

How I started my Flying Career.

Did you ever dream about flying when you were a kid? I know I did! I dreamed of being an airline pilot from a very young age.

I grew up very near the San Francisco Airport. When airplanes would fly up the “gap”, the departures from runway 28L and 28R, they would fly right over my childhood home. I would climb the trees in our backyard and sit on the top branches pretending I was flying those big jets as they flew by. In the sixties those jets were very loud. They would shake our house. We just grew accustomed to the noise and shaking. I loved it! From the front room window of our house I could see most of the San Francisco Airport. The big red letters on the United Airlines maintenance base were very visible. My Mom told me as a very young child I would always say, “I’m going to fly for Untied someday.” Yep, I didn’t get it quite right, I said “Untied” and not United and I ended up getting hired by American Airlines and not Untied. I should have known since the very first plastic airplane model I made was an American Airlines B707 with the orange lightning bolt paint scheme. It must have been a sign of things to come in my future.

While some kids dreamed of bikes, fast cars or motorcycles, I was looking at Flying Magazine or our Golden Home and High School Encyclopedia. The letters Aba/Ani volume 1 was the only volume I would read because of course it had airplanes and airline pilots. I studied that encyclopedia volume for hours and hours. The picture of the B707 cockpit was amazing to me. The section on being an airline pilot was a little overwhelming. I would find more books at our city library on flying and being an Airline Pilot. Most said you had to be good in mathematics and a lot of other subjects. Those were subjects in school that I just didn’t care about. I cared about airplanes. Also helicopters, but that’s a whole other story. What was I to do?



The encyclopedia with the B707 cockpit that I would study for hours as a kid in the B777 cockpit I flew for American Airlines.

I was the youngest of four in my family. My brother and two older sisters were very smart. I just couldn't live up to the standards they had set. My parents were very frustrated with me and my schooling. In fact, I was the first person in our family to get an F on my report card. You guessed it, it was in math. My Dad was furious with me. It was as if I had let the whole world down. "Why can't you be like your brother and sisters?" my dad would ask. I remember saying "Because I'm not them, I'm me". He replied with, "You won't amount to anything Billy." I proceeded to tell him "I'm going to be an Airline Pilot". I knew from a very young age that this is what I wanted to be when I grew up. I guess from the moment my Dad showed zero faith in me was when I thought, "Well I'll show you!"

You have to have a lot of drive and determination to become an Airline Pilot. The “Well I’ll Show You” attitude was a motivation throughout my career. The strive to be the best I could be kept me studying for years. I still strive to learn new things everyday.

The Start of the Dream

While reading Flying magazine I happened to see a coupon for a Discovery Flight. It read, “Pilot a Cessna 150 for \$5.” The coupon was from Peninsula Aviation at San Carlos Airport. What a deal I thought.

I clipped the coupon out of the magazine and begged my Mom to take me to the airport. My Mom said she would take me on one condition, “If you write a report for school, I’ll take you.” “I will, I will,” I said to my Mom. I was still only 14 years old when I made my appointment for the Discovery Flight on March 7th 1970. I was to take my first introductory flight, the start of my dream.

I can still remember the thrill of that day. It will last with me forever. Every time I take off in an airplane I still have that same thrill of a 14 year old little kid with a big dream. Oh I did keep my promise and wrote the story for my English class. I was given an A on that story with a little airplane and the words “Excellent” written by my English teacher Mr Selma. I still have that report to this day. I kept it to remind me of how much I wanted to fly. I knew that if I put my mind to it and never give up, I could do anything.



The report I promised my Mom I would write. With the A and excellent



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My Mom must have realized after my first flight at San Carlos that this was my passion. Possibly a focus to get me through school. She was right. I did very well in all my aviation classes and still just did enough to pass on all the others. I did well enough to get an AA degree from the College of San Mateo. They had an excellent aviation department. I transferred to San Jose State for their Aeronautical program . I completed a BS in Aeronautical Engineering Operations degree with an Airframe and Powerplant mechanics license.

My Mom had to approve of the flight school I was going to take my lessons from at San Carlos Airport. She looked into all the flight schools based there.

