

THE KEY! / Jim Trusty

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Being known as that certain instructor who will find a way to get his point across, who does not shy away from the hard to teach or the difficult to reach, I get crazy calls from other instructors quite often. Most of the time they are just trying to find some way to overcome the problem themselves and not really trying to pass the student off to me, but sometimes they are eager to let them go.

So I got a call from an instructor at a nearby airport saying the student he had was scared to death when the engine was pulled so that every single time he would cram the power back in and put that part of the lesson off until the next session. He did everything else well enough to pass the checkride and showed no fear of stalls, steep turns or slow flight, which usually brings out the worst in most students.

I agreed to talk with the guy, about 35 years old, 6' 6" tall and around 310 pounds, with no prior history of making inadvertent contact with the ground. He didn't know what the cause of his problem was either. He told me he would do anything necessary to get through this, but his natural reaction would be to put the power back in when it was pulled and go around for a normal landing every time.

I flew with him trying to spot any problems that might have led to his fear and could find nothing. We talked about air show performers, spins, war movies, and fast airplanes, but there was nothing he was afraid of. He then asked me to do whatever I had to do to get him over this hump. He also said that since he was so much bigger, younger, and stronger than me, he still just might overpower me and put the stick back in. He probably should have skipped the younger part.

We were about 15 miles from an airport that we used for this type of training because they had little activity and no published approaches. I gave him these instructions: Lock in on downwind after we get the AWOS at 3,000 feet, one-half mile east of the airport, pattern altitude 1,800 feet, and at this time try an emergency approach to land on runway 35. His last words before he got big eyed were, "Don't let me take advantage of you." Right!

At mid-field downwind, final radio call, 3,000 feet, one-half mile east, I told him to listen carefully to my procedures for this particular emergency landing. Lights, avionics, mixture, mags, master, and with this sequence completed, I removed the key and put it in my mouth and calmly told him, "If you do anything besides land this airplane, like putting your hands on me or not following the prescribed checklist procedures, I'll swallow the key."

Talk about BIG EYES. He had two of them! It got real quiet except for the prop, which passed in front of his big eyes about every 5 seconds--whoosh, whoosh, there it goes again. Then he asks, "Why doesn't the prop stop?" I asked him, key in my teeth, if he wanted me to stop the prop and he said, "NO!" All we need do now is raise the nose. We are at glide speed, 59 knots, left base, plenty of room and airspace, and he is flying the airplane. He isn't talking much, though. Final approach, nose a little low, speed a little high, runway coming up, whoosh, whoosh, wheels down, first exit, mission accomplished!

His fears were now gone and seemingly replaced with an expanded vocabulary of profanity. "My, how you talk!" I said. Then I asked him a very important question, "Wanna do it again?" And he gave the correct answer, "No, but I could if it became necessary." He had a great checkride. He did an emergency landing at the same airport and calmly told the examiner that he had done an emergency procedure at this airport before.

For someone who spends half of each working day teaching safety in one program or another, this might seem foolhardy, but to me it was just a means to an end that the student wanted and needed. We were never in any danger at any time, and he has now felt the airplane react to a real emergency situation. The important thing is that he handled it like a pilot should. I told him that I would never mention this training procedure if he didn't want me to. He said to go right ahead since it might help another student get over a fear, and that he was proud of the way he handled it. I think he did a great job in handling this mock emergency situation, too.

I've heard this story told several times since it actually happened, and each time I hear it the pilot gets better at handling an en route emergency. But you really had to be there when it actually took place to appreciate how funny it really was. I knew the Cessna 172 we were in as well as I knew my 1967 Dodge. I knew what it would do and when not to push it, and this time was no different.

You can talk all day long about engine out training and pulling the throttle back to 1,000 rpm, but it will never be the same or never be as quiet as when the engine really stops. The quietness, the lack of power, the loss of rudder effectiveness, and the picture of the flight instructor sitting there with the ignition key in his teeth will be with that student forever. He will always be keenly aware that he can do a lot more than he thinks he can if the circumstances are just right. This can be a great training maneuver when over an airport just for demonstration purposes.

I'll see you at the airport! Always remember, pilots who don't fly have no advantage over people who can't fly. What's your excuse?