



The \$418.00 Hamburger

Working for Uncle Sam in Naples, Italy prevents me from often seeing my family in the United States. It had been 18 months since I visited them in Texas. So, when I was in Louisiana as part of a training exercise, I knew it would be a great opportunity to rent an airplane and fly to Lufkin, Texas.

The date was April 1, 2011. The sky was blue and cloudless. The forward visibility was 10 miles, wind seven knots. My friend Jared Guillory and I departed Lafayette's airport at 10 a.m. We climbed the 30-year-old Cessna 172 to 4,500 feet for the 155 nm adventure. Despite her age, the 172 had advanced avionics, which allowed us to enjoy the tunes of Creedence Clearwater. The air was stable and provided a smooth journey.

I reminisced about the last time I flew to Lufkin. That flight occurred on December 14, 2001. I flew my sister there so she could care for my grandmother on my mother's side. On that trip, I offered Grandma Opal Chapman a flight around the pattern. After some initial hesitation, she agreed. She was 85 years old. Prior to getting inside the airplane, my aunt handed me a prescription bottle. I asked, "What is this?" She replied, "Nitroglycerin pills. Give her one if she has any heart problems during the flight."

I grabbed the bottle and silently thought to myself, "What am I getting myself into?"

Shortly after takeoff, my grandmother looked over at me and whispered, “It is so peaceful up here.”

I later learned she bragged to the whole town that her grandson took her flying “all over Texas.” I wondered if my 95-year-old great-grandmother, who was waiting in Lufkin, would also be willing to experience a general aviation flight.

About 90 minutes after takeoff from Lafayette, Jared and I were soaring over the beautiful sapphire-colored Sabine River that pours into both Louisiana and Texas. Lufkin’s Angelina County Airport appeared in the distance, and I entered left downwind for runway 33. I inadvertently demonstrated how not to land— bouncing the airplane in the air by “six feet,” according to my dad who was watching from the FBO. I taxied over, and eagerly met him, my aunt, grandmother and great-grandmother.

After eating giant cheeseburgers at Angelina County’s bustling diner, I quietly asked my dad, “Do you think Memaw will let me take her flying?”

“I don’t know. Let’s ask her.” He turned to his left and asked, “Memaw, would you like to go flying today?”

She said, “Oh, I don’t wanna take any time away from you with your son.”

My dad quickly replied, “I talk to him all the time on the phone and get to see him on Skype.”

Her face lit up and she excitedly said, “Okay!”

We walked outside to the Cessna on the tarmac. Memaw lacked a century by five years, and used a walking cane. My dad helped Memaw get into the airplane, while I

helped her from the pilot side. Then I felt a tap on my back shoulder and turned to see my aunt.

“Is there room for me, too?”

I chuckled and said, “Yeah, hop in the back!”

Once we were all situated, I asked Memaw when the last time she went flying was. She said, “I don’t know.”

I inquired further, “More than 30 years ago?” She laughed out loud and said, “Yes!”

I joked, “And it wasn’t in an airplane like this, huh?”

“No.”

I turned onto the runway, and advanced the throttle fully forward. The 160 hp Lycoming engine awakened! Oil pressure was in the green, the engine provided maximum rpms, and the airspeed indicator quickly accelerated. At 55 knots, I slightly pulled the yoke rearward, and the nose gear lifted. We began climbing at 70 knots, and ground objects became increasingly smaller. Memaw commented, “It’s amazing how small the trees look from here.”

Once we were out of the traffic pattern area, I snapped a few photos of the three of us in the air. It took three tries to get all of us in the picture. Memaw calmly said, “It’s probably best you quit taking photos and get back to flying.” I smiled and said, “Nothing to worry about, Memaw.”



We descended from 1,800 feet, and returned to the airport. We had a steady headwind, and I smoothly glided her to touchdown. When my dad asked how the flight was, my aunt replied, “I got a little nervous when there was some

turbulence.” Memaw immediately commented, “Really? I never got nervous.”

Most pilots have heard the “\$100 hamburger” expression when describing how much it costs to fly to a local restaurant to get a burger. Well, this was my “\$418 hamburger,” but it was worth every penny! General aviation is such a great freedom we have in the U.S., and it was an honor for me to fly my 95-year-old great-grandmother over the land she loves so much. We could all benefit from emulating her sense of adventure that shows no fading with age.

**Isabel Axum passed away on June 20, 2019, five months shy of her 104th birthday.*