

SEE

Once, I believed airplanes were angels. My father, 1st Lt. Shannon Eugene Estill, flew a plane in a war from which he never returned, and my imagination created airplane angels. As a child, I would watch clouds seeking planes among them, ever hoping to see my father's P-38 Lightning returning home.

As I realized planes were more than angels and had little time for cloud gazing, I wondered about the other men in my father's squadron. I began a search, knowing only his crew chief's name and where he lived in 1945. This slim clue was found among my father's letters to my mother.

When I found the crew chief just where my father wrote he would be, I became the honorary daughter of 150 new "dads": the P-38 pilots of the 428th Squadron, 9th Air Force 474th Fighter Group. They remember my father as an extraordinary pilot and friend.

At the invitation of one of my new "dads," I took a Southwest flight from Kansas City to Phoenix to arrive at Champlin Fighter Museum before it opened one magical morning. My father's friend led me to a distant corner of the museum hangar where we stood beneath massive double propellers and the formidable shadow of a perfectly restored P-38 Lightning.

I climbed the skinny silver ladder attached to the back of the plane, to sit alone in the cockpit as my father had before me. With the canopy closed and the harness fastened over my shoulders, I felt my father's protective embrace. The silenced power of the plane hummed around us.

Over the next six years, other silver-winged Southwest angels would take me to reunions with my "adopted dads" and return me to a time when routine passenger flight was a vision and angels were seen flying among the clouds.

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