She settled on Nystrom Aviation. Nystrom's main base was at Palo Alto with a satellite base at San Carlos. I would start my lessons on June 25th 1970. My first familiarization was in N6764J at Piper PA -28-140 known as the Cherokee 140. My Mom would drive me the 12 miles to the airport on Saturdays to take my lessons. My main instructor was Richard Lowe. Richard Lowe was a businessman that taught flying part time on the weekends. Taking my lessons I knew I couldn't fly solo until my 16th birthday. Richard Lowe said, "Let's make that our goal." I took a few lessons over the months at Nystrom's San Carlos satellite base. In December of 1970 Nystrom shut down their San Carlos satellite base. If I were to continue flying with Nystrom I would have to have my Mom drive me an additional 11 miles to Palo Alto until I got my drivers license. Lucky for me she agreed.

I took my pre first solo phase check a few days before my 16th birthday. Richard Lowe informed me he was going to be out of town on a business trip for my 16th birthday. He set up for the chief instructor to take me up for my First Solo sign off. I was disappointed Richard Lowe wouldn't be there. He really wanted me to solo on my 16th birthday and he taught me well to accomplish this goal. He believed in me. I didn't want to let him down. This would be one of the many check rides I would take in my flying career. One of the many, "Well I'll show you" moments.

On May 7th 1971 I would accomplish one of the first big milestones in my aviation career. May 7th was a Friday. My Mother must have told my Father what a big event this was going to be. Since that was a school day and both my Mother and Father worked my first solo would have to be in the afternoon. After work and school my Father made my brother and sisters come along for the event. It was also my twin sister's birthday. I was the youngest of the family by 20 minutes. I could sense my twin sister's jealousy along with my brother and oldest sister's resentment that they had to be there. Oh boy, the pressure I had to complete my first solo was enormous. I knew I would be considered the failure they always considered me to be if I didn't solo. This was a huge, "Well I'll show you" event of my life.

Chief Pilot Chuck Heasley met me at the flight school and gave me the keys to N95046. In the afternoon at Palo Alto Airport it can be windy with gusts. As it would happen, it was a windy afternoon as well. When we taxied out for our first take off I could feel the gusts. The thoughts running through my head were faster than the propeller was spinning. Was I going to solo today, was it too windy, does this Chief Pilot think I'm capable? On our first take off and pattern to land I found out quickly this wasn't Richard Lowe my main instructor. Chief Pilot Chuck Heasley was the yelling type of instructor. After my second flight around the pattern I thought, oh boy I'm a total disappointment to him. On my third landing, all of which I thought were good, Chuck Heasley said. "Pull over by the control tower" I was so disappointed in myself. I thought we were pulling over at the tower and he was going to say that he was done and wouldn't let me solo. As I stopped the Cherokee by the tower Chuck Heasley said "I didn't want to walk too far from the runway. I'll be up in the control tower watching. Go do three take offs and landings and come back here to pick me up when you are done." I couldn't believe it! After all his yelling, he was going to let me do my first solo. I again used my, "Well I'll show you." The Cherokee leaped into the air with me by myself. I was screaming on the downwind with joy that I was really doing this. I then remembered Chuck Heasley was in the control tower watching me. Could he see me? I better just fly and scream with joy later. There was a radio antenna tower on final that was near Palo Alto

airport. Richard Lowe said "Always be at 400 feet abeam this tower and say 400 feet to yourself". On all three landings I said 400 feet and completed my first solo. What a thrill to taxi back to the control tower to pick up Chuck Heasley. When I got to the parking spot there was a local reporter waiting to take my picture. That is when I realized that it really was a big deal to Richard Lowe and the people at Nystrom Aviation. Richard had set up for the reporter to be there since he was out of town. Richard Lowe really had faith in me. I did it. I didn't let him down. We would drive home to celebrate mine and my twin sister's birthday. I knew I was celebrating something bigger.

The article showed up in the newspaper with a picture of me shaking Chuck Heasley's hand while I was standing on the Cherokee's wing. At the end of the article the statement read that I had to be driven home by my

father because I could fly but not drive.

