How Much Time ya Got?

BY

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One day I was sitting at one of the tables at the flying school where I was a student pilot, tallying the time on the latest page of my logbook. Somebody walked into the room and, seeing what I was doing, asked, "How much time you got?"

I told him. It must have been ten or twenty hours, something like that. "Getting' on up there, huh?" was the reply.

In subsequent years, I've heard this exchange take place many times. Every time someone tells someone else how much flying time he has, the other one says, "Really getting' up there," or words to that effect. It doesn't matter whether the person has ten or ten thousand hours. That's what someone always says.

It's true. Whatever amount of time you have, however many hours of your life you've spent aloft, it's more than you had last time you flew. Getting' up there is done one hour at a time, for most of us, and learning the art and science of flying is mostly a slow, incremental process.

Buck Davis, one of those legendary pilots who had been around since anybody could remember, and who had done just about everything that could be done in an airplane, used to put "ten thousand hours" whenever he had to fill out a pilot history form. Buck had no idea how many flying hours he had. His dictum about flying time was, "You don't get any better after ten thousand hours." That always made good sense to me. Once you've got ten thousand, you ought to be able to quit counting. The difference between a pilot with ten hours and one with

twenty is profound. The difference between a pilot with ten thousand hours and one with twenty thousand is much less remarkable.

In my capacity as a pilot examiner, I got to look at the logbooks of many pilots. These documents often reflected the character of the owner. Some were neat and legible. Some were even filled out with the same kind of writing implement, page after page after boring page.

More frequently I saw a variety of colors and types of pen marks, written in many styles by many hands. Whiteout was used on the rare occasions when the owner tried to balance his book, usually in preparation for a test for some certificate or rating.

When I saw a logbook full of whiteouts, scratch-outs and corrections, I got a big smile on my face. These corrective irregularities were, in my opinion, badges of honor and emblems of accuracy. I complimented the owners of these books on having given authenticity to their flying records by admitting their errors and by making corrections to what were probably honest, though careless, mistakes. "This logbook is so messy that nobody could ever question its authenticity," I'd often remark to an applicant. "When you see a neat one, all added up correctly the first time, you have to wonder whether it is one of the great works of fiction of the Twenty-first Century."

If I were a chief pilot trying to decide which of two equally qualified pilots to hire, and if one had a neat logbook and the other had a messy one, I'd take the messy logbook's owner in a flash. It's a matter of credibility. Who probably really flew

those hours, and who likely included a lot of P-51 (Parker t-ball jotter) time in his flying record?

I had an applicant, one day, work out a cross-country log for a flight from New Orleans Lakefront airport to Gulfport, in a Cessna 150. The numbers she had used led her to believe that the flight of sixty-some miles would be made in twelve and a half minutes. This lady was crunching numbers without thinking about what they meant.

I sometimes think of her when I read in somebody's logbook that he has three hundred hours of total flying time, and that one hundred seventy of those hours were flown on instruments. I also see huge numbers of hours flown on "actual" instruments, not just simulated with a view-limiting device. Look, people. The weather is sometimes cloudy. Sometimes we can choose to fly in the clouds on purpose, to build up our "actual" time. But it just doesn't often happen that this kind of weather comes along with safe alternates, given the limited ranges of the bug smashers in which we fly. And just because you've filed an IFR flight plan does not mean that you can log the time as "actual instruments."

I once heard of an instructor who was said to have something like fifty thousand hours of instruction given, in a fifty-year career. Hummm. That didn't seem quite right. I worked six days a week as a flying instructor for six years, and I flew just over a thousand hours a year, during that time. It was in the heyday of the V.A. program when veterans were lined up around the block to take flying lessons with Uncle Sugar paying for it.

I remember what a grind that was, and how much time we spent on the ground per flying hour. This guy would have had to sustain that rate of flying for fifty years, through rain and shine, through hundred-hour and annual inspections, through sickness and health, through marriage and divorce, to log a thousand instructional hours a year for that many years. It was not impossible, but I thought it highly unlikely. And he must have had independent means, since even that amount of flying probably wouldn't yield enough income to support a family, on the wages earned by most flight instructors.

I also read a magazine article about a designated examiner who, the article said, had given over ten thousand check rides. Once again, it may not have been impossible; but I was a fairly active examiner for twenty-six years, and I never gave as many as two hundred tests a year, much less averaging that number, year after year, for fifty years. I know how much work is involved in giving a hundred fifty a year, and I can't visualize grinding out an average of two hundred a year for half a century. That person would have to have had a much greater tolerance for work than I do.

There are pilots who have legitimately logged many tens of thousands of hours. I suspect that these individuals are mostly airline types who log eighty hours a month, month after month and year after year, for a full career. Multiplying out eighty hours a month from the time you're twenty years old until you retire at age sixty, I come up with 38,400 hours. This seems to me pretty close to the upper limit that a pilot usually flies in one lifetime. Crop dusters and banner towers may work more than eighty hours a month, but most of these pilots do not do it

year-round. During wartime, I assume that many transport and bomber pilots probably put in many more hours a year than are allowed by the rules of Part 121, but most of those guys are now dying off. I doubt that there'll be many pilots with fifty thousand hours of real time left by the end of the first quarter of this century.

A pilot history form I recently saw asks, "how many hours as pilot-in-command do you have in a retractable-gear airplane?" My response to this item is that, if you know the answer to that question, you probably don't have enough time to qualify for whatever the form is being submitted for.

For the record, I have been flying just over fifty years. I flew as a flying instructor, full-time for six of those years, and have been actively involved in training and testing pilots, as well as flying recreationally, for most of those fifty-odd years. My longest time away from the cockpit was three and a half months, when I was recovering from breaking a leg in a skydiving accident. Aside from that, I doubt that there has been a month, and probably not many weeks, when I did not commit some kind of aviation.

I have just over eighteen thousand total flying hours. I have no idea how much instrument time, nighttime, multiengine time; how many takeoffs and landings I have made, or how many instrument approaches I have survived. And I don't care. I've earned all the ratings I want, and I don't intend to apply for employment as anyone's pilot for the rest of my life. As far as I'm concerned, being an "over ten" pilot is enough. Just like everybody else, hour by hour, I am getting' on up there!