

1.) What is your best achievement?

I am the youngest person to build an airplane, certify it as airworthy, and then conduct their first U.S. solo in that same aircraft. Although boys younger than I have built aircraft before me, none were allowed to fly their first U.S. solo in that same craft. To do so is no small task. As a budding Light Sport Aircraft Manufacturer, I was allowed to draft the language of my Airworthiness Certificate so that it permitted piloting by a student pilot. Next, I had to convince a team of FAA MISO inspectors, during the airworthiness inspection, that the aircraft was built/designed well enough for a student pilot to fly safely. Although they joke that the one who drew the short straw had to sign it, I did get a proud FAA MISO representative to sign the document on January 11, 2008.

I was 14, officially a Light Sport Aircraft Manufacturer—beating the regulatory deadline by just 20 days, and had built an airplane that could be flown by a student pilot! The problem was: I was 14. In the U.S., you have to be 16 to fly a powered aircraft solo. So I applied to the FAA to waive my age. The 40-hour flight testing period during Phase 1 of an aircraft's life where flight training is prohibited presented another hurdle. I would have to find an instructor willing to sign me off in an airplane we had not flown together.

My dad was brave enough to fly the aircraft the next clear day, and it flew well. Over the next year and a half, I would wait for the FAA waiver to no avail. My dad flew the aircraft enough to keep it in top condition but less than 40 hours total, to keep it in Phase 1.

A doctor authorized by the FAA issued my student pilot permit on the morning of my 16th birthday, but I could not find any certified flight instructor willing to sign me off on my first solo since the NTSB had just recommended grounding of all aircraft based on the kit I used to build my airplane. At least 10 people had died in mid-flight breakups of the airframe since 2006.

I was aware of the perceived shortcomings of the design and had made over 300 design modifications to the original kit. These design changes made it difficult to convince the FAA to certify my aircraft as airworthy back in early 2008. I spent two days in New England in various meetings explaining and defending my design changes. By the time I held a U.S. student pilot permit, however, those same design changes convinced the FAA that 'maybe' my aircraft was not subject to the problems the NTSB found in the original kit design.

I visited the kit factory, met with the FAA, and found little resistance to my plan to fly a Phase 1 test flight of my particular aircraft, if I could get the proper log book endorsement. I found a CFI in Minnesota, Tron Guy of Jimmy Kimmel fame, who was willing to train me in the "factory" built version of the aircraft: the one the NTSB wanted to ground. Within a few hours of flight training over a couple days, I was signed off to fly, as a test pilot on a Phase 1 test flight. So as not to surprise anyone, I posted my intentions on-line and mentioned it to mentors within the FAA.

I traveled the country for a couple weeks, visiting Sturgis during the motorcycle rally and checking out universities along the way, then returned to Aurora for my first U.S. solo. I do not seek publicity. WTTW had asked to film this first flight and Phil Rogers and Brant Miller had wanted to witness it, but, except for the videotape, I decided it would be safer not to make this a public event.

I flew my baby on August 24th, 2009. It was simply amazing. That weekend, when I returned home from IMSA, I got a rare Sunday morning visit and a wonderful hand delivered note signed by friends at the FAA congratulating me. They verbally noted, however, that they saw no upside to continued flight testing until they filed their response to the April NTSB letter. A few weeks later, another pilot died in a similar airplane, this one based at my airport. The FAA issued a bulletin all but grounding my aircraft and several hundred others.

I had flown the most deadly light sport aircraft ever designed on my first U.S. solo flight. I did not have a driver's license, yet I was a test pilot at age 16!