

# BEMIDJI AREA CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

THIRD STREET & BEMIDJI AVENUE, P.O. BOX 808, BEMIDJI, MINNESOTA 56601 • TELEPHONE (218)751-3540

September 13, 1983

Mr. Don Toeppen  
42 White Oak Circle  
St. Charles, IL 60174

Dear Mr. Toeppen:

Thank you for your letter and courtesy copy of The Vintage Airplane. Your article was most interesting and appreciated.

We have taken the liberty of photocopying the article and forwarding it to the current FBO, Bemidji Aviation.

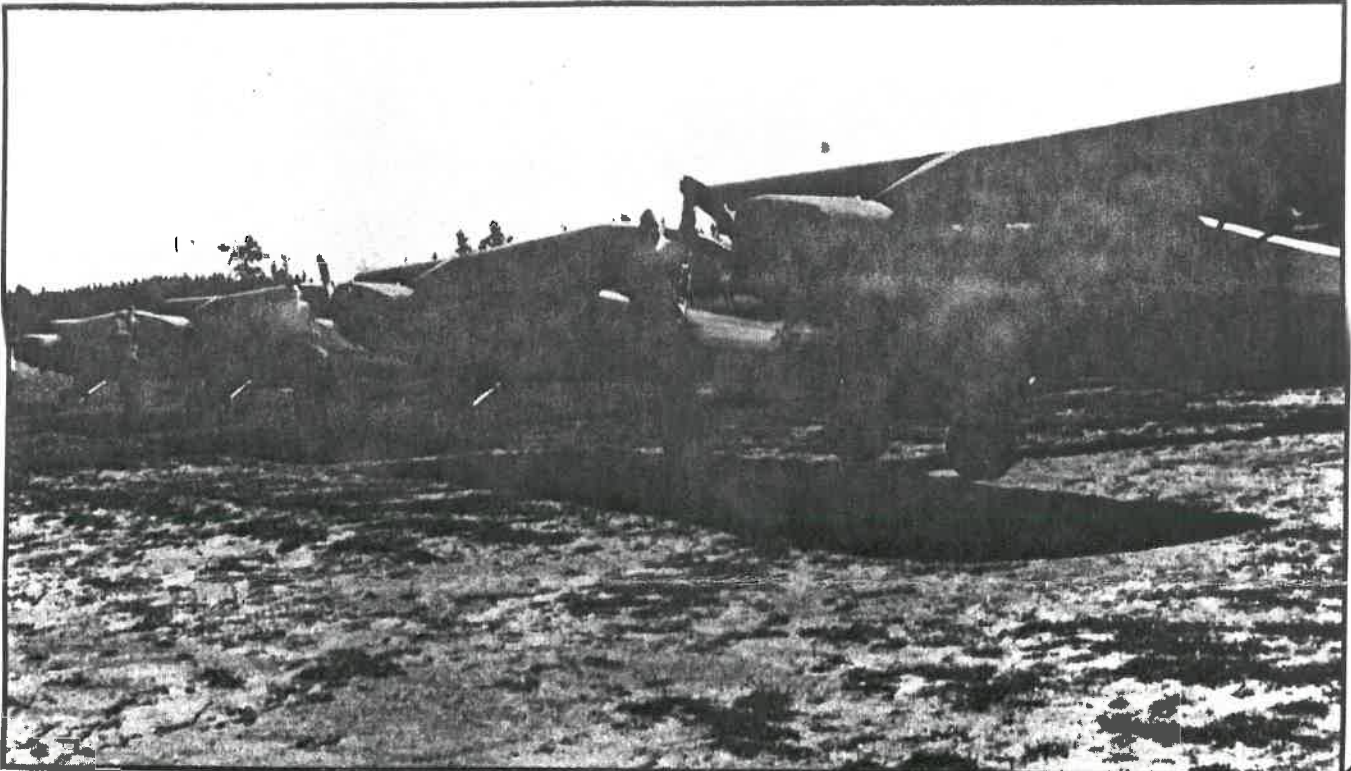
I soloed from Bemidji Airport on August 26, 1971, in a C-150 and sure remember what a difference without that 200 pound plus instructor on board.

