

## Tommy Carter

Littlefield Texas is not a place we would ordinarily have visited. Fifty miles northwest of Lubbock, it's a small ordinary town surrounded by cotton fields, oil wells, and the wind and dust. Littlefield, like most of West Texas, is poor. The oil crash has left the region with little to attract outsiders. Farm hands who make a few hundred dollars a month feel fortunate. Others work when there are jobs. Most times people just get by.

But a rough engine doesn't always happen over places you want to visit. We staggered into Littlefield airport on three cylinders and failing oil pressure. Our cross country summer vacation seemed to be over.

There wasn't much to see at the airport. A second World War vintage hanger dominated the mostly deserted ramp. The air wiggled in the midday August heat. I was thinking "Please, please let it be something simple."

"Y'all want some gas" was the greeting by the lone occupant of the airport.

The engine hadn't sounded like it would make it to the gas pump. We asked if there was an aircraft maintenance facility on the field.

"Well, some times Tommy Carter works on Mr. Brown's Pawnee."

We asked if he was a licensed mechanic.

"I shore hope so."

Some time later I found myself on the line with Tommy Carter.

"Har ya doing."

Not too well we had to admit. The engine was running rough.

"Well, Ah can get up thar later this afternoon. You see the combine gots a broke shaft."

I wasn't sure I was pleased to learn that Tommy Carter also worked on farm equipment.

Some hours later a dusty blue pickup truck wheezed up to the line shack where we had camped out. Out of the cab stepped a very large man. His a round face was mostly hidden by a massive beard. His eyes flashed friendly curiosity. He wore the local costume: ragged jeans, flannel shirt, and dusty work boots. I soon learned that such clothing is just as often used to wipe a dip stick as to clothe the body.

"Ah, You got a Mooney. Damn tight to work on if you ask me."

I hadn't. Within a few seconds the cowling was off.

"We got a problem. These ain't 'posed to be here."

From the bottom of the cowling he picked up a large nut with the broken shaft of a bolt still attached. He pointed to the number three cylinder. It was missing five of six head bolts and crooked when compared to its neighbor. The engine baffling was all ripped up. Oil was everywhere. My heart sunk. We were not going to get back to California in this airplane.

"Yor lucky there was an airport under you when this happened."

I didn't bother to mention that we were thirty miles and hadn't been all that concerned.

We moved out of the hot sun into the shack. The air conditioner struggled to drown out our conversation. I tried to size up this man. I guessed he was doing the same with me. We made an unlikely pair.

"First off, I gotta tell ye that I charge twenty dollars an hour."

If only the bandit mechanics in California could hear that.

"If this'n here were my plane, I'd tear down the engine and get the crank and case inspected. I'd be real suspicious about thet num'er three cylinder. How much time on the engine?"

One thousand hours, I told him. Too early for an overhaul. Certainly, too early for my bank account. Did he have a shop, I asked. Yes, he had a shop over at Morton Airport.

As we spoke, it became evident that Tommy Carter did not entirely fit my preconception of a good old boy hayseed mechanic. I learned he was a licensed Airplane and Powerplant mechanic, aircraft inspector, commercial pilot, and instructor at Texas Tech in aviation technology. He operated an aerial spraying business, and owned and farmed 600 acres of cotton, sorghum, and Longhorn cows.

It hadn't been easy, I found out later. Tommy's father was a West Texas dirt farmer. Tommy didn't much care for school. At 18 he was drafted. When the Army saw his aptitude test scores, he was sent to helicopter mechanic's school. With what he describes as totally inadequate training, Tommy found himself in the Vietnam jungles maintaining Huey attack helicopters out of a small box of tools. In wartime, the occupation of helicopter crew chief is not much sought-after. Tommy maintained the ship and crewed every mission. After one tour, Tommy volunteered for another, an act of patriotism that Tommy admits today was a "little stupid." Coming back he felt betrayed by the attitude of the country toward the veteran.

"They shoulda spent the memorial money on the guys messed up by Agent Orange."

