

WHY DO I NEED TRAINING?

An airline captain answers his own question

By Oliver Hasenberg

It was one of the greatest moments in my life when the container with my recently purchased Pitts S-1T arrived at a small airfield near my hometown in Germany. It has been a lifelong dream for me to own one of these great airplanes. Thanks to a friend of mine who owns a S-2A and has reasonable experience with various Pitts, we unloaded and assembled my airplane over the following three weeks. It took so long because I am commuting between Germany and Dubai, where I work as a captain on a Boeing 777 for Emirates Airlines.

I trained with my friend in his S-2A and got my check-out. This has been an interesting experience. Having made thousands of landings in different types of taildraggers, I thought landing a Pitts would be a piece of cake. I was wrong! Not that it's overly difficult; it's just different. In my nearly 12,500 hours of flying, I have never landed anything like the Pitts, and it took me more landings than I originally anticipated to get used to it and fly my first solo.



When purchasing your dream airplane, remember to factor specialized training into the equation, even if that means traveling to a different country.

Eventually the great moment came – the first flight in my own airplane. I was stunned when I experienced how much better my single-place performed as compared to the double-holer I flew before. After a few basic maneuvers and an uneventful landing, I was a very happy man. However, there was also a slightly uncomfortable feeling, and I knew the cause of it. I was scared! Not of flying or landing, but of botching a maneuver and ending up in a situation I have never been in before, like an inverted flat spin. Things which are known to have greedily claimed the lives of Pitts pilots.

When I decided to buy the Pitts, I thought I could just climb into it and start practicing aerobatics on my own based on training I received 15 years ago. That was simply not the case. Also, I soon realized this airplane and the type of flying I intended to practice were beyond my capabilities, and I needed training again.

Admitting that you need training even though you are a high-time pilot with lots of experience in all sorts of airplanes is not exactly ego boosting. As most of us know, pilots have strong egos, and the urge to avoid training comes almost naturally. I guess it is because we perceive criticism as something negative, albeit we know that critique is essential in any kind of training. I hardly know a professional pilot in my company who enjoys having a training flight (not a checkride) in the simulator, even though it is one of the greatest training tools we have.

So, here I am with my shiny new airplane and insufficient experience to make use of it properly. After some research I realized two things. First, there are a lot of myths out there about spinning in general and spinning a Pitts especially. Second, and more importantly, there is no substitute for practical training with a good instructor. I knew a lot about spin-recovery techniques, but would I be able to apply these techniques if I entered an inadvertent inverted flat spin from a botched hammerhead? I wasn't 100 percent certain, so I decided to seek instruction from

a specialist. Thanks to the Internet, information about flight schools and/or instructors can be easily obtained, and for various reasons I chose to ask Bill Finagin if he could teach me everything I need to know about spins. Among these reasons were that he has a very good reputation and lots of experience in the Pitts, and last but not least he is located on the East Coast, which is more conveniently located for me coming from Dubai.

I met Bill the day before our first flight, and we discussed what my goals were. He gave me a thorough briefing on what we were going to do on the next two days. We spent the next two days flying for about two hours a day with a break in between. We started off with the upright stuff, which I thought I was familiar with, but the vertigo effect after coming out of an 18-turn spin caught me by surprise. After completing the upright spin variations, Bill introduced me to inverted spinning, which we continued for most of the second day. This was a whole new world to me. I would not have wanted to discover this world on my own, but with the help of a good instructor it became a pleasant experience. The four-hour training enabled me to recognize different types of spins, execute them myself, and recover safely. Now, I feel a lot more competent and confident to do aerobatics and spins in my airplane, and I enjoy flying my Pitts a lot more than before. Thanks, Bill!

Since I started my airline career some 17 years ago, I have gone through the most extensive training programs, and I will continue to do so to keep flying safely for my passengers, my crew, and myself, regardless of flying a Boeing 777 or my Pitts. I think you can do the same,

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whether you are flying for fun or for a living. Take advantage of the knowledge and experience of other people whenever you can, and realize that you can always learn something new even though you have lots of experience. I am glad that I decided to seek out training from a competent person despite my initial hesitation to do so. It might have worked out, but I could also be a smoking hole in the ground. Like Albert Einstein once said: “Do not stop asking questions.”

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