



**JEFF SKILES**

COMMENTARY / CONTRAILS



# Clancy Hess

Connection with history

BY JEFF SKILES

**WHEN I WORKED** at EAA, one of the many enjoyable perks was daily interaction with EAA's passionate membership. Founder Paul Poberezny created EAA as a membership organization, and it is hard to imagine another that considers membership participation so basic to its core purpose. EAA prides itself on finding ways for the membership to participate.

## EAA MEMBERSHIP

EAA AirVenture Oshkosh is still very much a membership event, with the vast majority of attendees being longtime EAA members. AirVenture, or as Paul always called it, convention, couldn't happen without the work of innumerable volunteers not only during the show but also in the months preceding and following.

Members factor into so many other EAA activities as well. The Air Tours program is staffed on the road by member volunteers who maintain, manage, and fly the Tri-Motors and B-17. The Young Eagles and classic biplane flying at Pioneer Airport behind the EAA Aviation Museum depend on member pilots and ground crew, and many members work with the maintenance staff at EAA's Kermit Weeks Flight Operations Center maintaining and restoring EAA's fleet of flying aircraft.

Many members are close to the organization staff, and the relationships and friendships I developed through my work at EAA are important to me to this day. I'd like to tell you about one longtime member who sticks in my memory if only because of one incident.

Clancy Hess, EAA 100700, was a longtime EAA member and volunteer at AirVenture. While he was in his 90s, he was still very active and would frequently call up for seemingly no reason other than just to talk. Clancy would either leave a message with someone in membership services or on my answering machine, and it would always be the same.

## THE MESSAGE

"Jeff, it's Clancy. Give me a call back. You can call me anytime up until midnight or after 6 a.m. Anytime in between is okay, too!"

I knew a conversation with Clancy would not be a quick affair, so I generally called him back in the evening. I didn't live in Oshkosh. I would drive up for the week, arriving Monday morning before 8 a.m., and I drove back home on Fridays at 5. With nothing better to do during the week I usually worked until 8 or 9 p.m. and would return Clancy's call when the offices were empty.

Clancy was always excited, almost effervescent, and his personality was one of perennial good humor. In our conversations the words would spill out of his mouth with wild abandon as he spoke of his long involvement with aviation.

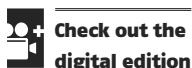
## UFOS

Clancy flew Hellcats in the Marines during World War II. He also flew in Korea and was an airline pilot with American Airlines for most of his life, but he only rarely talked about that. Clancy was most proud of being a charter member of AOPA and a member of the UFOs — the United Flying Octogenarians. In fact, he would mention this in every conversation. The UFOs, as I understand it, are a group of pilots who have flown as pilot in command after 80 years of age. An impressive feat, but octogenarians were relative youngsters to Clancy, who was in his 90s at the time.

Mostly, Clancy liked to talk about his childhood years and how he fell, almost accidentally, into a lifetime immersed in aviation. When Clancy was young, his family lived on the north side of Chicago. His father was a carpenter by trade who was interested in aviation. Clancy's father took the family to the Cleveland National Air Races in 1929, and the very next year the National Air Races came to Chicago. Clancy's father was involved in building some of the structures at Curtiss-Reynolds Airport to host the races in what is now the northern Chicago suburb of Glenview, Illinois.

## NATIONAL AIR RACES

The National Air Races of 1930 were a combination of cross-country derbies and closed-course pylon racing. The Men's Non-Stop Cross-Country derby from Los



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of EAA Sport Aviation to view Clancy Hess's Timeless Voices video.

Angeles was won by Wiley Post. Two cross-country women's races terminated at the finish line in Chicago, one from Long Beach, California, won by Gladys O'Donnell, the other from Washington, D.C., won by Phoebe Omlie. The culmination of the event was the Thompson Trophy pylon race that was won by Charles "Speed" Holman that year in a Laird Solution racing biplane, the only biplane to ever win the Thompson Trophy. A replica of a later version, the Laird Super Solution, is exhibited in the EAA Aviation Museum.

Facilities were scarce out in what was Illinois countryside at the time, so when the race pilots showed up with their airplanes, they set up to camp under their wings. Storms were moving in, however, and Clancy's father offered to put them up at the Hess house, which had ample room. Jimmy Doolittle was one of those to take Clancy's father up on his invitation. Some of the pilots stayed for all 10 days of the event.

#### CHARLIE LINDBERGH?

This all made a tremendous impression on 9-year-old Clancy, who obviously was still talking about it more than 80 years later. In fact, that was pretty much all that Clancy talked about, but on one occasion, Clancy added a new twist. He was talking about Charlie coming over to his parent's house for dinner during the race. He went on to say that Charlie was a big deal back then after crossing the Atlantic just a few years before.

Charlie, I thought? Who is Charlie? Then it suddenly clicked into place who "Charlie" was, and I tried to break into the flow of words — which wasn't so easy once Clancy got on a roll.

"Clancy, Clancy, Clancy," I said. "When you say Charlie, are you talking about Charles Lindbergh?"

Clancy seemed kind of miffed at the interruption. "Yeah, yeah," he said. "Charlie. Like I said, Charlie came over to the house for dinner one night..."

I sat back a bit stunned and conjured up in my mind the iconic picture of that tall, taciturn aviator standing by the propeller of the *Spirit of St. Louis* at Roosevelt Field. It never occurred to me that Charles Lindbergh would go by anything other than Charles. Charlie seemed entirely too informal for the man. But I suppose people who knew him might call him Charlie or even Chuck. Chuck Lindbergh! I thought about that for a while. But, if Charlie wasn't right, Chuck was just wrong.

#### CONNECTING WITH HISTORY

Then it occurred to me that Clancy, this man of many evening conversations, was a living connection with people that I only knew from history books. The names he was so casually dropping — Charles "Charlie" Lindbergh, Jimmy Doolittle, Johnny Livingston — were a who's who of aviation at the time.

While Johnny Livingston isn't as well known today as some other pilots, he was one of the winningest race pilots of his era and later became a test pilot for the



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Weaver Aircraft Company, better known as Waco. Livingston became a family friend and soloed young Clancy a few years after the Chicago National Air Races in a Velie Monocoupe at the age of 10. Clancy continued with aviation and had more than 1,000 hours of flying time when he joined up to fly in WWII. He was shot down and survived a midair collision, yet Clancy ultimately ended his professional career as a staid airline captain in 1981.

## CLANCY CALLED

I'm sure there are quite a few who will nod their heads knowingly about Clancy. He didn't just call me after all; he called many people at EAA in just the same fashion to share his stories of the early years. I'm sure he had his list of people over at AOPA as well.

Clancy has passed on now, but he is never far from my memory as my very own connection with those grainy, black-and-white photos of an earlier day when racing planes and outsized personalities ruled the skies. Clancy witnessed the Golden Age of aviation, and worked a lifetime to build aviation as we know it. He and many like him bridged the gap between those early pioneers and the world we know today. **EAA**

**Jeff Skiles**, EAA Lifetime 336120, is an airline pilot who also flies the B-29 *FIFI* for the Commemorative Air Force and owns a Cessna 185. Jeff can be reached at [JeffreyBSkiles@gmail.com](mailto:JeffreyBSkiles@gmail.com).

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