

A Pilot's Perspective, #5  
Make Your Aviation Dreams Come True

Learn to Fly

By Fred Benton

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Let's assume that you've never flown in a small airplane. Let's also assume that a little voice in your head is saying "I think I was born to fly!" – and accompanying the little voice is a glorious image of you guiding some imaginary airplane through loops, rolls, chandelles and other maneuvers. The theme music from "Top Gun" reverberates in the background. Is this scenario even remotely possible? Of course it is! Here's the deal: in my opinion, the most logical step 1 in learning to fly is to go for an airplane ride with a friend, family member or flight instructor. After a short, introductory flight, you'll know a few useful things. If you grimly unbuckle your lap and shoulder restraints and flee the airplane with the zeal of a trapped grizzly being released from its cage, that could mean you really weren't born to fly. However, as the prop comes to a dead stop after the pilot parks the airplane, if the grin on your face comes close to dislocating your jaw, that could mean a fledgling aviator has just sprouted a few pinfeathers.

It doesn't take a superman or superwoman to fly an airplane. Airplanes are like horses – they appreciate and respond well to confidence, respect and gentle treatment. Many pilots will tell you, in all sincerity, that they regard their aircraft not as a mere assemblage of parts, but as almost a living thing – their partner in the sky. Good thing to remember: in flying, as in horsemanship, finesse rules.

Here's what got me started: while going to Chico State College I read a book by Frank Kingston Smith, "Weekend Pilot." After that, I devoured every book and magazine I could find about aeronautics. While home in Yreka on spring break, I drove out to Montague-Yreka airport. The middle-aged gray-haired fellow who met me at the door of the office was Leo Purinton, already a legendary character in Siskiyou's aviation community. We shook hands and I asked if he'd take me up for my first airplane ride. He grinned, puffed on his pipe and said "Sure – go on out to that blue and white airplane. I'll grab the key and meet you there in a minute."

The next 15 minutes or so changed my life. After a flawless power-off (engine idling) landing on a runway marking he'd pointed out to me, Leo taxied the Piper Tri-Pacer back to the tie-down spot. Before I even got out of the airplane, I'd arranged for my first half-hour of dual instruction the next day. Leo, by the way,

hadn't taken the pipe out of his mouth from start to finish. Didn't bother me a bit! Those were different times ...

Lesson #1 with instructor Bill Frost was in a two-place, 85-HP Aeronca. After preflight briefing and inspection of the airplane, we took off. All of my previous reading about flying airplanes paid dividends. I felt completely relaxed and oriented. After 30 minutes of flight and basic instruction, we were back on the ground. I "followed through" Bill's control inputs during takeoff and landing, but had otherwise flown most of the time myself while Bill coached me in the fine points of holding a compass heading, making coordinated turns and attaining "straight and level" flight. That was many years and 2,000 flight hours ago. College and living expenses didn't leave much money for flying lessons, so I had to stretch my training over the next couple of years. While not the ideal method, this had some advantages. For one, I flew with, and learned from, five different flight instructors – all skilled pilots who generously shared their wisdom and experience. For another, by the time I received my private pilot license, I had flown six different airplanes – high-wing, low-wing, 2-place, 4-place, tricycle gear and tailwheel. Robert "Bud" Davis, USAF reserve pilot, and owner/operator of SIS-Q Flying Service (aerial firefighting) was my instructor for the final few hours. He signed me off and I flew a Cessna 175 Skylark down to Benton Field in Redding. My logbook then showed 50 hours, 25 minutes. After I finished the ground-portion of the examination (I'd already passed the FAA written test) Alma Hinds went up with me and we flew 1.2 hours to complete the required air-work. Then home to Siskiyou County with a fresh private pilot license in my wallet. A great day! I was already thinking about the commercial license, the complex-airplane and multi-engine ratings. These would come along later.

Today, there is a vast resource available on the web for prospective aviators. Type in "how to fly an airplane", "learn to fly" or some similar message and prepare to be inundated with information. Plus, you can get a pilot's-eye view from a J-4 Cub – or experience approach and a carrier landing from the cockpit of a Navy F-18 Hornet. Want to look over a real CAL FIRE S2T pilot's shoulder as he makes a retardant drop on a fire? It's all there, just a few keystrokes away.

For those in a hurry, where money isn't a major obstacle, there are formal flight schools offering intensive ground and air training. These academies specialize in turning out well-qualified pilots in a relatively short time. There are excellent packaged ground school training courses available from Sportys.com and other companies specializing in pilot training and supplies. Community colleges sometimes offer private pilot ground school courses – usually in their evening schedule. (Check with COS). Self-study at home is still an option, assuming one acquires the essential manuals and study-guides.

If you have this dream and want to know more about flying airplanes, gliders or both – how long it takes, what it will cost, airplane ownership vs. renting, medical requirements, etc., the next logical step is to meet and talk to one of our local CFIs (certified flight instructor):

Vern Fueston, (530) 842-6511, [fueston@cot.net](mailto:fueston@cot.net) or

Steve Mikinka, (510) 501-1377, [axlr8r@gmail.com](mailto:axlr8r@gmail.com)

I can almost guarantee that neither one of these gentlemen will be smoking a pipe when you fly with them ...