

Paraplegic pilot earns wings... and the respect of his peers



Learning to fly is challenging for most people. You have to get the money together and put in the time, overcome learning plateaus, and weather and equipment challenges.

Scott Miller from Albia, Iowa, had an additional challenge on the path to getting his wings. He is in a wheelchair.

Miller's journey began in 2006 while serving in the National Guard. He was riding his motorcycle home from a military drill in Des Moines, when he hit a pothole and crashed. The accident broke his back, paralyzing him from the waist down. While the accident changed Miller's life, he said it also made him appreciate life more. "I don't take anything for granted," the 25-year-old notes.

In 2012 he learned about a friend's father, who runs an air ambulance company and, like Miller, is in a wheelchair. "He wasn't paralyzed his whole life either," says Miller. "He became paralyzed in an airplane crash. When I heard he continued to fly, I knew I could do it. One of his pilots took me up in a Cessna 152 and after that I was hooked."

Because Miller does not have the use of his legs - and therefore cannot control the rudders or brakes with them - it was necessary to find hand controls for aviation use. A search of the Internet proved there was a set approved by the FAA through a Supplemental Type Certificate, however, the controls were no longer being manufactured. Bill Kyle, an aviation expert in Charles City, Iowa, was able to reverse engineer the controls from the still valid STC. The VA paid for the hand controls.

Miller began his training in a flight simulator known as the Redbird. "I was able to learn maneuvers and get proficient," he says. "We did everything in the Redbird: We did the instrument flight, the night flight, everything. So much so, that when I finally got into the airplane, everything was a no-brainer."

He has a wheelchair that he breaks down and carries with him during flights away from the airport. For local flights he leaves his wheelchair on the ground. He does require some assistance with the preflight inspection as he cannot climb up on the wing to check the fuel. "Because of hand controls, I have to handle the controls a little differently and I explained to the FAA examiner what I was doing so he would know what to expect.

Miller used his Veteran's benefits for flight training at Indian Hills Community college in Ottumwa, Iowa. Miller was an inspiration to other students at college. He always has a good attitude about him. He never complained and always did what he was told. Now that he has his private certificate in his hand, Miller has started making plans for his aviation future. He's thinking about making a few cross-country flights. There's also some thought about buying a plane of his own. He's thinking about a low-wing Piper model.