



QUESTIONING YOUR CFI



Flight instructors, like policemen, judges, and psychotherapists, hear many tales of woe. You learn never to say, "Now I've heard everything," but sometimes you are pretty sure nothing can top the latest little skit from aviation's ongoing melodrama. ■ Today was one of those times. I had been speaking at length to a rejected private-pilot applicant who had telephoned in hopes of receiving a stranger's opinion on what had gone wrong with his training program. As I hung up the telephone, it was awfully tempting to snap off the lamp and mumble, "Now I've heard everything." ■ The man's hard luck

Students share in flight-training responsibilities

BY DAN NAMOWITZ

story went like this. After a fitful few months of flight instruction at his local airport, the fellow's instructor pronounced him airworthy and sent him off for a checkride. The student doubted his readiness but deferred to the wisdom of the CFI. Off he went. The oral part of the checkride went badly—no, it was a disaster. Seems the examiner wanted to know things about the airplane that the student had never considered before. The applicant stumbled again and again in response to the questioning, until the examiner had no choice but to terminate the proceedings and suggest he try again after receiving more instruction...a *lot* more instruction.

I asked for examples of the questions the examiner had posed. They were routine queries about V speeds, emergency procedures, and aircraft systems. Why did the student not know the answers to such questions when the information is right there in the Cessna 152 pilot's operating handbook? "My instructor and I never used it," he said. V_X , V_Y , V_{NE} , etc., all drew a blank. Even when teaching engine-out procedures, the CFI had never insisted on use of best glide speed, with its lifesaving possibilities, but had casually talked the student through some sketchy steps and called it good. This, in turn, had caused the student to believe that other areas of study could be approached with equal disinterest. Thus the rude shock when the checkride turned out to be, for lack of a better definition, the real thing.

Sympathy has its limits, so I agreed with the fellow that he had received less than first-class flight instruction, but I expressed the view that he, too, bore responsibility for the disaster. This observation was not eagerly received; but after the storm passed, I pointed out that flight instructors cannot prevent a student from reading his aircraft's POH. Nor am I aware of any cases where a student pilot was ordered by a CFI not to read the Federal Aviation Regulations, *Practical Test Standards*, or other relevant materials on his own. Agreed, the flight instructor is the guide, and should not lead you astray with incompetence or neglect. But just as your lawyer or physician gives you "advice" regarding your final decisions in matters of law and health—perhaps supplemented by your own research—the instructor you retain to teach you to fly is your employee, and as such, may need supervision. (If he or she has a heavy student load that might cause certain details to slip through the cracks, assume he will need to be supervised.) Maybe it shouldn't have to be this

way, but it often is, and the stories I hear from far and near make it clear that not all student pilots are protecting their interests and investment as well as possible.

A friend of mine is a flight school chief pilot and designated examiner. I climbed the stairs, poked my head into his office, and found him sitting there, shaking his head in dismay. "What is wrong with some flight instructors?" he moaned. I sat down to sip coffee and hear the tale. A student pilot had come to town for a checkride. On examining his logbook, Sandy discovered that the fellow was ineligible for the flight test because he had never completed the



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required 300-mile solo cross-country that was set down for all CFIs and their students to see in the FARs.

Student pilots are not the only victims. A private pilot applied to a flight instructor for instruction aimed at meeting the requirements set forth under FAR Part 61.31(g) for pilot-in-command privileges in a tailwheel airplane. The instructor, a working pilot who apparently was still working from a dated copy of the regs, or perhaps from memory, was not aware of the new rule requiring that the trainee's logbook be endorsed for competency in specific operations such as wheel landings, crosswind landings, and go-arounds. After the training, the pilot's logbook merely bore a routine dual-instruction endorsement. Had the pilot subsequently soloed a taildragger and had an accident, I suppose a case could be made that he was in violation of FAR 61.31(g). The trainee returned and showed the CFI how to make a proper endorsement. (Weeks later he was amused to see that the CFI was now advertising identical flight instruction aimed at satisfying "recent changes" to the regulations.)

Last summer I was asked to give a rental checkout for a fixed-base operator.

The renter this day was an attorney—an attorney, mind you—who was vacationing in the area. He had just become a private pilot and wanted to take in the scenery from aloft. It was a good morning for a checkout because a sprightly crosswind was blowing. On such a day I can see more of a pilot's technique in the first five minutes than I can guess at in an hour when the wind is calm. But after an hour in the pattern, he had not made a single landing unassisted. We flew for a second session, but the technique was clearly beyond his recognition. Why? "We never did any crosswind work when I was a student," the man said with a good-natured but glum smile. "We either canceled or waited until things calmed down." Doesn't the PTS have something to say about crosswind proficiency? "My instructor and I are going to have a little chat about that as soon as I get home," the lawyer said.

Another night, another telephone call, this time from a veteran flight instructor. "What's this I hear about us having to give students a pre-solo written test—do you do that?" he asked. I said that I did. "How long has that been a requirement?" he questioned. A few years, I said. A short pause, then, "Hmm. Guess I'd better start doing that." The good news is that the fellow had learned of the rule from one of his students who had troubled to read the book.

Some instructors invent their own rules when the ones handed down by the powers that be don't seem to fit the situation—and here again, the unwary student is asking for trouble. The CFI's student was ready to solo, sort of. The instructor did not mind the fellow's flying traffic patterns alone, but he did not want him venturing away from the airport. How should his concerns have been handled? Most CFIs would correctly say that the instructor should have signed the solo authorization form on the back of the student pilot certificate, then endorsed his logbook with a traffic-pattern-only limitation. What the CFI had done instead was to send the fellow aloft with no endorsements at all, beyond a note of explanation in the man's training folder. The student was not one to delve into the regs independently; but, fortunately, the situation was discovered while the CFI was on vacation—and corrected before any mishaps occurred.

None of this is to say that student pilots are expected to know more of the dos and do-nots of flying than their flight instructors. But all this shows that reading the rules and training texts can head off problems. It also demonstrates that blind trust is not a useful trait for a student pilot—or any other kind of pilot. □