MY FOUR SOLOS

BY

ALAN MALONE

Flying solo for the first time is an adventure nobody forgets. When your instructor turns you loose in the plane, he is telling you that he has enough confidence in your flying skill that he is willing to put his professional reputation, as well as your welfare, on the line and authorize you to do the big one.

The instructor chooses a day when the wind is light and/or right down the runway and the traffic is light or nonexistent. The first-solo student goes up and flies around the pattern several times in perfect flying conditions and comes back down with a big grin on his face.

When I started flying, I was 17 years old. I had been a major airplane nerd for the last ten years, and thought I knew a little something about operating a flying machine. I had done well at first, picking up the basics of aircraft control without much trouble.

But when I reached the part where I had to bring the airplane back to earth, I experienced what we call in the trade a learning plateau. It is common for student pilots to hit a rough spot in the road to flying wisdom around that time. Landing an airplane involves applying all of the skills of basic stick-and-rudder work, along with maneuvering over the ground with appropriate wind correction, looking out for traffic, listening to what the tower is saying, and exercising judgment

concerning a combination of position, altitude, and airspeed so that the aircraft arrives at its flare point no farther than one third of the way down the runway. Then the pilot must respond to a rapidly changing control response as he keeps the airplane moving in the same direction it is pointed, ideally right down the centerline of the runway. If that doesn't keep him busy enough, he has to get the nose up into a landing attitude and hold it there with increasing back pressure on the elevator control just as the wings approach stall speed.

My dingbat instructor didn't bother to mention that *everyone* had trouble when they first tried to land. I suspect that he had a sketchy-at-best knowledge of the learning curve, the graph that plots learning accomplished vs. time spent in practice. And it would not surprise me to learn that he had never heard of a plateau, a sudden slowing of the rate of learning when the student has to apply lots of stuff he has recently learned, to a new and more complicated task. A plateau, represented by a leveling off of the rate-of-learning graph, is a normal part of flight training, and most instructors tell their students to expect this distressing turn of events about the time they have to learn to land.

I had just about decided I'd better swap my silk scarf for a bag of golf clubs when, one fine day, my instructor told me to let him out and go for three circuits and bounces all by my little lonesome.

It was a total surprise and an extreme shock. I taxied out and took off in a daze. I was in the air, climbing out from my first solo takeoff by the time my brain caught up with reality. I

pounded the empty seat next to me and rendered a hearty chorus of *Here we Go Into the Wild Blue Yonder*. What a thrill.

The tower changed runways on me after the first landing because somebody had spotted a dog wandering around out in the middle of the field. I got a little high on the first approach to the new runway, and decided to use some flaps to help get me down. We had never used flaps before, but I had heard somewhere that they were available in case you got a little too high. I yanked the Johnson bar, the flaps came out, and the bird came down just fine. In fact, when I got to about where I wanted to be, I decided I didn't need them anymore, so I retracted them. That resulted in one of those returns to earth better described as an arrival, rather than a landing.

We all have such memorable adventures on our first solos. At least, I have never heard anyone report that he went out and shot three routine and totally uneventful touch-and-goes on that initial solo flight.

Years later I found myself strapped into the front seat of a Schweitzer sailplane. I had decided I'd like to see what it was like to fly a glider. We were towed aloft by an airplane and the instructor showed me how to maintain position on tow. Then we released from the tow rope and glided around for a few minutes. We set up a glider landing pattern and got the bird back on the ground without much fuss.

After we landed, the instructor said, "Look, we're all strapped in and the tow plane is ready. Why don't we go up for another hop?" That was okay with me. On that second flight we caught a thermal and did a little soaring. He showed me how to use the spoiler control to regulate my glide path. Pushing the

handle forward retracted the spoilers, and the sensation was almost the same as adding power to an airplane. I made a very nice spot landing and rolled up to the place where the ground crew was waiting to re-attach the tow rope.

The instructor got out of the back seat, and said, "Well, you're still strapped in and ready to go. Why don't you take it around by yourself this time?"

WOW! Was *that* a surprise. It was as unexpected as the first airplane solo, and just as much of a thrill. After that, I couldn't wait to get back into a glider and add that category to my pilot certificate.

Some years later, I started flying jumpers – a good way to get some free flying time on weekends. I had asked them to train me so that I could make a jump, and I had gone through the classes, but they had a rule that the president of the club and the club safety officer, as well as a pilot to fly the plane, had to be present when I made my first jump.

One day, all of these people were at the drop zone. In fact, the safety officer was a pilot qualified to fly jumpers. I decided to bug the guys a little bit: "Hey, how about letting me do a dope rope (static line jump)? Everyone's here and Fred can fly us."

Fred looked at Dave, the training guy. "Is he trained?"

Dave looked at me. "I guess so. He's taken all the classes and he's packed five chutes." (This was a racket they inflicted on their students, to save themselves the trouble of packing their own chutes.)

“Get up on the tailgate of that station wagon and do me a P.L.F,” said Fred. A P.L.F. is a “parachute landing fall,” a way of hitting the ground without breaking a leg.

