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Touching the Sky: Flying with Passion in the Face of Tragedy

Josiah R. Lansford

Cedarville University, jrlansford@cedarville.edu

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Josiah Lansford

Josiah Lansford is a dual-enrolled information technology management major from Jamestown, Ohio. He never considered writing as a talent before coming to Cedarville. When he is not playing the piano or practicing musical theatre, Josiah enjoys experimenting with the latest gadgets and riding his motorcycle.

Touching the Sky: Flying with Passion in the Face of Tragedy

It's hard to tell why I possess such an innate desire to fly. No prophecy was spoken over me at birth, nor was piloting a plane something I've always excelled at. Maybe I was just swept along with my family, following the wake of my predecessors. Yet I wonder if witnessing the cotton patchwork of clouds fall beneath my view influences my mind, rendering me unable to walk the earth without wistfully gazing towards the sky.

I cannot condense the narration of my literacy into a smooth chain of events but will instead record the narrative as it prevails in my mind, a mixed assortment of moments and images. While my experiences are unique to one man, the story they tell is universal. Growing up, I considered myself a participant in my surroundings. Little did I comprehend my experiences becoming part of me.

2005. "I'm leaving for work, see you when I get back." I feel my dad's bristly whiskers graze my cheek as he embraces his youngest son, punctuated by a peck on the cheek. He is embarking on the 4-hour commute to Detroit Metropolitan Airport, where he will strap himself in the cockpit of a pressurized aluminum cylinder and hurtle toward Europe through the upper atmosphere. He will return in about a week, his flight bag bulging with streusel waffles, swiss cheese, and savory memories of his adventures abroad. Although my dad is gone a lot, having an airline pilot for a father carries its perks: Every summer, my family descends upon the Oregon Coast to visit relatives, receiving airline tickets at a heavy discount—provided there is room on the plane. Naturally, my favorite part is not the experience of flying, but the moment when the flight attendant shuffles down the aisle pushing a cart stocked with merrily clinking soda cans and small bags of salted pretzels for my indulgence. Over the years, the tired smell of the airport becomes my secondary home. Flying across the country at a moment's notice is something I take for granted.

2008. The military speaker drones on. As I slouch back in my cold metal chair, my first thought is to inquire when lunch will be served. The sugary aroma of barbecue sloppy joes—in typical Army style—stirs my appetite. Suddenly, my last name thunders across the speakers, pulling me back to the present. I'm at a graduation ceremony, where my oldest

brother Joel is to be awarded his army wings. My parents secure the pin to his lapel, and Joel is now a certified helicopter pilot in the Army. Though the prospect of lunch takes priority, I can't ignore the misty thought questioning what role aviation will play in my future.

2013. "Okay Josiah, go ahead and open it!" I unwrap the gift for my birthday, careful not to tear the tissue-like paper. A black pilot's logbook appears. Written on the first of many clean pages is an entry for my recent flight with Joel in his small two-seater Cessna. As I stroke the dark, textured cover, a glowing sense of pride shines in my excited eyes. This logbook is a physical symbol of my yet unrealized future. I scrawl my name on the front page with black ink and carefully store the book in my dresser drawer. That first entry marks the start of my flight training and my development in the literacy of aviation.

One of the first competencies I tackle is how to safely land the plane. This is a difficult feat to master, and the first time the tricycle gear smacks down on the runway without assistance from the other seat I am ecstatic. This first clumsy maneuver, however, is far from perfect. Many more jolts onto the hard pavement and countless desperate calls by my father for more left rudder will be required before I grease the landing perfectly, a skill I continue to hone to the present day in preparation for my first solo flight.

As the busyness of high school devoured my spare time, the flight lessons in the following years grew relatively sporadic. Slowly, the aspiration of growing up to be a pilot faded from priority. During those few lessons, however, I developed a fundamental appreciation for the art of piloting an aircraft, and the skill and practice required to succeed. Little did I realize how deep this appreciation would eventually run. Though I knew that aviation was a core part of my family, I didn't understand until later that it had become part of me, too.

2015. November. I'm studying inside a university library, where the cold reality of class deadlines has pushed aside my dreamy thoughts of aviation. Suddenly, my phone buzzes. It's my oldest brother, Joel. He now flies corporate for a large company and wants to know if I would be interested in periodically detailing his plane. I would charge the same amount as the local airport's services but would have a much closer care to detail. "Absolutely."

Suddenly, I find myself lying on the chilled concrete floor of a large hangar, breathing in the syrupy smell of waterless cleaners as I scrub grease off the belly of a high-end single-engine Cirrus. Every week, microfiber cloth in hand, I knead the white and gray finish of the low wings to a reflective luster, vacuum every inch of the four leather seats, and carefully wipe the pristine fiberglass. Although I would much rather be flying the plane instead of cleaning it, the fact that I am working in a hangar filled with beautiful aircraft makes me grin, until overspray from my cleaning solution reminds me to keep my lips shut.

Almost every good thing must come to an end, as they say, but many things aren't recognized for their true good until they do so.

2016. It is a cold, rainy night in January. The shivering clouds crumple together like a heavy quilt, and a persistent wind tumbles over the landscape. Judging from the weather, it would seem like a typical winter night, but tonight is anything but normal. At approximately 6:30 in the evening, a freshly-waxed Cirrus SR22 unexpectedly stalls on the final turn before landing and plunges into an embankment just short of Runway 25 at Greene County Regional Airport. The pilot is the sole occupant and is killed on impact. He is later identified as Joel Lansford.

My brother was taken doing the one thing he loved, and I am left behind questioning myself. Would it be proper to abandon aviation altogether as the loss of a family member through its grasp makes it too painful? Should one life stolen from my family be enough? Would continuing to pursue aviation in the face of death be irresponsible, or even worse, irreverent to the life that Joel lived?

Every cell in my body screams the contrary. No, the death of my brother makes the magnetic pull of the milky summer sky even more forceful. The color of aviation runs too thickly through my blood vessels to be extracted.

September. My dad—now retired and a licensed flight instructor—and I drive together to the old rusty hangar in Springfield. It's time to start flying again. For the first time in over a year, I perform the pre-flight walkaround inspection, checking for loose rivets in the high wings and running my hands over the two-bladed propeller. After pulling the plane out of the hangar, I climb into the cockpit, strap myself in, and place my hands on the controls. "Springfield traffic, this is Cessna eight-zero-seven-six-foxtrot, departing on Runway 24 and exiting the pattern to the southeast." As we rumble down the airstrip and lift off, I look over and see the creases from a big smile on my dad's cheeks. It's good to be back in the air.