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The Student Experience: Checkride

A dream realized

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'Congratulations, you're a pilot'

The big day had finally arrived.

I sat nervously as I waited for the examiner, frantically reviewing V-speeds, procedures, and systems in my head. They seemed to mix together into one giant and confusing maelstrom that now prevented me from thinking at all.

For the seventh time in three minutes, I reached for 91G's pilot's operating handbook and once more confirmed that I did in fact know the answers to the whirlpool of questions swirling in my mind. Nerves were really starting to play tricks on me.

An instructor walked in, and we chatted for a while. She told me about her checkride some years before and offered kind words about Ray, the designated pilot examiner I'd be riding with, a Boeing 737 captain for Continental Airlines.

Almost on cue, he walked in and shook my hand, a broad smile illuminating his friendly face. He had just completed a successful checkride with an instrument student and had paperwork to finish before we could begin my practical test. Slightly reassured, I sat down and listened to that student recount his checkride to another instructor.

I gave the last-minute cramming a rest and looked back on the previous five months.

This is it, I thought: the culmination of hours of work at home and in the cockpit, moments of intense frustration and doubt, sometimes even fear. I'd never once thought of giving up, but my confidence had often been tried and plagued with questions about whether I would ever become a pilot.

But as the moment of truth drew nearer, I mostly remembered the sheer exhilaration and tremendous sense of achievement of it all. The amazing journey I was about to complete was the realization of a childhood dream.

Whatever the outcome, it had all been worth it, and I tried hard to look at the checkride as just a final flight before being set free. More important, this was a chance to ride with one of aviation's sages and learn another trick or two about the art of flying.

Ray began with a briefing that somewhat set my mind at ease.

His goal was to pass me, he said, but in order for that to happen I'd have to hold up my end of the bargain. He wouldn't trick me and would do his best to brief me enough ahead of time so that I understood what he expected of me before performing a maneuver.

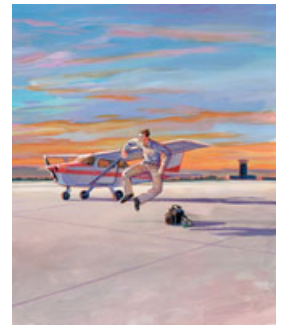
And most important, he said, I would be the pilot in command. Ultimately all rested on my shoulders, and while we could act as a crew, I would be the sole decision maker in that cockpit.

The idea of being the pilot in charge with a seasoned airline captain in the right seat excited me, and provided encouragement that I could pass both the oral and flight portions of the practical test.

Then began the oral examination.

The questions were mostly practical, as Ray seemed to be more interested in probing my judgment rather than my knowledge. After all, he explained, I'd exhibited the book knowledge by passing the computerized knowledge test some days before.

He covered airspace in some detail before asking about runway incursions, a pervasive problem that he said could be easily remedied by a clearer understanding of simple rules for ground operations. Questions also touched on controlled flight into terrain, radio communications, and decision making.



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"You're flying happily over here," he said, pointing to the area around Marlboro Airport, a few miles west of Boston. "And all of a sudden, you notice red fluid on your left strut. What's going on?"

"Hydraulic brake fluid leak," I answered.

"How do you treat it?"

"Well, it's not an emergency, so I'd look for a suitable airport where I could get it fixed, land, and have a mechanic take a look at it."

"OK, let's say you know a great mechanic at Marlboro and he'll give you a great deal on the work."

Ray pointed to the airport symbol on the sectional. At first, I thought he wanted me to figure out whether the tick marks around the airport circle, which indicate that fuel is available on the field, would suggest that kind of work could be performed there.

I gave it some thought, but something stood out.

"Nah, I wouldn't land there," I said.

"Why not?" Ray asked.

"The runway's only 1,600 feet, which would mean I'd have to slam the brakes to get the plane stopped. I'd be more comfortable with a runway where I can baby the plane back to the ramp."

"Let's go fly," he said, folding my sectional and handing it back to me.

While the idea of being drilled with questions had scared me, the flight remained the most daunting part. I knew I could perform all the required maneuvers, or Tyler and the check instructor would not have vouched for my abilities. Still, I couldn't help but worry that nerves and that unshakable knot in the pit of my stomach would get in the way of the tactile side of flying.

The weather was nice with some scattered clouds at 5,000 feet and the usual southern New England haze sticking to the horizon like a blanket, but not as perfect a flying day as the previous, which had no wind and air that was as smooth as glass. As a cold front made its way down from Canada, today was bumpier and significantly breezier, which led me to worry about my crosswind skills.

After a quick walk around the airplane and a string of questions about the pitot tube, static port, and other straightforward parts of the aircraft, we were off.

I taxied slowly to the runway, where I completed a thorough runup. Ray said we'd stay in the pattern initially and listed the tasks ahead: short-field takeoff followed by a short-field landing transitioning into a touch and go to a soft-field takeoff, then back again for a soft-field landing, after which we'd set out on the cross-country portion of the test.

I jotted down his instructions on my kneeboard and took a minute to run them through my head and plan the next few minutes.

Deep breath. *This is it...*

My muscles tensed, and the knot that had formed in the pit of my stomach an hour before tightened.

