

Ely Air Lines –

A Promise Carried Skyward

by Mike Ely and Linda Street-Ely

From the time he was a small boy, Metcalfe wanted to be a pilot. Although life was busy, he'd look to the skies and hold fast to his dream. But soon after the birth of his daughter, he was diagnosed with leukemia. Her childhood was a rhythm of hospital visits and hope. When he passed away, he left behind a list of things he had wanted to do.

His daughter read it and made a decision. She would be a pilot. She would do it for him.

After college, Lizzie came to Elstree Aerodrome in North London, to work toward that promise. By then, she was a magazine designer. Her days filled with layouts and deadlines, but her evenings and weekends belonged to the sky. Flying lessons came slowly. There were delays – weather that wouldn't cooperate, aircraft unavailable, and the constant challenge of paying for each hour of training. Still, she pressed on. After logging 25 hours in a small Cessna, she was ready for a milestone.

"I'm feeling very excited," she said, "because hopefully I'm going to be soloing – if the wind's all good."

Those 25 hours represented



total dedication. She wiped condensation from the windshield, checked the fuel, and walked carefully around the aircraft for a pre-flight inspection. For six months she had worked toward this moment – not just for herself, but for her father.

There is only one first solo flight. One moment when the engine hums and, for the first time, no one else is there to guide you. As Lizzie climbed into the sky alone, the world below fell away – and something else took its place.

"I hope he can see me," she thought. "I hope he can see what I'm doing."

In that quiet space above the earth, she didn't feel alone.

"My instructor stepped out," she said after the flight, "but my dad had jumped in."

She believes in guardian angels and felt his presence in that cockpit, steady and reassuring, as though he had finally taken the seat he'd always dreamed of.

The first solo landing is every student pilot's test. She was focused, determined to prove she could do this. The runway rose to meet her. She eased back, flared, and felt the wheels touch down.

A rush of pride filled her – for her achievement as much as for the promise she had kept. Her instructor and the tower controller offered their congratulations, and she joined the community of pilots who, after that first solo, can finally say, Yes, I've done it.

The bug had bitten. If she had a week away from flying, she noticed it; there was a feeling that something was missing. The sky had a way of calling her back, and of making her feel free.

"Once you take off," she said, "you can leave everything behind on the ground."

In honoring her father's dream, Lizzie had discovered her own. And somewhere, perhaps, a boy who once dreamed of flying had finally taken to the air.

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Ripkowski passes peacefully, *Continued from Page A-1*

never cursed. Her drink of choice was a Dr Pepper with a little lemon. Her therapy of choice was riding her bicycle, which she continued to do until she was 92 years old.

Janie was a devout Catholic whose faith sustained her throughout her life. For two years she attended Incarnate Word College, then an all-girls Catholic college in San Antonio. She was homesick every day. While there, the nuns asked if she wanted to become a nun. She replied, "Oh sister, I could be a nun during the day, but I'd have to go home to my mother at night." Family lore recalls that when she called home to Liberty, she would only manage to utter a single word, "Mama?" before breaking down into tears.

Janie never missed Mass or a holy day of obligation. She gave up chocolate for Lent every year for more than 90 years, a sacrifice she believed strengthened her relationship with the Lord. Though tempted with a chocolate-covered donut just two weeks ago by her granddaughter, she kept her Lenten promise until the end.

Janie graduated from Sam Houston State Teachers College in 1949 with a Bachelor of Science degree and promptly returned home to her childhood home with her parents and siblings. She worked at First Liberty National Bank (affectionately known in the family as "The Bank") for seven years alongside her father. These were among the happiest times of her life.

Tragically, she lost both her mother and father within a span of three years in her mid-twenties and missed them dearly throughout the rest of her life. She kept her parents' legacy alive by sharing so many stories of them with her children that they all felt like they actually knew Blanche and Artie. To the day she died, she could still get teary-eyed when speaking of her mother and daddy.

Janie married the love of her life, Herman Ripkowski, in 1954. Their marriage lasted 53 years until his death in 2008. In 1963, Janie and Herman built a home next door to her childhood home where her sister Joe Ann still lived. When her brother Jack married Laura Jane Finley in 1957, the couple built their home just across the street. Thus was born the beloved "Rip Root Hartel" generational family compound, where Janie and her two siblings reared their children together, around the cornerstone family home.

Eleven first cousins grew up in this compound like brothers and sisters. Janie taught them how to ride a bike, how to drive a car, and many times took them to the emergency room for childhood bumps, scrapes, and occasional broken arm. She could always be counted on to be there, her car ready with a full tank. Doors weren't locked, no one had to knock before entering. This extended family shared countless Sundays, holidays, birthdays, graduations, and weddings together. The

most beloved tradition at every event was the "Hook'em" family picture, a ritual that remains to this day.

