

First Flights — by Jack Prock

Many of our members are involved in the Young Eagles program, which I think is a great opportunity to spread the word about fun and safe flying to the next generation. I want to relate my experience of my first flight and share with you why I think the Young Eagles program is so important.

In the early 70's, I was a boy of 12 with the dream of becoming a pilot. Like many in our group, I would ride my bike to the airport and watch for hours the takeoffs and landings of local aircraft. I had plans to join the Navy and learn how to fly. One of my neighbors at the time was a naval aviator that lived two doors away and attended the Naval Post- Graduate School in Monterey. He was building a BD-5 in his garage and I would watch him in the building process at every opportunity, still dreaming of my own aviation career.

Since I had never been in an airplane, when he asked if I wanted to go flying, I jumped at the opportunity. I was so thrilled with going flying, that I remember not being able to sleep much the night before. That next day he rented a Cessna 150 from a local club and we went flying. Unfortunately for me, his idea of a safe, fun first flight was showing me the performance of the 150 and his piloting abilities. This included hammerhead stalls, spins and power off maneuvers, down to about 20 feet off the ground. To a 12-year old who didn't know much about how airplanes flew, I believed what I saw in the movies ... when the engine stopped, the plane would fall out of the sky!

To say the least he scared me to death. I remember several times during that hour trying to suppress the feeling I was going to wear my lunch. After landing I was so incredibly happy to be back on the ground. My career path was changed forever. After that day, my dream was crushed. At the time, I figured that if I couldn't handle those maneuvers in a small plane, how would I ever be able to handle them in a jet? I know now that those thoughts are irrational, but I still remember the raw fear I had while sitting in that plane.

After giving up my dream of flying for a living, I eventually became an engineer. I didn't fly in a small plane again until my newly acquired stepfather took me flying again in a 150 when I was in my mid-twenties. This second flight re-opened my eyes to flying. My love for airplanes returned. Within a year of that second flight, I had become a private pilot, bought a Grumman Cheetah, and was fulfilling my dream from my childhood.

Now with over 600 hours of flying time, I have given numerous first flights to kids. With the memory of my first flight in the back of my mind, every one of those flights has been as smooth and safe as I can make them. My reason for writing this here is to remind our Young Eagle pilots how impressionable the young passengers can be. I am sure that none of our pilots would ever do anything to intentionally scare these kids. But, if they could keep this story in the back of their minds the next time they give a ride and remember that even maneuvers that to us seem innocuous, may have unintended consequences.