



My Private Olympus

BY RICH KARLGAARD

The desire to fly a small airplane, if it appears in one at all, normally does so in youth. But not for me. Quite suddenly at age 45 I was gripped by the idea of launching myself skyward.

One would like to say such a motivation was mostly ideological, and it was. To start there is ultimate freedom—roaming the skies. This is pleasing to both halves of the soul, the secular-libertarian and the transcendent. Both halves, incidentally, get to share another pleasure, dominion over the earth, precisely the feeling one enjoys at 5,500 feet on a clear day.

On top of this is the sublime delight of drinking Avgas by the quarter ton and burping out cubic miles of noise. Nothing annoys lefty Greens more.

So that's why I fly.

The stupidest thing one can do, which I immediately did, is go out and buy an airplane before one knows how to fly it. Not just any airplane, but the *prince* of single-engine planes, the Mercedes-like Beech Bonanza. My A36, a 1994 model, had every goodie a pilot could want—leather yoke, air-conditioning, six cylinders, six seats. The plane cost the yearly salaries of fifteen Appalachian social workers (another sublime thought). Before *Spectator* readers tell me how rock stupid it was to buy a 202-mph retractable-gear, complex “doctor killer” as a training aircraft, let me tell you that it was March 2000 when

Rich Karlgaard is Publisher of Forbes.

I made the decision. Life was bountiful. Nasdaq had just hit 5000. Yahoo was worth \$100 billion, more than GM, Ford and Daimler-Chrysler combined. A company I had founded, Garage.com, had just filed for its IPO. I was going to be rich—didn't it say so in the IPO prospectus? I certainly felt it. What's a third of a million dollars? A trifle.

I'm not going to bore you with the sad story of how Garage.com's IPO never floated, or how, a few months after that, I actually started weeping when the mechanic presented a bill of \$4,500 for what seemed to me hardly any work on three of the Bonanza's six cylinders—\$4,500 for three cylinders! My wife started to weep, too, saying that my new sport had crowded out her dreams of a kitchen remodel and were keeping the kids in public school. The Bonanza went bye bye in February this year. But this is all side stuff. The main point is that until this summer, still short of obtaining my certificate, I did not fly. And I learned that I was very unhappy deprived of my aerial Prozac.

A little history on the economics of flying:

In 1978, the number of small aircraft built by Cessna, Mooney, Piper, Beechcraft, and others peaked at over 18,000. By 1994, the number had fallen to about 900. Some blame the 1986 tax law, which wiped out deductions for individual owner-pilots. But most blame trial lawyers. The evil shylocks convinced juries over the years that whenever a blind-drunk pilot flew over the mountains at night in a rainstorm and vanished, well, Cessna, you see, was to blame because it failed to warn him

of this risk. Yes, and it clearly was Mooney's fault whenever a 20-hour student pilot buzzed his girlfriend's house at 200 feet, stalled and spun it in. Ditto for the lucky pilot who was getting himself initiated into the “mile-high club,” forgot to switch fuel tanks and ran out of gas. Litigation exploded in the 1980s, and embedded itself into the price of every new airplane. In 1968, a new Beechcraft A36 cost \$38,700. In 2001 it costs \$645,000. During a period when the CPI has increased four-fold, the price of a new plane has gone up 18-fold. Thanks again, trial lawyers. Dirtbags.

If you take up flying, you'll be in for a shock when you visit an airport and see the fleet of 1970's-vintage trainers. The seats are torn, the plastic is peeling. Quite a number smell vaguely of puke. The general aviation fleet is old, because so few planes were built over the last twenty years. Last year the number of new planes crawled back to 2,500. In recessionary 2001, the number could slide back to 2,000. The entire fleet of piston planes in the U.S. is guessed to be about 300,000. With crashes and rust, stocks are actually delpeping.

