

My first solo

Buzz Aldrin

Man on the Moon – from a trainee pilot in the US military, Buzz Aldrin went on to become the second man on the Moon. In the second of our series on the first solo of well-known aviators, Buzz Aldrin talks to Yayeri Van Baarsen.

How did you get into aviation?

I grew up in the 1930s, just after Lindbergh crossed the Atlantic and my dad made a journey to Germany in the Hindenburg airship. My father was an early aviation pioneer, which had a large impact on me. I always wanted to get into flying, but I wasn't one of those boys who'd watch aeroplanes get fuelled up at the airfield and hitch rides with pilots. Instead I'd put orange crates together and simulate a cockpit. I figured the best way into flying would be military training.

How did your training go?

In the summer of 1951, I went to Bartow, Florida, a small US Air Force Base. There I learned to fly in a T-6 Texan, also known as the Harvard, an advanced trainer used in WWII. It was a taildragger and would sometimes get uncontrollable on landing and slide sideways, called a groundloop.

In the USAF, all students receive the same basic training before moving on to the next level. It wasn't like many people nowadays learning to fly, with a private instructor and at their own pace. There were about 35 guys in my class; we all started together and would end at the same time too. This increased pressure, but also gave comfort knowing that others were going through the same challenges.

Normally, it took 20 to 30 hours to reach the confidence level to fly solo. When the instructor felt you were ready, he'd take you to Gilbert Field, an auxiliary airfield near Lakeland, for landing patterns. I went in October 1951; I wasn't the first of our group. I don't remember if we had a big celebration afterwards or had water thrown over us, but I do know that we all came back from that solo flight with a big smile.

Were you ready for it?

I was apprehensive, but I think everybody is. Student pilots who aren't anxious probably borderline on being cocky or arrogant. It was a key moment and a big deal knowing that my instructor wasn't seated behind me. Everything I did would affect the success of my flight.

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However, I had a positive frame of mind and confidence, both from my instructor and because I knew the basic manoeuvres. I knew I could land the aeroplane without bouncing around.

The Wright brothers didn't know what their machine would do when they flew it for the first time, but half-a-century later many other pilots had flown solo in a T-6. As a student pilot you have to imitate what you've been taught, compare what you see through the cockpit window to what you're accustomed to seeing and make the necessary corrections, while following the prescribed optimum approach. You can go around in circles all you want, but no matter what you do, it won't get the instructor back in the seat behind you!

How did it go from there?

Afterwards I flew with more confidence and quickly moved on to more advanced jet aircraft like the F-80 Shooting Star which didn't have room for an instructor. Every time I stepped into a new aircraft without an instructor, it was a big deal. It takes me a while to get comfortable in a new aeroplane, it's like having to get used to a new car; it takes a bit to figure out the steering, set the mirrors and tune the radio. Later I flew the F-86 Sabre Jet, which is beautiful to handle. Everyone who has ever flown one will agree that it's the best aeroplane ever to fly, it's so responsive. Later on, when instructing second lieutenants upper classmen at the Air Force Academy, I had a final flight in an F-86 and found

myself doing one spin after another. The manoeuvring, the control, it was unusual, a human-machine interface.

Did any other unusual things happen during flight training?

Well, my instructor in the military, Jack Glass, wasn't that keen on doing aerobatics. He would mostly show me a manoeuvre once and then stay on the ground. I'd go up by myself and do what he just demonstrated. One time I attempted a double Immelmann. In order to execute this move successfully, the first pull up had to involve a lot of g-forces. At that time we didn't have g-suits, so I pulled up 6g and then passed out. Next thing I knew the aeroplane was going straight down, heading for Texas. In each hand I had a lever and somehow I managed to pull both throttle and stick back and got down safely. However, being momentarily unconscious wasn't a sensation I wanted to repeat. It was a long time before I tried the double Immelmann again... Actually, next time I did, it was in a jet and I popped a muscle in my neck. I felt paralysed and wondered how I'd ever get down. In the end, it all went well.

Was 'normal flying' still exciting after you'd been in space?

It certainly was. After I got back from the Moon, I met Richard Bach and soloed his Tiger Moth. For some guys that might not be a big deal, but for me it was. Every first flight is.

My first solo, though, was a major milestone in my career. Now, over 60 years later, I am aware of the significance of that flight and can recall some of the details. A first solo in an aircraft is a bit like a first Moon landing, except in space there are many people involved to make sure it goes successfully! ■



Buzz Aldrin, combat pilot, lunar module pilot and moonwalker

WHEN: October 1951

WHERE: Gilbert Field, Florida

AIRCRAFT: North American T-6 Texan

HOURS AT SOLO: 20

HOURS NOW: 4,500 hours of flying time, 290 in space



A 'moonwalk' of a different kind for Buzz!