



## **I Think I'm Alone Now**

*Butterflies, shaky knees, elation--it's all a part of your first solo*

*By: Christopher L. Parker*

You had a feeling about this day.

Call it intuition; call it a hunch, but something told you today would be that day. The day you solo. Everything you've learned up to this point--all the flight lessons; all the ground training; all the worry, excitement, frustration, and anticipation--it all comes together now.

Just five minutes ago, your instructor was there, beside you, admonishing you over pitch, power, and airspeed. Now you look over and the seat alongside you is empty. It's so odd. The cockpit seems so roomy now.

Outside, the engine is loping at idle, the prop spinning so slowly you can watch each blade as it sweeps above the cowling. There, ahead, is the yellow hold-short line. You remember the first time you walked into the flight school. That's when you started this incredible journey. It's hard to imagine you had no idea what an aileron or elevator did back then, but those days are a distant memory now. The flight lessons covering the four fundamentals: straight and level, climbs, descents, and turns. Rushing to ground school after work. The basic maneuvers (you hated stalls). The traffic pattern and landings.

No, you think, that yellow line is more than just a hold-short line. It's more than just yellow paint on the ground. It's a dividing line. It's the line that separates those who have, from those who have not. When I cross that line it will change my life forever. It will change who I am forever. When I cross that line I will join the thousands of others who came before me, the thousands of others who call themselves pilots. Suddenly, your thoughts are interrupted by a crackling voice in your headphones: "Cessna One-Two-Tree-Foxtrot-Sierra, make right closed traffic, wind two eight zero at five, runway two-niner right, cleared for takeoff."

It started out like any other lesson. You briefed traffic pattern procedures with your instructor for the umpteenth time, and then, as usual, you went outside and preflighted the airplane. He joined you after you were done. He asked you how you were feeling, and although this caught you by surprise, you said "fine." Do I look sick or something? you wondered.

You made three uneventful touch and goes (that went surprisingly well, by the way), and then he asked you to taxi over to the ramp area at the base of the tower. This was different; was something wrong? You had taxied to the runway, to the fuel pump, and to the tiedown, but never to the base of the tower. As you start running the shutdown checklist, he tells you to stop, opens the door, and starts to climb out. He says, "I'll

be watching. Make three full-stops and taxi back." Before he closes the door, he leans back in and adds, "Oh yeah, I almost forgot--and have fun!"

"Cleared for takeoff" still resonates in your headphones. Your next actions are more habits than conscious thoughts. Looking to verify that the runway is clear, you turn on the transponder and lights, and then taxi slowly across the yellow hold lines. This is it. You line up, make one last check of the gauges, add full power, and accelerate down the runway. Keep it straight with the rudder. The airspeed builds faster than you've ever seen it before. Rotate! The airplane leaps off the runway. This airplane's on steroids!

You concentrate on keeping airspeed under control. Pitch, power, airspeed, trim! You hear him talking, but he's not there--and you wonder if your instructor's words will haunt you forever. You do your best to maintain climb airspeed until pattern altitude. Fly the upwind, clear, turn crosswind, clear, turn downwind.

Finally, you're at pattern altitude. Lower the nose, reduce power, add some flap, take a breath. What just happened? I'm here alone, in an airplane, 1,000 feet above the ground, on my first solo! But there's no time to think. You revert back to your training. You can hear him quizzing you. What if the engine quits right now? I set up best glide speed, make a normal pattern if possible, and slip to lose altitude, if required. What if the radios fail? I make a normal pattern, look for a green light from the tower, continue my approach, and land. What if...you're interrupted by the tower controller's voice, "Cessna One-Two-Tree-Foxtrot-Sierra, you're cleared to land runway two niner right." Incredibly, you're downwind abeam the numbers already!

You reduce power, lower the nose, add the next notch of flaps, and set up your approach airspeed. Pitch, power, airspeed, trim. But wait, the airplane's not descending as before. After a few seconds, you realize it's the weight. Without your instructor's weight aboard, the airplane's not behaving normally. It's a glider, floating effortlessly on a wing that doesn't have to support two bodies, only one.

You reduce the power a few hundred rpm to compensate; the descent rate increases to normal. The airplane is a lot quieter now. You're almost gliding. It's nice up here.

You start looking over your shoulder, waiting for the 45-degree point. That's when you'll turn your base leg. Wait. Just a few more seconds. You look back one last time; now, turn base! Clear, roll into the bank, pause, roll out. You scan for other traffic on final. You must have gotten your money's worth from your lessons because you're not thinking about any of this. You're just doing it! On base leg. Almost home, you think; but then again, it's your first solo landing! Your thoughts resolve the problem for you: There's no one here to help me. I've got to do this by myself. I can do this by myself. I will do this by myself.

Get ready, clear, turn final. A little early, you decide. That's better than overshooting, you figure. You turn slightly to line up with the runway. Once on final, the intricate relationship between pitch, power, and airspeed guides your every move. The VASI lights say you're a little high on the glidepath, so you lower the last notch of flaps and retrim for approach airspeed. The airplane settles, and voilà, you're on glidepath. You ease in the power, ever so slightly, to keep it there. Outside your eyes focus on the runway numbers. You pick out your aim point, and a few hundred feet beyond that, your touchdown point. So far, so good. Just a few hundred feet to go. Just a few hundred feet and I'll be home free.

Then the pressure builds. You know your instructor is watching you. The tower controller is watching you. You feel like everyone in the world is watching you, so don't screw up! Snap out of it! Get ready to flare. Quickly, your eyes search and lock on to the midfield windsock. It's barely kicking and pointed straight down the runway. Good, you think, no crosswind. That's one less thing I'll have to deal with. You place your

feet lightly on the rudder pedals, just in case. The tail shuffles a bit as you check the rudder. The airplane feels like a kite, responding to every input and dancing in the thermals. The controls are so sensitive. It's a whole different feel. The ground is rising up. It's showtime.

You ease the power off and increase the pitch to break the descent. As the airplane settles in, you increase the pitch just a tad more to hold it off. You pause. The seconds tick off. Did I round out too high? Should I add some power? Then: Screech! Touchdown!

You gently lower the nose and ease on the brakes. You see you can make the high-speed exit so you aim for that. Clear of the runway, you come to a complete stop and run the after landing checklist. Lights: off. Transponder: standby. Mixture: lean. Flaps: up. Trim: reset to takeoff. Wait a minute. Stop. Your heart is pounding, your palms sweaty. Adrenaline is coursing through your body. I've done it! I've soloed an airplane! And, I did it well. No panic. No emergency procedures. That wasn't so hard, you conclude. I've crossed the line: I'm a pilot!

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