



In a FUNK about the FIRC

“I think we had better go back and try that one again”, I said as we cleared the runway. “Remember this is supposed to be a power off 180° **accuracy** landing, and I think floating almost three hundred feet beyond our touchdown point is not exactly accurate.” The pilot in the left seat taxied back to the runway and we tried again.

On his second attempt he was making the same mistakes. He pulled the throttle to idle abeam the touchdown point, but now took so much time going through his checklists that by the time he turned base, we were further from the threshold than we should be. Again, he had forgotten to take into account the wind. He realized his mistake, angled towards the runway and waited to add flaps until we had the runway made. But he waited too long and now found himself high.

Rather than bringing in full flaps, and putting the airplane into a forward slip, and thus keeping the airplane on target and on speed, he pushed the nose down, gaining airspeed. “Well”, I thought to myself, “at least we wouldn’t hit the imaginary trees that stood fifty feet high at the end of the runway.” As we came over the touchdown point, he surprised me by pushing the nose down, driving the airplane onto the runway. He did indeed touch down on the specified point, but why we didn’t collapse the nose strut, and get a prop strike is beyond me.

Now you might be thinking that I might be describing a training scenario with a client seeking the commercial certificate. The power off 180° accuracy landing is one of the mandated tasks in the Area of Operations dealing with take offs and landings. You might also think, if you know how I train my clients, that I might have been working with a primary student prior to their first solo flight. (This is a maneuver I do indeed teach primary students, preparing them for the possible dead stick landing.)

But the fact of the matter is I was administering a flight instructor re-instatement practical test. This particular applicant had allowed his flight instructor certificate to expire just a few short weeks before. He hadn’t had enough sign offs to qualify for renewal, and he had neglected to take a FIRC (Flight Instructor Refresher Course) before his certificate expired. So now he had to take a re-instatement check ride, which is an abbreviated practical test.

He knew I wasn’t too impressed with the impression he left on the runway (if it had been a grass strip we’d be out there replacing the divots from the last landing) but I said that I would accept it...just barely, and that we should continue with the “ride”. “Let’s taxi back, and on the next takeoff we’ll head out to the northwest where we’ll find some prominent silos which we can use as references for eights on pylons.”



In a short while we found ourselves over the silos. I asked the applicant to give me an in-flight lesson on eights on pylons. For those of you readers not familiar with the maneuver, it is a ground reference maneuver where you fly a figure eight pattern around two ground references. As you circle each “pylon” you keep a reference point on the wing pointed directly at the pylon in coordinated flight. Sounds easy, and if the wind isn’t blowing it is relatively easy. However if the wind is blowing, as it was this particular day, you will have to have a good understanding of pivotal altitude, and how your groundspeed affects that altitude, in order to fly the maneuver properly.

Well, this poor applicant didn’t have the foggiest idea of what the maneuver was about. Not only could he not fly it, he couldn’t describe or explain it either! The more we floundered through the sky, the redder his face got, as well as the pink on the slip I would soon be filling out. I finally had the sad job of informing this unfortunate fellow that there was no way that I could not issue a “notice of disapproval”, and that we had best head back to the airport.

But now we get to the crux of why I am sharing what was, for the applicant, a very embarrassing situation. How many flight instructors are out there, holding current flight instructor certificates, who would most likely fare no better than this applicant had? How many flight instructors renew their certificates every twenty four calendar months, without ever getting an in flight evaluation? I sadly fear the number is higher than we might want to know.

Let’s look at the various ways a flight instructor can renew their certificate. One way is through instructional activity. If a flight instructor signs off five applicants for practical tests (with an 80% pass rate) in 24 months, they can automatically renew, by documenting their activity to the FAA. Now that’s not really a lot of activity, but the FAA accepts it as sufficient.

Instructors who obtain their initial or renewed Master CFI designation from the National Association of Flight Instructors (NAFI) qualify for their FAA instructor certificate renewal partly as a result of the fact that they have to document active flight training way above and beyond that of just five sign offs in two years.

If an instructor conducts flight evaluations in the role of a chief or assistant chief instructor in a Part 141 flight school, or as a chief pilot for a Part 135 or 121 operation, this too, will serve as qualification for renewal.

There are a few other ways as well, (all outlined in FAR 61.197), but perhaps the most popular way to renew is for the instructor to attend a FIRC. (It can also be done on line) At the FIRC all the pertinent rules and regulations are reviewed in depth, and there is a test at the end of the course to insure that the attendee has stayed awake and taken the appropriate notes. It is a wonderful way to stay current with the changes that do occur in the regulations, and practical test



standards, but it has one very glaring deficiency. There is no evaluation made, in any way, shape, or form, of how the renewing instructor can perform as an aviation educator. Not only are his instructional techniques not reviewed, neither are his flying abilities, nor his genuine understanding of all the maneuvers and knowledge of aerodynamics beyond “book” knowledge.

All pilots are mandated by the FAA to undergo recurrent training. Whether you hold a Sport Pilot, Recreational, Private, Commercial or ATP certificate you have to have either a flight review or other acceptable form of recurrent flight training. If you fly professionally you might very well undergo this recurrent training every six months. Beyond the FAA requirements, many insurance companies require more frequent recurrent training other than the flight review. Of all these pilots, only the CFI does not have to undertake periodic flight training for their instructor’s rating. (They still have to have a flight review, or equivalent.) I truly think there is something glaringly wrong with this.

The person who received the pink slip from me, could have easily renewed his flight instructor’s certificate by merely going on line, spending the time required to complete the course, taking the test, and then having another two years before he would have to do it again. He would then be out there supposedly teaching others how to fly. No one would evaluate his instructing skills. No one would evaluate his flying skills. Would he really be qualified to instruct?

It is my personal belief that all instructors should have to undergo a periodic flight evaluation. It would not necessarily have to be conducted by an examiner, but could be conducted by a “senior” instructor as well. It would not have to be a pass/fail situation, but could be the same as a flight review. If the evaluating pilot felt the need for more training they could decline to “sign off” the review until that training was completed.

I really have no idea of how many instructors fall into the category of the one I’ve described in this article, but I worry that there might be way more than we think. Every one of us who shares the sky should strive to be the very best we can be. The sky is too unforgiving for us not to. One of the wonderful tools we can use to achieve this is to have a periodic flight evaluation. It is something we should all eagerly seek, whether we fly solely for the pure joy of flight, but more especially, if we are one of those who have taken on the responsibility of teaching others to fly, we should absolutely require it!

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