Out of the Blue

The Life and Legend of Kirby "Sky King" Grant

by Tim Trott

The following questions and answers may be used in full or in part for articles, features, and interview preparation.

Q: How did you come to know Kirby Grant?

A: I met Kirby and his wife, Carolyn, after they retired to Central Florida in 1971. Earlier, I had worked as a film editor and helped clean and ship the Sky King television prints for syndication. Later, I worked in the sound truck for the Great American Air Show, where Kirby was the announcer. He was a guest in my house, and I was a guest in his. I never asked for his autograph. You don't ask friends for autographs.

Q: Where did the title come from?

A: From Kirby himself. When I visited him after his heart surgery in 1978, he told me he was writing a book, and it would be called *Out of the Blue*, after the announcer's opening line on the show. He even mentioned it on *Good Morning America*. After he died, Carolyn told me the book had existed only in his mind and intentions. Writing it fulfills a promise I made to her.

Q: Why did the book take so long?

A: Like Kirby, I intended to write it and kept not quite getting around to it. But I kept meeting people who had been inspired by Sky King. My wife finally pointed out that if I kept putting it off, everyone touched by the show would be gone. So I went back to Carolyn's tapes and started tracking people down: Kirby's son Kip, the Browns at Sky King Airport, air show pilot Walt Pierce, collectors, and aviation researchers.

Q: Was Kirby Grant a real pilot?

A: That is the question everyone asks, and the book devotes a full chapter to it. The short answer is that there is no FAA record of a pilot certificate under Kirby Grant or his legal name, Kirby Grant Hoon, Jr. Kirby himself told one pilot he had flown straight and level but never took off or landed. Yet his son remembers flying with him many times. I'll let readers weigh the evidence. Licensed or not, he inspired an awful lot of real pilots.

Q: Who actually flew the *Songbird*?

A: In the early episodes, the Cessna T-50 Bobcat flying sequences came from Paul Mantz's company, which supplied the plane and pilots. For the Cessna 310, it was Bill Fergusson, Cessna's sales manager for the 310. He delivered the airplane to the set expecting to check out another pilot, and ended up doing the flying himself. He said it was some of the most fun flying he'd done since his military days.

Q: What about the famous "lost episodes"?

A: The story goes that many Sky King masters were destroyed in a fire at a New York film storage company. I found no evidence of such a fire at that address, and the current copyright holder says there are no lost episodes. There are plenty of myths like that, which is why the subtitle says "Legend" instead of "Life and Times."

Q: What surprised you most in your research?

A: How many inconsistencies there are, even about the end of Kirby's life. One hometown bank ad reported that he died piloting a plane, in the wrong year. In fact, he died in a car accident on his way to watch a Space Shuttle Challenger launch, a mission whose crew included astronauts who said they were inspired by Sky King.

Q: What was Kirby Grant like off-camera?

A: Exactly what you would hope. He never smoked in front of fans. When the Browns dedicated Sky King Airport, he stood in a hot office signing autographs for hours, and when they offered to pay him, he refused. He never really took off that white hat.

Q: Who is this book for?

A: Anyone who grew up watching Sky King, anyone who became a pilot because of him, and anyone who loves aviation, classic television, or a good story about a good man. If you're of a certain age, there's also enough trivia in here to win a few bar bets.

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