I did one. Then I did another one. Next thing I knew, I was at 3000 feet, climbing out of the door of the jump plane and on to the landing gear strut with a parachute strapped to my back.

“Now, wait a minute,” I was thinking. “Hey, guys, I was only kidding…”

Then somebody was slapping me on the leg. That was the signal to go. They had taught me that in ground school. I looked over at the instructor, who was sitting in the door, directing us over the exit point. He slapped me again and nodded his head in encouragement. I figured it was out of my hands. Either I was going to live or I was going to die. Either way, it was going to be over fairly quickly and painlessly. I did my exit, which was kind of different from the practice exits I had done, since I now had an 80-knot wind in my face.

Dave had told me the first thing I knew, the chute would be open, and I should check the canopy to make sure it had deployed O.K.

I looked up. There was no canopy. All I experienced was a huge, violent blast of air against my body. I looked up again, and there was the parachute, all nice and round and open. A gadget called a static line had opened the rig and now I was swinging in the saddle trying to remember how to steer the thing to land on the drop zone. They had neglected to mention that, at times of high adrenaline, your sense of time speeds up and every second seems like a minute.

So that was another memorable event that I think qualifies as a solo experience: a total surprise followed by the successful accomplishment of something I hoped to do, sometime in the indefinite future.

Another incident might not exactly deserve to be classed as a "first solo," although it did give me sort of a rush, shortly after I had acquired my instrument rating. It fell my lot one day to be flying a Cessna 172 on top of a deck of clouds that totally obscured the ground. To get down, I was going to have to execute something called a VOR Bravo approach.

I was going to have to establish myself on the 259° magnetic course toward the New Orleans navigational facility, known as the "very high frequency omnidirectional range," or the "New Orleans VOR." I had to maintain that ground track until my #2 VOR receiver indicated that I was passing the 023° magnetic bearing of another station located a few miles off to my left. I would then start a timer and commence a descent into the clouds. If all went well, I'd break out of the clouds before I got to 460 feet, the minimum altitude allowed by the procedure, the so-called "minimum descent altitude."

Once I got below the clouds, I'd presumably be able to maneuver visually for a landing. I had been trained to perform this kind of approach, and had done it several times. The difference was that all those times I had been accompanied by an instructor riding shotgun, looking out for traffic while I did the flying. During these training sessions, I wore a device that restricted my view so that I could see the instrument panel but couldn't see out the window. The instructor could see out just fine, but he would have me pull up and go around at the

completion of the approach, to simulate the clouds being too low for me to land, and I wouldn't get to observe the fruits of my labor.

So I never did get a sense of there actually being a runway down there at the end of the approach. During my training days, all of this stuff had been simulated. But this time, it was the real deal. I'll never forget the feeling of isolation I felt as I descended into those clouds, or the gratifying surprise I experienced as the ground loomed up at me as I emerged from the clouds' lower extremities. That episode provided the dramatic intensity of a first solo, but it gradually built to a climax, and was something I more or less expected, in some rational corner of my brain.

My last "solo" was a result of my work as a designated pilot examiner. Flight instructors in the area would come to me when it was time for them to be tested for the renewal of their certificates. Many of them, hoping to produce a positive attitude on the part of the examiner, would bring exotic aircraft in which to be tested.

I would then play the part of the student and observe their teaching technique. In some cases, it was the real thing. Like the time a friend of mine named John showed up for his test with an AT-6, a World War II era advanced training airplane.

Unlike the little 1600 pound, 100 horsepower trainers we usually flew, this bird weighed 5300 pounds and was dragged through the air by a big round 600 horsepower engine. It had two seats arranged in tandem and a maximum speed of 205 miles per hour. John installed me in the rear seat, where the instructor usually sat. I couldn't see much from there when we

were sitting on the ground, with the wings and that big round engine blocking the view.

We took off and flew around a little. The intercom left lots to be desired, but John was able to indicate how to operate the landing gear and the flaps and explain the power settings and the emergency procedures pretty well.

Then we returned to the airport for the landing. I had the controls, and made a circling approach so that I could get some idea where the runway was. I thought I had it lined up pretty well, but we bounced and swerved a little bit on the first try, and I gave it the gun and did a passable go-around. I brought it in for a second try and that time managed to get it on the ground and off the active runway without bending anything.

As we taxied in toward the ramp, I heard John saying something about the front seat. I thought he was asking if I'd like to try flying it from up there, and I indicated that I would.

We pulled up on the ramp and set the parking brake. The engine was still ticking over. He got out on the wing walk and helped me to extricate myself from the rear seat. Then I got my foot on the step and swung myself into the front seat. John reached down and helped strap me in, then explained how to adjust the rudder pedals, since his legs were longer than mine.

"All comfy?" he said.

When I said I was, he uttered one of those sentences that will live forever in my memory: "Okay, have a good time, and I'll be waiting for you in the pilot lounge when you get back."

So maybe, some day in the future, some instructor will turn me loose in an ultralight airplane or a paraglider or a gyroplane. But I doubt that any of those experiences will provide the jolt of adrenaline, the thrill of unexpected accomplishment, I have already experienced on my first four solos.