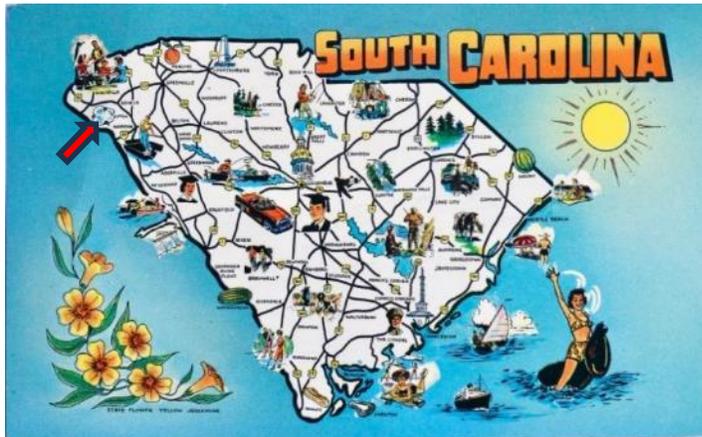


# The Trailing Edge

January 2025

## Better Late than Never! A Dream Realized!



In my 15th year, Dad took me to my first airshow. I grew up in a small farming community in Oconee County, South Carolina named Oakway. Oakway is in the Western tip of South Carolina and in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains, which is the easternmost range of the Appalachians. In the early 1900s, cotton was the cash crop. The big cotton farming era had passed by the time I was born, but I was told plenty of stories by my Dad, Mom, Aunts & Uncles about “pickin’ cotton.” The nearest town, Seneca, was 9 miles away and boasted a population of 7,500. We drove to Seneca once a week to go to the bank, buy groceries, and conduct the normal business of life. The nearest

“big” city was Anderson. Anderson was 25 miles away. In the 80’s it had a population of 137,000. We would drive to Anderson every month or so to visit my maternal grandparents. We’d also visit Anderson when we needed to shop for items with a bigger selection. Anderson had a Kmart, a Sears & Roebuck, and by the time I was a teen, a shopping mall. Everyone was excited to get a Mall! My high school, Oakway High, graduated 57 people in 1982, which is the year I graduated. Life was centered around family, church, work and school. I was blessed to grow up in this environment.

Anderson also had a municipal airport. In April of 1979, the Anderson Airport was hosting an airshow. The stars of the show were the Navy’s Blue Angels Demonstration Team. I honestly can’t remember how it came to be that my Dad and I attended that airshow. Maybe we saw it advertised in the local paper (no internet in those days). Or maybe my Dad heard about it at work. Or maybe I heard about it at school. Whatever the case, we decided to drive to Anderson on that Saturday to watch the airshow. We hopped in my Dad’s tan, 4-door, 3-on-the-column, 1971 Ford Custom, drove to the



airport, parked on the grass field adjacent to the airport, walked to the runway, and sat down on the grass to enjoy the show. As the Blue Angels performed loops in their tight diamond formation, stunned the crowd with knife-edge passes, and ended with the famous bomb burst, a dream was planted in my heart.



At that point in my life, I knew very little about airplanes. In fact, I’d never ridden in an airplane. That day at the Anderson Airport was the closest I’d ever been to an airplane. I didn’t know that the airplane the Blue Angels were flying that year was called the A-4 Skyhawk. I just knew it was gorgeous, loud, fast, and I wanted to fly one! I bought an airshow program and stood in line to get the autographs of every Blue Angel pilot I could.



The next year, the Air Force Thunderbird Demonstration team was scheduled to perform at Donaldson Airport in Greenville, South Carolina. Greenville was 58 miles from Oakway. My Dad and I made the trip in the Ford Custom “all the way” to Greenville to watch the incredible Air Force Thunderbirds. I am thankful that my Dad encouraged my dream. As I watched the Thunderbirds perform their amazing aerial maneuvers in the T-38 Talon, I knew that one day, I would become a pilot.

I graduated Oakway High, went on to graduate Clemson University with a BS in Electrical Engineering, and joined the Air Force with the hopes of becoming a pilot. Unfortunately, becoming an Air Force pilot was not in the cards for me. In my 20s, I took some flying lessons. I was stationed at Wright-Patterson Air Force

Base (AFB) in Dayton, Ohio. Lucky for me, the base had an Aero Club. I joined the Aero Club and took lessons in the Piper Warrior II. I progressed all the way to the solo short cross-country. I had about 65 flight hours at the time. However, due to the issues of life, I was unable to complete the course and earn my license. In fact, I stopped flying in my late 20s. As the years progressed, I had a good, blessed life, but becoming a pilot was not a part of it. The normal responsibilities of life and family took precedence over my dreams.

