Written by Carol Pomeday
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Peter Didier loves flying so much that he built his own airport, so it's natural that his son Tom has caught the flying bug and is about to join the ranks of licensed pilots.

"The biggest day in a pilot's life is when he solos," pilot and real-estate agent Peter Didier said as he stood near his two planes — a 1957 Cessna and a 1967 Piper Cherokee — outside the hanger at his Town of Port Washington farm.

It's been more than 30 years since Peter had his first exhilarating solo flight, but he watched proudly two weeks ago as his son Tom climbed into the cockpit by himself and took off into the sky.

"Your first solo is like getting married, except you can only do it once," Peter said.

A ceremony accompanies that flight — the pilot's shirttail is cut off and he wears the short shirt all day, a proud sign he's cut loose from his instructor.

"Once you've done it, there is a feeling of accomplishment. It's kind of addictive," said Tom, who flew solo three times last week.

"I kept looking at the seat next to me and Fred (Vogt, his instructor) wasn't there. You learn to fly real quick (when you're alone). I was nervous, but once you land the first time, it's OK."

The first solo flight is akin to getting a temporary driver's license. Tom must navigate with instruments, fly at night and fly solo for a longer distance before he can get his license and have passengers in his plane. He hopes to accomplish that in a couple months.

Tom must notify Vogt, who lives in the Town of Holland, of his flight plan until he gets his license.

Otherwise, he's free to take off and land on the grass airstrip that runs parallel to a cornfield on his parents' farm.

Tom and his brothers Mike, Dave and Joe, who died five years ago in a snowmobile accident, grew up flying in their father's plane. So far, only Tom is getting a pilot's license.

"After I soloed, I asked myself why I waited so long," Tom said. "I like flying over the lake and watching the sailboats. You can see how the colors of the lake change."

Peter first envisioned an airfield on the property when he was in high school and saw a plane land in the cow pasture on his parents' farm and taxi to the barn.

His father Nick jumped out, put some clothes in a suitcase, and he and a friend flew to General Mitchell International Airport in Milwaukee to catch a plane to New York to see the Milwaukee Braves play in the World Series.

"I thought that was really cool seeing an airplane land in the field," Peter said.

He took his first flying lesson when he was 16 and a student at Port Washington High School.

"It's a neat feeling being up there and, with you in control, watching the earth slipping away. You can't be a bird, but it's the closest thing to being one," Peter said.

"It's totally different than flying in an airliner."

When Peter went to college, he intermittantly took lessons. It wasn't until he got married and he and his wife Pat moved to the family farmstead that he came serious about flying.

"When we moved to the farm, I started the airport," Peter said. "I built the runway before I got a plane."

He bought a four-passenger 1956 Cessna and got his pilot's license. He often flew with his family to a cottage in northern Wisconsin or for a day of skiing at Indianhead Mountain in Michigan.

When the boys were little, the family could squeeze into the plane. Peter obtained permission from the Federal Aviation Administration to convert a baggage compartment into a seat for Joe.

That worked until the boys got too big.

Vogt's plane was also too small for his family, so the pilots decided to buy a larger plane together and sold their smaller planes to their brothers. Vogt's first plane, now owned by his

brother, is also in Peter's hanger.

Sharing a plane has never been a problem, Vogt said. If they both want it the same weekend, he said, they check to see who flew it last and the other one gets it.

The Piper can seat up to seven people. Peter has flown it to the Bahamas, New Orleans, Washington, D.C., and Hilton Head Island, S.C. It costs about $100 an hour to fly the Piper, Vogt said.

Two years ago, when Tom decided he wanted to learn to fly, Peter bought a 1957 Cessna almost identical to his first plane.

"Your first plane is like your first love," Peter said of his favorite aircraft.

"Flying the Cessna is like driving a sports car. The Piper is like driving a bus or a motor home. It's smooth, very dependable and you get a nice ride, but the Cessna is more fun. You can fly slower and lower."

It's too expensive to add Tom to the insurance policy on the Piper, so he uses the Cessna.

"We rationalized it actually saved money to buy another airplane," said Peter, who uses his airplanes in his real estate business and for aerial photos.

Peter said he hasn't had any close calls, but there have been times his wife was scared.

Once, he failed to switch gas tanks and the plane stalled and lost altitude until he realize what happened and switched to a full tank.

"I wasn't scared, but Pat was," he said. "It probably took two or three seconds, but it seemed like two or three minutes."

On his first solo cross-country flight to and from La Crosse, Peter said he became disoriented. He saw a water tower and flew toward that.

"It was Fall River, and I thought, 'Where is that? I'm still lost,'" he said. "We recently drove past Fall River."

The Didier airstrip is often used by pilots who notice flags and other markings during the day or lights at night.

That's how Vogt met the Didiers years ago.

"I flew over his field and saw two rows of runway lights," Vogt said. "I came back during the day and landed. Peter wasn't home, but Pat was there and she said I should come back."

The men met and Peter invited Vogt to store his plane there. They have been close friends ever

since and watched each other's children grow up.

So it was natural for Vogt, who operates the flight school at the West Bend Airport in addition to being a pilot for Lakeside Foods and Red Arrow Products in Manitowoc, to teach Tom to fly.

"Tom is one of my best students," Vogt said. "Every once in a while you run into one of these natural 'stick guys,' and that's Tom. He's a joy to fly with."