



Tyler Stargardt (right) and Evan Fagan after a flight in Sweet Revenge.

# Flights of a Lifetime

The life-changing generosity of EAAers

**PEOPLE TELL ME THAT** working at EAA must be a dream job for a pilot, but the truth is, there is very little that is aviation-related that creeps into my day. EAA is a business, and I deal with much of what is related to this business on a daily basis, including things like table centerpieces at the Wright Brothers Memorial Banquet. I didn't even know that we needed table centerpieces, but I am told that they are an indispensable addition to the holiday tableau and we simply must fit them into the budget. Recently a group of five of us gathered around a conference table where the various centerpiece options were presented in grave detail upon which all looked to me breathlessly for a decision. Let's make this clear: *I don't know anything about centerpieces!*

Is it any wonder that I love to get away from Oshkosh and hit the road on Grassroots Pilot Tour stops, or for just about any reason at all? Recently I had a very special experience that I would like to share with you, because it represents much of what our organization has been built on: inspiration, generosity, and giving back to the aviation community.

It began at the Gathering of Eagles banquet at AirVenture 2011. The Gathering of

Eagles is the annual fundraiser that funds much of our youth education programs and budget and provides many scholarships for the EAA Air Academy and for Young Eagles flight training.

On this evening, one of the auction items generously donated was a fantastic World War II flight-training experience. Ron and Diane Fagen of the splendid Fagen Fighters WWII Museum in Granite Falls, Minnesota, created a package by which a lucky donor would get a flight in the four aircraft a cadet would likely fly on his way to the cockpit of a WWII fighter and the European theater. For the uninitiated, that would be a PT-19, a BT-13, a T-6, and finally a P-51. Who wouldn't want a ride in a P-51?

The package gained quite a bit of interest and the bids kept coming in, but the ultimate winner was exceedingly generous EAA member and supporter Bill Bachschmidt, EAA Lifetime 744708. Bidding with his wife, Debora, the experience was purchased for their son, Foster, and soon-to-be daughter-in-law, Lauren. When it was clear that Foster and Lauren could not arrange their schedule to make it possible for them to enjoy this gift, they donated it back to EAA with instruction to share this experience with a Young Eagle. Wow! What a gift and what a generous donation by both the Fagens for providing the experience and the Bachschmidt family for donating it back to EAA.

We didn't have to think about it too long before settling on a very special Young Eagle for this wonderful opportunity. Tyler Stargardt, EAA 1020430, was the first graduate of the Sporty's Learn to Fly course to go on to receive a private pilot certificate. The Learn to Fly course is donated by Sporty's as part of our EAA Flight Plan, and it helps Young Eagles along the path to pilot certification.

Tyler is 19 now and has gone on to earn his instrument and commercial ratings. He has also received a flight-training grant from EAA funded by our donors and has volunteered for youth programs whenever we asked.

So, one day in September, I packed up the EAA Cessna 210 photo ship that we

often use for transportation and pointed its nose west for Marshfield, Wisconsin, to pick up Tyler. I decided to let Tyler fly the round trip to Granite Falls from the left seat. I'm a CFI after all, but I quickly realized that this kid is a very talented pilot and that the only learning opportunity would result from Tyler teaching me how to use the Garmin 430 in the panel. Tyler flew the 210 with great skill, missing no detail as he expertly piloted us to a feather-smooth touchdown at Granite Falls.

The Fagen family has long been known for its skillful restorations of the P-40 Warhawks that the shop specializes in, but this weekend would be the grand opening of the Fagen Fighters WWII Museum. The Fagens pride themselves on displaying historically relevant artifacts in their museum; that means they don't just have any old jeep in their collection, they have Omar Bradley's jeep. It's not just any P-51, it's triple ace Bud Anderson's P-51.

The Fagen Fighters WWII Museum's grounds, facility, and exhibits are beautiful and artfully accented by huge murals displaying fighting scenes on the walls. You can receive a mission briefing in the briefing hut and then climb the stairs to the control tower and stretch your imagination to see the long string of P-51s S-turning their way to runway's end. It's really quite something and is deserving of a stop if you're in that part of the world, or even a special trip.

We arrived a little early; apparently they took my arrival at "about 1 p.m." literally, and our arrival at 10:30 a.m. was somewhat of a surprise. But soon the PT-19 was being prepped for Tyler's first flight.

