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**TYLER AND HIS FRIEND** Dylan celebrate graduation.

# DINÉ GRADUATION

## THIS TIME WE MADE IT!

**W**hat time is Tyler’s graduation?” asked Jean, as we boarded the *Flying Carpet*.  
 “Four o’clock,” I said. “After landing we’ll have two hours to check in at the motel, change, and relax before

his aunt, Terri, picks us up.” I buckled in, donned my headset, and flipped the master switch. After confirming round-trip fuel for Flagstaff to Window Rock, I ran the checklist and turned the key.

“What’s that ticking noise?” asked Jean. My unprintable answer could be translated as: *Are you kidding? Nothing’s gone wrong for a whole year since my last must-go mission to see Tyler, and now something breaks again!* (See “Flying Carpet: Sage Advice,” September 2013 *Flight Training*.)

No way should the battery be low—I’d flown the airplane twice that week. Although the engine could be safely started, we dared not risk a dead battery at unattended Window Rock Airport, especially on a holiday weekend. After checking components and connections, Wiseman Aviation mechanic Rory Goforth diagnosed the likely culprit as a weak battery. But they stocked no replacement.

“We need to start driving!” Jean said. However, it was now two-and-one-half hours to graduation, and the drive would take more than three. I wondered aloud whether a battery might be had in Prescott.

At 30 minutes to Prescott and 90 from there to Window Rock, a quick battery swap might enable us to make it. If not, we were already out of luck. I phoned John Atterholt at Prescott’s Arizona Air-Craftsman.

“We have that battery, Greg,” he said, “but I need to prep it immediately if you’re coming. When did you last change it?” I told him to expect us in 35 minutes; the battery

was so old I couldn’t remember replacing it. With Rory’s help I started the engine and confirmed that both alternator and battery were working. Clearly it was safe to fly—at issue was whether the battery would crank the engine tomorrow at a place so remote you must bring your own tiedowns. Fortunately, today’s problem and last year’s magneto failure had occurred at Flagstaff, rather than one flight later at the isolated Navajo Nation capital.

“A 30-knot headwind!” Jean observed after takeoff for Prescott. I reminded her that it would shift to a mighty tailwind on the much longer flight to Window Rock. John’s mechanic met us when we landed with a battery and logbook endorsement; by the time I introduced Jean around, the installation was complete. Prescott’s usual swarm of Embry-Riddle University traffic was dormant between semesters, so within minutes we were aloft.

“We might just make it,” Jean said, noting our 167-knot groundspeed. Sure enough, we landed at 3:30. As Terri whisked us to the stadium, we changed into “Congratulations Tyler!” T-shirts made by his mother, Val. Printed on the backs were his dream aircraft and the words, “Airplane Pilot,” among other accomplishments.

Window Rock High School’s commencement felt both familiar and exotic. The exuberant grads were like those anywhere, except many sported traditional



**A YOUNG RELATIVE** models Tyler’s graduation T-shirt.

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Navajo dress with their mortarboards. The salutatorian and valedictorian prefaced their speeches by introducing their maternal and paternal clans in the Navajo language. Following celebratory hugs and photos, we adjourned to Val's house.

The next morning we sampled such Diné delicacies as blue corn mush and mutton ribs at the hotel breakfast, then joined family and friends preparing the reception feast. Although Tyler's promised traditional lamb slaughter never materialized, we still got a taste of Navajo cookery. An uncle burned wood in a half-barrel, shoveling the resulting coals into grills cooking steaks and corn. To much laughter, Tyler's grandmother, Leslie, taught Jean to slap, flatten, and grill Navajo bread.

At such a happy occasion, it's easy to forget that life on the "Rez" has never been easy. While shucking homegrown corn from Leslie's remote hometown of Piñon, I learned that her relatives still water such crops by hand from barrels. And upon asking about her graduation, I learned that she'd missed that opportunity because Piñon had no high school when she was a child. The Indian boarding school system still existed back then, and whenever unknown riders approached, her parents had hidden Leslie and her sister in burlap bags so they wouldn't be forcibly removed to faraway Phoenix or Albuquerque. No wonder Leslie is enthused about her grandson's blossoming future.

We loaded the food into pickup trucks and delivered it to the reception. We toasted Tyler's accomplishments with iced tea and lemonade. A viola-decorated graduation cake reflected his passion for music along with piloting.

The *Flying Carpet* roared to life that evening with proper vigor. Treasured gifts of a Native pot and jewelry occupied our backseat. With our hearts brimming at Tyler's accomplishments and the generous warmth of his family, Jean and I soared homeward into a golden Navajo Nation sunset. 🐉

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**Greg Brown** is an aviation author, photographer, and former National Flight Instructor of the Year.

📶 Visit his website ([www.gregbrownflyingcarpet.com](http://www.gregbrownflyingcarpet.com)).