

LICENSE NEXT STEP:

Commercial Certificate

AFIT'S ACCELERATED COMMERCIAL PILOT PROGRAM ADDS FINESSE, CONTROL AND THE ABILITY TO GET PAID | BY MARC C. LEE

I thought my instructor, John, was testing me to see how I'd react. "Gear down," I called, and waited for the familiar "thunk" of the gear, finishing its extension. I was busy setting up a power-off, 180-degree approach and landing to a specific spot, which was one of the required maneuvers on the commercial pilot certificate checkride, now just days away. The wind was howling pretty good in St. George, Utah, and my hands were full with keeping the big, turbo Cessna 210 stable in the roiling turbulence. I didn't hear the gear sound, and I noticed there was no "locked and down" gear light. My instructor wasn't flashing his usual "let's see what he'll do now" smirk. He looked serious.

Leaving the pattern, we began troubleshooting, recycling and pumping the gear several times, but still couldn't get it down and locked. Even consulting the manual proved fruitless. The wind got worse as we decided to head back to Cedar City airport to use their long runways and open approaches to our advantage while trying to fully extend the gear. But the airport had been closed. Trucks, equipment and men were scurrying about in the howling wind. We decided to continue north to Parowan (1L9), a slice of time out of the golden days of aviation, with a single 5,000-foot runway, a derelict crash truck and a great mechanic—Dave Norwood at Parowan Aero Services.

The wind was almost 90 degrees across the nose as we considered killing the engine to save the prop if the gear collapsed. Norwood walked outside and called us on his handheld, suggesting we make a low pass so he could inspect the situation. "Looks like the gear is in between its extension cycle," he said in a calm and studied voice. "It never finished coming down, but it'll probably be okay." He had seen this kind of thing before in 40 years of turning wrenches on general aviation airplanes. But "probably" wasn't my favorite word.

John had me land while he worked with the gear, pumping so it wouldn't collapse. I made the turn to final (I hadn't even thought to worry) with the 210 bucking about. Quickly, final turned into Mr. Toad's Wild Ride as I tried to put the burly airplane down gingerly. The wind was gusty, and my landing wasn't pretty, but the gear stayed up! John kept reminding me not to brake since the gear might collapse easily. We rolled to a stop in front of Norwood,

where he commenced a 10-hour repair, tracing the problem to a faulty down-lock switch. It was all within the realm of commercial pilot experience.

AFIT Approach

I was in Utah with Accelerated Flight and Instrument Training (AFIT, www.afit-info.com) going through their accelerated training program for my commercial pilot certificate. AFIT specializes in both end-to-end and "finish-up" ratings, where the instructor comes to you, and the training is focused into a fixed number of days. AFIT will instruct in your airplane or through a network of prescreened FBOs around the country. I had done my instrument training with AFIT and came back to the wonderful folks at Sphere One Aviation in Cedar City, Utah. I'd do the rating in their Cessna 210.

Among a handful of respected accelerated schools, AFIT differentiates itself with a single element: their instructors. Tony Montalte, AFIT President, tells me their secret of is that he selects only seasoned instructors who want to instruct full time and do it because they enjoy it. "At a lot of schools, the instructor works on weekends or maybe a few days here and there," said Montalte. "Most are building time to go elsewhere. We select instructors who want to instruct by choice and who have between 20 years' experience or more." AFIT goes far and wide to find instructors that fit their stringent requirements, and while not all of them have grey hair, each has a depth of experience that's hard to match.

In my case, I was fortunate to work with John Templeton, one of AFIT's top senior instructors. A seasoned pro, John has nearly 40 years' experience with everything from gliders to airliners. He was also my CFII during instrument training, and at this point, we've spent nearly 60 hours in the cockpit together. We've become friends, and his words often echo in my mind during a difficult approach or challenging maneuver.

AFIT's program requires just as much from the instructor as it does from the student. Each day consists of ground training fol-



Commercial training focuses on aircraft control, high-performance operations, federal regulations and decision making.

lowed by flying, then more ground discussion followed by more flying. It's not unusual to get six hours of flying in a day, and the rhythm of flying and debriefing turns into a welcome cycle as the days pass. Your job as a pilot is to come prepared: know the material. The instructor's job is more difficult, as he or she becomes teacher, mentor and motivational coach. My running joke with John is referring to him as "Yoda" for his quips and tidbits of wisdom. One example: "Call your gear down in three positions—downwind, base and final, so you never forget no matter how high your workload."

Detractors of accelerated programs say that so much is thrown at you that you could never retain it all. They say the traditional approach of earning the rating over many months and flying a few days a week is better. The truth is that it depends on the student.

Studies on learning reveal that the key to accelerated programs is to immediately use the skills learned once the training is over. The U.S. Military uses accelerated training for their pilots today, taking a student from zero time to fighter-jet pilot in 210 hours (90 hours in primary flight training and 120 hours in T-38 school). That's astonishing.

Will Fly For Money

The first question my pilot friends asked when learning about my planned commercial certificate was, "So, you want to fly for the airlines?" Most pilots only consider the commercial certificate as a gateway to corporate or air carrier operations. As a taildragger

and biplane pilot, I'm still holding out for a gig flying a venerable Beech 18 or DC-3, but I have no desire to fly for an airline. I'm pursuing the rating to become a better pilot. Though getting paid to fly is now a possibility, the commercial ticket was a way for me to continue learning.

