



STEVE KROG

COMMENTARY / THE CLASSIC INSTRUCTOR



Reflections

Lessons learned during some downtime

BY STEVE KROG

WHAT GOT YOU STARTED in aviation? What inspired you? Who introduced you to airplanes? Who encouraged or mentored you when you began learning to fly, or helped you along the way? Have you ever reached out and thanked them? Have you reached out to help the next generation of pilot wannabes?

These are all questions that crossed my mind recently while recovering from a nasty infection. It really knocked me off my game. I had to take it easy and stay away from flying for three to four weeks. For someone who flies nearly every day, that is a lot to ask. However, it did give me a lot of time to reflect.

My first recollection of airplanes was observing the North Central Airlines DC-3 fly over our farm four times daily flying between Minneapolis (MSP) and Brookings, South Dakota (BKK). As a true pilot wannabe at that early age, I stopped whatever I was doing and watched that beautiful silver airplane until it disappeared over the horizon.

So many great people have provided me with support and advice. If I could offer one bit of advice, take a few moments after today's flight and give some thought to who influenced you in your pursuit of flight.

There was a small private airport less than a mile from our farmstead. As soon as I could ride a bicycle, I would pedal to that place and hangar fly either the Champ or the Cub that were kept there. Even then I preferred the Cub over the Champ. (Champ owners who want to discuss this can contact Steve directly via his website, CubAir.net. — Ed.)

My father's friend, Carroll Bressler, gave me my first airplane ride when I was a teenager. I knew then that someday I would become a pilot. But having little money to pursue aviation at this time, my dream would have to wait.

Finally, as a junior in college, the opportunity to learn to fly became a reality thanks to the U.S. Army ROTC. I learned to fly and earned a private pilot certificate in exchange for four years of my life wearing olive drab.

I struggled with learning to fly. I was not a natural, and it didn't come easy for me. Thanks to a very patient and great instructor, Duane Vig, I completed the program and passed the checkride with a whopping 37 hours in my logbook. Had it not been for him and his laid-back way of making me feel comfortable and confident in the cockpit, I may have given up before my career ever started. Thank you, Duane, wherever this may find you.

Immediately upon entering the Army and headed for flight training, I was notified that all new pilot candidates had their orders rescinded as the Army had all the pilots it needed at the time. Frustrated, I put my aviation plans on hold for a couple of years.

Finally, it was time to get back to aviation, and I returned to the flight school where I had started. From November of that year until April of the next, I managed to earn my commercial pilot certificate, instrument rating, multiengine rating, and, finally, the sought after certificated flight instructor (CFI) rating.

Thinking I was becoming the "ace of the base," an individual who became a good friend took me aside and explained aviation life to me. Jim Christophersen, a fellow pilot and CFI, let me know there was no room at the airport for someone with an attitude. He also regularly shared bits of wisdom. Thanks Jim, for some great advice and for adjusting my attitude.

Another individual who influenced me was Al Nelson, a longtime pilot, barnstormer, and crop duster. One day the local skydiving club needed a pilot and asked me to fill in. Eager to experience this type of flying, I removed the seats and door from Al's Cessna 172. Al approached me and asked that I join him in his office where I learned a lot more about weight and balance than I ever had previously.

Al had been flying for more than 50 years and had done quite a lot of instructing as well. When he learned I was working on earning my CFI rating, he offered some tips and shared some experiences, but then he gave me a bit of advice that I've never forgotten.

He said, "Krog, for every 25 students you fly with, one will 'wear' the airplane, four will be above-average pilots, and the other 20 will just 'drive' the darn thing." I've flown with hundreds of individuals, young and old, over nearly five decades of instructing, and Al's numbers really hold true. Thank you, Al, for watching out for me and for sharing your wisdom.

My timing for potentially getting hired by an airline was terrible. When I had accrued the hours and began submitting my résumé, all the airlines were furloughing pilots. Discouraged, I decided that it would be in my best interest to pursue a career in marketing, something I had studied in college, and continue flying as a hobby. Moving the clock forward a few years, my wife, Sharon, and I ended up in Hartford, Wisconsin, due to a job change for me. After a year of getting settled and both of us adjusting to new jobs and a new area, we ventured to the local airport one Saturday afternoon. That proved to be the beginning of a whole new life for us.

At the airport for our first visit, we met several individuals with tailwheel airplanes, but no instructor to teach them. This presented an opportunity for me as I had done some tailwheel instruction in the past. I began flying and teaching in beautifully restored Piper PA-12s, Piper J-3 Cubs, Aeronca Champs and Chiefs, and an occasional Taylorcraft BC-12D. Sometimes, when one door closes, another opens. This was the door that led me to a career path that I still enjoy every day.

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It was here at Hartford that I was introduced to Jim Miles and Tom Hegy, both good friends. Jim had done everything from barnstorming to civilian pilot training to flying the “Hump” during World War II to crop dusting. He taught me about forced landings and the seven different stalls practiced in the military. Jim also taught me a lot about smooth coordinated flight. One of his sayings that has stuck with me forever is: “When flying, pretend your 90-year-old very frail grandmother is your passenger. She has a bad case of hemorrhoids, too. Every move you make in the airplane must be gentle and coordinated so as not to cause Grandma any pain.” I continue to use that story with nearly every student pilot I fly with. It always gets a laugh, but it sure gets the student to focus on their coordination. You were a great teacher and friend, Jim. Thank you for making me a better instructor.

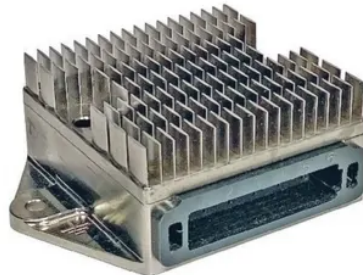
Tom Hegy, a career crop duster pilot accruing more than 50,000 hours, also helped me in many ways. My wife and I had acquired a 90-hp Piper J-3 Cub but really didn’t know anything about maintaining fabric-covered airplanes. Tom always had time to answer questions and assist with any maintenance issues that arose. Had it not been for Tom’s knowledge and help, our Cub would have been grounded numerous times for minor issues. Instead, Tom, also an A&P, came to the rescue, and we were back in the air in short order. Had it not been for Tom, I’m not sure where our flight school would be today. I owe Tom a huge thanks for all of his help.

And finally, I owe my biggest thanks to my wife, Sharon, who has been supportive of all my craziness in my passion for flight. I know I’ve tested her patience to the max numerous times, but it has all worked out. Together for 45 years now, I look forward to many more years of aviation involvement with her help and support.

It is amazing what one thinks about when forced to take it easy. So many great people have provided me with support and advice. If I could offer one bit of advice, take a few moments after today’s flight and give some thought to who influenced you in your pursuit of flight. Then pay it forward. *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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