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Father & Son Flying

Never Land Like That Again

By

M.D. Smith, IV

I got my private pilot's license in 1965 and my father got his a year later in 1966 at age 48. We both took to flying like ducks to water. I was renting airplanes from Huntsville Aviation at the old airport and my father was eager to buy his first airplane as soon as he got his solo, which he did. He purchased a brand new Cessna 172 and had the tail painted with our radio & TV station's "News Hound" logo and put the call letters on the tail.



One of our first trips was to a place he had driven me to many times as a child and one of his favorite fishing and vacation spots, Homosassa, Florida. I had been making that 12-14 hour driving trip since I was a very small kid and now we were going to make our first trip together in the new airplane. We left very early on a June morning and with a tailwind, we were nearing the Crystal River **International** Airport (a sign that I think was a joke) and their grass runway 18/36. I had practiced on grass strips in Huntsville and was not apprehensive about their 2300-foot grass field. The airport appeared just where the omni cross needles said it would be and I saw the windsock showing limply from the North and I lined up on the 36 runway. It was not the best of approaches and I was a tad high and landed about a third of the way down the grass strip. As I applied brakes, it felt like I was on ice and in an instant I saw that there was a thick dew on all the grass. So I started gently pumping the brakes to find how much braking I could use without losing all traction. It's amazing how many things flash in your mind

while glancing at the fence posts and barbed wire at the end of the runway coming closer by the instant. I got a sick feeling that I was going to really mess up my father's new Cessna when the fence stopped us. By now, it was too late for a go-around, but I considered it. Continuing to pump and apply just enough brake to hold, we sort of slid to a stop about ten feet from the fence with just barely enough room to swing the Cessna around and taxi back to the little one room office and gas pump at mid runway. To further add to my chagrin of nearly crashing at the end of the runway, my father had to holler out, "Stop," to me as I was swinging the Cessna around near the pump and would have clipped the wing tip on a light pole if he had not yelled out.

I knew I was a better pilot than that, but once things go a bit sour, they can pile up. I learned about grass strips in the early morning from that experience. It's something no one had ever cautioned me about, nor had I read in any books, but it sure is something to know landing at a strange grass strip in the early mornings where a early dew is possible (and I am sure the same would apply after a rain shower).

We had a good three day vacation fishing, but when the time came to leave, there was a terrible weather system north of us over Cross City and was not expected to improve for a day or two. So we had to use a rental car to drive to Tampa and catch a commercial flight back to Huntsville and leave the Cessna to retrieve at a future time. That future trip taught me another memorable lesson, but that is another story.

+++++++++[ another story ]+++++

It was two weeks after leaving the Cessna 172 in Crystal River because of weather. The weather cleared enough for us to make a VFR flight from Huntsville, AL to Crystal River, FL to pick up the Cessna. I had recently gotten checked out in a Piper Comanche and was happy to fly down with my father in this slick, retractable gear

speedster. Our plan was for him to fly the Cessna back and we'd spend the night in Ft. Walton Beach, FL, where the family owned a vacation house and fly home the next day.

The trip down was quick and went without a hitch. I was very careful to make sure the grass strip was not wet with dew or anything else when I landed there and I put down perfectly near the end of the runway and had come to a stop by mid field. I proudly announced, "Now that's the way to make a short field landing and stop." My father was much more pleased than the previous time we had landed at Crystal River ***International*** Airport. What a name for a grass strip airport. Even the hand painted, weathered wooden sign looked like a corner diner sign. Someone had a good sense of humor.

After just a short rest and a coke, we topped off both aircraft and started out on the return leg back to Ft. Walton and the Destin Airport. We had arranged to talk on an air-to-air frequency and try to keep each other in sight for the trip back, as my father was a very new private pilot with little time flying in this part of the country. He took off and headed north and I followed a few minutes later. I was able to catch up to him in the Comanche with no trouble and throttled back to a 23/23 cruise. That was the settings I had been shown for best economy at 23 inches of manifold pressure and 2300 RPM on the controllable prop. This was the first aircraft I had ever flown with a controllable prop.

It became obvious that with the Cessna at nearly full power of 25 inches, the Comanche was still leaving my father behind, so I kept lowering the settings to 22/22 and then 21/21 and finally 20/20. I had not thought about lowering the gear to slow down or use flaps. (Yes, I know what you are thinking. All I had to do was put the prop at full RPM and just throttle back to as slow a cruise as I needed to stay with the Cessna, but I had forgotten it at the time, just figuring I'd keep reducing the numbers to fly slower). Now the speed was seemingly OK and we were flying together. It was not long before the engine in the Comanche was complaining and running rough and I could tell the

engine was not feeling good at all. The engine heat was rising. I certainly did not want to make a forced landing even though the countryside was flat and open below me, so I told my dad on the radio that I was just going to have to speed up and go on. I could tell he was anxious about me telling him he'd have to navigate on his own and make it back to the Destin, FL airport on his own, but I didn't see much other choice.

So I bid so long and went up to 24/24 settings and off I went. The engine stopped complaining and I made it to Destin about 30 minutes ahead of him. It was a worrisome 30 minutes of waiting hoping he had not gotten lost, and once my father had landed, he confessed he really didn't want me pulling out ahead of him, but he understood my concern about the rough engine. He said, "It was a lonely feeling seeing your airplane slowly vanish out of sight." I made some comment about the engine in pilot's lounge and another pilot mentioned slow flight with the prop at high RPM and low throttle and I remembered instantly and could not believe I had forgotten that little tidbit of information earlier. Needless to say, the flight home the next day went off without a hitch and we stayed in sight of each other, wing tip to wing tip, but not as close as air force formations.

It's a good thing we can learn some things that don't bend the airplanes, isn't it? My father later bought an Aztec after we both got our multi engine ratings and we had a few hundred hours flying together until he died in 1985. I still fly all kinds of singles and twins and try not to do the dumb kinds of things I did 40 years ago, when I was just a novice pilot . . . but I sure had a lot of fun in those days. I learned never to fly a strange airplane without referring to the cruise manual as well as a flying checkout.