Tommy took advantage of the GI bill. He completed work for his mechanic and inspector licenses, got his private, commercial, multi-engine, and instrument ratings. His first job was in

the Gulf with an oil company as a mechanic and sea plane pilot. He also did some aerial spraying work.

"Near killed my self for sure."

Tommy and I agreed that he would work on the Mooney. He warned me that the peak of the spraying season occurred in September and that the Mooney repair would have be a second priority. This was frustrating at times when, in the coming months, little seemed to be happening. Tommy, it appeared, was flying from dawn to dark. In one week he logged 80 hours.

Aerial spraying is unlike anything in aviation. The planes are big and the loads are immense. Flying conditions are unimaginable to those of us who cruise along straight and level in the comfort of our cabin planes.

Tommy spoke about flying with a full load of chemicals into a setting sun with the windscreen opaque with bugs. He heard a loud bang, and the right wing felt heavy. As he looked back, he saw the wing tip wrapped around a big pipe stuck in the ground. He finished the application and landed to retrieve his wing tip.

"Damn stupid place to put a pipe", he said.

Tommy's wife Mary, a quiet but friendly woman, is part of the flying business. She is the flagger. In Texas flagging is done from a pickup truck driving along the edge of the field being worked. Sixty feet, wait. Sixty feet, wait. Its dangerous work. The chemicals take away your appetite, its hot and loud. Every 45 seconds 300 horsepower at full throttle passes right feet over your head.

The previous year, Tommy hit a power line. The Brave didn't seem to mind but the hot power line fell on the pickup truck. Around the airport shack the boys recount the story.

"Damn, that woman didn't know what's happenin'. Suddenly, bam, pow, zizzzt.... an' there's a big hole burned 'n the roof of the truck. Har har. Then bam, pow, zizzzt and there's there's this big sparking 20,000 volt snake in the bed of the truck. Har har. Bam, pow, zizzzt and that woman was outta there like a jack rabbit. Jes wouldn't do any more flaggin' for Tommy for awhile. Har har har...."

The joking didn't hide the love and respect that existed between Tommy and his wife.

We returned dejectedly to California on an airliner. As the weeks passed, I called Tommy every week to see how thing were going.

"Har ya doing." Each phone call began with the same greeting. "Well, I got some discouraging news. Ajax says the case ain't worth shit. Been lapped and line bored too much. They ain't had no business puttin' that case back in any plane. Way outta tolerances. Who done that last overhaul anyway?"

"Har ya doing." Another week's phone conversation. "Well I got some discouraging news. That crankshaft got heat cracks in three places. Ain't no good. We gonna have a hell of a time gettin' another one. Them bearin's all wore funny. Who done that last overhaul anyway?"

"Har ya doing." Still another week. "Them valve seats are shot. Gonna have to be replaced."

"Har ya doing." This was like a bad dream. "One of your cylinders needs to be rebarreled."

All the while, I'm sending checks to part suppliers and machine shops. Tommy said "It don't seem right for me to mark up parts or outside services. You pay 'em directly." My credit line was starting to look like I had a serious substance abuse problem.

In early November, three months after this affair began, Tommy told me the work was completed. I took some leave from work and flew to Lubbock on a Wednesday night. At eight the next morning I met Tommy at the airport. The cowl was off and we examined the newly overhauled engine. It was painted Lycoming grey and looked very new. There wasn't much left of the previous engine: three cylinders, some connecting rods, and a few bits and pieces. Most of the accessories had been overhauled.

"Them injector diaphragms cost you plenty. Its that damn liability 'surance. Nobody wants to make airplane parts no more. Lawyers...." My Texas friend was also a social observer and economist.

For a long time we stood around and silently admired the work. The baffling was new and shown like only polished aluminum can.

"That baffling was a chore."

We readied the plane for the first test flight. I was surprised that Tommy insisted on coming along. He said he needed to watch the temperatures during the first hour or two. We started up. I called out our intentions on the Unicom and got a funny look from Tommy. It seems we were the only plane using the field and anyway they didn't use radios much in Littlefield. Although he's instrument rated, Tommy said he avoids Lubbock with their "Damn fool control tower."

