

BEHIND
THE

Wing



More and more people from all walks of life are dropping a “c note” on a good burger, like something billionaire Richard Branson might do — even though the burger itself is only a small part of the experience.

by Tyler Ryan

Since the famous 1903 flight of the Kitty Hawk, people have looked to the sky and thought about how to, as President Ronald Reagan said, “break the surly bonds of Earth,” spread their wings, and fly. Although modern aviation began with a lighter-than-air balloon, in the late 1700s, it was the Wright’s North Carolina flight that put the real possibility into the mainstream minds of future aviators everywhere.

In fact, in the immediate years that

gaged in great dogfights across the skies of the European Theater.

Aviation also quickly made its way from dashing military pilots and certain dogs named Snoopy to farmers who found they could spray an entire field in a matter of moments to the United States Post Office and, of course, regular people who simply wanted to experience the world from a few thousand feet up.

Fast forward a hundred or so years, and there are well over a half-million licensed pilots in the United States, ranging from career captains to enthusiasts who simply love to soar a mile or two off the ground.

“Becoming a pilot, although it includes a lot of work, really isn’t as out of reach as you might think,” says flight instructor

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followed that first controlled flight, advances in aviation moved faster than a 747 reaching its rollback speed and taking off. Ten years later, World War I military pilots from both sides were en-

and FAA Inspector Tim Mitchell. Mitchell, who has been flying since he was a teenager, became an instructor in his early 20s and has over 16 years working with new pilots to reach their aviation dream.

“There really aren’t many people who can’t learn how to fly,” Mitchell says, citing only two people in over 150 students, with whom he has had to have the uncomfortable “maybe you should focus on being a passenger, rather than a pilot...” conversation.

Mitchell says that there are several reasons people decide they want to fly, including growing up knowing a pilot, and even self-reasoning, including how much easier it would be to visit a child at college.

Earning your private plane license, or PPL, is the basic foundation of aviation. It allows you to fly a fixed-wing, single-engine propeller airplane, like a Cessna 152 or 172. These planes, according to Mitchell, are time tested, dependable, and easy to fly.

Mitchell says the first step is a discovery flight, which is usually a 30 to 45 minute flight with an instructor, where you often take control of the airplane and get the feel for actually flying. It is often the make or break moment for someone deciding if he or she wants to learn to fly. After reaching 70 knots, rolling back the yoke, and leaving the ground, aviation will either be something that was fun to experience or something that becomes a passion.

It’s the passion that will drive someone to go all the way to earning his or her PPL. The Federal Aviation Administration requires a minimum of 40 hours of flight time to earn your license. Mitchell explains that 20 hours is spent with an instructor in the plane with you, 10 hours solo, where you hone your skills all alone with the airplane, and the balance of the 10 hours either solo or with an instructor, based on the individual student’s needs. During the time, students spend time practicing take-offs and landings, dead reckoning, basic skills, and even night flying.

Future pilots also have a required number of hours spent in ground school where they learn mapping, load requirements, including arm and balance, as well as fuel consumption and the impacts of relative wind.

Students are also required to undergo a medical exam, administered by an FAA certified doctor, who will evaluate their physical health as it relates to flying a plane.

Mitchell explains that the cost of the instructor, plane rental, fuel, medical exams, and associated fees can quickly add up to about \$7500 to obtain a private plane license.



Tyler Ryan and Tim Mitchell

“It is both an amazing feeling and a frightening one,” says student pilot Alex Scofield. “When you take off for your first solo flight,” he says. “You look over an empty seat and realize that your life is truly in your hands.” It’s in that moment that all the training hours come together,

and your confidence builds, according to Scofield. All the hours, both in class and behind the stick, culminate with a check ride, administered by an FAA official like Mitchell. The check ride is just that, he explains. There is a basic set of skills that must be demonstrated, ranging from a

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pre-flight inspection of the plane, checking the weather, to the takeoff, landing, and of course a series of maneuvers a mile or two in the air.

Once you have spent the hours, learned everything from the principals of flight to actually taking off and landing, and passed the check ride, and you are a bona fide pi-

lot, the fun part of aviation begins.

There will come an afternoon, not soon after earning your wings, when you and a couple friends will rent an airplane, take off from Owens Field here in the Midlands with Greenville on the flight plan. You will land at the downtown airport, catch an Uber to your favorite burger joint, enjoy a lunch, fly home, and, as you drive from the airfield, reflect on the \$100 you spent on the perfect hamburger. ■

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