

upside down again

A story of love and loss

BY LISE LEMELAND JESSUP

It's the middle of July 2011, and I am about to take my third and last flight at the Green Mountain Aerobatic Contest in Springfield, Vermont. It's a hot day, and I am slowly climbing up through 3,500 feet, circling above the few puffies that obediently hang around the perimeter of the box as if following orders of the contest director. I keep the runway and the box in sight as I wait for the chief judge to call me by name, giving me permission to enter.

This is my first season competing at the Sportsman level, and my first full three-flight contest. A good friend, who is also my safety pilot, is sitting in the back of my Super Decathlon, and we are both relatively silent. Then he pipes in through my headset, "So what do you want to do here?" I reflect for a moment and then answer simply, "I just want to fly the best I can." It being my third flight, I am more accustomed to the box and therefore less nervous and more focused than I have ever felt in a contest thus far. *Just keep your head together, I think. No brain fades today; just fly smart and do your best.* Smiling, I add silently, *And it wouldn't hurt to kick a little (bleep)!*

For most, completing one's first full Sportsman contest may be a proud but normal rite of passage, but this was not at all the case for me. This contest meant overcoming something much greater than first-time Sportsman jitters. So allow me to backtrack for a moment.

SOLSTICE DAY

June 21, 2010, a little more than one year earlier, was a beautiful, ceiling and visibility unlimited (CAVU), sunny day; a perfect solstice day for flying. At 7:30 a.m. my husband, Pat Jessup, who was also my flight instructor and a charter pilot, kissed me goodbye on our front doorstep. "I love you," he told me— as we always did, it was part of our goodbye checklist— and he climbed into his Jeep. And then in an uncharacteristic and portentous moment, he called out, "and don't you ever forget it!" while wagging his finger at me and grinning. With that he backed out of the driveway, waving slowly, and drove away to the airport to fly another charter trip. On most levels, it seemed like any other day, and the beginning of any other trip. But that morning was the last time I ever saw my husband.

One year ago, my life looked very different. Things were going great! My life was busy, full, and happy. A little more than a year before, under my husband/CFI's guidance, I earned my private pilot certificate (2009), and now we were working together on my instrument rating. Inspired by aerobatics, three of my new paintings had just received national acclaim, entering the permanent collection of the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum. A few weeks earlier I had also accomplished my first win at an aerobatic contest in Primary, and my husband and three kids had been there to watch me fly. I had recently published several enthusiastic articles chronicling my aerobatic training in *Sport Aerobatics*. When I met Pat two years earlier, I found love and I discovered flying all at the same time, inextricably entwined in one amazing person. Imagine, for a moment, the power of falling in love twice, simultaneously. Now, above all, we were blissful newweds eagerly approaching our first anniversary, and looking forward to a long life together.

Sadly, that was the only contest he ever saw me fly in; he never lived to see our first anniversary, and that fateful day—the longest day of the year—was the last time I heard his voice. The word "solstice" is derived from the Latin sol (sun) and sistere (to stand still), because at the solstices, the sun stands still in declination. The day his airplane crashed was truly the day my entire world came to a halt.

This is a story of love, loss, and hope. It's also a story about coping with tragedy, for all the pilots out there who have lost someone they care about through an aviation incident, and who continue with flying, or question whether or not they can.

The story is complicated by the fact that this man, whom I loved and respected with all of my heart and soul, was also my mentor in aviation.

MENTORS

Many words have been written on the importance of the role of a flight instructor. The relationship with a primary flight instructor is sacred, because as students we trust our lives to this person, placing all confidence in the instructor's abilities to keep us safe while teaching us to keep ourselves safe. Even the purely professional relationships between flight instructor and student pilot have a degree of intimacy, for the two individuals are sharing an experience that in many ways is transcendent. And though rationally, we know it's not possible, we somehow believe that the instructor is infallible, possessing the capabilities to pass on this highly coveted information to us.



My husband flying on a charter flight.



Pat co-piloting Memphis Belle B-17 at the Geneseo Air Show.

So what happens when your flight instructor is killed in a plane crash? How can you believe in your own abilities when even your mentor's abilities were not enough? Do you continue flying at all, and if so...how?

