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I was 'flyin' away on a wing and a prayer'

Staff Reports

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Last week, I wrote I was going to take flying lessons, and today, I actually followed through.

The theme song from the television show, "Greatest American?Hero," echoed through my mind as I pulled into the airport.

"Flyin' away on a wing and a prayer. Who could it be??Believe it or not, it's just me."

My heart skipped a beat as I scooted into the cockpit of Joe Kobiela's plane for my first flying lesson Tuesday morning at DeKalb County Airport. Since the skies were overcast and rain kept spitting, I kept thinking that Joe would cancel the lesson.

Before I actually made the commitment to start flying lessons, Joe agreed to take me up and give me a taste of what piloting a plane is all about. I met Joe through my co-worker, Jenny Kobiela-Mondor, who happens to be his daughter. He suggested taking flight lessons long-term with Laura Zook Gaerte of Century Aviation.

As he pulled his plane out of its hangar, he assured me it was a good day to fly. We walked around the newly repainted plane to make sure the rudders, wings, nose, propellers and tail were functioning properly. We also checked the color and scent of the fuel, which smelled oddly sweet, before heading into the cockpit.

Once inside the much-smaller-than-I-imagined plane, I sat down and pulled my seat belt so that it would be as tight as possible around my waist. I loosened it while Joe was going over the preflight checklist. I realized that if the plane crashed, a seat belt cutting off my air supply probably wouldn't save my life.

One of the first items of business was the instrument panel. As I looked at each glass-encased, circular instrument, I wondered if I would ever be able to remember all the numbers, letters and indicators. After recalling a stay at a hotel in Cincinnati where I met two drunk Norwegian pilots who talked about their flying experiences, I thought, "If they can do it, I can do it." I have not flown with the airline for which they worked for fear they might be piloting my plane.

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After my pep talk, I focused on Joe's flight lesson and put on some headphones with a microphone attached.

"Now, put your right hand on the throttle and push up," I heard Joe say through my headphones.

The propeller began to spin.

Before I even had a chance to whisper a prayer for our safe return, we taxied down the runway and were up, up and away. The thrill of flying into the clouds and looking at our tiny world below was exhilarating.

I was excited and nervous at the same time. Each time we encountered turbulence, however, my life flashed before my eyes.

"It's OK," Joe said reassuringly. "It's just a little bumpy today."

After I got my confidence back, he suggested I try turning the plane. With a little push of the rudder, which was on the plane's floorboard, near where the gas and brake pedals would be in a car, the plane leaned to the left and turned. As I looked out my window, I saw the whole city of Garrett. Cool doesn't even come close to describing it.

A few minutes later, we turned again, this time to the right. As I looked out Joe's window, I saw Hamilton Lake.

We turned the plane while descending.

We turned the plane while ascending. I didn't have to use a turn signal. I didn't have to stop at any stop signs. I just turned.

Next, Joe suggested we do some touch-and-gos, in which we land the plane on the runway and then take off again. That was fun. I could've taken off that runway, flown over I-69, turned left, turned left again and landed all day, everyday.

When we finally landed, I was glad to be on the ground, but a little sad our air time was over.

After helping Joe get the plane back into his hangar, I headed over the airport and signed up for flight lessons with Laura, who will start giving me flying lessons in September.

Maybe, by this time next year, I'll have my wings and that "Greatest American Hero" song out of my head.

Maybe KPC would like to have a pilot on its staff. Do you think anyone would ride with me?

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