Flying High at 16



VETERAN PILOT CHUCK HEASLEY PRAISES ROOKIE
Bill Cox can fly but he can't drive a car

San Bruno Youth's Airborne Birthday

Bill Cox, a high school sophomore from San Bruno, completed a year's training and celebrated his 16th birthday last Friday by making three solo flights from the Palo Alto Airport.

He said he had no problems at all. "I hope to celebrate my next birthday by getting my pilot's license," he said.

Cox has yet to get a permit to learn how to drive an au-

tomobile. He was eligible a year ago.

Cox is the son of Mr. and Mrs. William H. Cox of 2340 Toyon Way, San Bruno.

A year ago he signed up for flight lessons with Nystrum Aviation Corp. in Palo Alto and geared himself to solo on his birthday, the first time allowed.

The \$300 he has spent was saved from a paper route and working as a vender at Conestock Park. It will cost another \$300 to \$700 to get his license.

After his three solo flights Friday, the Coxes drove their

The Struggle to Complete the Dream.

I would continue to take flying lessons at Nystrom Aviation. I couldn't get my Private Pilot's License until I turned 17 years old. I had since gotten my driver's license so my Mom didn't have to drive me to my flying lessons. You have to complete a number of solo flights including cross country flights for your Private Pilot's training. My first solo cross country was to Tracy Airport. I had to have someone sign my logbook to prove I was there. I found some people at a hanger having a barbeque. They asked me to stay for a hamburger. I thanked them but told them I had to get back to Palo Alto. I didn't want my instructor to be worried. I was amazed how friendly people were at these airports.

While continuing my flight lessons I would have to take ground school lessons to prepare myself for the Private Pilot's written exam. One of many written exams I would take throughout my career. Don Orgish was the ground school instructor. He was a former World War 2 pilot. He always kept the class interesting by adding his stories about flying. It was during these times that my love grew for general aviation and the people involved. I would continue to share this passion for flying every time I could. I didn't realize at the time, but I was developing how I was going to be a pilot, flight instructor and eventually a Captain for a major airline.

I was the youngest in the ground school class. The older people in the class were very friendly and always treated me great. I think they were amazed by my drive and dream.

I took my Private Pilot checkride on June 14th 1972. William Geanatte was the designated pilot examiner for Nystrom Aviation. I had to make a flight plan and pass an oral exam before we could fly. Our flight was to take us from Palo Alto Airport to Livermore Airport. The oral exam went well and it was off to the airplane. We started the flight just like we were going on a cross country flight. When he saw that I could complete that maneuver we went on to the airwork doing stalls, steep turns and engine out procedures. We did all these while we continued to Livermore to do all the different take off and landings. Short field, Soft field and landing over a 50 foot obstacle. At the time Livermore Airport was a non control tower airport. Another

airplane taxied into position for take off while we were on short final. The examiner wasn't very happy with the other pilot's actions.

He grabbed the microphone announcing he was a FAA designated examiner and told the offending pilot that the aircraft on final had the right of way. The pilot then basically told the examiner to piss off. "We will be out of your way" It was so close I knew I was going to have to accomplish a go around procedure. As I did the go around my examiner told me to follow that plane. I was thinking, really, follow that plane? The chase was on. My examiner told the offending pilot to give him his name and aircraft number.

We were met by silence on the radio. Our little Cherokee could keep up with the faster plane. My examiner told me to take him back to Palo Alto, he was steamed. I'm glad it wasn't because of my flying.

What a way to end a check ride! William Geanatte shook my hand after we landed and said "Congratulations, meet me in my office when you are done tying down the airplane" In his office he gave me my temporary Private Pilot's license. He also gave me a little note to give to my Dad. It was a note I later found out that told my Dad what a great job I did on my check ride.

My first passenger was my Mom. How she got the courage to go up with her 17 year old son I'll never know. I flew her around the Bay Area then back to Palo Alto. That was the first and only time she flew with me.

After receiving my Private Pilot's License it was a struggle to build flying time. I would take friends up and share the costs. Quickly I ran out of money and also friends that wanted to fly. I would save up then pay for a lesson every once in a while but that wasn't going to cut it.

The Friends you Meet Along the Way

When I was at San Jose State working on my BS degree I would meet a classmate, Brian Harris, who would become a mentor and a lifelong friend. Brian wanted to be an airline pilot too. He had gotten more of his flying ratings by the time he had arrived at San Jose State. I still only had my Private Pilot's License.

