Teaching Rusty Pilots

Three steps to getting back in the air

By Chris Hope

I have always thought that one of the most enjoyable aspects of teaching was seeing the expression on the face of a new pilot who makes that first unassisted landing. Or perhaps it is sharing the thrill of the first solo or the "I passed it!" at checkride time. But I have come to appreciate one more pilot milestone — the joy of a pilot who tells me, "It is good to be back in the air. It has been too long!"

I have come to learn that there are three keys to helping rusty pilots get back into the sky. The excellent AOPA Rusty Pilots program is the first of those steps. This program reaches out to those pilots who have not flown for two, or five, or 10 years and lets them realize that they can get back in the air. This program reintroduces them to the big picture of flying and recurrency. The second key is to actually get them into the plane: to taxi, take off and see the world from above again. The third is to work with them to see how much the aviation world has changed since they last flew and help them get those new skills under their belts. Let's look at all three.

When AOPA introduced the Rusty Pilots program, I teamed up with a local flying club to put on a presentation. AOPA did the heavy work. It put together a slideshow that hit the highlights of airspace, weather, regulations and some of the other topics that are normally covered in ground school. It also sent out an announcement to all AOPA members in our community, spreading the word of date and time and place. I have done several such Rusty Pilots presentations since that time, and all of us are getting better at our parts.

When I present these seminars I always team up with a flight school or flying club or EAA chapter. We secure the location, of course, and put out the standard coffee and doughnuts. But I also ensure that the meeting information is broadcast through *www.FAASafety.gov*. And although AOPA puts together a pretty good PowerPoint presentation, I normally feel it needs some tweaks for our part of the country.

The Rusty Pilots program is good, as far as it goes. But as I mentioned, there are some tricks to moving to the next step. My fellow CFIs who teach in Part 141 schools work with younger pilots who are looking for an aviation career. Pilots who call me wanting to get back into the air are much different. They are older (obviously), generally more secure financially and already have a good deal of aviation experience. So, the challenge is to bring that experience back out, helping them to regain the good skills and to drop the skills that are no longer relevant.

I have flown with a couple dozen of these pilots, nearly all men, and I have developed some techniques that seem to work for them. First, as in all flight instruction, I discuss with them where we are going and how I intend to get us there. I tell them that I have no estimate of how long it will take to get them proficient. It could be a couple of flights, or it could be a bunch. I tell them that we will start from scratch, as if they have never flown before, and move along as quickly as they are able. And, I tell them that we are going back to ground school, but it won't look like it did before.

There is a wide range of skill levels in these folks. Some have been away just a year or two, but I have had pilots who have not flown in 15 years. And some were pretty good pilots in their day, and some probably were not. (If you have flown more than one or two flight reviews, you know that all pilots do not perform on the same level.)

Just like with a beginning student, I plan on making all of the radio calls. And I plan on taking full responsibility for situational awareness. My plan is just to let the pilot have fun, experiencing the joy he once had. I let him taxi (that seems to be a skill that holds) and make the takeoff (plan to have a gentle hand and right foot handy). Climb out as usual, fly straight and level, fly a while, and descend and land. If convenient, this is a great opportunity for a trip for lunch and a chance to get to know your student better.

Don't rush the student. Let him fly at his own pace. If the basics are working well, try some slow flight, steep turns, and ground reference maneuvers. You (and he) will know fairly quickly where he stands. Remember, he was once proficient at all of this, so he knows what all of the maneuvers should look like. But just like with a beginning student, there is nothing more frustrating than trying advanced maneuvers before mastering the basics.

So, the challenge is to bring that experience back out, helping them to regain the good skills and to drop the skills that are no longer relevant.

Like all student pilots, the rusty pilots are eager to see if their landing skills are still present. This is the time to be most alert. I have learned never to be complacent with another pilot, especially one I have not flown with. My hands are always resting very lightly on the stick/yoke, and my toes are always touching the bottom of the rudder pedals. Every pattern and landing deficiency that you have ever seen in your teaching career will be presented — high/low turns to final, early flare, late flare — you will see them all again. Be ready.

The third piece of the program is ground school. But this is different from the ground school that your rusty pilot once knew. You will need to review the basics, of course, of airspace and regs. But be prepared to spend a great deal of time with your laptop, tablet or iPad. Many rusty pilots are computer savvy, but they are probably not aware of just how many of our tasks are now done electronically.

When many of these people learned to fly, we called Flight Service for a weather briefing. (Some of us actually visited the FSS at our local airport for our briefings.) We laid out our sectionals on the floor and used a yardstick to chart our course. And of course, we used the E6B flight computer to compute wind drift and groundspeeds.

