



A SPIRIT IN THE WIND

STORY AND PHOTOS BY FRED BLOCK

When the call came in and I saw that it was my friend Matt, I had a feeling it was going to be good, but as it turns out, I had no idea of just how good.

We met when I was living in Georgia, spending many evenings on his wraparound porch in Savannah, talking about all sorts of fun & adventure, but mostly about flying. At that time, he had a bit of stick time from flying with his dad, but no license yet, and he was planning on taking lessons — someday. Matt told me about how he grew up at an airport, and how as a kid he helped his dad manage the place, along with the family crop dusting business. He also told me about his dad passing away years ago in a flying accident, and I still remember how awful I felt to hear of his loss. But when Matt told stories about hangar flying with his dad and the guys, I could hear in his voice how proud he was and how important those experiences were to him while growing up. The way I saw it, he was born into aviation, and the passion for flying was in his blood — it was just a matter of time before he officially became a pilot.

When I moved to Colorado, we still kept up and I was very happy to hear he finally started those lessons. We talked often and I could hear the determination in his voice, and I could tell there was no question he was going to get his license. I followed along through his initial training and was

happy when he soloed and began cross-country ops. When the phone rang, I answered with a hunch that our conversation would be another fun one...

"Hey captain, how's it goin'?" I greeted.

"Hey buddy, I was thinking of flying to Oshkosh next summer — wanna go?"

KABOOM!!!!

There wasn't actually any sound, but the explosion of thoughts going off in my head felt like it should've been audible. The initial impact seemed to shake loose just about every memory I have of growing up and flying out of KOSH — in an instant, thoughts of all of the amazing things to see and experience there came bursting into my mind — the incredible planes of every shape, size, color and personality, with pilots to match. Memories of family and friends, and seemingly endless inspiration. The next wave was filled with thoughts of all the planning and gear prep. Turns out my hunch was right — this was going to be a fun call. Having a little fun with Matt, I tried to drum up some faux-nonchalance...

"Sure — sounds like that *might* be kinda cool."

We laughed for a second, thinking about how fun it would be, and with that settled, we immediately dug into the plans. First, Matt would take an airliner from Savannah to Denver — then we'd fly a Cessna 152 from Denver to Oshkosh. Once we got there, we'd play it by ear and have a ton of fun at the airshow. A nice, simple plan.

Matt arrived the night before our departure and we had a million things to talk about — a perfect night to grab some beers and catch up, but we decided to save those for the trip. Since we had an early takeoff time planned, we tried to get some much-needed rest before our long day of flying.

The next morning, we got an updated weather briefing, pre-flighted, refueled, untied, started up, got the info, called for clearance — and just like that, we were actually rolling out to the runway, officially on our way. What a feeling! Everything looked good on running, and with a quick call to tower, we were cleared for takeoff. We were off, and with a gradual turn to the right, the Rockies were at our backs as we headed out over the plains. We leveled off at our cruising altitude — but the ground, getting lower and flatter, mile by mile, began its gradual descent towards the sea.

Matt was excited about how many Ag planes we saw out crop dusting — from our altitude they looked more like little toys than the big machines they are.

Everything was going great, and the only thing we might have changed were the winds. Picking up a bit, unfortunately, they weren't headed our way. There was no arguing with the wind, and soon enough, it became clear that we'd need to deviate from the plan.

By this point, we were over Nebraska, with its vast, wide open spaces; sometimes dotted with seemingly endless crop circles, while at other times looking almost like a lunar landscape of green, and nothing human in sight for as far as the eye can see. If you're ever looking for more elbow room, head to Nebraska.

At times like this, when you need to deviate, an iPad loaded with flight apps really shines — easily delivering the needed info so you can make a quick decision and focus on flying the plane. Our best option ended up being an airport off our left wingtip. After turning on course, we practiced some good old-fashioned pilotage and dead-reckoning, re-plotting our course on the paper chart, and re-running the numbers. Soon enough, we had the field in sight.

We were fueled up and ready to go in short order — but Matt spotted an Ag plane hangar across the ramp, so we decided to stretch our legs a little and walk over to check it out. No one was in the hangar, so we popped



our heads in the office to see if anyone was around, and a friendly woman named Connie got up from her desk to greet us. We introduced ourselves, and Matt explained that he had grown up helping his dad run an Ag-flying business, and how being in that office brought back memories for him. Soon enough, Connie and Matt were laughing, comparing notes about the crop dusting life, when eventually she asked, "...and what did you say your dad's name is again?"

"Noah Hutton."

Connie did one of those little shift & pause moves you do when a part of you recognizes something, but you're not sure yet what it is.

"You know, that name sounds kinda familiar. Would you like to hang around for a few more minutes until my husband Phil gets back in? I'm curious to see if he knows your dad. He's out on a flight right now, but should be back in 5-10 minutes." We said we'd love to, and thanked her again for the coffee and snacks she kindly offered us.

Sure enough, a few minutes later, the door swung open and a man walked past us as we drank our coffee and tapped our course changes into the iPad. We heard Phil and Connie talking, and soon enough, she brought him over to introduce us.

"Phil, these guys landed for some fuel and stopped by to talk some crop dusting," motioning Phil over to Matt. "It turns out that his dad used to run a few Ag planes. What did you say his name is again — Noah Hutton?"

After hearing that, Phil turned right to Matt, stopping a few seconds with a quizzical look on his face — eyes squinted a touch, head cocked just to the side, while his brain ran its search. Eventually, it seemed the answer was delivered, and with it Phil's body changed. His eyes squinted a bit further, almost in disbelief, and his head dropped forward and a bit more to the side. There was a palpable moment of silence before his question finally made it's impact...

