

New Beginnings

A pilot's return to flight after the terrorist attacks

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There have been two first flights in my life. These weren't first flights in the sense of first solo, first glider flight, or first balloon flight, although such milestones were memorable each in its own way. Rather, these were moments when I discovered, fresh and new, the pure joy and freedom of flight.

The first of those experiences occurred in a banking turn, flying a Cessna 150 over the cracked ice and windblown snow of Lake Mendota, near Madison, Wisconsin. I don't remember if it was as a solo student or new private pilot — it doesn't matter — but at that instant I escaped for the first time the nagging traumas of becoming a pilot and the consuming minutia of doing what pilots must do to remain aloft.

Instead of fearing the terrain as a threat to be avoided, I noted with fascination sailing iceboats and fishing tents among which I'd skated between college classes in the winter. While skating I'd experienced the fast-moving iceboats only as flashes of color passing me by. From the air, however, I could see their forward progress across the lake, and the paths left by their runners for miles behind.

The pressure ridges that blocked my progress when skating could now be seen in their entirety — cracked and buckling they formed huge rational

patterns stretching for miles like spider webs across the lake. I soared and gazed, soared and gazed, and knew that day for the first time that I'd achieved the ranks of birdmen and would never be cured.

My second first flight occurred on a warm autumn day just short of 30 years later — three weeks and two days after twisted souls hurled peaceful airplanes against skyscrapers. At first the grounding of all things flying seemed appropriate, in homage to those who had died and revulsion to the dark twist taken during the normally beautiful act of flight.

For days afterward I walked our quiet street, gazing up in wonder at a tranquil sky never before seen devoid of airplanes — at least in my lifetime. I'll admit to enjoying the peace of it for a time, and finding myself content with the quiet and solitude afforded by empty skies. But when airliners were again released to fly my mood changed, and I was soon overwhelmed with jealousy. Overhead, airplanes traversed skies closed to me.

As days passed, sadness turned to depression. Then hopelessness took over as I realized something that was such a part of me might be gone forever. There had been other disruptions in my flying over the years — the Arab oil embargo and the air traffic controllers' strike, among them — but although challenging, none had ever been like this, threatening the very freedom of flight.

My airplane, the *Flying Carpet*, between whose wings I had spent so many happy hours, was now no more than a throw rug. What if it was destined to rot amid cracking Royalite and flattening tires like other poor derelicts I'd seen fading in quiet airport corners over the years? To me neglected airplanes seem as sad as down-and-out people, and these images of decay overwhelmed me to a degree I didn't fully recognize until later.

On this particular sunny October day, however, I found myself unexpectedly released from my cage. Only instrument flying was to be allowed for the time being, but that was still flying. Like other pilots, I suspect, I'd been unable to face my *Flying Carpet* since the 9/11 events occurred. There was a shame in being a part of humankind that an airplane would never understand, its mission of flight being so simple and pure.

The *Flying Carpet* was covered in dust when I opened the hangar, her cockpit stale as I'd never smelled it before. Instead of the usual rich welcoming fragrance upon releasing the cabin door, only the slightest hint of drying leather was traceable in air tainted by mustiness. Compassionately, I pulled the neglected airplane into sunshine, recharged her tires, and cleaned her windshield. As the engine croaked, then stuttered and rumbled to life, my heart warmed at saving this bird from the clutches of death.

Rarely do we fly instruments in the sunny Southwest, and as I collected my clearance I recognized the strangeness of it all — three years flying from here, and it was my first instrument flight outbound from this airport. I was bound from Phoenix to Flagstaff, Arizona, to see my son, Hannis — a destination to which I'd flown many times before. This time, however, I would not fly direct. Rather, I'd be routed northwest over Phoenix, there to follow a circuitous series of airways via Prescott. I taxied for takeoff.

"My favorite part of flying is when we taxi out onto the runway and line up with the centerline." How appropriate that the words of my other son should greet me at this particular moment. An aspiring professional pilot, Austin, too, had left for college only a few months earlier. While filled with pride at both boys' accomplishments, I deeply missed their company — nowhere was the void greater than in the empty copilot seat. I relived Austin's words after savoring the engine runup — even the usual noisy gyro threatening failure didn't bother me this time. I urged the *Flying Carpet* down that centerline...and she flew!

That's when I experienced my second "first flight." Climbing over familiar terrain after weeks of thinking I'd never fly again, I felt anew the grace and privilege of soaring with hawks. Compounding the sensation was knowledge that tomorrow it could all be taken away again.

"How we've been betrayed," I thought. In the backlash of terror we'd been chained like cowboys off their horses to Earth. Fortunately what might have been a life sentence was, for the moment, commuted.

Familiar blue skies calmed me as I climbed toward the Bradshaw Mountains, and again I felt all that was flight. There's comfort and beauty in flying over familiar terrain. Those rooted to the ground imagine aviators fluttering lost from one teetering branch to another, closing their eyes, and setting out like messages in bottles for points unknown.

We pilots know that's not how it is. Every town, every mountain, every lake and river is connected to another in a continuum. Aviators over time grasp the true shape of every lake, the course of every railroad track, and where each road and gravel lane may go. Ranches lie hidden in mountain valleys far off the highway — but no matter how secret, we've been there. Yet like the body of a lover, even the most well-known hills and valleys never become so familiar as to preclude a new adventure on every trip. With each condition of clouds, time, and light, there's a new perspective.

Looking down, I noted progress over the village of Oak Creek. I'd never set foot in the place, yet in some respects I knew it better than its residents — how the town appears when first seen over red buttes from the south, the pattern formed by its streets" and how the creek itself actually meanders through town (not just the view from road crossings here and there). Moreover, I know the community's true location; how and where it really lies relative to its red-rock surroundings and the human fabric connected to it.

Flagstaff's position I divined from long familiarity, well before actually seeing the city itself. It materialized as expected, in the shadow of snow-covered Humphreys Peak. My son was waiting to greet me at the airport. We drove downtown like so many times before, and dined alfresco at a

favorite sidewalk cafe.

It was there, sipping fruit smoothies in the shade and talking with Hannis, that I finally felt whole again. Behind me in my logbook was the equivalent of 180 workweeks in the air. I'd believed it was over. Now, in the rich company of my son, I knew there was at least one more glorious flying hour to look forward to — the journey home. What more could I ask? I'd been relieved of my bowlegs and would soon be airborne once more. Always I had envied the boundless joy of new pilots; now I'd get to be one again.

Greg Brown was the 2000 National Flight Instructor of the Year. He is the author of numerous flight instruction books and he writes the "Flying Carpet" column for AOPA Flight Training magazine. His new book, Flying Carpet, is due out this spring.