

Teaching Your Wife to Fly
By a
Certificated Flight Instructor

I've tried twice with two wives and from one Certificated Flight Instructor (CFI) to another; it's really not a very good idea! Here's why.

One CFI that I knew a long, long time ago and at an airport far, far away, Van Nuys, California told me that he thought it might be a good idea for me to teach his wife to fly, and he could teach my wife to fly since he was having some trouble in this endeavor. He had been having some of the exact same difficulties I experienced and thought that arrangement might work. My wife told me she would go back to flying when she was ready and I could clearly see she was not yet ready! The other CFI and I never pursued this avenue of approach seriously. The idea may have been a good one **IF** you truly want your wife to learn to fly. I think both wives in this little scenario quit flying. Mine did.

Of course it can be done, I suppose, but this CFI found that "the wife" did not respond to instruction as other students did, rather she reacted more like her husband was trying to tell her what to do! This is the main factor I perceived to be the actual problem. The other factor of course, is motivation. The problem seemed to be that it was the "husbands" fault and not that of the flight instructor. Of course there may be other reasons, one of which already mentioned is the motivation to fly in the first place, and also the attempt to participate with the spouse in their area of interest. But alas, exploring other areas such as these would result in an entire book and there is not time enough for that type of counseling here. This experimental exercise to teach another CFI's wife to fly was never tested. No actual exercise conducted. No data to retrieve.

In regard to motivation, and to get on with an explanation of my CFI experiment in this delicate field with my current wife – yeah, that's right, I have more than one story on this subject! Anyway, she says before we were married I told her I did not want to marry anyone who did not know how to fly. I don't remember that particular statement, but she responded, "Oh, I've always wanted to learn to fly." Well I do remember that specific statement, but not the first part of the conversation. I don't think the conversation was quite that pointed. The conversation was more general in nature the way I remember it. Guess that's what she took from the interchange. Like I said, that was a long time ago, and there's always a "...failure to communicate."

My fiancée at the time and later my wife, decided not to continue to pursue her flying license after her fifth training flight. That's right, the fifth flight in a Cessna 150. It was a memorable flight for her, and of course I remember the event as well since she won't let me forget it! We were at 3,000 feet in the local practice area near the Palomar Airport in southern California when her door jarred open. The way she tells it to as many people as she can when the subject of flying comes up is that the door flew open about 4 feet or so, and "...it's a good thing I was wearing my seat belt or I would have fallen

right out and plunged headlong to the ground...” She uses her hands in a gesturing motion to show you how wide four feet really is. As you flight instructors and Cessna 150 pilots know, the door was ajar only a crack, but the brief wind noise was unnerving. I reached over and shut the door so quickly that the whole event from start to finish was only a few seconds. I told her later that even if she was “unbuckled” (her seatbelt was fastened) she would have had to push very hard to get the door open as far as she said and it would be very difficult to get out even if she wanted to. Well, she did want out, but on the ground. She released the controls and directed me to land immediately. She directed me – the flight instructor! I told her she should continue to fly back to the field, but evidently that scenario was not an option. I did think I could get her to see the incident from a better prospective back on the ground and we would continue her lessons very soon. But that didn’t happen and that was her last flight as a student pilot.

And we were not even married yet. I told her that was not a big deal although it seemed like one for her at the time and yes, even now. Believe me; the story has gotten much more dramatic with time. Yeah, I know, I’ve heard it all, but look at the money I’ve saved all those years with her not flying! Incidentally, our first date was a flight in my twin engine Piper Apache for breakfast to Catalina Island, and buffalo omelets were the fare of the day. She seemed to be very impressed. Must have been, the relationship has continued for over 40 years and still counting!

After we were married she flew with me on trips only. Never just up on a Sunday afternoon, or a breakfast run. One big trip was from Los Angeles to Tennessee and West Virginia and back in the Apache. She handled the trip well, but now says she only wants to fly when she could be served a drink. I told her I could arrange that, but as you can imagine that was only met with hysterics! Gee whiz, lighten up, I was just kidding. And now, after all these years, she does not even want to fly on an airliner. I will not claim this as my fault. She will fly on airliners, but grabs my arm on take off and squeezes pretty hard. Don’t know what to do about that...just sit there and take it and try to say comforting words. I certainly don’t want to pay some shrink to try figuring it out.

My second story, and getting back to my first wife who I met in Okinawa at an Air Force Aero Club ground school for aspiring pilots, it seemed to be a no brainer with regards to who wanted to learn to fly. Obviously we both did. I wasn’t trying to talk anyone into learning to fly. Maybe my second wife, but you already know that story.

As a CFI I did get my first wife to solo, and she seemed to be a good pilot. However, one day shortly after her solo endorsement and several supervised solo’s, she went out to the practice area to fly solo when I was away on weekend reserve duty in the Navy. It was about mid-day at Brown Field, a Southern California non-towered airport only one mile from Tijuana International Airport in Mexico when she ventured out to practice. She got a late start and there were so many aircraft in the practice area she got scared so she returned to the field, landed and never flew again. She claimed she was too busy at work and needed to concentrate on her training program at the bank. She would take up flying later. It never happened. I guess life happened and her desire to fly just diminished to nothing. One minor detail here is that there are many people flying in

California and even I stopped instructing between 10:00 a.m. and 4:00 p.m. at Van Nuys airport when the tower said to me one lovely day after entering the landing pattern, "...Cessna 79 Sierra you are number 17 to land behind the red and white Cessna in front of you..." Seemed like it took 10 minutes or more in slow flight just to follow the leader and land. That's a lot of time to pay for on the odometer even though you get to practice slow flight, and discuss other aspects of flying while looking out all the windows for other traffic! It just got too crowded in the pattern when everyone wanted to fly at the same time. That's a problem in California in anything you do – too many people!

All in all, my advice is to never try to teach your wife to fly. I'm sure it can be done, but it can't be worth it. Any future problem on their part would undoubtedly lead back to the training they received from you! Only train them to use the radio and learn how to land in case of an emergency. My wife can do that although she has not been through a formal course of instruction. She doesn't want to take the course anyway! She's sure she is not going to be there when I slump forward unconscious leaving others present to take over and land the plane! The "She" has given up flying in small planes ... but, I'm still willing to "roll the aerial dice of death and come up a winner again!"**

In summary, look at the money you are going to save over your married life if you are the only one flying! Think about it and see if you don't agree – much less stress in a marriage and much more money saved while you keep flying. And no one to blame if something trivial like a door popping open due to a neglected preflight instruction. Remember, you are the one there to blame! Otherwise, **the 'ole flight instructor and husband is off the hook.** With the money saved and no real blame to share should be a great combination that may be hard to beat over an entire lifetime!

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** Learned from a retired Air Force General who shot down three Messerschmitt 109 German fighters in North Africa during WWII. After a 1.2 hour flight with me in a Varga Kachina on 7/1/79 the General said to me, "We rolled the aerial dice of death and came up a winner again!" Thanks Brigadier General T. H. Watkins. U.S. Air Force (Ret), (Born 1914, died 2009). Absolutely a great guy and a great pilot.