



## Stephen Hopson

First Instrument - Rated Deaf Pilot

By Crystal Wright

Despite being born profoundly deaf, Stephen Hopson has never let anything slow him down. As the first deaf pilot to be instrument rated, Hopson has overcome many hurdles in his adult life before finding his bliss: aviation.

Hopson's parents did not discover he was deaf until he was three when his grandmother called to him from behind and he failed to respond. Despite being deaf, Hopson's parents decided to mainstream him so he would "attend a regular school and be surrounded by hearing children and teachers. My mom did not want me to learn sign language because she wanted me to assimilate myself in the world of hearing people" says Hopson. As a result of that decision and 20 years of intense speech therapy, Hopson speaks very clearly and says, "In fact, it wasn't until I arrived at college that I learned to sign for the first time."

His desire to learn about aviation began not long after it was discovered that he was deaf. Hopson remembers it well. He says "Every week for a long time she [my mother] would take me to the Albany County International Airport. We would pull up to the fence that surrounded the perimeter of the airport and I would eagerly rush up to the fence. My face would press up against the fence, hoping to see a plane prepare for takeoff. As soon as I saw one taxiing to the runway, I would run back to the car and put my head on the hood so that I could 'hear' the planes take off." His love of aviation continued through his adolescence and into his early adult years.

When Hopson was ready to graduate, he faced a dilemma. Although still very passionate about aviation, he followed the advice of his parents who had hopes of seeing him "go to college, graduate and get a 'real job'" he says. Despite taking their well-meaning advice, Hopson never forgot his enthusiasm for aviation.

After 15 years of working on Wall Street, Hopson underwent a career change that allowed him to focus on his career goals of becoming a writer and professional speaker. It was during this time that he stumbled upon a website for the Deaf Pilot's Association. An aspiring group, they gave Hopson the hope and encouragement that he too, could fly. He says, "As soon as I found out about other deaf pilots, I immediately began flight training...I received my private license one day before my birthday in May of 2001. The commercial came a few years later in July of 2002."

Despite obtaining his private pilot's license and his commercial rating, Hopson had dreams of achieving his instrument rating. He says, "When I first started flight training I was looking through the regulations and remember seeing the requirement to hear for the rating. I said to myself, 'I don't know how I'll do it, but I believe that I will one day get this rating.' Because I had a passion for aviation, I was willing to entertain the possibilities and that is exactly what I did. I filed it in my mind and kept the dream alive by taking all of the necessary steps toward the rating." To fly IFR Hopson uses a copilot to listen for air traffic control communications. The copilot writes the communication down in shorthand on a dry erase board for Hopson to read and

transmit his back to the controller. Because of this unique way of pursuing his dreams, Hopson has paved the way for deaf pilots all over seeking to achieve their instrument ratings, something he says he is very proud to have done.

Today Hopson is back on the lecture circuit where he is sharing his aviation experiences with his audiences. He says, "My ultimate dream is to fly jets, which, of course, requires not only an instrument rating but also multi-engine and jet type ratings." For the moment, Hopson is concentrating on his speaking career, but knows he will one day pursue his next goals. With his faith and determination, no doubt, he will. ■

*For more information about Stephen Hopson, visit [www.sjhopson.com](http://www.sjhopson.com) and [www.adversityuniversity.blogspot.com](http://www.adversityuniversity.blogspot.com).*

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