

back to one of the farms scattered here and there. When we'd passed four of the roads and found each one of them iced over, Archie stopped the car. "This is as good a place as any to start. How do you want to do this?"

We all turned and looked at Carl. He was looking away from us, in front of the car, down the long ditch, which stretched to the horizon. It was full of snow and nearly level with the road, with small ripple-drifts from the wind that blew across the huge open area. Where the snow in the ditch came up to each small crossroad, there was only a slight bump, then ten feet or so of icy snow on the road and then a slight bump back down into the ditch.

"How do you want to do this?" Archie repeated. "I have to work this afternoon."

We had planned it and talked about it most of the night. Carl nodded and said softly, "I'll get in the ditch and we'll tie the rope to the back bumper. You start slow and pick it up until you get to seventy-five miles an hour." He stopped and looked at Archie, a new authority in his voice. "Will your car do seventy-five?"

Normally this would have constituted a grave insult, but Archie only nodded. "She'll do better than that."

Carl smiled. "That's all I want. The man in the newsreel did just over seventy-four. If we do seventy-five I'll have the record."

The way he said it, so clean and simple and straightforward, he made it sound as if it would be a walk in the park. Carl clumped into the ditch on the skis and we tied one end of the parachute cord to the bumper and Archie ran the car a hundred feet down the gravel road, driving on the left so he'd be close to the ditch, and we handed the other end of the rope to Carl.

He tied a double knot at the end so it wouldn't slip out of his hands and then lined himself up in the middle of the ditch and nodded.

"All right. Let's go."

Archie let the clutch out carefully, eased it out until the rope was tight, looked back, saw Carl nod and started out.

Carl fell flat on his face and let go of the rope.

With the thick paraffin wax binding to the cold snow, the skis didn't move at all.

"The skis are stuck," he said, getting up. "I think it's the wax." He thought a moment and then said, "All right. I'll tie a loop in the rope around my wrist so I won't let go. You start slow and I'll lean back until the wax is rubbed off, then you go faster and faster until we break the record."

Archie looked at him, then shrugged. "We'll need a signal. Some way for you to tell us when you're ready to go faster."

"I'll hold up my thumb when I want you to go faster, hold it down when I want you to slow down." Carl demonstrated with the big gunner's mitts and the thumb stood up, easily seen.

"I'll watch for the signal," I said.

"I'll be ready with the camera," Wayne said. He had the camera because he was sitting in the back-seat on the same side as the ditch.

"I'll be ready to give first aid," Alan said.

Archie said nothing but coolly got back in the car.

And for a second or two it seemed as if it might

work. Archie let the clutch out, Carl leaned back and wrapped the rope around his wrist and the rope tightened and Carl started to move.

Slowly at first, as the wax first smeared, then scraped off his skis. I watched carefully as the load came onto the rope and the stretch came out of it and Carl's thumb was pointed straight up.

"Faster," I hollered over the noise of the wind. I had the window open so I could see better. "He wants to go faster!"

"Thirty miles an hour," Archie yelled. "No, thirty-five, now forty..."

I squinted. Some snow blew up off the road, obscuring Carl a bit, but then it cleared as the speed increased and I could see him better.

"More speed!" I cried. "His thumb is still up."

"He seems," Alan said, sounding exactly like a Mountie, "to be in complete control of his situation."

"Fifty!" Archie yelled. "Fifty-five..."

I glanced quickly out of the corner of my eye to see if Wayne had the camera ready but he was looking at the steering wheel knob and as I

watched he raised the camera and tried to take a picture of it.

"Wayne!" I bellowed. "Get ready!"

Then I looked back at Carl. He was really moving now, the skis cleaned off and the rope taut. And Alan seemed to be right, Carl was in control. We came upon the first crossroad and Carl leaned back, looking for all the world like a professional water-skier: He slapped the skis up over the small bump, slid cleanly over the icy road and dropped neatly into the ditch on the other side.

"Sixty!" Archie screamed. "Sixty-one, -two, -three..."

I looked into the ditch and through the wind and snow and I thought now that perhaps things weren't going as smoothly as I had thought. The goggles were tinted but still I could see that Carl's eyes looked larger—they seemed to fill the goggles. Maybe we should begin to slow the car down a bit.

But the thumb was still pointed up, straight up, wonderfully and courageously up, and I nodded at Carl, marveling at his bravery.

"He wants to go for it!" I slapped Archie on the shoulder, something I never would have done before then. You didn't touch Archie. But to illustrate the intensity of the moment, Archie didn't seem to notice. Instead he nodded and yelled, "I didn't believe the little bugger had it in him!" and floored the pedal.

The Ford seemed to leap ahead.

"Seventy!" Archie screamed. "Seventy-one, -two, -five, -six... he's got it! He's got the record!"

I waved out the window at Carl and gave him the thumbs-up signal. But he didn't seem to notice. He was in a semicrouch, one arm holding the rope and the other waving, or trying to wave as the wind slapped it down and back like a rag.

"Oooohhhhhhh!" Carl screamed. I couldn't believe it. He was yelling "Goooooo!" The thumb was still straight up—he wanted to go faster!

"Eighty." Archie shook his head. "That's all I can get—eighty-two and a half miles an hour!"

And then it happened.

I turned and looked ahead and saw to my

horror that we were coming up to the next cross-road and that the grader had been there and planed the icy snow down.

It was bare gravel.

And before I could think or say anything Carl bumped over the small snow bump next to the road and landed at almost exactly eighty-two and a half miles an hour in the middle of the gravel.