Ron Fagen's son, Evan, would show Tyler the ropes, beginning with teaching him the art of pulling the prop through to avoid hydraulic lock. We might as well get some work out of the kid! They then mounted the wing, fired up, and were headed for takeoff. For those of you who have never had the opportunity to fly the Fairchild WWII trainers, loosely identified as PTs 19 through 26, they are just about the most benign and easy to fly aircraft imaginable. The main

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difference between the various designations derives from the differing engine and canopy arrangements.

I was expecting flights around the pattern, but Tyler and Evan were gone for a long time before returning for landing practice. I thought this was supposed to be a taste of being a WWII cadet, not a full training curriculum. Evan instantly recognized Tyler's skill, as I did, and felt comfortable giving him the stick for landings on both grass and pavement.

Back on the ramp, the brutish-looking BT-13 was being prepared for Tyler's second flight. Appearing like a fixed-gear T-6, the BT-13 lacks the grace of the Fairchild and was used as a stepping stone to sleeker and faster retractable-gear aircraft. Once Tyler returned, his prop-turning skills were again put to the test on a Pratt & Whitney 450-hp R-985. Soon the rumble of the big radial accompanied the taxi out for another flight.

The Fagens' T-6 is still being restored, so Bruce Olson flew in from Minneapolis in his T-6 for Tyler's retractable-gear training. Even though they are in the WWII P-40 fighter restoration business, the Fagens hired the restoration out to a noted T-6 shop. We live in a world of specialists.

## This must seem like just a dream to a 19-year-old.

There was no need to pull through the 600-hp Wright since it was still warm, so Tyler and Bruce mounted up and off they went. I've ridden in a T-6 from the rear seat, and you can't see anything around that big nose, but Tyler still managed some great landings to end the day.

The next morning dawned crisp and clear as we made our way out to the airport. Tyler got a bonus flight, as if he needed one. Evan took him up for an aerobatic routine in his Extra. Evan Fagen is an accomplished aerobatic pilot as well. Maybe because of Tyler's youth, this turned out to be most memorable flight of the weekend.

Airplanes and people arrived from all over Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Iowa for the grand opening of the museum. Even though this wasn't an EAA event, it's aviation, so just about everyone was wearing either an EAA shirt or ball cap.

Around noon, the long-awaited moment occurred: The Fagens opened the hangar doors to pull out their P-51, *Sweet Revenge*. It was so highly polished that you could comb

your hair in the reflection off the wing. The propeller didn't have a single smudge along the length of its four glistening blades. Tyler donned a jumpsuit for this flight, posed for the assembled cameras, and shoehorned himself into the back seat of the P-51. I've flown in the back seat of a P-51, and entry is not a feat to be taken lightly by a 53-year-old man. Fortunately, Tyler is as skinny as I was at his age, and soon the four-bladed paddle propeller was spinning and the big Merlin barked to life.

This must have seemed like just a dream to a 19-year-old. Who wouldn't like to be taxiing out for a flight in a P-51? Hundreds of people were there to witness the flight as the P-51 hurtled down the runway and tucked its gear away in the wings. After some aerial maneuvers, they came back for a high-speed pass down the runway at what appeared to be every bit of the 250-knot speed limit below 10,000 feet. Then, they carved back around in the pattern for a tire-chirping touchdown with the Merlin popping and snarling on the rollout.

Tyler's ear-to-ear grin as he deplaned made me incredibly happy just to be a part of this tremendous experience. Tyler is a representation of the ability of EAA and the generosity of our membership to define the future of our shared passion.

For Tyler, that first Young Eagles flight changed his life by putting him on a path to becoming a professional pilot. And now, this tremendous opportunity will last in his memory, and mine, for a lifetime. Tyler truly represents what EAA is all about.

One of our EAA board members recently expressed to me that "corporations are about making profits; associations change lives." That's what we're doing together at EAA. Through the extreme generosity of our chapters and membership who have embraced the Young Eagles program, and through the support of donors and supporters like the Bachschmidts and the Fagens, we are inspiring Young Eagles like Tyler to embark on a lifetime of flight. I just feel fortunate to be along for the ride. **EAA**

**Jeff Skiles**, EAA 336120, is EAA vice president of chapters and youth education and flies a 1935 Waco biplane.