

July 2002

## Commentary

### Flying Carpet

#### Convergence

They come from separate worlds, Chris and Penny. He's a teenage Alaskan pilot and she a southern Arizona ranch wife. Never did I expect such different friends to converge at the same time and place.

"Cleared to land on Runway One-One Right," said the Tucson tower controller, interrupting my thoughts. "Use caution for military A-10 traffic landing on the left runway." Two jets overtook me in formation and landed on the parallel runway, all while my *Flying Carpet* hovered on final as if standing still.

Waiting for me when I landed was a slim, dark-haired young man. Until now I'd seen Christopher Sis only in pictures. We'd first met in an Internet chat room, where I'd assumed by his advanced knowledge that he was a commercial pilot. But then one day Chris had surprised me by asking about college admission requirements.

"Are you returning to school?" I'd e-mailed.

"Oh, no," he replied. "I'm only 15. I haven't even taken any flying lessons yet." When Chris did begin training - first in San Diego and then in Juneau, Alaska - he regaled me with tales of learning to fly. Not only was the young man an aviation buff, but he also proved to be a talented writer. Joy filled his stories, along with celebration of the small experiences that educate every pilot. Soon I waited eagerly to read of each lesson.

Through his keyboard, Chris told of using hairdryers to thaw fuel drains frozen by the Alaskan winter. He chuckled at forgetting with his instructor to untie the tail tiedown - then trying to taxi away. Chris flew his first solo cross-country at age 16, in wintertime from Juneau to Haines. After landing he searched with numb fingers for change to call his worried mother, then on the return trip circled humpbacked whales cavorting in frigid waters. Just nine months after becoming a private pilot, the 17-year-old was here in Tucson to earn his instrument rating.

By now I'd completed my after-landing checklist and shut down the engine.

"Chris!" I said, climbing out the door.

"Hi, Greg." Making small talk, we tied down the airplane. Despite the richness of his writing, it was refreshing to find a shy teenager in the real person.

"How goes your instrument training?" I asked.

"The flying doesn't start until tomorrow," he replied. "But already I'm enjoying the knowledge part. It seems like a privilege, using the approach charts...until now they seemed so mysterious, filled with all those little symbols and numbers." I imagined King Arthur's sorcerer, poring by candlelight over massive volumes filled with procedure turns and other hieroglyphics.

"Like opening Merlin's Book?" I asked.

"You could say that," he laughed. "Like opening Merlin's Book and suddenly finding you understand it."

Approaching the flight school receptionist, I asked where we might meet another friend for brunch. "There's a funky railroad-car diner," she replied. "I'll drop you there." Soon Chris and I sweltered on a dusty highway corner, squinting under searing Arizona sun for a tall redhead in a pickup truck. Enduring the unfamiliar heat, Chris told of his first flight with passengers.

"I flew my Dad and little brother from Juneau to Sitka," he said. "The flight over went great, but when time came to leave, I couldn't start the engine. Luckily, a mechanic came to the rescue. The hard part was convincing Dad and my brother it was safe to return; the flight is mostly over water, you know. On the way home I spotted another whale, like on my solo cross-country, and descended to circle it - but once we got closer it turned out to be nothing but a big rock." He again laughed, then wiped his brow. Even stories of wintertime Alaska couldn't temper mid-July desert temperatures in the 100s.

A truck pulled up, and out stepped Penny Porter. Six feet tall with a flaming bouffant, Penny's pushing 70, yet freely shares the giggle of a 12-year-old. Slim and beaming with sparkling brown eyes, she wore a cowboy-print blouse and squash-blossom necklace. Just as flight instructors have guided my piloting, Penny mentors my pen.

A southern-Arizona ranch wife, Penny began writing professionally late in life. Joyfully interpreting her children's adventures with the animals of her ranch, she's achieved success in books and popular magazines. Penny fears the airplanes that inspire Chris and me, but she teaches by example - her every communication contains gems of humor, beauty, and advice. In Chris's writing I'd discovered similar jewels, though still rough-cut. I'd shared my favorite of his stories with Penny, while in turn mailing her books and stories to the young man for inspiration.

I introduced these disparate friends - the mature teenager and the youthful senior - then clicked a photo of the diner. Inside, the place proved dark and dingy, the only other occupant being a large man reading the paper. "I've already eaten," said Penny, after examining her dubiously clean cup. Chris and I were too hungry to be picky. We'd just ordered *huevos rancheros* when the big man approached our table.

"I saw you taking pictures," he said, threateningly.



"This is a special occasion," I explained, surprised that anyone owning such a place might not want it photographed. "Your dining car seemed perfect for our first meeting."

"In that case," he said, warming a shade, "let me show you around." Proudly guiding us through his rail car, the owner left no doors unopened. He lived here, it turned out, and he especially prized the furnishings made from giant cable spools. We "oohed" and "aahed" appropriately at all we saw, including the dingy bathroom and dirty laundry heaped on a bed.

Back at our table, Chris and I drowned our spicy meals with water while Penny looked on, amused. Between glasses we talked of writing, flying, and life on a ranch. There was an awkwardness, too. So many personal details had been exchanged through our pens that it would take awhile for the physical presence to catch up.

Before dropping Chris and me at the airport, Penny observed that the surrealistic railroad-car meeting had somehow been appropriate for writers like ourselves. "We couldn't have written a more bizarre setting," she giggled, "nor could we have invented better characters to frighten the visitors."

Bouncing homeward that afternoon through summer turbulence, I looked back at Tucson, then ahead at Phoenix. Although just a hundred miles, today's *Flying Carpet* ride had carried me an emotional distance much greater than that. Sure, out the window lay craggy Picacho Peak, but my thoughts instead wandered much bigger territories - between future and past, writing and piloting, Arizona and Alaska.

*Greg Brown was the 2000 National Flight Instructor of the Year. His books include The Savvy Flight Instructor, The Turbine Pilot's Flight Manual, and Job Hunting for Pilots. Visit his Web site ( [www.gregbrownflyingcarpet.com](http://www.gregbrownflyingcarpet.com) ).*

*By Greg Brown*

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