



Charlie Kulp: A Man Born After His Time

by Linda Burdette

The little yellow plane heads for the ground. The narrator in the tower cries “Pull back on the stick, Silas! Pull back!” Just in time, the plane’s nose begins to rise and as the plane slowly rises and does a graceful backward loop, the narrator screams “not that far back, Silas!” And the crowd at the Flying Circus Aerodrome in Bealeton goes wild. The newcomers in the crowd have just realized that Silas is not the simple bumbling farmer he appeared to be. At the end of the performance, the narrator introduces Charlie Kulp, one of the finest aerobatic pilots in the world. Today is Charlie’s 80th birthday and he’s celebrating it by doing the thing he enjoys most – flying and performing.

Charlie developed his love of aviation at an early age. Growing up in Spotsylvania County, Virginia, his family passed Shannon Airport whenever they went to town. This was the old Shannon Airport, founded after World War I by Sidney Shannon, Sr. The old Shannon Airport was located on a site near what is now the Fredericksburg Fairgrounds, about ½ mile NW of the current Shannon Airport. From the road, Charlie and his brother, Harry, could just see the windsock and the tops of the hangars. Once in a while they could actually see an airplane taking off or landing. However their father was not interested in flying and never stopped at the airport to let the boys visit. Not deterred in the least, both brothers eventually became airplane mechanics and flight instructors. Charlie relates that he finally convinced his mother to take one flight with him, but his father’s feet remained firmly on the ground his entire life.

In 1942 at age 16, Charlie became an apprentice mechanic at VPI Airport (Virginia Tech Airport) in Blacksburg, Virginia. This job paid \$10.20 a month with housing, food, and medical care provided. Even though Charlie wanted to learn to fly, the aircraft at the airport were reserved for the cadets training at Virginia Tech. He had to hitchhike to Woodrum Field in Roanoke to pursue his ambition. He worked at various odd jobs, from cutting corn to picking apples, for 25 cents an hour to make money for flight lessons. The first time he went to Woodrum Field, the sign said that an airplane ride was \$2.50 and a 30 minute flight lesson was \$5.00. Charlie had never been in an airplane, but figured he’d go ahead and pay for the lesson. He figured if he liked flying he’d have one lesson under his belt and if he didn’t like it, he would be no worse off. The problem was that the instructor pilot kept him so busy during his first flight that he didn’t look around or enjoy the ride at all! It wasn’t until his third or fourth lesson that he finally settled down enough to actually look around and realize that he really enjoyed flying. At that time, Charlie’s older brother, Harry, was working in Nashville as a mechanic and occasionally would send Charlie \$5.00 to help out with his flight



Charlie and Harry Kulp in front of the Aeronca C-3, the “flying bathtub.” This was Charlie’s first airplane and was discovered at Zieger Field in Warrenton.

Photo provided by Charlie Kulp.

training. Charlie points out that when you're working for 25 cents an hour, receiving \$5.00 was like winning the lottery. Years later, when Charlie returned from the Navy, he took Harry flying and got him started on his flying instruction.

He made his solo flight in 1943 at Hicks-Kessler Flight School right before going into the Navy. Eyesight problems eliminated a flying career in the military so he chose to become an aircraft mechanic – he says because he didn't want to sleep in a tent in one of those islands. He continued his flight training while in the Navy and received his private pilot license in 1946.

Charlie fondly recalls his first airplane – a 1936 Aeronca C-3. It was 1946 and he and his brother had just returned from their tours of duty with the U.S. Navy. They rented a plane from Sidney Shannon, Sr. at the old Shannon Airport to visit a friend in Winchester. On the way, they landed at Zieger Field in Warrenton. This field was owned by Clifford Zieger and the only facilities at the field were at Zieger's home. As Charlie and his brother walked to the house, they saw the Aeronca languishing behind the barn and Charlie was immediately taken with it. He had built models of that plane as a boy. He soon bought the C-3 from Zieger and after fixing it up, he flew almost 400 hours in it.

The Aeronca C-3 was a 36-horsepower, 2 cylinder screaming machine. It was so low slung that there was only 6-8 inches of clearance on landing and the hull looked for all the world like an old-fashioned tin tub. Of course, it was called the "Flying Bathtub." On one occasion, it lived up to that name. A thunderstorm had hit the night before and, unknown to Charlie, the bottom of the hull filled with water. The next morning, Charlie took off, or at least tried to. When the nose of the plane lifted, all the water ran to the tail and the weight caused the plane to go nose-up. Charlie didn't know what was causing the problem, but realized that the aircraft was in danger of stalling. He pushed the stick forward to lower the nose. Of course, when the nose dropped, the water in the tail shot forward and drenched Charlie. Charlie immediately landed, with visions of the newspaper headline "Pilot Drowns in Airplane during Take-off". He drilled a small hole in the bottom of the hull and drained the water. Ever the pragmatist, he left the hole so that he didn't have a recurrence of this situation.

