

Full Throttle!

The Missionary Story of
Bennie and Theresa DeMerchant



Bennie DeMerchant
Dolly McElhanev

Full Throttle!

by Bennie DeMerchant and Dolly McElhaney

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Table of Contents

Foreword.....	9
Introduction	11
1. Clipped Wings	13
2. Tug o' War	21
3. Flight Preparations	29
4. The Proving Ground	35
5. Aliens in a Strange Land	47
6. Faith in Him Who Calleth	57
7. The Denuded Rooster	71
8. Flying a Turtle	79
9. The Mission Takes Wing	91
10. Rescue on the Abonari River	101
11. Wild Indians.....	113
12. A Harrowing Story	123
13. Oswaldina and the Stolen Aviation Fuel	129
14. "My Lord Knows the Way through the Wilderness"	143
15. The Daredevil Pentecostal Preacher	157
16. He Maketh Me to Lie Down	165
17. Extinguished Candles	169
18. Evangelizing with Leo Upton	181
19. Leave This to Me!	187
20. Hitchhiking Dogs and Flying Pigs	193
21. His Eye Is on the ... er, Floatplane	201
22. The Church Explodes with Growth	215
23. Into Deep Waters	225
24. A Charge for Theresa	235
25. Mayday! Mayday! Mayday!	241
26. Miracle in a Cow Pasture	253
27. The Greatest God of All!	259
28. The Fishhook Church	265
29. The Jerusalem Project	273

1 Clipped Wings



“Gerald, the plane is in a dive! We’ve lost fifteen hundred feet of altitude! We have dropped below three thousand feet!” As Bennie DeMerchant glanced at the climb indicator, what he saw made his heart race and sweat bead his upper lip. He knew that the Appalachian Mountains over which they were flying of ten thrust more than three thousand feet into the air.

“Fly the plane, Bennie,” Gerald Grant ordered. “You have some instrument training. I don’t.”

Bennie and Gerald, longtime friends from Perth, New Brunswick, Canada, and currently living in Saint Paul, Minnesota, had decided to fly Gerald’s plane to their respective Canadian families during the April 19, 1962, Easter break at the Apostolic Bible Institute (ABI). Bennie, with seventy hours of total flying time, eagerly rode in the copilot’s seat.

Behind the two, three-year-old Ann Grant slept sweetly, curled up into the back seat.

Bennie's instrument training was only instruction on how to operate an aircraft by instruments in level flight without seeing the ground in deteriorating visibility. *It's just enough to get the pilot turned around and headed out of bad weather!* Bennie thought as he took control of the plane, concentrating on dropping no lower. *But how do I turn around? I have no idea what direction I'm flying in. And I don't care what direction I'm flying in as long as it's not too far east and we don't fly over the Atlantic at night and run out of fuel. What if we slam into the hills below us?*

Bennie palmed the throttle with his left hand and pushed on it. The gallant little plane responded and began to climb. With each passing minute, flying conditions deteriorated exponentially. Dense fog and gathering darkness threatened them. No one spoke. Nothing interrupted the droning of the single engine. To Bennie, however, the engine seemed to be laboring, working hard to cut through the thick fog that curled through the wing struts. *Lord, if You'll get us out of this mess, I'll never fly an airplane again!* Bennie prayed. *I'm too young to die. I'm only twenty-one. Theresa and I have only been married a few months. She's too young to be a widow. I've nearly finished three years of Bible school training. I've seen Your hand on my life and heard Your voice in my heart. Am I not going to be able to fulfill the calling You gave me?*

As the plane gained altitude, Bennie slanted a look at Gerald. *He's probably thinking of Eleanor*

and Ann, Bennie thought. *O Lord, please! You'll be a great God if You let us land safely.*

Bennie's thoughts whirled faster than the plane's propeller. When he finally spoke, his voice had a raspy edge to it. "Gerald, grab a chart and let's see if we can figure out where we are!"

Gerald flipped through several visual sectional charts that he had flown across and folded during the long day. Under the dim red glow of the overhead cockpit light, his hands trembled in the turbulence from the clouds the airplane bored through. He tried to trace the route they were taking. No visual ground landmarks helped the two orient themselves to the charts as the plane groped through gray fog as thick as wool, as encompassing as a blanket.

"I don't know where we are," Gerald finally admitted, "except that we're about an hour east of Albany."

The thunder of his racing heartbeat nearly drowning the chugging of the engine, Bennie snatched a look outside. *Lord, please!*

Eternity, measured in nanoseconds, filtered past. Tension knotted in Bennie's stomach and whitened the knuckles of his clenched fists. Gerald resumed piloting the plane and concentrated on navigating the craft by the six precious, life-keeping flight instruments. He put the plane into a series of "S" turns as they peered through the side windows, looking for a break in the clouds that snapped through the wing struts.

"Gerald, there's a break!" Bennie nearly shouted. "Over there!"