THE ACCIDENT

The details of my husband's accident are still unraveling, as the NTSB is still in the process of concluding its final investigation. From the wreckage and witness accounts, it appears the C-210T may have suffered a catastrophic engine failure somewhere between 5 miles (where Pat made his last radio call, indicating no

issues at the time) and 2 miles from the William T. Piper Memorial Airport in Lock Haven, Pennsylvania. They tried to make the runway, but the plane fell short by a vexatious 400 yards. None of the three men aboard survived, although there were no civilian injuries either.

Pat held an airline transport pilot certificate with ratings for airplane single- and multiengine land. He was a CFII for more than 20 years, and a chief pilot for a small charter company. Suffice it to say that with more than 8,200 logged hours, my husband was highly experienced. But as we all know, experience can't always save our lives.



Me and my new Decathlon at the Greenwood Lake contest in New Jersey, 2011.

"And though rationally, we know it's not possible, we somehow believe that the instructor is infallible."

The weather was clear, the winds were light, and it happened at 1 o'clock in the afternoon. Through a lamentable breakdown in communication among the Pennsylvania police, the New York police, and the company for which my husband worked, neither I—the wife of the pilot,—nor his family were ever notified. At 10 p.m. June 21, I frantically discovered the news myself (via the Internet), illustrated with gruesome photographs of the wingless airplane lying on a suburban street. The burned-out cockpit where my husband's body lay was covered by a blue tarp.

I will forever regret seeing those photos that night, which were subsequently branded into my visual and emotional memory. Catapulted into hysteria, it seemed like someone else named Lise lived through the hours and days that followed, which hardly seem real to me even today.

LOSS

Those are a few of the details of how it happened. In the larger scheme, what I lost was my partner in life, my best friend, a wonderful step-father to my kids, and my most trusted mentor in aviation: my flight instructor. I was utterly devastated. My faith in life and in flying evaporated in an instant. How could something I loved so passionately—flying—take the person I loved the most from me? And when my connection to flying was destroyed, by extension, so was the inspiration for my artwork. In short, I felt like I had been robbed of everything that brought me happiness in my life, save my children. When I broke their hearts early the next morning with the inconceivable news that their step-dad had been killed, my own heart was shattered. Confused, scared, and upset, they begged me never to get in an airplane again, and of course, I promised...

What followed were weeks and months of agonizing experiences that derailed my life completely. In vain, I tried to reject everything about the grim reality vehemently, like a poison inside my own body. I could tell you about the endless flow of tears, the tormenting depression, the seemingly futile search for a reason to keep living when life felt utterly unbearable without him...

But then, little by little, I began to think about flying again. A faint but insistent voice drifted in and out of my thoughts, like a siren whispering. Was it the call of the sky? I found myself showing up at various airports, just to see the planes, though not our airport. Out of habit, I would turn my face to the sky every time I heard a small plane passing above... and I would think with pain and happiness of my love for him and for flying, and how much I loved flying with him.



Aerobatic airplanes lined up in an idyllic New England setting at GMAC 2011.



Me and my Decathlon at Wildwood Akroblast, New Jersey, 2011.

Bit by bit, I became cognizant that my husband had bestowed upon me a gift of my own wings. I knew that denying my love for flying and surrendering to the fear associated with it would be a mistake. And so, several months after his death, and after a few conversations with my kids evaluating the risks of aviation (to calm their fears, and mine), I scheduled a first flight back with my only other CFI: my aerobatic instructor, whom I trusted well.

FIRST FLIGHT BACK

Though difficult initially (I was quite nervous), that first flight back was easier in many respects than the ones that followed it later. While being keenly sensitive to my emotional state, my instructor kept me busy with a well-organized and successfully realized aerobatic lesson. We flew all of the old figures and a few



Pilot briefing at the Green Mountain Aerobatic Contest 2011 (GMAC).

“I found myself showing up at various airports, just to see the planes.”

new ones, and the task of staying in the moment was a welcome relief. The exhilaration was still there, and I felt sure Pat was also present in that airplane. Once we had taxied off the runway, I was overcome by a flood of tears, realizing it was the beginning of a new phase in my life: Simply put, it was flying, but without Pat.