Sincerely,

Nancy Henninger  
Executive Vice President

NH/sk

cc Larry Diffley, Bemidji Aviation  
Ralph Moberg, Moberg Seaplane Base



Piper J-3 Cubs on the Rising School of Aviation flight line, Bemidji, MN in 1942.

PRIMARY IN A

# J-3 CUB

*WITH BEST REWARDS  
TO THE CITIZENS OF  
BEMIDJI!  
Don Toeppen*



Don Toeppen in 1942 wearing headgear for motorcycles and convertibles.

16 AUGUST 1983

By Don Toeppen  
(EAA 109869)  
42 White Oak Circle  
St. Charles, IL 60174

(Photos courtesy of the author)

Visibility was at least 100 miles under the clear, blue, September post frontal sky. I knew that upon reaching 1500 feet above ground, the air would be so smooth that the J-3 Cub would cruise hands off. Getting to 1500 feet took a bit of flying time; I'd be in the practice area off the southern tip of Lake Bemidji by the time I got there.

From airport traffic pattern throughout the climb, we'd been flying a series of shallow banked 90° turns so as not to run into another aircraft that might be hidden by the nose. Not that such an event was likely; there were very few civilian planes flying in September 1942. Most of them were assigned to some military or military contract operation. Other than our four War Training Service Cubs, there was a lone Taylorcraft and a single Luscombe at the Bemidji, Minnesota Municipal Airport. They were both parked in the old WPA constructed hangar when I took off, and the other three Cubs were in their own practice areas. The plane and I were alone.

Upon reaching 1500 AGL, I trimmed her up, picked out the likely forced landing spots; there were plenty of freshly cut grain fields available for that purpose. So I just flew straight and level a few minutes enjoying the view. Buster, my instructor, said there would never be a time to just sit and look, but the whole flight experience was so new and spine tingling, I just had to sneak a moment now and then to enjoy the total experience. Buster had told me to practice spins. I certainly was in no hurry to

get started with that! I had become accustomed to the nose high attitude we needed to get a clean stall, but still didn't like it. To me, the attitude for a spin entry was worse because of what was going to happen next! A fellow had to think about this for a minute or two; it wasn't something to rush right into. So I did a series of clearing turns. The other Cubs were so far away that they were not discernable without binoculars even in this northern Minnesota visibility. Damn! Well, two more turns ought to do it. Uggghh. Time to stop procrastinating and do it.

Carb heat on, throttle closed, and pull the nose up. Gad, it was quiet! Just the prop barely turning over, and the slip stream sound diminishing to a whisper. Seemed like the nose was 80 degrees above the horizon. The first nibble of the stall caused a little tremble to run through the airframe and I kicked in full left rudder, and held the stick full back. All hell broke loose. The nose fell off to the left and the ground filled the windshield. It certainly didn't stay still, but started pinwheeling around like the numbered gambling wheel in a carnival.

Oops - I'm supposed to count the turns; where are we anyway? That has to be two turns, I think, let's recover! Full right rudder, then pop the stick forward. Holy smokes, Buster didn't turn upside down when he demonstrated spins! Ease her out, steady now. Slowly, slowly, ease the nose up. Might as well use this excess speed to get back to altitude. Now full throttle and climb her back to 1500 feet.

After about thirty minutes, it didn't take quite as many clearing turns to screw up enough courage to kick her into a spin, and it seemed that I could actually count the roads as they spun under the nose. We even *almost* lined up with the road after recovery, and I had an understanding with the Cub about tucking under. The Cub promised not to go upside down if I didn't hold the stick full forward for such a long time.

