

Carol Eichert, High Country Chapter

by Ruth Anderson, 2002

Is it possible for a person with an extreme fear of flying to become a pilot? You Bet!

Carol Eichert was scared to death of flying in a little airplane. In her hobby as a backpacker, getting to the back country site was often by air. She didn't want to be known as the backpacker who threw up on the way to the site. She decided to learn how to fly.

Starting her lessons at Glendale Airport, west of Phoenix, she was anxious and frightened. On her fourth lesson in a Piper Tomahawk, fearful as usual, hands sweating on the yoke, she looked down at the Arizona countryside. The sun was setting. Pinks and purples and oranges filled the sky. To her it looked like a fairyland, so beautiful. She said her fear suddenly "flip-flopped" into a passion for flying. That passion resulted in a private pilot license in 1992. She still scares herself every time she flies.

Carol now plans to work on her instrument rating. "For the fifth time," she says. Dramatic events have interrupted earlier tries, events such as injuring her back in her previous nursing job, running out of money and moving from Arizona to Grand Junction, Colorado, to start her own pilot supply shop.

Carol was a nurse for 25 years until the back injury occurred. In Phoenix she had worked into a management position. She said she was getting "bummed out" and wondering how much longer she could stay in nursing. She started a part time job in a retail pilot shop, Romeo Kilo, while continuing her nursing career. She became so interest in retail work in the aviation industry that she switched to full time at Romeo Kilo and part time at nursing.

At the same time her flying experience was growing. She flew in the right seat of a Citation jet with Chuck Pearson, a corporate pilot. He let her fly the plane whenever there were no passengers on board. When there were passengers, she did check lists, navigation, and the radio. The plane was hangared in Grand Junction. Carol fell in love with the town and moved to Grand Junction in 2001 to find a location for a shop of her own.

The terminal building at Walker Field Airport had some space available. At the beginning of September, Carol signed a lease for what she called a "closet." On September 11, 2001, she wondered if she should back out of her lease. Close-in parking was unavailable at the field, people were afraid to be at the airport, the National Guard hovered in front of her shop -- not good conditions for a new venture, you might say?

"But," she said, "Isn't that what the terrorists want: fear?" She was offered a larger space where the National Guard wouldn't be a discouraging presence for shoppers. On November 1, she opened "Two Rivers Pilot Supply," a bright cheerful space with a wall of windows overlooking the runway. She sub-leased some space to Chuck Pearson for his charter work. He helps her in the store as well.

To announce her presence, Carol ran three newspaper ads and sent out 1,300 postcards to pilots in the area. "My best advertising," she says, "is just being here and being seen." Airline pilots have also helped by taking her advertising to Salt Lake City and Denver

Gradually, sales are increasing. People come into her shop to watch planes load and take off -- waving to departing family, students, and relatives. Since no one other than paying passengers is allowed past check points, her shop with the great windows is a magnet.

Carol's philosophy is to have something for all areas of aviation in her shop -- hot air ballooning, gliding, hang gliding, helicopters, ultra lights, as well as standard airplanes. She loves the people she meets in her shop, from the pilots who bring in interesting pictures (some ending up on her walls) to the young children who amaze her with their ability to identify airplanes of all types. To help pilot trainees she offers them a ten percent discount on supplies. She loves her work, "because," she says, "it's hard to find a nasty person in aviation."

Now, Carol everything seems to be running smoothly. How about getting that instrument rating before you revert to that back seat felling you used to have!