Hit the Fast forward button... 40 years, 5 kids, divorce, 23 years in the Air Force, and a granddaughter. By this time, all my kids were adults and on their own. At that time, I was working at Edwards Air Force Base as a program manager. By happenstance, I received an advertisement in my email from the Edwards Air Force Base Aero Club. “Learn to fly!” it said. Suddenly it dawned on me that at this moment in my life I had the time and funds to earn my private pilot license (PPL). As I read the email, it rekindled the dream from long-smoldering coals to a full-



fledged flame. In less than a month, 27 April 2023 to be exact, I was sitting in the cockpit of Aero Club N108ED rolling down Edwards runway 23R for my first lesson. It took me awhile, there were some ups and downs (no pun intended) in my flight training; but by August 2024, I had accomplished all the flight requirements and was ready to take the FAA private pilot practical test, or as most know it, the checkride.



I met with the Designated Pilot Examiner, or DPE, on 10 August 2024 for the test. My DPE was **Mr Greg “Gecko” Morris**. He has been associated with Edwards AFB for many years. He owns a company that rents aircraft to the Air Force Test Pilot School, which is located at Edwards Air Force Base. He has flown and instructed in many different kinds of aircraft including the T-6 Texan, the L-39

Albatros, the Decathlon, the Extra 300, and the Pitts S-2B to name a few. He recently became President of Scaled Composites, of Burt Rutan fame. That is an impressive resume, and he is equally impressive in person, too. He is a very, very smart man with a quick mind, tons of energy, and is an amazingly talented pilot. He is also one of the nicest human beings I have ever met. I felt honored to fly with him.

I flew Skyhawk 909ED from Edwards AFB to Fox Field the morning of the test and met with Gecko at high noon. He had reserved a room at Barnes Aviation for the oral portion of the test. We engaged in some small talk to get to know each other as we went over the aircraft forms. Even though I had studied well, I didn’t feel completely prepared. This feeling was a combination of a consuming desire to achieve the goal of private pilot and the fear of the unknown. Those two things make for a bad case of nerves. I just didn’t know what to expect, and I was very nervous. Gecko and I found we have some friends in common. The conversation and his easygoing demeanor helped me to relax a bit. He was satisfied with the aircraft forms and started the test.



He did a short, but thorough pre-brief of how the practical test would go – oral first, then flight. He explained it could end in three ways: Pass, Failure, or letter of discontinuance. He asked me for my required documents and logbook for proof I had met all the requirements for the test. I had organized a notebook that contained all my documents (student license, medical certificate and Passport) and a summary of my flight hours, including the required cross-country and night flights. He liked that. It made it easy for him to quickly go through my logbook and ensure I met all the eligibility requirements. He went through the endorsements in my logbook, and I was actually missing one endorsement. It was the endorsement that confirmed my instructor had gone over the questions I had missed on the written test. I told him we'd done that many months ago and I'm not sure why it was missing. So, I called my instructor to tell him about the problem. He sent a text confirming we had completed that and said he would send an electronic

endorsement in Foreflight, which he did. That was good enough for Gecko and we continued the process. He explained that if we could not complete the full test because of some issue, sickness, weather, etc., he could issue a letter of discontinuance, and we would have 60 days to complete the test. He explained he would be asking me required questions from the required FAA Airman Certification Standards (ACS). He explained I didn't have to be perfect, but I did have to demonstrate knowledge of the ACS and safety, competency and airmanship in the airplane.

