

THE LITTLEST WAR BIRD COMES FULL CIRCLE

By Marvin V. Hoppenworth



My involvement in this story starts back in 1948. This young Iowa farm boy was working as an A & P mechanic (A & E in those days) and had just earned a private license. He would have liked to buy a Taylorcraft but those were over \$1000, well out of reach for this young mechanic. He heard a rumor about a damaged J3 Cub in a barn south of Jesup, Iowa. Jubilee was the name of the community, just a church and a store. A friend took him to see this so-called "damaged Cub". They were introduced to the pastor of the church and he led them to the lean-to portion of the barn.

There, in the far corner was the most depressing sight he had seen in a long time. There was an army Cub, L-4 type, olive drab paint; light blue bottom with yellow numbers NC9245H. It was all slumped over on a damaged left gear, wings along side with the struts folded up close. Obviously, it had been disassembled in a military manner and it was covered with a years worth of rural farm dust. What a dismal sight, but he had found an affordable airplane. The purchase price was \$250. Later it was discovered that it only had 248 hours since new. That lucky farm boy was me.

My mother took me to make the formal purchase since I was not yet the legal age of 21. The owner's father, Pastor Sandrock, signed for him since he was away in the military service. It was a purchase by proxy.

The records showed that this airplane, an L-4H had been flown in Europe as a spotter. This 'Grasshopper' was brought back by, a then Colonel Vernon H. Sandrock, the owner and possibly the pilot in Europe. It was licensed as a civilian J3C-65 in Pennsylvania in 1945 and it was assumed he flew it in the U.S. until some time in 1947 (judging by the years worth of dust, being an Iowa farm boy and knowing about such things). About 15 years ago I read where General Vernon Sandrock (Two Star, I think) retired from the army.

The derelict L-4 was transported to the Livingston Airport in Waterloo, Iowa where I was working as a mechanic for the Terry Flying Service. It was looked over good and the decision was made to recover it as long as I was doing it, and it would have to be done in Cub yellow. In 1948 there was no interest in war birds, they were "a dime a dozen".

Three months were spent, working evenings and on days off, rebuilding and recovering the Cub. On January 2nd, 1949, it was gassed up and made its first flight as my Piper J3C-65. It proved to be a good Cub. It was unique in that it had the L-4 buckboard seat in the rear, not the common canvas sling. Several other things that were unique were the propeller, a Sensenich 72CK43, the only wooden prop I have ever seen with a 43" pitch, and the windshield was a full .250" thick. It must have been a combat

windshield. I'm sure it was a combat Cub because when I recovered it, Signal Corps messages and empty carbine shells came out of the belly under the floorboards.

There was an interesting emblem painted on each side of the fin. It was about 5" square, yellow with about a 3/8" red border and a Siamese horse and donkey head (black) in the yellow square. Most likely it represented the pilot and observer flying back to back. I saved the patch of fabric. This is the only Piper L-4 that I know of which served in Europe and was brought back to the United States.



The Cub was flown to its maximum. The Cub and I had some real interesting experiences, many of which should not be put into print. Our hometown football/baseball field became the town airstrip for this Cub. It was used to commute to work from my parent's farm, a distance of 25 miles at least 3 times a week. (This was a year and a half before I had a car). Commuting to and from work, the Cub flew exactly the same route almost every time, right on the middle of an Iowa square mile

section. There is usually a fence on the half-mile mark giving an option of fields left or right. Most all our trips were below 100 foot and when the visibility got down to about 1/2 mile, we were right at home in familiar territory. Recalling one morning the Cub and I were 'bombing along'; into view came a truck and two farmers trying to load a horse into that truck. No doubt about it, I know we ruined their morning.

After about 5 months of flying the Cub, the desire to enjoy the luxury of night flight grew stronger so a set of NAV lights and a battery were installed. In the summer the Cub and I went out on many full-moon-lit nights. Our field had no runway lights. In the winters the Cub was equipped with Heath tubular skis.

In all my flights with this Cub during the 500 hours plus put on it from January 1949 to September 1954, I would estimate over half of the landings were off-airport landings. I recall one field was so short; the Cub was just pushed to the other end against the fence rather than taxi it. About 180 people received their first airplane ride in this Cub. That was my greatest thrill in flying, to share my Cub with someone and make it a nice smooth flight.

The Cub was almost lost to fire. It had been wind damaged up at my Dad's farm. To get it back to the airport the wings were secured along side, and with the tail on my Dad's truck, we proceeded to head for the airport. About half way, a flicker in the rear view mirror caught my eye - the right hand brake was on fire! I stopped, got out to see the fabric start burning up the landing gear. With one big kick of my heel, I broke

through the fabric and nipped it down, throwing the burning fabric into the ditch, then jerked off my coat to smother the fire on the tire. 'Poof, the tire blew and burned my eyebrows and whatever hair wasn't under my cap. Fortunately this kid was wearing glasses. One wheel and tire later we were on the way to the airport. After rebuilding another wing the Cub was back in the air again.

