

The Reef

by Bob Kirkby © 1996

The ocean shimmered in the light of an iridescent sun floating just above the horizon. Surf licked the sand and then retreated, sucking in its' breath and building energy for yet another run up the beach. Delicate fragrances meandered by as orchids crept open.

Karl slowly pulled his gaze from the water to look into the open hangar, where a pair of 1932 Waco UPF-7 biplanes sat waiting to begin their day. Before rolling them out for their morning wipe-down he paused to marvel at the splendour of these flying machines from yesteryear, one of which he would spend the day in, flying tourists on 20-minute sightseeing hops around the island.

Karl had come to Maui six months ago to unwind after spending two years as a flight instructor on the mainland. He had not intended to go into instructing when he earned his Commercial Pilots License, but there were no other jobs open to a low-time pilot. He was burnt out from the grueling pace of instructing seven days a week and needed a holiday.

Carefully he washed away the signature of a working biplane - thin streaks of oil radiating along the fuselage from beneath the engine cowling, brown smoke stains where the landing gear is blasted by searing gases from the engine exhaust, green wiskers on the lower wing from grass clippings flung up by the giant six foot propeller. Karl's thoughts wandered back to his first week here. He had been cycling around the island intent on visiting the historic gravesite of Charles Lindberg, the legendary aviator who first flew across the Atlantic solo on May 20, 1927. Only a mile from the grave he discovered a small airport just outside the hamlet of Hana on Maui's eastern tip. The sight of two biplanes sitting on the grass made him stop for a look around. He approached a leathery, well tanned man with graying hair polishing one of the massive propeller.

"Hi. You own one of these?" Karl inquired.

"Nope. Own both of them. Just finished rebuilding this one. I'll be usin' her to fly tourists for the first time today." The stranger extended a hand. "Name's Willy Wilson, you fly?"

"Pleased to meet you, I'm Karl Bradly. And yes I do fly. I just quit my job as a flight instructor and came over here to get away for awhile." Karl squinted as he moved into the glare of sunlight reflecting off the chrome propeller.

"Well I'll be damned." Willy continued polishing. "I was just thinking of running an ad in the Honolulu paper for a pilot to fly one of these birds. I can only fly one at a time. You interested?"

That was that. It had taken Karl about three seconds to make up his mind. The wage offer was minimal, just enough to live on, but he could not pass up a chance to fly a beautifully restored 60 year

old biplane around the island of Maui. And get paid for it. Compared to sitting hour after hour in a tiny under-powered training aircraft trying to keep students from killing themselves and their instructor, this job would be like taste-testing for Baskin and Robbins.

Karl was startled from his thoughts by the familiar clacking of wooden klogs. "Morning Karl," Claire Wilson chirped. "Better get Willy's plane ready to go, he has to fly over to the Kahului airport right away. Our agent has a bus load of Japanese tourists over there all looking for biplane rides."

Willy's wife of 18 years, Claire looked after the business side of Maui Air Adventures. Without her, Willy was fond of saying, he'd be weaving baskets down on Lahaina beach.

"She's fueled, washed and ready to go Claire," Karl grinned, knowing that she would be please with his readiness. Claire looked positively stunning this morning in a pair of white shorts and halter top that contrasted with her golden tan and auburn hair. Her round hazel eyes and shapely mouth looked large on the small, oval face perched delicately atop her 5 foot 4 inch very fit frame. Karl felt slightly embarrassed admiring the beauty of someone twenty years his senior, and his boss to boot. "What have you got for me today?"

"You've got six rides starting in half an hour, then it looks pretty quiet for the rest of the day. Just as well, the weather report doesn't sound very promising for this afternoon. I called Flight Services at breakfast. They're predicting overcast with some drizzle and winds picking up to 20 knots after two o'clock." Claire disappeared through the doorway of the little office attached to the hangar just as Willy strode across the tarmac with his usual purposeful gait, left arm swinging fore and aft in time with his step. His right hand held a full coffee mug perfectly level.

"Great morning Karl," he announced. "Too bad the weather's go'na crap out." One quick step and he stood on the lower wing, left hand on the leather trim ringing the rear cockpit, right hand still holding the coffee mug. He slowly scanned the sky, head swiveling and stopping every few degrees letting his eyes absorb what wasn't there. Karl watched curiously, wondering just exactly what Willy was looking for. He had seen him doing this on many mornings but never dared to ask why. The intensity in Willy's glazed eyes gave Karl the feeling he was watching some sort of mysterious ritual.

One long gulp and Willy tossed the empty mug to Karl. "I better get my butt over to Kahalui and fly those tourists before the weather closes in. Claire said they all went snorkelling on the Molokini Reef yesterday and now the whole lot wants to fly over the reef and take a picture before they head home. I wouldn't want to be around if some of them don't get to take their pictures." With smooth moves born of experience Willy swung himself into the cockpit and clasped the harness over his aging leather flight jacket.

"I'll give you a call on the radio when I'm through with my rides, see if you need my help over there," Karl intoned needlessly since this was their daily procedure.

Willy pulled on a leather helmet and glanced down at Karl from the big blue and gold Waco,

"Thanks ol' buddy, I might need help today." Willy flew the newly restored airplane himself leaving the shabbier red and white one for Karl. This couldn't have pleased Karl more. The scuffed leather cockpit trim, oil stains along the fuselage and cracks in the paint gave the old Waco an aura from the days of the great barnstormers. When flying, Karl felt himself drawn back in time to the 30's when aviation history was being made by the likes of Charles Lindberg and Amelia Earhart. Those were real pilots, the aviation pioneers who flew mail across the country in open cockpit airplanes, Curtiss Jennys and Tiger Moths, with nothing but a compass to guide them. When Karl could save up enough for extra fuel, Willy would let him take the Waco up solo if there were no passengers to fly. Alone in his time machine, Karl would go barnstorming in Kansas or fly a night mail run across Wyoming with only the lights of an occasional small town and the stars to fix his course or fly aerobatics with the great Waldo Pepper at an airshow in Dayton, Ohio.

