# Let’s not practice

Richard Bach

Practice, for her, was boring. Why, it is such grand fun just to be in the air! Look at this sky! This day! The fields all warm velvet, and the ocean … that’s my ocean! Let’s just fly for a while, and not practice slow-flying, and … look at that ocean!

What can you say to a student like that? It was her own airplane, her own new Aircoupe and the sky was as clear as air washed all night in rain. What can you say? I wanted to tell her, Look, you’ll like a day’s flying so much better, as soon as you can control your airplane with skill. Study the aircraft now, learn it well, and you won’t have to think about it; later … it will feel like you’re a pure puff of cloud, relaxed and at home in the sky.

But I could no more convince her over the sound of the engine than I could the many times I’d tried in the quiet of the ground. She was so eager to jump ahead, to plunge into the giant majesty of flight, that it was chains and hobbles for her to take one step at a time, to think about stalls and steep turns and forced-landing practice. So we flew around for a while, and I looked out at the fields and the sea and that dream-clear sky and worried about what would happen to her in this pretty day if her engine stopped.

“OK,” I said at last. “Before we land, let’s practice one thing. Let’s pretend we’re climbing out after takeoff and the engine quits, right there. Let’s find out how much altitude it takes for you to turn the airplane around, correct back to the runway, and flare out for a downwind landing. OK?”

“OK,” she said, but she wasn’t really interested.

I demonstrated one engine-failed turn, and took one hundred fifty feet to do it, from quit to flare.

“Your turn.” She botched the first one, lost four hundred feet. The second one took three hundred. The third went well, matching my one hundred fifty. But her heart wasn’t in practicing engine failures, and a few minutes later we were landed and she was still talking about the lovely beautiful day.

“If you want to enjoy flying,” I said, “you’ve got to be good at it.”

“I’ll be good. You know how careful I am about preflight checks. I drain all the water from all the tanks—my motor won’t quit me on takeoff.”

“But it can! It’s happened! To me!”

“You fly those old airplanes and their motors are always stopping anyway. I have a new motor …” She looked at my face. “Oh, all right. Next time we’ll practice some more. But wasn’t this the most beautiful day of the year?”

Three weeks later she was solo in the Aircoupe and I was in the Swift, camera on the seat beside me as our two airplanes rolled into position for takeoff, toward the trees. It was another Tiffany day, and I had promised I’d take pictures of her airplane cruising along over the fields.

She took off first, and by the time her Aircoupe was lifting into the air, the Swift and I were rolling to follow, full throttle.

I was just breaking ground, retracting the landing gear, when I noticed that the Aircoupe was turning right, instead of left, two hundred feet in the air.

What’s she doing? I thought.

The Aircoupe was no longer climbing. It was coming down, banking over the trees, the propeller a slow windmill. Without any warning, after a perfect run-up, her engine had failed on takeoff.

I was stunned, watching, helpless. She’s a student pilot! It’s not fair! It should have happened to me!

There had been no place ahead or to the side for her to land; it was all a forest of oak. Lower, she would have had no choice but the trees, but now she was turning back, trying for the airport.

She didn’t have a prayer of making it all the way back to the main runway, but the cross runway might be wide enough …

I was a hundred feet in the air when the Aircoupe glided past in the opposite direction, wings gently banked, wheels clearing the last of the trees by a man’s height. She looked straight ahead, concentrating on her landing.

The Swift pivoted hard around beneath me as I swung to land at once on the cross runway. I saw the Aircoupe touch the dirt at the side of the pavement, roll across the hundred feet of it and on into the cleared dirt on the other side. It took three seconds for the weak little nosegear to collapse, pitching the airplane into a spray of yellow dust, throwing the tail steep into the air, shuddering. Why couldn’t it have been me?

As I rolled up, brakes smoking, the canopy of the Aircoupe slid back and she stood up in the cockpit, frowning.

I forgot to think of a fitting understatement. “Are you OK?”

“I’m all right.” Her voice was calm. “But look at my poor airplane. The rpms went down and then there was just nothing. Do you think it’s hurt too much?”

The propeller, cowl, and firewall were bent. “We can rebuild it.” I helped her down the sloping wing from the cockpit. “That was not a bad piece of flying, by the way. You were good and slow over the last of the trees, you used every inch you had. If it wasn’t for that toothpick nosegear …”

“Was it really all right?” The only effect of the crash was that she wanted to explain. Usually she didn’t care what I knew or thought. “I wanted to turn around and land down the length of the runway, but I just wasn’t high enough. When I got low, I thought I’d better level the wings and land it.”

The more I stood there and looked at the space in which she had landed that airplane, the more I felt uneasy. After a minute, or two looking, I began to wonder if I could have done as well, and the more I wondered, the more I doubted that I could; with all my old engines failing and off-airport landings and short-field tricks, I doubted that I could have brought that Aircoupe down any better than this student who wasted her practice time flying straight and level, looking down through the air at the fields and the sea.

“You know,” I told her later, with a little more respect in my tone than I wanted to show, “that landing … it wasn’t a bad piece of flying, at all.”

“Thank you,” she said.

The engine had quit from a vapor lock in the fuel line, and when we rebuilt the airplane we changed the line so that it couldn’t happen again. But I kept thinking about the way she had flown that landing. Did the practice help her, the day that we flew the three simulated engine-failures-on-takeoff? It was hard to believe that they had—she had done them only as a favor to me. I began to believe that she had the skill she needed within her all along, and the cool thinking, waiting the moment she’d want it. I thought about that, about how I had nothing at all to do with her ability to fly. Finally I came to think that maybe everything we need to know, ever, about anything, is already within us, waiting till we call for it.

I had told her so, and now she believed it: even new engines can fail on takeoff.

But I still think, now, that there are times when a flight instructor is nothing more than pleasant company when a girl wants to go flying on a pretty day.



