

ep-2-san-francisco-beckons

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00:00 Enid Otun: Hello, and welcome to the second episode of If Women Were Meant to Fly, the Sky Would be Pink: San Francisco beckons. I'm Enid Otun. In this episode are expanding on the individuals who are instrumental in starting me on my path to becoming a professional pilot in the USA as I begin my commercial training.

[music]

00:52 EO: In episode one of my podcast, I introduced myself, I told you about my difficult early life, and described the framework of the beginning of my flying career. What I did not do was introduce you all to the exceptional individuals who were instrumental in making this happen. What you have to remember is that whilst I was always tenacious and determined, I lacked any real self-belief. When you feel like that, it can be surprising and confusing when others see potential in you. It takes a while to come around to that way of thinking.

01:26 EO: The people I'm about to describe started that process for me, and gradually, with their patience and encouragement, I avoided self-sabotage and learned to be kind to myself. The first man to set me on this path was the British Caledonian co-pilot on my first ever pleasure flight that I talked about in episode one. The second was the manager and chief instructor of the Lagos Flying Club, Captain Shaikh. He was an ex-Pakistan Air Force military pilot and, as such, had a very direct nature. He scared me senseless, but he was also kind and encouraging. He stood on ceremony and was polite and engaging, and a remnant, I think, that was left over from his military training.

02:12 EO: My first half hour was flown with Captain Shaikh as he assessed what I was capable of. Well, just as well he did most of the flying. I was too busy sweating, so much that my hands kept slipping off the control column. I was left in suspense at the end of the session, Captain Shaikh being a man of relatively few words, not knowing quite what he thought of me. It was a huge relief when he told me that he saw something in me and he encouraged my mum to invest in more lessons. So, I was set up with all my manuals and my student pilot licence. There was no going back now.

02:46 EO: I began my lessons shortly after that with the third man who would be a great part of my career, Chris Wadolkovski. He was a Polish-American expatriate, hired by the club as an instructor. Chris was a natural teacher and a very likable guy. He was about nine years older than me, but very young at heart, and we laughed a lot. I remember practicing steep turns when the bank angle was about 45 degrees. And as many students do, I kept leaning away from the turn. He would try to encourage me to lean into the turn and when I didn't respond, he would gently push me against the door just to prove a point, probably, that I wasn't going to fall out.

03:25 EO: It was a trick I used a few years later when I became an instructor, and my students did the same thing. Chris recommended lessons at least three times a week, and this worked out well for me as I grew in confidence. I had already mastered basic straight and level flying and some various other manoeuvres, so my first real challenge was building up to landings. Take-offs I could do, landings, they were a different pay grade. The club was located at the main International Airport in

the early '80s, and so we had to negotiate a lot bigger traffic as we taxied out in the tiny training aircraft, the Cessna 150 or 152, to fit in with all the rest of the commercial traffic. It felt intimidating at first, but whilst Chris was at my side, I was fine. He was confident and knew it all so well. I was not so confident, but I was determined.

04:17 EO: The build-up to my first solo flight was handled well. I knew that after landing practice, one day, Chris would ask me to pull over on the taxiway and he would get out and say, "You have it, Enid, go do some landings on your own." Wow, I had a choice. I felt like responding by asking him, "Are you totally mad?" But instead I gathered up as much courage as an eight stone bean-pole teenager could and tried not to run him over whilst I negotiated my way back to the holding point alone. This was it. I had to complete a set of three touch and goes. Now, this is where you took off, flew a standard pattern around the airport, landed, but instead of slowing down, you'd simply advance power and commence another take-off run, on the roll, as they say.

05:03 EO: Air traffic control were always aware when this is going to happen, so they could assist when necessary, like if you totally forgot a radio call, they'd kinda nudge you a little bit to respond. They kinda knew you had a lot on that day. I remember that first solo feeling, clammy hands, shaking legs, stammering radio call, but once I completed my pre-take-off checklist and was on the roll, I actually found I was quite calm. I was waiting for the 60 knots on the air speed indicator, runway 19 left falling away in the distance as I pulled back on the control column, got airborne all by myself. I looked over to the right and clocked the empty seat. But the panic had left me and I concentrated on trying to get this tiny little machine back on the ground in a controlled way.

05:50 EO: It worked out better than I could have imagined and I gained a new sense of courage. Two down one to go, and then I will have completed my first challenge, my first solo. It was about that time that a Nigerian Airways DC-10 decided to make an appearance on long finals to runway 19 left. And for those who aren't flying people, that basically means a bloody big plane was headed in my direction. The air traffic controller who had looked after me so well thought that after two successful controlled landings he could step up the pressure a bit. "Five November alpha whisky lima, shorten your downwind leg to base, you are number one to land."