After the pre-brief he dove right into the oral portion. I won't say it was easy, but it was not as difficult as I imagined it would be. He was quite thorough and presented me with almost two hours of questions and scenarios to respond to. He asked questions about everything from mandatory flight documents, to aerodynamics, to center of gravity, to aircraft systems, to airport procedures, to mandatory equipment, to airspace, to navigation, to weather. At one point, he asked me, "pick your favorite kind of fog and tell me about it." We laughed at the question, and I told him I was from South Carolina originally and we had a lot of ground fog. He said, "Okay, tell me about ground fog." My mind immediately went blank and I couldn't remember how ground fog was formed. Embarrassing! Gecko waited a few seconds and when he saw I couldn't come up with an answer, he said, "Okay, we'll just move on." After a few more questions, I remembered how ground fog was formed and told him I wanted to revisit that question and I explained how ground fog, or radiation fog as the FAA calls it, is formed. In addition, I had some trouble answering a question about maneuvering speed. I told him maneuvering speed is the speed at which you can input maximum flight control deflection in any axis and not damage the airplane. He said, "That sounds like the perfect book answer. Tell me a little more." I told him you would stall the airplane before you break it. He asked me what causes that. I told him that at the maneuvering speed, you don't have enough control authority to pull enough G to break the airplane. He said, "Very close." And explained to me that it was more about margin and that you're closer to the critical angle of attack or stall speed at maneuvering speed. At an increased speed you are farther from the critical AOA and can generate enough G before you stall to bend the airplane. Other than those two missteps, I did a respectable job of answering all his questions. Thankfully, I knew enough to move on to the flight portion of the practical test.

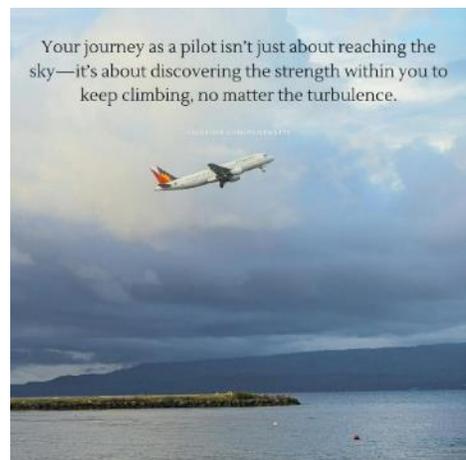
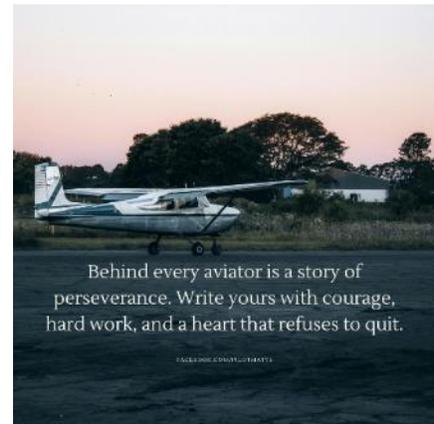
After we completed the oral portion, we looked at the weather together. During the summer in the Antelope Valley, the winds in the morning are usually fairly calm. However, it is very typical that as it progresses into the afternoon the winds increase. It was true that day. The winds were 16 gusting to 22. I could do it, but it was on the very edge of my personal minimums (and more wind than I really wanted to take the test in). The conditions were also worsening. I decided it wasn't a good day to fly a practical test. He said he agreed and didn't want me to be uncomfortable during the test. Gecko filled out a discontinuance letter, gave it to me, and he told me we had 60 days to get the flight portion completed. He told me I had done very well on the oral portion, and he was looking forward to flying with me.

Later that month, we scheduled early morning 12 September 2023 at Edwards AFB for the practical part of the test. When that day arrived, I got a text from Gecko saying that it looked like it would be windy at Edwards and he had 21 September open if I wanted to postpone. When your DPE sends you a text like that it's probably a clue that conditions are not good. I had already been looking at the forecast anyway. It was very bad. Edwards AFB was calling 210@17 and showed it worsening throughout the day. All the nearby airports were above 20 knots with gusts up to 31, including Fox Field where I'd be doing my landings for the test. In addition, there were 2 Airmets out. One for moderate turbulence and one for low-level wind shear. I explained that to him in a text and said I would rather wait and try again on 21 September 2023. His responded with a confirmation for 21 September and said "I think you are making a good call. I would be reluctant to fly a 172 today as well." That made me feel good – sounds like I made a good decision.

On 21 September 2023, I drove to Edwards AFB, strolled out to SkyHawk N909ED, fired up the engine, and flew the short 20 nm, 15-minute hop to Fox Field where I would meet Gecko. I landed, walked into the Barnes Aviation office, and took a seat to wait for Gecko to finish up with his prior instrument pilot hopeful. As soon as Gecko finished up with his last student, we went upstairs into the briefing room. I offered him the aircraft logs. He told me we had looked at them last time and asked if it was the same airplane. I said yes and I'd just flew it over about an hour ago and it's fine. He asked if anything had changed from the last time we looked. I told him no. He said that's good enough for him. We did some quick on-line paperwork. He gave me a quick, but detailed pre-brief. He listed everything we would be doing. He said, "We'll take-off, start the cross-country plan, I'll probably divert you pretty quickly, then we'll do steep turns and stalls, then I'll give you an emergency, we'll do ground reference maneuvers, fly back to airport and do the two required specialty landings, and we'll be done. That sound good?" I replied, "Yessir. Sounds good to me." And with that, we picked up our bags and headed out to the airplane.

