


# Sandbulte: Experiencing aviation for the first time

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I have never flown before. Even in this part of the world, that bit of personal trivia always seemed to come as a shock to others. I could never understand why. Flying is expensive, and my family never went on vacations far away enough where flying made sense.

But that changed July 2 when I made the drive to the Sioux County Regional Airport for my first ride in an airplane. During the 15-minute trip from Sioux Center to the airport, I had no idea what to anticipate or how exactly I would react. Although I'm not the best with heights or with roller coasters, I was unusually at ease with the thought of this trip.

Once I walked up to the terminal, I got in contact with my pilot, Joe Vander Waal, who wore a mustache suitable for Top Gun. This young man works as a flight instructor at the airport along with many other duties, and after delivering a firm handshake, he threw me a curveball: "I mean to let you fly as much as possible while we're up there."

Well then.

We were to spend about 30 minutes zipping across Sioux County in a 1981 Piper Warrior. Never before has my shortness been such an advantage as when I stepped onto the wing and ducked through the door into this small aircraft. After I scooted over, Joe climbed in too and got to work. With a laminated checklist in hand, his arms snaked around the cockpit in search for his targets, flipping toggles and tapping on gauges. He gave me a quick rundown of the basic steering controls, with a yoke and pedals in front of my seat that matched the ones in front of him. Seeing it all brought to mind an old T-shirt I used to have that said, "Multitasking: The ability to screw several things up at once."

Then we were ready to fire the engine. With a sputter and a rumble like a gasping 60-year-old smoker, the propeller grumbled as it awakened before quickly getting up to speed and smoothing out to a firm, steady hum.

The plane picked up speed as it jogged down the runway, and soon I could feel that we weren't in contact with the earth anymore. The early wobbles of the plane as it gained a few feet of clearance felt something like a car fishtailing on ice.

As Joe got us to proper height above Hyman's Pit south of Sioux Center, he looked at me with a grin turning up the corners of his mustache.

"You ready to take over?" he asked.

He got us pointed to Carmel so I could fly over my house, and then, with my hands on the yoke, I was in (supervised) control.

Cruising about 1,000 feet in the air, I was treated to a sight like nothing I had ever seen in person. We were flying over an ocean of green interrupted by the shimmering streams and pools of water leftover from the flood. Farms pierced the sea of green like little fiefdoms, little kingdoms of corn and cattle dotting a landscape I suddenly barely recognized. Out on the eastern horizon, white windmills silently stood watch, shrouded in the haze of many distant miles.

Soon enough, we were over Carmel and looking down on my house from above, its brown metal roof peeking out from among the trees. Next on the agenda was flying over my family's farm, only a mile southwest. What a treat to see something so familiar from a new perspective. Now about 600 feet high, even the hog buildings and grove took on a new air of wonder as we circled overhead. Joe kindly took over the controls so I could take a picture of the home place. As he looped around once more, I kept an eye out for a pair of rambunctious corgis on the lawn or my father making his way across the yard — sadly, no one was in sight. But in that moment, the smallness of my family's 100-some year history on that patch of the prairie and in the world struck me.

As we then began our way back to the airport, Joe remarked that problems seem so small whenever he's up in the sky. That's part of the appeal for him — there's a peacefulness in that small cockpit with the warm hum of the engine as you skate across the updrafts. And now, I can see for myself that same appeal. Yet, it has left me with one minor problem: After that, how can driving a car ever compare?

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