In 1947 Charlie worked as an A&P at the Springfield Airport in Springfield, Virginia. This airport was located in what was then the rural Virginia countryside. The airport was there before Shirley Highway was built and the Highway actually took one end of the runway. I-95 eventually replaced Shirley Highway and this area is now the intersection of I-95 and Telegraph Road. After Charlie left that job in 1950, the owner of the airport and his wife were killed in an airplane crash. The airport closed after that and developers purchased the land.

In 1950 he took over management of Shannon Airport in Fredericksburg. Dave Payne of Aero Industries at Richmond's Byrd Field had been managing the airport as a favor to Sidney Shannon, but in 1950 felt that he couldn't divide his time between Richmond and Fredericksburg. He hired Charlie to manage the airport and in 1951 Sidney Shannon hired Charlie directly.

While working at Shannon, Charlie worked on many of the planes for which he is so well known. In 1953, he contracted with Butler Aviation to re-cover the Texaco Eaglet Glider currently on display at the Smithsonian.

Charlie also for a time managed the Old Manassas Airport located at the current site of the Mattaport Shopping Center. While there, he purchased and restored the 1929 Fairchild KR-34 which now belongs to the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum.

Charlie's career seems to read like a who's who of airplanes in museums. In addition to the two already mentioned, he was involved in Sidney Shannon's purchase of the 1917 Standard E-1 and the 1927 Pitcairn PA-5 Mailwing currently on display at the Virginia Aviation Museum. He oversaw the restoration of the Pitcairn Mailwing and later flew it to Dulles Airport for the grand opening.

Charlie was one of the founders of the Flying Circus Aerodrome in Bealeton and the Flying Circus gave birth to Silas, the Farmer. Originally the Flying Circus focused on military aircraft from World War I and the airplanes were owned by the Flying Circus Company. They leased a local farmer's land with an option to buy. After two years, they faced a decision that they could not pay for the airplanes and exercise the option to buy own their planes and were invited to develop their own acts. In no time, the Flying Circus show included 12 planes, mostly Stearmans, WACO's, and Fleets. The goal was to recreate acts that might have been flown in the post-war barnstorming shows. Charlie loved the idea of an aerobatic show and decided to train to do the Flying Farmer act. By the Circus' second season, the Flying Farmer was part of the show. Charlie also agreed to manage the Flying Circus, a position that he held for 20 years. He resigned in 1990 to devote himself to the Flying Farmer act full-time.

The basic Flying Farmer act had been performed in an assortment of styles since World War II. At various times, the pilot was portrayed as a convict escaping the police, an absent-minded professor, or a drunken farmer.

Charlie particularly disliked the drunken farmer image; he felt it was a bad example to set for children in the crowds and decided that his alter-ego would be Silas, the farmer. At first, the set-up for the act was that the narrator would pretend to pull a raffle ticket and the "winner" of the "free ride" would be Silas. Once as he made his way over the fence to claim his ride, he overheard a lady say "Oh, I am so glad that old man won that ride."



Charlie performs the famous one-wheel landing during his Flying Farmer act.

Photo provided by Charlie Kulp.

Charlie later portrayed Silas as the man who cuts the grass and wants to fly so badly that he inadvertently takes the controls. The decision was pure genius – Charlie fit the image and the crowds recognized the sincerity behind the role.

As a matter of fact, Silas was patterned after Charlie's neighbor, Silas Hicks, an elderly farmer who always wore plaid shirts and overalls and smoked a corn cob pipe. When Charlie was putting together his costume, he asked Silas' wife for an old pair of overalls. She promptly brought him a new, starched set of overalls. He said "thanks, but I really need an old pair." She returned with a pair only slightly less worn than the first and he



Charlie entertains the crowd at his 80th birthday party by playing the harmonica. He also performed his Flying Farmer act that day.

Photo by Norm Crabill.

said “I need a really rough pair.” As a joke, she brought him a very worn pair with a few patches and he said “Now that’s what I need!” Silas himself never got to see Charlie perform. His frail health kept him indoors. But Charlie had a friend tape his show and took it to Silas, saying “I thought you’d like to see what your overalls were up to.” Silas was delighted. Over the last 35 years, Charlie has given over 800 performances and every time, he has worn that original pair of overalls and the shirt Mrs. Hicks gave him.