As we approached N909ED, I said, "I'll unlock the airplane so you can stow your stuff and hook up your headset, while I start the walk-around." As I started the walk-around, he got all his stuff settled in the airplane. He watched me do part of the walk-around and then told me he was going to walk into the building quickly to use the restroom. I was surprised he didn't watch the whole walk-around. As I finished the walk-around, he walked back up and we settled into the airplane. I went through the checklist, started the engine, and gave him a passenger safety brief. I got taxi clearance from Fox Ground and we were off! As we taxied out, we chatted about the weather situation we had discussed earlier in our pre-brief. It wasn't ideal, but I wasn't willing to wait any longer for the checkride. I wanted to get it done. We noted that the winds were getting worse, and they'd probably continue to get worse as the afternoon progressed. Given that, Gecko suggested we get the landings out of the way upfront, before we headed off to the cross-country portion. I thought that was a great idea and agreed. I taxied into the run-up area and completed the run-up checklist. I switched over to Fox tower, told them we were ready for takeoff and we're staying in the pattern. Tower gave me clearance, I acknowledged, did my last minute before takeoff checklist, and started rolling onto the runway. I told him I'd do the short field first. My short-field take-off was uneventful, and we continued around the pattern. The short-field landing was the maneuver I was most worried about. In training, I'd had trouble hitting the "captains bars," but recently I had practiced a million (only a small exaggeration) short-field landings in preparation for the checkride. I might as well get it done at the beginning, I thought. As luck would have it, I pulled off a very good short field landing. He had told me they would all be full-stop landings, so as I landed I got on the brakes and then said, "Simulated max braking." He said, "That's good. There's no reason to be mean to the airplane." Now my biggest worry was out of the way. We taxied back to the threshold of runway 24 and I performed a soft field takeoff. As I lifted off and pushed over into ground-effect, I realized I had pushed over a little too late and was higher than I wanted to be. Evidently, the DPE agreed. He said, "Maybe a bit high. Where is ground effect?" I answered, "Within one wingspan." He said, "OK. Good enough." I circled the pattern and did an adequate soft-field landing. Now I had the two specialty landings out of the way.

I taxied back to the threshold. I requested, received, and acknowledged clearance for takeoff on runway 24 and approval for a left downwind departure. At least that's what I thought I had heard. As I was rolling onto the runway, tower asked, "Did you want a left downwind departure?" I replied, "A-firm, I would prefer a left downwind departure, if possible." Fox Tower said, "Left downwind departure approved." I said out-loud as much to me as the DPE, "Did he clear me for a right downwind departure the first time?" Gecko said, "Yes, it was a right downwind at first." I said, "Dang, I thought he said left." Gecko responded, "That's all right. You guys talked to each other and figured it out." Uh-oh. That was a mistake, but it had been corrected and I put it behind me. I had reached the numbers and pushed in takeoff power to continue the checkride.



Gecko had asked me to plan a cross-country at least 250 nm from Edwards. I had planned a route toward the East to Prescott, AZ. I did a left downwind departure, established our cross-country course, contacted Joshua control for flight following, set my altitude bug to 7,500 MSL as a reminder of my cruise altitude, and told Gecko that our first waypoint was dead south of Edwards AFB South Gate and we were about 7 minutes and 30 seconds from the point. He told me that was good and within another 20 secs he said, “Your crazy passenger wants to divert to Yuma. Yuma is about 200 miles away.” I didn’t know where Yuma was, but I knew it was south of Prescott. So, I turned a bit toward ESE and said, “Well, it’ll take us about 2 hours to get there at cruise and we’ll use about 20 gallons of gas. We have enough gas to get there.” Evidently, that was what he wanted to hear because he said, “Sounds good, do you