THE POWER OF GRIEF

Back at home in southwestern New York, things began to deteriorate. However symbolic my initial return to the sky was, what followed was a long stretch of time without flying: The flight school where Pat taught had all but closed down, and the airport management was changing hands. Nothing in life could have prepared me for the difficulty of the ensuing months. The post-tragedy numbness eventually subsided, replaced by a

relentless ache. The word “widow” in Sanskrit means empty, and the verb “to widow” in English means to deprive of anything cherished or needed. Widow was my new, wretched, and unwelcome identity, and the emptiness was overwhelming. I grieved intensely, not just for my husband, but for flying and painting as well. I had no husband... I had no airplane to fly... I couldn't paint... essentially, I had completely lost my footing in life.

I struggled to cope with the loss, the sense of abandonment, and to accept what had become of my previously idyllic life. I was often confused about my feelings toward flying: Sometimes I longed for it desperately, other times I feared it tremendously, and sometimes I wondered if I, too, was destined to perish

in an airplane. Yet I clung to the fragile dream of one day owning an airplane like a child clings to its mother's hand...terrified that if I let it go, I would be lost forever.

FLYING SOLO

To make a very long story short, after many months spent reconstructing some semblance of normalcy for my kids and myself, I realized that if I wanted to continue flying, I would need to buy an airplane. There were literally no other options, and not a single aerobatic airplane to rent for hundreds of miles. Acquisition was not an easy task for a single mom on a college professor's salary! But I made the leap of faith in the late fall and purchased a beautiful 1996 Super Decathlon. I could not believe I was finally an airplane owner!

Although I was very excited to have an airplane, I had never soloed a Decathlon, or any taildragger before. In fact, looking back at my logbook, I had a total of only 17 solo hours, in any airplane, when my husband was killed, and only eight of those were cross-country solo. I was truly a neophyte flyer who was not at all accustomed to flying by myself, and now I needed to figure out how to find the courage to fly that plane alone—without becoming paralyzed by the possibility of something bad happening. I chose to hangar my Decathlon in Hornell at our airport, but that meant I would have to face the place where most of our memories together were made. Every day I would see the airplanes we flew, see the office that was no longer his, and circumnavigate the airspace in which we had flown together on every flight.

THE IAC COMMUNITY

With my mentor gone, and a new airplane in my hands, about which I knew virtually nothing, I reached out to the aviation community. And, most of that support came through the IAC network. I had always thought the IAC people were a fantastic, welcoming group. But post-accident, these friends came through in an amazing demonstration of support and camaraderie. One friend flew in from Ithaca on his own dollar, day after day, eventually checking me out in my Decathlon and soloing me. Another friend still helps me with oil changes, all maintenance and mechanical issues, even though it means a several-hour flight for him in each direction. My neighbor in my hangar (who was once an IAC member and an air show pilot) flew aerobatics with me until I was ready to do them myself, two months later. I was hooked up with a mechanic at another airport for my upcoming annual. My loyal Chapter 35 pals also donated a parachute to me and sent it freshly

repacked, and a Chapter 52 friend sent me an emergency fund, unsolicited, which helped me back on my feet in the first weeks following the tragedy.

In addition to all of the aviation advice, these friends offered incredible emotional support, and still do. They have visited me, my kids and I have visited them, and we have shared good times both in and out of the cockpit. Through this organization, I realized that although I may sleep, eat, and now fly alone...I am not alone in the aviation community. The IAC is a loyal, generous, and invaluable family, and I can only hope that these friends know how much they have helped me this year.



Mike Goulian (one of my aerobatic heroes) showed up at GMAC and gave me a personal critique of my 2nd contest flight!



Chatting with Mike Goulian and Aaron Ham at GMAC.

GAINING EXPERIENCE AND NEW MEMORIES

Earlier I asked this question: How do you continue flying after losing a loved one and mentor to a plane crash? We all know that flying has inherent risks, and flying aerobatics is no exception. Although it took a certain amount of courage to take my first flight back, the real test of my courage has come in the months following my airplane acquisition. I'm not the same pilot I was before I lost my husband, and I often feel it's a bit of a mind game to keep my emotions and fears in check when I fly. I have been forced to face the fact that "yes, it could very well happen to me." The challenge has been how to respect the risk, and yet not be debilitated by it.

