

Vaguely Uncool

I felt like I just had been kicked in the learning curve, and my heart was in my throat.

by Ltjg. Max Miller

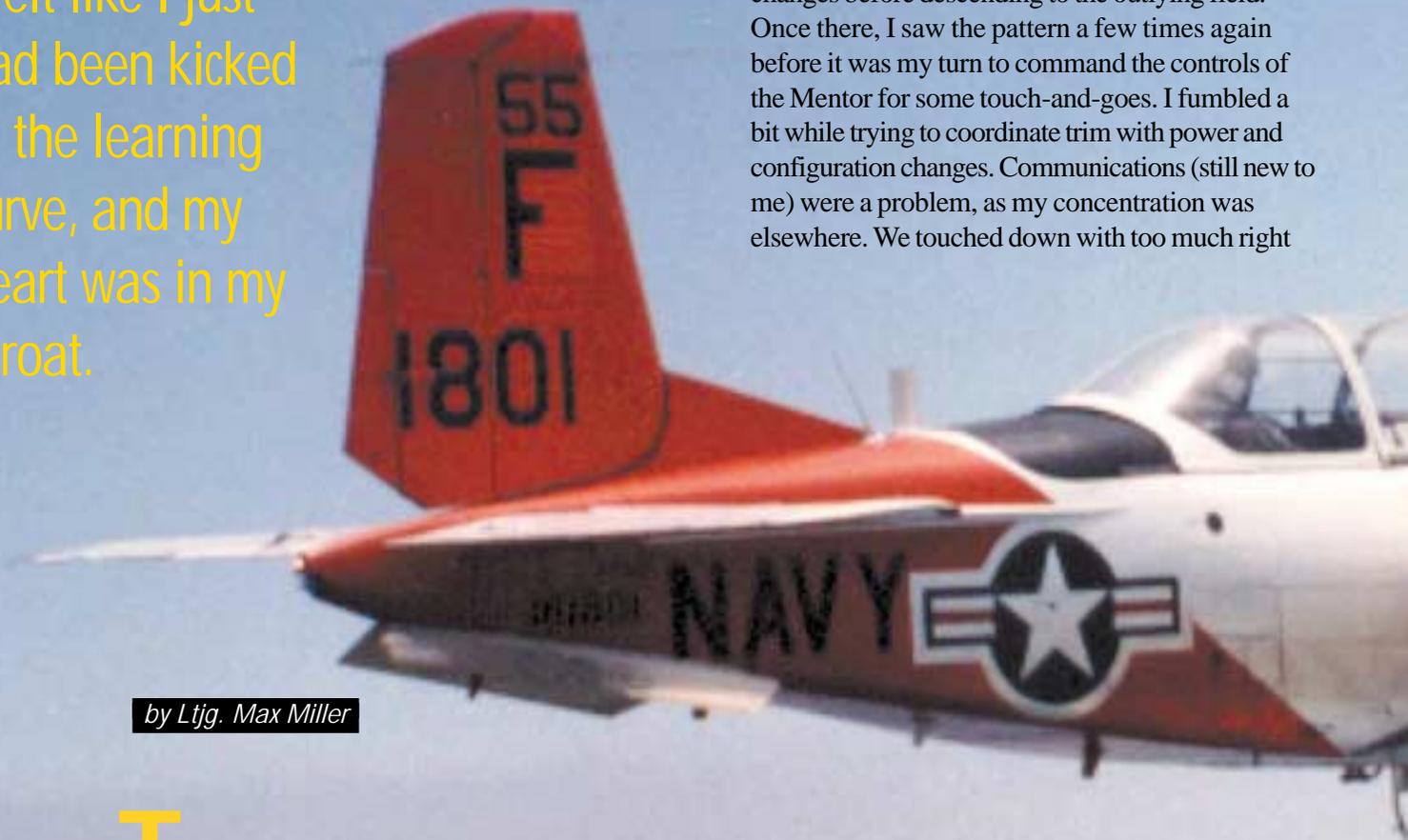
Three autumns ago, I was on my third flight in the oh-so-short portion of the NFO familiarization syllabus. This flight put the controls of the T-34 into my hands. It was a fresh, exciting feeling to be flying, and the pungent smell and taste of the exhaust at engine start initiated an ear-to-ear grin that nobody could wipe from my face. I finally was flying in a Navy aircraft! The brief included communications, flight profiles, landing pattern airspeeds, altitudes, power adjustments, configuration changes,

and visual checkpoints. Repeated through ground school, and reinforced in this brief, was the thrice-confirmed positive change of control.

After clearing our part of the airspace, I had the controls for some turns and configuration changes before descending to the outlying field. Once there, I saw the pattern a few times again before it was my turn to command the controls of the Mentor for some touch-and-goes. I fumbled a bit while trying to coordinate trim with power and configuration changes. Communications (still new to me) were a problem, as my concentration was elsewhere. We touched down with too much right

rudder. The right wheel touched first, then the left, and we yawed to the left as power was added, and we took to the sky again. My instructor mentioned my sloppy comms as I brought us toward altitude, and he said, "I have it for the next one."

"Roger, you have it," I replied casually. We banked slowly to the right and leveled 200 feet lower than I expected. I then became party to a commentary that I found odd, even for a green flight student like myself.



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“We normally would be turning toward downwind about now,” the instructor said.

“Roger,” I replied.

“We really ought to climb to pattern altitude,” was his next comment.

“Roger,” I replied. I was aware he was right and wondered what circumstances warranted the extension of the pattern so far past our interval.

“I have the controls!” he exclaimed. I felt like I just had been kicked in the learning curve, and my heart was in my throat.

“You have the controls,” I managed to cough out.

“Roger, I have the controls,” he said. Imprecise trim and my last power setting had been piloting the T-34 on that climbout. I felt the temperature rise in my helmet and hardly

fumble? Had he noticed? He wrapped up the debrief and solicited my comments on his instruction style. I decided to bite the bullet, discuss the fumble, and, in the process, learned a valuable lesson. Not only are novices vulnerable to vagueness in communications, but so are the masters. My instructor had seen the symptoms of what had been wrong and had corrected those symptoms by re-introducing me to the landing pattern, but until the debrief, he missed the root of the problem. I had seized upon his casual pronoun and had been convinced it referred to what was most immediately important to me: flying the aircraft. I had been so convinced I compromised our briefed procedures without any genuine concern.

I’m now a nugget ECMO in my first Prowler squadron, enjoying carrier life. The controls are



noticed the learning points that my instructor was no doubt reinforcing. He led me through the pattern once again before heading back to NPA. My heart beat with conscience-driven intensity, and I mistrusted the calm in my instructor’s voice. I just knew I was going to have my tail handed to me on the grade sheet.

At debrief, he never mentioned the control-transfer problem, and he was more than gracious on his evaluation of my pattern work. He fortified what I had learned with a thorough reiteration of his own methods of trim and control. Should I mention our

long out of my hands. Every so often, though, I’m relearning the lesson that pronouns and vague language have no place in the cockpit. Eventually, casual conversation becomes unprofessional. What seems obvious in the context of your own scan and thought may be different to your crew member, who is looking through very different eyes. I’m still not immune to the problems that produce, in a post-flight debrief, the statement, “Oh, I thought you were referring to [fill in the blank].” Every time I hear that or find myself briefing it to someone else, I remember the morning when I was flying a little closer to the pine trees than I wanted. 🛩️

Ltjg. Miller flies with VAQ-136.