

Captain of a Cub

By Kenny Miller

"United 678, Lincoln approach, you have traffic at your twelve o'clock position, less than a mile, slow moving, altitude unknown."

I am sure Lincoln approach control made that type of call in the late 1970's as a target appeared to the East of the city. It could have been the Daredevil Dentist hanging his Pitts on the sky or it may have been me.

Twelve hours of dual? Ridiculous I thought. I had over eighty hours total time and had flown high performance singles and had even logged a few hours in a Baron. But, the insurance company was not impressed with my experience and ordered the dual. I was the proud owner of this airplane I could almost out run on foot! I bought it so my best friend Scott and I could build hours without breaking the bank. He was an instructor and a soon-to-be professional pilot so he could give me the necessary instruction.

"Now Miller, you get inside and hold the brakes," he told me through the open fold down Plexiglas window. "Open the throttle just a little bit and when I tell you, turn on the mags. Be sure to holler 'clear' and 'switch on' so I know what's going on. Once it starts, I'll get in the front seat and hook up the door."

Scott stood back and off to the right of the wooden prop and gave his student the go ahead sign to do all of the assigned tasks so far.

"Switch on. Clear!"

With an outstretched right arm and a mighty grunt, Scott grabbed the wooden prop, gave it a pull and jumped out of the way. I am sure he was a little concerned about my definition of "open the throttle just a little" would be so the jump was to make sure he wasn't going to end up a tomato in front of this horizontal, Pennsylvania produced, flying Vegamatic. Ka-put. Ka-put ka-put. Try again Scott.

"Do you think the engine is broke?" I asked.

"No," he said as he had an insulted look on his face. "I just need to prop it again."

He was successful on the third try. The prop whizzed around and produced as much wind as my window fan at home. The trusty instructor jumped in the front seat and with a little goose of the throttle, we were on our merry way out to the business end of the short cropped grass runway.

"Turn it a little to the left and then a little to the right and look outside for traffic," he ordered as we putted along in a straight line. I pushed the left rudder pedal.

"The steering doesn't work."

"It doesn't have a steerable tail wheel, Miller. Touch the brake just a little but make sure you have enough speed first." I brought the power up, applied pressure to the toe brake, and we turned for a quick look to the left.

"Not that fast and don't hit the brake that hard! You don't want to ground loop it."

"O.K. already O.K. What's a ground loop?"

Finally, we were at the end of the short grass runway. Run-up. Mag check. Move the stick and see if the ailerons worked. Move the rudder pedals and see if the rudder moved. We were ready.

"See any traffic, Miller?"

"Nope," I said as I tried to get a good view from under the big fat fabric covered wings. "Hey, we don't have any flaps."

"It generates enough lift without flaps. Do a one-eighty and line it up with the middle of the runway," Scott ordered.

Stomp. Ka put put puttitta put. Bingo. The little yellow plane made a quick turn around and was lined up with this 1920's version of O'Hare.

"Dammit!" he hollered. "Be gentle. Now bring the power up and hold the stick with forward pressure," the instructor hollered over his shoulder as he shook his version of the stick to get the student's attention. "That will get the tail off the ground quickly and you'll have rudder control. Once the tail comes off the ground, use the rudder to keep yourself lined up and be careful so you don't ground loop it. The wind is coming from the right front so give it a little right forward aileron to keep the wing down."

"Is this stick working right?" the student asked. "It's flopping all over the place."

"That's me showing you where it should be, Miller. Let's go. Don't ground loop it."

"What's a ground loop?"

Down the runway we went and soon the tail was off the ground and both student and instructor had a decent view of things. So far so good.

"Pull it off!" Scott hollered. I eased the stick back and the Cub was in the air.

"Look out for the damn windsock."

Oh, not enough left rudder and too much right aileron. Stick a little left and back for the climb, left rudder, there you are young demanding one, the runway is back in front of us and the houses are moving back to the side of the runway where they were properly zoned in the first place.

"I don't know why he got so excited. I missed that windsock by at least two feet."

"Too much deck angle, Miller! Lower the nose, you're gonna stall!"

Stick forward. Power up. Stall my butt.

"Look out for the tree!"

If you ever decide to build a little country airport, make a deal with the neighbors to cut down the trees or pick out a better runway lineup than one that has three or four huge Nebraska cottonwood trees a few hundred feet off the end of the runway. Power up. Stick left and back.

"Watch your bank angle! You're gonna stall."

The boy sure gets jumpy. I wish he would make up his mind. Did he want me to miss the tree or not?

Finally, wide open Nebraska countryside. The fidgeting ended in front seat as the Cub gently glided through the now still evening Nebraska air.

"Now just get the feel of it for a little bit," came the order from the front seat.

"I know how it feels, remember the windsock and the tree?"

"Let's go back and do a few wheel landing touch and goes," the instructor ordered. "Just bring it over the fence at about thirty-five and touch down on the front mains only. Hold forward stick pressure and keep it straight with rudder and hold a little down aileron for the wind. Watch out for a ground loop."

Thirty-five? You're insane! Nothing stays in the air at thirty-five. What the hell is a ground loop? Damn I hate those fat balloon tires. We were supposed to be on the ground not bouncing back into the air!

"Pull the power back!"

Here goes the fidgeting again. Power back as ordered. There, nice and gentle back on the nice soft grass.

"Let's go. Let's go!"

I guess that means he's had enough "touch." Forward stick with not so much windsock right. More left rudder.

"Pull it off, Miller. Pull it off!"

Another tip for your country airport--don't plant tall broom grass at the end of the runway. When a full powered little plane goes through it, it throws grass all over the place and it makes it hard for the pilots to see. I know, I know. Watch out for the tree.

We made a few more training flights and Scott flew enough hours to get a full time flying job. He was flying Barons and right seat in Learjets and I was sitting in my office waiting for the hours to accumulate so I could take the cub up by myself. I went to the little airport lots of times and the farm dog and I sat in the open hangar and listened to stillness. I needed a couple of flights before I could push the little yellow bird out of the hangar and claim the sky as my own. It was like being fifteen all over again.

Then one of those perfect summer days rolled around. No wind. No thunderstorms. No FAA. The dog no longer hid when I went near my plane. He looked at me and gave me a smile and a whine. He knew and I knew what to do. Today was the day. Today I brought some courage with me.

I could hear all of Scott's instructions as the prop whizzed around in front of me. Check for traffic on the way out. Do a run-up. Watch out for the windsock. Get off before the tall broom grass. Watch out for the tree. I could hear his instructions as if there was a tape recording coming from the front of the cockpit. The view, however, was much better without the fidgeting friend in front of me.

The day was mine. The sky was mine. My cub solo lasted an hour or so and when I came over the fence at thirty-five miles per hour, a familiar form came running out to the runway to meet me.

"Miller, you weren't ready to take this up solo!" he hollered at me. "I stopped by your office and they told me you went out to fly and I was scared to death. You can't fly until I feel you're ready and I sign you off!"

"I'm alive so sign." He thought about it for a minute and decided he would. I was a finally captain of my 1946 yellow Piper J-3 Cub.

By the way, if you're ever on the flight deck of a Continental A-320 coming out of Newark, and you notice a captain that seems to fidget alot right before takeoff, don't be too concerned. He's probably worried about a ground loop.

"United 678, clear of traffic."

Too bad guys. You really did miss something wonderful.