

FOR THE JOY OF IT

The Sport Pilot certificate turned out to be my perfect re-entry to flying. Here's how it worked for me. Would it work for you?

BY CONNIE SUE WHITE
PHOTOS BY JON WHITTLE

>>> First Landings Aviation's Adam Valencic and the author prepare for a local flight.

I'M ONE OF THOSE PEOPLE you might have heard about who've made their first certificate a Sport Pilot certificate. I wasn't new to flying either. I had taken a break from the beginnings of a passion that, as a teenager, I thought would blossom soon enough.

The day of my first solo has remained vividly etched into my mind. It was a chilly December morning, the sky shrouded with the white, winter pall of a high, overcast ceiling — and it was my 16th birthday — when I

climbed into an Aeronca 7EC Champ. My dad, instructor and brother stood along the side of the grass strip watching as I taxied the short distance to 27. The nervousness that had set up camp in my psyche gave way to focus as I did my run-up. Ready and cleared for takeoff, I taxied onto the runway, swung the taildragger around and added full power. In that moment I experienced the freedom of flight under my own power — and it was like nothing I had felt before.

Alas, the “soon enough” turned into

30 years, thanks to something called life. However, that solo and the feeling I experienced that day have served as a beacon to finding my way back to something I thought I had lost — the joy of flight.

Before settling on the Sport Pilot route, though, I had encountered some turbulence along the way. When I began “retraining” last year, it was for the private license at a Part 141 school located out of town. It wasn't long before I discovered that life still gets in the way no matter your age. The realization hit me hard one day on the

long, afternoon drive back home from the flight school after a flight lesson. I began taking mental stock of where I was in the process. The good news was that I had finished my ground school training and passed the private-pilot knowledge test. The bad news was that I had become overwhelmingly frustrated with my flight training progress. All told, it had been nearly six months since I had started flying again, and I had only 15 hours logged. It felt like I was getting nowhere fast. And with summer approaching, Florida's almost-daily convective activity would likely delay my training even more.

Finding the Right Fit

During that drive home, I began to devise a rescue plan, for I didn't want to lose what I had been lucky enough to find again. First, it was clear that I had to get my training moved closer to home. The obvious key difference in this case compared with training out of town would be that I'd have the flexibility to reschedule for the next day, or soon thereafter, thanks to proximity. Now, if I missed a lesson, I'd have to wait another week (or more) since I had been training mostly on weekend days.

Next was finding a school. A week later, as I investigated my options local-

ly, I came in touch with First Landings Aviation, at the time a Sport Pilot-only school located at nearby Orlando-Apopka (X04). The more I learned about the school (it was the busiest Remos Pilot Center in the Southeast) and the Sport Pilot certificate, the more it seemed like a fit: I could get into the air sooner than I could working toward my private and fly in less congested airspace; and I would get back into a light-sport aircraft — a new Remos with a glass cockpit. The fact that as a sport pilot you can only fly LSA might be a turnoff for some, but I loved the idea. Light-sport aircraft were in my blood. Plus, it was comforting to learn that I could use the Sport Pilot training as a building block toward earning my private certificate later. The deal was sealed when my then-boss, Mac McClellan, suggested that it might be a good idea for me to go for the Sport Pilot first because we needed to begin covering it more in the magazine. What better way than to have a new pilot on staff to do it? I was back in the air that week.

Once the decision was made, there was little I had to do before being able to start training again. Though I already had my third-class medical in hand due to my original goal of a private license, a medical was not necessary — my U.S.

driver's license would have been sufficient. This is a big advantage for many who are considering taking up flying, whether it be to avoid the hassle and extra cost (the medical is not included in flight school fees) or because of health-related issues that would prohibit passing a medical. Interestingly, during my training at First Landings I had expected to run into students who fit the latter description. After all, from the day the Sport Pilot/LSA rule came into being in 2004, the notion that it would attract mostly the “no-medical” crowd had become popular in the flying community. It seemed quite the opposite at FLA, and the overall diversity of the students was surprising to me. Yes, it had a few students who

were restricted to the SP training due to medical limitations, but its students ranged from teenagers and college students to middle-age professionals and even young foreign couples on “working” vacations. There seemed to be quite a few women too.

When I asked Chris Esposito, instructor and co-owner of FLA, about this, he said the bottom line for most of the company's students is that the SP rating is an easier way to become involved in general aviation.

“I think light-sport aircraft have drawn such a huge range of people more because of the efficiency and technology of the aircraft than the medical requirements,” he says. And, he adds, because of their affordability.

Overall cost in time and dollars for the average student to achieve the rating can be half that needed to get the private certification, from flight training to airplane time. First Landings estimates the minimum requirements of flight and ground training needed for the Sport Pilot certificate at \$3,000, and the private (which it now offers training for) at \$5,300. Realistically, both most likely will take longer than the minimum time and therefore cost quite a bit more, but either way, SP is less expensive and less time-consuming. Esposito says FLA's completion rate for SP is much higher than for private, mostly for these reasons. The end result is that you are flying sooner for less. In my case, although I had to count the 15 hours in the standard-category Cadet as part of my total hours to certification, I considered it like I was starting from scratch in the Remos since the airplane and environment were so different. That means I finished with around 25 hours of Sport Pilot flight training in the Remos (minimum required is 20). The private ticket requires at least 40 hours to be logged. Although many schools don't include the extra fees (I paid \$60 for my medical, \$150 for the knowledge test fee and \$400 for the check ride fee/airplane rental) in their totals for either certificate, they don't change the bottom line in cost comparison of the two.

