

come fly with me

Tim pilots an airplane for the first time and lives to tell the tale



TIM O'SHEA
ONE MAN'S PLAN

By **TIM O'SHEA**
For the Monitor

Flying an airplane was one of those things I'd always figured was best left to the professionals. Just like driving a school bus, performing dental surgery or juggling candlepins at a toddler's birthday party, flying is something that, without the right training, patience, dexterity and skill, can end in blunt-force trauma, elbow tendonitis and tiny faces smeared with tears and frosting. Airline pilots are people with ice in their veins and money in their pockets, people wearing silk scarves and Ray Bans, guys with tough-sounding nicknames like Maverick, Ice Man and Waldo Pepper. So when offered the chance to take a flying lesson, I declined. But after some thought and a bit of gentle nudging, I decided to give it a shot.

On a muggy Friday morning I'm met by Gena Adams at Laconia Municipal Airport for my flight lesson. Gena, my 30-year old certified flight instructor for Sky Bright Flight School, started her flying career at Laconia Airport when she was 19. Since then, she's flown more than 3,000 hours with 800 of

them as an instructor, and for the record, she's wearing Ray Bans. Gena and her boss, Lee Avery – the owner of Sky Bright – are members of the non-profit Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association. Lee and Gena are eager participants in something known as Project Pilot (projectpilot.org), the AOPA's effort

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to increase the ranks of amateur pilots, whose numbers, Lee tells me, are dropping by the tens of thousands each year.

Upon arrival, I expect a two-hour chalk talk peppered with terms like “vector,” “vector,” and “foxtrot,” and a follow-up discourse on the role of pilots in American history. Then we'd regroup for a scenario-based disaster planning session rounded out by a quick pre-flight prayer in the airport chapel. Only after that would we talk about me flying. Instead, Gena shakes my hand, asks me to sign a few things, and we head out to the tarmac. It's out here that I figure we'll finally get into the training and pre-flight warm-up. I get ready for a set of deep-knee bends or maybe an isometric warm-up, but Gena stares, waits for me to stop stretching my hamstrings and says, “Are you ready to fly?”

She introduces me to the plane, a Piper PA28-161 Warrior. Whatever it lacks in tiger teeth designs on the propeller, the Warrior makes up for in style. It has a look of a well-kept and weathered Ford Maverick, and when Gena explains that this is a '79 model PA28-161, I worry I'll soon be airborne in something built

when I was last wearing my brand-new “My Sharona” T-shirt. But Gena puts me at ease, explaining that the older planes are often the better ones.

She walks me through the pre-flight checklist, and I do it all, from crawling underneath each wing looking for cracks or dents to checking the fuel levels, the brake fluid, vents, drains and flaps, and Gena introduces me to the “aileron,” “pitot” and “empennage,” terms I know will make me a better Scrabble player. But as we get ready to climb aboard, I wonder if this is a bit of a show, that there's no way – in the name of the Wright brothers, Chuck Yeager and the Red Baron – that she'd actually let me fly the plane. But Gena seems serious, so I let the charade continue. Even as I climb in and take my seat in the front, Gena showing me a dizzying array of dials, gauges and switches, I'm certain she will never trust me to take her and Lori, a photographer, up above populated areas without me ever having done something like this.

I turn the key, the engine starts, the propeller turns and we're moving. I start taxiing, crossing my arms and steering with my feet, which is a lot like driving a car with your chin. We make slow, wobbly progress across the runway – left foot, right foot, left foot. I worry that my haphazard careening makes me look like a vacationing astronaut, belly full of booze just prior to take-off, but I concentrate on keeping the plane steady. We cross over the runway, make a semi-smooth left turn and are lined up on the tar-

mac, the long runway stretching out before us.

Again, I'm certain Gena's being nice, and just when I'm ready to contribute, she'll make me hand out small bags of peanuts or introduce the in-flight movie. When she tells me to gun the throttle, all I can think of is a little boy pretending to fly a plane while mommy and daddy stand back and smile. "Wheee! Timmy makes the plane go vroom vroom!"

I line the plane's nose up with the white lines on the right side of the runway, and Gena tells me to count to three while releasing my feet from the brake and pushing the throttle as far forward as I can. We start zooming down the runway, and Gena says, "Pull back on the wheel." I still doubt she's insane enough to let me take control, but there's no time to think, and I do what I'm told, pulling back on the wheel. Just then, as our speed increases, we rise up, up into the sky. We're airborne! Within five seconds, Paugus Bay spreads out beneath us and we're flying - check that, *I'm flying!* Gena isn't even touching the controls as we climb higher and higher.

For the next 45 minutes I fly this trusty Warrior over Lake Winnepesaukee, banking left, banking right, checking my altimeter, air speed and fuel. Words like "yaw," "bank," "pitch" and "roll" start to come naturally to me, and Gena's advice - "Keep everything gentle and smooth" - rings in my ears. I get a good look at the lake below, even spotting my old summer camp from the sky.

With no prompting, Gena comments that people fly for all sorts of reasons - for work, for sport or just for the fun of it. And I believe her. This lesson cost me only \$59, and I've spent twice that just to share a seat on a Peter Pan bus to St. Albans with a guy eating a bag of garlic knots. This is way cooler than that and a lot more fun.

We prepare for landing, and I

wonder if maybe I'm in over my head. As I bank left for our final approach, I combine polite asking with gentle begging for Gena to take over. With 43 minutes of flight instruction under my belt, I'm sure any landing I direct will result in a lead spot on Channel Nine news ("Tragedy Lakeside in Laconia!" as Tiffany Eddy wipes away a tear on camera). Gena, calm as ever, instructs me to pull the flaps, and I use the huge lever to the right of me. We slow down and drop in altitude, then speed up to give us enough velocity to stick the landing. I pull the flaps up again, and we experience what I would call an organized plummet. Gena has the controls, and we land with a minor thump. I'm back to taxiing back and forth across the runway as we head for the terminal. We arrive, turn the engine off, do our post-flight check and climb out of the plane. Gena fills out the first entry in my personalized flight log, we shake hands and I head home, my hands shaking with adrenaline and my mind filled with the images of the lake and the mountains from 3,000 feet in the sky.

I'm done thinking that flying is for the pros. With no training, no Ray Bans and a mild fear of heights, I took off in and flew an airplane for less than what it would have cost me for dinner, a movie and babysitting.

Granted, I wasn't much help on the landing, but that's what the lessons are for.

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Photos by LORI DUFF / Monitor staff

Tim O'Shea goes through a pre-flight check with instructor Gena Adams before his first flying lesson at Laconia Municipal Airport.



With some trepidation, Tim O'Shea plays pilot for 45 minutes, soaring over Lake Winnepesaukee in a 1979 Piper PA28-161 Warrior.



LORI DUFF / Monitor staff

Tim O'Shea checks out the view below while in mid-flight.