

May 30, 2008 First Solo, or Groundhog Day at Clemson Airport

Every pilot remembers their first solo. That momentous moment when the flight instructor steps out and says, "Ok, you have it for one circuit around the pattern and land". Usually this event comes some 6 to 10 hours after flight training begins and is generally part of the FAA training curriculum or may be mandated by an insurance carrier when one upgrades to a more sophisticated aircraft type.

For most this first solo happens only once or twice during their entire flying career, but for me it has been a half dozen time event. Much like Bill Murray in Groundhog day, it follows the same pattern each time...yet each and every one has been none the less memorable. My first solo, in 1958, was in an early '40's Aeronca 7AC tail dragger, and came almost 10 hours into my flight training. I was not a quick study and had problems in mastering main wheel landings to the narrow hilly runway that was Ramapo Valley Airpark in Spring Valley, NY. I never did complete that training beyond my first solo cross country, which came at about 30 hours into my flight instruction, after which time I stopped flying. (I needed my money for college tuition.)

Now fast forward 7 years. After marrying, I decided to resume my flying, and in 1964 purchased a 2 seater Ercoupe 415C. This little plane was noteworthy in that it did not come with rudder pedals. In fact the only thing that it had on the floor, in front of the pilot, was a single brake pedal. With a panel mounted "steering wheel", you literally drove it off and back onto the ground. My first solo with this airplane also came 10 hours into my training (I told you that I was not a quick study). An additional twenty hours later, and I finally had a Private Pilots certificate.

You would think that first solos would now be a thing of the past However, that was not to be. It was about this time we decided that a faster airplane, which would carry 4, would better suit our travel requirements. When I purchased a Cessna 172 Skyhawk, I discovered that the FAA would require some additional dual training since this airplane **had** rudder pedals and I would need an endorsement to my license due to this extra "sophistication". Thus another 2 hours were spent in learning to use my feet in landing, before I received another "first solo".

Much went routinely over the next half dozen years but when our next plane, a 1960 Piper Comanche 250 was purchased, it was training time again. This plane had both an adjustable pitched propeller as well as retractable landing gear. This was considered a "really sophisticated" machine by my insurance company and they required dual instruction before they would cover me. Another "first solo" on the Comanche was signed off after 10 dual hours were accumulated.

Some 17 years later that single engine Comanche was traded in for its twin engine "big brother". Although the two planes were more alike than different, insurance and FAA regulations required some more training and another first solo. This one took me almost 13 hours, but also included an instrument proficiently evaluation and biennial flight review. Without those, it might very well have been done in what was now becoming my standard 10 hours.

Now 50 years after my very first flight in a general aviation plane, I am again undergoing flight training in a small, two seater tail dragger...my new "home built" 2007 Just Aircraft Highlander. Since it has been so very long since I last handled that type of aircraft, my insurance company again requires instructional training as well as a tail wheel endorsement. The total number of dual hours required before I can **legally solo** and carry passengers? You guessed it...10 hours.

It's groundhog day...all over again.



Take-off



Flying the Pattern



Runway in Sight



Touching Down



After the Solo