training in good shape and advanced to the final phase: flying the North American AT-6 Texan. This was serious business now. The AT-6 wasn't just an airplane; it was a teacher with a firm hand and very little patience for sloppy flying. If you could handle that aircraft, you were well on your way to earning your wings.

Advanced training took place at Spence Field, where the days were filled with formation flying, aerobatics, and the occasional reminder that gravity was still very much in charge. For a farm boy from Michigan, this was high-speed education in every sense of the word.

Of course, even future military pilots need a little downtime - and that's where things occasionally... took a turn.

My buddies and I became regular visitors at the local Army Air Corps recreation hall, which was located on the second floor of a rather elegant downtown hotel. Downstairs, the lobby was a picture of Southern refinement: well-dressed patrons sipping drinks, reading newspapers, and calmly smoking cigars as if the world had never heard of urgency.

Naturally, we felt obligated to improve the atmosphere.

One afternoon, in a moment of what I can only describe as highly coordinated poor judgment, we decided to stage a little entertainment. We captured a collection of large flies - no small feat in itself - and carefully attached three-inch strips of rice paper to each one. You might call them... experimental aircraft.

With everything prepared, the five of us gathered along the second-floor railing overlooking the lobby. I opened the box.

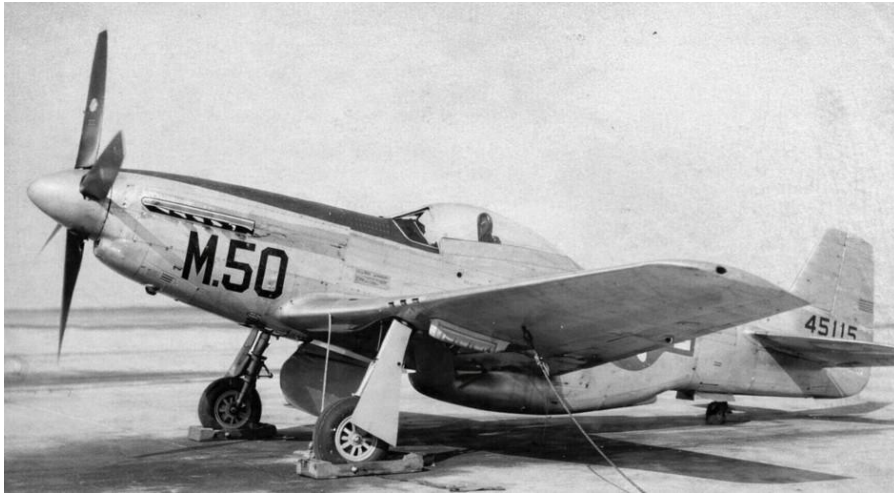
What followed was aviation history - at least in our minds.

About thirty flies, each towing its own miniature banner, descended into that peaceful lobby like a squadron on a mission. Within seconds, tranquility gave way to chaos. Patrons scattered, staff scrambled, and dignified cigar smokers suddenly found themselves in evasive maneuvers. It was less "afternoon in Georgia" and more "three-ring circus with wings."



Lucky for me, I made it through advanced training without breaking anything that belonged to the government, and I graduated in May of 1942. I was also fortunate to get the heck out of Spence Field - and not a moment too soon. By then, I had discovered that too much free time and a room full of pilots-in-training could lead to... creative decision-making. It was time to move on to something faster, louder, and considerably more official. 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 5**

### ***Not England but India***

Our call to duty orders came through on February 11, 1943, and like any young fighter pilot with big plans, I naturally assumed I'd be heading to England - home of the Eighth Air Force or maybe the Ninth Air Force. That's where all the headlines were being made, after all.

Instead, the orders said India.

Now, I'll admit - that wasn't exactly the direction I had pictured. But orders have a way of being very persuasive, and since I had volunteered for the whole adventure in the first place, I packed up my expectations along with everything else and went where I was told.

We boarded a Douglas C-54 Skymaster at Miami Beach and took off heading east. Somewhere about halfway into the flight, the officer in charge decided it was time to let us in on the details. He opened the orders and calmly informed us that our next stop would be Karachi, India.

Well, that settled that.

I spent the next two months in Karachi, which was a long way from both Michigan and England. My assignment there was to help check out Chinese pilots who had been trained in the United States. They were transitioning into the P-51 Mustang - an airplane they hadn't yet flown, but one I was more than happy to spend time in.

