



Those Things Didn't **Scare Me**

By LCdr. Randy Green

I loved my tour in the training command as a T-34 instructor. It was challenging and extremely rewarding. We flew day in and day out, including an occasional Saturday to meet our pilot-training rate. While I didn't set any flight-time records, I still had to see the flight surgeon on more than one occasion for a flight-hour waiver. The benefit of so much seat time was the proficiency and confidence I gained as an instructor.

I learned to feel comfortable letting students make mistakes. In the process of allowing these mistakes, I occasionally found myself in an unusual attitude, with varying amounts of available airspeed and altitude. The first time a student erred, I was quick to grab the controls. The hundredth time—well, you know.

Let's pause here for a minute. Think about any war movie you've ever watched. There's always a scene that demonstrates the courage and battle-toughness of the hero. You know—the one where the platoon is withering under enemy fire, and everyone, except our hero, is crouching low in the trenches. He's standing in the open, barking orders to his men, unafraid of the hail of deadly bullets whizzing around him. Amazingly, every time, he's escapes being shot, winged, dinged, or otherwise perforated by the enemy fire. He's been in this situation a hundred times and likely will be a hundred more times. He has a job to do, and he's going to do it.

So, here I am in the landing pattern for the hundredth time this week. I'm teaching a fam student who's coming off the 180, approaching the 90. He's flying visual checkpoints and, much to my delight, adjusts his angle-of-bank to compensate for the strong crosswind that is keeping him from reaching his landmark. However, he's underpowered; I can see this problem plain as day, but he hasn't recognized it yet.

He raises the nose to maintain profile. As the airspeed begins to drop off, I offer some friendly assistance, "How about a little power?"

No response.

"Watch the nose. You need a little power," I prompt.

I can see his head shift inside, looking at the instruments. Another few seconds pass. We're getting slow, which is unfortunate, because his ground track is looking good.

"Power! Power!" I tell him with more emphasis.

Still nothing. About this time, the rudder shakers fire.

"I have the controls," I say, as I take the airplane, adding power and leveling the wings.

"Hmmm, lot's of free-play in the stick," I said to myself.

As I complete the second nature go-around procedures, I explain, "Your ground track to the 90 looked great, but you need to compensate for these winds by keeping a little more power from the 180 to maintain profile..."

I remember giving him back the controls and looking ahead to find our interval traffic in the crosswind turn. As I did, my mind unconsciously replayed the last minute or so of our flight. I realized I never have been so slow in the pattern. It dawned on me the free-play I felt in the flight controls was an aileron gasping for air to push against as I leveled the wings. Come to think of it, minus a few knots more, we would have stalled.

Here I was, the battle-hardened hero, focused on my task of trying to help my student with his error recognition, oblivious to the enemy bullets flying around me.

Confidence is a great and necessary thing, but a balance needs to be struck. As my instructor confidence increased, so did my comfort zone (the length I was willing to let a student take the airplane). However, the airplane has aerodynamic and performance limits that have no idea (and don't care) where my comfort limits are. The danger is subtle; if I let the student cross my comfort limits, will we find ourselves outside the aircraft limits, as well?

I still think about this incident. No one was hurt, we didn't bend any metal, and I was not afraid—which is what scares me. 

LCdr. Green is currently assigned to VQ-4.