"Matt????!!!!"

KABOOM!!!!

Once again, there was no sound, but this time, all of us most definitely felt our own explosion of thoughts. Mine went something like this: *Wait a second! Did he just ask him if his name is Matt? But Connie didn't introduce us by name. All she said was Noah Hutton, and somehow, Phil knew Matt's name! What's going on? How did he know Matt's name?*

I looked to Matt, and then to Connie, and they both seemed as stunned as I was. But it was all coming together for Phil, and what he said took our breath away.

"You know, I've known you since you were about this tall," motioning down to about knee height. "I'd been flying radials and it was your dad who gave me my first turbine to play with. We became good friends over the years and I remember meeting you when you were just a baby. Unfortunately, we lost touch with your family after your dad passed away."

And with his own explosion of thoughts and memories, Phil went on to share a few moving stories with us as he reminisced about his old buddy Noah. Then, as he paused for a moment, slowly inhaling a long, deep breath, I could see he was starting to get a bit choked up.

I looked over to Matt, who by now must be overwhelmed by the unexpected connection with his father, and I saw tears begin to flow. Suddenly, I felt what seemed like an invisible vice-grip around my neck, choking me up to the point where I couldn't have said a word if I tried. You couldn't help but feel Matt's emotion, and as I looked around, I could see there wasn't a dry eye left in the house.

When Phil picked up with more stories, it became clear how much he really knew Matt and his dad. This was not just some passing acquaintance, this was a long-lost family friend. And to think, if we hadn't made our *Inception*-esque diversion-within-a-diversion, Matt may have never had the experience of learning a little more about his own life. The first diversion was our unplanned stop at a random airport in the middle-of-nowhere — the second was our walk to check out the Ag hangar. Without these seemingly random diversions, this reunion might never have happened.



After a few funny stories, Phil had us all laughing again. Matt was beaming like a little kid, proudly listening to stories about his dad's flying exploits. Soon enough though, it was time for Phil to head out on another spraying mission — but before he left, he handed Matt the keys to his brand new truck and pointed us into town for lunch at the local's favorite spot. We waved as he taxied out, and stopping at the departure end of the runway we watched as he blasted off, rocking his wings goodbye.

We drove into town pretty much speechless, hardly believing what had just happened. We rode along, replaying the scene in our minds, thinking of the odds of what had just happened. There wasn't much we could do besides laugh and shake our heads, looking at each other like, "Did you just see that?"

We decided rather than wolfing down our food and rushing off back into the air, we would really savor the moment, try to take it all in, and enjoy our lunch while we finished re-planning the rest of the flight. Although it was only bar food, our lunch tasted like the best thing we'd ever eaten. The iced tea was just right, and the bar-b-que sandwiches with toasted buns seemed perfect.

But there's only so long you can sit and talk about going to Oshkosh — it was time to get going. We dropped off Phil's truck, preflighted and were ready to rock. As we took off, I couldn't help but to think that our 152 was feeling the magic too, as it seemed to really want to go, despite being fully loaded. We rocked our wings, said thanks again to everyone over Unicorn, and grabbed a quick photo of downtown as we departed to the southeast. And just like that, once again we were flying over the vastness of the plains, but now filled with a bit more awe and wonder, not to mention a renewed love for airplanes and airplane people.

We made it to Oshkosh, and despite it being one of the wettest ever (Splashkosh 2010, aka MudVenture), we had a complete blast, just as we



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planned. We saw amazing planes, met great people, had those beers we waited for, and had a fun time sharing Matt's reunion story. For me, it was especially nice to see my parents and have some of my mom's home-made jambalaya. Without a doubt, the trip was everything we hoped for, plus some.

Not long after the show, with the aviation juices flowing, Matt wrapped up his training and got his Private Pilot License. He went on to purchase a Diamond DA40, and after logging some family cross-country time and getting dialed-in on the G1000, he's now readying for his instrument checkride. Meanwhile, Matt's four-year-old son Noah, named after his crop-dusting granddad, is already taking after his dad and grandfather, and is learning to fly. Lucky little guy — aviation is most definitely in his blood.



But the thing that still amazes me the most is how those seemingly random diversions on a cross-country led to an unexpected reunion, reconnecting two families. Phil and Connie have not only visited Matt and his family in Savannah, their son Kent now lives there and works for Matt's landscaping business. If it weren't for the wind that day on our trip to Oshkosh, who knows if the reunion would have ever happened? I'm still astounded by the luck of it all.

For me, this is another one of those times when flight lessons correlate to life lessons — the lesson being that diversions can lead to amazing things. That I shouldn't get too worried about being blown off track a bit sometimes, because who knows who I might meet, or what might surprise me along the way. I don't want to be just diverting all over the place, in fact I think the most important thing is to not lose sight of getting where I'm going in the first place. But if I can hone my adaptability, and also trust my determination, I can be open for those serendipitous moments, and still have the confidence of knowing I'll arrive at my destination. In that sense, I can sort of get the best of both worlds. Or maybe to put it another way, sometimes I need to stand up to the wind with everything I have — other times I just need to go with the flow.

But of all the thoughts and insights that came to mind while retelling the story, I think my favorite was from my Uncle Richard, a retired Air Force Colonel. After listening, he smiled and said matter-of-factly,

"Matt's father was in the wind that day, and he wanted you to land to meet his friends."

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