



# Finding Flight

Mentors, influencers, and role models

BY STEVE KROG

**FLYING IS A PRIVILEGE** that many of us may never have pursued had it not been for the influence of a mentor, friend, or role model.

Throughout our lifetime we come in contact with many people who contribute to our growth and development. Teachers, friends, uncles and aunts, neighbors, etc., all have the potential to influence who we are, how we act, and what career path we choose.

My first recollection of my fascination with airplanes was when I was 4 or 5 years old. Growing up on a farm in southwestern Minnesota, North Central Airlines DC-3s passed overhead four times daily en route to and from Minneapolis and Brookings, South Dakota. Whenever those beautiful silver birds flew overhead, I watched in amazement wondering what it would be like to be on board one of those flights.

## A MENTOR

My father was neither a pilot nor did he have an interest in flying, but he recognized my enthusiasm and introduced me to a friend of his. This friend, Carroll “Kak” Bressler, eventually became my mentor. He had learned to fly during the pre-war Civilian Pilot Training Program (CPTP) days but later washed out due to color blindness. He never lost his enthusiasm for flying, though.



Carroll “Kak” Bressler

Dad mentioned to Kak that I liked airplanes, and the rest is history. From that day forward, whenever I connected with Kak, he would always take time from what he was doing to talk airplanes with me. I didn’t know one airplane from another, but he was patient and told me about what it was like flying an airplane.

Kak took me for my first airplane ride when I was about 12 years old in a Cessna 172. Sitting in front with Kak, he let me follow him through on the controls. It was a fascinating flight and one that I will never ever forget. This flight really piqued my interest in learning to fly, and I knew then that someday I would become a pilot.

I was able to finagle a job working for Kak in my junior and senior years of high school — Saturdays during the school year and six days a week from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. in the summer. Kak was an expert in all things mechanical, an excellent teacher, and always willing to answer my flying questions. We spent many hours together fixing things and talking airplanes.

Some years later, my wife and I acquired a Piper PA-12 and would frequently fly back to where I grew up. I always called Kak several days in advance and extended an invitation to go flying. He never turned me down, and we had many very enjoyable flights together.

Kak has now gone west, but there isn’t a day that goes by that I don’t think of him and the positive influence he had on me. I shall forever be grateful for the many things that he taught and shared with me, especially about airplanes and flying. Most important, though, he taught me to never give up on my enthusiasm for flying.

## A ROLE MODEL

Instructors can make a huge difference when learning to fly. Some really care about what they do, while others sometimes seem to just go through the motions.

Learning to fly did not come easy for me. Though I was eager to learn, I was not a “natural” pilot. Had it not been for a very calm, laid-back, and understanding flight instructor, I probably would not have made it through the Army ROTC flight program.

My first instructor was a “screamer” and I struggled, but then I was handed off to Duane Vig. He had true cowboy blood in his veins, and nothing ever seemed to startle him. Our first flight was a short evaluation ride where he recognized what I was not doing, corrected it without screaming, and I was on my way to successfully completing my training and earning a private pilot certificate.

Had it not been for Duane’s calm demeanor, my flying career could have ended after nine hours of dual flight time. But he knew how to make a student relax and then achieve the desired result.



During our final year in college, Steve was able to acquire a Piper PA-12 Super Cruiser. We used that airplane to fly many places together. One day we decided we would see how many loops we could do between two airports. Steve was flying, and I was to do the official counting. We climbed to a safe altitude over the top of our airport and began our loops. When I called out the 26th consecutive loop and we were still within a mile or so of our departing airport, we agreed the plan was faulty and discontinued our record attempt!

Unfortunately, Steve was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease some years ago and was no longer able to fly on his own. But that did not deter his interest in aviation.

While he was on a visit to southeastern Wisconsin several years ago, I asked Steve to meet me at the Hartford airport (KHXF). I had arranged for a bit of help from the local airport crew, and we were able to get Steve comfortably situated in the front seat of my PA-12. Even though Steve hadn't flown a PA-12 for more than three decades, he handled the controls as if he flew every day. It was a lot of fun flying together once again, and we had a ball trying loops, spins, stalls, and lazy-eights. The landing was near perfect, too. Steve had the touch; something few of us are gifted to have.

I shall forever be indebted to Steve. Had it not been for his friendship as well as our flying together, I may have never furthered my aviation endeavors. But he was and is an inspiration and a true friend.

As we get older, we too can be a positive influence. Over nearly 48 years of flying, I've had the privilege of meeting many people through aviation. Many have inspired me, and I hope through the direction and support I received from the three individuals I've mentioned, that I have been able to pay it forward and be an inspiration to many others.

I've been fortunate to have met and been influenced by several individuals who allowed me to enjoy and share a lifetime of flight.

Why not take a moment or two and recall those who inspired you, or whom you have inspired, and say thanks wherever they may be. *EAA*

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**Steve Krog**, EAA 173799, has been flying for more than four decades and giving tailwheel instruction for nearly as long. In 2006 he launched Cub Air Flight, a flight-training school using tailwheel aircraft for all primary training.

## Many have inspired me, and I hope through the direction and support I received from the three individuals I've mentioned, that I have been able to pay it forward and be an inspiration to many others.

Duane had a positive influence on me more than he will ever know. I remember thinking to myself even then that if I were to become a flight instructor, I would pattern my style after Duane. I often think of him when working with a student who is trying hard but having a difficult time learning a maneuver. I will sometimes ask myself, "What would Duane do in this situation?" He made a deep and lasting impression on me about how to work calmly with students. I will always be in his debt for helping make me a good flight instructor.

### AN INFLUENTIAL FRIEND

During my early flight training I met Stephen DeLay, who became a dear friend of mine. We inspired, cajoled, teased, and encouraged one another while learning to fly. Steve earned his private certificate one day before I received mine, and from that day forward we became true airport bums, hanging out at the airport every free hour we had away from our college classes. When Steve and I could scrape together \$18, we

would rent a Cherokee 180 for one hour, each flying for 30 minutes.

I was a very timid pilot; Steve was not. He was not unsafe by any means but had the desire and drive to look — and fly — beyond the horizon. Within a week or two after earning our certificates, we talked about taking a long flying trip. Steve's parents were planning a vacation in Southern California, and they agreed to feed and entertain us if we flew out from South Dakota to meet them. The FBO was agreeable to our plan and rented us an airplane to do so.

This was a trip that I would never have undertaken on my own, but together we knew we could do it. It turned out to be a trip of a lifetime. We encountered snow squalls, wind, low ceilings, mountain flying, high-density altitude conditions, and California smog. Memorable beyond description, we learned more about flying during that trip than we had accrued during our training. It was an experience I shall never forget, nor will Steve.