COMMUNITY

The Long Way Up

How Aerobatic Pilot Rick Volker Turned a Delayed Dream into Unlimited Reality

By Valerie Boucher



The SU-26M was designed by the same engineers that designed Sukhoi fighter jets. Unbreakable! Photo by Rick Volker

Rick Volker doesn't do things halfway. An aerobatics pilot and COPA member, he flies with precision, intensity, and a kind of athletic discipline that feels as grounded in sport as it is in aviation. From leading a four-ship aerobatic formation air show act in China in 2017 to competing at the Unlimited level, you might assume he's been flying his whole life.

In reality, Volker came to aviation later than most, after careers and commitments that, for many, would have closed that door entirely.

"I was a springboard diver, a freestyle skier, and had an incurable fondness for anything with an engine that went fast," he says. "I announced early that I intended to become a fighter pilot."

That path shifted by high school. His father, impacted by the loss of a friend in a civil aviation accident and by his own frightening solo flying experience, worked to steer him away from it. As a result, Volker's career ambition turned toward medicine.

By adulthood, flying had fallen away entirely. In its place came eight years of dental school, the demands of building a practice, and raising two children.

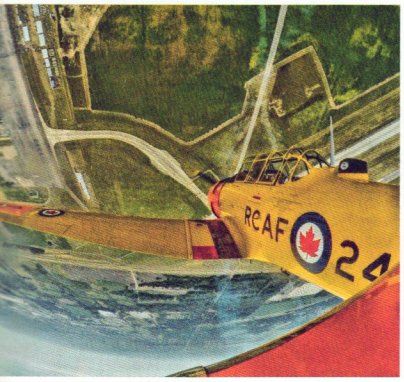
"This combination delayed my aviation dreams for about twenty years," he says.

The gift of an introductory flight at a nearby school brought it back, and from there, it moved fast.

"My dental office happened to be two minutes from the airport, which made it remarkably easy to schedule a 'two-hour lunch break' every day. I flew as often as I wanted to — and my patients were none the wiser."

Rick's favorite aircraft of all time, the Sukhoi 26M. More of everything that you can use. The only limit: your brain! Photo by Ricardo von Puttkammer.





Thunder over Michigan air show in the Harvard Mk. IV.- on the back side of a loop. Serious ground rush! Photo by Vito Palmisano.



The Harvard Mk IV in a Hammerhead during a Sportsman contest in Olean, New York named after Volker's teacher, Bill Thomas. Photo by Rick Volker.



Immensely challenging and rewarding! Flying the Spitfire with the CF-18 in the Canadian Heritage Flight has been one of Volker's greatest honours. Photo by Simon Lea/Meridian Productions.

Discovering Aerobatics

For Volker, learning to fly wasn't the end goal; it was a starting point.

"During my time as a student pilot, I watched Kermit Weeks on Wide World of Sports competing in a new form of freestyle aerobatics," he recalls. "He was doing lomcevaks and other wildly nonstandard manoeuvres that appeared to ignore both tradition and gravity."

Watching that, something clicked.

Aerobatics combined the intensity of athletic competition and high-speed problem-solving Volker craved; "it's essentially everything I enjoyed, but now airborne."

A pivotal moment came at an air show in Batavia, New York, where he watched Patty Wagstaff perform. Afterward, he asked how to follow a similar path.

Her answer was direct: "Get a tailwheel endorsement, buy an aerobatic airplane, get instruction, compete at the highest levels, and then consider air shows." Volker followed that advice methodically.

Soon after, he took a flight in a Pitts S-2B at the Pompano Aerobatic Center in Florida with Eric Haagenson, a former F-16 pilot and Northern Lights performer. "He completely rearranged my understanding of flight," Volker says. Not long after, he purchased a Pitts S-2B as his first aircraft.

He trained with Pitts specialist Bill Thomas, completing a ten-hour aerobatic course, his only formal coaching. From there, he progressed steadily, advancing one competition category per year. Practice became routine, seamlessly integrated into daily life.

