LUSCOMBE REPORT #6
BY
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I have an early weird recollection. A guy in a business suit is conducting a preflight inspection of a Luscombe. He crawls over, under, around, and through it, being careful not to get his nice clothes dirty. Then he throws his briefcase into the right seat, swings the propeller to start the engine, unties the tiedown ropes as the machine sits there idling, and then he gets in. He taxis out and disappears from sight, presumably on some kind of a business trip. The incongruous image of Luscombe and business executive will stick to my memory until I die, like somebody stepping aboard a skateboard to go and meet an important client.

In the early 60s, I was taking flight training in the newest, most uptown, knock your socks off flying machine on the airport, the thrifty, nifty, swifty Cessna 150. It had flaps. It had an electrical system. It had a radio that could transmit on three or four different frequencies and talk back to you on a cabin loudspeaker. It had an omni receiver, the newest up-to-date navigation device available at the time, just like the airliners. It moved along the ground on tricycle landing gear that made the machine tend to go straight if left unattended. The ads said that learning to fly a Cessna was pretty much like learning to drive a car.

Directly across the ramp from my flying school was an establishment that looked like it hadn't entirely graduated from the '30s. The students at that school learned in Taylorcrafts and

Luscombes, with a Stinson Voyager and a Luscombe Sedan thrown in for when they needed more than two seats.

One day, following a session in the Cessna, I wandered over to the competitor's establishment to have a look. Coming up on one of the trainers, I could hardly believe my eyes. It was *old*, dating back probably to the forties.

The fuselage looked like an ice cream cone that somebody had attempted to mate to an airplane, right behind the wings. There were funny little notches in the trailing edges of the wings, where the wings of normal airplanes join the fuselage, where the flaps were in the Cessnas. The Luscombe didn't seem to have any flaps. The ailerons were actuated by cables that stuck out of holes in the wings, attached to bellcranks that protruded right out into the slipstream. The door latches were primitive little bars of aluminum like something you'd find on the door of a chicken coop.

The instruments would have made Lindbergh proud, and you didn't even need a key to work the mag switch. There were round, automotive-looking oil pressure and oil temperature gauges, and a big tachometer that rotated counter-clockwise, opposite the Cessna standard. I couldn't see any brake pedals, and there were several tubes and fuel valves routed randomly around the cockpit, adding to the ambiance of the Spirit of St. Louis.

Worst of all, according to the instructors at the Cessna school, the thing had a tailwheel. Somebody told me that tailwheel airplanes were hard to handle on the ground. The Luscombe didn't look like it would be hard to handle. It just looked primitive and ungainly. In subsequent years, I came to

believe that sometimes people fly ugly airplanes for good reasons, just as men sometimes marry ugly women. When I see a man with an ugly wife, I think, "She must be one heck of a good cook." And when I see an ugly airplane taxi by, I say to myself, "I'll bet that thing really flies good." In the case of the Luscombe, I was to learn, beauty is in the eye of the beholder.

One thing I had to give the Luscombes. They had sticks. I thought I'd like to fly an airplane with a stick instead of the little "D" shaped steering wheels we had in the Cessnas. John Wayne, eat your heart out.

These were the days of transition between the era of the tailwheel and that of the flying milkstool, the machines old-timers ridiculed as being Mickey Mouse contraptions with the tailwheels on the wrong end. Trying to birddog some business away from the more modern school, the proprietor of the Luscombe school gave me the spiel, whenever he'd see me over there communing with one of his machines.

"A tailwheel pilot is a ***pilot***. A nosewheel pilot is an ***airplane driver***. Now, what do you want, training in a flying milkstool for more money, or training in a real airplane for less money?"

According to the folks at the Cessna 150 school, Luscombes were nasty, brutish, and short. The coming thing was the nosewheel. Flying up-to-date, modern airplanes, airplanes with engine-driven generators, radios, flaps, and nosewheels was more comfortable, safer, and much more efficient than hacking around in those obsolete relics across the ramp. I was advised not to scatter my shots by wasting my time

and money fooling around with those old crates. I was there to learn to fly, and learn to fly I would, the modern sensible way.

My financial condition did not permit dabbling. I stuck to the school where I had first enrolled, brand loyalty winning out over curiosity. I jumped through the hoops, passed the tests, and one day found myself with a private pilot certificate in my pocket.

I had logged something like seventy hours in Cessna 150s, along with one jaunt in a Super Cub, a machine which had tried to eat my lunch when I had attempted to land it. My certificate said I was qualified to fly anything classified as an "airplane single-engine land." I knew that this was not true. The Cub was such a machine, and it had proved to be beyond my capabilities. I was not a thoroughly qualified pilot. By the lights of the Luscombe people, my certificate should have said, "Private Airplane Driver, limited to flying milkstools only," not "Private Pilot." About half of the airplanes on the ramp, the ones with the tailwheels on the tails, would head for the boonies if I tried my newfound, but incomplete skills on them. It just didn't seem right. I figured I'd better get on across that ramp and check out in one of those little machines I'd been watching without understanding for almost two years.

I don't know whether I remember my literal first lesson in a Luscombe, but I have a distinct recollection of the instructor swinging the propeller to get the thing started, while I sat there with the stick pulled into my stomach, my heels mashing down on the tiny brake pedals.

