

STANDING TALL, FLYING HIGH
(Aviation Trilogy: FLYING HIGH)
By Carlton E. Spitzer

(Slim man in flying coveralls stands center stage looking skyward — points to imaginary plane)

(Excitedly)

That's a DH-4 mail plane with a Liberty engine. Yes it is! How I'd love to fly that silver bird.

(Turns to imaginary friends)

You guys can laugh . . . but someday . . . one day . . . I will . . . I will.

(Lowers hand slowly, looks at audience)

I was born under the sign of Lindbergh. We arrived in this world on the same day, February 4 — he in 1902 — I in 1916. His mother taught at my school in Detroit — Cass Technical. I felt connected to him.

(Shakes head ruefully)

But I was the only one in my family that thought about flying airplanes.

I could think of nothing else. I spent many hours building models of all kinds — and didn't speak to my sister for weeks after she sat on my favorite. I wished she'd gotten splinters for her carelessness. No luck.

(Climbs into chair as if it were a cockpit)

May 5, 1930 — that's a date I remember as well as my birthday. I'd saved for weeks to accumulate the grand sum of three dollars for my first airplane ride at Detroit City Airport . . . in an open cockpit Waco — N number C4045 — yellow wings and green fuselage.

(Excitedly)

The engine started with a mighty roar and the whole plane vibrated. I was shaking harder than the plane. As we taxied to a runway — a young white

kid by the fence waved dollar bills to tell the pilot in the rear cockpit he wanted to come along.

The kid and I shook hands as he climbed into the wide front cockpit. To tell you the truth, I was grateful for his company.

Once airborne — our fears forgotten — we thrilled to the sight of the Detroit River — big buildings downtown — and my favorite park — Belle Isle.

Those fifteen minutes — fifteen precious minutes — filled me with a fierce determination to fly — to make my dream a reality.

(Stands — paces back and forth stiffly)

Reality? Get a grip on yourself Neal. A poor black kid learning to fly? Who would teach you? Where would you get such money?

(Grins broadly)

Several months later I'd saved enough from odd jobs to take my mother with me — for a flight in a closed cabin plane — a handsome Stinson Reliant. The day was smooth as glass — and the pilot — seeing mother's pleasure — turned to point out landmarks. She stared at him sternly — “Young man — turn around and keep your eyes on the road.”

Mom and I formed a bond that day — and I continued to share my dreams with her. It helped me deal with constant ridicule and discouragement — from my own father — and most of my pals.

My aviation teacher at Cass warned me there'd be no job for a Negro — even if I passed the course. I thanked him and studied all the harder — passing the course with good marks.

But I kept getting reality checks. A white friend who'd already soloed sponsored my membership in the Cass Aero Club.

I was promptly rejected. The club would not admit a Negro.

(Mops his brow with handkerchief)

We were so poor we often couldn't pay the rent. It hurts me to tell you this — but we were evicted nine times — and I kept on changing schools . . . right up to the day I entered Cass Tech.

I graduated on a cold, drizzly January morning in 1934 wearing my father's dress shoes — two sizes too large — clutching my aeronautics diploma with fierce pride — and considerable relief.

I must say my instructor — Mr. Tabraham — always encouraged me. And other white mentors helped me along the way. I think of them often with gratitude — and respect. They took a lot of heat from their white friends for going out of their way to help a black man.

(Picks up model airplane)

In the midst of the Great Depression, a Negro minister and a Negro Lawyer helped me get a job in President Roosevelt's WPA program — teaching model airplane design and construction. I gave mother most of my eighty-five dollar monthly salary to keep house — the rest went for flying lessons.

(Smiling broadly)

I soloed in a Piper Cub on April 20, 1939 and began my life's work designing, building and flying experimental gliders and airplanes.

My best-known plane — on permanent display at the Experimental Aircraft Association's museum at Oshkosh, Wisconsin — is named Loving's Love. I flew that bright red midget racing plane from Detroit to Jamaica . . . (Looks toward sky, remembering) . . . over miles and miles of open water.

I refueled in Atlanta and stayed overnight at a Negro hotel . . . for only a Negro hotel would welcome me in a strictly segregated society.

In the morning a Negro cab driver drove me toward the airline terminal. (Protesting) No — no — driver, I have my own plane on the other side of the field.

He gave me one of those looks (Makes face). (Beaming) But his smirk disappeared and his eyes popped open when a circle of white pilots parted to watch me climb into my tiny red racer. (Pause) It was a glorious moment.

I met my dear Clare on that trip to Jamaica and we married two years later.

