

Testing my airworthiness

It has been more than a month since I began flying lessons. I did not proactively seek out flight instruction, since I'm afraid of flying. But as I explained in my first column in these pages in July, my wife (UDJ photographer Sarah Baldik) telephoned me earlier this year to say she had met a helpful pilot who was willing to assist me with tackling my phobia. A meeting was scheduled and up in the air we went; and I was not just a passenger, but behind the controls.

The pilot was John Eisenzopf of Ukiah Aviation and he has since become my flight instructor in my quest to conquer my fear and the skies. Initially John acquainted me with the general workings of the airplane and took



First
Flight
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me up over Ukiah, to give a passenger a glimpse of a pilot's perspective. It is amazing how a shift in perspective can tame a phobia or dispel a fear. Well, I much preferred this new-found pilot's perspective and am proud to say I am now a student of aviation.

A lot has happened in the last

month since my first flight. I take one lesson a week. The lessons find me in the air for about an hour and on the ground for about the same amount of time. There is much to do before and during flight to ensure safety and it seems that most of it can be found within the fine print of a laminated card roughly the size of half a sheet of typing paper. This card contains check list after checklist, all of which must be completed prior to becoming airborne.

We begin each lesson outside the airplane, a Cessna 150, a small side-by-side two seater plane with two full sets of controls. Because it is not enough to rely solely on the fuel gauge, my first check is the fuel level. This is physically

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checked by dipping a kind of dip stick into the plane's gas tanks located in both the wings. You must also check the fuel to make sure there is no foreign matter in the fuel, like water from condensation. A complete walk around has me checking everything from cotter pins and nuts to peering in behind the prop to make sure no animals have made their home there since the last flight.

Once inside the cockpit I continue down the list of checks. Most of

them are unique to airplanes and quite technical, while some of them are more simple in nature like checking your seat belts, but equally as important. John gives me a quick briefing. If anything should happen to the plane while in the air, the controls are Johns. If anything should happen to the plane while on the ground, a fire for instance, I am to open the door and run away from the plane very fast.

After about 20 minutes of checks, the fun begins. It takes little or no thought to get this plane airborne. If you can push a throttle in and pull back on a yoke, you

can get a Cessna 150 off the ground. The one finesse involved might be pulling back on the yoke. Instead of muscling it back towards my chest, I just apply slight backward pressure and the plane takes off when it's ready. Usually around 65 mph. When this happens I go from driving to flying. I have yet to experience anything that feels quite like it.

Once airborne my lesson tends to fall into one of two routines: either we head for the practice area over Potter Valley or we fly "touch and go's" in the flight pattern. The practice area is directly over

Potter Valley and taking off from the airport in Ukiah we fly directly over Lake Mendocino. I love flying over the water. Once in the practice area we begin running through slow flight drills and stalls. Knowledge of both these skills is necessary for landing. We practice intentional stalls so that they may be avoided during a landing, and stall recovery to, well, recover from a stall should one arise. By the way, a stall happens when a combination of airspeed and pitch causes the wings to lose their lift and the plane begins to lose altitude, at least that's my understanding

of it at this point. To recover from a stall one has to adjust the carb heat, increase the throttle, reduce the flaps and pull back the yoke while the plane is falling out of the sky, without panicking. Do all the aforementioned and within seconds control of the plane is regained. Most of this practice is to develop skills needed to fly in the pattern.

The "pattern" is the airspace 1000 feet above the Ukiah airport. In order to land an airplane one must first enter the pattern. The runway used and the directions of flight around the pattern depends on wind direction, terrain, such as

mountains, and residential locations. The pattern is established so that pilots can better know where to look for air traffic almost like right of ways in your car. To deviate from the pattern is like driving on the wrong side of the road.

In my next installment of my flight journal I will discuss more on how I'm dealing with my anxiety and about flying in the pattern, it involves many complexities of flight including the most complex and exciting part... Landing.

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