Perhaps I have become an even more cautious aviatrix. I take the time to preflight thoroughly, and I double-check safety harnesses, use my checklist religiously, and check weather obsessively. Up until this point, I practice high—and I mean way high, at 6,500 feet MSL (5,000 AGL) if I can. Friends tease me about needing oxygen when I fly aerobatics solo! I also have chosen to fly with a safety pilot in contests thus far, even though I probably don't need to. I monitor my emotional barometer carefully, and if I am feeling down, or upset...I just don't fly.

A friend once gingerly asked me if I ever think about the accident while I am flying. I wish I could say no, but in



Keeping my eyes on the runway post-contest flight at GMAC.

"The IAC is a loyal, generous, and invaluable family."

fact, the answer is sometimes...yes. Particularly on cross-country trips when I have more time to think. In fact, it happened to me on the way home from a contest in New Jersey this season. My thoughts drifted to the accident and the circumstances involved—while I was flying—and I had to very consciously push those thoughts out of my head as quickly as possible. So what did I do? I contacted ATC (I always use flight following) to ask for the current altimeter setting, even though I already had it dialed in. I just needed to hear a voice to remind me I wasn't alone. There is no denying the experience of this year has been woven into my identity, like the scars on my skin. I recognize that I have come a long way in less than a year. Losing my husband in this way has strangely demystified death for me. Sometimes I feel even stronger for having withstood this terrible misfortune; more fearless for having conquered the fear. The trick is to tap into that mode of thinking when I fly, instead of pondering the questions that can shake my confidence. In other words, in the not-so-delicate lyrics of a contemporary pop star, I sometimes have to tell myself, "Shut up, and fly (drive)!"

Ultimately, I know Pat would be proud of me. Rather than walking away from flying, I did the exact opposite: I threw myself into it with more determination and commitment than ever.

ONE YEAR AND A NEW BEGINNING

So...after a tragedy, does one keep flying? I want to emphasize that for me, the answer was a resounding "Yes!" But, that was just me. That may not be the answer for everyone. This is where I fall back on intuition... mine steered me to the skies, into the arms of my husband and CFI, and now it has led me back to the skies. And when I did venture up, I knew it was the right thing for me. When I fly, I hear his voice in my head, and all of the knowledge he gave me comes back. So all I can say to anyone who is questioning the decision is to look inward for the answer. Nobody can tell you how you feel or what is right. And if what is best is to let it go, and not continue flying, then I say that is just fine. Move on to a new phase in life and embrace whatever it is! Life is too short to not live it the fullest we can, every day.

I'm back on the ground after my final Green Mountain Aerobatic Contest flight, soaked with sweat but exhilarated. I give my Decathlon's bright red cowling a loving pat, *You're a good girl!* I whisper to her. I really do love my plane. And, as it turned out, I flew quite well that day. I finished the contest in a respectable position eighth out of 17. Which, considering my first flight brain fade (I flew two loops instead of a loop and a Half

Cuban...argh!), was a decent showing. For me! And, because I still have that fierce little competitive streak in me, I want to do better! And I promise myself I will.

While I am refueling and preparing my airplane for the cross-country trip home, I have a moment to myself to reflect. Looking back on the hardest year in my life, at strange and unpredictable times, I know that I have been bestowed with a new perspective. What is it that I can now distinguish?

I see that aerobatics has been a source of great joy to me, in a time of great sorrow. I see what I have accomplished, with the help of some fantastic friends: I returned to flying; I became an airplane owner; I soloed my plane; I moved up to Sportsman and flew my first full contest. And, I have begun painting again.



Paul Russo and I pushing planes out of the hangar.



Intense hours for everyone on the judges' line.



Me flying my plane during the contest flight in the early evening at Greenwood Lake. Visit Lise online at www.liselemeland.com.

"I see that aerobatics has been a source of great joy to me, in a time of great sorrow."

But above all, I have discovered that the IAC is much more than just an organization for a competitive sport. Contests involve so much more than just aerobatics. Every time I finish a contest, I leave with a weekend full of memories: of adrenaline-filled flights, of intense afternoons on the judges' line, of laughter and jokes at the dinners and banquets, of fascinating conversations about the nuances of flying aerobatics, and of many people I care very much about. Just one year after my husband's death, I now realize that the support and encouragement of my IAC friends got me through my worst nightmare. And, even though my world was turned upside down, I am back flying... upside down! Now *that* makes me happy. **IAC**

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