

# Forever Flyboy

BY COLLEEN MACDONALD

Jack Schenck's boyhood aspirations grew into a contagious passion for aviation that endured long after the 30 years he spent crafting his homebuilt plane. He still hasn't hung up his wings.



My husband Dan credits Jack Schenck with giving him two of his great loves: flying and photography. Jack had his eye on them both since childhood. As a boy in the Dirty Thirties, Jack was the target of schoolyard bullies. Those experiences triggered a recurring dream in which he escaped his tormenters by flapping his arms until he grew wings that would fly him into triumphant freedom. In time, Jack did find his wings, though he wasn't always flying when he soared.

As a child, Jack was full of unwieldy ambition, without the benefit of fatherly oversight in his Mennonite Brethren household. His dad died young. "My mother had her hands full with the four of us kids." Childhood rebellion for this self-described "renegade" meant refusing to limit his aspirations. He built model airplanes with his brother, and later devoured a how-to book about building and flying a glider. He satisfied his many curiosities, such as why his aunt's camera took all those pictures but required an excruciating wait before he could see the prints. He ordered a Kodak at-home processing kit and was developing his own pictures in his makeshift bedroom darkroom by age 13.

During high school, Jack worked part-time at the Stratford Beacon Herald,

giving him a foot in the door to his first full-time photography job at the London Free Press. In 1954, he became one of only a handful of photographers from London, Ontario to have his work featured in Life magazine. An editor at the Free Press let the Life editors know of Jack's offbeat series of pictures featuring an unlikely 7-year-old goat master from St. Marys who'd trained a farm animal best known for stubbornness to perform tricks on command. Soon after, *Billy Goat Ballet* appeared in the legendary magazine. "Back then, they didn't put your name under the picture, but they sure paid – 350 dollars!" Jack says with a gleam in his eye. "And that's back when I was making 23 bucks a week."

When the new-fangled concept of shooting stories with movie film came to television news, Jack was hired as a news camera operator at CFPL-TV, and equipped with a Bell & Howell 16 mm film camera. One of his first assignments was to shoot a movie version of his award-winning billy goat story, but he didn't know what to do when "faced with this moving image thing." He came back with 200 feet of unusable film, because it was effectively a series of still photos on movie film. "It took me six months just to wrap my head around the concept of telling a story in moving pictures."

I had long forgotten that the concept of storytelling in moving pictures – so familiar now – is

actually a learned skill, until Jack shared that story with me. I rediscovered this while visiting Jack at his retirement home apartment he shares with Florie, his wife of nearly 67 years. Like my husband Dan, I too have a connection to this 91-year-old man. Jack started as a news camera operator at CFPL-TV in 1956, in the infancy of television news. Sixty years later, I was among the last three news camera operators to be laid off, before the role was lumped in with the reporters'



tasks, and dedicated news videographers were gone for good at CFPL, now a CTV station.

Jack had sure mastered his craft by the time he shot what would become his favourite story at Expo '67 in Montreal. For the last three days of the expo, he followed the young people who'd come from every continent to participate. "Quite a few intercontinental romances bloomed. These kids just hated to see the whole thing come to an end. There were farewell parties, hugs and kisses. I got caught up in all of this and I guess you end up feeling for these

people." Jack's story was turned into an 11-minute documentary, and won several awards across North America. Looking back on his 35-year career shooting TV news, he says, "It was just so much fun, you know. It sounds corny as hell, but I tell people I never worked a day in my life." Corny as that may sound, it's true. I never worked a day either when I was shooting news stories.

The first time Jack actually flew wasn't until 1961, at age 35, when he could finally afford to take flying lessons. At ten dollars an hour, it was a costly pursuit for a married man with two kids to raise. After getting his pilot's licence, he joined the Sport Flyers of Middlesex. "They were a bunch of crazy guys who flew from a grass strip out in London Township. That's where I gave Dan his first flight." Dan wasn't the only beneficiary of Jack's passion for flight.

When Jack's grandson Alex was five years old, he took him for a ride in a Cessna 152. He sat him up on pillows so he could see out the cockpit, and gave



him the controls. “That kid had a natural bent for flying right off the bat,” Jack beams. “He could do gentle turns. He would say, ‘Is this all right, pop? Is this okay?’ And I said, by Jove, he’s got it. The bug, I mean.” Jack gave Alex the flying bug at five, and from then on, they went flying every chance they got. Alex is now a pilot in the Royal Canadian Air Force.

