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Gary Stephenson, Weather Maestro

By Mike Jones

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Real pilots all start their days exactly the same way: we check the weather. Even if we're not flying we're interested in the movement of fronts and the stewing of storms. The most convenient albeit unofficial source of that information is the local television weather forecaster. Every channel has them and often they are celebrities far more well-known than the "serious" newscasters: think Jim Cantore on the Weather Channel, Al Roker on NBC, and the wonderful late Willard Scott.

But as important as the weather is to flyers, few meteorologists are pilots. This is a problem because the details matter when cruising the skies. Generalized blue-sky forecasts are insufficiently precise for that moment hours from now when you are slogging through the murk, in-bound on some ILS.

Gary Stephenson breaks that mold. He's the chief meteorologist at Spectrum News 1 in central North Carolina and he's a dedicated Cessna pilot with instrument, commercial, and multi-engine ratings. "I'm not a meteorologist who likes aviation," he told me. "I'm a pilot who likes meteorology." Clearly, this is somebody we need to hear.

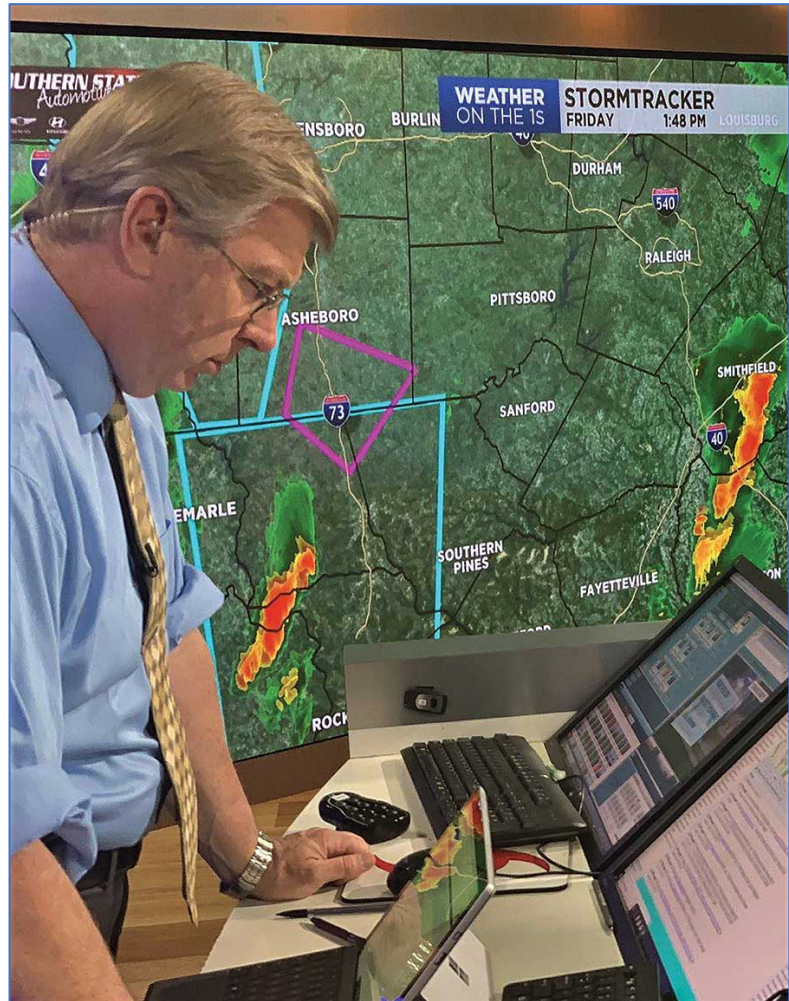
Addicted Early to Flying

Stephenson knows his planes. He was barely a toddler when he became a big fan of the TV series *Twelve O'clock High*. Then the movie *Airport* came out, followed by the *Battle of Britain*, and his interest in aviation never flagged. He earned his private ticket at Harnett County Regional Jetport (KHRJ) in 1985.

His degree in atmospheric sciences is from the University of NC at Asheville. He, like many meteorologists, can recall the specific moment which triggered his interest in the weather. “I was about four when there was this big ice storm across central North Carolina,” he told me. “I remember that storm: sitting with my Dad, looking out the window, watching transformers explode, trees crack and branches crash down. That one storm set me on this path.”

Handsome, garrulous and with a faint southern drawl, after college he

worked with the ABC affiliate in Asheville. Then he jumped to cable TV in Raleigh where he’s been looking at the radar for nineteen years. Stephenson’s employer is Charter Communications, a massive \$48 billion company with



Chief Meteorologist and Cessna enthusiast Gary Stephenson works on his “Weather on the Ones” forecast at the Spectrum studios outside of Raleigh, NC. Watch out when you see him with his sleeves rolled up — that means he’s concentrating and something about the weather is going to get really exciting really soon.

