A First Flight

The moment everything changes

BY STEVE KROG



THOSE OF US LUCKY enough to fly regularly often forget the freedom and sensation of flight. It becomes so natural to us that we overlook the feel of the airplane lifting off and watching the Earth drop away. Seeing the world in three dimensions is something one never forgets, especially if it is their first flight in a small single-engine aircraft.

Recently, a young woman stopped by the hangar. She was maybe 13 or 14 years old, standing there with her hands jammed in her pockets while she worked up the nerve to ask if she could look inside the Cub. I could tell by the way she studied it, not just looking at it, that this wasn't idle curiosity. She walked slowly around the wing, ran her fingers along the strut, and asked what the fabric was made of. Twenty minutes later she was strapped in the front seat, headset a little too big for her head, and we were taxiing out. I've watched this exact scene play out more times than I can count over the decades. It never gets old.

There is nothing quite like a person's first flight in a small airplane. Not a first flight on an airliner, mind you. That's a different experience entirely, sealed up in a metal tube with air conditioning and a movie screen, the whole business handled by someone you never see. I'm talking about the first time someone climbs into a two-seat taildragger or a high-wing trainer, feels the whole airplane come alive beneath them, and leaves the ground under their own power, or at least in the hands of a pilot they've just met an hour before. Whether it's a Cub, a Champ, or a simple Cessna, the airplane doesn't matter nearly as much as what happens inside the person sitting in it.

BEFORE THE PROP EVER TURNS

I always spend a few minutes on the ground before we go anywhere. Not because the regulations require it, though a passenger briefing certainly is required. I do it because those few minutes do more to calm nerves than anything I could say once airborne. I walk them around the airplane during preflight, let them touch the fabric and watch me check the oil, and answer questions about the control surfaces. Most first-timers don't realize how much of flying happens before the engine ever turns over. There's comfort in watching someone check things carefully rather than simply hopping in and starting up.

I demonstrate the seat belt, the door, how the intercom works, and what to do with their hands and feet. Mainly, keep them off the controls unless I invite them on. Then, we talk about what's coming. The noise, the vibration, the way the tail will bounce a bit as we taxi over the seams in the pavement or the bumps of a grass strip. Managing expectations up front prevents a lot of white knuckles later.

Wind matters, too, and I make a point of mentioning it, even to a passenger who has never flown before. It's a small thing, but explaining why we're using one runway over another, or why we're waiting a few minutes for a gust to settle, tells them this is a considered decision, not a roll of the dice. I also keep an eye on the ceiling and visibility, choosing a calm morning or a mellow evening for a first-timer whenever I can. There's no reason to introduce someone to flight on a bumpy, gusty afternoon when a smooth hour later in the day will leave them smiling instead of gripping the seat.

LEAVING THE GROUND

Taxiing in a small airplane is its own small thrill. Everything talks to you. The engine, the tires on the pavement, the little shimmy of the tail wheel. First-time passengers often grip the edge of the seat during the takeoff roll, not from fear exactly, but because the acceleration in a light airplane feels immediate and honest in a way that a



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jetliner's slow-building push never does. There's no long taxi to a distant runway, no lengthy wait in a line of aircraft. Often, it's just you, the airplane, and open pavement or turf ahead.

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Then comes the moment the wheels leave the ground. I've seen adults go quiet and teenagers erupt in laughter, and everything in between. No matter the specific type of reaction, I can count on something changing in a person's face when the ground falls away, and the airplane settles into that particular quiet hum of flight. The engine sound steadies, the bumps of the runway disappear, and suddenly the world tilts gently beneath the wing.

SEEING THE WORLD DIFFERENTLY

Once we're up and the climb settles into cruise, I like to point out landmarks, a lake, a water tower, their own house if we can find it. It's remarkable how disoriented people become at only 1,000 feet.





Roads that seemed straight from the ground reveal their curves. Farms lay out in a patchwork nobody notices from a car window. I've had passengers tell me they never appreciated how green or how orderly their own town looked until they saw it from a small airplane.

This is also where I let them feel the airplane a little, hands lightly on the stick or yoke, a gentle bank left, then right. I remind them the airplane is talking to them the whole time, through the sound of the engine or the pressure in the seat during a turn. That's something you simply don't experience sealed inside a pressurized cabin at 35,000 feet. In a small airplane, you're not a passenger watching flight happen. You're inside it, feeling every bit of it, helping make it happen.

I often think about my years teaching students to fly by attitude and feel rather than by numbers alone. A first flight is a small taste of that same lesson. The passenger begins to sense how the nose relates to the horizon, how a gentle bank changes the view out the window, and how the whole machine responds to the smallest inputs. Most will never touch the controls again after that day, but something about understanding it, even briefly, changes how they think about flight for the rest of their lives.

COMING BACK DOWN

The traffic pattern is where I talk the most, narrating what I'm doing and why, announcing our position, watching for other aircraft, setting up the approach. First-timers are often surprised there's so much thinking going on at a small airport with no control tower, and a few have told me afterward that watching this process made them trust the whole experience more, not less. There's something reassuring about hearing a pilot explain each step out loud rather than sitting silently through it.

The landing itself, that final flare and touchdown, usually draws one more gasp, followed almost immediately by a grin. Taxiing back to the hangar, most passengers go quiet again. This time, it's not from nerves but seemingly to hold onto whatever they just felt for a moment longer before it fades into ordinary life. It's a short quiet that I've learned not to interrupt. Whatever is happening in their mind during that final taxi is usually the most important part of the whole flight.

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WHAT IT LEAVES BEHIND

I've had the privilege of giving hundreds of first flights over the years, to pre-teens, teenagers, retirees, and sometimes nervous spouses talked into it by an enthusiastic husband or wife. Some walk away thanking me politely and never think of it again. Others walk away changed, already asking what it would take to get a certificate of their own. I've watched a few of those passengers go on to earn private and then commercial certificates, then become flight instructors themselves, tracing the beginning of that path back to one short flight on an ordinary afternoon.

Programs like the EAA Young Eagles have introduced countless young people to exactly this kind of flight, often for free, simply because a volunteer pilot and an airplane were available on a Saturday morning. I've flown more Young Eagles than I can remember, and I still can't predict ahead of time which ones will walk away unaffected and which ones will show up at the airport every weekend after that, looking for any way to be near an airplane again.

That young woman I mentioned earlier climbed out of the Cub and helped me push it back into the hangar. Before she left, she asked when she could come back. I told her anytime. That's usually all it takes. One flight, one honest introduction to what it feels like to leave the ground in a small airplane, and a dream takes root that sometimes grows into a lifetime in aviation. I've seen it happen often enough that I no longer consider it a coincidence. It's simply what a first flight, done right, tends to do to a person.

If you've never taken that first flight, find a local flight school, an EAA chapter offering Young Eagles rides, or a pilot willing to share the experience. You may walk away with nothing more than a nice memory. Or you may walk away, like so many before you, with the beginning of a dream you didn't know you had. Either way, you'll never look at the sky quite the same again. EAA

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