

# American Flyers

## Newsletter



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## Student Finishes Private in Less Than a Week

Renee Kerckhoff's husband was listening as his wife spoke of her dream to fly, and a couple of years ago he bought her a

Discovery Flight for their anniversary. Her dream transformed from an abstract wish into a reality that would require steadfast pursuit. In May of 2004 she started taking flying lessons with a young man who, it



turned out, was more interested in building hours than seeing Renee achieve her dream. This became a pattern of start and stop through a variety of instructors until she'd accumulated almost 200 hours and still didn't have her Private pilot license.

She called American Flyers during the summer to see what we could do for her. She liked what she heard and decided to wait until she had the time to do everything at once. Ultimately, it took her less than a week to finish her Private. "It was a great experience," she said.

Husband, Peter, and their two daughters support Renee's flying ambitions wholeheartedly. Renee was able to take her mother for a flight on her 75th birthday. Even though Mom was a little nervous at the time, now she brags about her daughter the pilot!

Although done with her Private, she's nowhere near done with her goals. She's planning on getting glass cockpit training and then she wants to become Instrument rated. All of this will help Renee and Peter achieve an even bigger objective: they want to do a touch and go at every airport in Missouri. Then Kansas. Then who knows where!

## Pilots & Fear of Heights – It's Probably Normal

By Richard R. Grayson, M.D., Senior Aviation Medical Examiner, Geneva, IL

A pilot and I were talking about fear of high places, called acrophobia. (From the Greek *ἄκρος*, meaning summit.) He related to me that he had no fear when flying an ultralight, even though all his supports were above and behind him. But when he tries to look out the window of a tall building, he can't do it if he's looking down. He has to back up to the wall so he's not near the window. And this pilot has 20,000 hours and flies airliners at 37,000 feet.

That reminded me of the time I took the elevator to the top of the Washington monument in D.C. and tried to look out the window. I had the distinct sensation that the building was falling over and I had to get back to the inner wall. I had the same thing happen the last time I was in a room on the 40th floor of a high rise. It doesn't happen when looking out an airliner window, however. And I spent many happy hours on my one story roof for 30 years maintaining my ham radio antennas.

I have met many pilots in the course of my career as an aviation medical examiner who admitted a fear of height. The pilots and I always have called this a phobia and I think most of us have a sense of guilt for having this defect. Now, however, I am not so sure that it's a phobia. A phobia is an irrational fear and thus is a neurosis. But wait; maybe it's a form of vertigo. If it is, we're off the hook.

I checked the internet and found a forum for pilots who confessed acrophobia. The box at right gives you a sample of their comments. I don't know what the prevalence of acrophobia is among pilots or among the general public, but I have read one author who thinks it is more common among pilots.

### Acrophobia confessions:

"I looked up to see workers on a bridge tower at 400 feet and felt nauseous, but 3 hours before I was flying over the same bridge with no problem."

"Put me up a tree and I'm almost paralyzed, but in the cockpit, I'm fine."

"I'm horrified of heights but no problems sitting in the cockpit."

"As RAF I'm not bothered about inverted spinning at 18,000 feet, but the wife changes the light bulbs at home. I think the fear of heights is a fear of falling. In an aircraft you're fastened to a chair and your brain thinks you can't fall out."

"My friends think it's hilarious that they know a pilot who's scared of heights."

"Put me in a 737 at 35,000 feet and no problem. Put me on a ladder at 6 feet and I'm in real trouble."

"Bizarre. I thought it was just me! I can't bring myself to ride my bike over the Dartford Bridge, yet the other day I was happily doing a tight turn at 1,500 feet over the same bridge."

It really doesn't matter. The main fact is that if you have this, you are not alone, and the fear of heights might be no hindrance to being a pilot.

Some experts on the subject object to using the term vertigo for fear of heights. Maybe they are wrong. 'Height vertigo' or 'vertical vertigo' is defined as dizziness experienced when looking down from a great height or in looking up at a high building or cliff. It has something to do with the wiring in your brain and the inner ear.

A theory has been proposed that there is a geometrical explanation of height vertigo as 'distance vertigo'. This seems to be created by visual destabilization of posture when the distance between the observer and the visible stationary objects become critically large.

Some wag suggested we start a support group called AAA for Aviation Altitude Anonymous.

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