Thanksgiving was her favorite holiday and often fell on her birthday. Early on, the families rotated houses for Thanksgiving dinner amongst the Rips, Roots and Hartels. Everyone brought their favorite dishes. MeMe was famous for getting distracted visiting with loved ones and occasionally burning the rolls. She continued this Thanksgiving tradition at her house after her siblings passed, hosting up to 50 or more family and friends. The meal was served buffet-style on fine Chinat paper plates with her cherished sterling silver flatware. The more people who came, the happier she was. Not long ago she reflected that she had lived the perfect life, one filled with family and love.

When her four children were old enough to attend school in 1970, she began her career as an educator. She first taught at Sam Houston Elementary and Liberty Junior High before joining Liberty High School. Over the course of forty years she served as a PE teacher, volleyball and track coach, driver's education instructor, and teacher of health and special education. Yet nothing brought her greater joy than her leadership of the town's famed drill team, the Liberty High School Panther Prancers. Mrs. Rip was the Prancers' sponsor and guiding spirit for 29 years. She expected the girls to master their dance routines, and insisted they understand the rules of football. Smoking, chewing gum, or cussing while wearing the Prancer uniform brought swift demerits. She liked to say chewing gum reminded her of cows chewing their cud. Many former Prancers still don't chew gum – or they swallow it quickly – when they see Mrs. Rip. To this day, any former Prancer can easily recall her favorite saying: "When life gives you lemons, make lemonade."

In those 29 years, she missed only one football game – to attend her nephew's wedding in the south of France.

Upon retiring, Mrs. Rip was given a lifetime pass to all Liberty sporting events. However, she never gave up her four football season tickets and she shared them freely with her family. She rarely missed a Panthers football game and loved watching her Prancers at halftime. Even in retirement, she coordinated the Homecoming Court halftime presentation until the remarkable age of 96.

Sports remained one of her greatest passions. She particularly loved football, baseball, basketball, softball and volleyball. She would often say, "You better know sports in this family!" She loved all Liberty teams, the Houston Astros, and above all, her beloved Texas Longhorns.

After sports, Janie loved Liberty parades. Her first appearance came in 1929 at the age of 2 when she rode a float

in the Liberty TVE Baby Parade. She later served as Queen of the Rotary Club in the 1941 TVE Parade. She proudly walked beside floats carrying her children in the TVE Baby Parades. During her 29 years as Prancer Sponsor, she joined her beloved Prancers in the parades. Later, she watched with joy as her grandchildren and great-grandchildren took part in Liberty parades.

In December 2025, at 98 years old, Janie was honored to serve as the Grand Marshal of the Liberty Christmas Parade. Bundled up in her coat, she led the parade in a sleigh with her children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren. She loved seeing so many of her former students, friends and family along the parade route as three generations of her family led cheers of "We love MeMe!" and "Merry Christmas!" A fitting tribute to a Liberty legend, this would be her final parade.

Throughout her life, Janie could not tolerate being late. She was known to tell her sister that events started an hour before they actually did just to ensure punctuality. While she enjoyed attending parties, socializing, and the occasional short trip, there always came a time when she had been away from her corner of Milam Street long enough.

"It's time to go home," she would say, clapping her hands together.

Janie has now made her final journey home to the loving embrace of Jesus. She leaves behind family, friends, and a community that will miss her dearly. All will cherish the memories of this strong, loyal woman who lived for nearly a century devoted to faith, family and service.

Mary Jane Hartel Ripkowski was preceded in death by her husband, Herman Edward Ripkowski and her son, Artie Ripkowski.

She is survived by her son David Ripkowski (Natalie); daughters JoBeth Maxwell (Steve) and Amy Jane Boles (Russell); grandchildren Alan Boles (Lakin); Justin Boles (Emmie); Nicole Riviere Shealy; Austin Shealy (Caroline); Brad Ripkowski (Andrea); Heather Rawls (Cory); Amber Wilson (Leon) and great-grandchildren Heidi Jane, Travis, Amelia Jane, Brooks, Danilyn Jane, Lainey, Carson, Chase, and Marshall. She is also survived by her cherished nieces and nephews of the original 11 cousins, Judi Cross, Suzy Schilling, Joey Root (Polly), Jay Root (Corine), Laurie Vaught McKelvey (Paul), Angie Patterson (Blake) and Jackie Jane Smith (Ray), and their many children and grandchildren.

Mrs. Rip would be pleased if memorial donations were made to LISD Education Foundation, Attention Brandon Davis, Mrs. Rip endowment, 1517 Trinity St., Liberty, TX 77575 or the Immaculate Conception Church Bereavement Fund, 411 Milam St., Liberty, TX 77575.