I kicked her into a final spin, recovered, and glided down to 500 feet AGL. There was just enough time for a rectangular pattern, "S" turns along U.S. Highway 2 back toward town and into the traffic pattern. Opposite the landing point on downwind, carb heat on, throttle closed. The 65 Lycoming ticked over beautifully. Check for traffic, turn on base leg and clear the engine. Now check for traffic, turn on final and clear the engine. Aim for the point, and as the ground starts to fill the windshield, commence the flare, holding her off, bringing the stick back, back, until, when it is full back, the wheels kiss the sod. Three point! How long would it be until I got another squeezer like that? Not bad for 12 hours.

Keep the stick back while taxiing into the wind. Left turn toward the hangar. Keep the stick back, and now the stick points into the wind coming from the right. Not much wind today, but Buster said to always taxi as if it were really howling, and when it did, the proper response would be automatic. "S" turn the ship so as to be able to see around the nose. After all, in 1942 there were very few tricycle gear aircraft. The B-24 and 25, a couple of fighters, the P-38 and 39, and who would ever by lucky enough to fly one of those? Now line up the wheels on the flight line and cut the mags.

And thus it went for 40 hours which completed the Primary WTS course for our class, just before Thanksgiving, 1942.

War Training Service, or WTS was a military adaption of a Civil Aeronautics Administration program known as the Civilian Pilot Training Program, or CPT. The object when our class started was to train us to be flying Staff Sergeants, presumably as artillery observers. By the time we were graduated some ten months later, the goal had changed many times as the needs of the war effort dictated.

But back to WTS Primary. The civilian course originally led to a private ticket. It consisted of a federally



Forest "Buster" Rising, Don's flight instructor at Bemidji.

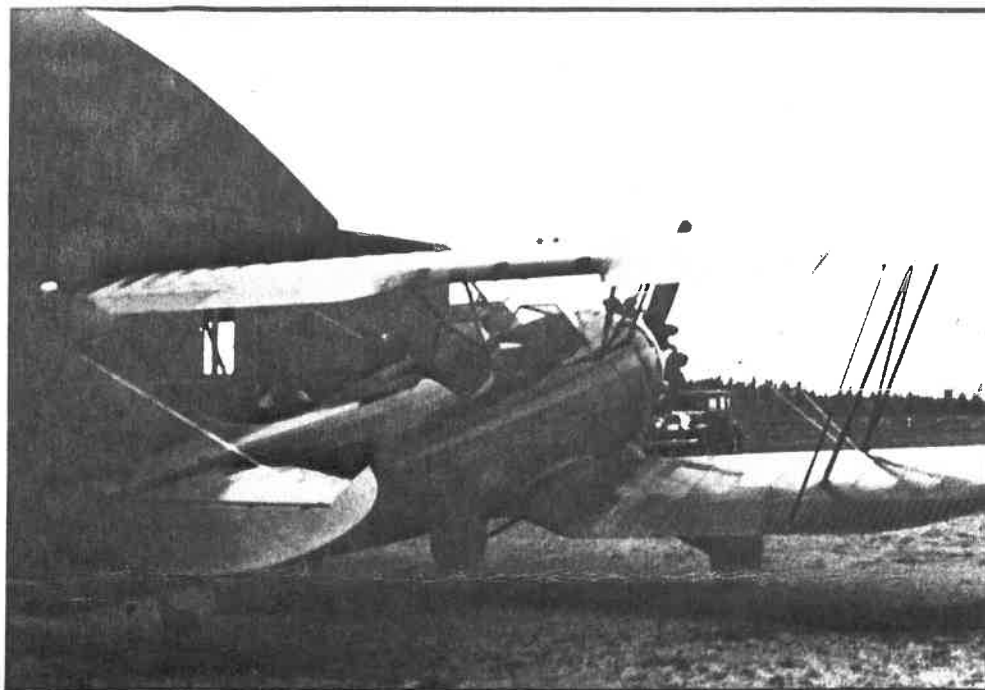
funded cooperative effort between an educational institution and a fixed base operator. In this case, Bemidji State Teachers College and Rising School of Aviation were the principals involved. The impressively named flight school consisted of Buster Rising, Commercial Pilot and Flight Instructor who also had an Aircraft and Engine Mechanics ticket, his wife Lou who ran the paperwork and dispatch functions, and two employee flight instructors.

