

A Stabilized Approach . . . to Life

by
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The idea of a “stabilized approach” was new to me some years ago, when my flight instructor began drilling this budding pilot for that exciting hour of solo flight, with its touch-and-goes in a Cessna 152, which had suddenly become two hundred pounds lighter. There was a mantra to learn, which still reverberates in my brain when descending on short final: aiming point, line-up, windsock, airspeed. There is no substitute for expert instruction. So far, it has kept me safe in a growing variety of airplanes.

According to the Flight Safety Foundation, the approach and landing is one of the most common times for a pilot’s error to turn into an accident. That is why we learn early how to control airspeed, when to lower the flaps, how to judge crosswinds, careful timing of the flare, and a touchdown spot to aim for. Pilots learn the importance of the pre-landing check list, which is best memorized, then carefully followed.

Particularly, for the complex airplane pilot, the GUMPS acronym is helpful, especially the ‘U’ for undercarriage. This simply means to double and triple check your landing gear. Take a look outside the window to see if the wheels are locked in place, and the panel indicator lights read “three in the green.” It is really embarrassing to land on the fuselage, not to mention a distinct hazard to your health and pilot privileges. Even worse, is to try a go-around after striking a prop on the pavement. In most cases that choice will prove a fatal error, as stalls and spins and fires witness against a second try to salvage a wheel-up landing.

While you don’t want to float too far down the runway, it is not necessary to always land on the numbers. And we shouldn’t expect every landing to be a ‘greaser,’ though they are impressive to the passengers. I often think of this slogan on an old day-timer calendar: “If at first you do succeed, try not to show your astonishment.” Remember in your shallow turn onto the final leg, to check the windsock again. Or, in a towered airport the controller will upon request give you another ‘heads up’ concerning the wind direction and its speed. That weather feature is seldom as forecasted, and will greatly affect your ground speed, even without the more hazardous wind sheer phenomenon.

Coming in to an airport beside a body of water poses more challenges, especially at night. The lack of visual cues around the landing field gives pilots the so-called ‘black hole’ challenge. A few pilots have even forgotten to click the mike for the helpful and sometimes life-saving ‘pilot controlled lighting.’ We don’t just aim for the beacon, or the VOR station. Look for the REIL, or better still follow an ILS glide slope to the MDA or decision height. There is much pilots can do to keep their landings safer, as well as avoid being one of those NTSB statistics we always hope to avoid.

Just as the Stabilized Approach will keep us healthy, and our airplanes out of the body shop as well as the graveyard, so also our approach to life can make a difference in the pilot's family. Here are some principles which seem obvious but are too often neglected, until a crash lands us in the emergency room. First, have an Aiming Point in your life. This means a goal for every day, each month, and for the year. Set reasonable, attainable goals, with definite plans how to reach them. They may involve learning new skills, educational achievements, advanced pilot ratings, books to read, articles to write or similar intellectual pursuits. Then, there are work projects, hobbies, gardening and landscaping goals, vocational objectives, financial and budgetary considerations to achieve. Improved family relationships with spouse and children must enter the equation or the 'stabilized approach' could turn turbulent as a thunderstorm.

Prioritization of objectives is like the 'Line-up.' Doing first things first is vital. Just as the Airworthiness Directives take precedence over the new upholstery job, and the annual inspection is more important than the paint job, so our lives must be prioritized in order to achieve the best results. As the pilot looks at the end of the runway just before landing, we must see beyond the immediate to be sure our life style is headed in the center line. Not the path of least resistance, but sometimes heading into the wind, or doing what is right even when others would like to compromise or follow the crowd.

Airspeed indicators tell us whether the plane will descend or fly, whether it will land smoothly with the stall horn blowing softly, or float and balloon to the detriment of passenger comfort and a jolt on the gear when the 'bird' finally settles. Similarly, we pilots must tame our ego and often our aggressive ambitions to set a pace which others can safely follow. Like the queen bee, which is capable of laying over 2,000 eggs per day, but who only lays as many eggs as her worker bees can take care of, we must temper our instincts so not to 'burn out' or crash with a sudden illness. The Japanese call it *karoshi*, which is literally translated as "working yourself to death." We don't even have the concept in our health care system or insurance diagnosis codes.

Finally, there is the wind sock, to tell us when to bank for a side slip, how much to crab, and to guide us in proper flap extension as we come in to land. Keeping abreast of the news means more than scanning the headlines and watching the weather channel. We need to know the trends in our fragile economy, to observe which way the 'winds of strife are blowing,' and to discern the meaning of the portentous times in which we live. Seriously, we are seeing changing circumstances of freedom, where renewed religious faith, carefulness in personal health practices, and healthy decisions as reducing personal debt, and improving our dietary choices may have life-and-death consequences. I could be more specific, but will save those counsels for your phone calls, or another time. Please keep in mind that Stabilized Approach, every time you land. And . . . do it safely.

*[Doctor Hansen, author of the popular book on home health care, **Get Well At Home**, currently serves as medical director of the **Emerald Valley Wellness Clinic**, and its **Live-for-Health Seminars** in Creswell, Oregon. Pilots who for health reason are having trouble passing their medical should contact us. For further information or inquiries, contact: clinic1@emeraldwellness.com]*