

Ultra-Light Fright Flight

By Mariah Burton Nelson

"I'M TOO YOUNG to die," said Larry FOX, another Weekend writer. "You go."

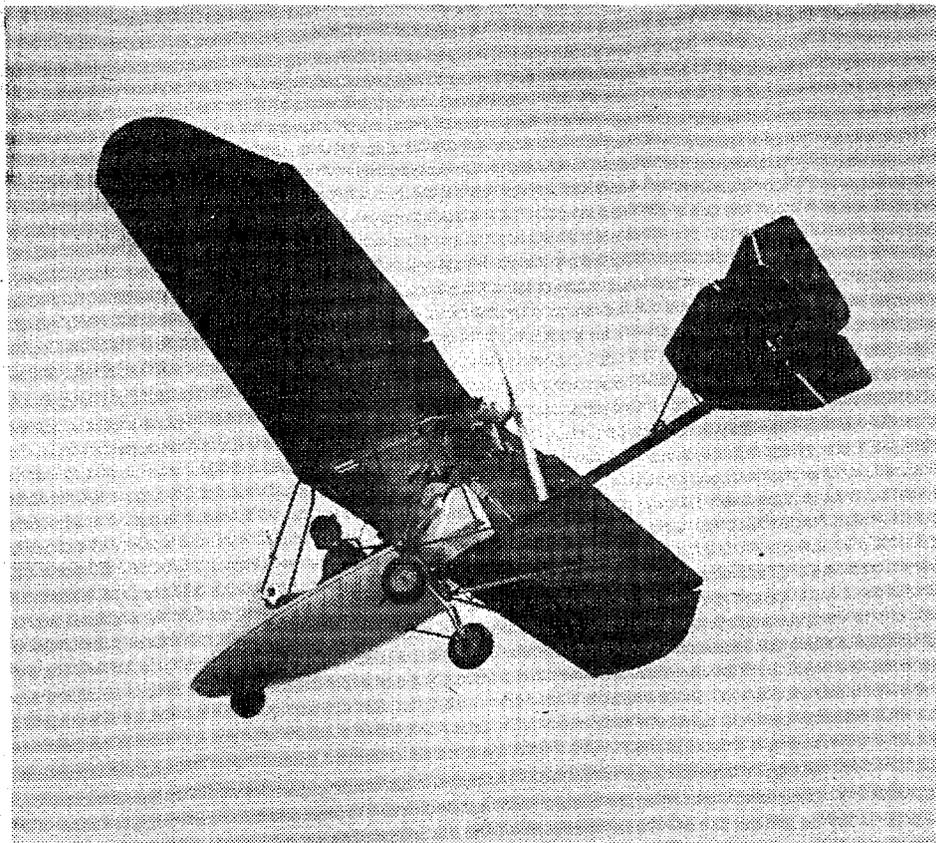
That's how it came about that I flew in a flimsy, open-cockpit aircraft not with normal trepidation, but with death on my mind.

Before liftoff I talked with Bruce Peters, owner of Washington Sky Sports, a company specializing in tiny, dragonfly-shaped aircraft called Spectrum Ultralights. Peters has 12 years of piloting experience, he assured me. Even if the engine goes out, the plane can safely glide down. It can land in a cornfield. "You're in for a treat," he promised.

The day of liftoff we drove to a short runway behind a southern Maryland trailer park. I wore my aviator shades and my closest approximation of a flight jacket; Bruce wore normal clothes. After Bruce's pre-flight inspection, I did my own. Much to my horror, I saw plane parts fastened with bungee cords, zippers and duct tape. ("Non-essential parts," Bruce explained.) Made of Dacron, the wings were sewn in the zig-zag stitch I used to use in home ec. Maybe it's me, but I find it difficult to trust an airplane constructed on a Singer.

To make matters worse, Peters, a dimple-cheeked man with the springy step of a Muppet, is only 25 years old — which, since that's younger than I am, is very young. Turns out his 12 years of experience began on a hang glider at age 13. For the past six years he's been performing loops, stalls, and wingovers in Stearman biplanes in Bealton's Flying Circus. My fate was in the hands of a kid who gets his jollies flying upside down.

"Today is a good day to die for all the things in my life are present," said Crazy Horse, which was very evolved of him, but when it came to the possibility of my exchanging life for one airborne thrill today



BY LARRY MORRIS

Bruce Peters in an open-cockpit ultra-light plane.

longer in my reckless teens or roaring twenties, I have noticed that the more intensely I love life, the less romantic I feel about an early death.

Yet I can't play it safe just because cautious colleagues and homemade airplanes petrify me. "I don't need to fly because flying doesn't frighten me; I need to fly *even though* it frightens me," writes Diane Ackerman in *On Extended Wings*, the saga of her flying lessons. "To me, real courage . . . has to do with keeping one's passion for life intact, one's curiosity at full stretch, when one is daily hemmed in by death, disease and lesser mayhem of the heart. I decided it was as good a day to die as any.

Also I trusted Bruce. On the way to the

plate: Vader 1) carefully and confidently, even slowing to the required 5 mph through the trailer park. He spoke with knowledge and humility — a rare combination at any age — about weather patterns and the physics of flight.

Before I knew it I was strapped into the dragonfly, head protected by a helmet ("If we crash, should I try to land on my head?"), control stick between my knees. In front of me was a motorcycle-sized windshield; behind me was Bruce, now elevated to the status of savior. "You've got controls back there, too, right?" I squeaked into the control stick in my right hand, the throttle in my left, and the pedals under my feet all

First we hopped, baby-bird style. Taxi down the runway, nose up, wheels off the ground, wheeee . . . and set her down. "Do that again," I said, a child tossed in the air. On the second hop, I was grinning like a toothpaste commercial. On the third, we abandoned the earth altogether.

I can't speak for Orville Wright, but I'd bet that the first time he soared — not that 12-second, 120-foot skip but his first real flight — he felt, along with elation, another primal feeling: terror. After all, many of his predecessors died in the attempt. Flying is not natural, despite the ubiquity of flying dreams; anyone with sense should be, at very least, nervous. Flying in an ultralight is like heading toward the heavens on a lounge chair. You're not even in the plane — there is no "in." You're seated, legs outstretched; lean to the right or left and a seatbelt is the only thing keeping you from your first and last skydive.

But it was, indeed, a treat. Cruising directly into the wind at 3,000 feet, I felt suspended, motionless, like an Amelia Earhardt actress with a fake earth below. We peered at the shimmering Potomac, its yardstick bridges, Monopoly neighborhoods. I looked for cornfields, just in case, and spotted instead our own shadow, surprisingly beautiful as it bumped over trees and houses. My stomach plunked into place as if, after abandoning it on a hundred youthful Ferris wheel rides, I finally caught up with it.

Bruce showed me how to turn the plane and how to keep it level. After a while he put his hands on my shoulders. "Congratulations," he said. "You've been flying the plane for a full minute."

"Don't you dare have a heart attack," I answered.

The truth is, I like to be scared, though I prefer having *been* scared. So when we touched down, returning to the conspicuously flat two-dimensional world, I was all smiley again — scared silly — and grateful for another risk taken and survived. Thanks, Larry.

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