

# *The Trailing Edge*

December 2023

## **O Solo Me! Today's the Day!**

I awoke bright and early at 0600 on Wednesday morning, 29 Nov 2023, and my first thought was "Today's the day... ..It's gotta be!" At 0700, I checked the Palmdale Airfield automated surface observing system (ASOS), then I pulled out my iPad and checked the weather at Edwards AFB via Foreflight. The winds were favorable - 070@3. Today I will *finally* get the opportunity to pilot the mighty Cessna 172S Skyhawk on my own in a pattern solo flight...or, at least, I hope I will. The fourth time is the charm.

I've had a lifelong dream to become a pilot. Many years ago, I started flight training at the age of 25. During those training years, I flew 67.7 hours. Indeed, I was very close to the goal of achieving my private pilot license. However, as so often happens in life, I was thrown a curveball. Actually, it was more like a "beanball." One that smacked me in the head and threw me completely off-balance. These personal issues in my life precluded me from achieving my dream. Oh, so close. From that point, work, family and just generally navigating life took precedence over my dream. Unfortunately, I didn't have the time or funds to continue my dream of flight. That time was not the day.

My preoccupation with flight led me to a career in the United States Air Force, not as a pilot, but as a flight test engineer and acquisition program manager. The Air Force has given me a wonderful life. I have lived in eight different states which allowed me to see many beautiful sights and participate in many different activities. I've also had the opportunity to contribute to many different Air Force aircraft projects and missions, to include F-16, B-52, C-17, KC-46, and Cheyenne Mountain Air and Space defense. After retiring from the Air Force in 2010, I was offered a civil service job at Edwards AFB, which I eagerly accepted. I *love* the Edwards test mission! Currently, I lead the test program for the Nation's most capable and proven bomber, the B-52 Stratofortress. One day at work, the Edwards AFB Force Support Squadron sent an email advertising the Edwards AFB Aero Club. I thought, what better place to accomplish my dream of flight than at "the center of the aerospace testing universe." Today is the day.

I immediately renewed my commitment to earning a private pilot license. At the age of 59, with my five children grown and on their own, life has afforded me the time and funds to once again pursue my passion. I excitedly joined the Edwards Air Force Base Aero Club and had my first dual training flight on 27 April 2023. While my previous flight training and the aviation knowledge acquired over my lengthy career helped, I quickly realized that this was going to be a significant challenge. After 30 years of not flying, I had to learn everything all over again, including how to land. My early landings were horrible; there's no sugarcoating it. It made the situation all the more annoying that 30 years ago I *could* land an airplane, and I knew how it *should* look, but I couldn't make the airplane do it. Learning a physical skill at 59 is harder than learning that same skill at 25. It's been a rough and emotional ride. I've had several breaks in my training and other setbacks outside my control, but I persisted and since April I have 40 dual training flight hours and 105 landings. Today's the day!

My instructor (Bishoy Abraham) and I have been trying to accomplish this solo flight mission for weeks now. The first opportunity was on the day before Veterans Day, 10 Nov 2023. We were all set and ready to go, but I received a phone call the night before from Bishoy informing me the flight was cancelled. It seems there was a last-minute decision for the new B-21 bomber to accomplish its first flight, and that shut down the Edwards airfield for the day. Strike one. The next week I was out of town on business. On 22 Nov 2023, we walked to the aircraft, did the pre-flight, and taxied out to hold short of runway 05L. At the hold short line, Eddie Tower told us the bird condition was severe. We could see people on the runway trying to scare the birds away. Tower told us it would be a 10-minute wait. Then they told us it would be 15 minutes. After waiting 30-40 minutes, I keyed the mic and disappointedly told tower we would taxi back to parking if it was going to be any longer. They gave us approval for a 180 and taxi back to parking. Strike 2. The next opportunity was on 27 Nov 23. I arrived at the Aero Club at 0800 and found that my instructor was sick. Bishoy apologized profusely. I took this one in stride; you definitely can't fault a person for not feeling well. Strike three. At this point, one of my best friends told me in his old Air Force squadron they would have called me "snakebit." I had to agree. It's a good thing I'm not playing baseball, or the umpire would be declaring "You're out!"

On 29 Nov 2023, I arrived at the Aero Club a few minutes before 0800. Bishoy called me and said he was going to be a few minutes late. He asked me to go out and do the aircraft preflight inspection. He would dispatch the airplane when he arrived and meet me at the airplane. I walked out to N108ED and started the preflight inspection.

Bishoy walked up about the time I finished my inspection. We noted we only had 15 gallons of fuel, but 1.5 hours of flight time would be plenty enough for today's mission. We planned to fuel the airplane after the flight. We got into the plane, started the engine, completed the run-up check, and taxied out to runway 23L. Edwards automatic terminal information system (ATIS) said the wind was calm, visibility was 10 miles, altimeter setting was 30.00, and the density altitude was 1,800. Edwards field elevation is 2,311 MSL. Given the reported density altitude and the fact we have only 15 gallons of fuel onboard, we were expecting good performance. A perfect day to fly! Today is *definitely* the day!

