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SUMMER SPECTACULAR

LEARNING TO FLY

BY RICH WARREN

I spend so much of my life up in the air you'd think I'd be used to it by now. So an e-mail invitation to literally go aloft shouldn't have grabbed my attention like it did. "Be a Pilot" screamed the spam-like header, and I was about to delete it when I noticed it was a personalized invitation to take a flying lesson—virtually for free—and write a story to persuade others to do the same. I was even encouraged to take along a photographer.

Turns out that "Be a Pilot" is a legitimate enterprise that allows people to experience an introductory flying lesson, for very cheap, in hopes they'll be so enamored they'll sign up for more. This is no fly-by-night operation. More than 1,800 flight schools around the country offer the program; last year nearly 34,000 people took advantage of it.

I was intrigued, even though I'm far from a fearless flyer. It takes days of whipping myself into a semi-hypnotic state before I'll board an airplane, during which I persuade myself I'll be riding a train.

So what demon possessed me to hit the "reply" button and sign up? I never talked to an actual person, making it all seem less real. Plus, I figured no complete novice would be allowed to take the wheel in the first lesson.

Still, as the day approached, I quietly began putting my affairs in order—informing friends where my will is located, finding good homes for my cats. That morning I heeded the age-old admonition to put on ultra-clean underwear, so as not to shame my mother. Before I left the house, I tidied my kitchen so my executors wouldn't have to deal with dirty dishes.

On the way to Bolton Field near Grove City, John, the photographer, was such a comfort. When I mentioned I'd left a clean kitchen as my legacy, he said, "Who cares? You'll be dead." Remarking that I should have had my hair cut, he said, "Oh, they'll take care of that at the funeral home." He snapped his gum. "Provided, of course, it's open casket."

My flying instructor, Adam Whitehead, was a personable and youthful man who'd "soloed" on his 16th birthday, and whose absolute poise gave me confidence, even when we passed by a plane with its hood open, exposing mechanical innards resembling a Volkswagen Beetle's. "Not much to go wrong," Adam said, noting my wariness. "Kinda like a lawnmower."

We arrived at our plane, a Cessna 172. During the flight check, we scrutinized every conceivable element of the plane's exterior. I thought I found a crack in a section of the wing. "Don't worry," Adam said. "Even if it fell off, we could still fly." When I spotted a stepladder in the rear of the plane, Adam quipped, "Oh that's for if we land in a tree."

I was especially disquieted by the cables in the plane's rudder, which appeared no more substantial than a bicycle brake's. "If they broke, we could still guide the plane by opening and shutting the doors," Adam explained, and this time—I'm not sure—I believe he was serious.

Adam's levity calmed me substantially. Plus, his total competence was apparent from the get-go. He explained every inch of the plane's surface, and he even looked inside the motor to see if birds were roosting there. That ladder turned out to be not for treetops but to examine the upper wing.

Giddy and giggly, I climbed inside the cockpit, which was covered in green shag



TOP GUN HERE I COME: RICH WARREN JUST NEEDS A SCARF AND GOGGLES

JOHN HOWLEY

carpeting and seemed no bigger than a Ford Escort. We donned our head gear, complete with microphones, making me feel very *Top Gun*-ish. Adam verified the fuel level, while I verified the location of the barf bags. He described all the many knobs and dials on the console, but he may as well have been speaking Farsi because pre-lift off panic was descending. I do remember him saying it was hard to crash a small plane since they can glide a long way. "Yeah," I thought. "Tell that to Buddy Holly or Patsy Cline."

Take-off was much smoother than I expected, but unsettling nevertheless. All you can see is white sky until you level off—and that takes a while. "I'm on a train, I'm on a train," I kept repeating to myself, but my subconscious wasn't buying it.

When we leveled off, the ground finally became visible 3,000 feet below. "Well, where do you want to go?" Adam asked. This was something I'd never been asked by a pilot, and I was flummoxed for an answer. So we flew westward, the towns of West Jefferson and London and the flat cornfields of Madison County beneath us.

Thankfully, there were none of the gusty "thermals" we'd been warned about. But even in calm air I was experiencing severe cottonmouth, and my butt muscles were clenched so violently I feared they'd never again loosen.

Adam asked if I'd like to do a "stall and glide," a standard procedure to show jittery first-timers how the plane can be restarted. To my mind, it sounded more like a "stall and crash," and I nixed the idea in no uncertain terms. He did feel compelled to demonstrate a "steep turn," wherein my side of the plane dropped down, down, down till my left side seemed parallel to the ground, cre-

ating gastrointestinal sensations I'd rather not describe.

Then we were pointed back toward Columbus. Straight ahead were the skyscrapers of downtown, and far to the right were the dramatic hills around Chillicothe. From this vantage point, Ohio looked rather compact, and I was starting to feel rather God-like, especially when Adam insisted I take the wheel and make little baby turns. "Hell, I'm flying this puppy!" I said to myself.

Then came the highlight of the day, a "touch and go" landing back at Bolton Field. Adam said the number-one goal of the "Be a Pilot" lesson is to allow students to experi-

ence take-off by actually doing it. I was a hard sell on this suggestion. By this time, though, we were coming in, Adam pushing buttons and twisting knobs in a hideously complicated sequence, all the while explaining his every move. It was lost on me as I watched the ground gliding towards us. The landing was smooth, and we hadn't taxied far before Adam turned to me and said, "Take us back up."

So I floored it, pulled back on the wheel and up we went, my hands able to feel the plane straining to take us aloft. I'm here to tell you it was way cool. I enjoyed it so thoroughly, he let me do it again, the second lift-off not as smooth as the first. By this time, though, there was so much adrenaline surging I could see how people get hooked on aviation.

When we finally were back on Mother Earth, my buttocks beginning to unclench, I restrained the urge to kiss the ground like the Pope does. Instead, I just anti-climactically walked inside the terminal, saying my goodbyes to Adam, who provided me with an official-looking "Pilot Log" that recorded the day's lesson. There was plenty of space to record lessons yet to come.

Will there be any? It's doubtful. Yes, there are plenty of thrills, and the views are spectacular, but I don't think I could ever get all that button-pushing and knob-twisting just right. And unlike the crashes in a video game, a false move here might hurt. Still, with the right accessories—a pair of goggles and a neck scarf to wave in the wind—you might just persuade me to get high again. ☺

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