Ground school was held at night at the College. We flew every flyable day, seven days a week, sun-up to sunset. Basically, ground school subjects were the same as they are today for the private ticket, except we had no radios or instruments to contend with. In fact, we never saw a needle, ball, or radios until we hit Cross Country WTS two courses later.

As you might imagine, with seven students per instructor, and four airplanes total, we flew the planes so much that we saw several 100-hour inspections on each ship before the course was completed. That meant no flying for some of the students until the plane was back in service. With nothing else to do, and us wanting to get back in the air, we had a chance to help Buster with the inspections and repairs. It was a good chance to learn something else, like, "Hold that bolt still, dummy, or I'll never get this nut tightened."

Toward Thanksgiving it began to get quite cold. At night after the last flight, the oil would be drained from the engines and stored in large tin cans. In the morning the cans were placed on top of the oil stove that heated the dispatch/weather shack, the only heated area on the field other than Buster's house. When we were ready to fly, the hot oil was poured into the engines, and away we went.

The flight curriculum was unusual by today's standards. It consisted of a series of maneuvers that had to be performed in a specific order. Thus, the instructor or check pilot could ride with a student ready for final check and never utter a word. Theoretically, every student in the country could follow this sequence without command. Needless to say, I do not remember the sequence, but the



Waco UPF-7, NC174 flown by CAA inspector D. J. Kells out of the Fargo, ND office in 1942.

log book shows the following maneuvers were flown: A standard departure was made from the airport traffic pattern, and the Cub flown to the practice area. The log shows the low work to have been rectangular course, "S" turns across a road, series of "8s," climbing turns to 1500 feet. Now for the high work: Series of turns, 720° steep turns, stalls, forward slip, 2 turn spins, spirals, gliding and gliding turns, and coordination exercises. Somewhere during the series, there were ample opportunities to practice forced landings. Upon return to the field, we'd shoot 180° side or overhead approaches. After a couple of trips with the instructor, you knew just where to go to have plenty of good forced landing fields available, and just which roads to use for reference during the maneuvers. A guaranteed thumbs-up ride if you didn't foul up a series of maneuvers.

Back at the airport, those of us who were waiting to fly would take a model plane, draw lines in the sandy soil representing roads, and talk ourselves through the flight sequence. I suppose we would have washed out had we completely forgotten the sequence on the final check. My old log shows I transposed two of the maneuvers on the final check, but still passed.

One other "skill" we picked up due to the small size of the school was that of weather observer. Bemidji was one of the many stations that reported weather every six hours. This information was taken, put into a code quite different from that used for sequence weather today, or even in that day. This was sent to the Weather Bureau by Western Union. Either Buster or Lou had to take these readings at 0000, 0600, 1200 and 1800 every day. The only way for them to have a night out was for one of us to take the readings. It has now been 41 years since I did this; by now I might be a bit rusty.

Our relationship with the town and college was different than that of the usual student. Our schedule precluded complete assimilation into the student body. Additionally, most of us were older than the senior students though some of the younger members of our group struck up interesting relationships with the co-eds, as might be expected. We did enter my 1941 Ford convertible as a float in the homecoming parade, decoration courtesy of one of our class members, Bob Petersen, a commercial artist before Pearl Harbor.

We took our breakfast in the college dining room. One  
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morning, several of us were seated at a large, round table with some of the freshmen women, girls who had apparently led a sheltered home life. Verdie Paulsen, a true woodsman who also was an experienced heavy equipment operator was with us. As the warm cereal was served, Verdie quipped, "Where is my warm beer?"

The poor freshmen girls were visibly shaken, and even moved their chairs away from Verdie, as much as the limited space would permit.

We arranged for our own sleeping quarters, usually one or two with a local family. It was my good fortune to obtain a room on the main street, Bemidji Blvd., with the Foley family. One of their sons had preceded me in WTS Primary and was at that time, flying Waco UPF-7s in secondary. My room was on the second floor of their bungalow. Though the quarters were comfortable, there was minimal space for clothing which required storing some things in my suitcase behind the attic dwarf wall.

