

Statistically it's true that flying is the safest way to travel. But how about winging to a vacation or business destination yourself in your own plane? At first thought, it might not sound all that safe. In fact, the prospect can seem terrifying.

Take these personal reasons into account:

- I have recurring dreams of seeing a small plane crash in my neighborhood.
- My father's Air Force bomber was shot down during World War II. He was a gunner whose job was to shoot down enemy fighter planes, and he did, but not that time. Luckily, he survived to tell about it—and had a fear of flying for the rest of his life—although many years later he was able to fly as a passenger on commercial jets.
- The first time I flew (on a small, private plane at age 9) my breakfast also took off—and landed in a bag. Luckily, subsequent jet flights have not bothered me.
- The jet-crash scene in the Tom Hanks movie *Castaway* bothered me a lot, however. It felt so realistic and reminded me too much of the deaths of John F. Kennedy, Jr., and former Chicago radio personality Bob Collins, both of whom were piloting small, private planes that crashed.

But, as my father used to say, "You only go around once." So, when a flying lesson invitation from the [www.projectpilot.org](http://www.projectpilot.org) group glided into my email, I thought twice—and decided to go for it. The learn-to-fly program, which has about 3,500 participating schools, is sponsored by the Frederick, Maryland-based Aircraft Owner and

Pilots Association, the world's largest of its kind, with more than 407,000 members.

I am hardly alone in deciding to give flight a chance; the nonprofit association reports that about 100,000 people take an intro flight every year, and the number of licensed pilots has increased about 6 percent in ten years.

I'm not a bandwagon-jumper, but I'm also not getting any younger. I enjoy speed, and find that experiencing a little danger once in a while provides a rush that makes me feel alive. And it wouldn't be like I would have to do this solo; a pro pilot would really be in charge of the plane.

With two motion-sickness pills inside me (I didn't want a recurrence of my maiden flight), I head to Griffith-Merrillville Airport on a sunny, but freezing, January day, accompanied by a *Shore* photographer, who, somewhat reluctantly, has talked herself into this mission.

We are met by Dave Kogler of Schererville, Indiana, a certified flight instructor and flight operations manager of Griffith Aviation Inc. Kogler, who turned 43 this year, was 21 when he earned his pilot's license. He became interested in flying as a hobby, through his brother, and formally worked as a mechanic, construction worker and a steel mill supervisor before taking on his present duties full time three years ago.

# A Place to Feel Free

LEARNING TO FLY  
GROUNDS FEAR OF FANTASY

by BILL BERO | photography by LAURI DYKHUIS



#### UP AND AWAY

After a step-by-step lesson, a thorough preflight safety check, and a swervy ride down the runway, finally, the plane ascends into the air—like it *wants* to be there.

Kogler's reasons to love flying hit home for me. "Nobody can bother you when you're in the air—no cell phones are ringing. I love climbing to 5,000 to 10,000 feet; it's so peaceful. I would much rather fly than drive." He recalls flying over a fatal accident on Interstate 65 about a week

before, an experience that reinforced that feeling. "It may be cloudy and snowing, but you can climb above all that. I feel much safer in the air than I do on the road. You get home feeling relaxed and not stressed from sitting in traffic."

The preflight safety check of the plane, a 1974 Piper Warrior II that regularly is used for training purposes, also helps to calm us. Before takeoff, every step is gone over with a fine-tooth comb—often, more than once. Kogler's knowledge, patience, sense of humor and explanation of what we will be doing are reassuring; that is, until I find myself in the driver's—I mean pilot's—seat.

Gulp.

This is not like preparing to drive a car. There are about forty things that need to be checked and done before the plane can be set in motion. "It's all about safety. That's the top priority," Kogler says. It's also not like driving a car. Steering is done with the feet as you taxi to the runway. Braking also is done with the feet, but in a different position on the two rudder-pedals. We practice for a little while, since the plane has to be heading straight and true down the runway when building speed for takeoff, and initially I have it drifting on either side of the centerline. Had I been in a car, the police surely would have pulled me over for suspicious driving.

Soon, it is time for takeoff. The moment of truth, I pray I won't hit any trees, or nose-dive into the ground. "Give it full throttle, and keep it straight," Kogler says. We are going about 70 mph when he tells me to pull back gently on the yoke, a steering-wheel-looking instrument in front of me that helps the plane climb, descend and "roll," which helps ease turning while in the air.

Soon, we are climbing. It is so much smoother, easier, than I had imagined. It feels more like floating. "It almost takes off by itself," Kogler says. I had visions of having to jerk the yoke hard to get the Piper off the ground. That isn't the case. The plane seems to take to the air like a feather—like it *wants* to be there. "This kind of day, cold and clear, is the best for flying and teaching, since the air is thin. The air in summer is much heavier and bumpier," my instructor says. I soon realize I didn't need the motion-sickness pills.

We climb to about 3,500 feet and are doing about 120 mph, when





Kogler shows me how to level off the plane by lining it up with the horizon. We try a few more ascents and descents before he has me try some 20-degree turns, which he says are standard for an intro flight. "We're not going to do anything scary or difficult on your first flight; we don't want to scare you away," Kogler says, chuckling. There would be no attempts to instrument-fly or do dogfight-like maneuvers on this trip. That is left to lessons down the line.

Earning a pilot's certificate requires a minimum of 40 hours of training. The cost estimate for Griffith Aviation's Private Pilot Course is \$4,000 to \$5,000, depending upon the plane used for training. Prices vary, according to the flight school. For more information on learning to fly, visit [www.projectpilot.org](http://www.projectpilot.org), or call Dave Kogler at 219.924.0207. Griffith Aviation Inc. is located at 1705 E Main St, Griffith, Ind.

Soon, piloting seems easier. The ride in the crystal-blue sky is invigorating. We fly over *Shore's* office, and Kogler tips the Warrior to the right to allow for some photos (just in case anyone doubts we did this). At this point, I feel I could fly all day, but it is about time for the lesson, which lasts 30 to 40 minutes, to end.

"Ready to try a landing?" Kogler asks. Not really, but yes, I guess. Gulp again. I envisioned this to be the most dangerous part. Tom Petty's song,

"Learning to Fly," pops into my head—specifically the line, "Coming down, is the hardest thing."

But it isn't, again thanks to my instructor. I can't recall all the steps, since my nerves kicked back in and it is almost a blur, but I remember we checked the fuel and adjusted the flaps and trim, another control, as we slowed the



**TEACHER EXTRAORDINAIRE**  
A skilled flyer and natural instructor, Dave Kogler seemed to have faith in this amateur pilot.

engine almost to a stop and coasted in. "We're just gonna come in nice and easy and set it down." Although Kogler says I did most of the landing and it was good, I can't help but think

he had much more of a hand in it than he is admitting. Either he, or the spirit in the sky, I don't see how I could have brought it down *that smoothly*. But thanks, Dave.

We taxi back in, stop and turn off the motor—a process that involves about twenty more steps—again to assure everything is done right and safely. I breathe a small sigh of relief, but do nowhere near want to kiss the ground. I love the experience, although I'm not immediately sure whether I want to go the full route and get a license. The temptation to do so, however, is great. The sky is like a different world—one you seem to have all to yourself. Where, like Kogler says, no one bothers you.

It is a place to get reacquainted with yourself and restore faith in your ability. A place to feel free. Maybe someday I'll return there—on my own. How about you? S