As their guide into the new world, I find that we instructors need to be knowledgeable on everything GPS, of course, but also everything about the electronic flight bag. We need to know about tablets and iPads, and not just the ones that we use. Some pilots have a tablet or iPad and will want to know which application they should buy. Some will not yet own any type of tablet and will need to know about the differences among them. We need to be ready to help.

Where do we get our weather briefings now? Help your student navigate through your favorite weather websites. And be prepared to discuss everything that he sees on the internet. Some of the information is correct and useful, some correct and not particularly useful, and some is just misleading. Take time to discuss it all.

Another area where you need to show your full knowledge is BasicMed. Does your rusty pilot need to visit his favorite aviation medical examiner? Maybe. Has he had an FAA medical exam within the last 10 years? Was his last medical exam unrestricted? If you don't know the answers, make sure that you can point your student in the right direction.

I have come to truly enjoy working with my rusty pilots. It is just one more aspect of teaching that keeps me learning.

Chris Hope has been teaching teenagers and grandparents for more than 40 years. Contact him through his website, www.ChrisHopeFAAFlightInstructor.com.

When Should You Go Around?

Advice on decision-making

By Ed Verville

Last month I had a single-engine commercial student on a checkride start his approach to landing at too steep of an angle. Instead of managing his airspeed for the steeper descent he came in a little fast, which distracted him from correcting for the crosswind. He was just about to contact the runway while still in a crab as well as drifting across the runway. I had to take the airplane controls and do a go-around to avoid crashing.

While debriefing and issuing a "Notice of Disapproval" for the unsatisfactory checkride, I asked the applicant why he did not just perform a go-around from such a poor approach without crosswind correction. He said he thought doing a go-around would make him look bad. I stated that it would not look nearly as bad as crashing an airplane would make him look.

As a designated pilot examiner (DPE), I would prefer to see someone go around rather than try to save an approach that might damage the airplane or worse.

We have all read many articles on how to conduct a go-around maneuver, but all of them are vague on when you should execute a go-around. These vague descriptions include "go around when the approach does not look right" and "go around when you are not stabilized."

This article is about when you should go around, and it will assist you with your decision-making about whether to continue to a landing or abort the landing and set up for another try. Most pilots are capable enough to make minor corrections and continue to a landing, but when do these corrections become too much to overcome?

Ballooning

All of us have flared too fast or too much and had our airplane balloon (continue in flight rather than descend to a landing). If the balloon does change the landing attitude, you may simply add a little power and let the airplane settle back to the runway. Remember that the airplane will sink faster after the balloon because of some loss of lift as the airspeed decreases, so some power and a quicker flare may be required. If the airplane balloons so much that you are no longer in a landing pitch attitude, you need to add power and execute a go-around.

Bouncing

Recovering from a small bounce is similar to recovering from ballooning in a landing. Just add a little power and expect a quicker descent in the second flare. If the airplane bounces so much that you are no longer in a landing attitude, you need to add power and execute a go-around.

Drifting

Each spring season results in a rash of accidents as pilots dust off the rust and relearn how to land in crosswind conditions. Remember that all of the landings should be on the main wheels first, with no drift and the lateral axis of the airplane lined up with the runway centerline (the airplane pointed down the runway). If you do not have directional control and drift control stabilized during the flare, or if you lose this control during the flare, you need to execute a go-around. Both drift control and directional control are frequently lost when attempting to recover from a balloon or bounce. Your drift control should also maintain the runway centerline within the area between your main tires.

The Touchdown Zone

Pilots continue to run off runways resulting in significant aircraft damage and injuries. The FAA Practical Test Standards and Airman Certification Standards (PTS/ACS) require that airplanes touch down within a specific area. In an effort to reduce runway excursion accidents, this requirement has been further restricted for airline transport pilots in the FAA ATP PTS (Change 4 dated 4/4/2012). The PTS states that pilots shall land within 250 feet preceding the touchdown zone markings to 500 feet beyond the markings as opposed to the previous first third of the runway. So, if you are not going to touch down within the touchdown zone, execute a go-around.

Your aircraft's main landing gear is very strong and will support your airplane as long as it is used as designed. This requires that you land on the main wheels first, not the nose wheel, you have the longitudinal axis of the airplane pointed down the runway (not crabbed), and the airplane is not drifting to the either side. Following these techniques and using good aeronautical decision-making will help you avoid becoming an accident statistic or failing your next checkride.

Ed Verville is a designated pilot examiner (DPE), training center examiner (TCE), ATP and CFI-IA-ME and holds type ratings for the B-747, CL-604, CL-65 and CL-30.