



BY NATALIE BINGHAM HOOVER

# My greatest flight instructor

The most important lessons aren't in a book

**THERE IS A PLAQUE HANGING** in my closet next to a picture of my dad. It says, "My father taught me how to fly." Dad flew KC-10s in the U.S. Air Force, then DC-10s for FedEx. I never actually took a flight with him. He died when I was 21, a year before I took my first flight lesson. But 21 years of living with a man like my father taught me more than a few lessons, and helped shape me into the person I am today—into the pilot I am today.

If I had to describe Dad in one word, it would be *wholehearted*. He never did anything halfway. I can remember walking past my parents' bedroom at night and Dad dragging me in. "Nat, come quiz me on these DC-10 flashcards." I'd ask what he was studying for.

THE AUTHOR with her father on her first birthday.



"Oh nothing. Just trying to stay sharp." Looking back, I wonder if he actually needed me to quiz him, or if he just wanted to make sure his daughter saw him work at studying, constantly striving to be a better pilot. He wasn't that way just with aviation, though. You should have seen him in the kitchen. He was always trying new recipes, working on the perfect way to cook a steak, mastering his omelet-making skills. He never just *cooked*. He put his heart into every meal.

As a dad and as a husband, he was all in. For Mother's Day, he bought Mom a baby grand piano just because she mentioned she wanted to learn to play. There was rarely a ballgame when I couldn't look over and see Dad in the stands.

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I still remember the first time I beat him at a game of H-O-R-S-E in the driveway. I was a high school sophomore. He was never one of those people who would *let* a child win. He beat me year after year, never missing a shot on purpose. That day I beat him, I knew I had won fair and square. He always played his best, no matter what. He hated to lose.

Five years later we were sitting in the bleachers, watching my little brother play baseball. Dad had recently received a tough cancer diagnosis. I can clearly remember how he tried to comfort me. "You know how I hate to lose, Nat. Don't worry. I won't let this cancer beat me." Although the cancer would finally take him home almost two years later, I do not believe it beat my father. To his dying day, he was his usual wholehearted self: still cooking, still going to work (a desk job in the standards department after he lost his medical).

So, when I started flying a year after he passed, how could I do it any other way than wholeheartedly? I make it my goal every year to add a feather to my aviation cap. In 2016, I took an aerobatics course to conquer my nagging discomfort with stalls and spins. This year, a glider rating is in the plans. I always admire other pilots who aren't satisfied with being mediocre. One of the captains I fly with on the Beechjet is our go-to guy whenever we have a systems question. He once told me he picks up the systems manual once a month and rereads a chapter. It's not difficult, but he continually strives to make himself better.

One of the new flight instructors I've had the pleasure of working with frequently flies his own airplane just to keep his stick-and-rudder skills sharp. Whenever one of his students cancels a lesson, you will see Peter walking across the ramp, climbing in his Grumman Tiger, heading out for a quick flight. I admire that about him. I don't know where his aviation career will take him, but I have no doubt he will be the very best at whatever he chooses to fly.

So now, when I'm subjecting myself to being rolled upside down in an Aerobat so I can understand every possible outcome of a stall gone wrong, I hope I'm getting it right. I'd like to think that I am making Dad proud, that I am being the pilot he taught me to be.

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