

Fast Hands in the Cockpit

By Ltjg. Scott Meairs

The day for me to solo was here at last. I had made it through FAMs and was ready to take off and return unassisted in the T-34 Mentor. The ODO instructed me to bounce at our home field and then go to the working areas to enjoy some time on my own. After doing the touch-and-goes, I raised the gear handle, along with the flaps, and climbed out toward the beach.

A bright-red wheels light lit up the cockpit, and the gear horn went off. My gear indicated three up and locked. A quick glance at the flaps showed me the problem; my gear was up, but my flaps still were down. I reached down to raise the flap handle—surprised at myself for not doing it in the first place. I was more surprised to find I indeed had raised the flap handle.

I started to accelerate and had to bring the power back so I wouldn't overspeed the flaps. It must be flap circuit breakers, I thought. Quickly reaching back to push them in, I was puzzled to find that the breakers were in place. I cycled the flap handle twice more to get a response. To my relief, they came up as advertised. Now I was ready to enjoy some quality solo time.

I checked in with Corpus departure and told them I would be climbing to take one of the working areas. Their response was not what I expected. Departure said they could not find my transponder and suggested I cycle it in case it was left in standby. How could I be making all these simple mistakes on a seemingly routine flight? There was no screaming instructor trying to rattle me.

I reached down to turn the knob on the transponder and was surprised, yet again, to find there was no power to it. A quick scan of the instrument panel shocked me even further. I was reading empty gas in both tanks. Since I had gas a minute ago at departure, I thought there was

an electrical problem. The circuit breakers must have popped, so I looked back to see which ones they were. Again, no breakers were popped. I decided it would be in my best interest to return to base and ask someone for help.

On my way back, I switched to base frequency and explained my problem. Their first response was a no-brainer. They asked me to check my circuit breakers and reset any that had popped. Already having done that, I decided to humor them and give the breaker panel a quick scan. I radioed back that no breakers were popped.

Again they told me to give it a quick look. This time, I saw the cause of all my troubles: A utility bus switch was in the off position. I flipped it on, and the cockpit finally appeared normal. I sucked it up and told them the problem and that now all was right with the aircraft. After what seemed like an hour of debate among instructors, I was told to come in for another touch-and-go and depart as normal.

“Could I have forgotten to check the switch in preflight?” I wondered. No, all was normal during pretaxi checks, as well as during my first bounces. Once up at altitude, I reached back to try and simulate how I could have flipped the switch off by mistake. Sure enough, the cuff on the sleeve of my flight suit caught the switch and pulled it off—something I would not have noticed in my haste to reset the breakers during my original flap problem.

The flap situation was determined to be a sticky internal switch, which was out of my control. But the bus switch being off was the result of my actions. During the crew briefs, I always had briefed, “No fast hands in the cockpit.” That day, I learned that statement also applies to a crew of one. 

Ltjg. Meairs currently flies with HS-6.



Photo by Matthew J. Thomas