

Memory©

I used to know that there are three ways to tell if you are getting old. The first one is that you become forgetful. Uh, uh, I can't remember the other two. Maybe the story went that memory is the second mental skill you lose with age. You ask, "What was the first?" "I can't remember."

That said, I was watching Alan Alda, of MASH 4077th fame, go through a memory test on PBS last week. The program began with Alda watching the making of a video with a young couple partaking of a picnic lunch on the shore of a body of water. Later the producer staged selected scenes of the video for the taking of still photographs with certain elements different.

Alda was shown the still photos and then was given a memory test in which he was asked to discriminate between how the original video production differed from the photos. Alda's memory mixed up the two sources of information to the point that it was obvious his mind could not tell which was which.

The purpose of the experiment was to show that mental images from different sources can be twisted and confused. That this can occur under controlled test conditions only verified for me the confusion of visual images flying students get from their lessons. There is ample reason to believe that the confusion can be made to carry over into all the other senses. In my experience the least likely to be crossed up is the sense of smell but my wife often accuses me of being contrary.

A student pilot can be expected to get widely varied sight pictures of the landing approach, roundout, and flare. Imposed on this is all the landings he has watched on TV, seen in movies, and watched at the airport. To this, add any toy airplane landings as a child or a model maker. Top this background with spoken images and procedures from pilot friends and multiple instructors. Read Stick and Rudder, Ron Machado as well as Kershner. Mix in a portion of MS-5 or s6 flight simulator and is it any wonder that students have difficulty with landings. Alda had it easy with only two image sets and still blew half his answers.

The problem, in my mind, is that there is an image conflict just as Alda had only compounded by multi-sensory perceptions. The student pilot is not sure of just what image to use in a given landing. There is enough difference between every landing so that no one image can be relied upon as a constant. What's more the kinesthetic sense is completely new, unanticipated and peculiar.

The student pilot must begin the most difficult learning process of all, unlearning. Airliners do not land as training aircraft are supposed to land. For most student only the written word accurately portrays what takes place in a good landing. Changing the written word into the desirable visual image does not come easily. There is tremendous psychological difficulties in believing that to make a good landing, you must make the runway disappear from view. You are asked to believe that the sought for sight picture does not include the runway. A good landing is a tremendous act of faith.

The instructor may have presented a particular concept of control movement over and over in the process of teaching landings without apparent effect on the student. Then for no apparent reason a brief

statement gives the student some unexpected insight into what is supposed to happen. For every student this seems to come at a different time and in a different way. Whatever it is, it should be bottled.

Before I became involved in flying, I was involved in teaching children with learning difficulties. I became a much better teacher of children through teaching flying. I became a much better teacher of flying by teaching children. Just as children must believe they can learn, so must a student pilot believe that he can land an airplane without seeing the runway. Once a student believes in the teacher, most any learning process is possible.

There is another memory aspect which can add to a student's ability to perform as well as he would desire. I recommend that immediately before landing practice, an inter-airport flight, or any set of maneuvers that the student review not just mentally, but orally what he expects to do and how he expects to do it at all discrete points of the flight. This process should be an habitual process for recharging the batteries of short term memory. Don't believe that this recharging can be bypassed any more than could a preflight. The better and more complete your near term flight review the less likely are you forget pertinent information. Practice of the right kind makes perfect.

One more important aspect of a student pilot's training is the study process. You do not fully understand an instructional video in one viewing. You will not fully appreciate the nuances of meaning and implication of a book in one reading. A good example of such a text is the government publication known as the Pilot's Handbook of Aeronautical Knowledge. One sentence of this student textbook is often re-written into a chapter in others. This book is the concentrated orange juice of student pilot literature. I have likened the text to water buffalo meat. Even in quarter inch cubes it will require considerable chewing before it can be swallowed.

The final question is what can you or your instructor do to facilitate the learning process? Repetition alone is not enough. Rewording or restating material may help. In education there is a term called 'readiness'. A student can be exposed to material prior to being ready and it will be essentially a wasted effort. For some concepts a foundation must be laid. The student must be nurtured with peripheral material that will increase the student's awareness and readiness to learn. Students will vary in awareness of the kaleidoscope of sights, sounds, sensations and concerns that make up a flying event. What happens will be made up of many memories, some false and some true. Eventually, as in much of life, it comes down to what the student chooses to believe as memory.