So for the last ten years, one's flying options have come down to this: buy a new plane and dispatch your wife to laundry jobs and your kids to public schools in ripped blue jeans. Or else manfully rent old junk. But now, thanks to the Internet, a middle way has been born: fractional ownership or leasing. It's a perfect example of what the Web does best. By speeding up information flow and lowering costs, the Net can “make markets” that had been previously too expensive or inconveniently “sticky.” And thus today there is a Web-based liquid market in new aircraft, for pilots who want to own as little as one-eighth of an airplane.

In June I plunked down \$8,000 for a one-

eighth lease of a brand new Cessna 172SP. I doubled up to a quarter lease a month later. For these modest sums I get to fly 150 hours a year. On top of the down payment, I pay about \$800 a month in Avgas and service fees. All said, I bought the equivalent of a Lexus 450, as opposed to the equivalent of a Maui condo. My kids get to go to private schools, and my wife once again talks to me without weepy outbursts.

Oh, yes, and I finally got my private pilot's certificate. The actual checkride consists of 90 minutes of oral quizzing and another 90 minutes of flight maneuvers that must be performed within the FAA's prescribed standards. These include making 45-degree bank angle turns for a full circle to the right, and then one to the left, without gaining or losing 100 feet or the examiner's lunch. A frightening moment comes when the examiner tells the student to close his eyes, then puts the plane in a dive, a stall or a near spin. Looking solely at the instruments, the student is required to put the plane back on the straight and level within five seconds. Word is that 60 percent of students pass on their first try. I did, even though I bounced my short-field landing and momentarily forgot how to do radio tracking.

In fact, tracking one's course by VHF Omidirectional Radio is a sore subject with many new pilots, and it should be. VOR was state-of-the-art for a generation, until the much superior Global Positioning Satellite system became cheap and available in the 1990s. Today, every pilot uses GPS if he has it, and most do. Dial in your destination's three-letter airport code (it already knows where you *are*) and pop!—there's an electronic map, a direct course, the heading to your destination, current ground speed in knots, and estimated time of arrival. The newest versions even include pictographs of mountains, lakes and forbidden military airspace. Accuracy is within a few feet.

Global positioning has knocked VOR back to the Stone Age. It is getting so good it nearly can land a plane. So, what does American aviation's governing body think about GPS? It ignores it! To the FAA, modern marvels of navigation do not officially exist. And student pilots are required to play along with this criminally dangerous game; they have to knuckle down and master VOR, including (I kid you not) Morse Code and spastic needles. It's the same old depressing story: regulations, etched into law when they made sense, then

hanging around long after their useful life. Bureaucracies ratchet only one way—more authority. And it takes a real crisis to kill them.

I shouldn't be ungrateful. Private aviation is nearly impossible in Europe, with its high population densities, silly noise restrictions and Avgas prices that can reach \$6 a gallon. Flying a small airplane for giggles is feasible really only in the U.S., Canada and Australia. In the U.S. it takes a minimum of 40 hours of in-flight training to become a private pilot. The national average is 70 hours; for me, older and admittedly chicken, it took over 100 hours. This does not count classroom training for the written exam, which one can easily avoid (the training, not the exam) with a \$300 CD-ROM course. That's how I did it, hunched over my Sony Vaio laptop studying aerodynamics and density altitudes aboard commercial jets, traveling from my home in California to Forbes headquarters in New York. Instructors run \$25 an hour in rural areas, up to \$60 an hour near big cities. Throw in plane rentals and figure on about \$10,000 to obtain a license.



Worth it? In my book, yes. With a private certificate one can fly anywhere in the U.S. (outside of restricted military areas), cruise at any altitude below 18,000 feet, and land at any airport, except (post September 11) those within a 30-mile radius of Boston, New York and Washington D.C. To do that, you'll need to obtain the next rung on the pilot ladder, an instrument certificate. This is the rating John F. Kennedy, Jr. did not have. Beginning a descent from 5,500 feet into Martha's Vineyard in his new Piper Saratoga HP, he lost the horizon in the evening gloaming. This is frighteningly easy to do. Flying by the gauges is counterintuitive; I know, because one day while flying with an instructor in my Bonanza through the clouds over Los Angeles, I became *convinced* we were nose down and losing altitude. All my instincts screamed at me: pull the yoke and raise the nose! The gauges told another story. We were flying perfectly straight and level. Had I done what every cell in my brain wanted me to do, I would have slowed the Bonanza's airspeed,

perhaps to the point of a stall.

