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Papa Louie, the Old Radio, and Flying

Fulfilling a father's promise

BY DANIEL PIMENTELR (From *AOPA Pilot*, October 1998.)

When I was a very young boy, my father and I had a plan. Maybe it was just so much blue-sky dreaming, but it was our plan, and it was great.

From as early as I can remember, my dad, whom we affectionately called Papa Louie, liked airplanes. He had friends who flew, and he went up as a passenger any time the opportunity arose. It was my dad's goal to learn to fly and to eventually buy an airplane of his own. He would then teach me to fly it, and I would spend eternity flying him and his friends all over as my dad's own personal charter pilot.

Yes, that was "the plan," and it kept our aviation fires burning for years. Two flying nuts we were, found at warbird shows often — when we were not parked at the observation lot of Fresno's air terminal watching the airplanes land. There was something wonderful about the combination of hanging out with Dad and watching airplanes fly overhead.

But that was 1966, and the 30-plus years since then have brought about many changes.

My father's interest in flying came through listening to aviation radio chatter that boomed out of the family's proud old 1940s-era Zenith All-Band radio. While most receivers back then were lucky to drag in a scratchy AM signal, the "Old Radio," its carved wood cabinet standing more than four feet tall, was a technological marvel of its time.

The premier model in the Zenith line, the Old Radio lived up to its "all-band" name all right, pulling in everything from ship-to-shore and police calls to distant AM signals; shortwave broadcasts from around the globe; and, of course, all the communications bands used by commercial and military aviators.

With its many vacuum tubes glowing long into the night, my father and friends would sit around the Old Radio, listening to DC-3 pilots dancing with fog banks as they attempted near-zero-zero landings at San Francisco. Often heard were military pilots flying off to war; the heroic voices of these "soldiers of the air" crackling through the Old Radio's large speaker may have been, at times, among the last words some of America's most courageous aviators would ever transmit.

The Old Radio came into my life as it passed down through generations and, looking as if it may have seen its better days, found a corner of our Fresno garage to call home in 1966. It was mostly used for background noise as Dad fixed a car or two, with the radio's big ivory selector knob usually glued to Papa Louie's favorite country-western music station.

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Growing up, I was always amused by the Old Radio, with its big dial filled with frequency numbers calling out for me to investigate. A quick bicycle trip to the local Radio Shack provided me with the books and equipment to rig up a long-wire antenna atop our home; and with a flick of its big power switch, the Old Radio instantly came alive again.

Soon, the corner of our garage became my "listening post" to the world, and it often took a crowbar to get me away from the intrigue of that radio. There wasn't anything that old beast could not pull in, and even measured by 1990s standards, the reception, clarity, and frequency selectivity of the Old Radio would make most modern receivers run and hide.

I had been known to cruise the shortwave bands, but what kept me staring at the Old Radio for hours was the aviation bands and, of course, the radio calls of the Fresno Police Department. My father was a beat cop with FPD back then, and I spent many nights with friends and neighbors listening to live cops-and-robbers action coming from the Old Radio, always hoping to hear Dad's voice as he captured yet another bad guy.

He was my hero.

It became almost ritualistic to me, listening to the Fresno airport tower on the Old Radio each afternoon after school, waiting for the next airplane to be cleared for takeoff. If I was lucky, it would be a United 707, but to a wide-eyed 12-year-old future pilot, it really didn't matter. From a Piper Cub to the National Guard's swept-wing Delta Darts, everything that departed Fresno to the west flew into my view as I sat at my garage listening post, hanging on to every word that the pilots and controllers said.

While most kids were playing with G.I. Joe action figures, listening to The Monkees, and watching *Gilligan's Island*, I was happily memorizing the flight schedules of the major airlines that departed Fresno. When the weekend came, my friends knew where to find me. If not perched before the Old Radio, they could find me hanging on the airport fence.

This enthusiasm for aviation kept hold of me and my dad for much of my young adult life. But family obligations always stood in the way for either one of us to actually begin flight school. It wasn't until he retired from police work and was free of the financial burden of raising kids that my dad was able to finally get started on his private pilot certificate.

As could only be expected for a guy who had enjoyed a love affair with airplanes for much of his life, he jumped in with both feet at age 62 and was well on his way to his ticket when fate dealt him a surprise blow. With 25.1 long-overdue hours logged, my father died suddenly of a stroke, never having soloed and leaving behind a legacy that I personally could never attempt to match.

At his funeral, I silently promised to finally get my pilot certificate in his honor so at least one of us could fulfill our dream to fly. Yet, following in his footsteps, I too had a family to support, so it took a few years to put the proper funding in place to begin learning to fly. After about 65 hours of sheer bliss mixed with an occasional somber emotion, Steve Murray, my CFI, pushed me hard and gave me the skills to proudly pass my checkride in September 1996.

Papa Louie would have bought Steve a beer for a job well done.

Over the years, the Old Radio was the catalyst that created the lust for aviation that both Papa Louie and I enjoyed. It was the center of attention and the place where we both fell in love with airplanes. But time is an old tube set's worst enemy, and with its wires frayed and its connections dusty and brittle, this proud old receiver, after more than 50 years of tireless duty to our family, finally gave up the ghost and now stands at rest in the entry hall of my new home.

The antique Old Radio is surely a family keepsake, but my pilot's certificate is now, and will forever be, my most prized possession. Each time I fly, I think about "the plan" that I had with Papa Louie and about how proud he must be, knowing that I am now able to enjoy the title of pilot in command.

As I go about the business of flying, usually having fun just poking holes in the sky, I cannot forget the one thing that makes it special to me, and only me. When I am up there, cruising through the sky high above the crust of this planet, I am always a few thousand feet closer to Papa Louie, in a spiritual sense.

And maybe one day when fate tries to deal me a blow and knocks me and my airplane from the sky, just as it did when I used to fall off my bike learning to ride, you can bet my dad will be there to lend a hand and save the day.

After all, we were a team, and we had a plan.

Daniel Pimentel is a journalist and graphic designer in Sanger, California. He holds a private pilot certificate and has accumulated 110 hours in three years of flying.

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