

Drawn to the skies

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BOB ZELLAR/Gazette Staff Sam Melnick holds earphones as he stands near the strut of a plane at Laurel Airport. Sam Melnick, left, watches as his grandson, Jay Taffet, checks the dipstick. Sam Melnick, left, has flown decades, but became the passenger for a flight piloted by his grandson, Jay Taffet.

Story By JOHN FITZGERALD Photos By BOB ZELLAR Of The Gazette Staff

Sam Melnick loved flying even before he could fly. Of the 100 years of manned flight, Melnick has been a part of half of it. He recently took a flight piloted by his grandson, Jay Taffet, then sat down in the lobby of Northern Skies Aviation at the Laurel Airport to talk about a life lived in the skies.

"I flew continuously, and I always enjoyed every minute of it," Melnick said.

Parental qualms He earned his pilot's license in February 1942. He was in his early 20s.

"I wanted to fly long before that," he said. "I wanted to get my license in '37 or '38 when my friends were going into it. But you had to get your parents signature, and they wouldn't sign."

Melnick, now in his 80s, said his parents, Louis and Ada, thought of flight as an unnecessary risk.

"They didn't know what aviation had come to be. They thought it was a novelty and people like that neophyte Lindbergh took their lives in their own hands. They didn't see the necessity for that."

In June of 1941, Melnick graduated from the University of Montana with a business degree, and by August he started training to get a pilot's license.

When Melnick came back to Billings, he got a job at Midland Bank as a bookkeeper, a job he enjoyed because he could come in early and get out by early afternoon to go flying.

"And, once the war started, you could keep your own hours because they were afraid they'd lose you," he said.

Melnick entered the Civilian Pilot Training Program along with many of his friends. They flew planes from Lynch Flying Service.

He joined the Army Air Corps in March, 1942. He went to Nashville, Tenn., for his preflight training, then to Montgomery, Ala., where he got his instructor's ticket, then to Macon, Ga., where he was an instructor. He spent the war in the United States., training pilots in Georgia and Alabama.

He went into the Army Reserves in 1945.

"Dad and I opened a real estate and insurance office," he said. "We did well. It was a small office. You know, things were booming back then. We made a lot of mortgage loans."

Melnick was recalled to the military in 1950 and sent to Okinawa, where he was base operations officer at Kadena Air Force Base.

He stayed in Okinawa for two years, returning in 1952. He remained in the Army Reserves, reaching the rank of major, and was the commanding officer of the reserves in Billings.

Son in skies

Melnick and his first wife, Suzana, had four children - Steve, Sandra, Sharon and Saralee.

He taught Steve to fly when he was in high school. Steve soloed when he was 16. He graduated from Senior High in 1961, then from the Air Force Academy in 1965. Steve flew F-4 Phantoms and was stationed in Germany for a time.

He was stationed in Vietnam in 1970. He was killed when his plane went down in August 1970. Steve Melnick left behind a wife, Linda, and two sons, David and Jay.

Melnick doesn't know what happened on Steve's last flight.

"You don't get the proper information," Melnick said. "It was a night flight. They were looking for ground fire. (The military) doesn't tell you anything. I

have my own thoughts about what happened, but it doesn't matter. It won't bring him back."

Melnick wanted to teach his daughters how to fly, but Suzana Melnick wouldn't allow it. "She didn't think it was something girls should do."

Melnick is now married to his second wife, Helen.

Parade of planes The first plane Melnick flew in was a 65-horsepower Piper Cub. His early flying experiences included time in Steermans, Fairchilds and Stinsons. While training in the CPT, he flew Waco UPF-7's, Taylorcrafts, Piper Cubs and Stinsons.

"Later, the top airplane I flew was the AT-6. It was a fine airplane - a 450-horsepower, 2-seater airplane," Melnick said.

Later came the P-40s. "Like any plane it had its idiosyncrasies. It got you up there and back."

He flew P-47s, and, for a short time, he flew P-51s. He also flew C-46s, C-47s.

At one time, he was qualified to fly in about 30 different airplanes, he said.

"In those days you could do that," he said. These days, military regulations prohibit being qualified in more than one type of airplane.

In his years as a pilot, Melnick has seen many changes both in aircraft and in facilities.

The Laurel Airport in the 1940s "was pretty crude," he said, adding, "There was just one grass runway and a post with a phone and a cover. You could

use the phone to call to town. We just used it as an auxiliary to the Billings airport, to shoot touch-and-goes."

The Billings airport wasn't much more advanced.

"The runways had lots of cracks, and grass grew through them. In those days, you had to get up early and run the deer and antelope off the runway. We had one paved and one grass runway, and we didn't have a tower."

But, just as the airports have improved, so have the aircraft.

"Now you have better communications and transponders and other aids. The airplanes became more dependable; the fuels have improved. One of the big improvements in military aviation is the ability to do midair fueling - now the pilots can fly half-way around the world and then come back to their home bases in the U.S."

In 1970, Melnick was able to buy his own airplane - a 1949 Beech Bonanza. Later he bought a 1950 Beech Bonanza.

"The best plane I ever flew was a Beech Bonanza V-tail," he said. "It was very responsive, very agile, good performance, a very reasonable rate of fuel consumption."

Maybe the performance wasn't as good as he remembers. In 1984, Melnick crashed the Bonanza at Billings Logan Airport.

"It was a hot summer day, and I was showing off," he said. There were two aboard, and no one was injured "but the plane was dented up."

He bought another 1949 Bonanza, which he owned until 1993.

"It was a beautiful airplane. I took the money from that and bought a Chevy Blazer. It was not a good trade When you sell an airplane, you sell some of your freedom."

Back into the air Melnick will soon be 86 and, because of failing health, hasn't flown for 10 years.

"I'll tell you, after flying for 52 years and being 75 or 76 years old, if you can't hear, you better get the hell out of the air," he said.

That's why it was a treat when Melnick's grandson, Jay Taffet, came up from his home in Montgomery, Ala.; rented a plane at the Laurel Airport; and took his grandfather up in the air for a spin around Yellowstone and Big Horn counties.

Jay, 34, has followed in his father's and grandfather's footsteps. Jay earned his pilot's license when he turned 18, was in the ROTC while attending Vanderbilt University, and served in the Air Force for five years.

He now works in the real estate finance and investment analysis business in Montgomery. He usually flies Piper Aeros and Piper Cherokees.

He came to Billings to take his grandfather out for a spin "out of the goodness of his heart," Melnick said. The pair flew over Big Horn Canyon, then made a low approach over Billings before returning to Laurel.

"It was my first time mountain flying," Jay said. "It's all sea-level flying in Alabama. Here, the land seems to be climbing with you."

Jay's goal is to buy his own airplane. "I wish grandpa hadn't sold that Bonanza and bought the Blazer," he said.

Melnick laughed. "All my grandkids wanted that airplane."

He was very happy to be flying again with this grandchild.

"Jay's an excellent pilot - smooth, knows what he's doing. I'd be happy to have him fly me anywhere."

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