Instrument flying has some freedom issues: it puts you under the constant orders of air traffic control. Liberty to do as you like is sacrificed for the comfort of knowing that one is being watched, and steered clear of any obstacles or other planes. In fact, two airplanes under instrument control have never collided in the U.S., a remarkable record. The debate in 2001 is, can onboard technology do as good a job? That is, if every plane has GPS, onboard maps, radio and radar, why shouldn't pilots take responsibility for seeing and avoiding each other, thereby winning back some freedom and saving the taxpayer some money? The largest private pilot lobby in the U.S., the Aircraft Owners and Pilot's Association, is perversely determined to preserve the status quo. It fears losing free use of ATC, and getting no regulatory, tax or litigation relief in return. But such a tradeoff, if it could be worked out, would be worth it. Costs would fall, safety would improve and more people could afford to fly.

What a shame that flying costs so much and is regulated so dumbly! It is the most fun I've ever had from a sport. Three days after getting my certificate, I took up my first willing passenger (or victim) in my time-shared Cessna 172SP. Jeff, an old college roommate, was in town for our Stanford 25th reunion. I picked him up at dawn, so we could squeeze in our flying before the football game and festivities later that day. Out of San Jose Reid-Hillview airport we climbed south, then leveled out over Monterey. We continued down to Big Sur, steep-turned around the lighthouse and got clearance from Monterey Approach to fly over Pebble Beach at 2,000 feet. You could see whitecaps crashing the shore and golfers on Pebble's fabled 17th green. We continued up the coast, circling the Santa Cruz amusement park and its 1920's era mountainous wooden roller-coaster. Then I shoved the throttle home and we climbed over the mountains, enjoying glass air and fifty-mile views. We floated on full flaps down into Reid Hillview and, to make it a perfect day, flared to a feather-smooth landing. A pure greaser, pilots call it.

Flying is a huge kick and a privilege, too. Before the Greens or the FAA decide to take this one away, I intend to visit every state in the Union, in a small airplane. Level at 2,500 on a clear day you can watch pass under your cowlings the most God-blessed landscape that ever was or will be. ✎

BEN STEIN'S DIARY

SATURDAY
Little Rock

Here I am at a big football field, maybe I should say stadium, in Little Rock. Rain was predicted, but so far it's blustery but pleasant. I came here two days ago with my wife and son to attend a reunion of my wife's father's family, the Denmans, and to see the Razorbacks play against the Gamecocks of South Carolina. I happen to love college football at Little Rock, and I am in a great mood.

Last night we had an immense dinner party at a fabulous restaurant called Capers in a suburb of Little Rock. The only surprise came from a young woman who is a third cousin of my wife, perhaps even more slightly related. Upon my asking her about herself, I learned that she is a "King Fahd Fellow" at The University of Arkansas in Fayetteville. She got to be this sort of scholar because she was a fine student at an Arkansas high school. In particular, she did well in the Model United Nations and also in the (yes) "Model Arab League." Yes, it turns out that throughout Arkansas and in many other states, there are such things as the Model Arab League in high school. Students choose which Arab country they wish to be, and then they have debates and write papers about problems common to the Arab world. A typical paper might be about how to deal with coercion by a non-Arab nation of a large group of Arab civilians. Hmm. I wonder what that might refer to.

I asked the lovely young lady how the Model Arab League got started in her state. She said she did not know exactly, but she thought it was started by that charmer, Senator J. William Fulbright, a stupendous enemy of Israel and hater of Richard Nixon. But, she added, the program got rolling in a big way in about 1990. Now, let's see...who the heck was governor of Arkansas then...Oh, yeah. It was that great guy, Bill Clinton, and his wife, the Senator from Gaza. The ones that all us Jews voted for so enthusiastically.