Brian was continuing his flying at AeroTrends. Aero Trends was a FBO and Cessna Flight Center at Reid Hillview Airport. Aero Trends was owned by a former United Airlines pilot, Bud Terry and his wife Jenny. Bud and his wife Jenny ran the flight school, maintenance shop, aircraft sales, charters and the fuel island. At the time, I was working two separate part time jobs. One for Grand Tree Furniture Rental where I moved furniture in and out of businesses, apartments and homes. T

The other for LAC Avionics at Reid Hillview Airport. I cleaned the shop and was taught how to do pitot static checks on airplanes. Brian told me about an opening at Aero Trends as an aircraft fueler. Aero Trends ran the Exxon Fuel Island. I really liked working at Grand Tree and LAC Avionics, but Brian informed me about the discount on aircraft rentals as an employee. This would be a big break and a lot of help with my ratings. I met with Jenny Terry about the job. With Brian's recommendations I would get the job as a fueler. The first of many jobs I would work at Aero Trends. Brian was an instructor for Aero Trends and he checked me out on a number of airplanes while he was teaching. Brian would later fly cargo and charter flights. On some of the cargo flights I would tag along. On the legs that had no cargo Brian would teach me to fly the "bigger" planes. At the time a Cessna 207 was huge to me.

As I was working on my instrument, commercial, CFI, CFII and multi engine ratings, I had some great instructors. Hank Smith and Willard Bowman were instrumental in teaching me. What I find interesting is considering nowadays everyone is divided by race and privilege. I just didn't see it back then or now. Both Hank and Willard are African American. I never saw

them as anything but my flight instructors and friends. I never had any privilege. I worked very hard for everything I achieved. Just like Hank and Willard did for their achievements. They didn't care that I was white and I didn't care that they were black. I just cared that they were good pilots and teachers, which they were.

Hank went on to earn a Phd in education and Willard retired recently from United Airlines as a B747 Captain. I learned from them the effort you put in will be rewarded. Even with obstacles to overcome, never give up.

Every Job and Then Some

I worked every job you could at Aero Trends. My work ethic and having worked so many different jobs really helped. Bud and Jenny treated me like I was their son. They had 3 boys, however none of them were interested in flying. Jenny quickly saw how I interacted with the pilots and club members at the flight school. She asked me to start working at the front desk. I gladly accepted. It was a great atmosphere at Aero Trends. I met a lot of club members while I would either schedule their flights or check their paperwork out after they flew. All the time I was working on my flight ratings. After graduating San Jose State with my A&P I would start working in the maintenance shop helping out while still working the front desk. One night just prior to closing, what I thought was a little girl called the flight school. I ended up talking to her for about 30 minutes. She had all kinds of questions. At the end of the conversation I wished her good luck and I hoped she would choose Aero Trends for her lessons. Aero Trends had a requirement for proficiency checks for club members to rent their planes. One of my jobs was to go through the list of people that were due their PC checks and call them. I noticed that a lot of them were always reluctant to schedule. I would sometimes see them frustrated after their flights. It always made me wonder why. I would find out after I completed my CFI. Not having any students initially after completing my CFI I had a plan. I got the book that had all the club members that needed PC checks and started calling. I was so busy giving PC checks my first month of teaching. I asked one of the club members why he didn't like doing his PC checks. He said the last instructor yelled at him the whole flight! I remember that feeling. That was Chuck Heasley's method on my first solo.

I vowed to myself I would never teach that way. I had so many club members come back and schedule me for their PC's

It was Fate

In between students and PC checks the flight instructors would sit around the big table Jenny had in the lobby of the flight school. If there was nobody around I would just study. One day while having coffee around the big table with fellow instructors a young girl showed up to the flight school. Jenny was working the front desk at the time. I remember all the flight instructors perking up and trying to look cool when the young girl entered the flight school. Let me digress a little. One night while getting ready to close the flight school office the phone rang. Aero Trends, may I help you, I said. On the phone was what I thought was a little girl asking about taking flying lessons. Of course I would talk about that. After around thirty minutes of talking and trying to convince her to choose Aero Trends the young girl thanked me for my time and hung up. Well months later that young girl signed up for flying lessons at Aero Trends. Jenny brought her over to the table and said, This is Bill, he will be your instructor. When I asked the young girl, why did you pick Aero Trends, she said, "Some nice old man talked to me for thirty minutes about flying and taking lessons at Aero Trends.

