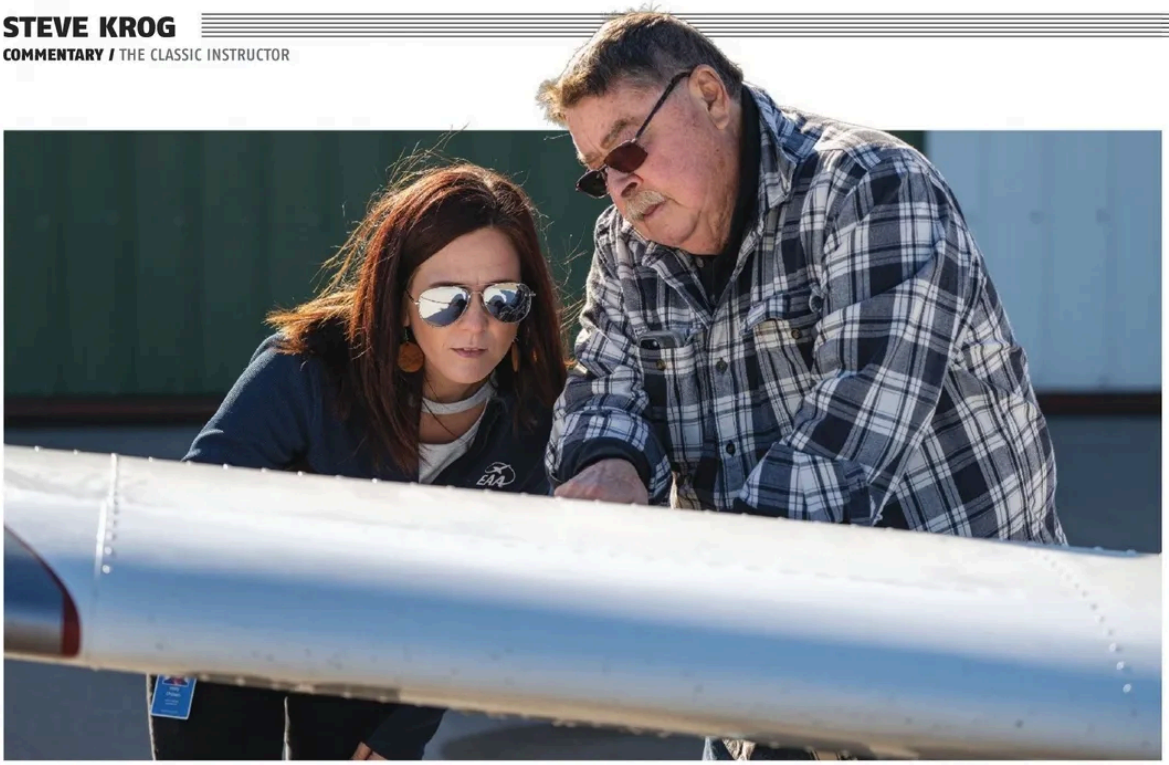


Can Common Sense Be Taught?

Playing the "What if" game

BY STEVE KROG



COMMON SENSE IS THE basic, practical judgment and understanding of everyday situations that most people share, relying on experience, intuition, and widely accepted beliefs enabling sound decisions.

There are several ways to acquire common sense: practical judgment, shared knowledge, and intuition and experience. I have a sign above the hangar door leading to the airplanes. It reads:

Good judgment comes from experience and Experience comes from poor judgment.

Acquiring common sense is a bit like that, especially when it comes to flying and flight training.

Most of us learned some semblance of common sense through shared knowledge. I grew up on a farm in southwestern Minnesota. My father frequently shared his knowledge of common sense by expressing himself if I did something wrong.

"Close the dang door, son. Were you born in a barn?" Or, "When you leave the room, turn the lights and television off! Do you think I'm made of money?" This shared knowledge taught me to think and anticipate. I'm sure anyone reading this has similar experiences of common sense acquisition.

Many flight training schools teach students to memorize the procedure for every maneuver, or to use the checklist for certain situations. That is fine if every flight is performed in perfect conditions. But we all know that flight conditions change from minute to minute. This is where common sense comes to the surface during the flight.

We must learn to adapt as the flight progresses. For example, let's say you are going to fly out for breakfast approximately 80 nm away. The sky is clear of clouds, and surface winds are light and variable. It should be a great day for the breakfast flight.

Thirty nautical miles into the flight you begin experiencing light turbulence. It doesn't seem like it will amount to much, but there is a visible cloud bank in front of you at least 100 miles away. Not a

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problem, you think, but the bumps are getting sharper and your groundspeed has slowed by at least 15 knots. What would you do if you were in this situation?

Had common sense been employed we would have checked the forecast weather.

What is it doing now, and what will it be doing three or four hours from now? What is the surface wind forecast? If it shows light and variable at 3,000 feet now but indicates 25 knots in three hours, we may want to think about things. Just what is that cloud bank 100 nm away? Your flying friend tells you not to worry about it. There is always a cloud bank over the river on the west side of the state.

