

## Introduction

By the early 1960s, the U.S. space program was making remarkable progress. Television programming was interrupted to broadcast grainy black-and-white images every time an astronaut blasted off into the distant sky. Assembled in the school gym to watch the historic launches on a rabbit-eared TV set, we stared in awe at the sight of booster rockets hurtling from their pads, carrying the brave explorers in tiny, tin-looking capsules. I and almost all of my junior-high-school classmates in suburban Cleveland wanted to be members of this elite corps of space travelers.

Even before the space race had captured the public's attention, my parents had told me the most captivating stories about aviation from their own lives. My mother regaled me often with her recollections of growing up near Cleveland's main airport. She climbed the airport's fence almost every Labor Day weekend in the 1930s and watched what was arguably the greatest of aerial exhibitions—the spectacular National Air Races. Drawn to the world of flight, she eventually went to work at that very airport. My father had served in the U.S. Army Air Forces during World War II, and though he was neither a pilot nor an aeronautically inclined person, he sometimes talked about what it was like to serve on an air base in wartime.

So for as long as I can remember, I had wanted to fly. Both Mom and Dad encouraged my desire for flight, and on a lovely spring day in 1963, they drove me to a charming grass airport not far from home. They bought me a fifteen-minute ride in a Piper J-3 Cub, the iconic little puddle-jumper that gave wings to a few generations of aspiring aviators.

On that memorable day, I recall shaking hands with a most accommodating instructor pilot who was attired in a snug-fitting steel-blue uniform as if he were an off-duty airline captain. All around us

were worn Cubs, not show planes but real working ships with sun-faded paint schemes and engines that dripped oil. The airport air was full of the sweet smell of highly refined avgas mixed with the strong odor of nitrate dope used for coating the fabric airplanes. Mechanics in grease-stained coveralls scurried about with great purpose.

To a twelve-year-old boy with unbounded aerial ambitions, this quaint airport, with its wide grass runways and array of high-wing, two-seat taildraggers, seemed the ideal place to fulfill my dream. Aloft and manipulating the controls for the first time under the watchful eye of the instructor, I felt exhilarated. Traversing the uncluttered blue sky as if sailing gentle ocean waves, and knowing that I could point myself in whatever direction that suited my fancy, gave me my first real taste of freedom. The world's infinite possibilities were within my grasp.

It felt right up there. I did not want to come down, back to the world below that was predictable, limiting, and artificial. Alas, there was no choice. Yet, I knew that the pleasures of flight would always stay with me. I would never be the same again.

Filled with excitement over my new discovery, I soon developed a colossal appetite for books that described the great pioneering pilots. I had not one dream but many dreams about those extraordinary men and women who conquered the poles by air, navigated over vast oceans, won air races, set speed and altitude records, dueled in fighters on their way to becoming aces, performed stunts at air shows, barnstormed across prairielands, flew the mail, developed comfortable and efficient airline service, and, just at that moment in time, rocketed into the uncharted void of space to change humankind's worldly vantage point forever.

The school library was a good source for books about the air combat of World War II, and the local bookshops stocked lots of titles on the emerging field of spaceflight. These books tended either to focus on one pilot or to provide a sweeping overview of aviation. I did not see a volume for children my age that told the stories of many of the leading aviators of those first sixty years of powered flight. So in later years, I decided to fill this gap with a single book containing the stories of a wide cross-section of aviation's heroes.

The lives of more than twenty aviation luminaries are presented here, in the hopes that children, their parents, and teachers will learn pivotal facts about the history of flight, some of the key contributors, and notable aircraft. It is equally hoped that readers will find inspiration in the stories of courage, perseverance, teamwork, and creativity.

The famous aviators whose exploits are covered in this book were each dreamers, too. Their extraordinary accomplishments, which entailed breaking with convention and overcoming major obstacles, started with a dream. In their aeronautical endeavors, many of them came up against seemingly insurmountable technical problems. At times, they were scoffed at and ridiculed. Some faced the challenge of physical handicap, while others were forced to confront the curse of discrimination. Undeterred, they followed their dream against the forces, both natural and manmade, that tried to hold them back. In the end, they broke through these barriers and achieved success.

Interestingly, these legendary aviation figures came from every walk of life. Some had comfortable upbringings, while others had to scramble just to make ends meet. There were Ivy Leaguers and there were high-school dropouts. High society shared the skies with newly arrived immigrants and even slave descendants. Aiming for the heavens took precedence over everything else. The common thread for these diverse flyers, inventors, and explorers seemed to be their embrace of the sky.

They were not without flaws, but their legacy reminds us of the heights to which humankind can rise. History's most accomplished aviators have proved that we are limited only by our own imagination. In the future, it will be today's little flyers, empowered by their dreams, who ultimately soar above virgin horizons, forging new chapters in the history of flight.