The fifteen men in the Sport Flyers of Middlesex bought and sold various airplanes they jointly owned. Of the four planes they owned at any one time, Jack says, “The bank mostly owned them. We were running on the thin edge most of the time.” Only the financing was risky. Dan remembers Jack always said, “There are old pilots and there are bold pilots, but there are no old, bold pilots.” But to those of us outside of aviation, it seems rather bold to take on a homebuilt experimental craft. The club bought one such plane called a Jodel D11. Who knew that same model would become Jack’s new lifelong companion?

A man who’d started building a Jodel in a rented pig barn had abandoned the project, leaving the landlord in the lurch with a whopping \$37.50 owed in back rent. The owner of the barn offered the whole shebang to Jack – blueprints, tools, and supplies – in exchange for the back rent. It was the early 70s, and so began a decades-long labour of love.

The barn was unsuitable for building a Jodel, so Jack moved the project to his Beachwood Avenue home and started construction in the basement. His baby soon needed a proper workshop, so he had



his carport converted to a garage. Jack knew the project would out-grow the garage when it came time to build the wing, with its 27-foot span, so he had a 32-foot long sunroom built on the back of his house. Initially, the sunroom was Florie’s cherished retreat where she enjoyed her morning coffee, until the Jodel invaded.

Jack figured it would take 10 months to build the wing. Maybe a year, tops. Almost two years later, Florie was helping him secure the Dacron fabric to the wing with 18-inch long rib stitching needles. Florie finally got her sunroom back after Jack rented a hangar to finish construction. The project was shelved at times “to raise a family and go on vacation and all sorts of things,” but thirty years later at age 75, his Jodel D11 was complete. Only it wasn’t a D11 by then. “I registered it as a D11-S. The S is for Schenck, because I did so many modifications I figured I deserved it.”

In a less proud moment, he calls it “a real mongrel,” even if it is made with Sitka spruce and aircraft

plywood from Finland. Built on a shoestring budget, his D11-S has parts from World War 2 aircraft, an F86 Sabre Jet, and a Piper Cub. Custom crafted to make it faster and prettier than the specs called for, it’s truly an original.

I asked Jack how he acquired the knowledge to build a plane. “That’s why it took 30 years!” he replied. I laughed and laughed. “Seriously. I started with the knowledge to build a bird house.” While the project did hone his woodworking abilities, he knew he’d never acquire the skill required to weld the metal parts. He was skillful though at “schmoozing the head welder” who taught at a technical school. That teacher did all the welding for him, and caught Jack’s bug in the process. He went on to get his pilot’s licence. Another convert had discovered the same passion that has inspired Jack for over 80 years.

Despite Jack’s cautious restraint, he did have a close call with the Jodel about six years ago, when he suddenly began losing oil pressure. It’s supposed to stay around 30, but

it was plummeting toward zero. That's when the engine seizes and the propeller stops, reminding Jack of an old joke: "Daddy, what's that spinning thing for? It's a big fan to keep the pilot cool, because when it stops, does he ever sweat!"

