

ep-3-reality-sets-in-1

[00:00:00] Hello. And welcome to the third episode of if women were meant to fly, the sky would be pink reality sets in, I mean it, or turn this episode, I'll pick up from the taster and introduce you to the next phase of my training, my struggles with childhood trauma and my deeper involvement in San Francisco life.

[00:00:50] In the last episode, I had made some bad decisions in my effort and haste to impress and, prove that I was capable of becoming a good professional pilot. Everyone's had some [00:01:00] experience with that, I'm sure, it's one of those things that happens as part of the learning process. Be it learning to ride your bike, drive a car, or fly a plane.

[00:01:09] And whilst everyone makes mistakes in this profession, it can be catastrophic. Years later, I saw it happen in my students, particularly in low hour pilots who are pushing boundaries and confidence levels, excited by the amount of knowledge they have absorbed in a relatively short period of time., but overconfident in their abilities, experience comes with time.

[00:01:29] There's no rushing it. I did have one favorite exercise which allowed me to let off steam and enjoy my flying without fear of judgment or pressure. I would head out in the Beechcraft sundowner. A low wing, single engine, four-seater aircraft, which just spelt fun, destination, Nut tree airport. The famous Nut tree airport located in beautiful Solano County, California midway between San Francisco and Sacramento.

[00:01:56] This was unbelievable fun in the 1980s, [00:02:00] park the plane and take the nut tree railroad train into the airport terminal to sample the famous burger and fries, buy souvenirs. relax, and then fly back again. Much the same as I might do today, taking the family to the coast for fish and chips and a walk on the beach.

[00:02:15] But instead I flew, it was the best place ever. And it was one of those flights that serve to build up my confidence again and again, as more friends asked to go with me for a day out. However, during this time, memories of my early childhood trauma started to make an appearance, seemingly triggered by setbacks or perceived setbacks.

[00:02:35] In my flight training, I'd come a long way, both literally and emotionally from the scarred, scared youngster from Lagos, but each knock back seemed to validate my father's cruel treatment of me, and I started to doubt my ability to see this through. Maybe I was actually stupid and lazy. Maybe I wasn't capable of achieving anything, perhaps he'd been right.

[00:02:56] I was beginning to self-sabotage.

I [00:03:00] started to develop a fear of basic flying exercises that I had to perform solo. Instead I would head out to the coast in half moon Bay to practice the simple landings I was now good at, avoiding the more challenging procedures I would need to learn to pass the next phase check.

[00:03:16] Luckily for me, someone was watching could see exactly what was going on and was taking notes. This senior instructor would take control of the next phase of my journey and be both teacher and confidante, as I navigated the next patch of turbulence.

[00:03:38] After my wakeup call with a foggy bay area, I found that I was exceptionally over sensitive about solo flights, even the fun ones. I had managed to drive down to San Jose after my near miss and discuss my feelings with Chris. She tried to reassure me that things like this happen and that it didn't make me a bad pilot, if anything, it focused me in on my ability at the [00:04:00] time, and the fact that through experience and building my hours, my response to situations would change. It took me a while to forgive myself and accept that this was all part of the learning process. But in the meantime, it also forged closer relationships with my fellow students. I found that by confiding in them, it helped us to support each other as a community of student pilots.

[00:04:23] Some of the guys brushed my experience off as no way comparable to some of the stupid things they had done on solo flights, which could have led them to literally crash and burn. They also confided in me and said it was something they wouldn't talk to their instructors about because men didn't do that.

[00:04:39] Some of the conversations I had with them over the following weeks and months would assist me as an instructor to deal with both the emotional and practical elements of learning to fly. As well as always being together through ground school and flying lessons, we decided as a group that we would venture out socially.

[00:04:55] San Francisco was 30 minutes up the road and beckoned for many different [00:05:00] reasons. We would often try to meet up at the airport and take one car into the city to sightsee and eat lunch at fisherman's Wharf. Fisherman's Wharf was a favorite due to its location by the water and its proximity to Alcatraz a veritable destination for tourists of which we were part.

