STEVE KROG

Lessons in Learning

Through the eyes of a tailwheel instructor

BY STEVE KROG

I'VE HAD THE DISTINCT PLEASURE of teaching people to fly, young and old, for more than four decades. It began as a job to build flying time. Like many young pilots, I had a dream: I wanted to become an airline pilot.

A year or two passed while I built flight time. However, when I accrued enough time to be considered for the airlines, they were furloughing pilots. The final time I applied I was told to sit tight at least three more years before any new hiring would be done, and don't call us, we'll call you.

Frustrated, I gave up flying for several years and then a friend, Dick Hill, reignited the flame. I've been instructing regularly ever since. It became a lifelong passion continuing to this day.

I've taught hundreds of students of all ages and backgrounds. Each offers their own unique challenge, and it is the instructor's responsibility to figure out how each student best learns. For as much as I've taught students, they, too, have taught me.

Some of the things I've been taught, or have learned to accept, are humorous, others have been frightening, and still others fall into the category of "I can't believe he/she has just done that."

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PHOTOGRAPHY BY **JIM KOEPNICK**

STUDENT WITH AN ATTITUDE

Years ago, as chief flight instructor I frequently inherited students with whom other instructors were having difficulties. One student with a particularly bad attitude comes to mind. It was time for the student to solo, but the instructor was hesitant because of the bad attitude. I agreed to give it a try, flew for several hours, and felt the student was in the right frame of mind to solo.

After taxiing to the ramp area to drop me off, I told the student to taxi back to Runway 12 and do three takeoffs and landings. The student nodded, added power, and proceeded to taxi directly into the 3-foot snowbank on the ramp perimeter. No damage was done other than a bruised ego.

The next day we tried it again, this time completing the solo flight without incident. As the student taxied back to the hangar, we observed the student had become a "true ace of the base." The student, assuming we were watching from the hangar, lost focus, started smiling and waving, and proceeded to taxi directly into the corner of the hangar. Solo a success — score one for the hangar, airplane nothing. The student climbed out of the aircraft, inspected the damage, and walked away never to return. Two ego bruising experiences in two days was far too much for the student to accept.

I've had my share of experiences, good and bad, over the past four decades, but the good far exceeds the bad.

TAKEOFF INTO THE FOG

Early one spring morning I experienced a situation that caused me a near panic condition. I had scheduled two students to each fly their long solo cross-country flight. Both completed their final planning and taxied in trail to Runway 30. I observed both as they completed their run-ups. As the first student taxied into position, I looked toward the west and observed an un-forecast rapid-moving low-level fog bank hiding the western half of the airport. Assuming the students would see it as well, I expected both to taxi back to the hangar and wait for the fog to clear. Surprise, the first airplane taxied into position, added full power, and began rolling down the runway. I began screaming "no," but to no avail. The airplane disappeared into the fog. I remember thinking this cannot be happening and began listening for the over-revving engine and subsequent crunch, but it never happened.

The second student taxied into position and I thought, "No, not you, too." But after sitting on the centerline for a few seconds, the student taxied off the runway and back to the hangar. I asked the student what was going through his mind. He replied, "I saw the first airplane disappear into the fog and decided I better not go."

My mind was still racing wondering what had happened to the first aircraft. I decided to call flight service (FSS) to find out if the student had activated his flight plan and learned that he had. I could finally breathe again, so I asked FSS to contact the aircraft and ask if he had any problems on takeoff, which they did. The student replied, "No problem."

By the time the student returned several hours later, I was ready to offer a lecture the likes of which have never been heard at this airport. I remember meeting the student as he taxied onto the ramp and began chewing him for the full hundred or so yards to the hangar. I continued chewing while he shut down and exited the airplane. Finally, after exhausting my full vocabulary, some of which consisted of single syllable four-letter words, I asked what happened. Calmly, he replied, "I was so focused on the map and the instruments when I taxied into position, I never looked up to see the rolling fog bank. I added full power and only then saw the fog. I was committed so I did what you taught me, keep the wings level and one wing thickness above the horizon line on the artificial horizon. A few seconds later I was on top and could see it was clear to the west so I kept going." I congratulated him on keeping a cool head and apologized for the lengthy butt chewing. He went on and earned his private pilot certificate several weeks later.

THE OVERDUE CROSS-COUNTRY STUDENT

The overdue solo cross-country student is also one that requires a handful of antacid tablets. I've experienced a few of these, and several flights come to mind. The first involved a student who was not only overdue but overdue by several hours. I made radio calls and tried his cellphone but never received a response. Long overdue and several hours beyond his fuel range, I expected the worst. Finally, the Cub could be heard approaching the airport. The student landed and taxied to the hangar all smiles. Before I could say anything, the student commented that it was a great flight. When I quizzed the student about the length of time and being several hours overdue, the student smiled and offered that at each airport visited, the hangars called to him, and he looked in each to see what kind of airplanes could be spotted. It was a true pleasure flight for him, but one that probably shortened my life by a year or two.

THE OVERDUE PHONE CALL

Another time I sent a student on a solo cross-country, and the planned return time came and left. As I paced around the ramp looking to the southwest hoping to spot the overdue Cub, the phone rang. The voice at the other end, who is also a good friend, asked if I was sitting down. Then he chuckled and said the airplane is okay. Now he had me going. When his laughing ceased, he explained that my student had landed uneventfully but shortly after a sky diver had a chute malfunction, landing hard and breaking a leg. Consequently, the airport was immediately closed. My friend entertained my student for another couple of hours until the airport was reopened.

These are experiences but a few of us get to enjoy. I wouldn't trade them for anything.

SOLO FLIGHT FOLLIES

One spring afternoon a young student who had two or three solo flights logged was ready for some light crosswind work. We launched off turf Runway 36 (200 feet wide) dealing with a 10-15 degree, 8-knot crosswind. After practicing approximately 10 very successful landings, I decided to exit the Cub and allow the student to try a few more solo landings. The first was good, followed by a second that was a bit shaky. The third was one of the most interesting I've ever observed. Forgetting to add aileron the Cub drifted to the right. Then too much aileron was added dropping the left wing, all while the airplane is still 3-4 feet in the air. Following a hard touchdown and a spectacular bounce, the poor Cub made several significant S-turns, then exited the runway to the left missing the gliders that were tied down, through the drainage ditch passing between two runway lights, and came to a stop on the centerline of Runway 29 pointing westward.

I finally caught my breath and assumed the student would taxi to the hangar. Instead, power was added and a takeoff was made from that point. Now I'm quite concerned. I've got a frightened student in the air unsure of what to do. The student climbed to pattern altitude and proceeded to fly around the airport for several laps. Rather than upset his thinking with a radio call, I opted to let him first clear his head. Several minutes later he entered the pattern for Runway 36 and proceeded to made another three to four excellent crosswind takeoffs and landings.

After taxiing back to the hangar, he shut everything down and just sat in the Cub with a big grin. When asked to explain, he replied, "I knew exactly what I'd done wrong and I knew I hadn't hit anything on the ground, so I just took off again, cleared my thinking, and came back in to land. This time I could hear your voice, though — left wing down, right rudder, flare, flare, flare, stick all the way back and in the corner." Just another life-shortening experience in a flight instructor's day!

I've had my share of experiences, good and bad, over the past four decades, but the good far exceeds the bad. Self-satisfaction is immeasurable when you see a student complete a first solo flight, demonstrate spins unassisted, pass the checkride, and take a passenger for a flight for the first time. These are experiences but a few of us get to enjoy. I wouldn't trade them for anything. 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.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JIM KOEPNICK