06:27 EO: Wow. The faster, heavier, DC-10 was closing in on my landing space. So, well, [06:34] my careful checklist-driven process to hurry it up a bit. Well, this wasn't part of the plan. The instructor hadn't prepared me for this. I checked up ahead as part of my airmanship, looking out for aircraft in the vicinity and checked the silhouetted shape of the majestic DC-10 hurtling down the approach. "Cleared straighten finals, one nine left number two behind the Cessna 150 now turning base leg." A base leg is when you're right angles to the runway you're landing on. I won't repeat what I heard myself saying. I realised I had to bank steeply to make it on to base leg and then again on to finals. And instead of the gentle power reduction timed and nailed to perfection for the right phase of this exercise, I now had power off, diving towards the ground at a somewhat faster speed than anticipated.

07:23 EO: As I regained control of my emotions and the aircraft, I realised Chris had prepared me for just such an event, and all I had to do now was see it through to the end. I did. And as I rolled out in a hurry, off the runway, Chris was waiting for me, beaming with pride. I think he also may have flipped the finger to the now visible DC-10. Logbook signed, congratulations all round, all

that remained was my celebratory dunking in the MIG-21 ejector seat, and a slap-up Chinese meal that evening, with the club. It was a new and wonderful feeling to be celebrating this important milestone with such a supportive group of new friends around me.

08:02 EO: Captain Shaikh was also instrumental to my commercial career in other ways. He had an affiliation with a US school just outside San Francisco, in a place called San Mateo, the Airline Training Institute. He was very persuasive and he encouraged me to follow what he said would be a great career path, for me to train as a commercial pilot and flight instructor, so that one day I could eventually return and teach at the club. He said I was very good and that I would excel. And you know what, that was all I needed to hear. Another confirmation that perhaps I was okay, not too damaged, and actually had some talent at something. Several months later, I was processing student visas at 3:00 AM, that was the start time, outside the US Embassy on the Lagos mainland. I did this for about three weeks straight, and there was a lot of paperwork involved, as well as a lot of stress. I was 18 years old, and on my way to the United States on my own.

08:58 EO: What just happened? Apart from travel as an unaccompanied minor, back and forth to school, I was a long distance novice, but I was about to be thrown in the deep end, known as Southern California. What I didn't yet realise was that this phase of my aviation journey would push the boundaries of my capabilities, but it would also invoke parts of my life that had hitherto lain dormant, and for good reason. So, at the beginning of March, 1981, and I boarded the first of two flights to my final destination of San Francisco, and what would be my new home. I don't actually remember very much about my arrival, but I do remember being very excited and very scared at the same time. My skinny frame in bell-bottom jeans and sporting an impressively voluminous afro. I had a pocket full of dollars, a student visa, and a driver waiting for me to take me to my first home in San Francisco.

[music]

10:06 EO: My initial reaction, once I touched down in San Francisco, full of adrenaline, was that it really did seem to resemble a US drama. My only knowledge of the States until now had been via TV, you know, Kojak, Starsky and Hutch, all those programmes that I used to watch in Nigeria in the '70s. I was met by a friendly young lady, who was about to become a good friend for the next few years. She was from Tonga, and was the head driver, and basically looked after all the foreign students while they trained. I was now one of them. To my surprise, it turned out that I was the first female foreign student to enroll on the commercial licence course, and they didn't want to put me in student housing on my own. So as a consequence, I was thoughtfully housed with the family of one of the company's engineers. I travelled back and forth to the airport with him each day. This lovely family were also from Tonga, and they welcomed me into their friendly community, and what was to be the start of a long and happy friendship.

11:03 EO: I had a day or so to settle into my new life in this strange but fascinating country, and then it was straight into training. I had my first assessment flight booked and my first instructor assigned, Alan Philips. I remember him, he was about 30 or so and very, very tall, and we got on famously, immediately. He was confident and encouraging, and it seemed like my luck had been changing steadily over the last year or so, as I'd been meeting people that were, in one way or another, shaping my life in a very positive way, and this was a complete contrast to my life a few

years earlier. Curiously, I wasn't quite sure how I was meant to respond, yet I did feel I could trust these people. We operated out of the small San Carlos Airport. It was amazing. When you lined up and took off from runway 30, the beautiful city of San Francisco came into view to the north. Well, assuming it wasn't foggy.

11:57 EO: The extraordinary Golden Gate Bridge and the beautiful Redwood Shores were just up ahead as well, and they often served as that reassurance that I was in the right place in the early days of getting my bearings. My first three flights were getting comfortable with the location, the rules and the radio procedures in the US. I would soon be building my flight hours with solo flights and landings at many other airports in the area, as well as cross-country flights, designed to test my navigational skills. We had a specific training area to the west of San Carlos, in the region of an airport called Half Moon Bay, right on the coast. It was an uncontrolled airport, which meant control was exercised by pilots letting other pilots know where they were by radio, there was no control tower. In the early days of my training, it was quiet and great for practicing touch and gos and crosswind landings, which were always a challenge. Whale watching was a big draw in the later years, just off the coast, a few miles south of the airport. It was a great joy to see, dropping down to 1500 feet and just watching the whales migrate up the coast.

