



STEVE KROG

COMMENTARY / THE CLASSIC INSTRUCTOR

What I Would Have Missed

If I'd never learned to fly

BY STEVE KROG

Steve is taking a little time off this month, so here's a look back at one of our favorite columns of his. This Classic Instructor originally ran in our April 2017 issue. — Ed.

RECENTLY MY WIFE AND I were sitting in a hotel lobby awaiting a ride to the airport. We began conversing with the middle-aged couple sitting nearby. He, noticing the airplane logo on my shirt, asked if I flew. Answering in the affirmative led to a nice discussion of the type of flying I do.

During our conversation, the gentleman said he had always wanted to learn to fly, but like with many of us, life had gotten in the way. Though he was in his late 50s, he was considering taking it up again. I gave him my card and encouraged him to call if he had questions or needed further encouragement.

Later that day, my thoughts returned to our conversation. I began thinking about what I would have missed had I not learned to fly at age 19 and continued pursuing flying all my life.

I would have missed the thrill of my first hour of dual instruction. December in South Dakota is usually not very favorable temperature-wise, and my first day was no exception. It was a cold, breezy early afternoon when my instructor walked me through a complete preflight inspection. My first recollection was the aroma of 100 octane fuel (the old original kind, not the new blue LL variety) when I removed the fuel cap to visually check the fuel tanks. It was a unique fragrance, something I'd never experienced, a pleasant smell and one that lingers.

After completing that first solo flight, I was about to explode with excitement. I had actually flown an airplane all by myself. What a thrill and a builder of self-confidence.



I would have missed the first time I was in control of the airplane, almost afraid of moving the yoke too much for fear I'd cause a problem. The many dials and gauges were overwhelming at first, but my instructor was thorough and explained each, though I remembered very little about them. The cockpit aroma was a unique mixture of fuel, electrical, and cabin heat.

I would have missed the terrifying lesson on stalls when my instructor let me enter a stall without telling me what to do to recover. I encountered my first spin at that moment, thinking I was going to die while my instructor kept shouting, "Recover, recover, recover!" Finally taking control, he easily executed the spin recovery, but I was quite shaken, even uncertain if I would ever want to fly again. Thankfully, another instructor intervened, and I continued my flight training. This was a lesson that has remained vividly in my mind to this day and has made me a better, safer instructor as a result. I teach every one of my students how to enter and recover from a spin.

I would have missed my exhilarating first solo flight — a feeling and experience like no other. There I was, sitting at the end of Runway 12 alone and about to fly by myself for the first time. The takeoff was uneventful, as was the full traffic pattern flight, but I remember looking at the empty seat next to me and thinking, "You can do this." Duane, my instructor, had confidence in me, and I couldn't let him down. After completing that first solo flight, I was about to explode with excitement. I had actually flown an airplane all by myself. What a thrill and a builder of self-confidence. It is a feeling that is very hard to explain, but one that each of us has when completing that first solo flight.



I would have missed the apprehension and sleeplessness the night before taking my private pilot checkride. Launching into the oral portion, my palms sweaty, I was sure I had studied all the wrong material. But once we began, the oral was easy and I completed it in a short time. I recall my biggest fear for the flight portion was holding heading and altitude during slow flight, but I nailed it that day. The remainder of the checkride was easy after slow flight.

I would have missed the satisfaction of giving my first airplane ride to one of my college roommates (I had three at the time). Darryl said he'd go, so off to the airport we went. He was busy taking pictures while I was busy flying. As it turned out, that was his first time in a small airplane. It was a fun flight, and one that we have relived numerous times over the years.

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I would have missed the challenge of flying a Cherokee 180 from South Dakota to California and back over our college spring break. Stephen “Step” DeLay, a good friend and flying buddy, had earned his private certificate a day or two before I got mine. Over a mug or two of golden brew we talked about taking a flying trip. His parents were planning to be in southern California over spring break, so he called them. Reluctantly, they agreed to cover our expenses while in California if we paid our own way to and from. The next day after classes, we drove to the airport to chat with the FBO and ask if he would rent us an airplane for a week or so. By this time, we were both quite sober and expected to have our request turned down. To our surprise, he said why not. We had three Cherokee 180s to pick from, and we chose N9301J as it was the newest and had a dual comm arrangement.

