

Early Days of the OSU Flying Club - by Dan E. Chauvet

Way back in the middle of the previous century during my senior year at Oregon State I caught a bug. I'm talking about the flying bug. It resulted in me spending many hours in the catacombs of the old library, the basement area, seldom frequented by people looking for information. The aviation books were down there—how airplanes fly, how to fly airplanes, and aviation history. When my conscience got to me, then I shifted to my regular study for the courses I was taking.

I've tried to psychoanalyze myself as to why I became interested in aviation. During World War II, I lived in Monterey in a big house on the hillside with a great view. With my brass telescope I watched military airplanes fly off from both Monterey and Watsonville Airports. They dive bombed targets in Monterey Bay and towed targets past Fort Ord for gunnery practice. I lived a vicarious life imagining I was flying those airplanes. Was this the deep seed that caused the flying bug?

At the Memorial Union (MU), on the bulletin board, was a card about the Oregon State Flying Club. I attended one of their meetings and decided to join. Club membership was small, maybe about seven people attending the meeting. The flying club's airplane was a single-engine, tail wheel 1947 Aeronca Chief. It had side-by-side seating. Each occupant had a normal control wheel with the throttle control in the middle of the panel. It was purchased for \$900 before my time.

The leader was John Bolles, a professor of aeronautical engineering. I remember him being a short, stocky man with an assertive personality. He had been a Boeing test pilot. During a dive test he severely injured his eardrums by flying with a cold; that ended his test piloting career. Before Oregon State he taught at UCLA and University of Washington. At UCLA he rode his motorcycle to work wearing slacks, white shirt and tie, and a leather aviation jacket. In the morning when he passed the line of cars with the blue-suit professors, they frowned on his non-professor-like demeanor. And he frowned on the uppity-uppity stuff.

Looking at my old logbook Mr. Bolles signed it with the notation of ATR 124935. ATR stands for Airline Transport Rating, the highest rating in aviation, the doctor's degree in pilot ratings. The 124935 means that in the history of the United States, he was the 124,935th pilot to be certified. During the summer vacations he worked as a crop duster up in the Yakima, WA area. To survive being a crop duster one must be a very talented seat-of-the-pants type pilot, or you die. I never took his course in aeronautical engineering, and glad I didn't--he had a reputation of being very tough.

So the Oregon State Flying Club was lead by a uniquely talented and highly qualified aviation person. Completely dedicated. He was the flight instructor. His charge per hour—zero.

My first lesson was on January 25, 1958. I had never been in an aircraft. John Bolles was busy, periods of bad flying weather, and aircraft maintenance problems interrupted the continuity of my flying lessons. Sometimes it was weeks between training flights. The average lesson was 40 minutes long and his instruction squeezed every last second into attaining maximum progress.

I remember one lesson where we started takeoffs and landings at Corvallis Airport. Tail-wheel aircraft are more difficult to control on the ground than nose wheel airplanes. On the ground, there is a response delay after directional control input to the rudder pedals. Directional control varies with engine rpm acceleration, speed, and whether the tail is higher or lower. It takes acquired feel to keep a tail wheel airplane straight on takeoffs and landings. So on takeoff the airplane veered towards the left side of the runway and I pushed right rudder, and it then

veered right. These veerings left and right continued—until finally the aircraft obviously was going off the left side of the runway and I pulled back on the wheel to get airborne. Off the runway we went a few feet in the air, over a ditch half full of water. The airplane speed was less than needed for a safe takeoff. “I got it” said Mr. Bolles. He immediately maneuvered the aircraft to the center of the runway and said, “you got it.” Because of tension both my legs went into an uncontrollable spasm and that continued around the traffic pattern until the left turn towards the landing runway. Then the landing, followed by the swerving takeoff, and then continued spasms—it was Baptism by Fire. With John Bolles, the only time the students did not fly was the second prior to disaster. We got our money’s worth.

During those days the operator at Corvallis airport saw the club as competition. The Club was forced to move to Albany airport, with a gravel runway. The commercial operator there saw us as customers.

On May 26, 1958 I was doing takeoffs and landings with my instructor, Mr. Bolles. After landing he told me to stop the airplane on the runway. He unbuckled his seat belt, opened the door and stepped out. “What are you doing?” “I’m getting out.” “Why?” “You are going to take this airplane around the traffic pattern and make three full stop landings, taxiing back for each takeoff. You will follow my hand signals. I will be standing right over there.” “Are you sure?” “Of course I’m sure,” and he walked off. I had seven hours fifteen minutes of flying time. John Bolles was right again; I made three good solo landings. The aircraft climbed faster without the weight of the instructor and that alarmed me. I immediately dropped 100 feet to fly the exact pattern altitude.

Later in May 1958, at a flying club meeting, John Bolles announced his leaving Oregon State; back to teach at the U of W. Disappointment was profound and we said, “This is the end of the flying club.” Bolles pointed his finger at me and said “no, Dan is going to be President and run the flying club.” “Who me? I’m a beginning student pilot. I know nothing about running a flying club.” “You can and will do it.” Fortunately, there was a new member, Dick Frazier, from Hawaii. He became the treasurer and we spent hours talking about management and promotion. It’s a wonder I didn’t flunk out of school. Membership grew. We bought another airplane, a low-wing Ercoupe, with a low frequency radio in it—very modern. The club grew and thrived and when I left Oregon State the club was in good shape. Many years later I stopped at Albany Airport. The Oregon State Flying Club had a number of airplanes and reportedly was doing well.

I soloed at Albany 50 years ago. Since then, logbook number 9 (a big one) shows 17,912.1 hours. John Bolles said, “Always log your experience neatly, honestly and accurately. It’s a legal record.” I have. I worked in Boise as a charter pilot and flight instructor for two years. Then I was a commuter airline pilot. I flew as a corporate pilot for 26 years and was Chief Pilot for Granite Construction Company. I have two jet type ratings, Lear Jet and Cessna Citation. I also specialized in instrument instruction (flying in the clouds) and multi-engine instruction. I even instructed my wife Sarah for her Private Certificate without getting divorced. I’m not the only Beaver in the family. Emotionally I watched my daughter Eileen graduate from OSU.

“When you come to a fork in the road—take it.”--Yogi Berra (allegedly). The Oregon State Flying Club and John Bolles—a fork that led to a captivating career change.

Dan E. Chauvet, class of 1958