We took off. I realized how much I've missed flying the last three months. The Littlefield airport rotated lazily below us. All went well for twenty minutes or so. Tommy intently watched the engine gauges looking for a drop in the oil temperature which signals the end of the ring seating process. As we swung into the sun on each circuit, the visibility dropped. I saw that the windshield was covered with a film of oil.

"Shit...Prop seal."

We landed. With a heavy heart Tommy removed the cowling.

"I sho tried hard to get that prop seal in good the first time."

We found no indication that the prop seal was leaking. We removed the prop and discovered that a tiny o-ring on the prop shaft has been damaged. We drove to Lubbock (50 miles each way) to buy the part. By the late afternoon the prop was back on. We took off again. Tommy saw his oil temperature drop. He was a happy man, whistling and telling stories. We landed.

"Shit...."

The belly of the aircraft was covered with oil. Off went the cowl. The problem was the oil cooler. It was leaking badly. There were no oil coolers in stock at the part dealers. Tommy starting calling. I wondered if I was going to have to go home without the airplane. It turned out so-in-so had a brand new oil cooler that might fit. Another trip to Lubbock, this time in the dark, to rummage through somebody's garage. It was exactly the right oil cooler and brand new. I paid the asking price. We talked airplanes for awhile. It was friendly, relaxed. I could tell that they thought I talked funny.

"You'll come back and see us again."

It took most of Friday morning to get the oil cooler installed and to fix a few things that Tommy didn't like. They looked fine to me. At two in the afternoon we flew again. After two hours, all was perfect. Tommy took me on an aerial tour of his territory. We flew over his farm. I didn't realize that he lived fifty miles away in another direction. Texans don't measure distance like the rest of us. I saw this pond and that town. Tommy pointed out a road where he landed for chemicals for a week in August. It looked narrow with ditches on both sides. He must be a good pilot, I thought. The land below was brown and dry and set into squares lined up with the cardinal points of the compass.

"You'll come over for dinner tomorrow?"

I said that I had to start back to California by the afternoon at the latest. Tommy told me with a smile that "dinner" in Texas was just after noon.

We agree that I would fly over to Morton, near Tommy's house, the next morning. We would do the final adjustments and then have "dinner".

Tommy farm was, I suppose, typical. The front yard had six pickup trucks and an equal number of dogs, all quite friendly. Almost bigger than the small house were the combines, cotton pickers, and bailers. It was hot and dusty. I met his wife Mary, the flagger. Mary has long been a voice on the phone that said so many times, "Hold on, y'hear, I'll go out to the shop to fetch Tommy. He's working on your engine. Oh, by the way, we finally got them new exhaust valves from Tulsa." Mary knew as much about airplane parts and machines as Tommy.

"Dinner" was wholesome and good, consisting of three complete meals of meats and down home vegetables. Iced tea washed it all down. Mary didn't sit down to eat with us. She hovered around, talking to Tommy, shy about me. I thanked Mary and we left for the airport.

Tommy showed me the farm. We bumped across fields looking at cotton plants, and cattle.

"Now that I'm done with the Mooney, I can pick my cotton"

We talked idly about growth chemicals, the sex life of the Texas cow, altercations with the neighbors, his mother who lives down the road, his son (who I never met) who is an A&P like his father, and I would guess, shy of strangers like his mother.

We angled through the dirt roads and arrived suddenly back at the airport. The Mooney was pushed back and preflighted. Tommy tinkered with the cowling and then it was time to leave. There was an awkward moment. I wanted to let him know the gratitude I felt that circumstance had brought us together. I wanted to tell him that I admired him even though we were, by life's accidents, very different people. I wanted him to know that I was easily trusting my life to his work. I wanted to really thank him for his competence and honesty. I wanted to hug him goodbye.

Instead, as men in West Texas do, we parted.

"You'll come back and see us some time."