On the ground I sat in a reclining attitude, my legs sticking out straight in front of me, canted slightly upward, matching the

slope of the flight deck. Although the visibility over the stubby little nose was pretty good, the instructors I flew with kept telling me to "S" turn as I taxied, and to look diagonally out the side, past the nose, to keep track of where I was going.

Taxiing like that gave me practice in starting and stopping turns at taxi speed. I found that depressing a rudder pedal started a turning tendency which, if left unchecked, would continue, getting tighter and tighter until the airplane swapped ends and ended up going backward.

To prevent this occurrence, I found it necessary to add opposite rudder a little bit before I needed the swing to stop. After a suitable delay, the airplane would respond by beginning a swing in the opposite direction. The faster we taxied, the more abrupt these swings would become, and the more promptly I would have to apply force on the opposite pedal.

Before long, I started getting the knack of leading these swings with little jabs of rudder control, using my tiptoes on the tiny pedals that protruded from the floor in front of me.

In the air, the Luscombe was different from the Cessna in that the stick and rudder forces were disproportionate. It took some muscle to get the ailerons to respond, while the rudder pedals gave such a slight amount of feedback that you could hardly feel it in your feet. It took some subtle technique to work the stick and the rudders so as to keep the ball anywhere near the center. The pitch control just about split the difference between the ailerons and the rudders, except for when you wanted to flare prior to landing. You had to put some pretty serious pull on the stick to get the nose up where it was supposed to be, in what they called the "three point attitude." In later years, I got quite a

bit of time in a Luscombe which had been modified with a bigger engine, making it more nose-heavy than a stock Luscombe, requiring even more force to make it pitch up at low speed. Students in this machine were briefed to let the instructor know when they lost feeling in their left arm. This was a sign that it was time to call it a day.

The plane they started me on was an "A" model, one equipped with a 65 horsepower Continental engine. There was a placard that said you were supposed to take off with full carburetor heat, but we pretty much ignored this advice, since the little mill barely put out enough horses to get two adults off the ground when it was revving up to its full capability.

There was a radio in the bird, along with a battery to provide juice. A jack in the side of the fuselage allowed you to plug a battery charger into the system after every flight, since the wind-driven generator was not up to the task of keeping the battery charged as it struggled to keep the filaments in the tube-type radio lit up. Occupants wishing to communicate with the control tower had to wear headphones. There were no speakers in the cockpit.

The instructors at the Luscombe school were a bunch of fatalists. They didn't attempt to teach. They just sat there and prevented crashes until you worked things out for yourself.

One day we had a pretty serious wind blowing, and I thought I might go out and sharpen my tailwheel skills with some touch-and-goes in the Luscombe. At the last moment it occurred to me that it might be a good idea to take along an instructor, so I snagged Dale, who said he had some free time on his schedule. We taxied out and took off more or less into the wind. Then we told the tower we wanted to shoot a few on the

crosswind runway, which happened to be the longest one. The runway number was 17 in those days, although years of hard landings have knocked it around so much that it's now runway 18.

I set up for my approach, noticing that we had about a 30 degree wind correction angle cranked in to keep us moving down the centerline. I remember thinking I was glad I had brought Dale along for the ride.

As we settled toward the runway, I rounded out a little high. Dale grabbed the controls and cranked in almost full left aileron, combined with a mighty stab of right rudder. It was one of those returns to earth better described as an arrival, rather than a landing. He wrestled it into submission, then turned to me and shouted, "You got it."

I grabbed the controls, firewalled the throttle, and shoved forward on the stick. The tailwheel came off the ground and the Luscombe decided that it was a weather vane. It turned left, showing me where the wind was coming from. I jabbed in all the right rudder I could find as the airplane rolled off the left side the runway. A few more frantic stabs at the controls got it going straight, straight through the grass of the infield, straight into the wind, straight toward the control tower. It was one of those moments of Zenlike clarity when you don't think. You just react.

Actually I do recall taking a microsecond or so, trying to figure out whether it would be better to stop this madness in the grass or to get back into the air. I thought about storm drains, taxiway lights and other possible obstructions hidden in the weeds and decided I'd better get off the ground before we hit

something. I became obsessively interested in flying, struggling to get us back into the air, shoving the throttle hard forward and trying to discover a pitch attitude that would yield lots of lift with as little drag as possible.

After what I remember as a lengthy ground roll, the Luscombe staggered up off the ground. The terminal building filled the windshield, the control tower protruding from the top, growing nearer and taller as the seconds of our lives ticked away. It was way too late to call it off. We were committed to flight. All I could think to do was ease off to the left a little bit and look for somewhere to go.

About that time, I noticed that the carburetor heat was still on. In all the excitement I had inadvertently complied with the placard next to the throttle. I shoved the carb heat in, and we gained about 20 percent more horsepower. We climbed through a space between the tower and the first hangar to the east of it, passing several feet above the tiedown area where I had seen the gentleman in the suit depart in his Luscombe two years earlier. In those days the trees weren't as high as they are today, and we managed to clear them and continue our climb out to the southeast.

All of a sudden I remembered Dale. You know, that instructor I had hired to ride along and keep me out of trouble? Yeah, that one.

I turned my head to the right and looked at him. He was totally incapacitated, paralyzed with laughter, tears running down his cheeks, his arms clasped around his belly, unable to get his breath.

The tower called and asked if I had an instructor aboard. Yes, I replied, I definitely have an instructor aboard. Have him call the tower when you get down. Right.

Dale's postflight briefing was brief and to the point: "Malone, you handled that like a pro. A prophylactic!