



The Best of *Flight Training Magazine*

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Flight Lesson / By Joe Wilbur

PHANTOM WIND

Correcting for what isn't there

My early lessons went fairly well, and I passed through the same ups and downs as most students probably do. When I soloed on a very calm morning just after reaching 17 hours of instruction, I was absolutely thrilled.

As my instructor Paul and I were returning from the practice area one day, we tuned in the AWOS and heard there was a seven-knot crosswind. I thought to myself: ailerons into the wind, opposite rudder, stay aligned with the runway. Only, it didn't work. I was all over the place, eventually landing very hard, way off to the side, and partially sideways. We cleaned up, lined up, and took off to do it again. Repeat performance. The wind, I thought, was having its way with me, and I couldn't seem to do anything about it.

Paul, sensing my frustration as I again began drifting off the extended centerline, calmly said, "You need to stop correcting for wind that isn't there." The obvious had escaped me. The AWOS was wrong, or the conditions changed. There was no crosswind, and the airplane was clearly telling me so. With that detail, I landed easily.

I thought, from now on, I need to just "fly the airplane."

That turned out to be a real turning point for me, not only in my training, but in my life as well. At work I found myself more confident, more content, and more productive. My confidence in flying changed as well. I began noticing improvement in my ability to stay coordinated in turns. I began winning my battle for altitude control. Breathing normally while performing stalls and unusual attitude recovery became routine. I was learning to relax. And being relaxed helped me to stay ahead of the airplane.

The day of my long cross-country I faced the prospect of a real crosswind. I was to fly from Warrenton, Virginia, to Charlottesville, to Farmville, and back. The surface winds at Charlottesville and Farmville were stronger than usual but mostly aligned with the runways. At Warrenton, however, there was an eight-knot crosswind.

I had no major issues on the first two legs, but on the flight back to Warrenton I computed my groundspeed and found it to be significantly less than planned. I was 65 miles from home and growing apprehensive about the crosswind at Warrenton.

Rather than fixate on it, I considered my alternatives. If I had trouble landing, I would simply fly over to Culpeper where the runway orientation would be favorable. Done—I enjoyed the rest of the flight.

Arriving near Warrenton, I tuned in the AWOS and sure enough, there was a strong crosswind, with winds gusting stronger even than it had been earlier. I entered the downwind leg and paid attention to how much crabbing was necessary to keep a ground track parallel to the runway.

I turned base, and because of the wind almost immediately needed to start my turn to final. I realized I would overshoot, but stayed calm. I made a conscious effort to remain coordinated throughout the turn with a steady bank angle of 30 degrees. Given the conditions, I had decided to use an approach speed of 70 knots with flaps at 20 degrees. Once on the extended centerline, it was time for the sideslip.

Success. I finished my long cross-country with a very good crosswind landing. I taxied, shut down, tied down, and drove to work. That landing felt almost as good as when I soloed the very first time. It highlighted the most important lessons for me to remember—not only for flying, but in my life as well. First, because sometimes the

wind isn't actually there, I need to evaluate the situation at hand with all available information, remembering that the airplane is the most valuable and timely source of information at my disposal. And second, because sometimes the wind actually is there, I need to recognize my own limitations and decide on a course of action with alternatives; doing this sooner rather than later is the best way for me to stay relaxed and fly safely.

What would you have done? Discuss the scenario with your instructor.

Want to know more?

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