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Cemetery cleanup needs volunteers, *Continued from Page A-1*

Cleanup work will include edging around headstones, removing an old chainlink fence, filling low spots, clearing debris, and general grounds work as the association prepares for spring maintenance.

Volunteers who are able are encouraged to bring a weed eater or edger, safety glasses, work gloves, bolt cutters, and a

wheelbarrow to assist with edging, fence removal, and filling low spots.

Families are encouraged to remove old flowers and decorations before the cleanup to make maintenance easier.

Community service hours available for students and court-appointed individuals. Bring your forms.

For more information, voice or text 832-427-9096.

The Linney-Acie Cemetery Association is a nonprofit organization dedicated to caring for and preserving the historic Linney and Acie cemeteries. We appreciate the community's support and can't wait to see y'all on March 28.

Celebrate Easter at FBC Dayton, April 3-5

DAYTON - First Baptist Church Dayton welcomes you to celebrate Easter beginning with a service on Good Friday, which will focus on Christ's death with song, Scripture readings and celebrating communion, all by candlelight. The service is at 7 p.m., Fri., April 3.

An Easter Egg-stravaganza will take place Sat., April 4, from 10 a.m. until noon, on the church campus. Come enjoy a train ride, family games, popcorn, crafts, cookie decorating, outside egg hunt, black light egg hunt in gym and of course sharing the Good News of our risen Savior, Jesus Christ.

Resurrection Sunday Worship will begin at 10:30 a.m., April 5.

Everyone is invited to a wonderful celebration of the risen Christ in a Christ-centered service worshipping our great God and giving Him glory for the resurrection

of Christ, our Savior.

First Baptist Church Dayton is located at 202 East Houston Street. Call 936-258-8231 for additional information.

Ole Tyme Days returns, April 10-12

DAYTON - The Dayton Ole Tyme Days Festival returns to downtown Dayton April 10-12 for three days of family fun, entertainment, interactive activities, exciting carnival rides and games, vendor booths and more. All festival events take place in Dayton's downtown Main Street area. Festival proceeds are used to provide scholarships for Dayton High School's graduating seniors, something the Dayton Ole Tyme Days Festival Association, Inc. has been doing since 1997. Last year the festival awarded \$36,000 in scholarships.

Festival hours on Fri., April 10, are from 6-10 p.m. with carnival hours from 6 p.m. to 12 midnight. On Sat., April 11, the festival gets underway at 9 a.m. and continues through the evening until 10 p.m. The carnival opens at 9 a.m. and closes at 12 midnight. Sun., April 12, the festival and carnival open at 9 a.m. and close at 5 p.m.

Food and craft vendor applications are currently being accepted. Entry fees range from \$250 to \$650 contingent on space size. Contact Sheree, vendor chair, at 281-224-2975.

The ATV/UTV Show is set for Sunday, April 12, from 8 a.m. to 1 p.m. To participate, contact Jamie at 281-610-3918. There is a \$25 entry fee.

Fairytale Fantasy is this year's theme for the Lil' Miss

and Lil' Mister Pageant. The pageant will take place Sat., April 11. Entry is open to ages 12 and under with a \$30 entry fee. Contact Julie Campbell at 936-258-4339.

A fun cooking competition, the Jr. Chili Cookoff, is open to anyone ages 5 to 18. The competition will be held Saturday during the festival at the Crossroads Plaza from 8 a.m. until 12 noon. There is a \$25 entry fee per team.

Entries for the Barbecue Cookoff are being accepted through April 10. Teams are required to participate in a minimum of four categories.

Participants can register now for the Bike, Car and Truck Show. Vehicles will be on display Sat., April 11, from 8 a.m. until 12 noon. There is a \$25 entry fee per vehicle. Contact Weslee Woodard, event committee chair, at 713-553-9705 for information.

Complete festival and registration information can be found on the festival website at daytonoletymedays.com.



County Republican Precinct Convention, March 28

LIBERTY - Conservative grassroots Republicans will not want to miss the Liberty County Republican Precinct Convention, for all precincts, taking place on Sat., March 28, beginning at 9 a.m. at New Work Family Workshop Center located at 2512 Grand Avenue. The County Convention will take place immediately following the precinct conventions.

Also taking place will be the election of delegates to send to the state conventions happening June 11-13 in Houston. Come and take part in shaping the platform of the Republican Party of Texas.



George and Iva Votaw joined Iva's sister Betty Kersh (right) at the Dayton Noon Lions pancake supper held at First Baptist Church in Dayton last Thursday.