Taking the time to use common sense to get a good weather briefing would have prevented your uncertainty as well as the uncomfortable feeling growing in your stomach. It may have been perfect weather at 0700 but marginal by 1200.

Today, it is simple to obtain good weather information. ForeFlight is one of the most common sources, but there are several choices. Some require an annual fee, while others are free. Had you taken the time to get a weather report you would have found that there was a fast-moving cold front. Turbulence was forecast as well as an increase in winds both at the surface and at altitude. Your beautiful breakfast pleasure flight turned into an uncomfortable experience.

Years ago while flying a charter flight, I experienced a situation where judgment, experience, and common sense all came into play. I was to fly two people from eastern South Dakota to a small community located on the Wyoming and South Dakota border. It was winter, and a deep low-pressure area was moving eastward out of the Rocky

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Mountains. The trip would be VFR, and it was meant to be a quick turnaround. According to the forecast, I should easily be able to get there and depart before the approaching snowstorm/blizzard was anywhere near my destination.

My plans fell apart before ever departing. One of the passengers was nearly 30 minutes late. Finally in the air and approximately 100 nm into the flight I noticed my groundspeed deteriorating. Then the turbulence began.

The approaching front was now clearly visible and moving rapidly eastward. A quick call to the nearest flight service station told me the system was rapidly building in intensity, and surface winds were peaking at 60 knots. I was about 30 nm from my destination and could see a turf runway dead ahead. I lined up for a turbulent 5 mile final with a stiff crosswind from left to right. At this point, I wasn't sure if I would win the race to the runway or if the storm front would come in first.

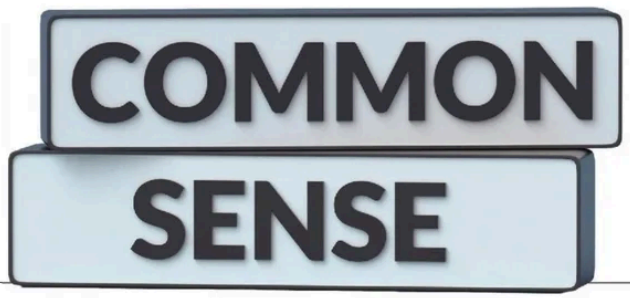
About 1/2 mile from the runway the wind really hit me. It was about a 60-degree crosswind, and I had a crab angle where it seemed I was looking at the runway through the passenger side window. I knew I could now make the runway, but the Piper Cherokee Six I was flying wouldn't have a gear left if I landed at this angle.

Just over the end of the runway, I gave the airplane a full blast of power and instantly chopped it while applying full hard right rudder. I hit hard, like an aircraft carrier landing, but it was straight, and the airplane was still usable.

Before I finished taxiing to the end of the runway and tiedown area, the blizzard hit us. Thankfully the town police officer had been alerted and was waiting for us with all lights flashing, which provided me with direction to taxi. That flight made me a true believer in checking the weather, and I vowed never to be challenged like that again.

Lack of common sense may be allowable in many aspects of life, but circumstances can quickly rise to the surface and hurt you, your passengers, and your airplane without it.

What I have frequently experienced when flying with individuals who have been taught elsewhere is a lack of common sense. After discussing this phenomenon with designated pilot examiners (DPEs), they too have seen a lack of common sense displayed by pilot candidates.



Common sense can be taught, but it will take a good instructor to first recognize the problem and then train the student to correct for it.

A DPE once shared this example. As the pilot candidate entered the traffic pattern, the DPE reduced the power and stated the pilot had lost the engine. The pilot then reached for the checklist and began going through it, item by item. Meanwhile, the airplane is slowing and losing altitude. Finally, the pilot stated he intended to land about 1/2 mile to his right, away from the airport. Had common sense been in play, the pilot would have shortened his downwind leg, turned left and then left again, and landed on the runway.

Many of the young pilot trainees today grew up in the COVID era, where their training was mostly at home on the computer. They were never allowed to get out and experience life and the bumps and bruises that accompany the learning experience. Everything they have learned has been from information on a computer screen.

It is the responsibility of today's flight training facilities to recognize this shortcoming and go well beyond the norm to train these young pilots. They have never been taught to think, only to memorize and believe what they have learned verbatim. Common sense can be taught, but it will take a good instructor to first recognize the problem and then train the student to correct for it.

One practice I like to use with all pilot trainees is to play the "What if" game. While flying on a cross-country, for example, where would you go if the engine quit at this instant? While flying locally doing air work, what if the engine rpm dropped to 2000 at this point? What would you do?

The student will more than likely say they are going to land in a field. But what if the airport is 5 miles away and you have 3,000 feet of altitude to use to your advantage? Would you still try for the field, or would you head for the airport?

Examples like this should be taught and then allow the student to execute. The best way to acquire experience is by doing, but within reason. That's why a good instructor should be sitting in the seat with the student.

Unfortunately, many young student pilots are taught to pass the test and perform maneuvers according to the required FAA standards. Nothing more, nothing less. They are not taught the "What if" phase of flying, and that phase may help prevent them from bending up a good airplane or worse!

We're about to enter good weather flying. Get current, stay current, stay safe, and enjoy! EAA

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