So, there I was, halfway around the world, helping introduce a new group of pilots to one of the finest fighters ever built. Not exactly the combat assignment I had imagined, but important work all the same.

And, as it turns out, you can only spend so many hours flying and briefing before you start looking for ways to stay busy. In our spare time, my buddy Campbell and I did what came naturally - we built model airplanes. Some habits, it seems, don't go away... they just travel internationally.

Looking back, Karachi may not have been England - but it was the beginning of a whole new chapter, whether I planned it that way or not.



## CHAPTER 6

### *From India to China with The Flying Tigers*

Eventually, I was transferred out of Karachi and sent on to Kunming, China - now things were starting to sound a lot more like the war I had signed up for. I was assigned to the 311th Fighter Squadron of the Fourteenth Air Force - better known as the legendary Flying Tigers. Not a bad outfit to be associated with.

When we arrived in Kunming, we were personally greeted by General Claire Lee Chennault himself. That's the kind of welcome that makes you stand a little straighter and reconsider any bad habits you might have picked up along the way.

Before long, I was assigned to a fighter strip at Sian, the northernmost U.S. airbase in China. If you were looking for the edge of the map, this was it. From there, I flew a number of reconnaissance and bombing missions against Japanese forces. It was serious work, and the margin for error had a way of shrinking the farther north you went.

By this point, I was flying the P-51D Mustang - the same airplane I had set my sights on back in training. There's something satisfying about finally arriving where you always intended to go... even if it takes a few unexpected detours through places like Karachi to get there.

The photos from that time tell the story pretty well. One shows me in the cockpit of the P-51D at Sian - right where I wanted to be. Another has me standing in front of the barracks back in Kunming, looking every bit like a young pilot who had travelled a long way from a Michigan farm and somehow landed in the middle of history.

Not exactly the path I had mapped out - but it worked out just the same.



**Robert** in the cockpit of a P-51D. 1945 Sian China. Age 24



## CHAPTER 7

### *Chinese Hospitality & First Parachute Jump*

One morning, a few of us were handed orders to fly down to Karachi and bring back some fresh P-51 Mustang fighters for service up in Sian. That sounded like a fine assignment - new airplanes, clear purpose, and a chance to log a few more hours in my favorite machine.

The trip down went smoothly. The trip back... not so much.

We were cruising at about 35,000 feet, skimming just above a solid overcast, with nothing but mountains hidden somewhere below. That's when my oxygen regulator decided it had ambitions of its own and stuck wide open. I tried everything to shut it down, but it wouldn't cooperate. A quick mental calculation told me I had only a few minutes of oxygen left - not exactly comforting at that altitude.

I radioed the Flight Commander and explained the situation. The only option was to descend - straight into the clouds, with mountains waiting somewhere underneath. Not ideal, but neither was running out of oxygen.

So down I went.

I punched into the overcast and held my course, hoping I'd come out somewhere that didn't involve a sudden stop. Eventually, I broke through the clouds - right between two very tall mountains. That will get your attention in a hurry. From there, it became a matter of dodging terrain and stretching what fuel I had left. Somewhere along the way, I had the distinct feeling I wasn't entirely alone in that cockpit. Call it instinct, luck, or a little extra help - I wasn't about to argue.

With fuel nearly gone and options running out, I made the decision to bail out at about a thousand feet above the ground. The parachute opened with authority - no gentle introductions there - and after a couple of swings under the now open canopy, I landed near a small canal.

I gathered up my chute and had just started to get my bearings when I found myself surrounded by a group of Chinese villagers. They escorted me to what I quickly understood was the head man's house. It was about then I realized my flight jacket was gone - apparently liberated by the wind when I bailed out. Not exactly what you want to lose in unfamiliar territory.

Communication was... creative. One man had spent time in Shanghai and knew some Mandarin, so between him and my well-worn phrasebook, we managed to get by. Then another man came in, pointing insistently at his chest with both hands. Now, during training, we had been told that offering female companionship was considered a polite gesture in some villages. So naturally, I assumed I was about to be treated to local hospitality of that variety.

Being a happily married man (I wasn't married at that time), I flipped through my phrasebook and made that very clear.

The message was delivered... and completely ignored. The man kept pointing at his chest.

Just then, another villager walked in - holding my flight jacket.

