

# How I spent my summer vacation...

by Ethan Brown

I AM GOING INTO GRADE 9 THIS FALL and I am pretty sure that my English teacher is going to make this the first assignment. If the topic is not about my summer vacation then it will be one of those; "Tell me about yourself so that I can understand you better" kind of assignments. Really!! Every kid in this class went camping, went to the lake, or took a long trip to visit some relative. Gag! If I was an English teacher I would NOT want to read sixty essays that were all the same. And that red pen! What is with the red pen? How come every English teacher in the entire universe uses a red pen? At least four years of university and a gazillion years of teaching and the best they can come up with is a red pen?

If I was an English Teacher (ET) I would want to read about some nerd who spent the summer working on alternative energy sources then improving the efficiency of batteries by .03%. No, scratch that – too much data and not enough action. Maybe I would want to read about some ultra-humanitarian who used her allowance as seed money and started an internet Save-the-World fund. Yawn. Noble, but I think it has already been done. Then again, maybe the ET would be interested in an ordinary kid doing something he has always done which turned out to be something out of the ordinary for the others in my class.

For as long as I can remember, my dad and I have been going out to one of the local airports a couple of times during the week, all day Saturday and sometimes Sunday. My dad flies and most of his friends fly. I have spent hundreds of hours in an airplane and I have spent even more time helping out at the gliding field and around the other airports.

Maybe for some kids this would be an extraordinary experience, but for the kids in our gliding club, CAGC, camping at the airport is what we do. The adults sit around the fire and tell the same old stories, over and over and over. They love it when a guest shows up because they can tell the same stories AGAIN. We even have our birthday parties there.

When we were younger we would light a huge fire in the fire-pit and then when it got really dark, we would grab our flashlights and Leo would take us "hunting". We went hunting for coyotes, gophers, bears and probably even alligators. It turns out that Leo was not much of a hunter because one time we actually found a pair of eyes staring at us in the darkness and he trampled one of the kids on his way back to the campers.

So when I told club members that I would like to solo on my 14th birthday, they did not question it. They just said they

would make it happen. So I guess it was not really a big deal. – it was just part of what we were all doing every weekend anyway.

I kind of always knew that you could solo a glider at 14 but I never really thought that a power plane could be soloed at 14 too. Most people seemed to think that you had to be 16. Turns out they were wrong. I would be turning 14 on August 11, so during the winter my mom signed me up for power ground school. Two nights a week and all day Saturday for three weeks.

My dad drove me to the airport and sat through the classes with me but he did not say very much in class and he did not do any of the work for me. It kind of bugged me that he did not help me out more but I understand now that I needed to learn the material and that when I am in the plane by myself I have to know what I am doing. While I was in ground school, I also passed my radio licence. I thought that it would be more difficult but it was actually pretty simple. I think being around airplanes and pilots so much helped me out.

To fly a power plane solo I needed to pass an exam called a PSTAR. For those who do not know, the PSTAR is fifty multiple choice questions and you have to get at least 90% to pass. I took my *From The Ground Up* book to school and read through it during free reading time. The exam was much tougher than I expected but I eventually passed it.

I am not really sure when I started to get serious about flight training in a glider but once I told dad that I wanted to solo at 14, he stopped flying with me. Dad is an instructor but he thought it would be better if the other instructors flew with me. They all have different styles and they each had different things they seemed to focus on, but eventually I figured out what each one would be looking for.

After we landed and the glider was being towed back they would talk, and talk, and talk, and sometimes even wave their hands in the air to emphasize a point. The first time the instructor sat in the golf cart and I walked the wing by myself was interesting. I thought that meant I had flown pretty well. My dad said I had screwed up so bad the instructor didn't know what to say. I hope my dad was joking.

The powered flying was a little more complicated. I wanted to solo in a tail dragger. My dad owns a Piper Cub and he has a share in a Citabria with some other people in the gliding club. We even have a class 1 aerobatic instructor with thousands of

hours of experience who is on the Citabria insurance. It turns out that insurance companies do not like to insure ab initio pilots in taildraggers. I was disappointed when dad made the decision to pay for lessons in a Cessna 172. A 172? Everyone learns to fly in a 172. I wanted to be different. My new plan is to get my recreational license at 16 and fly the Cub until I am 17. At that point I hope to have 100 hours of Pilot-in-Command (PiC) time and then I can start towing for the club.

Once July arrived, I started power flight training at the Red Deer airport. I flew every chance I could but it was a problem sometimes because of weather, mechanical breakdowns, and instructor availability. I could have flown more if I did not care which instructor I flew with but my dad figured that would cost more money because the first flights with a different instructor would be “instructor orientation flights”. It worked out pretty good because my ground school instructors were also the flight instructors. I got to know them and I liked all of them but I felt a bit better with Marshall so I just flew with him when he was available.



When my birthday finally arrived, Marshal came in on his day off and flew two circuits with me and then I taxied back to the hangar and he got out. I flew one circuit, landed and taxied back. The Air Cadets who were doing their flight training met me with a bucket of water.

My parents then drove me to the Innisfail airport and the gliding club CFI flew with me once and then sent me solo. This time there was no bucket of water or anything. I knew something was up, I just could not figure out what. Later in the day, the Bergefalke was available so the CFI said to take it up again. I found a little bit of lift and managed to stay up for about half an hour. One of the other gliders joined me in a thermal and then I left to go try somewhere else. I found out later that the pilot joined me in the thermal because he saw that I was climbing better and he assumed it was the CFI flying. He later joked that it should have been him leading the parade, not the other way around.

My mom brought out food and a birthday cake. While we were getting ready for supper I kept running into people who were carrying buckets of water. They all had some lame story about why they needed the water. I knew something was about to happen when the people sitting beside me began to move away. Drew came around one of the campers with a bucket and he was on the other side of the picnic table carrying the bucket down low so that I would not notice. It was totally obvious. What was not so obvious was that Carol also had a bucket of water and she was behind me ...

As I write this article in September, I have not flown the 172 again. Once gliding is finished for the season, I will have lots of time over the winter to fly it. I fly gliders every chance I get. Every weekend I have at least one check flight but then I can fly on my own after that. I have even taken my dad up for a couple of flights.

Since Canada is one of the few places in the world where you can solo at 14, I guess I can say that for a few days at least, I was the youngest pilot in the world. It is pretty sweet that I was able to solo both a glider and a power plane and, for sure, that's not commonly done. When I am as old as my mom and dad and sitting around the campfire, I can talk about about the time I was the youngest pilot in the world and maybe the kids then will be impressed – but I doubt it.

There are a few things that everyone who reads my story needs to understand: (1) I grew up in this environment. Some people ride horses, some people race cars. We fly airplanes. I have been doing this all of my life and was lucky enough to be born into an aviation family. (2) I'm surrounded every day by aviation people and not one of them said that I could not do it – instead they encouraged me and they supported my goal. (3) The flight training process is so thorough that you just do what you are trained to do. (4) I am just an average guy who is surrounded by people who have allowed my dream to become a reality. □