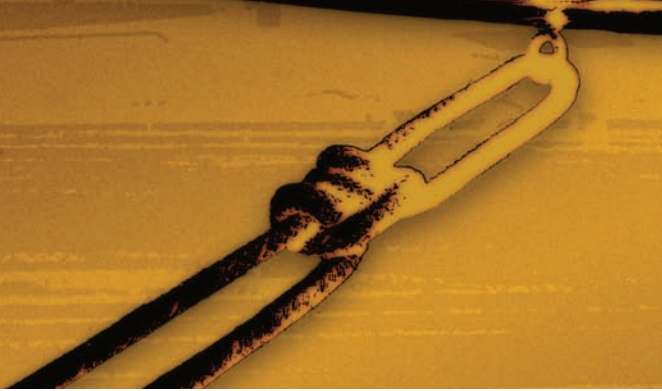




SUSAN PARSON

Postflight



Piloting Takes Perseverance

People sometimes ask how I got interested in flying. The only answer I can offer is that I think I was simply born this way. My first memory is an Eastern Air Lines Boeing 727 *Whisperjet* trip to New York City when I was three. I was enthralled. From then on, I wore pilot wings that I cut from my mom's stocking cardboard. I pretended to fly the glider on the back-

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yard swing set. I counted contrails from the jets climbing out of the nearest "big" airport, North Carolina's Asheville Regional (KAVL). A high point of my childhood was a solo trip from Philadelphia (KPHL)

to Charlotte (KCLT) when I was 13, on local-service airlines — Allegheny and Piedmont — that no longer exist. I wanted nothing more than to be in the sky.

A combination of fear ("Do I have the right stuff?") and finances (or, more accurately, lack thereof) kept me ground-bound until I was 28. Then, one day I took a step that profoundly changed — and defined — the course of both my life and my career. I signed up for a private pilot ground school offered by my county's adult education program.

Ground School

For the next six weeks, I was never far from my newly acquired copy of the FAA *Pilot's Handbook of Aeronautical Knowledge* (PHAK). My instructor, a crusty old fellow whose favorite expression was "piece o' cake," quickly grew to expect my "let's-try-that-again" questions when his stock explanation didn't produce an ah-hah moment of understanding. I struggled to master the concept of different kinds of altitude (*density* altitude?!) and airspeed (is "false" the opposite of "true" airspeed?!).

Truly baffling was the dark art of interpreting that mysterious instrument known as the Vee-Oh-Are, or the Very High Frequency Omni-directional Range (VOR). I still remember sitting on my living room floor, PHAK open in front of me, a test question study guide beside me, and scraps of paper everywhere with my scrawled attempts to visualize

my position relative to the VOR station or, even more challenging, the non-directional beacon (NDB). For a "mathophobe" like me, it was a great triumph to get through the multiple interpolations required to answer some of the aircraft performance questions. But, I am nothing if not extremely stubborn, and once embarked upon the ground school path I was wholly determined to persevere.

Flight Training

Perseverance was certainly a handy habit when it came to the actual flight training. I was fortunate to have an excellent instructor and I loved the humble little Cessna 152s that carried me through the private pilot flight training curriculum. It wasn't always easy. I struggled to land without my efforts being registered as seismic activity on the Richter Scale and, embarrassingly, I still sometimes struggle with that.

I gritted my teeth through stall entries and, until the day my instructor dedicated an entire lesson to intensive emergency approach and landing procedures, I frittered away my altitude by endlessly searching for the perfect field. I stammered through radio calls, especially when making forays from my non-towered home airport to a field with an operating control tower. On my first solo cross country, I almost immediately became unsure of my position (the pilot's perennial euphemism for lost) and hastily beat a retreat to home base. To his credit, my instructor made me talk through my mistake and then sent me right back out to finish the trip — and I did.

Ups and Downs

As my own experience suggests, flight training is full of ups and downs — both the literal ones involving the aircraft and the emotional ones involving the acquisition of any new skill. But take it from me: It's well worth the effort. Persevere, enjoy the process, and welcome to the wonderful world of aviation!

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