



WHEN VICKI VAN METER was little she thought she was a pig. "Not eatingwise!" she says. "I actually believed I was a four-legged animal. Everyone still calls me Hammy."

Unless they're calling her Amelia Earhart. Vicki, a tall hairpin of a 12-year-old, made headlines last September as the youngest girl ever to pilot a plane cross-country. On June 4—the day after she finishes sixth grade—she will take another pass at making aviation history, by attempting to do the same across the Atlantic.

## Vicki Van Meter

She will begin her 3,668-mile journey in Meadville, Pa., a town north of Pittsburgh best known as the birthplace of the Talon zipper, and hopes to touch down in Glasgow three days later. Vicki, the youngest of the three children of Jim and Corinne Van Meter, has lived her whole life in Meadville. "I'll never forget Track and Field Day in 1991," says Jim. "Vicki won the girls' 400 meters, threw up, walked to the other side of the track and then won the 200 meters and the football toss."

"Dad!" protests Vicki. "Why did you bring that up?"

"To show how tenacious you are."

"That's so embarrassing!"

Vicki came by her interest in planes naturally. Her grandmother worked as a weather-observer and met Vicki's grandfather, an air-traffic controller, at what is now the Greater Pittsburgh International Airport. Her stockbroker dad once owned a Piper Tri-Pacer. He sold it to put Corinne through college. "I've always dreamed of becoming an astronaut," says Vicki, flashing a mouthful of braces. "I think it would be neat to be the first person to walk on Mars."

She has been prepping over Earth since the fall of 1992, when Jim spied a sign-up sheet for flying lessons at the Port Meadville Airport. "If you want to fly to Mars someday," he told her, "maybe you'd better put your name down."

"Yeah," said Vicki. "O.K."

Within a year she had logged 50 hours in the air and another 60 hours in ground school. "The hardest part was sitting in a room full of smoking pilots," she says.

Last summer she resolved to fly coast to coast. Because she was five years too young for a solo pilot's license, she was accompanied by her instructor, Bob Baumgartner. As the two flew from Augusta, Maine, to San Diego, it was Vicki who did all of the takeoffs, navigation and landings. "It was neat watching the earth move below me," she says. "I don't wanna sound like a dork, but the Rockies looked like upside-down ice-cream cones, and the trees looked like broccoli."

Though she admits to a fear of heights, Vicki says she was never scared during the four-day flight, even during the bumpy Oklahoma City-to-Phoenix leg. Battling nausea, the flu and 40-knot head winds that bounced her tiny Cessna 172 as much as 200 feet, she persevered by gripping the yoke in one hand and an air-sickness bag in the other. When Vicki finally made the landing in Phoenix, her father was there to meet her and reminded her, "You may be honorary mayor of Oklahoma City [a distinction she'd been given a day before], but you still have to clean your room when you get home."

For the record, the controls in Vicki's Cessna 172 were strictly manual. On her transatlantic flight she will pilot a higher-tech Cessna 210 owned by a family friend, Curt Arnsperger, who will accompany her on the trip. "I'll fly as much by hand as I can," she says with a broad smile. "I don't want some kid to say, 'Oh, she flew the ocean on autopilot.'"

Jim thinks the only thing that might stop his daughter is if her plane went down. "And even then," he says, "she'd want to paddle the rest of the way."

—FRANZ LIDZ

RICHARD MACONSON

The 12-year-old aviator plans to spread her wings all the way across the Atlantic.

