

Flying Lessons: One Woman's Story is about how one young woman's life was transformed when she overcame her fear of flying and learned to trust her intuition.

FLYING LESSONS: One Woman's Story

By Sherry Knight Rossiter

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FLYING LESSONS

ONE WOMAN'S STORY



Sherry Knight Rossiter

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Chapter 1: Learning to Fly

“Once you have tasted flight you will always walk the earth with your eyes turned skyward; for there you have been and there you will always be.”

Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519)

As a child growing up in Fargo, North Dakota, in the 1950's, it never crossed my mind that I could become a pilot or have a career in aviation. Like most young girls of that era, I assumed I would become a nurse or a secretary or a teacher. But Fate intervened. As my life unfolded, I made many choices, conscious and unconscious, that eventually led me to my first solo flight, an event that literally changed my life.

In the early 1970's, my first husband purchased a 1959 Cessna 150 (N6400T) in order to complete his own flight training. Shortly before he was to take his Private Pilot checkride, he decided it would be a good idea for me to complete what is called "a Pinchhitter Course." This is a course designed to teach spouses and other frequent passengers in small aircraft the basics of airplane flight control, aerial navigation, and radio communication. The purpose of taking such a course is obvious. If the pilot is suddenly incapacitated in flight, a front seat passenger who's completed a Pinchhitter Course, could -- at least in theory -- fly the airplane to a safe landing area.

For me personally, the notion of flying in a small airplane was not an appealing one. Only after much internal conversation did I manage to convince myself that completing the Pinchhitter Course was a wise and prudent thing to do. I came by my

reluctance quite naturally as both of my parents were fearful flyers and avoided commercial flights whenever possible.

My first flying lesson is still vivid in my mind even though I had my eyes shut for most of the flight. Fortunately, I had an experienced flight instructor, who recognized me for the reluctant student that I was. Wisely, my instructor took time on the ground prior to takeoff to familiarize me with basic aircraft terminology, flight control functions, and certain safety considerations. I asked a lot of questions during our preflight discussion in keeping with my personal belief that you can never have too much knowledge.

After takeoff, the instructor continued to explain everything he was doing and why in a calm, matter-of-fact tone of voice. He told me he was continuing to apply pressure to the right rudder to compensate for the torque created by the propeller. Without “holding” right rudder during climbout, the airplane nose would not maintain a straight track over the ground. He told me he kept his hand on the throttle while climbing out as a safety precaution. He also told me about the importance of always looking for other traffic. During this introductory flight, he was careful to make only well-coordinated, shallow turns because even a standard rate turn (i.e., approximately a 30° degree angle of bank), would cause me to clutch my seat cushion in abject fear.

Once we had sufficient altitude, my instructor provided a very simple demonstration of aircraft stability all the while explaining that the airplane really wanted fly – it was human input that caused the airplane not to continue flying. Later, after I became an airplane flight instructor, I remembered this discussion and demonstration of aircraft stability, and I used the technique with my own primary students.

At the end of my first flying lesson, I was still not completely convinced that the airplane *wanted* to fly or that learning to fly was really a safe or sane thing to do, but I was intrigued enough by the process to finish the 10-hour pinchhitter training course.

On subsequent lessons, my exceedingly patient flight instructor taught me basic aerodynamics, aerial navigation, radio communication procedures, and a basic landing technique that would serve me well into the future. Being a fairly shy person at this point in my life, I hated talking on the radio, but I knew it was a skill I needed to master.

On my tenth and final lesson, I was both excited and frightened. I was excited that I had completed the entire Pinchhitter Course but frightened about the prospect of flying in an airplane with someone other than my flight instructor, whose skill and judgment I had learned to trust over the last few months. After sharing this concern with my instructor, he encouraged me to take a few more lessons and then “solo” the airplane. At first, I was shocked by his suggestion, but a voice deep inside me whispered, “That’s a good idea. Do it!” After further discussion, I agreed to take a couple more lessons. However, I was pretty sure that soloing an airplane had not been what my husband had in mind given his competitive nature when he signed me up for the Pinchhitter Course. In spite of this awareness, I decided then and there that I needed to solo to bolster my self-confidence. I also decided not to tell my husband about my decision.

Early in the morning on January 21, 1973, I headed to the Marin County Airport which is located 30 miles north of San Francisco’s famous Golden Gate Bridge. Anticipation and anxiety were running pretty high as I realized today might be the day I would solo. After all, my instructor said I had been making very good landings for quite some time and that mornings usually provided the best wind conditions for first solo flights.

After a couple good landings and some brief discussion, my instructor said, “I have the airplane.” I responded as I had been taught to do with “You have the airplane.” (When there are two pilots in the cockpit, it should always be clear to both of them which one is handling the flight controls.) We landed and my

flight instructor pulled the airplane off the runway and onto a taxiway, where he got out. A wave of panic initially swept through me, but I knew this was something I absolutely had to do for reasons I would not have been able to articulate at the time.

I carefully checked my gauges, made a clearing 360 degree turn at the end of the runway to look for other traffic, and then announced my departure from the uncontrolled airport. It was hard to tell which sounded the loudest – the thumping of my heart or the airplane engine. I advanced the throttle, making a flawless takeoff, and began my climbout.

