

Albert Whitted Airport

I took my first flying lessons at Albert Whitted Airport in downtown St. Petersburg, Florida. Like most early flyers, I had time and no money, or money and no time, so after a couple of years I had close to eighty hours, but nowhere near getting my license. A few interesting notes on those days.

All my flying was done at Sunshine Flying Club. What a great place. Drinks and popcorn, cool pilot stuff hanging on the walls, neat tee shirts, lots of tall tails, and a whole range of rental planes available including a Piper Tomahawk, Cherokee 140, Cessna 150, 152, 182 and several others out of my price range.

One morning my instructor was exceedingly picky about my every move. After three taking offs and landings to a complete stop, and me thinking I might be ready for my next instructor, He told me to stop the Piper Tomahawk, way overloaded with my 200 pounds and my instructor Jerry, 230 pounds, at the departure end of Runway 18. With my mouth hanging open, he stepped out of the aircraft and told me to make three takeoffs and landings to a complete stop, and then to taxi back to Sunshine Flying Club.

All I wanted was a pee, but he calmly told me, "You're ready or I would not sign you off. Three takeoffs, three landing to a complete stop each time, taxi back to the Club." And then he was gone, walking off towards the Club.

Deep breath. Carefully follow the preflight checklist. Contact the tower. "St. Pete tower, Tomahawk 56522 is ready for takeoff, request remaining in the pattern for three full stop landings."

"Piper 56522, position and hold one eight."

"Position and hold, one eight."

"Piper 56522, cleared for takeoff Runway 18, remain in the pattern."

"56522 cleared for takeoff, one eight. Remaining in the pattern." I shoved full power like I always did. I did not know what was wrong, but I know something was way off right away. The nose was too high. I was jumping off the runway. I pushed the nose over slightly and heard the engine roar as I continued my ridiculous accent in this under powered sky bound beast.

With a smile, it dawned on me that this plane was quite a performer without that 230 pounds of dead weight in the passenger seat. With a reduction in power bringing

it out of the red, I stopped porposing and maintained a normal departure angle. With a sharp ninety degree turn to the right, if I did say so myself, I reported, "St. Pete tower, Tomahawk 56522 right downwind for one eight. "

"Tomahawk 56522, you are number three for one eight, number one short final, number two turning right base. Call your right base."

"56522 number three for one eight. Will call right base." I leveled off at 800 feet and actually had a few seconds to enjoy being in the air as pilot in command for the first time. I actually reached out and touched the empty passenger seat. My instructor was out of the plane but not out of my head. I heard him clearly. "Be precise, 800 ft, not 780 or 820. Crisp 90 turn from downwind to base, level the wings. Gentle turns."

"St. Pete tower, Tomahawk 56522 turning right base for one eight."

"Piper 56522, cleared for one eight, full stop"

My instructor talking me through every step that day, even after he left the plane. When I taxied off the runway for the third time the controller told me, "Good job! Congratulations." I knew he had been holding my hand also. I taxied up to the Sunshine Flying Club to two dozen hands clapping and whopping it up that I had not dinged one of their options to the air. They cut the back off my favorite St. Pete Sports Car tee shirt and hung it on the wall of the clubhouse with dozens of others, but my red one looked the best.

My most exciting landing at Whitted occurred about three months later. It would never had entered my mind, so the heads up was appreciated when the tower told me, "Piper 56522, cleared for three six, caution sailboat."

"Caution, sailboat?" Landing on three six, or one eight at Whitted, was like landing on an aircraft carrier that didn't wobble. Water, seawall, runway. Focused on the runway, I had not noticed that a sixty foot sailboat was underway, left to right in front of me, intercepting my landing path perfectly. It looked like I would clear the mast, but not by much.

"St. Pete tower, request long landing," as I added power.

"Long landing approved 56522. That is a first, aircraft sailboat near miss," the controller noted.

Having cleared the mast by 200 feet, I reduce power and thanked the tower, "Nice call."