Charlie has had many remarkable experiences while doing his act. Once in Augusta, Georgia, while waiting to begin his act, he was told two ladies wanted to speak to him. The two ladies explained that when they were girls, their father had a Piper Cub just like Charlie’s which he kept in a grass field near their home. Some of their fondest memories were of flying with their father in that airplane. Their father had recently passed away and they asked if Charlie would take their father’s ashes up for one final flight in a Piper Cub. Charlie said yes, and put the plastic bag in his overalls. He carried it through his act and afterward walked back to the two ladies. They were all sobbing and thanked him for bringing back such warm recollections of their father.

Charlie is particularly proud of his appearances in England and that, when he was a small boy, Prince Harry (younger son of the Prince of Wales) saw Charlie’s Flying Farmer act. Charlie made a friend there who collected old tractors and this gentleman brought one of his tractors to use in Charlie’s show. He also became friends with the Duchess of Beaufort. The Duchy of Beaufort hosted a fox hunt in the winter and an air show every summer; Charlie performed in this air show numerous times. The Duchess invited him to visit and he toured Beaufort Manor. The following year, Charlie’s mother passed away and he discovered that her effects included a collection of royal memorabilia from England. He was amazed when he picked up a book and it fell open to a page on the history of the Dukes of Beaufort. On his next visit to England, he presented the book to Duchess Caroline.

Charlie reports that in 35 years of doing this act, he’s had a lot of “goof-ups” but most people think his mistakes are part of the act. In the early days of the act, he would end by landing, cutting off the engine, and running from the plane with the crew in hot pursuit. Then he would return to hand-prop the airplane and move it off the field. Once when he was hand-propping the plane, he tripped over the ends of his overalls and fell flat on the paved runway. The reaction from spectators was “Hey, that was so funny! You should really keep it in the act!” Suffering a terrible headache from hitting his head on the pavement, Charlie’s reply was “The heck with that!” (Or words to that effect.)

On another occasion when Charlie was performing at the Flying Circus, he landed on one wheel. This was part of the act and all went well until the wind got under the upper wing and Charlie could not get that wing to drop. He taxied all around the air field and still couldn’t get the wing to drop. Finally he blasted the throttle and

the wing settled gently down. Afterward everyone told him that was a great ending to the act and he should certainly keep that one-wheel taxi in the act. He didn't tell them it was all a mistake.

Charlie has also had some harrowing experiences while doing his routine. Four years ago in Peachtree, Georgia, many of the acts in the air show were unable to perform because the ceiling was too low. However since Charlie's act is executed so close to the ground, both he and the people running the air show thought he would be able to perform. As he took off, he saw a dark spot in the distance, but thought it was just a shower. As he completed the first turn of the performance, he looked back and the dark spot had become a solid wall of water. He immediately wrestled the small Cub to the ground and a 60 mph wind whipped toward him. The wind spun the plane around and pushed it backward between the taxiway and the runway. Six big guys grabbed the plane and held it as the storm passed over. The next year, the air show planners placed red and green flags on golf carts to give pilots a heads-up if the weather began to turn. They called them "Charlie flags". During the pre-show briefing, this announcement got a lot of laughter, but the pilots really howled with laughter when Charlie stood up and said "The only problem with those Charlie flags is that I'm color blind." Luckily, the FAA representatives in the room were familiar with Charlie's sense of humor.

When asked if there is one particular fellow aerobatic pilot that he admires, he replies that he respects all the pilots he's met. He has flown in shows with almost all the notable aerobatic pilots today and appreciates that the flying community is so close, especially the aerobatic community. He says "You know, to have been able to mingle with the people I've been able to mingle with and to get paid for it has been wonderful. I have respect for every one of them." His advice to a young pilot embarking on this type of adventure is to be a decent sort and remember those who support you. At an air show, Charlie spends most of his time with the ground crew. He points out that the people running the show and the performers are in the limelight, but it's the ground crew that are working overtime to keep everything going smoothly.

How long will Charlie keep flying? Well, he's the first to point out that there's difference between flying and performing. Each winter, he takes stock and makes a decision on whether he will retire or perform the next year. At the end of November 2005, he hadn't decided about 2006. But as for flying, Charlie reckons he'll keep flying as long as he possibly can. Asked what he considered his greatest accomplishment he's quick to say "Learning to fly." He's proud of all the young people he's introduced to aviation and of all the young parents who loved the Flying Circus when they were children and are now bringing their sons and daughters to see it. So when you see a small yellow Piper Cub flying erratically, it's probably just Charlie practicing – or not practicing – his renowned inability to fly.

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This is Linda Burdette's second article for the Virginia Eagles Newsletter. She is enjoying this new pastime so much that she has agreed to take on the job of Feature Articles Editor. She and her husband, Randall, are pilots and live at Dogwood Air Park, a residential air park in Fredericksburg.