

I Am an Addict

by Jeff Nelson



I blame Mike Montefusco. He introduced me to this demon that is taking all my money and most of my time. I've tried to shake it and am considering counseling but am not sure it will work. No money for it anyway since I am using every penny to support my habit. My habit? Flying of course! It started innocently enough, Mike was in for a little dental work and mentioned that he flew from time to time. Liar, liar pants on fire! (He flies ALL the time). He asked if I ever thought about learning to fly. Trying to be nice, I said sure but never had the time or money. He said he was flying to Lufkin in a few weeks for pancakes. Would I like to come? Sure I said. A few weeks later we met at the airport and off to Lufkin we went. Fun, fun, and more fun. He mentioned a ground school class he and his other dealer were putting on in March. I don't have the time I said. You don't have to fly right now he said, just a couple hundred dollars and a couple hours a week to see if you like it. O.K. I said. Looking back I can see him casting the line out into the water with the shiny, tasty bait right in front of this poor innocent fish. So I went to ground school class number one and found it interesting. He's twitching the lure now, tempting me to bite it. Second class, oh boy it is tempting but I really don't have the time. Third class comes and I have actually opened the books before class and have become pretty curious. Mike and Dennis (the dealers run in packs!) are really into the fire and brimstone like television evangelist and I walk the aisle, write the check, take the bait or whatever you want to call it. I can feel the hook being set and am ready to get on with the show. Anybody can do it, why not me? I really hit the books over the next three weeks and faithfully show up to class-easy peasy. After a month I tell Dennis I'm ready to take the FAA test. He looks at me like I'm crazy. (He keeps this look and maintains it all the way through my training-I believe it is the look of terror and it is justified!) Take the test a week later and pass. Flying is going to be a snap. Ground school is over about a month later and the real fun begins.



First Flight with The Great Satan



Dennis says show up at the club and we'll take the Archer for a spin. I'm thinking no problem, twenty minutes tops and I'll be ready for my check ride. Well, twenty minutes later and I'm trying to figure out where you get into the plane and do I really have to do an annual inspection every time I fly? After talking to FSS for the first time I am sure I am a moron but wanted to let everybody in Fort Worth to know that I was as well. Finally in the air and things are going well. Dennis got us up to altitude and I've got the airplane. Super-duper. After a few minutes of silence I hear a short message from God? emanating from the headset. "We seem to be losing altitude at an alarming rate". This may be harder than I anticipated.

Solo Really Means You're By Yourself



Fast forward to October. I've flown once or twice a week and am still pretty pitiful. Got so frustrated that I almost quit. Weather delays, vacation for everybody, new engine in the Archer and other gaps in the schedule don't help my progress. I learn that I am certainly not a multi-tasker. In short, I am just pitiful. Slowest student ever to come along. Dennis says I'm doing fine but is glad that dentistry was my chosen profession. October comes and he gets out of the plane and says "land three times". I say no problem-as soon as you get back in the plane! He arc welds the door shut. I immediately forget everything I have learned. I pray to Jesus, pee my pants, do my checks and take off. I land three times. Crash landings are not a new concept for me anymore. We put more nitrogen in the landing struts and fly two days later. The Archer is one tough airplane. In case you are wondering, it can be dropped from fifty feet over the runway without a significant amount of damage. Glad the wheel skirts were off before the flight.

Cross Country Means The Controllers Can Be Cross

We finally get to go someplace! If I wanted to live over Lake Tawakoni I would have bought a houseboat there! Dennis and I take a couple of trips. I have chosen to take the scenic route and also have chosen to vary my altitude quite a bit to enrich the flying experience. The Great Satan is not exactly thrilled by my choices and reminds me often of these minor miscues. We eventually find Gregg County Airport, Texarkana, and GVT. We also make landfall at each of these locations. Landing is a little too generous of a statement. We also make Ardmore, Meacham, Aero Country, Mineola Weisner, Wood County, Meacham again, Commerce, Caddo Mills, and any other place that Dennis needs to go to pick up parts or get the airplane serviced. There is a method to his madness. I have saved the Flying Club thousands of dollars in expense learning to fly from here to there. Dennis is a smart boy. I also gained about fifty pounds eating at every great airport restaurant in each of those places. Am quite good at checking weight and balance now. My first solo cross country went off fairly smoothly except for two notable exceptions. I got a little confused at Gregg county when the cross controller want me to take a right base for another runway when I was already cleared to land on a different runway. I locked up like a bad wheel bearing and just flew straight ahead, cleared the runway to the right and had to call him back and beg for mercy. He vectored me back and I landed safely but he was not really that cheerful about my learning experience. I did escape a trip to the tower however. When I took off he did say something about getting out of Dodge even though I told him I was going to Texarkana. They need to pay more attention. The only other problem I had was a curt reminder from FW Center that I would never reach GVT from Texarkana unless I maintained a westerly heading. Simple enough. Oklahoma can be a nice place to visit in early February, the Red River... but I digress.



Are You Ready For Your Check Ride?

With everything else out the way, my prep for the dreaded check ride began. A few months had passed since I did any serious flying. Annual for the Archer, weather, weather, weather, and more weather. Rust was hanging off everywhere and it showed. I picked up the pace and started flying solo every other day and with Dennis once a week. I was improving and my landings were getting better. Not good, but better. Finally in Late June I took my pre-checkride ride with Harry. Went O.K. He looked a little worse for the wear after the lesson but I made it through. Work on this, that and the other said Harry. Really a very good experience. Learned a bunch in one hour. You could tell he was rooting for me to do well and was very helpful. More training with Dennis and I was ready for the big day. Met Harry at the terminal and got the paperwork out of the way. We went flying and I made it through the ride. I don't think I flew particularly well that day but Harry was great and helped me through the process. I was so nervous I could have bent cast iron between my butt cheeks. Harry knew it too. At the end of the morning I had that piece of white paper that said PILOT! Hallelujah! Some graduate summa cum laude, some magna cum laude, and some thank you laude. I was the latter!



The End of the Beginning

Aviation has opened a new world for me. Since my check ride six weeks ago, I have flown with my wife to see my son in College Station, been to Ardmore twice with my youngest son and father-in-law, been to Stephenville to eat at the Hard Eight BBQ with Mike Montefusco (who used to be my friend! LOL) and have flown several times just for fun over Lake Tawakoni. Flying allows me to spend time with my friends and family both in the plane and where they live. I have a son in school in College Station, a daughter starting school in Waco, a brother in Houston and friends all over the state. I now have the ability to visit them for dinner and be back home in a couple of hours and have a blast doing it. Flying has made my life richer, fuller, and more complete. Challenging to learn? You bet! One of the hardest things that I have done. Frustrating at times? Absolutely! The best things in life usually are. Expensive? Depends on how you look at it. We always spend our time and our money on the things we value. We trade our time at work for money, then trade our money for things we value. If you value your teeth you seek out the best to take care of them. I sought out the best flying instructors because I value my life and those in my care. Can I put a price on my experience? No way! It has added so much value to my life and a lot of enjoyment as well.



End of the Line?

Nope. Am studying for my IFR rating right now. Am flying as much as time and money permits because I am still learning. I suppose I always will be! I have flown enough now to identify my own screwups and errors. Still talk to Dennis and Mike and several other pilots after I fly to figure out how to correct my mistakes. We learn then we teach. I am so grateful that a few folks out there love to fly enough to spend their time teaching a brain dead dentist to shift from down in the mouth to up in the air! Thank you Dennis and Mike for opening up a whole new world to me.