AVIATORS FLIGHT LOG BOOK

ARTHUR E. ABNEY
To my wife, Helen Abney, for her help, understanding, and patience
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Foreword

David NewMyer

In 1941, the nation mobilized its military, and young Americans went off to war. This book tells the story of one of those young men, Arthur E. “Gene” Abney of Harco, Illinois, who went off to war after the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. He was part of the Flying Egyptians, a group of young pilots from Southern Illinois Normal University (now Southern Illinois University Carbondale). The pages of this book reflect the unquestioning sense of duty felt by these young people and especially Gene. This sense of duty viewed through the prism of wars fought since that time seems not only highly honorable but incredibly brave. This book is also a reflection of the times and of the proud and patriotic people of that era, who simply did what they had to do.

Gene Abney’s career in aviation spanned sixty-plus years, from flight lessons at Marion Airport in the fall of 1941 to his involvement in aviation management curriculum and the flight advisory committee of SIU. Gene’s list of accomplishments is long but most outstanding among them is his work to share with others his absolute love of the airplane and its inventors, Wilbur and Orville Wright. From his salutes to Wilbur and Orville from the cockpit of his PBM while on training missions in North Carolina to his salutes in this work and in the foreword to Howard Scamehorn’s Balloons to Jets, Gene’s aviation vocation clearly is
his avocation, and he wants to share with others that feeling, that sense of belonging.

I have known Gene for the last thirty-five years, and I wish I hadn’t missed the other fifty-plus years. Through this book, the reader will get to know Gene, his comrades in arms in the U.S. Navy, his years at the Illinois Department of Aeronautics and American Airlines, and his retirement years. In a special section of the book are stories by some of Gene’s many friends in Illinois aviation who provide insights into the times in which Gene lived and worked and the industry that he loves. Enjoy the read, and enjoy the ride!
Preface

December 17, 2003, marked the hundredth anniversary of the Wright brothers’ historic flight at Kill Devil Hill near Kitty Hawk, North Carolina. The activities for the celebration were the motivating factor in my decision to undertake this book project. The initial incentive for my embarking on this effort was in January 2000 when then-director of Southern Illinois University Press, Rick Stetter, his then–chief editor, Jim Simmons, and I attended an aviation meeting at the Illinois state Division of Aeronautics at the Springfield Airport. Rick evidenced a pronounced interest in my flying career, particularly my navy pilot experience in the Pacific theater during World War II, and suggested that I consider writing a book on my squadron’s activities. Being in my eighties and with a failing memory, the last thing I thought I wanted to do was to undertake a book project. I thanked Rick for his interest and reiterated that I would not be at all interested in the project.

During the next few weeks, I kept thinking about the idea. As the days went by, I became more aware of the activities surrounding the Wright centenary. The Centennial of Flight Commemoration Act established a commission to “promote upcoming activities and events that will celebrate the 100th anniversary of powered, controlled flight.” The U.S. Mint issued commemorative coins with engravings of the Wright Brothers and their Wright Flyer. A number of other events were in the
planning stages. It occurred to me that this centennial event was an opportunity for me to point out the way the airplane had changed my life, directed me away from my chosen careers of school teaching and, later, the practice of law. It would also give me a chance to express my sincere thanks to Orville and Wilbur for making the airplane available to me and to the world.

I had never written anything to date except a few magazine articles, so I thought that I would meet innumerable difficulties, but I have been fortunate to have wonderful help, cooperation, and advice from many understanding, able, and unselfish people without whom I could not have completed this effort. My sincere gratitude for this needed and welcome assistance.

I am very grateful to Rick and to my editor Liz Brymer for their help and encouragement. On the suggestion of author Janice Petterchak, my friend Kay Harris, an excellent typist, was enlisted to help with manuscript preparation. I extend my sincere thanks to Kay for all of her help, which included serving as a very welcome and needed local editor.

I want to extend my sincere appreciation to Dr. David NewMyer of Southern Illinois University for his foreword. Dave is very much aware of my activities in the aviation field.

In addition, the following authors not only permitted but freely encouraged the use of their books in any way necessary—Donald Sweet, a former patrol-plane airman; John Carr, a VPB-16 patrol-plane commander; James Haynes, an Illinois author of three aviation books; VPB-16 pilot and squadron historian Richard Elwood (through his widow and Wally Elwood, my wife’s and my close friend); and Dr. Howard Scamehorn in his Balloons to Jets; Donald Abney, Kelowna, Canada, for Abney family history; and many others.

Also I want to express my appreciation to Kathryn Hodson from the University of Iowa Library; Diana Brackert and Nick People of the Dayton, Ohio, Air Force Museum; Bill and Sue Ascroft for their help with photographs and information from the Pensacola Naval Aviation Museum; Jim and Carolyn Ferrel for Wright brothers pictures and details; Larry and Merry Byerly of Byerly Aviation, located at the Peoria Airport; Bob O’Brien, former Springfield Airport manager; Lucille Abney for her
supply of historical information on the Harco area; the Saline County Historical Society for information on the Harco Coal Mine activities; the Naval Historical Section; Dominick Banacci of the United States Aviation and Trade School Association for the use of Wright Centennial material; Mrs. William Scarpino, widow of our late VPB-16 captain, William Scarpino; personnel of the U.S. Naval Historical Center; Ed and Connie Fetzer of the Prairie Aviation Museum for their continuing information and encouragement; Craig Isbell, former Charles Lindbergh coworker and operator of Springfield’s Southwest Airport; and Jimmy Young, my first flight instructor at the old Marion Illinois Airport.