Turns out, all that pointing had nothing to do with hospitality and everything to do with patches. On one side of the jacket was my Fourteenth Air Force patch, and on the other, a large yellow scorpion. They weren't offering companionship - they were asking about my insignia. I was never so happy to be misunderstood.



After that, things settled down nicely. The head man offered me a bed for the night - covered, no less, in silk. Not bad accommodations for a fellow who had just bailed out of an airplane and had no standing room reservations.

The next morning, they woke me early. A sampan was waiting on the canal. Before I left, the head man pointed at my .45-caliber pistol and then at himself. Seemed like a fair trade for the hospitality, so I handed it over. Then I climbed into the covered boat with two men on the oars, and off we went.



For the next two days, we travelled by boat and on foot toward a town called Ningbo. My diet consisted mostly of local oranges - plentiful and excellent - and a few equator bars I had tucked away in my parachute pack. Not exactly gourmet dining, but it got the job done.

Once in Ningbo, I was turned over to a Chinese officer, who contacted my base back in Sian. After about three days of waiting, two Stinson L-5 Sentinel planes flew in and landed just outside town. I was driven out to meet them, where we were greeted by a group of English and French missionaries stationed nearby. They invited everyone in for lunch, and we swapped stories about life in China - something I hadn't expected to be doing when I started that flight.



Then it was time to head back to base.

We took off and returned to Sian, and just like that, I was back where I started - minus a little fuel, but with a much better story.

I still have part of that parachute, the ripcord, and that same flight jacket. Remarkably, it still fits - proof that some things hold up better than others over time.

Not long after, while I was still in Sian, we heard about the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. At the time, we didn't fully understand what had happened - but we did understand what it meant. Plans had been in place to move us to the Chinese coast for operations against Japan itself. That would have been a very different - and far more dangerous - assignment.

To put it plainly, many of us would not have come back.

So, while that day over the mountains was close, it wasn't the closest call I'd ever avoided. And for how the war ended, I remain deeply thankful.

## CHAPTER 8

### *Going Back Home*

After the war wrapped up, I made my way back to Mason, Michigan - back to familiar ground, though I was no longer quite the same farm kid who had left it. With the help of the GI Bill, I got back into the cockpit in a different role, working toward my flight instructor rating. Before long, I was teaching others how to fly - doing my best to pass along good habits and quietly discourage the bad ones I had already tested myself.

I instructed for a couple of years and then, in 1946, became the operations manager at the Mason airport. Not a bad gig - close to home, plenty of airplanes, and just enough responsibility to keep things interesting.

A few months into that job, my brother Harley and I decided to expand our "fleet" by purchasing a surplus Fairchild PT-19 down in Jackson, Michigan. I flew it home myself, which is always the best way to make sure you like what you just bought. And I liked it.

Harley, who had a real talent for painting, decided the airplane needed a little personality. So, he gave the nose a makeover inspired by the shark-mouth design of the Curtiss P-40 Warhawk. The result was hard to miss and even harder to forget. Harley was proud of that paint job - and rightly so.

We flew that airplane every chance we got. Some of those flights were for business, like taking parachute jumpers up to altitude. Now, having already exited an airplane once under less-than-ideal circumstances, I had absolutely no interest in making a habit of it. But then came a Saturday afternoon - and a dare.

A good friend of mine, Bart Smith, took me up a couple thousand feet in the PT-19. Bart and I went way back - we had built model airplanes together as kids and both ended up in the Army Air Corps. He flew B-17 Flying Fortress over Europe and had enough stories to keep you listening for hours.

On this particular day, he decided I should prove something. So, I did. I climbed out of the back seat and made my second parachute jump - this time entirely on purpose. I figured that settled the matter. I showed him.

We had some great times in those days - flying, working, and occasionally making decisions that seemed like a good idea at the time. I miss my good friend Bart.

One of my favorite photos from that era shows an air show at the Mason airport, with our PT-19 parked off to the side - nose painted, standing proud. Harley never got tired of pointing it out, and I never got tired of flying it.



## CHAPTER 9

### *Just Flying Around*

After the war, flying didn't slow down - it just got a little more personal. One of my favorite passengers was my mother. I flew her down to Danville, Illinois in our trusty Fairchild PT-19, and to her credit, she handled it like a seasoned traveler. In fact, she declared the back seat "as comfy as could be," which tells me either she trusted my flying... or she had a very generous definition of comfort.