90,000 employees in 41 states. He's now their chief meteorologist in central North Carolina and supervises a well-equipped team of charming weather geeks who provide central North Carolina with precise and entertaining forecasts 24/7. Charter is particularly proud of its hyper-local news coverage, a big part of which is exemplified by the loquacious Gary Stephenson.



With funds always tight, it took Stephenson four years to get his private ticket, mostly flying this tired Cessna 150 out of Harnett County Airport in central North Carolina. He got his license in 1985 and today he has instrument, commercial and multi-engine ratings.

Flying as a Passion

Stephenson had a number of options when pondering his college choices. “I wanted to be a professional pilot, so I could have studied aeronautical engineering or I could have studied meteorology,” he recalls. “I figured if I’m an engineer and fly into a thunderstorm, an engineer can’t glue the wings back on. But if I am a meteorologist, I’ll know enough not to fly into that thunderstorm.” Always pragmatic, meteorology became his future.

But flight training was a challenge. “I had the same problem lots of people have: I ran out of money,” he acknowledged. “I had to shut it down for a couple of years. But when I got back into it I was able to get my check ride in just six weeks.”

Stephenson says the “on-again, off-again” entries in his logbook highlight the milestones in his life. First there was flying, then he got married and flying stopped. It started again only to be nipped when he bought his first house. A couple of years later he began flying again but the logbook went cold when the first baby arrived. Remembering those days, he squeezes his index finger and his thumb almost together. “I was this close to buying a J-3 Cub when we had a second child,” he smiles. “My son is what happened to my Cub.”

The personal value of flying is important to Stephenson; the intellectual and physical accomplishment of controlling an airplane safely. “Flying is my passion. Once you’ve been bitten, there’s



Stephenson did a lot of his flight training with Cecil Edgerton (right). Years later they got together again in front of a handsome Cessna 182 they used for a Spectrum News 1 promotional shoot.

nothing like it,” he said. “You don’t even need to go anywhere. Some of my best flights were just being in the air, flying the plane and looking out the window.”

“Even today, I wish I was logging more hours,” Stephenson laments. “But to be honest, my job is a 24-hour operation; I just don’t have the time. Not to mention putting two kids through college.”

Mostly he flies out of Harnett County these days — usually in a Cessna 182 — but he's flown everything from a Cessna 150 to a Cessna 210. As a celebrity he also gets some opportunities that you and I might miss: a ride in an F-18 with the Blue Angels, aerobatics in a F-15 Strike Eagle, plus some logbook time in a B-17 and even a B-29. His favorite airplane of all time is the Spitfire, "but I love the 182," he laughs. "I'm a Cessna guy."

Like most pilots, Stephenson remembers his first solo. He was flying a tiny Cessna 150. Setting up on short final Stephenson found himself humming the theme from the movie *Airport* and his confidence is sky-high. "I'm thinking, I'm going to grease this, I'm going to show Cecil," he said. "You know what? I bounced. And the second time around, I bounced, and the third time I bounced again. But I soloed. It couldn't be better. That had been my dream since as long as I could remember. You never forget."

Cecil? I had to find out more.

Emit "Cecil" Edgerton III was Stephenson's flight instructor in those early years. Pioneer-lean but salesman-chatty, he's another North Carolina native whose family has been in the area since the Revolutionary War.

Cecil remembers Stephenson well. "It was back in the 1980s and I was teaching out of Harnett County. Well, not really teaching. My philosophy is I can't teach anybody anything, I just keep them from killing themselves while they figure it all out," he laughs. "Gary was bright, intelligent and enthusiastic. He didn't have any trouble with radio work, that's for sure. He should have been a flight instructor."

Memories & Favorites

I asked Stephenson about his most memorable flight and instantly he started to laugh. He took his future wife on her first airplane flight, which

wouldn't be unusual except it was just their second date. Even after all these years, Stephenson is impressed with his Lisa.

"I give her a lot of credit; not many girls would go flying with a guy on the second date." Stephenson feels he was very lucky picking her and she's been very supportive of his for love of aviation for thirty-plus years.

"Even though I was on TV and was a pilot, that doesn't mean you exude confidence in everything else, like girls," Stephenson confesses. "I wanted to put myself in an environment where I was



One of the advantages of being in television is the insider-access one gets to all sorts of interesting places and all sorts of fun people. Here Stephenson poses with a transient Boeing with a snappy paint job that wandered into his local airport.

confident. And I was proud of that flight, but it didn't impress her as much as the rose on the seat when she got into the airplane."

"With Lisa, you're talking about a brave soul. She comes to the airport and she's a little nervous, but I'm explaining everything is going to be OK," Stephenson explains. "There was a noise-abatement procedure at that airport, so after we took off I just rolled left to stay clear. Left wing way down, right wing way up. Surprised, she grabbed the handle to open the door! I immediately righted the plane and said I was SOOOO sorry. Gradually everything calmed down. Plus, I greased the landings."