13:01 EO: San Carlos, too, was a wonderful place to fly, and my fellow students and I enjoyed excellent training. We had a Boeing 707 simulator on the premises, which was used for airline training, but it was also used to provide training to the pilots who used to ferry the space shuttle from place to place, piggybacked. The space shuttle, amazing. We met the crew quite frequently, and we were always in awe of this level of flying, something we all aspired to. I spent a lot of evenings when I was not doing my ground school training getting a few precious hours in during the maintenance cycles on the Boeing 707 with the ground instructor. I enjoyed his company and his many stories and how we laughed, as I crashed the aircraft repeatedly into terrain.

13:49 EO: I was building up my hours at quite a pace, taking phase checks with the FAA examiners to make sure I was achieving what I needed to, and looking towards doing my long cross-country commercial flights. I had one planned to Las Vegas, of course, combined with a weekend and some mates. Well, that was the plan, anyway. I was full of confidence at that time and loving every minute. It seemed inevitable, however, that one day I might become a little too confident, in spite of my huge belief in doing things by the book. I'd made a lot of friends in my first year and I was really enjoying this new-found belief in myself. I liked my early morning flights. It meant that I could get going whilst the airport was quiet and uncontrolled. I simply had to announce on the radio where I was and off I went.

14:38 EO: That day, I had agreed to meet a fellow aviator and a really good friend at the San Jose Airport for breakfast. Chris, she was an awesome pilot and instructor, as well as a charter pilot for Skyway Aviation, which was a subsidiary of the Airline Training Institute. I idolised her. She was one of those pilots that had a God-given natural talent and was spot on with everything she did without seeming to try. I knew I had to work hard at what I did in order to achieve, and I was okay with that. But unfortunately, my urge to impress her almost had dire consequences for me. The weather forecast that morning had called for fog in and around the Bay Area, particularly around Palo Alto and its hills. San Jose was clear, however, and I made the decision to keep visual and fly clear of the forecast fog. I wasn't instrument rated yet, I'd only just started that part of my course.

15:33 EO: And that was when you'd have been allowed to fly on instruments alone without the need to remain visual with the ground, or what is called VFR or Visual Flight Rules. But I wasn't there yet and I had to be sensible about the flight conditions that I flew in. I took off north and turned east towards Palo Alto, all seemed great as I climbed to 500 feet to remain visual and plot my route further south to San Jose. It was only a 15-minute flight, 20 nautical miles or thereabouts. Something caught my eye on the ground and I fixated on it for a short while. But when I next looked up, I'd flown straight into a bank of fog. I panicked. [chuckle] This wasn't good. I needed to keep the aircraft straight and level at the very least and try to figure out where I was. The one thing I was sure of was I was perilously close to the Palo Alto hills, but not quite sure how close I was, as I couldn't see them anymore.

16:26 EO: I had planned to fly along the ridge at an altitude lower than I would normally have been to cross them. God, I felt clammy and scared, I was completely out of my comfort zone and not thinking straight. Alan, my instructor, had drilled this into me over and over again, he said, "Look, if you get into trouble, call for help. Use your radio. It doesn't matter how much trouble you may be in or how stupid you feel, it may just save your life." Luckily, I remembered that. I reached up to my radios and dialed in the San Francisco radar frequency. "I need help. I'm in a bank of fog near Palo Alto. I'm not instrument rated, and I'm very scared." Within seconds, a female voice had responded to me, telling me to fly the airplane as best I could straight and level and to dial in a transponder code, so she could track the aircraft on a radar screen. "Climb to 2000 feet," she said.

17:17 EO: Her voice comforted me and I didn't feel so alone. I felt stupid and reckless, but not alone. She continued to talk to me, reassure me, guided me back to San Carlos and stayed with me on the radio, in my ear, until I was on approach to land. Now, she made me promise to call her when I got on the ground just to make sure I was all right. To this day, this unnamed woman remains my guardian angel. She didn't report the incident, as she felt I had learned a valuable lesson, and she was absolutely right. We both knew I was lucky to have survived in one piece.

17:55 EO: Thank you for listening to this episode. Your comments and reviews are very much appreciated. I also want to thank Lucy Ashby for editing all of these episodes. In my next episode, I'll introduce you to some of my more challenging flights, the training that gets even tougher and makes me doubt my ability, and my emotional state spirals downwards as result of my last mishap. My flying suffers as a result. Thank you and good-bye.

[music]

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