

Aerobatics

Why you should!

RANDY WHITSON, EAA 666129

Growing up on a soybean farm in western Tennessee allowed me to spend a lot of time watching cropdusters. I remember the sight and sounds of those big Ag-Cats. That big radial engine and prop combination could be heard for miles, so they could easily be found.

The skill and precision of the pilots was remarkable, too. Five feet off the ground with a pull to near stall at each field's end isn't most pilots' idea of fun, but to a young boy who loved airplanes it was remarkable! Time spent watching those amazing planes and pilots had an influence on me. As far back as I can remember, I wanted to fly.



I was 18 before I finally started flying lessons in a Cessna 152. The day I got my private certificate in hand, I started looking for aerobatic training. Being a college student, it took me a while to save the funds necessary to take the training, but I finally did and was able to find an aerobatic instructor and a Decathlon for \$68/hour (good luck with that today).

Finally I was there—I had 90 hours' total time after 10 or so hours of aerobatic training, including everything the Decathlon and instructor could throw at me. Then the money ran dry again, and I was back to straight and level in a 150.

What happened after the aerobatics is where the real story begins. At that time I thought I was just out to have fun. Everyone kept telling me, "You will be a much better pilot after taking aerobatics." They were right! Back in my rented Cessna I immediately noticed an increase in my comfort level.

No longer was my focus locked forward, wondering what the airplane would do next. Now, I knew it would only do

what I wanted and nothing else. Almost instantly, I was able to look around and finally relax. What a joy flying became. I could look at the friends whom I took flying. Turbulence, which used to be fairly unsettling, was now like it didn't exist. Basically, every aspect of flying in visual flight rules conditions became easier.

A good instructor will, however, push you into your adrenaline rush.

During the next 12 or so years my aerobatics was very limited, due to financials and lack of appropriate aircraft, but during that time I managed to churn through the ratings. The part of aerobatics that stuck with me was the comfort that I was in control of the airplane and not vice versa. Some pilots start their CFI training without having done one spin. I had done literally hundreds (even a 150 is approved for spins). As a green certificated flight instructor (CFI), I definitely had a lot to learn about teaching and student personalities, but I always knew that I had the airplane. That confidence gave me more time to be an instructor instead of a passenger.

Aerobatic Flavors

I find that there are two kinds of pilots, those who are eager to do aerobatics and those who aren't. For you eager ones, find a reputable and qualified instructor—and the money—and have fun. I know that is all the encouragement you need.

Let me focus on those of you who are not so eager. I have worked with many pilots who were none too excited

to spin an airplane, let alone get one completely inverted. However, after they got past the uncertainty and possible motion sickness, they were glad to have been there. Most CFIs who teach aerobatics can tailor the flying to meet your goals. If you just want spin awareness and unusual attitude recovery training, not a problem. Just discuss these things with your prospective CFI to make sure he or she can work within your criteria.

Prone to Motion Sickness?

Maybe you are one of those people who get motion sick. Pushing through it for short periods will be worth it. Find an instructor and explain your situation to him or her. No good CFI will push you beyond your tolerance level when it comes to motion sickness (remember the CFI will usually have to clean the plane). Take it slow. The instructor will understand.

I once had a prospective private pilot student who carried a trash bag on his first 15 flights. He used it on most, but he kept pushing and got his private. Except in extreme turbulence, he is now free of motion sickness. What I have found is that many people are "scared" sick. If you are already a pilot, it is usually a combination of the adrenaline and the fear of the unknown that work together to cause motion sickness. The reality is that you probably are not extremely prone to motion sickness if you're a pilot.

A good instructor will, however, push you into your adrenaline rush. He or she will also explain things on the ground and in the air as they are being done. Any instructor who doesn't explain the maneuvers, or tries to surprise you, should be replaced. You don't need to love aerobatics, but you do need to have been there. Just riding through aerobatics with a friend may have some value, but dual instruction with your hands on the controls is where you will find the real payoff.

The area where your adrenaline awakens is the area where you get that feeling in your stomach not related

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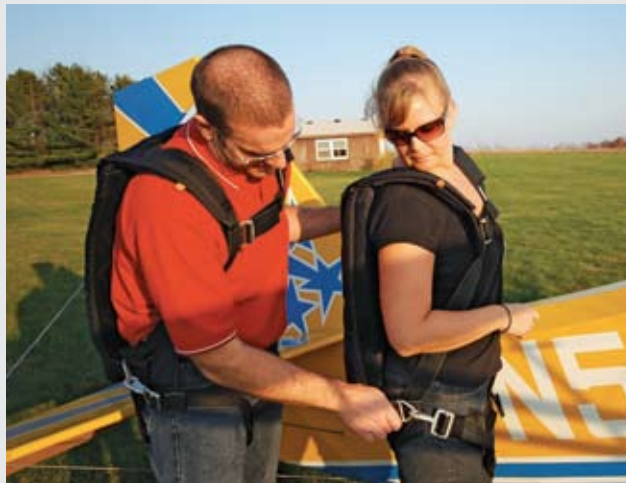
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Removing all loose cockpit objects prior to aerobatic flight is critical.



A windshield full of Mother Earth is a common sight during aerobatics.

to motion. For many people it might compare to public speaking or that first kiss—you probably know what I’m talking about. The adrenaline you get in a controlled training environment will pay big dividends in the real world.

Obviously, there is more to being a good pilot than the physical skill and mental gymnastics required to control the plane in all phases of flight. What aerobatics will allow you to do is spend more time on navigating and communication. It will also better prepare you for emergencies that may arise. I have trained pilots who felt uncomfortable in emergency descents, steep bank situations, and aggressive slips, and that’s fairly common in the non-aerobatic pilot world. Unusual attitudes are only unusual because you haven’t experienced them often.

Still Asking Why?

The main reason to consider aerobatic training is simple—it may save your life and the lives of your passengers. If you were a police officer wouldn’t you occasionally practice shooting your gun? Not because



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you plan on using it tomorrow, but because you never know. Let’s face it; no matter how well you plan, things don’t always go according to plan. Have you ever been to a fly-in? Ever been in a traffic pattern with eight or more other planes all at different speeds and pilot skill levels? Ever tried to land a Bonanza or Cessna 210 behind a fleet of Cubs or ultralights? Then you know that sometimes planning isn’t always enough.

Let’s get back to the fun part of aerobatics. After 16 years with limited exposure to aerobatics, I finally got a Decathlon. My wife, Kate, is also a pilot, so we picked it out together. The airplane isn’t a new one, but it gets the job done. My aerobatic training came back after about three or four hours of alone time in the airplane. With plenty of altitude, I was again feeling comfortable with the unusual attitudes and the forces associated with aerobatics.

My wife and I competed in our first aerobatic competition a few months after we got the plane. It was an amazing experience for a little farm boy who grew up watching crop dusters. We still have a lot to learn about aerobatics and eventually will need a higher-performance airplane to compete seriously, but for now the Decathlon is just right.

I can’t do aerobatics justice in this article, but I encourage you to go find out for yourself. Find a qualified instructor and airplane and get inverted. It just might become the time of your life that saves your life! 

Randy Whitson is a 39-year-old CFI with instrument and multiengine ratings and more than 20 years of flying experience.

go direct

The International Aerobatic Club is a great resource for information on aerobatics and instructors. Visit www.IAC.org.

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