We would learn that somewhere early on in the run, after approximately thirty-five miles an hour, Carl realized that he had made a terrible mistake and that he did not want to go any faster, did not want to try to break the record and most emphatically did not want to go to eighty-two and a half miles an hour.

He had tried to scream, had bellowed, "No!" but all we heard was "Oooooohhhh!" The rest was torn away by the wind.

He had tried to wave but the wind just knocked his arm down and on a bump the rope went slack and then tightened and caught his right arm around the wrist so he couldn't get it loose, couldn't signal

with that arm either. And then, because the speed gods had apparently taken over his life and *they* wanted to see him break the record—as Wayne said—or because he was just plain unlucky—as Alan said—or because he was dumb as a fence post—as Archie said—the same loop that caught his wrist had snagged the right thumb on his flight mitten, jerked it off his thumb and twisted it in such a way as to make the empty mitten thumb stand straight in the air, as if Carl wanted to go faster and faster. . . .

But for now, we watched in awe.

The skis stopped dead.

Stopped dead when they hit the gravel and Carl skipped out of them like a rock across the top of a pond—that is, if the rock weighed a hundred and thirty-five pounds and if it were made out of flesh and blood encased in sheepskin and if it were being towed by a car at over eighty miles an hour, and if the water were snow and ice.

Wayne was still looking at the steering wheel knob and Alan had turned for a moment to look at

the road, this being the first time he had ever gone over eighty miles an hour.

But I was watching Carl, looking for his signal. For a second he reminded me of a swordfish I'd seen in a newsreel that had jumped out of the water and was trying to shake the hook out of its mouth.

Carl did not hit the gravel road, which was a miracle because it would probably have killed him. Instead when the skis stopped he seemed to spring into the air, clearing the rest of the road and flying into the snow on the other side, burrowing in for half a second or so, then exploding out, almost vertical, his hands twisting like the swordfish's head as he tried to rip himself loose from the rope.

He failed. At the height of his arc the rope snapped tight at eighty miles an hour and snaked him back under the snow, where for two heartbeats he looked for all the world like a high-speed gopher. We couldn't see him at all, just this rippling little bulge of snow, and then he burst forth into the open again.

You notice funny things in an emergency. I saw that his thumb was still pointed straight up and I thought, Man, Carl is one brave guy. He doesn't even care if he's got skis on, he's still going for it.

"Stop the car!"

It was Alan. He had turned and seen what was happening and had more presence of mind than me—everything had happened so fast that I hadn't had much time to react. And, to be honest, I still had that great curiosity. Carl's thumb was still pointed up and who was I to deny him fame?

Archie hit the brakes as soon as he heard Alan scream—hit them so hard that Wayne flew over the backseat and planted his face on the steering wheel knob, which gave him a black eye we talked about for years.

Unfortunately the brakes on the Ford worked better than the snow's friction on Carl and when the car stopped, he had the great misfortune to pass us, although he had stopped burrowing into drifts like a gopher. As he passed, he flopped end

over end and Archie said later that he'd looked like a dead carp.

He lay ahead of us in the ditch, unmoving, a lump of snow and mangled sheepskin, and we piled out of the car and ran to him.

Floundered to him, really, because the snow in the ditch was soft (which had probably saved his life). We sank into it up to our waists.

"Carl!" Alan yelled, leaning over him. "Can you hear me?"

Nothing.

But Wayne, who was holding a hand over his eye, said, "There's life! I saw his hand move."

Then an arm came up, just half an inch, fell back, and a muffled voice said, "Snow..."

"What?" Alan asked, leaning over to hear better. "What did you say?"

"Snow," came the mumble, "...too much snow."

We pulled him up out of the ditch and found he was absolutely right. There was too much snow. It had been driven under his eyelids; it filled

his mouth, was packed in his ears and jammed inside his jacket; it filled his pants, was packed into every opening and crevice of his clothes and his body; and as we stripped him in the car and shook the snow out on the road and helped him to get dressed again in the wet clothes, he never said a word. Not one word, until we were driving back to look for the skis (we only found one) and headed for town to get Carl to his house and into a warm bath.

He sat huddled and silent in the back, even when Archie paid him the supreme compliment of saying, "You got balls, kid. You broke the record."

Nothing, no sign Carl had even heard Archie. Then, as we crossed the Eighth Street Bridge and started into town, he raised his head and said:

"I heard the angels sing."

"What?" I said.

"I said I heard the angels sing. Right at the worst part, when I went under the first time, I heard the angels sing."

"Oh. That's nice." All right, I thought, maybe he took a pretty good shot in the head. We

couldn't find the flight helmet either, or the goggles. Maybe he thinks the angels were singing for him.

But it was Alan, who had that presence of mind, it was Alan who asked in his best Mountie voice, "What were they singing?"

Carl looked out the side window of the car at nothing, at everything. "They were singing 'Your Cheatin' Heart,' by Hank Williams."

And after that nobody ever called him anything but Angel Peterson.

2

The Miracle of Flight

Nobody had flown by human power then and private air travel had not advanced very much because of the Second World War. It was only nine years after the end of that war, and we were just past the Korean conflict, so most aviation research was done on military aircraft.

There were no jet airliners. There were military jets that had fought in Korea, but commercial air travel was still in lumbering two- and four-engine prop planes. Some airlines still used the old DC-3s for passenger service on short hops (incredibly, now, more than fifty years later, some small airlines *still* use those same old DC-3s) and