

Man Flies

A TRUE ACCOUNT OF TAKING OFF, FLYING AND LANDING

By Michael E.C. Gery

On this 100th anniversary of the Wright Brothers work on North Carolina's Outer Banks, I figured it was my duty to fly an airplane. I hoped to feel what Orville Wright felt when he flew that heavier-than-air, motorized aircraft on Dec. 17, 1903, from a Kitty Hawk sand dune.

First of all, I should disclose that I have been a member of the "Man Will Never Fly Memorial Society Internationale" since 1990. Thanks to the late Ed North of Nags Head, this hallowed organization has steadfastly refused to believe that humans should fly. Our motto: "Birds Fly. Men Drink." We used to gather in a Nags Head barroom each December when all the usual First Flight devotees gathered some other place to celebrate the Wright Brothers. One December, during the first Gulf War, we agreed that those were not manned aircraft flying over the sands of Kuwait and Iraq. Ed North decided they were flying carpets, and the rest of us agreed.

I've seen the so-called photograph by John T. Daniels of Manteo that seems to show Wilbur Wright running alongside the contraption that they say flew that day in 1903 up to 20 feet over a distance of 120 feet in about 12 seconds. And I've read the Wrights' accounts of mosquitoes down there (those I believe). Maybe the insects themselves spurred those Ohio boys to leave the ground.

Even so, I arranged to take a flying lesson at First in Flight Aviation, based at the Franklin County Airport (LHZ). The lesson was set up for me by the Be a Pilot program (their motto: "Stop Dreaming. Start Flying.") If you're interested, you can do the same thing. (See how on page 17.)

My instructor was an enthusiastic and very knowledgeable young woman named Cheri Dyson. An instructor for nearly three years, Cheri hopes to become a bush pilot, preferably in

Africa. I asked her why she flies small airplanes.

"I'd rather fly than drive," she said. "Plus, it's fun."

This was good enough for me. So we looked outside. That's the first thing you need to do: make sure the weather will let you fly. We checked the computer and radar reports from inside the airport, then looked outside the window. Cheri said "it's hazy" (which I knew already) but OK. Visibility was 5

miles. Optimum is 6, minimum is 3. We looked at the 2003 Aeronautical Chart published by the N.C. Department of Transportation to plan where we'd fly. We decided to go east toward Bunn, Spring Hope and Momeyer, places I have always wanted to see from the air.

The Cessna 172R highwing was parked right outside the little terminal, and she looked healthy. But we had to check her anyway. The preflight inspection involves running down a checklist that makes you examine just about everything in and on the aircraft, beginning with your Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) air-worthiness certificate and registration, through your cockpit switches and instruments, lights,

gauges, meters, wing flaps, tires, propeller and fuel supply. I checked the fuel tank (we burned 100 low-lead octane) and inspected the fuel itself at 13 different sump locations to make sure no one had messed with it. We looked at the engine to make sure no birds were in there. Cheri herself uses the checklist every time.

Then we climbed inside. The cockpit of this Cessna looks like the inside of a MG sports car from the 1960s. Narrow leather seats and a mass of dials right there in front of you on the panel. I was in the pilot's seat (on the left) and Cheri described what each gauge and switch does, where the throttle is, the mixture control, the attitude indicator, the directional gyro, the fuel pump switch, the yoke (steering wheel). She told



The instrument panel and dual controls of our Cessna 172R. I handled the pilot's yoke on the left (you rotate it like a steering wheel and push or pull it to dip or rise). My instructor had the controls at right, just in case.

me I would taxi us out, and handle the controls while we take off. I said, "No problem." She reminded me that she had an identical set of controls on her side of the plane. "In the event of an emergency," Cheri said seriously, "we'll land in a field, and I'll meet you at the back of the plane." I said, "No problem." We buckled our seat belts and donned headsets. Then Cheri yelled, "Clear!" She told me to turn the key to start the engine and push in the throttle until we reach about 1,000 rpm.

To taxi out on a runway, your feet work floor pedals. The tops of the two pedals are your brakes. The bottoms steer the plane's wheel left or right. That takes some practice, I can tell you. We weaved along the Franklin County Airport tarmac for a good while.

Then we let her rip, running to 1,400 rpm. Cheri checked the oil pressure, the gauges, the propeller pitch. We buzzed her to about 2,300 rpm, raised the wing flaps and pulled the yoke, rose skyward, and there we were: flying. In fact, I was doing the flying. I swung that yoke counterclockwise and the aileron flaps rotated us leftward.

"Try not to pitch us at a 90-degree angle," Cheri called to me through the headset.

This baby can do 135 miles per hour at cruising speed. We were flying over Bunn in no time. I took her south to check out the traffic on 64. Vehicles down there were crawling along at 65-70 mph in the Nashville area. Looking down, I dipped the nose too much, and Cheri had to lift us back into position.

Up there, you don't have to keep your eyes straight through the windshield. You can look down, or sideways and still keep going straight ahead. In fact you should look down and sideways pretty often.

Cheri told me to stay out of the clouds. You need a special license to fly in the clouds. It's the coveted "Instrument Rating."

"How do they know if you're flying in the clouds?" I wondered. "Who's checking?"

Cheri figured it was a wise-guy remark. Then she said, "For one thing, you don't know who else might be in there." Good point.

When the two fuel tanks are full, this Cessna can carry four people for almost six hours, or about 750 miles. You could leave from Morganton-Lenoir (MRN) at 3 p.m. and fly to Manteo-Dare County (MQI), take a swim, then have dinner at the 1587 or Clara's, and be back in Morganton by 11 p.m. or so.

We flew over Lake Royale and Louisburg and peered down on some landing strips out there, then we winged back to LHZ. Cheri radioed to a nearby pilot that we were in the vicinity. Then she radioed our intentions to LHZ: "We're going to do a touch and go." In other words, she would show me how to land the plane on a runway, then lift us back up. We'd circle, and I would land us the second time. No problem.

You know how it feels when your jumbo jet shakes and rattles as it tries to slow down on a runway? Well, landing in a single-engine Cessna is nothing like that. You let her down rear wheels first, then touch the nose wheel, then work those floor pedals and taxi in. Once you're on the ground, it's almost a let down. You feel like going back. ■



Outside the Franklin County Airport (LHZ) terminal: Flight instructor Cheri Dyson, student Michael Gery, and our Cessna 172R highwing.

To Be a Pilot

To take a \$49 introductory flying lesson, contact Be A Pilot at www.beapilot.com

or (202) 842-4099. Among more than 1,600 Be A Pilot flight schools nationwide, 55 are in North Carolina.

Here are some facts about becoming a pilot:

- 40 hours of certified instruction for a private pilot license, including 10 hours flying solo, 5 cross-country (50 miles and back), 3 with instruments, 3 at night, and 10 night take-offs and landings. Most students take at least 50 hours.
- Start learning at any age, but you need to be at least 16 to solo.
- You must pass a physical examination (20/40 vision with or without corrective lenses, good balance and hearing, no serious physical problems).
- Final test includes an oral exam and flight test with an FAA-approved examiner.
- You can complete lessons in three or four months. Instruction costs between \$4,000 and \$5,000 to get the license.
- Renting a plane (about \$100 per hour) is most common among pilots who don't need to fly all the time. Or you join a club that owns one.