[00:05:17] There never seemed to be a shortage of enthusiasm for visits to both, the weeks were hard, and that seemed to make us all feel the need to really let off steam and party at the weekends. This particular Saturday saw a healthy group of four of us, myself, the guy from the Nigerian air force, another from the police force. and yet another from the Nigerian postal service, all sponsored to undertake further flight training and make a difference when they returned to Nigeria. So, keep this picture in your mind listeners, we were four black folk venturing into the big city for a fun day out. What could possibly go wrong?

[00:05:52] Well, as we drove up highway 101, the main artery into the city, it seemed uncharacteristically quiet, [00:06:00] but this didn't faze us. At least we'd be more likely to get a parking spot nearer to where we wanted to be. Lombard street. Now Lombard street is known for the one way block on Russian Hill, between Hyde and Leavenworth streets, where eight sharp turns, are said to make it the most crooked street in the world, we would usually have attempted to drive down it, but this time we decided it might be more fun to walk. We found a great parking spot and headed off in the direction of the wiggly street, as we called it, about halfway there, we decided to take a shortcut between streets and duly made our way down a fair sized alleyway. What greeted us on the other side can only be described as

the stuff of nightmares. I exited first and was on the verge of encouraging my companions to hurry up, when I saw the first flash of white. At first, I thought it was the usual artistic display that you're used to seeing in San Francisco, everything quirky and out there.

[00:06:56] But as I emerged out of the alleyway and into the sunlight, [00:07:00] I slowly realized all white significance of the now visible uniform belonging to the KU Klux Klan. Initially I was so taken aback, I thought I was seeing things I wasn't processing the picture accurately. Surely this was something in my lifetime that I was only ever going to see on newsreels in the 1950s or TV in Texas or the deep South, the now terrifyingly visible uniform of hatred, racism and homophobia came directly into view.

[00:07:31] I was too late to push my companions back into the alleyway, and I was too frightened to run. My legs were rooted to the spot, my mind searching for a way out of what I couldn't believe was happening. How did we not realize this was happening? How were there no signs? Why on earth were they here? of all places.

[00:07:50] Surely San Francisco, bastion of all things out and proud would be the last place on earth these bigots would be. On reflection, I think that was the point. [00:08:00] They were asserting their right to come into places as they wished and stir up hatred and divisiveness. We had now worked out, that far from blending in with the crowd, we stood out," the Nigerian contingent had arrived". A few of my companions grabbed hold of me and we took off up another side street. Unfortunately, the side streets were also littered with stray, KU Klux, Klan supporters, women, and children waiting on the men folk. The looks of hatred were palpable, as we tried to negotiate our way out of the white sheet convention. It actually wasn't the sight of them that there was the main catalyst, but the accompanying silence.

[00:08:41] And with that silence, came an air of absolute hatred and belief in the Aaryan race. We didn't hang around to see if this would turn nasty. We found our way back to where we had parked and left the city behind. Regrouping at San Carlos airport restaurant, we half joked about our near [00:09:00] miss with the clansman. Privately., I suspect my friends were as shaken as I was by what had happened. It was a sight of American life we hoped never to bump into again.

[00:09:18] As I built my flight time and completed the necessary ground school subjects, I was starting to do a lot more cross country flying, this involved a lot of different scenarios from just local flights, more interaction with air traffic control, different airports and procedures, decision making regarding weather and instrument flying, the latter was something I had struggled with both with my flying and with the theory.

[00:09:40] I seem to be behind the curve all the time, and with instrument training, this was something you couldn't afford. I was now working on the instrument portion of my commercial license and I had the deputy chief flying instructor as my teacher. Her name was Beth. She was an extremely experienced instructor, small in stature and highly impressive as a [00:10:00] pilot.