My flight instructor had warned me that the airplane would virtually leap off the ground without his 220 pounds onboard, and he was right. The airplane became airborne very quickly.

While climbing to a pattern altitude of 800 feet AGL (above ground level), I kept myself busy looking for other traffic. Not until I reached pattern altitude and trimmed the airplane for level flight did it really sink in that I was the only occupant of the aircraft. Fear momentarily washed over me, but it vanished just as quickly as it had come, as I realized making a safe landing would be entirely up to me.

After reaching pattern altitude, I lowered the nose of the airplane, reduced power, and adjusted the elevator trim tab, which lessened the amount of pressure I had to exert on the control yoke. I then made a right turn to crosswind and then to downwind using a standard rectangular traffic pattern. When I was adjacent to the end of the landing runway, I reduced power and added the first 10 degrees of flaps as I'd been taught. A few seconds later, I turned onto base leg, added another “notch” of flaps, and adjusted the trim tab. Things were looking good. As I rolled out on final approach, I added another 10 degrees of flaps. Everything still looked good. Then I heard my flight instructor's voice even though he wasn't in the airplane. “Don't add the last 10 degrees of flaps until you know you have the landing field

made.” Did I have it made? Yep. Down came the last 10 degrees of flaps, and I touched down right “on the numbers” at the threshold of Runway 31 at Gness Field in Novato, California, after a little more than 11 hours of flight training.

My first landing was a little rough, but it put a grin on my face. My second landing was smoother, and my grin grew broader. By the third and final landing, I was smiling so broadly that my face actually hurt. It was during the third landing that I felt something inside of me shift gears, and I intuitively knew my life would never be the same after this solo flight.

It was many years later that I looked back on this solo experience and realized that learning to fly really did change my life by literally expanding my horizons, increasing my self-confidence, and providing the impetus to continue to challenge myself in other ways.

I’ve often described this solo experience as transformational because it was during this solo flight that I realized how much I had let my fears control me up to this point. My mother was an incredibly fear-based person, and she inadvertently transferred many of those fears to me. Fortunately, I hadn’t allowed her fear of physical injury to completely stifle my childhood activities, and I learned to swim and ride horses in spite of her loud protests and tears. Soloing an airplane, however, was an even bigger accomplishment in my mind – one that pushed through more than fear of physical injury. Soloing an airplane forced me to rethink my entire future because I knew I wasn’t going to be satisfied to simply be a passenger. I didn’t just *want* to learn to fly; I *needed* to learn to fly!

Driving home from the airport, I was bursting with pride at my solo accomplishment, but I was pretty sure my husband wasn’t going to share my joy. By the time I arrived home, I just couldn’t keep my news a secret. I bounded into the house and announced I had soloed. My spouse was visibly unhappy to hear

this, and he left the house immediately. Clearly, there were other issues within our marriage, and my solo flight brought those issues to a head.

Within six months, we were divorced, and our community property was divided up equally according to California statute. He got the Porsche 911T and I got the Cessna 150.

Later, when I began to recover from my hurt and grief over the demise of my marriage, a friend suggested I complete my flight training for a Private Pilot certificate. Even though I still harbored some trepidation about the safety of flight, I knew this was something I needed to do for me, for my Spirit, or I would never be at peace. I believe that is the reason that Amelia Earhart's well-known poem "Courage" is now one of my favorite poems.

Courage

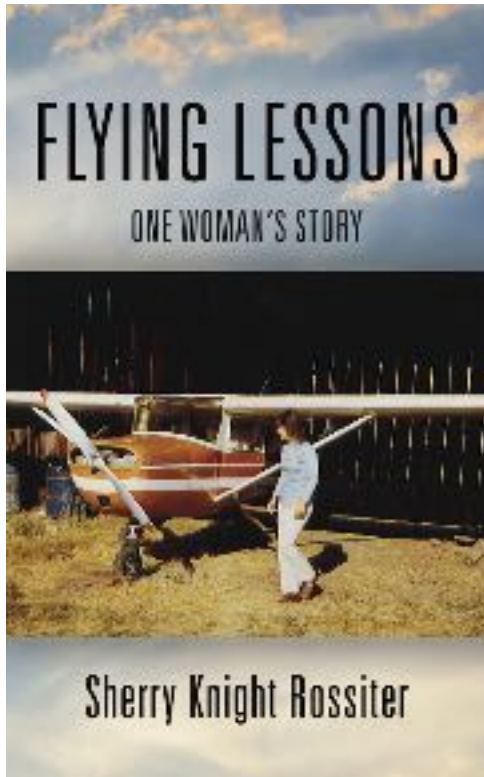
Courage is the price which life exacts for granting peace.
The soul that knows it not, knows no release from little things;

Knows not the livid loneliness of fear,
Nor mountain heights, where bitter joy can hear
The sound of wings.

How can life grant us boon of living, compensate
For dull gray ugliness and pregnant hate
Unless we dare.

The soul's dominion? Each time we make a choice we pay
With courage to behold resistless day
And count it fair.

Amelia Earhart (1997 – 1937)



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