

The Flight of His Life

How Trevor Fennig overcame tragedy to pursue his dream of being a pilot



AIR APPARENT
Trevor Fennig, left,
is the youngest pilot
that Stewart McQuillan,
right, has trained.

THE STRAY BULLET severed Trevor Fennig's spine. He'd been practicing shooting, firing a handgun at cans in the woods of Bryant, Indiana, when his gun fell to the ground and went off. Paramedics airlifted him to the hospital, but the accident left him paralyzed from the chest down. Only 18, Fennig thought his dream was over: He wanted to fly helicopters, and helicopter pilots have to use foot pedals.

Then he heard about Stewart

McQuillan. A 52-year-old British military veteran who is also a paraplegic, McQuillan spent five years designing the HeliLeg, a device that lets pilots operate foot pedals by hand. The Federal Aviation Administration approved the HeliLeg in 2002, and the veteran now trains flight instructors on the apparatus, with efforts funded by Return Flight, a nonprofit he cofounded.

Fennig, now 21, learned of McQuillan through an online video demonstration and emailed to ask about training. "I didn't even know if

it was the right email address or if he would answer, but I asked him if I could become a commercial helicopter pilot," Fennig says, noting that he'd been employed as a dispatcher at the local sheriff's office but held out hope that he could learn to fly. "It seemed like the [Heli]Leg would work."

McQuillan, a married father of three grown children, had partially retired. Currently a captain in the U.S. Air Force Auxiliary, he is assigned to the Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs as an aerospace education

officer. Eventually, though, he agreed to help. "Trevor just hounded me," the veteran explains. "Finally, I flew out to meet him. I could tell he had the passion: His room, his Facebook, his life, are all about helicopters."

McQuillan also remembered what it was like to get back into the cockpit: "I know how I felt to be able to fly again. It's even more

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incredible to be able to give others back their dream."

If the "guinea pig"—a teasing nickname for the fearless Fennig—gets his commercial license, it'll prove that other paraplegics can fly, too, says McQuillan, who trains Fennig at TYJ Global flight school in Broomfield, Colorado. (Fennig has received assistance from the flight school and his community to cover expenses, which have totaled nearly \$50,000 thus far.) In addition to initially flying a few routes with Fennig to get him used to the device, McQuillan trained the school's flight instructor, Mike Fyola, on the apparatus.

But working with Fennig—an introverted young man who has never lived on his own—is different from working with military veterans: It's like being a parent again.

"I want Trevor to do well, but right now I can't be the chummy friend," McQuillan says. "Flying helicopters

at high altitude requires more skill, as we have less power to work with. The hardest skill Trevor has to learn is controlling the helicopter in buffeting winds when hovering."

So the veteran metes out equal measures of criticism and praise. That means Fennig is occasionally grounded until he finishes his training tasks, which include everything from studying for his written examination to learning cross-country navigation and how to evacuate the aircraft in an emergency.

But the eager flier, who also rides a modified motorcycle in his spare time, remains willing to learn. "I live life like I'm not paralyzed," he says. "Stewart's tough on me. There's definitely that British military thing going on, but that's a good thing most of the time. He proves if you put your mind to it, you can do just about anything. And I'm here to fly."

"I always hover in the background to make sure he doesn't have problems," McQuillan adds, explaining that the rigorous training can be intimidating. "I'm still waiting to push him hard enough that he becomes angry, but so far he never has."

That may be because Fennig is enjoying himself. "Flying a helicopter is nothing like I thought it would be. It's tricky," he says. "But the first time I flew by myself [taking over the controls], it was nice."

If licensed, Fennig will work for Copters for a Cause, a Denver nonprofit that provides helicopter rides to help charities raise money.

Will the young trainee succeed? His mentor has no doubt. "He's gonna do it or I will kick his ass," McQuillan declares. "Or find someone with a working leg to do so." —*Laura Daily*

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