

I pushed the throttle forward, quickly glanced at the tachometer to check for the full 1450 RPM, let my feet dance on the rudder bar to keep the nose straight down the runway, and thought, “Wow! I’m actually out here on my own!”

That’s how I celebrated my Sweet 16. Making my first solo flight in my father’s 100-year-old Curtiss Jenny. Years ago we thought, “How cool would it be for a 16-year-old girl to solo in a 100-year-old airplane on her sixteenth birthday?” Within no time at all that became my dream and I told myself that I would do anything to make it possible.

I’ve grown up and spent my whole life around aviation. With my bedroom window overlooking the grass runway, I would always jump out of bed in the morning to see what was taking off or landing. With the Golden Age Air Museum practically in our backyard, it consumed most of my time. I enjoyed watching my dad and other volunteers restore vintage aircraft, give rides, and most of all go flying with my dad. He took me for my first airplane ride, which I don’t have the slightest memory of, when I was two years old in the 195. My parents have since told me that I loved it in the sky. As I grew older, I started flying in the 1932 Taylor E-2 Cub with my dad. I would sit up in the front seat and he would let me take the controls. I always knew that I wanted to be a pilot and work towards my license, but it was during a 2014 trip to Oshkosh that I was inspired to get serious about flying and logging time. I was exposed to new aspects of aviation and new people, and I can’t remember a time where I was more excited to earn my license.

I did a majority of my training in the E-2 Cub, but I also learned a fair amount in the Champ and 150. The big date in May was rapidly approaching and I was almost old enough to make my first solo. I had over 50 hours logged, and the only thing preventing me from soloing earlier was my age. Dad let me choose from his personal collection, and of course I followed my dream and chose the Jenny. My goal was to do something unique, something that’s never been done before. I wanted to create my own footsteps, rather than just follow those of somebody else.

My dad and his father spent 7 years restoring this 1917 Curtiss JN4D Jenny. It is powered by an OX-5 producing 90 horsepower. Its gross weight is 1920 pounds, it cruises at 70 mph, and has a very long wingspan of over 43 feet which makes it hard to turn around on the runway. This aircraft was designed during World War I to be used as a primary pilot trainer. There were approximately six thousand produced, which helped the Jenny to become the aircraft of choice for American pilots returning home from the war. Many pilots purchased them as surplus from the military and used them to earn a living with Barnstorming. The restoration of this aircraft is to original condition, and hadn’t been flown since the 1920s. The paint scheme represents Earl S. Daugherty, a famous barnstormer and Hollywood pilot of Long Beach, California. Some of the most common questions we receive include, “Are you related to Earl Daugherty?” and “Why is your name spelled with an A on the side of the aircraft.”

The winter months in Pennsylvania often cause great flying obstacles. There is usually snow on the ground, and if not, the cold temperatures would make open cockpit flight very uncomfortable. Even in early spring, the grass field is typically too soft and wet to fly the airplanes. About a month before my birthday we transitioned my training into the Jenny. I had about three hours in it at the time of the solo, but very vigorously performed many takeoffs, landings, and practiced forced landings.

The big day finally arrived and I couldn’t have been any more excited. When I looked out the window that morning, I saw IFR conditions. The clouds were very low with almost no visibility, it was rainy, and too windy for the Jenny. Dad and I were planning for the solo flight

to be first thing in the morning before a crowd gathered at the airport. We waited for hours for the conditions to improve, but we weren't sure they were going to. More people arrived at the airport and formed a good-sized audience. After more waiting, the rain stopped, the ceiling rose, and the wind calmed enough to fly.

Dad and I climbed in the historical biplane for a few flights around the pattern. After two successful landings, he turned around in the front seat and asked, "Are you ready?" I nodded and said, "Yes!" He asked again, "Are you sure?" and my response was identical, but with more enthusiasm! Dad climbed out and gave me one last little briefing, and then a few seconds later I found myself lined up on the runway with full throttle letting my feet dance on the rudder bar. Before I knew it I was off the ground! It had a much longer takeoff roll with two people, and I was getting used to its different performance. I kept climbing, constantly eyeing up fields I'd land in if I lost an engine. After all, I was putting my faith in an original, 100-year-old OX-5. I reached my altitude much sooner than expected due to less weight in the airplane. I made two left turns to set up for the downwind leg, and kept glancing down at oil pressure and water temperature to verify everything was running correctly. I treated it just like it was another flight, pretending that Dad was up in the front seat with me. I wouldn't let any stray thoughts get into my head, but I did take a second to think, "Wow! I'm actually up here all by myself!"