It turns out, moreover, that there is a J. William Fulbright Center at the university. Within this is the King Fahd Center, which gives out scholarships to students in Arkansas and elsewhere. The students have to take Arabic all four years in college and show a

continuing interest in Arab affairs.

Now, don't get me wrong. I don't think the Model Arab League is illegal. I don't think it's treasonous in the slightest to be involved with it. Not at all. But it certainly is true that the Arab League takes a very harshly critical line against the United States on many issues, especially, of course on Israel. And, to say this once out of many times, several of its members are actively involved in terrorism against the United States. I wonder what the reaction would have been in the United States if Khrushchev had wanted to start a "Model Warsaw Pact" or a "Model Comintern," with chapters in high schools in Arkansas and elsewhere. In retrospect, it looks as if the Comintern might actually have had a far more modest set of aims with regard to the United States than many members of the Arab League have. What would have been the reaction if Stalin had wanted to set up "Lenin Fellows" for persons who studied Marxist-Leninist Theory and Russian for four years? I wonder if the students engaged in the Model Arab League have any idea that many members of that league would endorse the cold-blooded murder of Israeli children. I wonder if the sweet-faced kids who get the King Fahd Fellowships are aware that Osama bin Laden is a Saudi, that much of his funding comes from Saudi Arabian citizens, and that Saudi Arabia itself has played a highly equivocal role in the terrorists' war on the United States? The newspapers are filled with stories about how Saudi Arabia is *just not helping* us track down the terrorists' cells.

Maybe I'm confused because I am an unabashed supporter of Israel. But aren't Model Arab Leagues peculiar things to have in a country that many Arab states hate and terrorize? Isn't King Fahd a somewhat dicey role model for American young people? Doesn't he have multiple wives and concubines? Don't they have summary execution for women convicted of adultery? This seems like a bizarre role model in a world where we elevate women's rights to iconic status, and rightly so. The whole subject seems extremely strange to me. I wonder why we have never heard about this before, or at least I have not.

I often wonder just how deeply Saudi Arabia, with its vast CIA connections and its immeasurable wealth and its appetite for

friends in high places, must have its hooks into the ruling class in America. Don't get me wrong: so does Israel. But Israel does not pay for people to blow up Americans. And Israel's hooks into America are fairly obvious, and I don't think any serious person would doubt that Israel's goals do not include destruction of "The Great Satan," the United States of America.

Anyway, let's forget all about this. The mass murders were a whole month ago, and we are hard at work bombing Afghanistan, and here we all are happy as clams at a football game in Arkansas under threatening skies. (I'm kidding, of course, about ever forgetting.) The fans around us are amazingly polite, as people in Arkansas always are. The game was supposed to be a rout by South Carolina, but in fact it was not at all. The Razorbacks held onto a slender lead, and we all screamed ourselves hoarse with glee as Arkansas won.

I could easily have been killed on one of those hijacked flights. I could easily have been crushed or burned to death in the World Trade Center. Much more to the point, if I had been born twenty years earlier (or even five years earlier) in Poland or France or Hungary or Holland, I would have been murdered gruesomely by the Nazis. Instead, I am getting mobbed for autographs at Memorial Stadium in Little Rock. I am a lucky, lucky guy. There is nothing like being in the heart of America.

SUNDAY

And here is more good news. I am at the airport in Little Rock waiting for a plane to take me to Pittsburgh and thence to State College, Pennsylvania. My plane is delayed by about two hours. But everyone at the airport is so cheerful, so friendly, so filled with good cheer that I really do not mind at all having this wait. It's sort of a big tailgate party minus the alcohol. This is what I endlessly marvel at: Americans are such super cheery persons. This one knows my father-in-law. That one knows a friend from the White House. The other was in the audience when I spoke last April at Washington & Lee. One young woman is studying ancient Greek. Another is studying economics. Boys from South Carolina are flirting with them. Everybody is in a great mood.

Finally our Embraer airliner made in Brazil came in and US Air whisked us off to Pittsburgh. It was a model flight except for