



STEVE KROG

COMMENTARY / THE CLASSIC INSTRUCTOR

Overcoming Fear and Anxiety

Getting back in the left seat after a moment of panic

BY STEVE KROG

I'VE WORKED WITH SEVERAL INDIVIDUALS throughout the years who experienced a situation creating fear or anxiety. One of the pilots had accrued 500-600 pilot-in-command hours flying his Piper PA-28. One particular flight occurred in the western United States. Observing roll clouds and heavy fog coming off the mountains, he immediately attempted to get to the nearest airport less than 5 miles away, but he lost the race, becoming enveloped in heavy fog less than a mile or two from the airport. He kept his flight attitude level but ended up striking the ground. Neither he nor his passenger were seriously hurt, but the incident left a deep scar on his mind and his confidence.

Fast-forward two years. The pilot had decided to challenge his fear and try flying again. He came to me, related in detail what had happened, and wanted to fly again. We flew about four hours over the course of two afternoons before he was ready to do some solo flying. During the four hours of flight time we reviewed the basics, followed by a lot of stall work, and then concentrated on landings where he was most fearful. The pilot kept repeating himself on every approach, "Krog, I don't mind telling you my palms are sweaty, and I have a knot in my stomach."

I talked him through each approach and landing as if he was a beginning student working in the pattern for the first time. After a half-dozen approaches and landings, he appeared to be relaxing just a bit so we reversed roles. I asked him to treat me as a first-time, very timid passenger and tell me everything he was doing during the approach and landing, which he did. We completed his recurrent training with an additional two hours of hood work practicing turns, VOR tracking, and unusual attitude recovery. Today this individual again owns an airplane and uses it to see the United States from the air, especially now that he's retired! Rather than walk away from his love of flight, he decided to meet his fear head on and beat it.



HOW DO YOU DEAL WITH ANXIETY?

How do you deal with fear and anxiety, especially when it relates to a situation or a flight that you have previously made? Upon completing the flight without further incident, did you put the airplane away and dwell on the situation all the way home? Maybe you closed the hangar door and decided to never again fly in a crosswind. Or even worse, the incident was such that you've vowed never to fly again. None of the outcomes should be allowed to fester in your mind or gut denying or limiting your satisfaction of flying an airplane for pleasure in the future.

Fear, according to the dictionary, is defined as apprehension or uneasiness caused by the presence of danger, real or perceived. Anxiety is defined as a state of being worried or uneasy about what may happen.

Over 40-plus years of flying airplanes, I can recall countless times having conversations with individuals at social gatherings who tell a story of learning to fly but then having a frightening experience causing them to quit out of fear. What a loss to our GA community.

Fear and anxiety are two words not commonly found in a pilot's vocabulary, nor are they openly admitted to. After all, a pilot is capable of flying an airplane solo, an achievement very few others can do, or have even attempted to do. Pilots, whether male or female, are "macho" characters then. Right?

That is a perception created by movie characters. John Wayne in *Flying Leathernecks* and Tom Cruise in *Top Gun* played the role of macho pilots quite well. It's an image we as pilots like to subtly identify with, but slice away the façade and you'll find a human being who has experienced both fear and anxiety at different times while acquiring flight time. The macho pilots share their perceived fears over refreshments telling all who will listen, "No kidding, there I was ..." stories often greatly enhanced as the night goes on. We all know one or two fellow pilots who fit this category. Most of us, though, remain tight-lipped keeping our thoughts to ourselves allowing them to grow and fester within.

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STEVE KROG

As general aviation pleasure-flying pilots, we have all encountered moments of fear or anxiety during our flying careers. Anxieties are rather common when first learning to fly, especially if one has either a non-verbal or a military-wannabe instructor pilot. One says very little to explain what is about to happen, while the other plays the role of a Marine gunnery sergeant, screaming and ranting for the entire training flight. Neither are good representations of how instructors should conduct themselves and have probably done as much or more to turn individuals away from pleasure flying than the cost has ever done!

Rather than have a frightening experience, bury it internally, and then dwell on it every time you think about going to the airport, it is better to talk about it with someone. Get it out in the open, analyze it, think about how to avoid this experience occurring again, and then file it away under "I'll never do that again!" There, now you've moved on.

How do you, a general aviation pleasure-flying pilot, deal with anxiety when flying? Reflect for a moment; I'll bet you've experienced a vivid anxious moment or two. And if asked, could relate to me the exact time, place, and circumstance. I know I've experienced anxious flying moments at different times over the years.

Most of us general aviation pilots have experienced fear or anxiety while flying, dealt with it as best we could, and then once safely on the ground vowed never to do that again. The situation remains on our mind and in our gut, though. Over 40-plus years of flying airplanes, I can recall countless times having conversations with individuals at social gatherings who tell a story of learning to fly but then having a frightening experience causing them to quit out of fear. What a loss to our GA community.

I'LL NEVER DO THAT AGAIN!

As an instructor, I attempt to instill in all students that should they have a

problem with any portion of their flight(s), present or in the future, they should stop by and we'll talk. Countless individuals have come to me, when no one else is around, and shared their personal moments of fear. I aggressively promote this mindset. Rather than have a frightening experience, bury it internally, and then dwell on it every time you think about going to the airport, it is better to talk about it with someone. Get it out in the open, analyze it, think about how to avoid this experience occurring again, and then file it away under "I'll never do that again!" There, now you've moved on.

The daughter of a good friend was taking flight lessons at a flight school some distance away. She called me one evening and asked if I would fly with her for an hour or so as she was coming home to visit her parents this upcoming weekend. When we met late Saturday afternoon, she related that she had really scared herself doing power-on stalls and consequently had become afraid to perform them. This "fear" had grown to the point she was even unsure if she would continue flying.

After some ground discussion, we took to the air to see what could be done to erase this fear from her mind. We began with a series of imminent stalls, where I did the flying and she called out when she could feel the approaching stall. Next, we did a series of power-off full stalls followed by a series of partial-power full stalls. Then we graduated to doing a modified "falling leaf" where I controlled the power, ailerons, and elevator. She had the rudder controls only. Her task was to keep the wheels down, the wings up, and descend 1,000 feet. Timid at first,



Find another competent pilot, or a flight instructor, and talk it through to overcome fear and anxiety.

she soon relaxed. Confidence began to build as she realized that even when stalled she still had control of the airplane. From there we advanced to full power-on stalls with varying bank angles. By the end of the flight, she had regained her confidence and the fear was gone.

I often wonder just how many more active pilots would be a part of our pleasure flying world had actions like these been taken. How many people would not have walked away from one of the most fulfilling and challenging hobbies had they not encountered a questionable flight instructor or scared themselves during a flight?

I've dealt with numerous individuals who have scared themselves on landing, usually a crosswind landing. Unfortunately, many who have experienced this situation alter their flying by avoiding flight on crosswind days, limiting significantly the amount of pleasure flying they are able to enjoy. An hour of dual flight could probably eliminate or greatly reduce this anxiety and build confidence.

Fear and anxiety as it pertains to flying can generally be overcome. One must first recognize and accept that it exists. Then, find another competent pilot, or a flight instructor, and talk it through. And, finally, with the help of an instructor, or competent pilot, challenge yourself and meet the anxiety head on. It's amazing how quickly it becomes a non-factor. *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.

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