General characteristics L-4			
Primary function	Liaison / observation		
Power plant	One Continental O-170-3 engine		
Thrust	63 HP		47 kW
Wingspan	35.2 ft		10.74 m
Length	20.4 ft		6.22 m
Weight	empty	740 lb	336 kg
	max.	1,221 lb	554 kg
Speed	max.	85 mph	137 km/h
	cruising	75 mph	121 km/h
Ceiling	9,285 ft		2,830 m
Range	186 miles		300 km
Crew	Two		
Date deployed	1941		
Cost	\$2,600		
Number built	14,125 (in use USAAF approx 5,160)		

After coming back from the service, (I was an aircraft mechanic in the Army 7th Division Air Section in Korea) the Cub was again used to commute weekends between the farm and the Hunter Airport in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. Eighty miles one way just doesn't get it on 12 gallons if you plan on doing anything else. We bought a lot of farmer gas going back. You know what a head wind does to a Cub on cross-country! It ruins a lot of your estimates.

In 1953, I purchased a Taylorcraft BC12-D needing recovering and an engine overhaul. This airplane fits into the life of the Cub because it was to become the replacement for the Piper J3C-65 (alias LH4). It had 24 gallons fuel capacity and now would be able to leave Cedar Rapids, Iowa and file for Detroit, Michigan non-stop.

Another person enters my life and the Cub. In 1953 I gave a young lady her first airplane ride, all the way from Cedar Rapids to my parent's farm. I found out later she was not afraid, even a bit bored, and was relieved that flying was so smooth. Her name was Catherine and she became my wife in September of 1954. Now, being faced with a problem, a Taylorcraft about 2/3 completed and in need of money to buy furniture, the Cub was advertised and sold for \$505. A gentleman by the name of Ford from Crystal Airport, Minnesota offered \$500 for it and I said, "\$505 and it's yours" - just what had been invested in 1948.

Since selling the Cub, it went on to be used as a training plane at Shamrock Aviation. The Cub was later sold to a farmer in Eau Claire, Wisconsin. From there it was purchased by an airline pilot named Hank S. Weber. We corresponded in 1974, and later found that he was ferrying the plane across Iowa in October of 1975. He accepted my invitation to stop over night in Cedar Rapids on his way to Miami, Florida. The Cub was now painted white with a blue stripe. You know! Once behind the stick it was 'Old Home Week'. Something unique about an old Cub, "Instant fun - just add gas". Being able to give my two sons a ride in Dad's old Cub sort of made me proud.

In correspondence with Mr. Weber, he indicated he had sold the airplane to a friend by the name of Jim McIver in Miami. I contacted this man and offered the military acceptance plate (which I had kept) and the shield from the vertical fin because he wished to restore it to the L-4H configuration. He indicated that the Cub L-4H was stored in a trailer waiting restoration. It survived Hurricane Andrew only by the trailer being blown on its side by the wind. It was to be restored in the near future.



Marv and Cathy Hoppenworth

During the year 2000 I placed a call to Jim again and was surprised to have his wife tell me that he had passed away. Mrs. McIver informed me that the airplane would probably be placed in the Air Museum in Kalamazoo, Michigan. This summer, through contacts with the museum's curator, I found that it was indeed headed there when completed.

So, now the **littlest warbird** has come full circle. From L-4H to 50 years as a Piper J3C-65 to back to being configured as an army L-4H.

Editor's Note:



NC9245H at the Air Museum in Kalamazoo, MI

The military versions of the Piper Cub, L-4s were produced in large numbers for the then-new role of airborne artillery spotting and liaison. The L-4 performed its first combat mission for the Army on November 9, 1942, when three of these airplanes were flown off a carrier deck to spot for ground units going ashore in the invasion of North Africa. During WWII, members of the Civil Air Patrol flew hundreds of the L-4s searching for enemy submarines in coastal waters. At the end of World War II, many of the L-4s were sold in place in Europe.

In October 2001, Mr. Bill Painter of the museum called and said, "The Cub is here". On November 6th, Catherine and I arrived in Kalamazoo to see the Cub. It looked very nice. I recognized the N9245H registration number. I even recognized a splice on the tubing in the cabin, which I had put on over 50 years ago when the Cub was wind damaged on Dad's farm.

Here are some links to related websites:

Sensenich Propellers

<http://www.sensenich.com>

Brigadier General Vernon H. Sandrock

http://airforce.dtic.mil/news/biographies/sandrock_vh.html

Kalamazoo Aviation History Museum

<http://www.airzoo.org>