Checkride Story

by Denis Dancanet

Sunday, February 6, 1994, was an awesome day. After weeks of pretty slimy weather, finally, clear skies and great visibility. Which was a good thing, because I had my private pilot checkride scheduled at 10 am.

I fly out of Allegheny County (AGC) near Pittsburgh. I started flying July 1993, thinking I would (for sure) finish by the end of the summer and (of course) with not much more than 40 hours total time. Yeah, right. Here I was 7 months later, with 65 hours in my logbook and getting nervous as the big moment approached.

My flight instructor recommended I go to the club early and call the examiner from there; that way I would have time to relax before it all started. So at 8:30 am I called from the airport and the decision was simple. "Looks like a good day. Let's do it."

I had an hour and a half to kill before the guy arrived. I pored over the airframe and engine logs of the Cessna 152 in great detail. I suddenly became alarmed that the airplane was past its 100 hour inspection. The last one had been in September and it sees pretty heavy duty as a trainer. But, no, it was OK. Because of a bird strike, which required some work on the left wing and fuel tank, it had been out for a while.

I stared at the huge VFR wall planning charts. It's amazing how many things you notice in that state of anxious waiting, like all the MOA's and prohibited and restricted areas in Arizona. How can people fly anywhere there? I looked at the Sporty's cockpit posters. What are all those buttons for in the Citation? You can't even put your elbow down anywhere, you would probably turn something on.

The guys in the club didn't make it any easier. "You'll pass for sure." "Don't worry about it." "I'm taking the plastic letters out right now to put your name up on the board."

At 10 am the examiner came in. He was a friendly looking ATP who had just retired as an electrical engineer from Westinghouse. "You'll like him," everybody told me. They were right. He really seemed to know his stuff, and took pains to make me feel at ease.

Administrative stuff. Interminable. My hands felt cold. He pulled out the Practical Test Standards and said we were going to follow it very closely. Surprise, surprise. He opened it to the beginning (Preflight Preparation) and we started.

No problem with the certificates and documents part. I had already done the weight and balance. He had me demonstrate I can read the performance charts from the information manual. We talked about airplane systems for a while. Then he asked me to plan a cross-country.

OK, I admit, I cheated here. I am one of those people who takes forever to plan a cross-country. Just drawing the line on the map might take me 10 minutes (especially if it goes over to the other side, or to another map). It's a labor of love. I like taking my time picking checkpoints, looking at the A/FD and Flight Guide, writing all the necessary frequencies in the flight plan. I could never make it in half an hour. The best I could do was 45 minutes. So what I did is talk to others who took their ride with this examiner and found out that he usually asks for Clarksburg (CKB), Erie (ERI), or Carlisle (N94). So I planned them ahead of time, filling everything out except, of course, winds aloft, times, etc.

He asked me to pull my sectional out, and he must have been puzzled seeing lines drawn to his usual destinations. Fortunately, he said "Well, since you have Carlisle already drawn, why don't you plan a cross-country there." One-way only. He asked me to pick checkpoints close to each

other at the beginning so we didn't have to go too far to figure out groundspeed and ETA.

I got weather. "How about clear, clear, clear," said the FSS guy cheerily. What a day. AGC was clear, visibility 15, and winds 240 at 10. Pilot report over Johnstown (about halfway), at 5,000 feet, clear skies and unlimited visibility. This is unusual for the Pittsburgh area. Carlisle was clear, 15, and light and variable winds.

I filled out the flight plan. I introduced another checkpoint at the beginning so we didn't have to go close to Latrobe for the second checkpoint. Even so, it was fast.

He checked it out and seemed pleased. He started asking me a lot of questions about the sectional. I needed hints on a couple of them (remember those tables with controlled airport frequencies, and MOA hours of operation). I did not answer to his satisfaction what class airspace Youngstown (YNG) is. It used to be a TRSA, but now, I thought, it was just class D with stage III radar services.[1] He took notes when I missed something. Fortunately it was rare, what with hints.

He asked some weather questions. I missed another one: What area does a terminal forecast (FT) cover? I said 15 miles, because I thought I remembered an example from Aviation Weather Services, where, in the comments section, there was some special notation for a weather phenomenon happening more than 15 miles out. No. It only covers the airport itself.

We finally went out to the airplane for the preflight. There was no fuel sampler cup in the airplane (again). I had to run and get one from another. The preflight took a bit of time and I learned a great deal. When checking flaps, I deploy them all the way, and push them timidly up and down. No. He pushed them pretty violently. He also grabbed the rudder and moved it up and down. "I'm not flying in this airplane unless I make sure these things are attached well," he said. Hey, he's an old ATP. He must have seen a lot of things.

He asked a lot of real-life type questions that I hadn't heard before. They made a lot of sense, but I was clueless on some of them. What if there is a dent in the skin in between the tail and the cockpit? Should I be concerned? I thought, probably not, it doesn't seem to be crucial to the integrity of the airplane. He said it would compromise the strength greatly.

What if you suspected that a line person put Jet-A in your fuel tank and almost immediately realized it, but didn't tell you anything? Not enough that you could tell by color. How will you find out if there is Jet-A in there, without starting the engine and potentially killing it (it would have to be taken apart and cleaned if Jet-A got in there). You would drain fuel from a tank and pour it over a porous material like regular paper and feel if it's oily. If yes, there's Jet-A in there.

We got into the airplane. I gave him the "passenger speech"—don't touch anything, no smoking, shut up when I tell you, etc. He recommended I tell passengers what the throttle control is and that it's just like the gas pedal on a car.

