

Between Kittyhawk and The Moon

by Lynne Belluscio

Russ Holderman's niece stopped by this last week and dropped off 10 copies of a new book about her uncle Russell Holderman, pioneer aviator and Don Woodward's pilot.

Russ was born in Buffalo in 1895, but his family soon moved to the Bronx where he grew up. He became enthralled with flying. He built model planes. He went to early air shows. Eventually, at the age of 18 he soloed in a Curtiss Pusher biplane. The year was 1913. He later described his emotional ride with destiny: "Any mistake usually meant a crack up. Young as I was, I had been around flying fields enough to realize that, and it was with a kind of solemnity that I went about the rite of making my first solo flight. My enthusiasm was still high, but a small fear tingled at the base of my spine, and I had an indefinable feeling that it was then or never than I should begin a flying career ... I buttoned my sweater, turned my peaked cap backwards, waved automatically at Shneider and pressed the throttle. Power took hold of the shaking machine and pulled it forward ... Somehow I leveled off. Fear assailed me for brief seconds and suddenly released me. I felt like a swimmer who has plunged into the water to a great depth with insufficient air in his lungs, and for three or four terrifying seconds has fought his way to the surface, where the boundless air breaks the grip of his momentary fears. I felt free as the swimmer when the air fills his lungs... My air speed was inconsequential, but my trouser legs kept slapping against my spindly shins like a line of washing in the wind. My eyes watered, my heart pumped rapidly, my hands perspired, my brain sang strange songs, thrilling songs, songs different from those of a man attached forever to the earth and unable to enjoy the infinite freedoms of the sky."

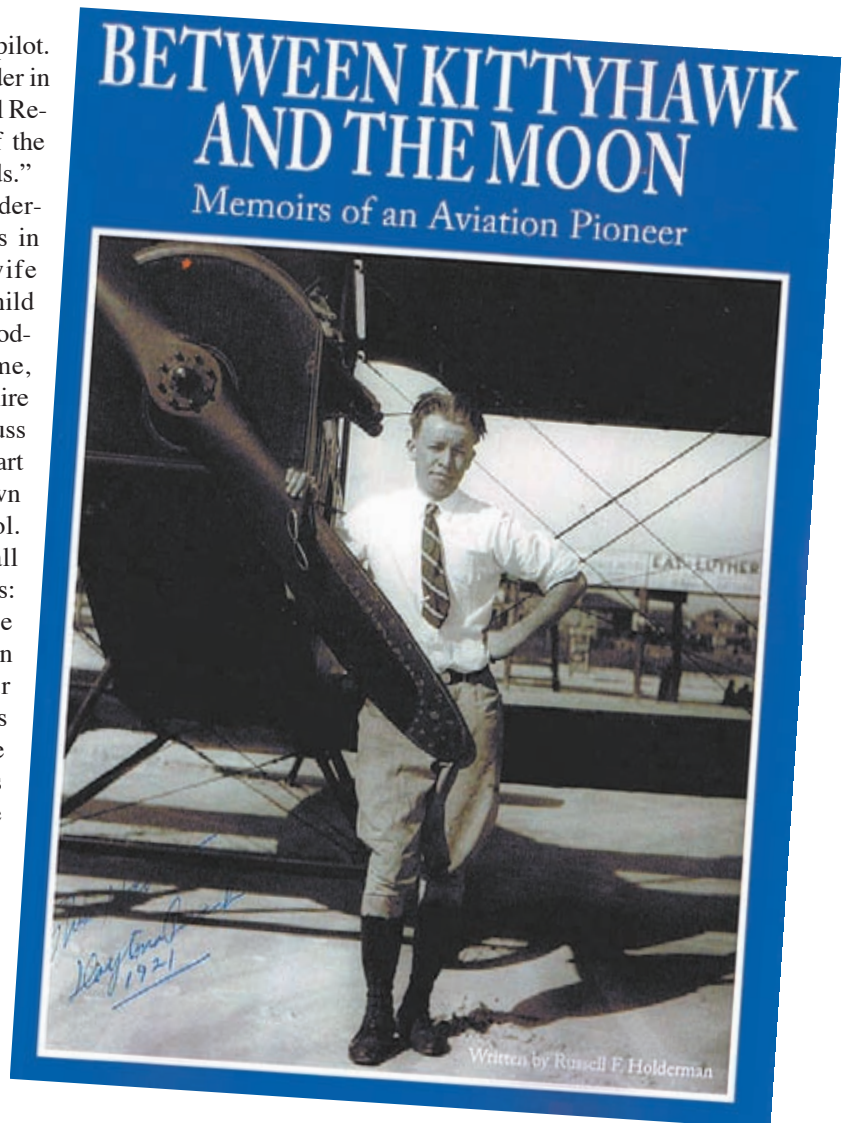
Russ continued his love of flight and received his pilot's license #227, signed by Orville Wright. He was a flight instructor during World War I. He was a