We made a fuel stop in Indiana and spent some time visiting my Aunt Julie and Uncle Will Hackman. My mother, Fannie Hackman before she became a Starr, was right at home there. Those trips back and forth to Illinois turned into something special - part family visit, part aerial adventure, and just enough unpredictability to keep things interesting.

On another trip, I flew her to see my Aunt Emi and Uncle Oscar Thomas, who had a farm in Rossville, Illinois. Lacking a proper runway - but not lacking confidence - we landed in one of their unplowed fields. It wasn't exactly an airport, but it got the job done, and the welcome was worth the approach.

While we were there, we met a cousin, Gene Hackman Sr. - the father of the now-famous actor Gene Hackman. At the time, of course, he was just family, and none of us were placing any bets on Hollywood fame during a farm visit in Illinois.

Family visits went both ways. Will and Julie later came to visit Audrey and me after we were married, and we always enjoyed their company. Good people, good stories, and plenty of laughter - no airplane required.

Speaking of stories, my brother Roy had more than his share. During the war, he served as a crew chief on P-47 Thunderbolts in England and France. Between the two of us - and the rest of the family - you could fill a hangar with tales from those years.

Come to think of it, flying didn't just run in the Starr family... it practically taxied through the front yard.

## CHAPTER 10

### *The First and Only Love of My Life*

In 1948, I met a young lady who not only tolerated airplanes - she actually enjoyed them. That alone was enough to get my attention. Audrey Mae Snider and I started flying together to dawn patrols around Michigan, which is about as close as you can get to romance when your idea of a good time involves early mornings, cold air, and the smell of aviation fuel.

Somewhere between take-offs and landings, I came to a very important conclusion: I'd better not let this one get away.

So, in the spring, I asked Audrey to marry me.

She said yes.



Whew. I've had some close calls in airplanes, but that might have been the biggest relief of them all.

We were married on May 21, 1949, in a Catholic church in Lansing, Michigan. From that point on, I had a co-pilot for life - and a good one at that. We built a life together and raised two children, Robert and Robin.

Audrey was, without question, the best decision I ever made.

We shared many years together until she passed away in 2002. A few years later, in 2005, we lost our son Robert. Those were hard days - far harder than anything I ever faced in the air.

Our daughter Robin now lives in Cave Creek, Arizona, and it seems the aviation bug didn't skip a generation. She's a sport parachute jumping instructor and holds a private pilot license too. I suppose you could say she inherited the family tendency to spend more time in the sky than on the ground.

Looking back, airplanes may have been a lifelong passion - but Audrey was the one constant that mattered most.

## **CHAPTER 11**

### ***Crop Dusting and Sky Baby***

Around 1950, I met a fellow who had built what he proudly called the "World's Smallest Airplane." Naturally, that got my attention. As it turned out, I was the only test pilot who could successfully fly the thing - which either says something about my skill... or my willingness to try what others wouldn't.

Not long after, I moved my family out to California, where aviation opportunities seemed to grow as fast as the traffic. By day, I worked as an aircraft mechanic for Northrop Corporation and Lockheed Corporation. By night - and any spare minute I could find - I was teaching myself crop dusting. It seemed like a practical way to stay sharp, make a little money, and keep one foot firmly in the cockpit.

Somewhere in between all that, I got involved in building and test flying the Sky Baby. According to the record books at the time, it was the smallest airplane in the world - and I had the privilege of being both a co-builder and its pilot.

I flew Sky Baby at the Detroit Air Show in 1952, and I'll admit, it was a thrill. There's nothing quite like flying something that looks like it shouldn't be able to leave the ground - and then proving that it can.

But as with many partnerships, things didn't stay smooth. Problems developed between me and my partner, and somewhere along the line, my name started disappearing from the publicity surrounding the project. Now, I didn't help build and fly the world's smallest airplane just to become a footnote.

So, I made a decision.

If I was going to do this, I'd do it my way.

I knew I could design and build a better airplane - smaller, stronger, and more capable - and this time, I'd make sure the credit landed where it belonged. So, with that, I tipped my hat and went my own direction.

Adios to Stits.

Looking back, that moment wasn't the end of something - it was the beginning of a much bigger idea.

And somewhere in the middle of it all, I snapped a photo of Audrey standing next to Sky Baby in 1954 - a reminder that no matter how small the airplane, the story around it was getting bigger by the day.



