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MEMBERS of the Student Pilot Pep Talk Facebook group rendezvous at Lake Havasu City Airport, Arizona.

PEP RALLY

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When pilots in training get disheartened, a few well-placed words of encouragement can often keep them flying. So several years ago I organized a Student Pilot Pep Talk Facebook group. Friendships blossomed, and some Southwest-area members recently proposed our first-ever fly-in rendezvous at Lake Havasu City Airport, Arizona. I asked along student pilot Victoria Coleman, who'd recently celebrated her first solo, and her husband, Paul.

Victoria and I agreed that rather than make this a "lesson," we'd share piloting duties as equals: She'd handle the radios and navigate while I flew. Once aloft, Paul enthused about his wife's newfound skills.

"We recently bought some property in Pagosa Springs," he said. "Victoria will be able to pilot us there!" Although Victoria had yet to start cross-country training, she'd thoroughly scouted our route and destination airport and compiled relevant radio frequencies. And although new to aerial navigation, she precisely tracked our location via landmarks. It turned out

she's always loved maps, and as a child she aspired to be a cartographer.

"You're a natural at this!" I said.

"I felt that way, until the other day," Victoria replied. "I recently had a great solo day in the pattern. But last time I flew, there was a light crosswind. I wasn't sure I could handle it, so I landed. Now I'm nervous about mastering landings, and about flying by myself."

I assured Victoria she wasn't alone

in such challenges, and explained that learning plateaus are so common and predictable they're described in the *FAA's Aviation Instructor's Handbook*: "in learning motor skills, a leveling-off process, or a plateau, is normal, and can be expected after an initial period of rapid improvement. The instructor should prepare the student for this situation to avert discouragement."

Seemingly still far from Lake Havasu, I asked Victoria to help plan our descent from 8,500 feet to the 783-foot-elevation airport. Never having done it before, she was surprised at the need to start down 35 miles out.

"Based on the chart, there appear to be mountains this side of the airport," added Paul from the backseat. "How do we know how low we can descend?"

I answered that when closer, we'd address that issue visually. Nearing the ridge, Victoria questioned whether we'd clear it, so I shared a mountain-flying tip: Approaching from above, you see increasingly more terrain on the other side, but from below you'll see progressively less.

Lake Havasu's traffic pattern teemed with soon-to-be familiar voices when we landed. We taxied to the airport restaurant, and, while munching barbeque in the shadow of a blue biplane, bonded with the Pep Talk Group.

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New flight instructor Miranda Rydstrom and her boyfriend, Bijan Maleki, had flown from Chandler, Arizona, in their Cessna 182RG. Also from Chandler were instrument student Theresa Farley and her husband, Brian, in a rented Piper Warrior.

“This is my farthest cross-country, and the first with my hubby!” Theresa announced. “It dusted off my flight planning and nontowered airport skills. I love meeting new friends and reuniting face to face with those I usually only see online!”

Shari and Ken Meyer wowed everyone by hopping from Wickenburg, Arizona, in their diminutive Eclipse jet. Said Shari, “Meeting with pilots of different experiences, hours, and ratings makes me even more aware of how we are all students and always will be.”

Mike Hardison and Paul Meehl piloted a flying club Cessna 172 from Carlsbad, California. Mike recently returned to flying after 18 years away and is building a Van’s RV-7. “Since getting current I’ve flown about 30 hours, so at this point I’m like any student in the group. The learning curve is steep, but I’m getting into longer cross-countries.”

For Paul Meehl, “after so much ‘virtual’ support and camaraderie from the Pep Talk group, it’s fitting making my first interstate flight and cross-country fly-in to meet everyone.” Victoria was intrigued to learn he’d pre-flown the trip on his computer flight simulator to build familiarity and confidence, and she eagerly jotted down the recommended software.

When Victoria mentioned her frightening crosswind experience, Theresa praised her judgment. “Good for you! You landed and didn’t go back up before you were ready.” Then she laughed. “If that’s all the challenges you’ve faced so far, you’re way ahead of me!”

“So I’m not the only one? This is normal?” Victoria asked. Miranda added that everyone at the table had experienced similar insecurities and questions. She expressed appreciation for Victoria’s journey as a student pilot. “It reminds me of my own first solo just two years ago. It encourages new students and experi-

enced pilots alike to learn their struggles are not unique.”


Too soon, we headed for home. “Meeting pilots of all ages with all kinds of planes, and the fact that so many were women, really inspired me,” Victoria observed after takeoff. She mentioned Bijan’s aerobatics, and the Meyers’ progression to jets. “It’s hard enough learning to think at the speed of a 172. I can’t imagine mastering jets!”

“Not long ago, you couldn’t imagine flying any plane!” quipped her husband. Being new to private flying, Paul was amazed at the group’s activity level: “These people fly with a passion—and a lot! Commercial flying is about practicality, like ‘what time I’ll get there.’ It’s inside-focused: You read a book, watch movies. But lightplane flying is clearly outside-focused. You fly slower and lower and enjoy what’s around you: canyons, water, things you never see from an airliner. I find myself thinking, *I don’t even know where we are, but I’d love to go there.*”

Paul also noted that as pilots Victoria and I were always thinking ahead. “It’s like a chess game; you’re always planning the next move. Where are we going next? And what will we do? That’s comforting when you’re traveling ‘in baggage.’ I was so-so about coming today, but I’m glad I did.”

“Flying is something I really want to master,” said Victoria. “Being alone in the plane is still a little frightening to me, but thanks to the group I feel broadened by the possibilities. Seems like if you really want to do it, you can.”

It was a marvelous day of flying and dining with new “old friends.” But best of all was sharing the gift of flight with an aspiring pilot. We licensed aviators need to encourage and invite along more of our student brethren. As for pilots in training, seek out a pep talk whenever you need one, and hitch an airplane ride anytime you can! 🛩️

Greg Brown is an aviation author, photographer, and former National Flight Instructor of the Year.  (www.gregbrownflyingcarpet.com).