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GREG AND JEAN BROWN at Lebanon-Warren County Airport in Lebanon, Ohio, on a 1977 day trip to the Kings Island amusement park.

FORTY YEARS ALOFT

FLYING ONLY GETS BETTER

Forty years ago this month I took flight as a private pilot—and never came down. While others have flown longer than me, it's astonishing that a guy in his 50s should have soared over more than a third of the history of powered flight.

I remember little from that autumn day I earned my wings at Madison, Wisconsin's Truax Field—just that examiner Claude Frickelton was dissatisfied with my sparing use of elevator trim. “Here, I’ll show you,” he said, and demonstrated our final touchdown using just rudder pedals and the trim wheel.

My logbook yields no hint of excitement at passing, nor the decades of joy to follow—only that I earned my certificate the day before Thanksgiving, 1972, with 48 flight hours. More telling entries reveal I treated my girlfriend and best bud to rides within days afterward. When I met my wife-to-be, Jean, two years later, she was stuck with flying as part of the package. Thousands of hours on, the technology has changed, but not the adventure.

My primary instructor, Bob Vetter, was a hands-off CFI. I remember escaping Air National Guard F-102s in Madison's traffic pattern one day, only to inadvertently enter a spin during stall practice. “What’re you gonna do?” asked Bob, his

arms calmly crossed while the world spun around us. “I don’t knooooowww!” I replied. Without touching the controls, Bob guided my recovery. Ever since, I’ve felt comfortable vanquishing spins. More wisdom from Bob: “Never fly into weather you can’t see through.”

Piloting has never been inexpensive. I rented University of Wisconsin Flying Club Cessna 150s for \$11 per hour; when those were unavailable I paid \$14 at the FBO. Instructors ran \$6 to \$8 per hour. That sounds cheap, but auto fuel cost 25 cents per gallon back then, and \$3,000 bought a new car. Assuming 1972 prices at 10 percent of today’s, my flight training cost about the same as now. On the downside, a new four-place airplane cost five times the price of a new car in 1972, versus 10 times today. Used aircraft, however, are cheaper now than ever.

Countless expense-sharing passengers helped keep me aloft when otherwise I couldn’t afford it. (Students hitching lifts via the university ride-share boards were

mightily surprised to hear from a pilot.) Later came flying clubs, and ultimately a used airplane.

The biggest fear of new pilots in those pre-GPS days was getting lost. Then as now, we learned VOR navigation, but spotty coverage meant aviators had to be skilled at pilotage and dead reckoning. The only way to determine groundspeed—and, hence time to your destination—was by timing passage between known checkpoints, and dividing distance by time.

When passengers asked, “What’s that town?” we rarely knew unless it was a predetermined checkpoint. By the time we computed position based on ground-speed and last-checkpoint-crossing time, the place was out of sight. To counter passenger fears that “our pilot is lost!” I learned to compare navigating between checkpoints to driving an interstate highway—you might not know your precise location between exits, but you know where you’ve been and where you’re going. Lacking cell phones, satellite locators, or handheld radios, we monitored for emergency-landing sites near highways or farmhouses.

When not acquiring weather briefings via pay phone, we perused hand-drawn radar summary charts and thumbed through cascading rolls of encoded teletype paper at then-widespread local flight service stations. (Hence the twisted DNA of weather encoding that still frustrates new pilots.)

In-flight weather was limited to forecasts and pilot and sequence reports radioed from flight service. Pilots blessed with automatic direction finders could tune away from listening to static-filled baseball broadcasts on the primitive

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devices, and employ them as crude lightning detectors. You can see why datalink cockpit weather is the biggest safety improvement in my four decades of flying. Close behind are noise-cancelling headsets. Imagine interpreting radio calls and your screaming flight instructor without benefit of headset, intercom, or even earplugs.

While the mechanics of flight haven't changed, the rules have: I needed 20 solo hours to qualify for my checkride, including 10 of solo cross-country. At one point the long solo cross-country was 300 miles—quite an excursion in a 100-mph airplane. No night cross-country was required, and Class B airspace was still years away.

Even seemingly immutable flight techniques have wavered:

installation costs denied many pilots access to it. Today's microelectronics lower flying costs even while enhancing safety—portable GPSs and tablet computers inform pilots as to location, weather, and terrain in even the most basic aircraft.

My biggest lesson learned in 40 years of piloting has been to separate rational concerns from irrational ones. Set aside any hokum about “gut feelings.” If your thorough homework indicates it's safe to fly, do so. If not, don't. But always go with the facts over gut feeling. Otherwise you'll rarely take off.

Another thing. My dad was a flier before me, and I grew up hearing about “fatal” threats to general aviation. It's just part of the journey we

The image shows a Pilot's Logbook with handwritten entries. The logbook is divided into several sections. The top section is titled "MONTHS OF OPERATION & DATES" and contains a grid for recording flight hours by month. The middle section is titled "PILOT'S LOGBOOK" and contains a table with columns for "DATE", "TIME", "TYPE", "CLASS", "COUNTRY", "STATE", "COUNTY", "CITY", "HOURS", "MILES", "GAL", "LBS", "GAS", "OIL", "FUEL", "OIL", "TOTAL", "TOTAL TO DATE". The bottom section is titled "PILOT'S SUMMARY" and contains a table with columns for "TOTAL TO DATE", "TOTAL TO DATE", "TOTAL TO DATE", "TOTAL TO DATE".

recommended crosswind-landing practices have flip-flopped repeatedly between full flaps (to minimize touchdown speed) versus partial flaps (to minimize cross-control requirements). For a time, power-off stalls were christened approach-to-landing stalls, and power-on stalls became takeoff-and-departure stalls. Use of pitch versus power to adjust landing approaches remains controversial to this day.

While many modern aircraft have incrementally evolved—the Bonanza debuted in 1947 and the Cessna 172 in 1956—the revolution's been in avionics. In 1972, most VFR aircraft featured one semi-reliable nav/com. More than once I deciphered out-of-kilter radio frequencies after the radio-tuning-knob drive belt slipped. Time-to-station readouts were unimaginable, much less moving maps. No wonder GPS is such a hit.

Even as avionics technology improved,

pilots eternally weather. Yes, declining pilot numbers are concerning. But if each of us recruits just one new aviator, and we enhance flight training to retain those who start, we can overcome this challenge. Sustain pilot numbers and other problems such as cost, fuel, and regulation will resolve themselves.

Piloting is phenomenally safer and easier than when I first launched skyward. But the joys continue undiminished. Every takeoff and landing is still thrilling. Each gift of flight to friends remains something they'll remember for a lifetime. Deplaning from a personal aircraft still fosters awe and admiration among the ground-bound souls who greet us. Most important, the miracles of sky, clouds, and Earth from above are as exhilarating as ever. With the passage of time, flying only gets better! 🛩️

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