"What's with the 40-degree bank angle?" Yoda asked as I cranked the 210 over, trying to stay tight on base leg. "As a commercial pilot you have to concentrate on making all your maneuvers smooth, gentle and easy." That was one of the greatest lessons in my commercial training. Having been something of a lone wolf before, I never considered my bank angles or descent rates as long as they were what was called for on that approach. The commercial rating, it turns out, is about flying in a way that's consistent and always stable. "You have to think about grandma in row 26," John smiled, admonishing me to keep my banks in the pattern to 20 degrees and my descent rates under 500 feet per minute.

The other great epiphany of commercial training was that I learned to master the aircraft. While instrument training dealt with complexities that were external to controlling the aircraft, commercial training takes you back to the basics in a new way. Instead of just learning slow flight again, you have to master slow flight, so your altitude variances are minute. It's the same with stalls, steep turns, or the lollygagging Lazy 8 and zooming chandelle. The maneuvers refine your skills to a dramatic degree. It's freeing to be able to know you can put an airplane where you



Flight planning is part of every commercial pilot's skill set. Smooth flying and consistent approaches are a hallmark of advanced training.

want it without hesitation. It's like aerobatics, but in the opposite, gentler direction.

Dancing With A Pig

The turbo Cessna 210J Centurion is a heap of airplane. Designed with a laminar flow, cantilevered (no strut), high-dihedral wing, the airplane loves speed and altitude, but hates mushing around slowly or being asked to make a lot of aerial changes quickly. It's made to go far, fast and high, and gives even today's Cirrus a run for its (considerably more) money. With an easy cruise at 170 knots in the flight levels, it's a performer. However, it's also known for its lumbering pitch performance. Some owners have given it the affectionate nickname of "pig." For me, taking the 210 through the commercial repertoire was like coaxing a ballet from a weight lifter. After a series of slow flights, I had to ask John to take the controls while I shook the cramps out of my arm muscles.

At first, I was intimidated by the 340 hp, turbocharged monster. But, I quickly became comfortable with her and even grew to love the old gal. A superb airplane with crisp roll response and a roomy cabin, it shows that Cessna was an innovator even back in the '60s. I heard Cessna improved the elevator feel on later models, making a good airplane even better.

What It's Like

Earning the commercial rating is in some ways more difficult than the instrument, but in other ways, more fun. First, it's all VFR so you can set aside the instrument complexities for 20 hours or so. The idea is total mastery of your aircraft. What you're doing is refining your seat-of-the-pants stick-and-rudder skills. You're learning to fly the airplane with more positive control, so you don't become just a "systems operator" that can't handle a visual approach (as we saw with the Asiana crash last year).

It's also a chance to root out and correct bad habits. During our many conversations, John had picked up that I fly high approaches in my biplane. My Great Lakes 2T-1A has the glide ratio of a Coke machine, and I can be 800 feet over the threshold and still make the first turnoff. John perceived this and changed how I flew the approach in the 210. "You want your first power reduction on downwind opposite the numbers," he said. "Then you want to lose 300 feet until your base turn, 200 feet on base, then 300 feet on final. You want to almost brush the threshold lights." Though it felt awkward at first, the stabilized pattern was much more suited to the 210. Now, I can tailor the approach to the airplane more effectively than I would have before. The systematic approach is what works for commercial flying.

AFIT knows how to get students ready not just for the checkride, but for real-world flying. After the gauntlet that John put me through, the checkride was almost playtime. I felt confident and sure as I talked through each maneuver, explaining what was happening, just like an instructor would. It's a thing John taught me, and helped me keep my "checkride-itis" at bay, though I thoroughly enjoy flying with this particular DPE, Dan Smith.

As we finished the checkride and ambled back to the FBO, I wondered if I had demonstrated enough "mastery of the airplane." John and another pilot were waiting. "Say, do you know any professional pilots that could fly me and my buddy to Birmingham?" John joked to my DPE, wondering if I had passed. "I sure do," said Dan, "How about this guy right here.? He just passed his checkride." P&P

Preparation Tips and Tricks

Accelerated programs aren't for everybody. They demand a lot out of the student, but yield a confidence that traditional FBO programs can't match. The consistency that everyday repetition of maneuvers provides is astonishing. The key to success in an accelerated program is preparation. The student must arrive on training day fully immersed in knowledge. Having earned ratings through traditional and accelerated methods, here are some tips on what works:

1. Take the written first. Passing the test first assures you that you'll have the knowledge necessary to pass the oral exam and answer questions about why you're flying a particular maneuver.

2. Use a good home-study course. I recommend the King Schools courses. There's a certain something in their style of teaching that makes the material stick. There are other good courses out there, but King Schools remains the gold standard for a reason.

3. Travel elsewhere to train. Being away from home and the

distractions of your day job makes an enormous difference in how much you absorb during training and how well it sticks.

4. Practice the basics before you start. Become reacquainted with basic skills, such as using checklists, making callouts ("Airspeed alive," etc.), and the difference between short-field and soft-field landings and takeoffs, etc.

5. Supplement with current test questions. In addition to the King Schools course, I augmented with ASA's written test preparation guide. It's excellent.

6. Study what the FAA says. Get a copy of the FAA's *Airplane Flying Handbook*, *Aircraft Weight and Balance Handbook*, *Aviation Weather Services*, and *Pilot's Handbook of Aeronautical Knowledge*.

7. Prepare for the oral exam. The best oral exam guide available is the *ASA Commercial Oral Exam Guide*. Start reading it long before your checkride. Know it, and you'll breeze through the oral.

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