

HOW ANGEL PETERSON GOT HIS NAME

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.

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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

they cruised a little over a hundred knots, about the speed some people drive their Mercedes on the L.A. freeways. Fast for a car, but very slow for an airliner.

People had learned to glide, though. There were gliding clubs all over the country and more in Europe, but there was no such thing as a hang glider, or even the concept of one.

Until Emil (pronounced "Eee-mull") learned to fly. And after he did, like Angel, he was never the same again, although I think the fact that Emil later became a mortician and ultimately had to get out of the business because it was rumored he was selling body parts to collectors (*collectors?*) had nothing to do with Emil's accidental discovery of hang gliding.

Emil's real problem, or what would prove to be a problem, was that he was what folks called "tight with a nickel."

He was so tight that I once saw him buy a candy bar, eat half of it and then sell the remaining half to another boy in school for the full five

cents the original candy bar cost. Six times in one day. This doesn't say much about the six boys who bought the half-bars, or about Emil's ethics, but it shows how far he would go to stretch a nickel. Actually, I was one of the boys who bought half a candy bar but in my defense it was late in the afternoon in history class, which was taught by the football coach, who related every aspect of history to football ("Caesar would have made a good quarterback... Cleopatra would have made a good quarterback, if she had been a man... Napoleon would have made a good quarterback... Robert E. Lee would have made a good quarterback...") and who had the most monotonous voice on the planet. When Emil offered me the half candy bar, I would have given him a dollar if he'd asked for it, I was that bored.

And in Emil's defense it must be added that money did not come easy in those days. Most jobs for a young boy were hard work and many were downright dangerous.

During the late summer and early fall it was

possible to get work on the farms around town. There were no safety regulations then or child labor laws and the farm work could be crippling. I worked one farm for a summer when I was twelve and the work was seven days a week, fourteen hours a day for a dollar and a half a day (not an hour but a *day*) and food and a bed to collapse in.

In the fall it was possible to get temporary employment picking potatoes but this was no picnic either. A large machine went down the rows and dug the potatoes up and we crawled on our hands and knees behind and picked up the potatoes by hand.

For a whopping seven cents a bushel.

In the winter there was school and no real part-time work for us except selling newspapers in the bars, delivering newspapers to homes in the morning and setting pins in the bowling alley at night and on weekends. Or, in my case, all three.

Nobody I knew got an allowance. My parents were pretty much the town drunks and I didn't get any help from them in any situation, let alone fi-

nancial. But even with my friends who had decent parents, any extra money for school clothes or just for spending had to come from work. In 1955, when I was sixteen, I hitchhiked three hundred miles to get a job at a Birds Eye fresh-frozen vegetable plant for the harvest in southern Minnesota and received the truly astounding wage of a dollar and five cents an hour—eight dollars and forty cents for an eight-hour day. It was what a man made to support a family, truly a fortune for a young boy.

But when we were twelve and thirteen, there was no money like that, and anything that was relatively expensive became very dear.

I remember buying my first bow and materials to make a dozen arrows: eight field points and four broadheads, with a fletcher to put the feathers on, which I got at the small meatpacking plant from turkeys being taken in to slaughter. The bow was a Fred Bear Cub and cost thirty-nine dollars and I had it on layaway at the hardware store for four and a half months before I had enough to pay for it.

So for somebody who was already very tight with money, like Emil, every dime was important. It was strange, then, that Emil would be the one to make the investment that allowed him to become the first person to try hang gliding....

Of course it didn't start out as Emil trying to fly. Once again, it began with the army surplus store.

During the Second World War there were no synthetic fabrics, and parachutes were made of silk. It was a low-grade silk to be sure, but after the war the material in the parachutes was in great demand by women who used it to make clothing, because silk was very expensive. Many different-sized parachutes, full size for men and smaller sizes for light freight or mortar flares, were for sale in the surplus stores.

Before Emil got in on the act, Willy Parnell took a small freight parachute to the top of the water tower, where he unintentionally invented base jumping. Actually, base plummeting might be

more accurate, since the parachute he used was for something that weighed eighty pounds and Willy came in at a hundred and sixteen. He said he thought it was working, though the ground seemed to be coming up pretty fast, until he went through the roof of the Carlsons' chicken coop. The article in the paper was headlined:

BOY CRASHES COOP!

The story said Mrs. Carlson wasn't sure if the chickens would ever lay again, since, as she said, "They have a powerful fear of hawks and they thought it was a giant hawk that come after them."

Several of the chickens and a goodly pile of chicken manure combined to break Willy's fall and keep him from killing himself but he did manage to break his right ankle and missed out on some school and all gym classes for the rest of the year, and he got the nickname of Stinky Parnell because of the way the chicken manure ground into his skin—the smell didn't go away right at first.

Which had nothing to do with Emil and how he invented hang gliding.

It all started because Emil's mother sent him to the army surplus to get a parachute. Emil's older sister was going to the prom and her mother wanted to make a silk dress for her. She had called the order in to the store and paid for it and Emil was supposed to just stop and pick it up.

Which was when he saw the target kite.

During the Second World War, planes, even fighters, rarely went much over four hundred miles an hour—compared to the two thousand or so miles an hour they do now—and there was no such thing as a missile. American fighter planes used wing-mounted machine guns and they had to fly tight on an opponent's tail and open on him from close range, under two hundred yards.

New fighter pilots were trained on target kites made of silk with aluminum frames and a silhouette of an enemy Japanese Zero Fighter, top view, in black with the famous red meatballs on the wings. The kite would be flown far above a target range on parachute cord, and new pilots would

make passes at it and shoot it down without endangering the pilot of a tow plane because of their inexperience.

The kites were well made and very large, eight feet wide by ten or twelve feet long, usually a pale blue so the kite body would disappear against the sky and only the silhouette of the plane would show.

And there was one on the wall of the army surplus store when Emil went in to pick up the parachute for his mother.

He had to have it.

"I don't know why," he told us later. "I never thought of it before. It was just there on the wall, blue and black with those red meatballs, and I had to have it."

And it was expensive.

Eleven dollars.

Emil tried his best to get cranky old Phillips, the man who owned the surplus store, to come off the price. But Phillips knew he had Emil and stuck to his guns. Emil paid in full.

Which was not just eleven dollars; it was setting