As it turns out, that nice old man was me!

As I showed Colleen (the young girl) how to preflight the Cessna 150 on her first lesson she asked, ``Where are the signs that say "Student Pilot" on the plane. I had to laugh. You guessed it, I made up some "Student Pilot" signs and taped them onto the Cessna 150 for her next flight. After the required number of lessons Colleen soloed in N7657U a red and white Cessna 150. Summer was coming around and Colleen was going to travel in Europe with some friends. She was also going to visit her brother John who was studying in Europe. Colleen asked me if I would write to her. I said "sure!" I sent postcards to Europe with little notes. When Colleen came back from Europe to continue her lessons I made a big decision. I built up the nerve to ask her out on a date. I said if you say yes I won't be

your instructor any more. Colleen's father told me years later that he told her. "He must be a good catch or just a shitty instructor" Colleen did say yes. Colleen took a few more lessons with another instructor, Gene Bradly. Colleen just didn't like the studies of weather. Actually once at the flight school I saw her falling asleep while watching her Cessna Pilot Center tapes on weather. To this day we have a running joke about temperature dewpoint. We continued to date but Colleen's interest in flying lessons had waned. Eventually I got the nerve to ask Colleen to marry me. As fate would have it we got married on March 7th which was the same date I took my very first introductory flight in a Cessna 150.

Some Dreams Take Longer to Complete.

Besides wanting to become an Airline Pilot, I also wanted to fly helicopters. I would watch the television show The Whirlybirds.

Chuck and PT would have adventures in their Bell 47 helicopter.

I was totally hooked. I made a helicopter cockpit out of a cardboard box with a control stick of wood and grip from clay. I would "fly" with Chuck and PT as I watched the show. As I read more books to learn about helicopters. One book suggested getting my "fixed wing" ratings first since helicopters are more expensive to operate. As I would find out "fixed wing" ratings were expensive as well. The helicopter rating would have to be put on hold for the time being.

My Dad worked for Oroweat Bread company. When he became manager of the local depot he hired me to pull weeds and clean up where the bread delivery trucks parked. I worked on Saturdays. My first paying job. I had numerous jobs after my weed pulling to pay for my flying ratings. I worked as a paperboy delivering the San Mateo Times. I worked for the San Bruno Street Department during Summer break from high school. I learned a lot of my constructions and mechanical skills there. My Dad and the bosses

wanted me to work at the San Bruno Street Department as a full time job out of high school. I still told them I wanted to be an Airline Pilot. During high school I worked as a Hot Dog vendor at Candlestick Park. I worked at the San Francisco Giants games and the first year that the San Francisco 49ers played at Candlestick. I worked for a group called Manpower. They would assign jobs where you never knew what you were going to be doing. I worked at so many different places with Manpower. It really made me realize I could do anything if I put my mind to it. I still wanted to be an Airline Pilot. I was fortunate to get a job working at the San Francisco Airport working for a Customs Broker, Arthur J Fritz Co. I would drive to all the airline cargo areas to help with the importing of many items. I would get to be by the pilots operations area and the big jets while doing my work. Talking to the pilots made me even more determined to follow through on my dream.

When I Transferred from the College of San Mateo

I found out that San Jose State would only accept half of my units from the College of San Mateo. I thought I would be entering as a junior however I had to start as a first semester sophomore. What a setback that I would have to overcome.

I decided to use the extra time at San Jose State getting my A&P mechanic license. At the Aero Department I met many students that had the same dream of becoming airline pilots. Everyone that I went to school with that wanted to become an airline pilot eventually did. San Jose State Aero Department has students working for virtually every major airline.

In your career as a pilot you never know how it will turn out until you are retired. I was fortunate to be hired with American Airlines in 1984 when the hiring door had just opened. I was the 116th pilot to be hired.