



Never Too Old to Learn

Never too good to not improve

BY STEVE KROG

I HAD THE PLEASURE of speaking at a recent FAA Safety Team seminar. There were about 45 registered attendees ranging in age from 18 to 55-plus. All had one thing in common: They loved all aspects of aviation and flying airplanes.

The attendees were attentive and asked a lot of good questions, which told me I was with a good group of safety-oriented and proficiency-conscious pilots. When I asked for a show of hands of pilots who had 400 or more hours of flight time, most raised a hand. Further refining my question, I asked how many truly had 400 hours of flight experience or did they have one hour repeated 400 times? There was a look of confusion by everyone, not quite sure what I meant by the question.

I have nothing against a pilot who pleasure flies for an hour or so every week or two. Some of us like to visit different airports and attend fly-in events while others prefer to enjoy the pure pleasure of a local flight. Whatever satisfies your need for flight is all that matters. But do you prepare and conduct the flight as thoroughly and as safely as you can? Or do you “kick the tires and light the fire,” assuming all is good with your airplane? By that I mean, have you cut your preflight inspection or your self-evaluation over time?

Without a bit of stall practice, will you have retained the skills necessary to recognize an unanticipated stall? Will you initiate a proper recovery before the stall is fully developed?



The FAA (and previously the Civil Aeronautics Administration) has studied aviation accidents and incidents practically since the beginning of flight, focusing on what caused the event. Was it an equipment, pilot, or weather problem leading to the accident? While the studying of accidents and incidents continues, a theory developed that has proven to play a large role in many of these situations. The FAA refers to it as “the normalization of deviance.”

In the simplest of terms this means something unacceptable becomes gradually acceptable where there are no adverse consequences. If you make the same mistake often enough and nothing bad happens, it becomes a habit. Then, later the overlooked potential problem becomes a real problem. For example, you’ve inspected the tail wheel on your aircraft every time you’ve flown it for the past three years. You’ve noticed the tension springs are a bit stretched but never really gave them another thought. The aircraft has become a bit more difficult to taxi over time, but it has been so gradual you didn’t notice. Then, while landing after a one-hour pleasure flight, the airplane takes on a mind of its own and takes you for an interesting ride through the tall grass, hopefully without causing any damage other than to your ego. You knew the tail wheel needed a little attention, but you’ve come to expect it to be fine. Your deviation has become normal and accepted, leading to an incident that could have been prevented.

As pilots we all committed to setting and maintaining high standards for flight. However, circumstances sometimes cause us to shortcut or deviate from safety. Most of the time we get by with it, but then it jumps out and bites us. We’ve all seen pictures or video of aircraft flying with the towbar still attached. Gas caps not replaced and left on the wing. Oil caps left off. Cowling fasteners not snapped into place. All these situations and more happen with some regularity when we deviated from our normal safety practices and preflight inspections. Perhaps it was due to being in a hurry, or we were distracted. In either case, we’ve deviated from the norm.

Deviation from the norm can also be experienced during flight. Perhaps your first takeoff of the day was a bit shaky, allowing the aircraft to drift well left or right of the runway center. Rather than

making a note of it and deciding to practice your takeoffs, you decide that's good enough today and tell yourself you'll practice another day when you have more time.

Maybe your landing was somewhat less than perfect, again letting the airplane wander all over the runway. Well, that's good enough; you're down safe, and the airplane is none the worse for wear.

Accepting these now lower standards for your takeoffs and landings is a setup for a future incident. Then the FAA will connect you with an area flight instructor and require that you get several hours of "remedial" training before the incident is closed. The FAA provides a list of items on which we must focus and an estimated amount of flight time that should be expended. I've flown with several individuals under these circumstances.

Is most of your flight done off a turf runway? Turf covers a multitude of sins on both takeoffs and landings. You're not even aware of it until you fly to a nearby airport and land on asphalt. Only then do you realize that your handling skills have become a bit lax. I would suggest that when you next go for a pleasure flight and the surface



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winds are favorable, venture to a nearby airport and try a couple takeoffs and landings on the hard surface. You'll be amazed at how quickly your skillful inputs return, thus making you a better, safer pilot.

When I was speaking at the safety seminar mentioned at the beginning of this article, I asked for a show of hands for those pilots who had done a stall in the last 30 days. It wasn't surprising that only one or two people raised a hand. When asked who had done one in the past

year, about half raised their hand. I find this somewhat troubling. Without a bit of stall practice, will you have retained the skills necessary to recognize an unanticipated stall? Will you initiate a proper recovery before the stall is fully developed?

Where is a stall most likely to occur, even on a Saturday morning pleasure flight? When making the descending turn from downwind to base, and again when making the turn from base to final. If it occurs in either of these positions, it will be unintentional and not expected.

When you make your weekly flight, do you ever challenge yourself? Let's say you are planning a pleasure or scenic flight and will fly around 1,500 feet AGL. Once at your altitude and trimmed for level cruise flight, can you maintain that altitude plus or minus 50 feet for five minutes? What about maintaining altitude plus or minus 20 feet when making a 360-degree turn and rolling out on your starting heading plus or minus 5 degrees? Can you keep the ball perfectly centered when making the turn? These are all small things, but you'll maintain a high level of proficiency and move away from normalization of deviance by practicing these maneuvers from time to time.

There was a time in my early flight training where I was apprehensive doing stalls. I would play a mind game with myself all day long before heading to the airport for my flight. I'd tell myself I'm definitely going to do some stalls today. But by the time I got to the airport and into the sky, I'd talk myself out of doing stalls. Tomorrow will be a better day for stalls, right?

Finally, I challenged myself by committing to do at least three stalls on every flight. By doing so, there was a beginning and a definite

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end for practicing the maneuver. At first, I was apprehensive, but I continued with this mindset. It wasn't long before stalls became comfortable for me.

Stalls are not that difficult to master, nor are they any more dangerous than a medium bank turn. But many pilots were taught by a weak or inexperienced instructor who also had a fear of stalls. Consequently, you as the student inherited that fear of stalls.

Airline pilots are required to undergo simulator and classroom training yearly. This keeps them sharp by practicing all types of potential in-flight emergencies to ensure safe flight. Corporate pilots do the same by attending a three- or four-day safety seminar with simulator time to maintain proficiency.

We, as general aviation/pleasure flyers, owe it to ourselves and to our fellow pilots to practice and strive to maintain a high level of proficiency and safety. If we don't, we're normalizing deviance and compromising safety for ourselves and others who may be enjoying a flight with us. Do your part; challenge yourself to be a better pilot and don't become the news headline of the day. *EAA*

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