

The Wingwalk

By
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The music is loud and my heart paces like a tiger smelling the air. I secure my wing walk outfit, tie my shoes, and fix my gloves. The excitement builds as my pilot Hartley Folstad and I push our trusty steed, our Stearman bi-plane out of the hangar. After a vigorous pull and push, we turn the plane and right the tail wheel. The wing walk rack is checked and the gear axle trapeze is cleaned. Wires are examined. Clouds in a light blue sky are drifting overhead and we hear them calling. The wind is a steady fifteen knots. No turbulence has been reported. Visibility is ten miles.

The flight's focus today is practice for air shows. Hartley and I review our routine. "As you turn down the crowd line, I will start the axle hang." "Right, but remember to tug on the communication line when you're about to hang." "I'm always too busy. O.K. OK., I'll tug, but don't blast me with power until I swing back up."

The last bit of conversation is sealed with a kiss as Hartley gets himself settled in the cockpit and I poise myself out on the left wing. My take off position is lying out on the javelin, a stick holding the flying wires in place – I'm suspended over the ground. The black tarmac is beneath me and the ground begins to rush by, grass becomes blurred, the breeze slaps my face. Yow! It's a bit cool today. The tiger springs and leaps into the sky.

There is no time to gaze and inhale the pattern of the orange grove below. No time to praise the mountains etched with snow. I carefully place the ball of my foot on the 1 1/16 inch spruce spar. Hidden

by the fabric of the wing, the spar is the only surface on the wing I can step. Bracing myself between the flying wires, I await the pilot's signal. He nods his head and I begin to scale the wing toward the fuselage. The wind from the propeller blasts me like an arctic gale and I step off the leading edge of the wing onto my gear axle trapeze. – O.K., I remember to tug on the communications line. I'm sitting on the bar by the gear and the heat from the engine warms my nose and cheeks. My feet are dangling in the air below. We turn toward the crowd line and I scoot under the plane. My feet find the cross wires and my toes strain with pride.

Breath, pray and release. I push and the earth rises above me. I'm clapping, I sing at the top of my voice, hoping someone will hear me above the roar of the Pratt and Whitney. We are champions and friends, this big biplane and I. Exert the stomach muscles and up I come. "Damn I forgot to tug the communication line." Quickly I stand up on the gear bar so Hartley is aware that I'm fine. I step back up onto the wing and wait...Hartley nods and like a pleasant conversation on a white sandy beach, I waltz into the front cockpit.

The Stearman climbs for altitude and I grip the handholds in front. I stand up and climb up over the back of the top wing to the rack on top. I push through what I call the wall of wind. Hartley moves up the throttle and pushes the Stearman into a dive...140, 150, 160 mile per hour. This is the downside of a loop. My eyes feel like they are pulled through their sockets...my cheeks ripple and I try to squint to see where the crowd line is as the plane goes inverted at the top of the loop. Earth above, sky below. The g forces pound on my body, I grab a swallow of air before my body is propelled downward against the rack like a mighty undertow pulling you below the surface of the ocean. I bend my supporting leg as the plane gathers speed for a barrel roll. The right leg is in passé. Again, I command my arms through what I would like to envision as beautiful port of bras sequence.

The hammerhead maneuver is like a gift. The plane rises up and my body is one with my partner, the Stearman and the sky. Ready, and the dive for the sky surf loop begins. This time my body is a sail. My back bone is the mast. I allow the wind to unfurl my body and I balance and float as my invisible partner, the wind, lifts me higher. Up and over until the currents subside and I am pushed back into the front cockpit.

The last crowd pass, and I shake hands with Hartley. He controls my stage. Every moment on the throttle, every movement on the stick is his. Without his assuring strength the Stearman would be shackled to earth. Pilot, plane, wind and wingwalker all move in unison to paint their art upon the sky.

Hartley brings the biplane back to earth. The American flag is raised in celebration of our country and the courageous men and women who defend it. We taxi back to the hangar.

Wing walking is not found as an option in a college curriculum. Wing walking is not found on the list of what professions make the most money. Wing walking is not found on the list of professions that will make you a household name. But to those of you who would like to challenge the sky and jump into the unknown, wing walking can hold the keys to unleashing the tiger within you.

Just remember "Tug on that communications line."