I think the Jenny is a relatively easy airplane to fly, but it has a few traits that are different than the way other airplanes will handle. Multiple times I've been cruising along, and it feels like there is someone in the front seat playing with the pedals. The rudder bar can be felt trying to move itself, and it takes force to keep it flying straight and coordinated. Also, it has no elevator trim. When I'm in the back seat with Dad in the front, I'm constantly applying back pressure to the stick, which gets heavy. Occasionally when you're flying straight and level, it will drop a wing out of nowhere. To get it back, you may have to use two hands because of how heavy the stick is. Even in medium to steep turns, it takes two hands to bring it out of a turn, and it can get tiring after a half hour of flying it. Another thing differentiating the Jenny from most other airplanes is the absence of an airspeed indicator, which most people aren't used to flying without. You have to fly by feel, listen to the engine and the air going past you. I get asked a lot of questions about how fast it goes, but we aren't exactly sure.

After setting up on the downwind leg, I passed the airport and pulled the power back. It has a pretty good sink rate, so it's important to keep the speed up and the nose down. I made two more left turns and lined up with the runway. When flying the Jenny, it's necessary to sporadically goose the throttle when the OX-5 is idling in order to clear the engine. I slowly pulled the stick back and began to flare. The wheels and tailskid gracefully kissed the ground and I felt a sense of relief that I had brought Dad's favorite toy back without a scratch. I still can't believe he let me fly it!

I kept it straight for the remainder of the landing roll and then used the entire width of the runway to turn around. Combined with the large wingspan, the lack of a tail wheel and brakes makes it difficult to make this turn. During the taxi in, I was so excited and proud of myself, and I couldn't wait to get back and tell my parents all about the flight. I had forgotten about the crowd of people that gathered to watch and that the flight would go down in history, but I couldn't stop thinking that after a lot of hard work I finally accomplished my dream.

After the Jenny solo I took a few minutes to relax and share my adventure, and then it was time to make my second 16th birthday solo flight. This time, I was in a 1932 Taylor E-2 Cub, another plane full of great historical significance. Most of my training was in the Cub, and I had

no doubt about soloing it. Unlike the Jenny, the Cub does have elevator trim, but with Dad in the front seat and a full tank of fuel, there is not enough nose up trim. Again, I couldn't believe how differently it flew with only one person. It only took a mere three hundred feet to take off, and just like the Jenny, climbed so much better. I believe my first solo Cub landing was a personal best. The temperature was below average for late May and with open cockpit flights, I only went around the pattern twice in the Cub before getting too cold. My plan was to additionally solo the 150, which has heat, that same day. Unfortunately, we ran out of daylight due to our late start, but I have since soloed in it.

The Jenny solo was a once-in-a-lifetime event, and it has provided me with some once-in-a-lifetime opportunities. I've been working with many wonderful people for magazine articles and internet stories, and I was lucky enough to be featured in a few interviews this year at Oshkosh. Thank you everyone for all of the words of encouragement and congratulations, and I have been privileged to meet so many amazing people.

I am now starting my Junior year of high school and have plans to study aerospace engineering in college. An airline career is also a possibility. Furthermore, I'd like to one day represent our country on the U.S. Unlimited Aerobatic Team, and perform in air shows, including Oshkosh. Dad has already started teaching me aerobatics in the Eagle, and we've brought the Eagle to the airshow circuit. In the rest of my free time, I volunteer at the Golden Age Air Museum, where we host multiple fly-ins and airshows throughout the Summer and Fall. For more information, visit goldenageair.org.

My dream was not to become the first person to make their first solo in a 100-year-old airplane, but to solo my dad's 1917 Curtiss Jenny, that he and his dad spent seven years restoring, on my 16th birthday! This experience has proven to me that hard work and determination really does pay off, and I hope it will inspire others to chase their dreams!