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# A flyboy

## at heart

BY MATT GUNN  
*Staff Writer*

The single-engine Cessna 172 Skyhawk responded willingly to each gentle adjustment, taking us northeast from Rocky Mountain Metropolitan Airport to the outskirts of Fort Collins and back.

Somewhere around 7,500 feet above sea level, it hit me: I was flying the airplane.

It was the realization of a distant dream that was lost somewhere between childhood and the unpredictable transmutations of time. But there I was, being delivered to that castle in the sky by a fixed-wing, four-seat airplane heading away from the metro area at roughly 140 mph.

The experience was nothing short of astonishing. And equally as striking was how easy it all was.

My lesson was arranged through ProjectPilot.org. The new initiative, launched by the general aviation industry and sponsored by the [Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association](#), is meant to lure people into the cockpit and take away the intimidation of leaving the ground behind.

Once arrangements were made, I visited McAir Aviation, where chief flight

instructor Justin Wigal helped make that dream of flight a reality. After a brief introduction to the program, it was out to the plane, where final checks were made before departure.

I was reassured that everything was intuitive; it was simply a matter of adjusting to an unfamiliar machine. As Wigal explained, "It's really easy, actually. There's a lot of people that I've heard say, 'It's no different from driving

Please see **TAKING FLIGHT**, Page 10B a car.' "

On the ground an airplane is controlled not with the hands, but with the feet. This took some getting used to as we taxied to the runway. The concept of following a straight line seems simple enough. We made it through the wobbles and toward the end of the runway, where we walked through an engine and gauge assessment.

McAir's instructional fleet is composed of new airplanes, none with more than four years of service. Despite an aircraft's age, it is still part of regular procedure to ensure safety first.

For a pilot, it's important to follow a series of steps

before even considering a flight. Factors include weather patterns and ensuring that the aircraft is mechanically sound. A flight checklist is a pilot's best friend through the process of preparation.

"You don't want to believe you've memorized it," Wigal said.

Once we confirmed the Cessna was in fact safe and ready to fly, we moved onto the 9,000-foot runway.

It took only a fraction of that tarmac to throttle up to 60 knots and rise toward the sky. While Wigal ensured we followed a straight line down the runway, I assisted by pulling back the yoke.

The altimeter affirmed what I saw. As I pulled the wheel toward me, everything below grew smaller.

My instructor carefully explained what was going on as I learned the basic functions of the Skyhawk. Though the pedals are responsible for ground maneuvers, most operations in the air are conducted through the yoke.

An aircraft operates in three dimensions. The yoke controls the pitch — or vertical movement — and the roll, which could be described as the wings moving up and down to turn. The third axis, or yaw, is side-to-side rotation of the craft through use of the pedals.

The Cessna Skyhawk has been a popular flight training aircraft for decades because of its stability and ease of use.

"It's just a real forgiving airplane that allows a student to make mistakes, and there's not a price to be paid," is how

Wigal described it.

And once airborne, I was able to experience just how easy the operation was. I nervously gripped with both hands, though I was told I could fly the plane with just one. But as I grew more comfortable, it was apparent that small movements were all it took to get a response.

Wigal gave me reference points along the ground both to maintain level flight and

direct me out of controlled airspace and into the open skies. A sense of freedom and empowerment accompanied the experience of flying the airplane. As we turned back toward the airport, I knew attaining private pilot certification was something I could do.

"That's probably the biggest accomplishment for an instructor," Wigal said of helping people reach that goal. "Other than the fact that we get to fly every day."

The Federal Aviation Administration requires a minimum of 40 hours in the cockpit — 10 of which must be solo flight — before an individual can test for certification. Wigal said the national average before prospective pilots take their exam is about 75 hours, and that the average at McAir is in the 50-hour range.

Along with hours logged come ground training, quizzes and minimum health requirements. A computerized FAA knowledge test score of 70 percent or above accompanies a two-part "check ride" administered by an approved examiner. Wigal said the main

thing examiners look for is not necessarily how a person flies, but the precautions and planning that go into each flight.

Perhaps the biggest hurdle toward achieving certification is the cost. The Cessna I flew rents for \$108 per hour, and instructor fees are \$37 per hour.

"If you get through it right at the bare minimum of 40 hours, you're going to spend \$6,000 or \$7,000," Wigal said.

I took all of these things into consideration as we made our final approach. Financing is

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available for prospective pilots who qualify, and a private certification is permanent, with nothing beyond that other than occasional FAA medical exams.

Wigal did most of the work on the landing while I lightly held the yoke. Even the most minuscule adjustment can dramatically alter a plane's performance as it nears the ground. We had a nice, "greasy" landing — pilot-speak for a smooth return to earth.

With my introductory flight over, I became convinced that my childhood dream of flying planes could very easily become a reality.

### What is ProjectPilot.org?

**WHO:** A general aviation industry initiative. The Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association sponsors ProjectPilot.org.

**WHAT:** Promotes low-cost introductory flights to people interested in becoming a pilot.

**HOW:** Educates public through online information and works to get people in airplanes.

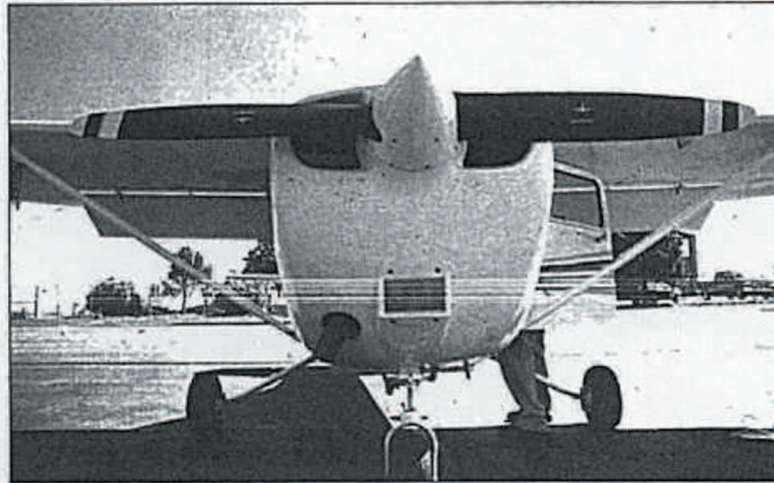
**WHERE:** More information regarding local flight schools can be found at <http://projectpilot.org>.



Photos by LEAH BLUNTSCHLI | The Courier

**EVERGREEN NEWSPAPERS** reporter Matt Gunn takes control of a Cessna 172 Skyhawk four-seater June 8 at Rocky Mountain Metropolitan Airport during a flying lesson.

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**THE CESSNA 172 SKYHAWK** four-seater is the No. 1 flight training airplane used by McAir Aviation.



**A VIEW FROM THE CESSNA** at 7,000 feet, about 17 miles north of Rocky Mountain Metropolitan Airport.



**REPORTER MATT GUNN** checks out the view from the Cessna's cockpit before his first flying lesson with McAir Aviation, sponsored by ProjectPilot.org.



Photos by LEAH BLUNTSCHLI | The Courier

**HEADING BACK** to the airport, Gunn looks elated.



**WIGAL COMMUNICATES** with the tower at Rocky Mountain Metropolitan Airport while watching for other planes in the sky.



**GUNN, LEFT, AND MCAIR** Aviation's chief flight instructor Justin Wigal in the cockpit of a Cessna 172 Skyhawk four-seater June 8 at Rocky Mountain Metropolitan Airport after a successful flying lesson.