

FLYING YOUR RV STARTS BEFORE YOUR RV

Van bought lunch, (it happens!) so we sat around the table, dabbing french fries and throwing out ideas. There was Jerry VanGrunsvan, Mike Seager, Van and me, all trying to come up with specific topics for the promised series of Training and Safety articles. As you can imagine, the conversation ranged widely as Jerry and Mike talked about their experience transitioning pilots into the RV.

They weren't altogether happy stories. Both Jerry and Mike have encountered more unprepared pilots than they bargained for. And not just unprepared for the RV....they've both had students that were so lacking in basic flying skills (some from rust, some from inexperience, some from poor basic training and habits) that they would be reluctant to sign them off in any airplane. It's easy to understand how it could happen. Building an airplane often takes all the available time, money and energy, and keeping up the flying skills takes a back seat.

The first thing we all agreed on is that trying to transition an unskilled, rusty pilot into a high performance homebuilt is a waste of time at best, and a recipe for disaster at worst.

Gradually, we narrowed the topics for this initial article to questions of *preparation* and *discipline*.

First, *preparation*: We agreed that a candidate for transition should be current and have skills *at least* sufficient to pass the flying portion of a real BFR or Private Pilot checkride. He should be able to takeoff straight, climb holding the correct airspeed and heading, maintain level flight, turn, recover from stalls and land to a standard that would pass a checkride. We suggest that six months or so before the proposed transition training, the builder should be down at the airport checking out in a trainer (you lucky people who fly regularly while you're building can ignore this part.)

We also agreed that transition would be smoother if a pilot took another step and held himself to a higher standard than simply passing a checkride. This higher standard is not easy. It requires practice and a good understanding of the basic principles of flight. But if you have trouble with them in a trainer, it will be more difficult yet in a clean, quick airplane. You will have to work.

Which is where *discipline* comes in:

Now, before you stop reading or bum this newsletter, be advised that discipline, as we refer to it, does not necessarily mean the same as when your school teacher rapped your knuckles with a ruler or when your army drill instructor shouted obscenities in your face. According to my handy dictionary, discipline may mean:

- 1. *Training to act in accordance with rules.*
- 2. *Activity, exercise, or a regimen that develops or improves a skill; training.*
- 3. *Punishment inflicted by way of correction and training*
- 4. *The rigor of training effect or experience, adversity.*
- 5. *Behavior in accord with rules of conduct*
- 6. *A branch of instruction or learning.*
- 7. *A set or system of rules and regulations.*
- 8. *To train by instruction and exercise; drill*
- 9. *To bring to a state of order and obedience by training and control.*
- 10. *To punish or penalize; correct; chastise.*

Of these, item #2 probably best defines the form of discipline we need as pilots. Many of the other definitions imply a form of harsh outside control. However, some of these, such as #9, can also be applied as a form of SELF training and control.

Military discipline, as objectionable as it is often viewed, has as its primary purpose a harsh training to the eventual end of surviving

mortal combat. In pleasure flying, while seemingly very dissimilar to mortal combat, discipline can also contribute to survival.

One of the most highly DISCIPLINED fields of flight is scheduled airlines. Not only in piloting, but design, manufacturing, maintenance, etc. An FAA statistic (on airline safety) states that "if a passenger were to choose one flight at random each day, that passenger would, on the average, go for 21,000 years before perishing in a fatal crash." Now, DISCIPLINE doesn't sound so bad after all, does it?

If we use the "D" word in the forthcoming articles, please remember that we are using it in the most positive way.

It is tough holding yourself to a higher standard. You must evaluate your flying critically and apply the mental discipline to make corrections. This means practice...see #2 above.

I've learned a thing or two about practice by living with a professional musician who is expected to come up to speed on a new concert program every two weeks or so. The biggest lesson is that practice and repetition are two different things. Listen to a child practice a new piece of music...they stumble when they reach the hard parts, so they go back and start at the beginning, over and over. Most of their time is spent playing the easy parts...not practicing and improving the difficult parts. The teacher's job is to break the cycle and teach the student the discipline of working on the difficult bits, slowly and steadily, applying the correct basic skills, until they become as natural as the easy parts. There are no shortcuts. You may learn one piece, but if the correct basic skills are circumvented, it will catch up with you later.

Several of Mike/Jerry's students have mentioned that they really "just want to know they can get the RV up and down in one piece" and are not too concerned about flying it precisely so early in the program. They figure they'll learn the more difficult stuff as they become more familiar with the airplane.

You may be able to make this work, if you have the discipline to really practice and learn when you fly your own airplane, but there are at least two reasons that we don't like this approach.

1. It is SO easy to get a certain comfort level and go no further, so your flying becomes simply repetition, rather than learning. One thing we've all learned: either you're getting better or you're getting worse. Nobody stays the same, so if you are not actively, consciously, practicing to get better you're probably getting worse. It can happen so slowly that you don't notice... until one day you realize that you're not comfortable going into a short strip that used to be straight forward, or that you are reluctant to try maneuvers that used to be comfortable. In a new airplane, the unknown is especially scary, so the tendency is to stay away from it and fly where it's comfortable...it's a losing game.

2. When you climb in for that first flight, you are not just a pilot; you are a *test* pilot. There's a big difference. Testing a new airplane is not the time you want to be trying to recall old skills. If anything goes wrong, you want to have (in Tony McPeak's phrase) the "mental bandwidth" available to deal with the problem. Your flying skills must be ready to serve you. You may not have time to rummage around in the mental junk drawer looking for them.

So before you pick up the phone to schedule transition training, rent, borrow or beg another airplane and work on your flying skills. Set precise standards for what you want to achieve. Practice critically and work on the hard stuff. Prepare yourself through self-discipline.

As this series goes on, we plan to get more specific, recommending exercises and standards that will help improve your flying and prepare you for transition training to your RV.