(Stands, walks stiffly to other side of stage)

Like all human beings I've had my share of challenges — and disappointments. I learned long ago to measure a person by the way they respond to setbacks. We all have them.

Like many others, I've known poverty — discrimination — and injustice — and my share of pain — physical and emotional. I must quickly add I've also had days of pure joy — high above Mother Earth — singing aloud as I circled puffy cumulous clouds . . . and many joyful years with my dear Clare as well.

(Sits in chair, hands on imaginary controls)

It was on a beautiful Sunday morning in 1944 that my life changed suddenly — drastically.

In flying one must check things out thoroughly — on the ground. We call it pre-flight. It pays to be methodical — uncompromising about the airworthiness of the aircraft one is about to fly — and mindful of one's own physical and mental preparedness — on any given day. It matters little how many hours one has flown previously. What matters is how well one pilots today.

(Shakes head remorsefully)

On that lovely morning I had my mind on an afternoon picnic with my girl friend — and less on preparing a glider for flight I'd designed and built. I tell you this with chagrin — but I must be truthful so you might benefit from my painful lesson.

If you are in a hurry — don't fly an airplane. That's not a contradiction. It's the best advice I can give you.

(Pauses, remembering)

The airport was under construction. Grassy areas near a runway I normally used for landing the glider were piled high with dirt. I failed to set my airspeed indicator properly. The tow line from glider to the car that would pull me aloft was shorter than I would have liked.

Yes, yes — you are right — I should not have flown. But my students had come to see the glider fly and I did not want to disappoint them.

(Hands move to describe accident)

I had less airspeed than indicated on the dial — and when I turned at low altitude to land — well, a wing stalled — I spun to the left — turf rushing up to meet me. (Gesturing wildly) I managed to recover from the spin — but hit the ground nose down.

The impact crushed my legs — smashed my face — pushing one eye out of its socket so it rested on my cheek (Gestures). Pain was excruciating. I lost consciousness and awoke in a hospital. It became my home for several months. Doctors amputated one leg immediately — the other a few weeks later — both below the knee. My sight was impaired but intact.

My girl friend quickly decided she didn't want a legless boy friend with a smashed face. Friends — I hit bottom physically and emotionally. The good nuns at the hospital helped me regain my composure — and positive spirit. I've been forever grateful to them.

Eighteen months later I opened a flying school at Detroit Airport where I had taken my first airplane ride — walking on two artificial legs. I quickly learned to manage without crutches or cane. Later — when I met with young people — they wouldn't believe I was disabled — until I took off one of my legs. Then they got all apologetic. To put them at ease I assured them artificial legs have their advantages.

You can wear any shoe size . . . and be as tall as you like. I must say new lightweight legs are a great improvement over the original wooden ones.

I became the first black racing pilot in America — and the only legless one (laughs).

After designing — building and racing experimental planes for fifteen years — I decided — in my forties mind you — to enter college to earn a degree in aeronautical engineering — so I could do what I had been doing all my life with a technical school education (laughs).

Returning to school was difficult — but with Clare’s loving support — the professor’s patience — and my own perseverance — I graduated and accepted employment as a civilian engineer with the United States Air Force at Wright Patterson Air Force Base near Dayton, Ohio.

For the next twenty years I traveled the world — working on high altitude missions and other exciting projects.

(Taps knees)

I had several sets of legs over the years and “grew” an inch taller. (Grins)

Until I was almost eighty years of age I could pass the FAA physical and regularly flew a plane I’d designed and built I kept in my garage at Yellow Springs, Ohio.

Neighbors would wave as I towed the Loving WR-3 behind my car to a grass field down the road — lock its folding wings into place — climb into the rear cockpit and take to the sky. That plane was a pleasure to fly. Today it’s on display at an air museum in Huntington, Indiana.

When health problems grounded me, Clare urged me to make a record of my experience to encourage other disabled persons they need not be handicapped — and if they wanted to fly — well — they surely could.

My book — Loving’s Love: A Black American’s Experience in Aviation — was published by Smithsonian Press in 1994. I hope you’ll find time to read it.

My message to kids is this: discover what you like to do best — and learn to do it so well someone will pay you for doing it. For me it was flying — and designing and building experimental planes.

Friends — I faced poverty — discrimination — physical trauma and mental anguish. But let me share a personal conviction before I leave you — No challenge is too great if you have the courage to follow your dream — and live your life fully — with faith in God and trust in your fellow man.

(Walks slowly, stiffly off stage, turns)

Believe me . . . I know it's true.
