

Aerobatic flying: not for the faint of heart

By Jolayne Houtz
Of the Emerald

Imagine yourself in a small four-seat airplane 1,000 feet above the ground with the wind screaming past your window and the distant crackle of an air traffic controller's voice over the radio.

Now imagine pushing in the controls and watching the nose of the plane dip farther and farther below the horizon. Soon you're looking straight down into a grove of trees as your plane hurls itself toward the ground.

The wind screams louder; the green-and-brown world starts to spin in front of you as you lose orientation.

Then think of pulling the controls toward you hard and feeling the plane shudder under your hands as it struggles to climb upward like a fish swimming upstream. Soon the plane rights itself again, floating on currents of air.

You have just experienced aerobatics.

To some people, even getting into a 747 is an effort. But others take flight to the limit through aerobatics, using loops, spins and other tricks to explore the parameters of flight.

Allan Cline, a Eugene pilot, started Eugene Aerobatic Adventures about five years ago to teach others the art.

"When you're doing

aerobatics, you don't think of either past or present," Cline said. "You're just right there."

Some of the maneuvers Cline teaches include the barrel roll; the hammerhead, which takes the plane straight down into a dive, then pulls it straight up and then back down into a dive; and an Immelman Turn, where the pilot puts the plane into a dive, pulls it up and does a half-loop before pulling out.

Learning the maneuvers takes someone with the ability to stay oriented even when the world is spinning. And aerobatics is not for the faint of heart or stomach, Cline added.

Once Cline took a client up for a ride, and as their plane was

headed into a nose dive, the man froze on the controls. Cline said it took all his energy to get the plane back under control.

But some people seem to have a natural aptitude for aerobatic flying. Another time, Cline took a 70-year-old man flying. The man's family gave him the ride as a birthday present, and when Cline did an aerobatics show over the family picnic, the man was delighted, Cline said.

"Normal flying is a little slow after aerobatics," said Cline, who has been performing aerobatics for eight years. "It teaches many people to face their fears of flying."

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pocket or a "bump in the road" as Duke called them.

"That was a stall," he said with a smile as he throttled the engine smoothly back to full power.

"You're safer right now in this plane than you will be driving home in your car," said Duke, who has been flying since 1972 and is the chief flight instructor at McKenzie.

I was beginning to get the feel for it, and he let me steer the plane this way and that. I felt a little like Chuck Yeager and the Wright brothers rolled into one.

Finally it was time to head

back, and he pointed the plane toward the horizon. Soon the black airstrip appeared and he demonstrated how the flaps help increase lift, allowing the plane to fly at greatly reduced speeds to make landings easier.

As we dropped toward the ground, I felt that tingle in my belly that one feels when going over a rise in the road in a fast-moving car.

The ground seemed to swell under us as we got closer until finally we were sailing only a few feet above the huge white stripes of the runway.

We touched down with a slight bump, and as I steered the plane back to the parking area, I realized that I had experienced more emotional highs and lows in a half-hour than I usually experience in a week.

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