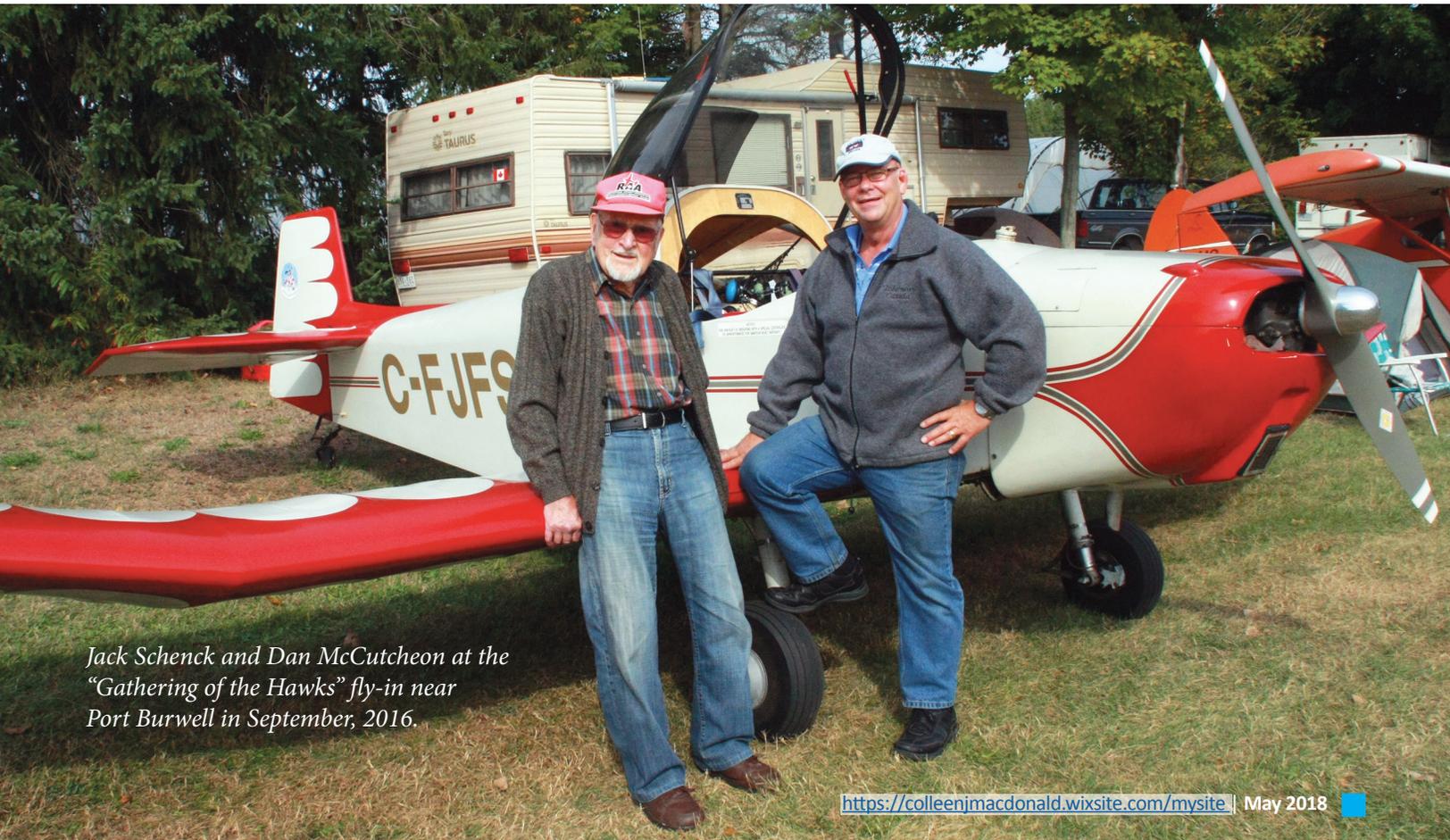
Jack was really sweating as he came in for an emergency landing at 50 miles an hour on the grass strip of a farm he flew over often. "There was a bad crosswind and I lost it on final and I started cutting his corn with the left wing. It spun me around sideways and I hit the tall wet grass and then one wing went right into the corn. When that plane is going sideways, it feels as though you're in the Tilt o' Whirl at the fair." In the end, the wing only had a couple of punches in it, and the farmer who pulled him out of the corn was a kindred spirit who moved his own plane out of the way to accommodate Jack's in his personal hangar.

The loss of oil pressure was due to a simple moment of distraction after loosening the oil cap to add more oil. "I didn't get around to it, and the loose cap allowed the oil to drain out." He'd prefer not to keep that part for posterity. "Pride keeps you from putting too much detail in the logbook."

Jack last flew the Jodel in December of 2017. He plans to go back to it, even though his licence is now restricted because he was diagnosed with atrial fibrillation. "They were going to yank my licence completely, but I whined and complained and got my doctor to write a note to the gurus in Toronto. And they finally said, 'Well, okay, as long as you have a licensed pilot with you.'"

Jack is just shy of having logged 500 hours in his Jodel. "I'm going to hang up my wings when I get 500 hours on the homebuilt." He promised Florie he'd be done with it once he reached that tidy milestone. Soon to be 92, Jack is thinking about his legacy. He has bequeathed his beloved Jodel to his grandson Alex, and he's hoping to track down the goat-training boy from St. Marys, who'd now be in his 70s, to give him the original 1954 Life magazine that featured his story.

Jack is unique, and his plane is a one-of-a-kind masterpiece, but he says all dedicated pilots are alike in one way: "Every avid flyer says the same thing in different words to describe their love of flying. It comes down to one word: freedom." I would add to that, and I think Dan would agree, contagious passion.



*Jack Schenck and Dan McCutcheon at the "Gathering of the Hawks" fly-in near Port Burwell in September, 2016.*