



## NICKI RAE ACKER

For many pilots, it seems that flying has always been a lifelong dream. Not so for me. For a long time I was content to be a passenger and a navigator. I wasn't afraid of flying, I just didn't want to be a pilot—that was too much responsibility and pilots had to know too much! Then in 1997 I took the Pinch Hitter course offered by GDAC and it changed my life. Until then I had never even touched the controls (or wanted to), but because I often flew right seat with my husband, Dick, taking the course seemed like a good idea. After that, I was much more of a participant when we flew.

In 2000 I decided to go for a second dose of Pinch Hitter, this time along with two other women from Clare. I still didn't think I wanted to be a pilot. But sometime during that weekend—I'm not sure when it happened—I started thinking, "Maybe I could do this pilot thing after all." On the ride home, Becky Smith and I talked ourselves into trying one hour of flight instruction, this time in the *left* seat, "just to see if we liked it." After that first hour, I never once thought I would not get my license and quitting never crossed my mind.

That's how my roller coaster ride of learning to fly began. Luckily, there were more highs than lows! I do believe that I had some advantages over many student pilots: we owned the airplane, we live only about six miles from the airport, and a top-notch instructor was available any time I wanted to fly. My boss even let me come in late on mornings when the weather was nice so I could fly before work. But the two biggest pluses were Becky and Dick. I was very fortunate to have a good friend learning to fly at the same time and with the same instructor. It was invaluable to have someone else there who was going through the very same things I was. Becky and I even soloed on the same day! Dick was (and still is) 1000% supportive and it was so nice to have my very own, in-house aviation consultant! I could wake him from a sound sleep and ask questions about pitot static systems, airspace, or to practice "tower talk." Believe me, we did have some strange 4:00 a.m. conversations!

I passed my check ride on March 16, 2001. I can honestly say it was the most satisfying feeling of accomplishment I've ever experienced. There was a quote by Patty Wagstaff in the October 2000 issue of *AOPA Flight Training* was my mantra:

"I'm impressed with anyone who sticks with it to get the private license....that's still a big accomplishment. There aren't too many people who can walk around and say 'I'm a pilot.' It's a big deal."

Dick and I do most of our flying in a 1946 Cessna 120 taildragger. We have taken it on trips all over the U.S. and even to St. Johns, Newfoundland. We joke about allowing time for the "geezer factor" when we travel (a phrase borrowed from Rinker Buck in *Flight of Passage*)—wherever we go, the old guys always have to come out and admire the airplane and talk about the one just like it that they used to fly or the one they learned in, etc.

I suppose an autobiography should cover more than just the aviation part of my life.....I am also:

- a Yooper, originally from Manistique, Michigan.
- a two-time graduate of Central Michigan University where I have been employed for 24 years (currently Assistant Director of Career Services)
- an alto clarinetist in the Central Michigan Area Concert Band
- married to Dick since 1989
- a chocoholic
- a future *Jeopardy* contestant (or at least I fantasize about it!)