## **CHAPTER 12**

### ***UFO's and Active Duty with The Guard***

In 1954, I joined the California Air National Guard, where I went from propellers to pure jet power in a hurry. We started out flying the P-51H Mustang - a fine machine in its own right - but before long, I transitioned into the North American F-86 Sabre jet.

Now that airplane... that was something else entirely.

The F-86 was, without question, the finest aircraft I ever flew. It had speed, power, and just enough attitude to remind you that you were no longer easing through the sky - you were charging through it.

While flying with the Guard, I learned I could spend a year on active duty with the Air Defense Mission. Their job was to monitor radar stations on the islands off the Southern California coast and keep an eye on anything in the sky that didn't file a flight plan - or didn't feel like behaving.

That suited me just fine, because I had developed a particular interest in unidentified flying objects - UFOs, as we called them - ever since my time in World War II. Let's just say I was more than a little curious... and quietly hoping I might run into one.

Turns out, I didn't have to wait long.

One day, we were scrambled to investigate a radar contact - a bogie sitting perfectly still at about 50,000 feet over Los Angeles. My wingman and I went full throttle toward the target, climbing hard through 37,000 feet. Before long, we both had it in sight.

It was cigar-shaped. No wings. No visible propulsion. No explanation.

We were closing in when, without warning, it accelerated and disappeared so fast it made us look like we were backing up. And that was that - no chase, no second look, just gone.

I had a few more encounters like that during my time on active duty, and after a while, I came to a conclusion: we might not be alone in this universe. Now, I realize that's not something you put in a standard flight report - but I saw what I saw.

Somewhere in between chasing unidentified objects and keeping the skies tidy, I managed to accomplish something a little more official. In 1954, I was awarded membership in the "Mach Busters Club" by North American Aviation for flying the F-86 faster than the speed of sound.

Breaking the sound barrier in that aircraft was something you didn't forget.

Then again, neither was chasing something that didn't seem to follow any rules at all, namely UFOs.



## CHAPTER 13     *The Guinness Book World's Smallest Piloted Airplane*

In 1955, I moved my family to Tempe, Arizona - where the weather was better for flying and the ideas seemed to come a little faster. Not long after arriving, I met a fellow named Orville Lloyd, who was in the middle of designing an experimental two-place biplane he called the Liberty Sport at Falcon Field in Mesa.

Naturally, I got involved.

I helped build it and handled the flight testing, which is a polite way of saying I was the one who got to find out if all the good ideas actually worked. It was a great project, and I enjoyed working with Orville. He later moved on to Salt Lake City and, from what I heard, kept right on building airplanes - which tells me he had the same condition I did: once you start, you don't really want to stop.

When the Liberty Sport project wrapped up, I turned my attention back to something that had been sitting in the back of my mind for quite a while. I wanted another shot at the title.

Back in 1950's, I had been the co-builder - and the only test pilot to successfully fly - the Sky Baby without turning it into spare parts. My partner on that project was a capable builder, but flying it required a slightly different skill set - and a willingness to accept a certain level of... risk.

From flying both JR and Sky Baby, I had learned exactly what worked - and more importantly, what didn't. I knew I could design something lighter, safer, and more refined. The idea was simple: build a better airplane, and take back the record properly this time for myself.

Of course, "simple" doesn't always mean "quick." It took me about 25 years to get around to it.

Finally, in 1980, I started building my next contender right in my garage in Tempe. I called it the Bumble Bee I, and I affectionately referred to my garage as the "skunk works" - a nod to the legendary Lockheed Skunk Works. My version wasn't quite as secret, but it had just as much determination packed into it.

This time, I wasn't just building an airplane. I was settling unfinished business.



## The flight of... The Bumble Bees

At first glance, most engineers and professional pilots had the same reaction to my little airplane: "I don't believe it can fly." I took that as encouragement.

Both of my Bumble Bees flew - maybe not in a way that made anyone feel completely relaxed - but they flew. They were aerodynamically sound, even if they demanded your full attention and then some. Flying them wasn't casual; it was more like a firm handshake with physics.