barnstormer and stunt pilot. He was a Lt. Commander in the United States Naval Reserve and President of the prestigious "Early Birds."

In 1928, Russ Holderman was flying planes in Florida, when his wife Dorothy sold a Fairchild airplane to Donald Woodward. In the meantime, Woodward wanted to hire Russ as a pilot, but Russ said that he had his heart set on operating his own field and flying school. Don "brushed aside all my arguments with this: 'Come north with me and I'll let you build an airport and have your own school and what's more, I'll back the whole thing.'" And so, Russ Holderman and his wife "Dot" came to LeRoy and Russ designed the D.W. Airport.

If you have read Brian Duddy's book about the D.W. Airport, you'll enjoy the several LeRoy chapters in Russ's book. He described the opening ceremony and the party afterwards: "Woodward shot the works that night on a colossal clambake, with all the trimmings ... lobster, chicken, corn, everything. All flying guests were given engraved cigarette lighters. Army and Navy pilots were given traveling clocks."

Russ was kept busy at the Woodward Airport, but in 1934, Frank Gannett from Rochester called. He wanted Russ to give a flying demonstration. Later Gannett came to watch Russ fly in a glider exhibition. As Russ wrote later: "I got into the newspaper game by landing a glider on a pie plate." And that is exactly what he did. "I brought the glider in slowly and put it down with its single landing wheel pointed toward the crowd and with its nose on the pie plate. When it was over, Gannett told me that I was the man he wanted for a pilot." Russ Holderman went on to fly for the *Gannett News Service* for



many years.

In 1950, forty seven years after his first solo flight, Russ had the "second" thrill of his life, when he flew with the Blue Angels. In 1974 he was awarded an Honorary Doctor of Aeronautical Science from Embry Riddle Aeronautical University. He died in May 1981. His wife died a few months later. When their house was cleaned out, their niece, Nancy went over only to discover that everything she remembered was gone. She went up to the attic and found several boxes of papers and photographs. "Put that down. It's only stuff that needs to be thrown away," her mother told her, but Nancy was not to be put off and took the boxes home, knowing that one day she would help tell the story of her Uncle Russ Holderman.

Her father had worked with Russ to write his memoirs, but John had died young and the

project was never completed. Nancy Durante, transcribed all the hand-written notes. When Duddy was almost ready to publish his book about the Woodward Airport, I mentioned that I had Nancy's name and phone number on my roleadex. He called her and went down to see her and included some of the Holderman information in his book. When I had a chance to read some of Russ's stories, I was fascinated with his love for flying and his poetic manner of telling the tale. "*Between Kittyhawk and the Moon*, the sky was full of people. Between the Wrights and Neil Armstrong, the story was written in a thousand ways and a dozen tongues, sung to the tune of singing struts, painted with ice and dust, milky cloud, soupy fog and blood." The books will be available at the tent on Trigon Park during the festival and at the Jell-O Gallery Gift Shop.