want to do steep turns or stalls first?” That was it? That was the divert? Well, that was easier than I thought. I told him we could do steep turns first. I did my clearing turns, completed the steep turns with no issues, and then we did the stalls. He wanted to see both a power-off stall and a power-on stall. The power-on was a bit uncoordinated and he commented on that, but evidently it was good enough to pass. Next, we did slow flight with no issues. Then, he put me under foggles for a few minutes. He gave me some turns, airspeeds, climbs and descents. I didn’t do as well as I wanted, but he seemed fine with it. Then we did two unusual attitudes. The first he put me in a right climbing turn, and I recovered. The second he put me in a left descending turn. On first reaction, I put in a smidge of power, but then said “no” out loud, backed off to idle, and then recovered. Gecko said, “Yes, you started to put in the wrong power adjustment, but caught it and recovered. That was okay.” Whew, almost messed that one up! Then, he told me we had lost the engine and pulled the power to idle. I went through the emergency

procedures (EPs) properly to include a forced landing. He told me to recover around 1,000 AGL. During the EP, we had descended enough to perform the last maneuver on his agenda, turns-around-a-point. I found a road intersection and did a decent one and Gecko said, “Take us back to Fox.”

After we landed at Fox and I had shut down the engine, Gecko turned to me, stuck out his hand, and said, “Congratulations on becoming a Private Pilot.” As I shook his hand, I grinned and said, “Thank you, I appreciate that more than you know.” He responded, “I think I have a good idea.” And he was right. Every pilot, including him, must feel the stress of that first checkride to earn their wings.

After that, it was all over but the paperwork. We walked in, did some FAA paperwork, took the picture that I now treasure, and I flew N909ED back to Edwards Air Force Base as a new private pilot! I wanted to do backflips to celebrate, but I was too tired. After texting my instructor and my aviation mentors, this 59-year-old man went home and took a nap. I think I earned it.



Things I learned from my Checkride experience:

1. Make sure you have all your pilot documents, aircraft documents, and a summary of your flight hours, including all the specific requirements, well organized. I used a spreadsheet to outline my flight hours and how I had accomplished all the requirements. I put it in a notebook along with my pilot documents organized by tabs. This makes it easy for the DPE to ensure your documents and eligibility requirements. It takes less time than going through your logbook. It also shows you are prepared and professional. I also included a tab with a summary of the aircraft logbook inspection/requirements and the logbooks were tabbed for easy access.
2. Make sure you have all the necessary endorsements the day before the test is scheduled. The fact that I didn’t have one endorsement was not a showstopper for me, but it could have been. If I couldn’t have reached my instructor to send the electronic endorsement through Foreflight, we would have had to discontinue the test at that point.

3. The DPE is pulling for you. The vast majority of DPEs want you to pass. They have requirements laid down by the FAA on which they must test you, but they try to make it as clear, simple and easy as possible. At least, that was my experience.
4. You don't have to be perfect. You just have to be competent and safe. I made several mistakes during my Checkride, but I took action to correct them and that was good enough for the DPE to have confidence in my airmanship skill and to issue a pass.
5. The DPE must tell you the moment you don't pass a maneuver. If the DPE does not inform you of a failure during the Checkride, then you're doing fine. In fact, if the DPE doesn't inform you of a failed maneuver during the whole Checkride, then when you turn off the engine, you know that you've passed the test!
6. It's best to relax and enjoy the process. I was more nervous than I had to be. Looking back, the checkride was a bit stressful, but enjoyable. Be focused, of course, but don't get too nervous. Nobody likes to fail, but if you do, realize it's part of the learning process. You can still continue your training and eventually get your license.

Thinking back over this decades-long journey, it dawned on me that a Skyhawk initially fueled my dream, and a Skyhawk helped me fulfill my dream. Even though these Skyhawks are vastly different aircraft, I think it is fitting. Almost poetic. Meant to be. Destined, even? While the situations in my life postponed my dream, the dream was always there. It may have been muted by life for many years, but the whisper was still there. Never let life squash your dreams. If I can do it, so can you. Remember, it's never too late. In fact, it's better late than never!

-- Glenn "Grits" Nicholson  
 USAF Lt Col (Retired)  
 \*New\* Private Pilot



**Postscript:** Many thanks to my awesome instructor, **Mr Bishoy Abraham**. Bishoy is a very smart, talented young man and an extraordinary flight instructor. He taught me everything I needed to know to pass my Checkride; but more importantly, he taught me how to be a safe, competent pilot. And... we had tons of fun while doing it! Bishoy, huge thanks for everything you taught me! I won't forget what you did to help me make my dream a reality!