"Clear prop," Willy shouted, warning of his imminent engine start. He engaged the starter and the big 220 horsepower Continental radial engine turned jerkily through two revolutions before coughing to life and belching a cloud of blue smoke straight back into the office doorway. After a brief warmup Willy taxied out to the runway, scattering a few dozen birds into the sunlit air. The engine roared as Claire came out to watch him depart, and catch a breath of fresh air.

"There goes one hell of a pilot", Karl said.

Claire flushed with pride. "Seems a waste flying tourists around two at a time, but he loves it. Willy hasn't left the island since we came here 15 years ago and he probably never will. I have to go home to San Francisco every couple of years just to remind myself of why we came here."

Although he had tried several times to get Willy to talk about his past flying experiences Karl always felt he was treading on nerve endings and backed off. "Most pilots love to talk about their flying experiences, but Willy never does," he tested Claire's mood. "He didn't learn to fly like that dodging seagulls."

Claire leaned back against the fuselage letting the sun warm her face. "It was the Air Force. We were high school sweethearts. Willy graduated a year ahead of me and went off to serve his time hoping they would teach him to fly. They did. And he was gone.

"Then one day I saw a film of him on the TV news. He was being dragged around in front of the camera with a sign hanging from his neck. It read 'Imperialist Pig Fighter Pilot'. He was a guest of the North Vietnamese."

A knot gripped Karl's stomach. He felt he was prying. He said nothing.

Claire continued, "At the end of his second tour of duty his F-4 Phantom was shot down - by accident. A Navy Phantom pilot mistook Willy's plane for the enemy.

"Fighter pilot POW's were prized by the North Vietnamese. They were singled out as the

perpetrators of the war since they and their planes were so visible. Willy...he spent four years in the so-called Hanoi Hilton, being tortured and humiliated in public, over and over."

Karl swallowed noisily as Claire paused to catch her breath before continuing, "I spent the rest of the war at anti-war rallies. Making silent speeches. Writing unopened letters. A lifetime later he came home."

A car pulled into the parking lot beside the office. Relieved at the intrusion, Karl watched a young couple walk into the office. "This must be your first ride," Claire said. "I'll go collect their money and send them out."

Five minutes later Karl was strapping the pair into the wide bench seat in the front cockpit. "So where would you folks like to go this fine morning, around the island or up to the Haleakala volcanic crater?" Karl inquired. Around the island was the unanimous choice. Karl passed them each a headset and climbed into the rear cockpit.

Departing from Hana Karl did a gentle turn towards the south for a clockwise circle around Maui. At first he rolled into turns slowly to let his passengers get use to the feeling of being in an open cockpit biplane. First-timers always expected to be flung out of the aeroplane when it banked for a turn. Karl thought this odd since the centrifugal force in a turn pushed one further down into the seat. Once they looked comfortable he would throw in a few tight turns just for thrills.

Almost immediately Karl started into his running commentary over the intercom. When he first started this job he taped a crib sheet to the instrument panel but by now most of it was committed to memory. He related ancient Hawaiian myths picked up from tourist books, invited questions from his passengers and made up answers when he didn't have one. It was his job to see that they got their money's worth. He remembered Claire's directive that word of mouth was Maui Air Adventures' best advertising, and it had better be a good word.

They were just rounding the southern tip when the Island of Molokini came into view. Karl explained, "That small horseshoe shaped island up ahead is the tip of a volcanic cone. On the north side is the Molokini Reef which is famous for snorkelling and scuba diving." While he talked he looked for Willy. "The pock marks in the island were made by fighter pilots using it for strafing practice during World War II." He should be flying about a hundred feet above the reef with a pair of shutter bugs, he thought. He continued to scan the reef from his 300 foot perch.

Over the roar of the engine he heard a loud gasp as if both passengers had sucked their microphones down their throats. "What's wro...," he stopped mid-syllable as his eyes caught a blue blur passing their left wing tip from above. Instantly Karl dipped the left wing to get a better look. It was Willy's Waco - diving - almost vertical - straight for Molokini Island. What the hell, Karl thought, Willy must have lost control. He keyed this radio and called, "Willy this is Karl..." but before he could say more Willy pulled the Waco out of the dive and into a vertical climb from no more that 50 feet above the island. Thinking the crisis was over Karl levelled his wings and watched Willy continue his vertical

climb until the biplane slowed, then flicked over into perfect Hammerhead stall. Karl keyed the radio again and called, "Willy this is Karl, what's with the aerobatics?"

Willy came back, "No sweat Karl, just doing a little aerobatic demonstration for my friends here."

Stunned, and embarrassed, Karl switched the intercom to "isolate" so his passengers, now peering intensely over the left side, would not hear the radio conversation. In the time this took Willy had pulled out of another vertical dive, executed two snap rolls and begun an inside loop. "Willy," Karl pleaded into the mic, "you can't do aerobatics with passengers, you'll scare the hell out of them." And lose your license, he thought.

At the top of the loop Willy flipped the Waco upright and entered a gut-wrenching outside loop, pulling up no more than twenty feet above the island. God, he's going to give them heart failure, thought Karl. He tried again, "Willy, cut it out. We get most of our business from the Japanese tourists. Claire will kill you if you screw that up."

Willy climbed back to 300 feet and put the Waco into another terrifying dive heading straight for Molokini Reef.

Through the static on the radio Karl heard, "They aren't Japanese ol' buddy."