A huge plus for me when I was



>>> **Top:** Nearly 12 percent of First Landings Aviation students have been women, about twice the amount of the overall female pilot population. **Above:** Though Sport Pilot students train out of and in uncontrolled airports and airspace, they can choose to add training for a controlled airspace endorsement.

considering switching schools was moving out of the Part 141 training environment I had chosen (both 141 and 61 are available for the private) into the Part 61 environment of Sport Pilot training. I learned quickly that Part 141 didn't suit my learning style and didn't allow the flexibility I needed. For example, at a Part 141 school, there is a set checklist of tasks that must be accomplished each lesson. Taking a day “off” from that checklist to focus only on landings the entire lesson isn't protocol. That means if you don't finish the checklist

for that particular lesson, say in one flight session, you have to do it the next flight lesson and so on, thus running out of time to get a certain task accomplished, such as landings. At a Part 61 school, there is more flexibility in the training. During my Sport Pilot training, there were a couple of lessons during which we spent the entire hour in the pattern practicing touch-and-goes. That translated to 70 landings in 15 hours in the Remos. The condensed frequency and practice gave me the confidence I needed. I soloed shortly thereafter, at 16 hours.

Aeronautical Experience

>>> Among the requirements necessary to apply for the Sport Pilot certificate is aeronautical experience. The airplane category/single-engine land or sea class privileges require that you:

Must have logged at least 20 hours of flight time, including at least 15 hours of flight training from an authorized instructor, in a single-engine airplane and at least five hours solo in the flight proficiency requirements areas of operation listed in FAR 61.311, which must include at least:

- Two hours of cross-country flight training.
- 10 takeoffs and landings (each landing involving a flight in the traffic pattern) to a full stop at an airport.
- One solo cross-country flight of at least 75 nm total distance, with a full-stop landing at a minimum of two points and one segment of the flight consisting of a straight-line distance of at least 25 nm between takeoff and landing locations.
- Three hours of flight training on those areas of operation specified in 61.311 preparing for the practical test within 60 days before the date of the test.

For more info on the Sport Pilot certificate, visit sportpilot.org and faa.gov.



>>> How much time a student spends on groundwork is up to him or her. First Landings Aviation developed its own ground school program and supplements it with the Gleim Sport Pilot Kit. Typically, if its students study on their own, they spend about four to six hours on the ground. Otherwise, it can be 10-plus.



At the End of the Day

To be honest, it had crossed my mind when I was researching local options that going for the SP certificate seemed like a cop-out. But that notion was quickly put to bed once I took the big picture into consideration. Learning to fly has inherent challenges no matter which certificate you choose to pursue or which training environment. It still requires commitment and discipline to achieve the goal. Life's interruptions and Mother Nature's moods still get in the way, making time still a precious commodity. Even with my training only 20 minutes away, I had to deal with personal schedule- and weather-related cancellations. It's worth noting that many of the weather cancellations were due to wind. With a maximum gross weight of 1,320 pounds, light wing loading and low inertia, no-goes are more likely in a light-sport aircraft, especially in gusting wind conditions.

Let's not forget other people's schedules either. I was ready for my practical test and check ride in mid-October but, thanks to weather, the first appointment was canceled. We met a week later and again a cold front left us with adverse weather conditions. I

was able to salvage the time somewhat by completing the oral that day. But, I couldn't get on the schedule for my check ride until another two weeks later because the examiner was booked. The monthlong wait for my check ride seemed like an eternity — and gave me plenty of time to build up anxiety.

Additionally, becoming a safe pilot requires the same basic skills (other than for night and instrument training required for the private) regardless of the certification: A crosswind is a crosswind for *any* student. I became very familiar with that the day of my cross-country solo. The wind had kicked up considerably and turned into a direct crosswind (the strongest I had encountered) between the time of departure from my home base and the time I returned. Adam Valencic, my instructor and co-owner of FLA, came on the radio after I announced my downwind entry, reminding me that I could land at a nearby airport that was aligned with the wind if I had trouble. Already with that in mind as a backup plan, I responded that I would if necessary. My setup for final was a bit off, so I announced a go-around with an aside for Adam that I was comfortable

>>> One of the challenging — and most fun, in my book — aspects of flying a light-sport can be the landings. With less mass and less momentum (inertia), the aircraft are more responsive to control inputs and require a more critical landing flare.

giving it one more attempt. Now “familiar” with the wind, my setup was good on all legs — and my training sufficient — to land safely.

At the end of the day, I completed my Sport Pilot training in just over four months, and that was at a somewhat relaxed schedule with some delays. That is two months less than it took me to log the 15 hours I had acquired earlier in the Cadet. And now, once I spend time enjoying flying as a sport pilot, I won't have much further to go for my private license.

Along the way, there clearly were some fits and starts. I had to ask myself some questions to figure out what would work best for me. What was my mission? Did I want to fly solely for recreation, or did I want to be able to fly to that business meeting in another state? Did I want to carry more than one passenger? What kind of airplane did I want to fly? Did I want to fly at night? Could the Sport Pilot rating help me continue on to my private? Most important, what would keep that passion and joy alive and accessible? For me, pursuing the Sport Pilot certificate was the answer, a remedy to the frustration and fear of losing my reacquired enthusiasm to fly. For those of you who might find my story familiar and are considering returning to the skies, or who want to learn to fly, you might find yourself asking the same questions.

But in the end, whichever path is a fit, I'm certain we are all flying, first and foremost, for the same reason — for the joy of it. ✈

>>> Exclusive to the iPad and Web: Check out the March iPad edition to get Connie's take on switching from a standard-category airplane to an LSA as well as a look at an in-flight video taken during her Sport Pilot training. Additional training videos are available on her blog, *Logbook*, at flyingmag.com.