

The Early Years

I was born in 1909 in New York City and lived in Hell's Kitchen on the westside of Manhattan. We lived in a five-story tenement with outside fire escapes for each family. And, there the kids would be able to sleep outside in the summer months and look up into the starry summer skies and dream. My fantasy was to get in the air and fly near the stars and moon. Being five years old I figured this was a definite possibility and made many trips above the earth in my imagination.

There were times when an occasional vintage plane roared up the Hudson River or overhead going someplace. When that happened, everyone stopped what they were doing and looked skyward. We were in total amazement at man's new dream come true in the early 1900s.

The first recollection of an intimate occurrence with flight was when my father opened the *New York Times* around 1915 and found a winning ticket to a free hydroplane ride around the Statue of Liberty and back to the starting point at 97th street in Manhattan. I remember his excitement and the good wishes from many of his friends in our

neighborhood who saw him off that day in the Curtiss hydroplane. To me it looked like the Wright Brothers plane at Kitty Hawk with pontoons on it.

Of course, this made dad the hero around our block and he puffed a bit about his bravado and the fact that he had passed the “grand old lady” many times when he was quartermaster on a sailing ship. Now here he was so close in the air that he could almost kiss Lady Liberty’s hand.

World War I came along and with it the thousands of stories of the romantic battles in the air. Stories of the airman of various Allies’ Air Forces and of the enemy as well. War is like dog eat dog, but these recollections of mine at age eight seemed to be about the comradery of men, friends and foes that belied the purpose of war and rose above us ordinary mortals. Airmen seemed to be a breed apart and it was this exclusive society of men of the air that fired the imagination of the youth of my day by the thousands. Out of that surge of interest came a few geniuses who made the strides into this century with technological development, sacrifices and beliefs that made space travel a realistic accomplishment today.

During this war my mother died from the bad flu epidemic that struck the country. She was only twenty-eight and left my father with the problems of caregiving and feeding the seven children in a rough and tumble section of town. This was a tough time, and Dad decided to put four of us in the Episcopal Orphans Home located on 145th Street and Convent Avenue in New York City. There were many times while living there, that I thought of running away. The place was surrounded by high brick walls and topped with barbed wire. Because of this I fantasized about flying out of there.

I enlisted a couple of cronies to build me a glider in the unused swimming pool. I had seen pictures in magazines and books of gliders, and so then we fashioned one with the semblance of a wing and fuselage and tail. It was essential that I designed something I could wrap around myself and hold onto in the long arduous run off into space to get into the air and soar.

We had a shed with a ten-foot peaked roof at the home that divided the girl and boy areas. One evening when nobody was around, we managed to get the wood and window shade contraption up on

the roof. I wrapped it around me and was ready for take-off. My vision was that once in the air I could get over that brick wall into the street on the other side and land. I could then run to the subway with the nickel I had hoarded for this purpose and get back to my Dad. Home sweet home!

The wind was blowing just right to take me there, or so I thought! All ready for take-off – I set my jaw and started down the slope in a quick run. Just about when I thought it was the appropriate time to jump into the air, I managed to miss the edge of the roof and took a nose dive into my friends. We all wound up in the clinic with bruises, but no broken bones, thank God. But, we were cured of flight for the time being until a more advanced aircraft could be built with better materials than the window shades we used.