[00:10:01] She was to become a friend and confidante as I negotiated the ups and downs of flight training, and my wavering sense of self-worth. She worked patiently with me, both in the air and on the ground to get me through my ground school exams, as well as my numerous phase checks. It was quite a struggle, some days several key instruments on my flight panel were intentionally blocked out to teach me how to rely on the bare minimum. My frustration appeared in the form of swearing and sour looks, but my instructor kept me focused and compliant until I had proven, mostly to myself, what I could do. I got there in the end, and for those weeks of difficult, hard graft, I was rewarded with outings to fly ins.

[00:10:44] Now these usually took place at small precariously positioned airports and were friendly, laid back gatherings. I grew to look forward to them and enjoy them, and they were frequented by revered and talented aviators. Over time, my confidence grew, and to [00:11:00] my delight, I began to feel as if I was one of them.

[00:11:04] Flyins were a collection of pilots and their machines, of every size and type, gathering at a small airport with usually one runway, we would spend time in each other's company whilst oohing and aahing at the assortment of aircraft on display. This particular airport had a tabletop runway. Now a tabletop runway is a runway that is located at the top of a Hill, mostly with one or both ends adjacent to a steep precipice, which drops into a deep Gorge.

[00:11:31] This type of runway creates an optical illusion, which requires a very precise approach by the pilot. There were barbecues, pleasure flights for non aviators, and familiarization flights, for those who liked to the idea of having a go in an aircraft, they hadn't flown before. There were also landing competitions, which were a big draw.

[00:11:50] So prior to your arrival, you needed to sign up with your aircraft to take part. The runway was marked with a line where you simply had to land on it or closest to it to be in with a chance of winning. [00:12:00] There were some caveats to this. Once established on your final approach, you weren't allowed to add power to maintain or increase your height above the ground.

[00:12:09] Once you had your power setting established, you were only allowed to reduce power until you wheels touched the ground. As you can imagine the landing competitions at airports like these were challenging to say the least, occasionally terrifying, which sometimes resulted in slightly sodden underwear. Many of the competitors were wily old pilots who had done everything from military flying to crop spraying to sightseeing, flight instructing and more. Our age ranges varied from 18 to 80. And the aircraft ranged in variety as well. Crop sprayers, training aircraft and aerobatic aircraft. And there were a whole range of aircraft assembled and more often than not, depending on their handling characteristics and or looks, their names were changed for the amusement of us all.

[00:12:57] The Cessna 150's we flew, [00:13:00] were known as the one filthy, a buck and a half, or cesspit. The aerobatic version was the aero splat, the larger Cessna 172 was a sky chicken and the RG model was, the strutless or gutless. Now Piper, PA 28's, which were also single engine training aircraft were known as warriors or more aptly worriers on account of the fairly frequent mishaps at the time,

[00:13:31] The PA 38 tomahawks, which were a training aircraft that resembled an angry chicken to my mind where the trauma Hawks, Terra Hawks or trauma rocks. Now the beech sundowner, which I personally loved to fly was known as a slow downer on account of it being a rather sluggish aircraft.

[00:13:52] Early business jets were saddled with names like that as well. The learjet 23 was known as the fear jet. Uh, the first [00:14:00] Cessna citation that I flew once qualified, which had less than spectacular performance, was known as a levitation, a Crustacean, a mutation or a slowtation. As you can tell, I learned a lot during this time, met so many inspiring characters and had fun whilst doing it.

[00:14:19] My training was far from complete, but my confidence was gradually improving, and San Francisco had begun to feel like home.

[00:14:28] Thank you for listening. Your comments and reviews are very much appreciated. Thank you to Lucy, who's done all the editing as usual. In the next episode, I will introduce you to some precarious cross-country excursions over the Sierra Nevada mountains and good times to be had in Las Vegas and Reno.

[00:14:47] Additional instrument training ground school gets me through a rough patch. I meet yet another person unconnected with flying that provides the first sympathetic counseling sessions to sooth my mental health. Commercial license flight test [00:15:00] over, I receive an extra ordinary offer. .