I especially want to thank my VPB-16 squadronmates for their encouragement and help—Robert Anderson, William Briggs, Robert Caldwell, John Carr, Robert Delzer, John Douglas, Max Jones, James Peltier, the late William Scarpino, and John Toomey.

I am, of course, very grateful to the fifty authors of the stories in part two of this book. I extend my sincere thanks to each one of these heroes, and I am sure readers will enjoy the tales of their close calls.
Introduction: Kitty Hawk to the Moon

When Orville and Wilbur Wright made their first flight at Kill Devil Hill near Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, on December 17, 1903, they could not, even as forward-looking as they were, even in their wildest imaginations, have envisioned that the vehicle (somewhat modified) they flew would take men to the moon just sixty-six years later.

The Wrights were true visionaries; at the same time, they were dedicated, methodical scientists with drive and tenacity. Their interest in flying began in their preteen years when their father gave them a toy with a propeller and a rubber band. When the propeller was wound up, the toy would fly. The propeller intrigued them, and their interest in flying was born. Orville and Wilbur made and flew kites of different shapes and sizes. The neighborhood kids showed so much interest in the kites that the Wright boys made them to sell.

The Wright brothers also read a great deal about early efforts to fly. They read the Greek myth about Daedalus and his son Icarus, who flew out of jail with wings fashioned from feathers and wax. Despite his father's warning, Icarus did, indeed, fly too high, and the sun melted the wax that held the feather wings together. He fell into the sea and drowned. Visionary Italian artist Leonardo da Vinci had attempted to unlock the secrets of flight with his ornithopter, a complicated wing-flapping machine. It wouldn’t fly. German scientist Otto Lilienthal, in
working with kites and gliders, discovered that a wing that is curved on the top surface would provide lift. He recorded his calculations that attempted to show how much curvature in what areas of the wing provided a given amount of lift.

The number of experiments with balloons, dirigibles, and gliders increased every year, but no one had been able yet to overcome the Earth’s gravity with a heavier-than-air machine and perform a sustained flight with a pilot. Orville and Wilbur, now drawn into glider flying, soon developed the goal of coming up with a glider-type machine that would fly under its own power. One thing they needed was a geographical location that had a good, steady wind. The U.S. Weather Bureau told them that the seashore of the Outer Banks near Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, would meet their needs. The Wrights made many trips there during the four years before their historic flight near Kill Devil Hill, about five miles from the town of Kitty Hawk.

In their glider efforts there, they discovered that Lilienthal’s calculations on the camber in the glider’s wing were incorrect. They made their own studies, placing varied miniature wings on the handlebars of bicycles, which, because they operated a bicycle shop, were not in short supply. Another problem they faced was their inability to control the glider’s lateral movement. They could control the pitch and the yaw but not this puzzling lateral movement. They discovered the answer when one day Wilbur happened to twist a cardboard box and saw that one end lowered and the other end moved upward. That resulted in their wing-warping procedure, and that method of controlling the lateral movement of the airplane was used until the advent of ailerons.

During their efforts to solve such problems, the Wrights received help and encouragement from Octave Chanute, a Chicago scientist who was also experimenting with gliders. Chanute and the Wrights became close friends during this period, and that friendship continued until the time the Wrights argued with the U.S. Patent Office over their patent problems and with the Smithsonian Institution regarding Professor Samuel Pierpont Langley’s Aerodrome.

With the wing-warping problems solved, the Wrights concentrated on finding a lightweight engine to get their airplane into the air. They
finally designed one of their own and put it together with the help of Charles Taylor, their assistant in the bicycle shop. Deducing that the propeller worked on the same principles as the wing and using their homemade wind tunnel, the Wrights designed and built a more effective propeller.

Now with the control problems solved and a functional engine, they were ready to fly. A week before their attempted flight, Langley, secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, using pilot Charley Manly, made an effort to fly his Aerodrome from the top of a houseboat. His failure gave the Wrights a chance to be first to successfully fly an “aeroplane.”

On December 17, 1903, they were gathered at the Kill Devil Hills area for their attempt to make their historic flight of the first successful piloted heavier-than-air flying machine. They planned to make the takeoff from level ground, not from the hill that they had been using with their gliders. The wind was strong and gusty, but they finally decided to make their dreamed-of effort. It was Orville’s turn to fly. Wilbur had tried unsuccessfully two days before. At 10:35 a.m., the plane, which they called the Flyer, began to move along the rail. Wilbur ran alongside the right wing. The plane rose into the air at the forty-foot point along the rail. It was hard to control. At 120 feet from the takeoff point, a skid caught in the sand and dragged the Flyer to a halt, but it had flown under its own power for twelve seconds and made history. The brothers made three more flights that day. On the fourth flight, Wilbur flew 852 feet in fifty-nine seconds.

The Wright monument at Kill Devil Hills was dedicated in 1932 with Orville’s participation. It was erected on the hill that the Wrights used extensively in their glider-flying experiments. When I was based at Naval Air Station, Harvey Point, North Carolina, I flew over the monument almost every day and usually gave the brothers a grateful salute.

Struggle and Success

Following their historic flight, the Wrights ran into problems, but as they had done in the face of their first airplane problems, the brothers persevered. In 1904 and 1905, they continued their research, flying out of a field near Dayton owned by banker Torrence Huffman, who allowed