

How did I end up at the controls?



First Flight

By James Acevedo

swallow stopped halfway and cut off my air supply. The person who was to occupy the space next to me was now stowing his carry-on over head and about to take his seat. He looked like he might be close to my age and it was my last hope that we might make small talk and my panic subside. To my horror, he just sat down, jammed the ear buds from his iPod into his ears and took the shared elbow rest. That did it for me. I stood up and notified a flight attendant that I was not feeling well. I wished she would tell me something that would make me feel calm and return to my seat, instead she asked if I needed to get off the plane and I said yes. By this time, however, the plane was nearly ready for take off. I stood at the front of the plane with a thousand eyes on me waiting for an eternity for the stairs to be repositioned at the planes door. When I finally exited I was passed by an airport security guard on his way to check my seat for a bomb. I walked numbly across the tarmac towards the terminal filled with a sense of despair and humiliation.

After the experience in San Jose I settled into a life without airplanes. Just the mention of a trip by airplane spiked my anxiety. If I wanted to go somewhere, I either drove or didn't go at all. Not flying didn't seem to affect my life too much and besides, I always told myself that someday I would tackle my phobia. One afternoon a few weeks ago, I was busy at work building a grape arbor when I got a call on my cell phone. It was my soon to be wife Sarah. She excitedly announced to me that she may have found an opportunity for me to fly in a small airplane with a pilot sensitive to my anxiety. Upon receiving the news my mind swirled with a mixture of both anxious apprehension and joyful anticipation. The pilot was John Eisenzopf of Ukiah Aviation. I agreed to visit John with Sarah. When I met John I found him to be a very easygoing man with a sincere smile. In his office he answered all my questions with care. He told me about others he had helped with their flying phobias and when he asked if I'd like to take a flight I decided I felt comfortable with him and agreed to go up.

I've always wondered what it would be like to fly an airplane. The funny thing about me taking flying lessons is that I am terrified of flying. However, when the opportunity to learn how to fly an airplane was presented to me, I thought it might be a great way to overcome my phobia. Don't get me wrong, just the thought of flying made my mouth go dry and my palms sweat; but I was willing to check into it further.

I'd like to summarize briefly my experience with airplanes. Up until about four years ago I've flown on a little under a dozen airliners within the country and once to Mexico. I was nervous of flying during all these occasions; however, my anxiety didn't prevent me flying. Once airborne I was usually more relaxed and sometimes even enjoyed my time marveling at how such a machine could carry me safely and swiftly to my destination. Unfortunately, my fears began to grow with each successive flight. I began to feel trapped. My airplane travels came to an abrupt halt four years ago when I found myself in a very embarrassing situation.

I was boarding a flight from San Jose to Portland. I was extremely anxious as I took my window seat by the wing. I looked out on to the wing and began scrutinizing the rivets holding the plane together. It became hard for me to swallow. I observed the scratches on the small Plexiglas window. My chest began tightening around my lungs. Immediately I looked elsewhere within the plane seeking out some form of relief. All I found was an endless line of boarding passengers and the cabin seemed to grow increasingly smaller. I picked up the Sky Mall magazine in front of me to try and distract my anxious mind. Instead, my mind began to swirl as if I were on a fair ride. I attempted to swallow, but my

What I thought was going to amount to me going for a ride in small airplane, turned out to be my first flying lesson. Unlike getting into a car and driving off, when one gets into an airplane everything must be checked. John walked around the plane performing a list of checks that he had long since memorized, explaining everything to me as he went along. After many checks we boarded the plane. Sarah came along and rode in he back while I sat behind the controls to the left and John to the right. Both seats have controls fully capable of flying the airplane. I was anxious sitting there in the plane. I think it helped that it was just the three of us and I had openly disclosed my fears. Not having to hide it made it feel better.

To my surprise John handed me the keys and had me start up the plane. John pulled out a checklist and walked me through more checks. After all checks were made he instructed me to increase the throttle and begin taxing toward the runway. While on the ground the plane is driven to the left or right through the use of foot pedals that operate a rear rudder. He told me turning the yoke wouldn't do anything while on the ground but most people can't help turning it anyhow at first. He was right. I found steering with the rudder was a bit tricky and I zigzagged the airplane off towards the runway. Before we entered the runway we stopped again and performed more checks and examined the sky before proceeding. Once on the runway John instructed to increase the throttle. I thought it seemed like a dangerous idea considering I was weaving the plane this way and that, still getting the feel of the foot controls. I also took note of us closing in on the end of the runway. Reminding myself that John was a capable pilot with a full set of controls in front of him as well, I

increased the throttle and he gently spotted me as I pulled back on the yoke and we became airborne.

We climbed and climbed and soon I saw the ocean from our position over Ukiah. Seeing the coast from the air over Ukiah gave me my first taste of a perspective that one can only gain from flight. We flew over Lake Mendocino and then over Clearlake. After that he told me to take the plane over Hopland before returning to Ukiah. Throughout the entire flight John was giving instructions and answering questions. The conversation, the hands on learning and the newness of the experience all took away from my anxiety. Steering the plane filled me with a wonderful sense of freedom. As we neared the airport John took the controls and brought us down with a gentle landing. Once we were on the ground I weaved the plane back over to its tie down area and parked it crooked. John revved the propeller and held one break swinging the plane into its proper position. I looked over to find him smiling and then I killed the engine. I can't say that my anxiety disappeared but I can say that I flew again.

John mentioned that he would like for the general public to know more about what it entails to become a pilot and perhaps remove a false shroud of elitism that can sometimes be associated with private piloting. He thought it would be great if someone taking lessons were to write a column about it for the newspaper. After that day I thought I might like to take flying lessons and write a column about it. I was still afraid but in the end I knew I would feel terrible if I didn't give it an honest try. I spoke with John and then the newspaper and we all came to an arrangement. That's how I've ended up here at my computer writing an article about my first flying lesson.

Editor's note: Tommy Wayne Kramer is on vacation. His column will return Aug. 1

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