He tells another Lisa-story about living under the approach path to RDU. “A couple of weeks ago, we were having a COVID-free birthday party on the front porch of my house. Everybody’s doing their social distancing thing but I suddenly hear a big helicopter approaching. I grab my camera with a big old 400mm lens and I leap off the front porch, right into the crowd, forgetting all about COVID just so I can grab the picture. My sister-in-law asks my wife, ‘Does he do that often?’ Lisa just says, ‘You get used to it after a while.’ “



Without a doubt, the Spitfire is Stephenson’s favorite airplane. While he’s seen them fly here in the USA, he lusts to go to the massive Duxford airshow in the UK and see the plane that won the Battle of Britain actually flying in the UK skies. In the photo he’s leaning on one of the eight Browning .303 caliber machine guns Spitfires used to protect their shores.

Like most pilots, Stephenson is addicted to airshows. His favorite military show is the Cherry Point Naval Air Station, NC while his civilian top-choice is the Military Aviation Museum in Virginia Beach, Virginia. That show features a

wide array of World War II aircraft, including a Spitfire, Hurricanes, a B-25, and the world’s only airworthy Mosquito salvaged out of Canada.

“To go and see those WWII aircraft in the air is just unbelievable,” Stephenson says, shaking his head. “Anybody who likes WWII aviation has got to go see the Fighter Factory in Virginia Beach.”

Oddly, for a guy who loves things-with-wings, Stephenson has never been to Oshkosh, Sun-n-Fun or even Triple Tree. Maybe someday?

Advice from the Expert

Stephenson asserts unequivocally that flyers really don't become pilots until they've earned their instrument ticket. Quality training in real weather is essential. "It's different when you're bouncing around in the real murk [as opposed to foggles]," he explained. "My IFR cross-country was a long grind in hard IMC. We shot the approach into Kinston right down to minimums. That's really good training... it makes you much more confident."

Even today, pilots die because they underestimate the weather. Case in point: the mountains of western NC are deadly. "I can't tell you the number of times people flew VFR into clouds and found the rocks. Plus, those mountains produce all sorts of rotors and down drafts," he said. "Even on a clear day, especially if you're going to an area you've never been before, double-check the weather ahead of you." He also urges every flyer to maximize their use of the latest technology to stay up-to-date.

His second observation is that pilots are too cavalier about convection and icing. Just because there's only a 30% chance of thunderstorms doesn't mean there's a 70% chance you won't run into one. "You know Scott Crossfield? I interviewed him years ago. He flew the X-15 and was the fastest man in the world," Stephenson recalls. "He died flying a Cessna 210 into a thunderstorm. It blows my mind that somebody with his experience, his knowledge, would do something like that."

Amazingly, Stephenson uses many of the same tools we ordinary pilots use when planning a flight (he's a Garmin *Pilot* user); there are no arcane web sites or exotic forecasting tools. He feels we're all walking around with everything we need, weather-wise, both before the flight and even in flight. The technology has improved so much that today, pilots are actually looking at the exact same information Stephenson uses to make his TV forecasts.



Stephenson enjoys sitting on his front porch at the approach end of Runway 23L at RDU International and watch the traffic come in for landing. Here's a recent shot he grabbed of the Coast Guard coming to visit.

“Years ago, I remember calling flight service and asking them all these technical questions, this was back in the day before the internet, and the guy said, wow, you’re asking about stuff that nobody asks for,” Stephenson remembered. “Along the way, I have made tons of No-Go decisions, leaning on the side of caution because I look at every scenario. It drives my family crazy because I want to be ready for anything... But, I’ve sure had some surprises in the air. Surprises in an airplane are never a good thing. Those in-flight surprises push the pucker-factor right through the roof.”

That said, the most important advice Stephenson would offer any pilot is to always err on the side of caution. If there’s the slightest chance the weather could go awry, always have a Plan B.

One Special Moment

“I’ll never forget one flight, it was in the early 1980s. I was doing flight training, and it was one of my night flights, clear and calm and beautiful,” Stephenson said. “A full moon was rising over the horizon, a beautiful orange globe coming up into the night sky. I’m one of only a handful of people who saw the moon that night from the sky. Flying is fulfilling, it’s unique, it’s an accomplishment. As pilots, we’ve done something really hard, something that only a handful of people have done, and we’ve followed our dream.”

About the Author

Mike Jones is an aviation writer based in Pinehurst, NC. Commercial-rated, he’s logged over 3,000 hours in more than two dozen types of planes. Due to COVID, most of the fun places he likes to fly are closed. Once there’s a vaccine and the 2021 airshow season opens again, he can’t wait to get back into the air. He’s always accessible at PilotMike2012@gmail.com.