We both learned a lot about flying from that eventful trip. We encountered snow squalls, mountain flying, high-altitude takeoff and landing performance, VFR on top, turbulence, and California smog. Since both of us had learned to fly in the Dakota flatlands in the winter, these situations were all new to us. Step had about 45 hours of total time and I had about 42, so we were true novices when we launched on this trip. We each acquired about 10 hours of pilot-in-command time but a lifetime of experience. When in doubt, we landed and asked the local pilots for advice.

I would have missed the pleasure of meeting my future wife if I had not learned to fly. I was flight instructing, and she had just graduated from college. As a graduation present, her parents bought her flight lessons. I was lucky enough to be her instructor. Sharon earned her certificate that summer and then left the area to pursue her nursing career. We stayed in touch and connected again a year or so later. We just celebrated our 40th anniversary in December.

I would have missed the satisfaction of owning our first airplane — a very tired and rough-looking Aeronca Champ 7AC. We loved it and flew it as often as we could get to the airport. It wasn’t much to look at, but it was ours and we could fly any time we wanted rather than having to schedule an airplane a week in advance. We spent many wonderful hours in that airplane.

I would have missed the challenge of flying a J-3 Cub to Sentimental Journey in 1987. Sharon and I were asked by friends to fly their newly restored Cub to Lock Haven for the fly-in. We agreed, had a wonderful flight, and met many new friends. On the return flight home Sharon commented that she wanted a Cub. That was all the inspiration we needed and began a search for a good clean J-3.

I would have missed becoming the proud owner of a J-3 Cub. Several weeks after the Sentimental Journey flight, we located a Cub through a good friend. It was located in South Dakota, and we would need to act fast. We left at dawn Saturday morning in our Champ and returned late Sunday afternoon in our first Cub. What a thrill it was flying over 500 miles with the door down and window open, cruising at 500 feet AGL. Cub flying at its finest, and we were loving it. We’ve had Cubs ever since that weekend in the 1980s.



We were true novices when we launched on this trip. We each acquired about 10 hours of pilot-in-command time but a lifetime of experience.

I would have missed opening the hangar door just before day-light and waiting for that first ray of sun to peek over the horizon in preparation for a sunrise flight. Taxiing in heavy wet dew created a mist around the open Cub door, and the airplane left three distinct tracks in the moisture-laden grass. When full power was applied, the dew spray filled the cabin area and instantly we were airborne. Looking back over my shoulder I could see where the tire tracks ended and the propeller blast had blown the dew off the grass. What a thrill to fly at this time of day. The sun is just peeking over the eastern horizon, and the air is as smooth as silk. Not a bump anywhere.

I would have missed seeing the world in three dimensions. Cruising along low and slow in a single-engine airplane like the Cub is an experience everyone should have at least once in a lifetime. At 70 mph and 500 feet AGL, the topographical features are easily recognized. Cattle in the pasture can be seen and the accompanying aroma experienced. Fresh mown alfalfa is one of the finest smells one can experience. Deer and wild turkeys are easily spotted. I oftentimes take young persons for a flight and have them count the deer and turkeys. They don’t believe me at first, but then after spotting a few, it becomes a challenging game.

I would have missed making that last landing in the evening as the sun disappears behind the western horizon. The sky is a brilliant red-orange, and the few clouds are pink. The long shadows are gone, but at 500 feet I can just barely see the top of the sun. What a sight it is to behold and one that only aviators get to experience.

I would have missed the hundreds of new acquaintances and friends I’ve made through aviation, many becoming lifelong friends. We all have one thing in common — the experience of flight and seeing the world from an entirely different perspective. It can’t truly be described. It needs to be experienced to be understood. **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.