One Friday night, we were all going to a school dance after class. Following dinner I took a fresh white shirt from the suitcase, put on my suit and went to class. It was hot in the classroom that night. Soon I felt something moving under my shirtfront. Unobtrusively as possible, I located and extracted a small fly. A few minutes later, I felt another and the exercise was duplicated. Soon, it felt like my undershirt was alive! Exiting as gracefully as possible I rushed to the men's room and stripped to the waist. Somehow fly eggs had been layed in my clean shirt and the hot room plus my body temperature had been sufficient to start the hatching process. A good brushing of the "clean" shirt solved the problem.

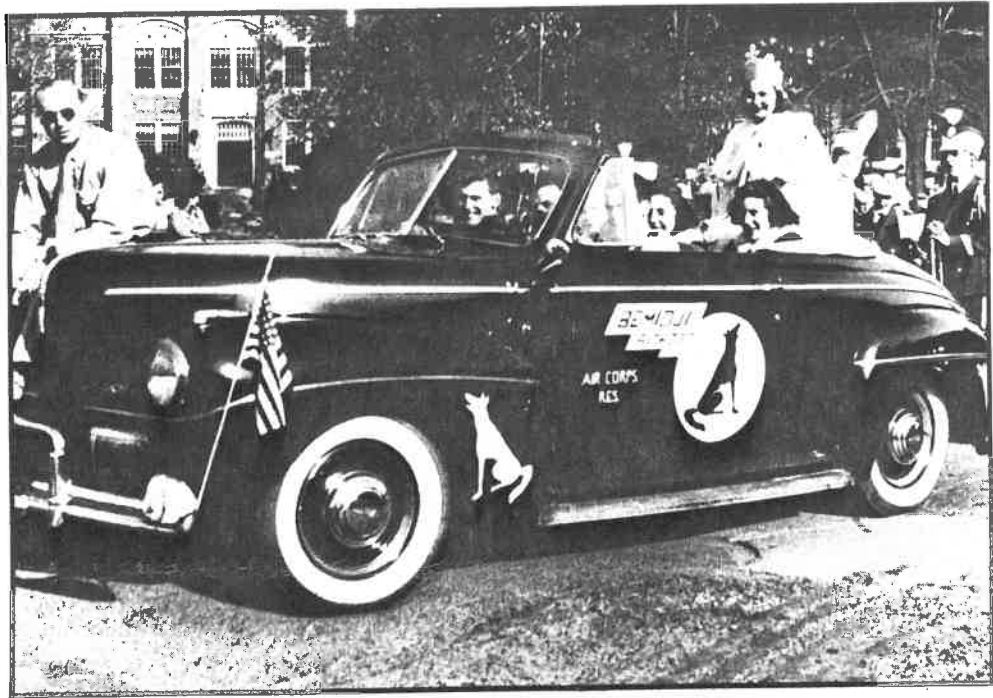
On yet another Friday night, Dr. Height who taught all navigation and math subjects was dressed in his hunting clothes when we assembled. Calling the class to order, he fixed "Downwind" with a stern look and said, "At 2100 I am meeting my companions to start on a weekend hunting trip. We have a great deal of ground to cover. I will not answer any damn fool questions anyone asks just to take up time."

That was one of the shortest Friday night classes on record!

