

2012 in Review

By Chris Hope, Master CFI

The end of the year always seems to be a good point to sit back and look at the year past. Some parts of the year we are glad to have closed and gone. Other parts are nice to savor. Some of us can enjoy this contemplation by the fire with something warm and soothing to drink. Others do this contemplation on the beach. But indulge me as I look back a touch and look at where we have been, (and where I have been), this past year.

A year ago this month, the AircraftOwner.com editors and I found each other. Although I have written extensively for other magazines and other organizations over the years, this is the first time that I have needed to come up with a regular column for a national publication. But it has been good for both of us, and I enjoy the feedback that I have received from all of our aviation web-friends.

In January, on the national level, it seemed that we were moving into our third year of presidential campaigning. Little did we know how much more was to come. I was writing about the premonition that we pilots get when we know we are about to do something really stupid. But that sometimes that doesn't stop us. We all get this feeling that "well, fuel seems a bit tight, but the gauges always read low. I think I can make it." Or, "Yes, the weather is kind of crummy but DUATS says it will get better as I go along." Or, "it's just a little tail wind, but I am lined up for a

straight-in and using this runway will save me two minutes of taxi time." Don't you just hate it when the airplane gets bent real bad, and you say to yourself, "I knew that would happen?" I hope that that thought sunk in at least once this past for you, and you rethought any upcoming stupid actions.

In February we moved into techniques for surviving and mastering instrument approaches. Specifically, I talked about some techniques to make that last three minutes between the final approach fix and the runway seem like a non-event instead of a white-knuckle experience. These techniques include planning for the missed approach and follow-on actions prior to reaching the final approach fix, and reviewing the expected altitude and sight picture when breaking out of the clouds.

In March, with the spring winds starting to kick up, I looked at improving cross-wind landings. I mentioned a couple of facts and techniques that many pilots have forgotten. First of all, we can improve that "nose straight – on centerline" thing with reminding ourselves to look to the far end of the runway just prior to and during the flare. It is a very natural trait to unconsciously move our focal point from the far end of the runway to a point about twenty feet in front of us. With this nearer focal point, it is hard to notice the drift of the plane, or the natural pivot of the plane. Secondly,

many pilots have a tendency to neutralize rudder and ailerons in the flare, just at the moment that we should be increasing both inputs.

April was a bittersweet month for me, flying-wise. I spent part of the winter on the beach, watching pelicans make spot landings, power-on stalls, and short-field takeoffs. Which was truly enjoyable. With a beverage in hand, it was just as enjoyable as sitting at my favorite small airport, watching local pilots do the same (without the power-on stalls, of course.)

But the down-side of April was relating the fact that I had earlier been asked to comment by the local news media on a pilot who was flying low and slow over a friend's house when the airplane ran out of lift, and the pilot ran out of altitude and ideas. (Does this perhaps relate back to, "I knew that was a bad idea?")

For many of us in the country, May is the time of year when we are dusting off unused skills and getting back in the air. And so I offered some tricks to bring organization to your cross-country planning. I related some specific steps to take a several days before the trip that will save some time on the day of the trip.

In June and July, I focused on the next steps in aviation training after that private pilot's checkride. Aviation should be fun. That is why we fly. But it always fun to be improving our skills. I talked about new challenges. For newly minted Private or Recreational Pilots, I suggested a long cross-country –

one that takes you well out of your local flying area and perhaps your comfort zone.. For more experienced pilots, I suggested a new rating or endorsement. If all of your flying has been in a four-seat Cessna or Piper, try flying a glider or a light sport aircraft. Or maybe go in the other direction and take a flight or two in a complex or high-performance plane. Or, perhaps finding a body of water and the appropriate instructor and using that as your launch pad toward a sea plane rating.

August in much of the country was hot. And so I talked about all of the ways that the heat affects our airplane's performance, as well as the way that the heat affects our own performance. August was also a good time to talk about what happens when we inadvertently fly into airspace where we don't belong. Nothing good is going to come out of the experience, except maybe we get a learning moment without too much pain. (And did I mention that on a national level we were STILL talking presidential politics?)

September brought out some thoughts concerning glass panels and those ever-increasing iPad aps. Although I love the information that they bring, I mused a bit about the price these aps exact – not so much in cost but in pilot distraction. This column probably generated more feedback than any other that I wrote, and you can look forward to some additional thoughts on the subject in 2013.

October brought me back to “fun-things-to-do-in-an-airplane.” Fly-ins are great, whether they include a trip to Oshkosh or Sun and Fun, or just a pop over the county line to a pancake breakfast. But even more rewarding than a short cross-country to see friends, I suggested that you take a cross county flight where you transport a cancer patient to a treatment facility when she has no other means of transportation. Or transport a dog to a new home. Or just take some kids on their first flights. You can do all of these activities through Angel Flight, Pilots ‘n Paws, or EAA Young Eagles. (Check them out.)

Last month gave me a chance to write a couple of book reviews, and to ask what is on your book shelf.

(and thanks for all of your suggestions.) And finally, the 2012 political ads are past us. (What is that? A political ad for 2016?)

So what is coming up in 2013? I’m not sure. You, the readers, drive this column. I know that I will spend some more time talking about striking a balance between basic flying skills and new gadgets. And recent experiences have pointed out that we pilots don’t always know all that we think we know about the mechanical state of our aircraft. And I have received questions about how to find the perfect flight instructor. So, stick with me and explore with me this never-ending world of aviation.

Fly safe.

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