The plan was to takeoff on 23L, enter a left downwind for South Base runway 25, and do a few practice touch-and-goes before Bishoy got out of the airplane. As we stopped in front of the hold short line, I keyed the radio "Edwards Tower, Skyhawk 108ED holding short 23L at bravo, ready for takeoff, request pattern work on South Base runway 25." Tower responded, "8ED hold short Runway 23L at bravo, the C-12 that just took off reported birds at the departure end of the runway." Oh, no!!!! Not again! Could this be strike 4?! "8ED, holding short 23L at Bravo." We looked for the birds and didn't see any. Tower called us, "8ED, winds calm, be cautious of bird activity, cleared for takeoff." "Eddie Tower, 8ED cleared for takeoff runway 23L, we'll be on the look-out for birds and tell you if we see any." With that we taxied onto the runway and took off. We didn't see any birds. Yep, today's the day!

On takeoff I noted that with the light fuel load and low density altitude, this thing was indeed climbing fast today – a lot faster than usual. As we approached pattern altitude, tower approved a left turnout and told us to report downwind for South Base runway 25. We entered a left downwind to runway 25, I did my pre-landing "GUMPS" check, and called tower, "Edwards Tower, 8ED, downwind, runway 25." Tower responded, "8ED, cleared for multiple patterns, report last downwind." "8ED will report last downwind." We did three circuits. All my patterns were stable, and my landings were good. I call them "squeakers" because of the soft "chirp" sound the tires make when you gently set the tires down onto the runway. What a wonderful sound! We did stop-and-goes instead of touch-and-goes because the Edwards Aero Club Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) only allow student pilots on first solo to do stop-and-goes. After the third one, Bishoy told me to turn off the runway and taxi back near the gas pits. Another aero club staff member (Josh) was waiting there with another airplane so Bishoy could listen in on radio communications in that airplane while on the ground. Today's the day!

As I pulled off the runway, Bishoy keyed the mic and told tower that he was about to get out of the airplane and his student would be doing a first solo. As we taxied back, Bishoy asked me if I was ready. I said, "yep." He asked me if I was excited. I said, "Yes, and a little nervous." He laughed and said, "That's good. That will keep you alive." When I stopped the airplane near where the other airplane was waiting, Bishoy took out my logbook and annotated the necessary endorsements. Then he briefed me, "Taxi to the runway and hold short. Tell tower you are doing a first student solo. Do two stop-and-goes like we practiced and one full stop." Then, Bishoy hopped out of the airplane. As he was closing the passenger door, he said "Have fun." I watched him as he walked toward the other aero club airplane. Today...is... The...DAY!

I continued to watch Bishoy walk away as he joined up with Josh to ensure he was clear of my aircraft – my aircraft. Then, I took a deep breath, made sure all the switches and instruments were in the right configuration, took a glance at the engine display to make sure everything looked correct, and then pushed in a smidge of throttle to start the taxi to the threshold of runway 25. That taxi seemed a little longer than usual. I was thinking, I didn't know I was going to be this nervous. After all, I've done a solo before, albeit 30 years ago. OK. I'm really doing this. Today's the day. As I approached the hold short line, a big lump rose in my throat and my eyes got misty in anticipation. A combination of anxiety and joy. I didn't know this was going to be so emotional, either! Most young folks in this situation would not admit to these emotions – that's not "cool." In fact, when I was 25 and doing this, I don't even remember being nervous or emotional. But us more "mature, senior folks," don't mind admitting to the emotions that well up inside. And, maybe, at this age, it means more to me. After all, I've been waiting for 30 years to pursue this dream. Today's the day!

As I stopped my airplane at the hold short line, I pushed the emotions down inside and focused on the pre-takeoff checklist: fuel selector both, fuel shutoff valve in, trim to takeoff, flaps up, mixture full rich, throttle 1,000 RPM, engine green, transponder 1200 VFR, lights all on. I pushed the emotions down again, took a hard swallow to get rid of the lump in my throat, and said out loud, "OK, everything looks good. I got this. Let's go." I said this out loud to make sure my voice was steady before I keyed the mic. "Edwards Tower, Skyhawk 8ED, holding short South Base runway 25, ready for takeoff, first student solo, staying in the pattern." "8ED, winds calm, report airborne." For you pilots, Edwards Tower doesn't clear aircraft for takeoff or landing on the South Base runway because they don't have a good view of the runway. It's "see & avoid." I took a look at the final approach path – clear; looked down the runway – clear. Rolled out on the runway, lined up on centerline, heels to the floor, push in full throttle, right rudder, engine 2300 RPM and in the green, speed coming up, 55 KIAS, rotate. Off I go into the wild blue yonder, Keep the

wings level and true. No nervousness now – just focus. “Edwards Tower, 8ED, airborne.” Climbing high into the sun – well, at least to pattern altitude. Today *was* the day!

