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Finding My Wings

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I am not a morning person. Even though I loved being there, 0700 hours seemed too early to be standing on the tarmac at a small airport in southern Minnesota. The pilots around me looked happy to be awake, though. Maybe they were actually excited to get the contest started. Not me. I was cold. I felt scared and sick. Another pilot offered me coffee, mentioning that I did not look too good. I refused. I was beyond coffee.

I was going to fly in an aerobatic contest. It had been my goal to fly the Sportsman sequence in a contest ever since I started flying aerobatics two years earlier. In competition aerobatics, pilots fly a prepublished sequence of maneuvers, like loops and rolls, and are scored on the perfection of the flight. This all takes place within a 1000 meter square “box” of air in the sky at a safe altitude of at least 1500 feet above the ground. I had been practicing for months and expected to be nervous, but nothing prepared me for the doubts that flashed through my mind in the moments before my flight. *I can't do this. I haven't practiced enough. I'll forget where I am. Oh, I wish Herb was here to help me.*

Had my friend Herb been at the contest, he would have told me a joke, made me laugh and relax. But he wasn't there. He had died in a crash while flying aerobatics a few months before. I was on my own. I stood frozen by my plane as I watched pilots get ready to fly, judges get ready to score, propellers spin as engines started and I thought back. Back four years to when I first met Herb.

Just thinking about Herb made me smile. He was 50 or so, his exact age never seemed important. What was important was his hearty laugh, his jokes and his positive attitude. It was impossible to be near Herb and feel down. His mischievous smile rubbed off on anyone around him and made everyone feel good to be alive. Herb was an avid aerobatic pilot and competition judge. When he wasn't flying, teaching someone to fly, or judging a contest, he was teaching others how to be competition judges at judging schools throughout the country.

I was at a judges school with my boyfriend, an aspiring aerobatic pilot who flew cargo for a living. I was interested in aviation but didn't think I could accomplish a feat like getting my pilot's license, let alone fly aerobatics. My boyfriend didn't help. He told me flying would be "too hard" for me. And, part of me believed him. As I sat in the judge's school learning about the proper lines, angles and rules of competition, getting my license and flying in a contest were far-away dreams that seemed too difficult to tackle. Meeting Herb changed everything.

Herb picked up on my desire to fly and took me under his wing. As the instructor of the judges school, he singled me out to answer questions. At first, I was scared I would make a fool out of myself. I didn't believe I was smart enough

to know the answers. But I was. Each time Herb asked a question, I knew the answer. I was surprised in myself. I was also surprised that someone took so much interest in me, a non-pilot in a classroom full of pilots, many of them professionals with thousands of hours in the air. Throughout the weekend, Herb challenged me, encouraged me to strive for more than I thought I could accomplish. He convinced me I should follow my dreams and learn how to fly.

The next day I signed up for flying lessons and started training in earnest. Soon, the old boyfriend took a hike, probably thinking I would never get into an aircraft, let alone fly aerobatics, without his help. He was wrong. There were times when I felt like giving up. I lacked self-confidence. I ran out of money more than once and had to borrow from my family and friends. But always in my mind was the knowledge that Herb believed in me and I kept forging ahead. Finally, on April 3rd, 1992, one year, seven months, and three days from the day of my first lesson, I got my pilot's license.

So, there I was, near the end of the 1995 competition season, stumbling around the Albert Lea Airport, getting ready for my first Sportsman flight. Herb was gone and I was scared to death. *What am I doing here anyway?* I thought as I looked at the other pilots who appeared confident and calm as they readied their planes.

Then, it was my turn. It was now or never. My plane was waiting and I was glued to the airport tar. I wanted to run away and hide. I wanted to forget about flying in a contest and start knitting for a hobby. Then, I heard a voice, "You can do it, Myrna." Herb's voice. "Come on, get up there and show 'em what you're

made of.”

I strapped on my parachute, climbed into the plane and adjusted the tangle of seat belts around me. Now that I was in the plane, surrounded by the familiar black interior, knobs, gauges and dials, I felt a little better but my nerves were still a jumble. I went through the starting checklist. Zero the altimeter. Zero the G-meter. Check the radios. Make sure everything was secure so no sunglasses, keys, or spare change would float by my head at the most inopportune moment. The airplane was ready but my legs were shaking so badly that I had to hold the stick in one hand and try to steady my legs with the other. *Why am I doing this?* I wondered as I started the engine.

“Come on Myrna.” Herb’s voice echoed through my head. “You can do this. Let’s get going.” I taxied my plane out to the runway, took off and started to climb.

"Okay, get yourself set up" It was as though Herb was in the back seat, coaching me. I climbed to altitude and got ready for the first maneuver, a two-point roll. “Good, now here we go...Get ready...Roll!” I pitched up a fraction and shoved the stick all the way to the left to turn the plane upside down. “Great, now hang there for a second, stay level. Okay, back up now” I brought the stick back to center and rolled the plane upright. “Good job. Now get ready for the next one.” I flew the next few maneuvers, not perfectly, but well enough.

Then, I started to have fun. My anxiety was still there but rechanneled into adrenaline that kept me strong while the forces of gravity pushed and pulled me around the cockpit. Finally, my last figure complete, I rocked my wings to let the

judges know I was done and started my descent.

“You’re not done yet,” Herb’s voice reminded me as I started to relax. “You have one more maneuver, you have to land.” At first it sounded silly, then I remembered what Herb had once told me. After the rush of flying a sequence, pilots sometimes “forgot” to fly all the way to the ground. Contest landings were often more interesting to watch than contest flying.

I lined up for the runway. “Okay, Myrna. Hold it...let her settle...your speed’s fine...hold it another second. Good, job!” I could almost feel my coach pat me on the back as the wheels touched the runway.

Now I couldn’t wait to get my feet on solid ground. I taxied to the holding area, my legs so weak it felt like I was pushing bricks instead of rudder pedals, I pulled the power to idle and the mixture to lean. The engine stopped, I flipped the switches off, opened the door and climbed out of my plane. I had done it! I had really flown in my first Sportsman contest.

For a moment, I stood there and looked at the plane. I was almost surprised to see that it was empty. Herb wasn’t with me in the plane - I flew all by myself. But in my mind he was there, clear as day, looking at me with his fatherly grin saying, “You did it Myrna. I knew you could.”