On Sunday afternoon my closest friend in the class, Chuck O'Meara and I finished flying and went in the 41 Ford to his home ground, Cass Lake, some 18 miles from Bemidji. Chuck was an expert woodsman who had worked



Don's 1941 Ford Super Deluxe convertible served as the WTS float, transporting the queen in the 1942 Bemidji State Teachers College homecoming parade.



as a guide and mail boat pilot on the lake for most of his young life. As we walked the wooded shore path of the lake that fall day, he suddenly noted a movement in the path ahead of us. Quickly he picked up a stone, threw it and stunned a grouse twenty feet ahead of us. Before I could fully comprehend what he was up to, he had rushed ahead, grabbed the grouse, and wrung its neck. As a city boy with some knowledge of wilderness ways, it was only now I fully comprehended the lucky, successful hunting demonstration that had taken place before my eyes. On return to the campus, Chuck gave the bird to Dr. John Glas, the school business manager and WTS coordinator. A week later, Mrs. Glas invited Chuck and myself for a Sunday dinner of grouse, supplemented by enough other fowl to make a most enjoyable and welcome home-cooked meal for four. This was typical of the wonderful feeling that existed between our class members and the people of Bemidji.

The most memorable event? My first solo, just before sunset on a beautiful fall afternoon. The J-3 is soloed from the rear seat. It doesn't establish any climb records when there are two of you on board, especially when you are both required to wear parachutes. The person in front acts like a sound insulator to a certain extent. Thus, the first solo takeoff will give the student some surprises. First, without the sound barrier, the engine noises are more clearly heard. But small matter; you are going to get to do this yourself! You go through the runup, clear the area for traffic, line up and open the throttle. She jumps into the air! The lighter load really makes a difference. The airport boundary sees you well into the air, and the crosswind turn is just barely outside the field. Opposite the point on downwind you apply carb heat, chop the throttle, and as the ship glides through the approach, the engine ticks over ever so nicely. You break the glide, hold her off until the stick is all the way back in your lap, and she touches down, three point! It will be a few hours before you duplicate such a well executed landing again.

The funniest event? The day "Downwind" took off to the west in a light wind and, instead of doing his practice work, flew over to Ten Strike to buzz the school where his girlfriend taught. By the time he returned to the airport, we had a 180° wind shift and the velocity had become quite brisk. He entered the pattern without looking at the wind sock. Only problem was that he flew across the far boun-

dary of the field some 200 feet in the air. His correction was nice, but even with the base leg over the shore of the lake, he was still airborne at the west boundary. By now two instructors had fired up two other Cubs, and had them headed into the east wind. As "Downwind" chopped the power, the first one took off to the east, right over the point he was using for touchdown - he thought. This didn't phase him; he just continued. As he turned final, the second instructor took off right at him. He got the message and after reversing his pattern, made a beautiful landing. He never did outlive the name of "Downwind".

Final Check Ride? CAA Inspector D. J. Kells came in from the office at Fargo, North Dakota in a Waco UPF-7, NC174, a beautiful ship with a black fuselage and orange wings. His first check ride on the base? Me. All went well up to stalls. While trimming the aircraft, she stuck in the up position and wouldn't trim down. Kells tried to help by approaching a stall to unload the stabilizer, and trimming like mad, but that didn't work. Between the two of us, it was in full nose up position and seemed destined to stay there forever. Did you ever try flying a plane with the nose trimmed full up? It leads to stiff arms, and not very good straight and level flight. I was damn glad to get Piper Cub, NC35228 back on the flight line where Buster could re-adjust the trim cable tension!

We were all home by Thanksgiving, awaiting our next assignment to WTS Secondary where we would fly the wonderful UPF-7s. It would be after the war before we would have a chance to go back to Bemidji where a fine, new airport with paved runways replaced our sod field. Lou had passed away; Buster and the children had left. I never saw or heard from the man who had really started me in this wonderful industry. It has been so worthwhile. It would have been nice to tell him so.

*Editor's Note: After completing WTS training, Donald B. Toepfen was sent to Central Instructors School at Brooks and Randolph Fields in Texas and then to Spartan School of Aeronautics in Tulsa, Oklahoma where he served as an Army Primary Instructor in 1943 and 1944. In 1944 he was hired by United Airlines, making captain in 1947. When he retired in 1977 Don was Director of Flight Operations, based at Chicago's O'Hare Field.*

*In retirement, Don continues to fly in single and twin Piper and Cessna aircraft as pilot, chief pilot, and Director of Operations for three different Part 135 operators.*