ON PRE-TEST JITTERS

BY

ALAN MALONE

So you've jumped through all the hoops. You've run down the elusive sign-off, an achievement that seemed to grow more complicated the closer you got. There was always some little detail you hadn't quite taken care of. The regs require three hours of night dual and you discovered that you were two tenths short. On that last cross-country, you neglected to land more than fifty nautical miles from your original point of departure. And, of course, there was that point five of hood time you and your instructor had been saving for a brush-up just before the check ride.

The chief instructor has audited your logbook and has checked all the little boxes. Your instructor has written a bunch of things in your logbook and has been prepping you for the oral.

It's like you've been riding your horse across the desert for a long time and you've finally reached the mountains at the other side. The closer you come, the higher the mountain range looks. You gaze up at the seemingly unscalable peaks and wonder how you're ever going to get any farther.

My friend the Big O and I were standing on the Lakefront Airport sea wall just before my CFI check ride. The wall was about five feet high and three feet wide. I was as nervous as a duck laying its first egg.

“You think you could ride a bike between two parallel lines on the ground drawn about three feet apart, without going outside the lines?” he asked.

“Yeah, I think I could,” I said.

“You think you could ride a bike along this seawall without falling off?”

“Sure.”

“What if the wall were fifty feet high with everything else the same?”

“That’d be harder,” I said.

“Well, this test you’re about to take is no harder than riding between the lines,” said the Big O. “It’s just that somebody’s hoisted the lines way up in the air, and you ***really*** don’t want to fall off.”

I thought that was a pretty good metaphor for pre-test anxiety. There’s no secret about what’s about to happen. It’s just that you’ve invested so much in this training that you ***really*** don’t want to do something stupid and bring home a pink slip.

So the big day gets here and you walk in and meet that scary examiner, the guy who holds your fate in his hands. It’s a butterflies-in-the-stomach moment.

In my twenty-six years as an examiner, I worked with quite a variety of applicants. The best ones took the test in their stride. The worst ones had a hard time coming up with their own name.

The FAA's theory about this nervous-applicant syndrome is that they want to see how a pilot performs when he's under pressure. According to this line of thinking, when the hair gets short and the rubber meets the road; when a pilot someday meets up with a problem that's going to take some creative application of his knowledge and skills, he's also going to be under pressure. So pressure is an okay part of the test.

But I've gotta tell you, it sometimes gets way out of hand. I had one guy show up with his paperwork almost right, but he had entered his middle initial instead of his middle name in the little box. I whited out the block and asked him what his middle name was. He couldn't come up with it. Now, how was I supposed to give any kind of a legitimate test to a guy who was that nervous?

Following a few preliminary questions I posed more or less to get him warmed up (all of which he missed), I discontinued the test. A discontinuance means that because of some circumstance beyond the control of the people involved, the test couldn't be completed as planned. It's usually the result of weather problems or some mechanical glitch with the airplane. It doesn't mean anything bad. Nobody flunked. It's just that the examiner or the applicant judges that they can't complete the test as planned. It's the equivalent of putting a mark in your book, so you'll know where to take up reading again when you get a chance.

In the event of a discontinuance, the examiner is supposed to write a letter stating the cause of the discontinuance and listing all the parts of the test that were satisfactorily completed

prior to the discontinuance. Then the applicant has some time to fix whatever was wrong and come back to finish the test.

A copy of the letter goes to the FAA office that supervises the examiner. I got a nasty call the day they got that guy's letter in the mail. I was told that being nervous was not a legitimate cause for a discontinuance. I didn't think the inspector who was chewing me out had given as many check rides as I had. I didn't think he'd ever had a case like that of the guy who couldn't remember his own middle name.

It didn't happen very often. I think I had three, during the twenty-six years I served as an examiner. When I discontinued the other two nervous applicants, I wrote in the letter that the examinee had become ill during the test.

For the most part, applicants have a fairly lengthy interlude to settle down while the examiner fiddles with the paperwork and audits the logbook. That process frequently takes up to half an hour, by the time the examiner measures the mileages between points on cross-country flights and checks to see that all the requirements for the test have been entered properly in the applicant's logbook. I actually had one guy fall asleep while I was engaged in those operations.