"Daily practice flights, woven into my work schedule, felt like play; fitness training supported G-tolerance."

"When preparing for air show season, I fly six days per week for six weeks as a personal minimum. I maintain nearly that frequency throughout the season."

Aerobatics, he says, produces a familiar kind of reward. "It has an endorphin effect remarkably similar to long-distance running — except with more upside-down parts."

Reaching Unlimited

Volker eventually reached the highest level of competition: Unlimited aerobatics, a category few pilots enter.

"I never had formal coaching beyond that initial 10-hour course," he says. Instead, he relied on judges' critiques and constant self-assessment to refine his flying.

To continue progressing, he transitioned to the Sukhoi SU-26M, an aircraft capable of the precision and power Unlimited competition demands. He went on to win several regional contests.

"What surprised me most," he notes, "was how much time I spent refining negative-G snap roll fractions on vertical uplines."

Competition sharpened technical precision. Air shows required something different.

"The focus shifts from being judged to creating something compelling to watch," Volker says. That led him toward freestyle and gyroscopic manoeuvres, many of them his own design, where creativity became as important as control.

Beyond his own competition, Volker has served as an Air Show Competency Evaluator (ACE) for more than 15 years, giving annual evaluations to every civilian performer in Ontario and Quebec. "In that role, I aim to help acts improve," he says. "It gives me more competition with my own act, but it helps the industry get stronger."

Flying Warbirds

Beyond aerobatics, Volker has flown some of aviation's most iconic aircraft, including the Messerschmitt Bf 109 and the Spitfire Mk IX.

"Flying warbirds has given me an appreciation for how different these aircraft are from general aviation airplanes," he says. "Their controls are precise, direct, and brutally honest — more akin to modern aerobatic monoplanes."

What he likes most about warbirds is that they demand discipline and offer little margin for error.

"Fighters go exactly where they are pointed and never second-guess the pilot. I love that — and I will not own an airplane that behaves otherwise."

Some moments stick with him: "At 300 knots and ten feet above the runway in a Spitfire, while practicing over an airport, the engine failed, filling the cockpit with smoke. I could not see any instruments. I pulled up into what I thought was a 45-degree upline. When the smoke cleared at 1,800 feet and 180 knots, it revealed a very expensive glider. Fortunately, I was able to glide to a perfect landing." An experience,

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he says, permanently changed his trust in engines.

Not Finished Yet

Despite his success, Volker doesn't consider his flying career complete.

"Formation aerobatics remains my final frontier," he says.

Even after leading a four-ship formation team with some of Canada's most elite pilots, including Snowbirds Lead Brent Handy and former Snowbird and Northern Lights founder Mario Hamel, he found himself challenged.

"Their formation skills were, frankly, freakish—and transferable to any aircraft," he says. "They made me acutely aware of how much I still had to learn."

That sense of ongoing challenge is part of what keeps him engaged. Recently, he has been exploring the SIAI Marchetti SF-260C, a military trainer that offers both utility and performance.

Learning to Fly Later in Life

For pilots who didn't start early, Volker's path shows there is no single way into aviation. This perspective also helped him support his wife, Trish, who earned her Private Pilot License at 50. Under Volker's instruction in an Extra 300L aerobatic monoplane, she went on to win her first aerobatic contest.

"My advice to aspiring pilots is to take an introductory flight," he says. "The biggest surprise is discovering that flight training is a journey where each day matters more than the destination."

He also encourages new pilots to stay curious and open to the breadth of flying.

"Read aviation magazines, attend fly-ins, and expect your interests to evolve. Don't immediately buy the aircraft you trained in. Fly in as many types as possible — vintage, floatplane, bush, aerobatic, military trainer — before committing. Seek out true experts and ask them far more questions than they expect."

Volker's path into aviation wasn't direct, but it was deliberate. Starting later gave him a clearer sense of purpose and the discipline to pursue it fully. That may define his flying more than anything else.

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