"Let's go," I muttered to myself.

Ten degrees of flaps, yoke full aft, and we were off. My feet danced on the rudder pedals as I worked hard to keep the airplane on the centerline. Ray has a reputation for being a stickler about that. As we gained speed I adjusted elevator pressure for pitch to avoid lifting too soon or banging the tail of the airplane on the tarmac, and ailerons for wind correction. I had done this several times before, but with Ray's critical eyes focused on my every move, it felt like the first time.

A little distracted by the workload and tension during the soft-field take off, which simulates departing from a grass or dirt runway, I allowed to airplane to lift slightly out of ground effect, where I lost some lift. The stall warning blared and I pushed the nose down slightly to avoid a stall, which would have been bad form.

As the airspeed increased, I allowed the nose to rise higher and tried to maintain V_X --the best angle of climb--as best I could in spite of the bumps, occasionally glancing over nervously at Ray. As I'd forced the nose down on takeoff to return to ground effect and gain some airspeed to avoid stalling, I thought that the nosewheel kissed the tarmac and I figured that was the end of the ride for me.

However, the examiner wasn't furiously jotting down notes, nor was he huddled in a ball on the floor sobbing. *So far so good*, I thought. And around we went for more.

Reassured that time was not an issue with Ray, I performed reasonably well.

Next came the cross-country portion of the test, which I felt comfortable with. Ray had asked me to plan a trip from Bedford, Massachusetts, to Hazelton, Pennsylvania. The course I'd plotted conveniently took me over familiar landmarks in the area, which I'd made sure to survey one last time a few days before.

In spite of what I proudly thought was cunning preparation, I managed to embarrass myself by turning to the compass direction from which the wind was

blowing rather than my on-course heading, because both numbers were close together on my flight log. While Ray noticed the error he remained silent, hoping perhaps that I would catch myself.

A minute or two after takeoff, it struck me that something just didn't look right. I caught my mistake, admitted it, and corrected. Surprisingly, Ray did not stop the checkride or make any cutting remark.

At that point, I became increasingly relaxed. Ray had showed me that it was OK to make mistakes on the checkride, as long as you identify them and correct them within a reasonable amount of time.

This realization made the rest of the flight easier. Navigation work went without a hitch, as did the instrument flying portion in spite of the turbulence--which at times made it quite a handful to maintain heading and altitude. I performed climbs and descents, straight and in turns, then recovered the aircraft from some pretty interesting unusual attitudes.

Stalls were next. The first power-on stall broke into quite a steep right wing dip, resulting from my excessive use of right rudder to compensate for the left-turning tendencies of the airplane at high power and high angle of attack. I asked Ray if I could start it over, and he agreed, blaming the turbulence for what happened. I still believe it was my fault.

My second attempt went smoothly, as did the power-off stall in a clean configuration. One steep turn and quick turn-about-a-point later, Ray instructed me to pick up the ATIS and take us back to Bedford. I felt encouraged and on the flight back chatted with Ray about his job with the airline.

As we entered the pattern, the control tower gave another pilot a wind check indicating a 12-kt wind at about 60 degrees from the left of the runway.

"Ah, excellent," said Ray. "It'll give you a chance to impress me with your crosswind skills."

"Don't hold your breath," I shot back, suddenly gripping the yoke in fear of what awaited. Crosswind landings had never been my specialty, although I understood how to perform one. Add a designated examiner onboard and you have a cocktail that's sure to increase your blood pressure.

Final was bumpy, and I was trying hard to make a stabilized approach and maintain my speeds. I crabbed into the wind and proceeded toward the runway, reviewing every step that lay ahead of me. How on earth was I going to plant the airplane on the centerline with this wind? I wondered. And I knew Ray would be watching.

Over the runway, I kicked out the crab, rolled into the wind, and held opposite rudder to keep the airplane over the line. I had to consciously force myself to look all the way down the strip, which helped me to flare at the right time. The left wheel touched first, and I increased rudder deflection to stay on the centerline, or I knew Ray would get me. Held the wheel back. Right main is down. Brakes on.

"Nice landing," said Ray.

Awestruck by my new ability to put the airplane on the centerline in what at the time was a strong crosswind for me, I forgot to increase my wind correction as the airplane decelerated, but soon caught myself.

It was a long ride back to the ramp.

But minutes after landing I heard the words I'd waited half a lifetime to hear: "Congratulations, you're a pilot."

Ray headed back in to the terminal to get started on the paperwork, and I tied down the airplane while performing the touchdown dance.

With the back of my shirt drenched and my limbs shaking, I walked around the airplane nervously, wanting to hug it and thank it for getting me through this milestone. I could hardly stand in place and wanted to let everyone who'd listen know that I'd done it.

The dream that I had fostered so many years earlier had come true, and as I left the airplane, I thought back to the days I'd spent watching the aircraft land and wishing I was up there and smiled.

Perhaps on my next landing a wide-eyed dreamy kid like I used to be will look up and know that one day he'll be the one behind the controls. That dream, I came to realize, is within anyone's reach.

Mark Wilkinson was a Boston journalist when he learned to fly in 2004. He enjoyed flying so much that he decided to pursue a flying career.

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