

FLYING CARPET / By Greg Brown

## SUNSET OVER WINDOW ROCK

AN 'AWESOME' DAY OF FLYING



"What's it like, flying in winter?" asked my young Navajo friend, Tyler.

"It's a blast!" I replied. "Not only does the airplane perform better in cold air, but nothing beats playing tag with snowcapped mountains. You'll love it!"

I'd long promised Tyler and another teen pilot, Zack, this trip during their holiday vacations from school. Both young men aspire to professional piloting careers: Tyler in large commercial airplanes, and Zack via the Air Force Academy. The two hadn't met, so I'd suggested that Zack and I fly to Window Rock, Arizona, where Tyler would take a turn at the controls. There, I hoped the two would become friends and support each other's efforts.



In the process, Jean and I would visit our friends Adriel and Holly Heisey, who first introduced us to Tyler, in nearby Gallup, New Mexico (see "Flying Carpet: Diné Photographers Show," February 2010 Flight Training). Jean and Holly planned some "girl time" while the boys and I flew.

Never propose piloting adventures to young people unless you plan to follow through. By Thanksgiving Zack and Tyler were phoning almost daily to ensure I didn't forget my offer. Between everyone's family obligations, however, Christmas approached without us leaving the ground.

"We'll fly between Christmas and New Year's," I promised, but a blizzard stymied our plans. We then settled on December 31, but Adriel and Holly were hosting New Year's guests. That left only the boys' final vacation weekend for our flying adventure.

"Let's shoot for Saturday, with Sunday as backup," I offered. Finally our trip was in place! At 6:45 Saturday morning, Zack launched us from Flagstaff along Interstate 40 toward Gallup. En route, he regaled Jean and me with stories of attending last summer's Civil Air Patrol cadet camp.

"Bring the boys back for lunch," urged Adriel when he and Holly collected Jean an hour later at Gallup Municipal Airport. By now at home with the controls, Zack steered us 17 miles northwest to Window Rock Airport. He also made the radio calls. Tyler was waiting eagerly with his mother, Valerie, when we landed.

"My mom's never flown before," he enthused. "Can she come with us?"

"Of course!" I answered.

Tyler also had a plan. "Last week, Adriel and I flew over Cove Arch in the Chuska Mountains. I'll take you there today!"

I introduced Valerie to the airplane and briefed her before takeoff. Tyler soon chauffeured us northward over a wonderland of snow-smothered spires and mesas.

"What a thrill it must be, piloting your mom on her first airplane ride," I said.

"Yes, and next time we need to invite Grandma along, too!" he beamed, circling her home in Fort Defiance so Val could photograph it. When the young man skimmed a jagged 9,000-foot butte, I asked its name.

“Adriel said that butte is unnamed, so I should pick one and apply to the U.S. Board on Geographic Names for approval.”

“Too bad you don’t have a girlfriend to name it after,” I quipped. “Imagine the points you’d score! Anyway, it sounds like quite a flight you made with Adriel.”

“It was fun, but when Adriel opened the doors on his FlightDesign CT, I froze because I didn’t bring a coat!” Like parents everywhere, Val rolled her eyes from the back seat.

Tyler was passionate about showing us Cove Arch, but it was still miles away and our passengers were growing restless in the back seat. Besides, we were traversing snow-covered wilderness where help would be hard to find in case of problems. So to Tyler’s significant disappointment I suggested we turn back. Fortunately, he rebounded with a perfect entry to the landing pattern. “Can I put the flaps down, Greg?” he asked.

“You bet, Tyler!”

After dropping Val at Window Rock, Tyler flew Zack and me back to Gallup, where we joined Adriel, Holly, and Jean for pizza and ice cream. Our hosts even indulged me with a stop at Richardson’s Trading Post to buy a pair of my favorite boots.

Tyler now flew Jean, Zack, and me on our final leg to Window Rock. As we walked to meet his waiting aunt in the airport parking lot, I noted the Flying Carpet silhouetted against a stunning Southwestern sunset.

“Be right there!” I said, retrieving my camera. But Jean and Zack intercepted me before I finished shooting. Tyler had left, and I’d missed saying goodbye. I keyed him a quick text message before takeoff.

The sun had set by the time we lifted off, and as Zack guided us homeward we watched the timeless rock beneath us morph from gold to red to blue to gray, and then disappear altogether in blackness as the last vestiges of purple twilight vacated the western sky. With no moon tonight, the only remaining light twinkled from the glowing Milky Way and faraway communities like Winslow off our wing, and later Flagstaff far ahead.

“This is my first time flying at night!” said Zack, captivated. The young man expressed wonder at glowing Flagstaff as we approached to land, and then remarked on the airport’s colorful runway lights.

Exhausted, I somehow mustered energy to check my computer before rolling into bed that evening. There, a Facebook message waited from Tyler. “Today was awesome!” he wrote. Who could argue with that?

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