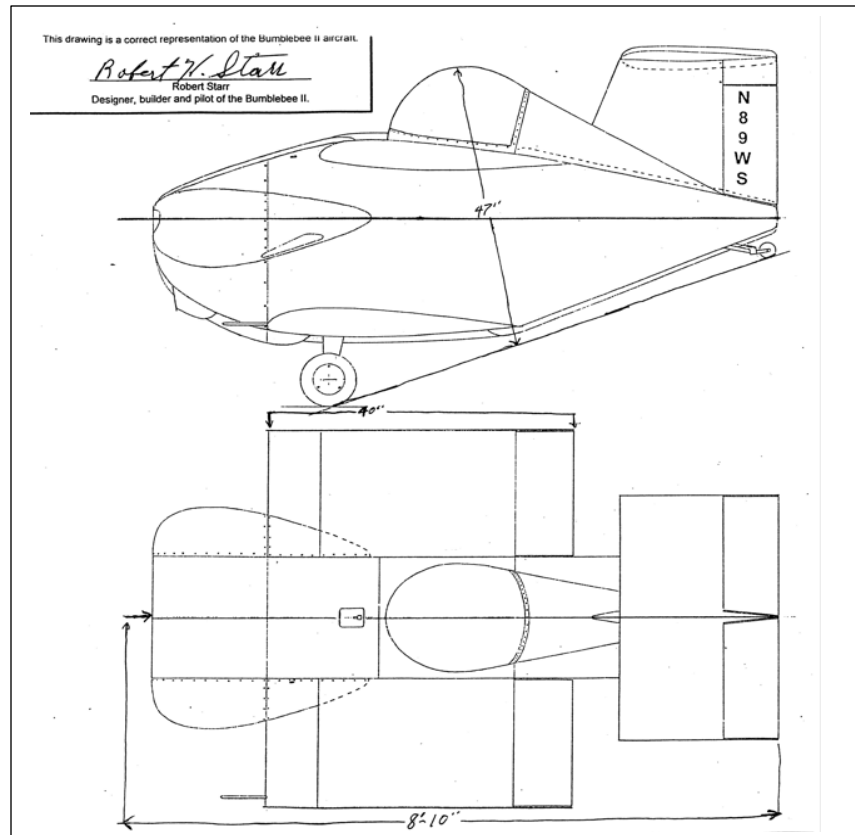
### SPECIFICATIONS:

#### 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 took the Bumble Bee I up for the official record in 1984. It was a challenge, no question - but even at age 60, I figured I still had a little edge left. I named it "Bumble Bee" for a reason. According to popular belief, a bumblebee doesn't have enough wing area to fly - but no one ever told the bee, so it flies anyway.

That seemed like a good philosophy. And just like that - the record was mine.

A couple of years later, in 1986, Len Clements from Channel Ten in Phoenix flew down to Marana, Arizona, where I had been testing the airplane with my son Bob. They filmed me flying the Bumble Bee, and I ended up with some pretty fine footage of that little machine doing exactly what people said it couldn't.

I gathered up all the proof and sent it off to the Guinness World Records. They agreed - I had the smallest piloted biplane in the world. Now, naturally, I wasn't finished.

The original Bumble Bee I weighed in at 520 pounds empty, and I knew I could do better. So, in 1988, I built the Bumble Bee II - smaller, lighter, and even more ambitious at just 396 pounds. It flew successfully and claimed the record once again - a title it still holds today decades later.

Of course, progress in aviation occasionally comes with a reminder that gravity is always part of the equation.

During one flight in the Bumble Bee II, the engine quit on the downwind leg. That's not the kind of silence you enjoy. I brought it down as best I could, but the airplane was totaled, and I spent some time in the hospital. Fortunately, I recovered - though I can't say the airplane did.

The original Bumble Bee I, however, lives on. It's on permanent display at the Pima Air and Space Museum, which I think is a fine resting place for a little airplane that made a lot of noise in the record books.

By 2007, I had logged over 15,000 hours of stick time - everything from crop dusting to military flying. I've had the privilege of flying aircraft at both extremes: from the smallest airplanes in the world to the North American F-86 Sabre at supersonic speeds.

Not a bad range.

Flying has given me more than I could have ever asked for. It's taken me across the world, tested me in ways I didn't always expect, and introduced me to people and experiences I wouldn't trade for anything.

I've also been fortunate to have a family that supported me through all of it - through the building, the flying, and the occasional hard landing.

All things considered, I'd say life treated me pretty well.

Robert H. Starr (1924 - 2009)



## Robert Starr and Bumble Bee Weblinks:

Home page: [World's Smallest Piloted Airplane – Guinness Book World Record Smallest Airplane](#)

YouTube Channel: <https://www.youtube.com/@rseincorp>

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](#)



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