

My Ray Scholarship Experience

Gabe Creeger, November 2022

I've had a passion for aviation and a desire to become a pilot for a long time, but I wasn't sure where to start. Then I went to a Young Eagles Rally in 2019 and found out about EAA, and through them, so many possibilities were opened up to me. Now, thanks to the Ray Aviation Scholarship provided by EAA Chapter 122, I am moving one step closer to making my dream to become an aviator a reality.

I applied for the Ray Aviation Scholarship in 2021, but I wasn't originally one of the recipients. Later that September, however, another available slot opened up for the scholarship, and I was awarded it! I began my training for my Private Pilot license out of Penn Valley Airport (KSEG) in Selinsgrove, with Dave Hall, Colonel, USAF (ret) as my primary instructor and a Cessna 172 (734UU) as my training aircraft. When Dave wasn't available, I would train with Mike Keller, US Army (ret), who is another flight instructor at Penn Valley. I actually had the chance to go with both of them to pick up the Cessna from Capital City Airport (KCXY) in Harrisburg to bring to Penn Valley the previous December.

I started off with a couple of ground lessons before getting my first training flight in the Cessna on January 11, flying for an hour or so over the practice area we have set up between Penn Valley and Williamsport Regional Airport (KIPT). After that, I continued to work towards my license and getting my hours in.

I flew my very first solo on March 4, the forecast clear and the winds calm. All I did was stay in the KSEG airspace and fly three rounds in the traffic pattern for about half an hour, but when I made my first takeoff, I couldn't help but smile big. It felt freeing and uplifting to realize that for the first time ever, I was the sole occupant flying a plane!

Around mid-May, I completed my first solo XC, flying from KSEG to Altoona / Blair County Airport (KAOO), University Park (KUNV), William T Piper Memorial (KLHV), and KIPT before returning to KSEG. It was a nearly three-hour flight, and it felt awesome because it was my first time flying for a long time like that and reaching several different airports by myself. The next day, I flew my first training flight at night, staying in the KSEG traffic pattern and getting in most of my night landings. Landing at night when you can't see everything that you'd expect to see during the daytime was definitely a different experience for me.

Once into the summertime, I completed my second solo XC to finish up the solo XC time I needed. I flew from KSEG to Wilkes-Barre / Scranton International (KAVP), then to KIPT, and finally back to KSEG. After that, Dave and I began discussing how we would do the night XC, which we are still working on when to do as of now.

On days when I didn't have a flight lesson, I made sure to put in adequate time studying in preparation for the written test, which I took in June. I used a variety of materials and tips from Dave and my scholarship coordinator, Jeff Probasco. A study guide that I borrowed from Dave and a Gleim study guide that Jeff recommended were definitely helpful for me, as were the practice tests and training videos on Sporty's website to help me prepare. The hard work paid off, and I ended up scoring 90%!

I've had some pretty interesting moments over this past year of training. On one of the dual flights before my initial solo, I flew over to my first towered airport (KIPT). Flying into controlled airspace for the first time was exciting for me because it was also the first time that I talked to ATC. I'll admit that I was a

little nervous doing that. Once during the spring, when Dave and I were on a training flight in between State College and Altoona, I spotted a C-17 Globemaster III a mile or so ahead of us and crossing to our left! It was flying super low to the ground along an IR training route that we happened to be crossing, and it was so cool to witness a military plane doing something like that! Landing on a soft landing strip for the first time was also a new experience for me. I don't recall having a rough time landing at all, but I do know I was going a little fast while taxiing. There was also a time when the Cessna's flaps weren't working right, and Dave was going to take it to Bloomsburg to get it checked out. He let me come along to drop it off and we had to perform a no-flap landing, which went smoother than I imagined.

I had the opportunity a couple of times when Dave was flying out of state in his Cirrus SR20, whether to pick up/drop off someone, to tag along with him. Both of those flights were pretty fun cross-countries for me. The first time we went to Hagerstown Regional Airport (KHGR) in Maryland on April 22 to pick up a student, and we dropped him off at Wilkes-Barre Wyoming Valley Airport (KWBW) before returning to KIPT. On the second out-of-state flight, we flew to Orange Municipal Airport (KORE) in Massachusetts on May 12 to drop off someone doing a machinery inspection. We actually ended up flying through clouds for a while after we left Orange on the return flight home. Flying through IFR weather like that for the first time, when you can't see anything in front of the nose of your airplane and hardly know what's coming, was so exciting and nerve-racking for me.

Apart from the training I did with my instructor(s), the involvement in Chapter 122 activities have greatly contributed to my experience. There's been the Chapter's monthly meetings that I've attended at Capital City, and with each meeting, I've been inspired by the unique stories and presentations given by the chapter's members. I've also volunteered in the Chapter's Aim For The Sky fundraiser in June and the 2022 Young Eagles Rally in September. They gave me opportunities to hang out with and meet other Chapter members and scholarship winners, and it's been great to volunteer in those events. Events like these help to raise money for the Chapter so that they can provide more scholarship opportunities and interactive possibilities- helping young aviators, like me, get their feet off the ground.

Although it has been an amazing year of training, it hasn't been without its flaws. Since I began training, I've experienced a handful of situations where things were just out of my control or didn't go as planned. Technical issues with the Cessna and weather interferences have been a major opposing factor, leading to a number of lessons being either postponed or canceled. There were also times where training was slowed down due to family/health issues that neither Dave or I had control over. I have come to learn that these things all come along with being a pilot, and that you just have to take it as it comes.

I am so thankful for the opportunity I had to be awarded the Ray Aviation scholarship and to be a part of EAA Chapter 122. I'm thankful to have great veteran instructors and scholarship coordinator to help guide me as I learned and trained for my pilot's license. And strangely, I am also thankful for the times where I've made a mistake while training, because being exposed to those scenarios showed me how real they can be, and learning from them is helping me to become a better pilot.

As of now, I am currently continuing to work on my studies and working to finish up my training in preparation for my checkride, which I hope is going to be soon. I've learned a lot since I began in January, but there are three things that I've learned that are most important to me: 1.) Being focused matters; 2.) I've learned to appreciate the importance of all that book content I've studied; and 3.) Every step that I've taken in my training has been a confirmation that being a pilot is something that I want to do as a career. I can't thank EAA Chapter 122 enough for making all of this possible.