



STEVE KROG

COMMENTARY / THE CLASSIC INSTRUCTOR



That First Solo

A feeling like no other

BY STEVE KROG

DO YOU REMEMBER the first time you rode a bicycle without a helping hand? Driving a tractor or car for the first time? How about the first day of high school? The day you received your driver's license? Your very first real date? These life events are memorable. However, for pilots the only event that is truly easy to remember in every detail is the day of their first solo flight! It's an event like no other, leaving an imprint on pilots' memory banks encompassing every minute detail of that special day.

Over the past four decades I've had the opportunity to not only solo many students but also satisfy my curiosity by asking many pilots if they recall the day they soloed. The pilot's eyes light up as a big grin creeps across his or her face. Without further prodding he or she can recall that special day in detail.

I accomplished my first solo flight in a Piper Cherokee 140, N6495W. It was white with blue trim, light blue vinyl and cloth interior, and child seats in the back. The instrument panel was complete with one Narco Mark 12 radio of 360 channels and a VOR head.

The airport where I was taking flight training in Brookings, South Dakota, had one hard surface runway of 5,000 feet, 12/30, and two short turf runways. The turf runways were seldom used as the prevailing winds were nearly always from the northwest or southeast.

Flying did not come naturally to me. I really struggled to perform maneuvers within the tolerances required to pass a private pilot checkride. Landings were particularly difficult. Every landing was a 10-foot carrier landing arrival. I could keep the airplane on the centerline but couldn't make a smooth touchdown. The instructor who had been working with me on perfecting landings was becoming progressively more impatient, which increased my anxiety. Finally, he threw his hands in the air and told me to park the airplane.

The post-flight review was spent chastising my inadequate performance. Another instructor overheard the one-sided discussion and asked if he could take a crack at improving my landings. In exasperation, my instructor told him to have at it.

The next afternoon the new instructor and I began to taxi to the runway. He had a very relaxed demeanor about him, which

Above: Jamie Weber is a dedicated and focused young aviatrix, soloing in minimal time. Jamie trades clerical help including scheduling and billing, plus hangar duties in exchange for flight time.

helped settle my nerves. After the preflight check, he told me to make a normal takeoff followed by a normal no-flap approach and landing. I did so and again dropped it in from about 10 feet. "I think I've solved the problem," he said and had me taxi back to the flight office. "Don't shut down; I'll be right back," he offered. A minute later he was back carrying a square boat cushion. "Here, sit on this, and then let's try it again," he said.

I slipped the boat cushion under me and taxied back to the runway. What a difference the cushion made. I could see over and around the instrument panel and keep the runway in full view. My takeoff was normal as was my approach, but the landing was a squeaker. "Show me that again," he said. Three more takeoffs and landings were made, each as good as the first one.

"Turn onto the taxiway and stop" was all the instructor said. I prepared for a lengthy critique. He unlatched the upper door lock, popped the handle, and began to undo his

seat belt. "I'm getting out now, and I want you to do three more takeoffs and landings, then taxi back to the flight office. Be careful and have fun," he offered, and was gone.

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I taxied back to Runway 12, checked my trim setting, made my radio call, and taxied into position for my first solo takeoff. Once in the air I finally remembered to breathe. Almost instantly it seemed I was at pattern altitude and at midpoint downwind. Again, I made my radio call. I was flying solo! The three takeoffs and landings were accomplished in a blur. What a rush it was when

the prop stopped and the instructor was standing near the wingtip wanting to be the first to offer congratulations.

I will never forget that January day. It was overcast, and the temperature hovered around 25 degrees. The surface wind was from the southeast at 12 knots. Snowbanks were piled high on either side of the runway.

However, if it hadn't been for a patient, understanding, observant flight instructor willing to fly with me, I may never have experienced the gratifying occurrence of a first solo flight. I have been forever thankful to him for giving me a chance. Had it not been for him I would have probably joined the ranks of frustrated students who walk away from learning to fly due to an instructor unwilling to observe, understand, encourage, and then correct my shortcomings. Once I made that first solo flight, overcoming the lack of making good landings, the remaining flight training proceeded rapidly.





Above: Dave Howard works full time plus is a volunteer fireman. His free time is quite limited but his focus and dedication helped him solo in record time.



Left: The look of accomplishment as Todd Miller taxis to the hangar following his first solo. Todd drove from Cedar Rapids, Iowa, to Hartford, Wisconsin, (a six-hour drive one way) every weekend to learn how to fly.

SOLOING THROUGH THE EYES OF AN INSTRUCTOR
Today I get to relive first solo flights through the eyes of flight students young and old as well as in my mind as a flight instructor. This past flying season (I live in a northern climate) I had the pleasure of soloing about 15-20 students, all in tailwheel airplanes. What a treat and pleasure to be able to do so and be a part of these students' special days.

Every student is different in how he or she interprets what you say and puts your direction into practice. A good flight instructor understands this and should approach each student as a challenge. No two individuals are alike in how they learn. Some students need to be shown a maneuver numerous times before being able to perform it satisfactorily, while other students perform the maneuver with a brief verbal discussion and one demonstration.

Nearly 90 percent of my instruction is done in tailwheel airplanes, mostly in J-3

Cubs, so I sit in front and the student sits in the tandem rear seat. I'm quite vocal and have a difficult time speaking without using my hands and arms. My wife cautions people around me when we dine out to be careful of my swinging arms. I'm bound to tip over at least one water glass at every meal.

Students have come back to me after soloing, telling me they knew they were getting close as I was saying very little and my hand gestures were minimal, but my head was nodding up and down quite a bit. Just before I solo a student I go through a mental checklist: Has the student made at least five consecutive satisfactory takeoffs and landings? Have I covered emergency pattern situations with the student? Have I covered "What if the engine quits now" exercises ensuring that the student has been exposed to numerous situations requiring instant action to maintain safety? And what about balked takeoffs and

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landings? If I can answer yes to these questions I've asked of myself, then it's time for me to exit the airplane.

After a good landing, I'll ask the student to taxi off the runway and stop. As I undo the seat belt and headset, I ask if he or she has any questions. The expressions I see on the faces of students at this point are priceless. Some show trepidation, others smile and show confidence.

Three takeoffs and landings later the students taxi back to the ramp. Ear to ear grins can be seen from the taxiway. As they complete the engine shutdown it's quite easy to see their self-satisfaction. I like to give each student time to savor the moment before congratulating him or her. As the traditional shirttail cutting is completed, the words begin to flow. Even the shy and soft-spoken students have a lot to say. They can describe every detail of each takeoff, trip around the traffic pattern, and landing. It's exhilarating for the student, a real self-confidence builder.

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Sharing the pleasure of flight is an experience that can only be understood by someone who has been there! *EAA*

Steve Krog, EAA 173799, has been flying for more than four decades and giving tailwheel instruction for nearly as long. In 2006 he launched Cub Air Flight, a flight training school using tailwheel aircraft for all primary training.