Without Bishoy in the airplane, 8ED was climbing very fast. I was at pattern altitude well before I reached the end of the runway. And, at pattern altitude, I didn’t have to use as much throttle -- about a hundred less RPMs. “8ED, report base runway 23L.” I keyed the mic... then released it. Wait... what did they say? As I turned crosswind I keyed the mic, “Edwards Tower, 8ED is on South Base runway 25.” “8ED, correction, report base runway 25.” “8ED will report base runway 25.” I turned downwind and started my pre-landing GUMPS check: Gas both, Undercarriage down & locked (it’s fixed & always down), Mixture full rich, Prop spinning (it’s not a constant speed), Seats upright and locked and lights all on. This time a new voice from tower, “8ED, are you doing multiple landings on runway 25?” “A-firm, 8ED” “8ED, report last downwind.” “8ED will report last downwind.” For those of you unfamiliar with Edwards flight ops, Eddie Tower is a training unit. They train air traffic controllers for the Air Force. I likely had been talking to a trainee, and the 2<sup>nd</sup> voice was the voice of experience in the tower.

Now I’m at the perch point (abeam the numbers), pull power to ~1700, below 110 KIAS lower first notch of flaps, push a bit to catch the pitch-up caused by the flaps, note the airspeed decrease to 85. Turn left base, below 85, lower flaps to 20 degrees, everything looks good, and everything is *quiet*. *Quiet in my airplane*. Turn final, get that last bit of flaps in, aim at the numbers, airspeed looks good – maybe a bit fast at 68 KIAS but that’s ok, power idle, round out above runway, bleed off airspeed, gently pull the yoke back to flare, keep pulling back slowly to hold it off the runway, hear the soft chirp of the tires, grin, good landing! Ease in the brakes at first and then apply more for the stop on the runway. Once stopped on the runway, pull the flaps up to zero, ensure mixture is rich (it is), glance at the engine (it’s green), push in power for the “go” part of the stop-and-go, heels to the floor, engine 2340 RPM and green, airspeed coming up, 55 KIAS, rotate, welcome to the sky! Successful first solo pattern and landing! And it was a good one! Today’s the day!



There was no nervousness now at all. This is fun! But keep your focus on flying the airplane, Glenn. The second circuit was another stop-and-go. Next circuit will be my last one – too soon! During the third downwind I called tower, “Edwards Tower, 8ED, left downwind runway 25, full stop.” “8ED, report off runway.” “8ED will report off

runway.” As I chirped the tires on the last landing, I applied some brakes, but kept the speed up to get to the taxiway faster and raised the flaps to make sure I stayed glued to the ground. Just as I get to the taxiway turn-off, my cell phone rang. Hmm... My cell is connected via Bluetooth to my headset, and Bishoy and I had pre-briefed if he wanted to talk to me, he would call me on my cell. Sure enough, it was Bishoy. I answered. Bishoy laughingly asked me, “Are you going to do a fourth one?” I was confused and said “You want me to do a fourth one? I didn’t know that was an option, I was about to taxi off the runway.” He said, “No, come on back.” We hung up and I taxied off the runway. Due to that interaction, I honestly don’t remember if I called tower to tell them I was off the runway. I suspect I did not. I taxied back to the gas pit and used the checklist to shut down the engine. I opened the door and got out of the airplane as Bishoy and Josh walked up. I received my congratulations from them. They told me my landings were very good. I asked how they could tell from where they were standing. He said they could tell by the position of the plane and the chirp of the tires. He said they heard chirps on all three. Today was the day!

As we talked and fueled the airplane, Bishoy and Josh were laughing about the third pattern. They said something about hearing me push in power for the third one and Bishoy asking Josh, “Is he doing a third one?” It finally dawned on me that Bishoy and I had a miscommunication before my solo flight. I thought he told me to do 3 circuits – 2 stop-and-goes and one full stop. He thought he told me to do 2 circuits. Oops. I told him, “Oh, I thought you told me to do 2 stop-and-goes and one full stop. So that’s why you called me on the phone? ...to make sure I didn’t do a fourth one?” He laughed and said, “yeah.” They thought I was being a “rebel” and I thought I was following instructions. We all got a good laugh out of that, and he told me it wasn’t a big deal. No harm, no foul, I guess.

Josh took the obligatory planeside picture to commemorate the event. Bishoy Abraham, Skyhawk N108ED, and the Edwards Aero Club will always hold a special place in my heart. I can tell you, all the hard work is worth it. All the frustrations of wondering “will I *ever* get the hang of landing this *dang* airplane?”, are inconsequential and forgotten. There is no better feeling than when those tires leave the pavement, and you are *flying*! There have been some days that I walk into the aero club office after a tiring day at work and think to myself, “I’m fairly tired. Do I really want to fly today?” And then, at the end of the flight, I’m always glad I flew. In fact, I become energized by the flights. As the aircraft soars, my spirit *always* soars! I am blessed the Lord has given me the opportunity, the ability, and the resources to chase my passion. In fact, God gave me the passion, too! As happy as I am, I must remember that this is just the first milestone. I have a couple more months of study, training, and practice before I capture my dream of becoming a licensed pilot. Eye on the Prize! This solo experience has caused me to redouble my commitment to my dream. Carpe Diem is one of my favorite maxims. Translated from Latin, it means “Seize the day!” 29 Nov 2023 was my day. Whatever your dream, make today your day.

- **Glenn Nicholson**  
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