

Me and Mr. Mike



by First Officer
Bob Lukow

I guess when a doctor gave me the traditional pat on my rump on my first day here, he must have scrubbed in prop wash.

It seems that long ago that I first wanted to fly. I can even imagine that hanging upside down there in his grasp may have generated a fervent desire to do aerobatics.

The desire lay dormant in my younger years, but it burst into flame again in 1947 when a flight instructor demonstrated and then taught me to do loops and spins. In those postwar years aerobatic aircraft were neither common nor inexpensive. Some surplus trainers were available, but aerobatics admittedly didn't warrant the same priority as making a living.

I continued working on pilot ratings — private at first, then commercial and on up the ladder toward qualifying for airline flying. Even this tough and interesting training didn't dim my memories of the great sensation that comes from making an airplane do things that even birds don't think of doing. But all flying, even commercial, can be exciting and awe-inspiring and I'll admit that preparing to become an airline pilot sated my aerobatic appetite without destroying the dream.

In 1950, I got married and we were blessed by four sons and a daughter. We enjoyed the pranks of the kids and will always remember the fun we shared together, although as with any young family money was not plentiful. It was my wife, Doris, who realized that I still yearned for aerobatics, perhaps much like

a bird yearns for spring. On rare occasions we would somehow manage to get along without something and I would run to the airport with that extra ten or twenty dollars for another aerobatic session.

By 1969, I was flying for Frontier and it was in that year that a fine young man suggested we become partners in an aerobatic airplane. He was a pilot, too, in the service, and his suggestion awakened the old dream — adrenalin almost replaced my blood. Armed with a smile, a hope, my dream and a little more money, I visited airports, hangars and people and found what was to become, instead of a somewhat hazy thought, a tangible reality.

My partner, Mike, didn't get a chance to fly our new plane. The Viet Nam war was heating up and he got his overseas orders. I promised him that by the time he returned, I'd have our little plane ready to flash its wings in the morning sun.

I spent most of my free moments going over our little pet. A few modifications, new paint and that old 1947 dream was on the verge of realization. I couldn't wait for Mike to come home and see what had been done to our proudest possession.

He never came home. On July 11, 1971, I got the word that Mike had been shot down and killed on a combat session.

His full name was Michael Lukow. He was my oldest son.

The airplane had lost its meaning and its purpose. I sold the little beauty and with my family hoped that the webs of the past

would perform their duties and solace us in our sorrow while we remembered the blessing of his one-time presence.

In the early months of 1973, thanks to the encouragement of Doris and my children and embellished with Mike's memory, I decided to take another crack at the exacting world of aerobatics.

I located and purchased the world's most accepted aerobatic airplane, a Pitts Special. It has since been rebuilt completely from tailwheel to prop tip.

Subsequently, we moved back to Milford, Nebraska, (20 miles west of Lincoln) to live the life Doris and I are most familiar with — the quiet and peace of a small town, and the beautiful and comfortable company of our families and friends. I am a Denver based pilot with Frontier and commute to Milford on my days off.

Now, as the early morning sun reaches out with its rays of a new day, attempting to wake the earth with its warmth . . . or in the evening, as the ambers replace the blues, sometimes the only sound is the soft purring of a small airplane playing in the sky. If one looks up, he will see the tiny wings flashing as it darts, rolls, dives and loops above Nebraska cornfields.

With enough practice, I hope to enter some aerobatic competition in the coming months. And win or lose, it will be carrying a proud name on the side of its fuselage.

For, if you will forgive both a father's pride and the bitter-sweet taste of nostalgia, we christened it . . .

"Mr. Mike."

(Editor's note: Mike, a highly decorated young officer, earned the Distinguished Flying Cross, Bronze Star and 24 air medals, prior to his death at the age of 20.)