I got ATIS, and Allegheny Ground cleared us to taxi to 28 (main runway at AGC is 10-28). Brake test. With great effort I managed to taxi slowly (I normally taxi so that the airspeed indicator is not moving—I don't think it moves until about 20 knots, which is hardly a brisk walk).

I went through the pre-takeoff checklist slowly. The airplane behind me got obnoxious ("Tower, what is this Cessna in front of me doing?") Hey, it was a busy day. We were cleared to take off and off we went (normal takeoff).

On initial climb-out I realized I forgot to start my chronometer. Damn! Very little time had passed, but I always have trouble remembering that. The cross-country portion went very well. He

[1] I still don't know what he wanted for this one. In the debriefing he didn't make it clear. He seemed to imply he considers it like a class C, although he acknowledged that it wasn't.

asked me about some landmarks: "What town is that? How about that one? Is this the highway?" At the second checkpoint he had me compute actual groundspeed and ETA. He seemed satisfied and took over navigation.

Another real-life question: "Suppose you have a fire. There is smoke in the cabin. How do you find out what kind of a fire it is and what are you going to do about it?" I was dumbstruck. There are checklists for various kinds of fires, but nowhere did I see a description of how to find out which one you have. He wasn't satisfied with my answer. You first turn the master off. Close the heat vent. If it's really smoky in the cabin, open the window briefly to clear it.[2] Now reopen the heat vent. There is only one place through which the smoke from an engine fire could come into the cabin, and that is the hole in the firewall for the heat. If you get smoke again, then you've got an engine fire and big problems. Do the checklist and whatever you do, get down fast. Otherwise, you have an electrical fire. Check breakers. Turn the battery on. Wait. Alternator on. Wait. Instruments on one-by-one. If you get smoke at any step, you have isolated the problem. If you can only run things off the battery, save it until you are close to the field. It might last for 5 minutes or one hour. You can't tell. It depends on how old it is, and other factors.

I remembered to do the prelanding checklist and clearing turns before each maneuver. Power off stall with 20 degree flaps, full stall. I forgot to retract the flaps after the recovery. "Full recovery," he said sternly. I fixed it. Power on imminent stall. Minimum controllable airspeed. The stall warning horn was on only intermittently through this one. I would start losing altitude and correct it before it got to 100 feet, but I added too much power. Shallow turns at this airspeed. Passable but not pretty.

We got down to 2,000 feet for S turns. It is a challenge to find a straight road in Pittsburgh. It was pretty crooked. I didn't think I did a great job, but again passable.

We went to nearby Rostraver (P53). It's an uncontrolled field with one runway (7-25), where I did most of my training. I did a soft-field landing. I was holding 55 on final and the airplane was being shaken up by wind gusts (there is a ravine right in front of 25). I told him that henceforth I would add 5 knots to the short/soft approach and short takeoff speeds. He agreed that would be a good idea. The landing was a little flat. I goosed the power too late.

Soft field takeoff, short field landing, short field takeoff, some of them with obstructions. Around we went a couple of times. Then engine out on downwind abeam the numbers. I used to have a hard time with engine outs because I tried to time it so that I got right to the edge of whatever I was trying to land on. My flight instructor insisted that I just go straight for the field and worry about excess altitude later. That's what I did, holding 60, and going through the restart procedures. When I was sure I would make it, I put in full flaps and slipped it in. I don't know about you, but I really enjoy this part. Maybe it's because it harkens back to the old days. Maybe I've been reading too much Saint-Exupéry.

We went up again and did a go-around. Then we left Rostraver for the last part, the dreaded hood work. I was pretty worn out and thirsty by then and wanted nothing more than to get it over with.

Straight and level, climb here, turn there. It went fine. In the unusual attitude recovery, he made me put myself in the beginnings of a graveyard spiral (this has got to be the greatest aviation term). I recovered without a problem.

[2] He acknowledged opening the window is controversial, but he recounted a personal experience with an engine fire in a Commander where he couldn't see anything, and opened the windows to clear the smoke, and executed an emergency landing. He said he would have been dead if he had left the smoke in the cabin.

We went back to AGC. The controller was drowning in a sea of airplanes. She extended our downwind for 28 forever. Another controller seemed to take over. I asked if I could turn base now. Yes, I could. Winds were 240 at 12. There would be some crosswind on this one. I crabbed in until very close, then I swung it around and lowered the wing. It didn't work that great. I bounced once on the mains and put it down. He said not to worry, I landed on the mains, and other than my ego, everything was fine. If I had pushed the nose down, instead of pulling back after the bounce, he said he would have had to fail me, as porpoising is very dangerous.

I taxied (slowly) back to the hangar and shut it down. He turned to me and said, "Well, what do you think?" I didn't do as well as I had with my instructor, or by myself, but I thought it was good enough to pass. I didn't say anything. He smiled and extended his hand. "Congratulations," he said as we shook hands.

People at the club were great. They all seemed to be very happy for me. Much merriment and shaking of hands. My name was on the board almost instantaneously (they had picked the letters out already, after all). My instructor sat with me through the debriefing. The examiner explained what I missed, what I could improve. He handed me the temporary certificate. I signed it and handled it with reverence.

The examiner said that overall it was a very good test. To my surprise, he said I shouldn't have much trouble learning to fly by instruments. And I always thought I wasn't very good at it. Maybe I was having a good hood day, or he was being kind. We shook hands again, and he left.

After 1.8 hours of my very first PIC time, I was now Private Pilot, Airplane Single Engine Land. What a great feeling. It took a while, it wasn't exactly what I had expected, but it was sure worth it.

3 pm. A long day. I drove home through the cratered streets of Pittsburgh (heavy winter) with a smile on my face, thinking about flying.