After he's been duly processed, the candidate is supposed to receive a briefing. There are several items that the examiner has to make clear before the fun starts. He tells his test-taker that there are only three possible outcomes of a practical test: a pass, a failure, or a discontinuance. Whatever happens, the examiner will be documenting the outcome in writing and sending a copy to the FAA. Then it's important that the applicant be informed that passing the test requires that he meet

the minimum standards of performance put forth in the Practical Test Standards, a publication furnished to the examiner and his clients by the FAA testing gurus. If he fails to meet those standards in any area of knowledge or skill, he gets a pink slip that has written on it specifically which chapter and verse (known as an area of operation and a task) were not performed satisfactorily. The form also lists the tasks that were not tested, if the applicant elects to call off the test at the time of the failure. Then the applicant has to go get some more training in the unsatisfactory areas and the instructor must write a statement to the effect that he has conducted this remedial training and now considers the applicant ready to finish the test.

When the applicant hears this stuff, it usually calms him down a little bit. It's not the examiner's job to judge him. It's the examiner's job to evaluate him based on these standards and to report to all concerned whether the applicant's performance was satisfactory or unsatisfactory. It's a black/white issue, in most cases, like making 70% on the written exam or making less than that score.

In most of my years as an examiner, about 85% of the applicants passed the test on the first go-around. Of the folks who didn't pass on the first try, almost all of them passed the second time around. The two multiple failures I remember were both applicants for the Airline Transport Pilot certificate. One of these gentlemen kept coming back for repeated tests in a Cessna 150. This airplane was so light that it didn't take much turbulence to knock it off the standard during instrument approaches. On this kind of ride, the applicant cannot allow the needles guiding him toward the runway to deviate more than one quarter scale during the final segment of the approach. But this

guy kept insisting that he wanted to be tested in a 1600 pound airplane, and turbulence be damned.

The other guy kept using a non-standard procedure for identifying which engine I'd failed on him, just before turning onto final approach. I think this gentleman identified the wrong engine three times before he finally gave it up, with the FAA office nipping at his heels, threatening to revoke his multiengine privileges.

After any ride resulting in a pass, a fail, or discontinuance, I'd have a heart-to-heart with the recommending instructor, and I don't remember any time when more than one applicant from any particular instructor had a problem with any particular item, after the instructor and I had analyzed the discrepancy.

A non-standard policy I followed during my entire mini-career as an examiner was that I collected one fee that would cover all my services until the applicant either successfully completed a test or gave it up as a bad job. I found this policy useful in the rare cases when any of the parties involved thought my verdict seemed marginal. Nearly always, the applicant would leave with a good clean pass or failure. But once in a while, some instructor would get a little rattled, thinking that I might have cut his guy some slack instead of writing the dreaded pink slip. I doubt that this happened more than four or five times in the entire twenty-six years I was involved with this work; but when it would happen, nobody could contend that I had written a pink slip to squeeze more money out of anyone. In this business, perception often becomes reality, and I think my clients sometimes appreciated

the fact that I had nothing to gain from reporting an unsatisfactory performance.

My approach to this part of the job also irritated the other examiners, most of whom collected either another fee or another half-fee for re-tests. I thought that was just fine too. I never felt that I should conduct my affairs in such a way as to make the competition happy. The FAA manual we worked from said that we could collect a "reasonable fee" from the applicants to pay for our services. I thought my fee structure was more reasonable that that of the other guys, and so did many of my clients.

I relate these things to make the reader understand that I usually bent over backward to try to make applicants and their instructors understand that I was going to give them a fair and impartial test. For the most part, the process went smoothly. But there were occasional applicants who, for some reason, had a problem with exam-itis, and I always felt that I more than earned my fee, working with those people.

There is a well-known list of things that don't help the nervous prospective test-taker. To hear that the examiner has an 85% pass rate makes it worse for some people. Flunking would put you in a select group of 15% of the dunces who don't measure up.

Another fairly useless practice is to debrief previous victims. I remember one guy who was being prepped this way, and the prepping person mentioned that the examiner loved to ask about density altitude. "Remember," the veteran said, "Density altitude is not an altitude, it's a performance reference datum for the airplane."

The testee-to-be glommed on to that. It sounded so ***learned***. He paced around the office muttering to himself, "*Density altitude is not an altitude, it's a performance reference datum for the airplane… "Density altitude is not an altitude, it's a performance reference datum for the airplane… "Density altitude is not an altitude, it's a performance reference datum for the airplane… "Density altitude is not an altitude, it's a performance reference datum for the airplane….*

You get the picture. The big day arrived and, sure enough, the examiner asked the applicant, "What is density altitude?" The applicant lit up like a light bulb.

"*Density altitude is not an altitude, it's a performance reference datum for the airplane*!" screamed the applicant.

"*WRONG,*" replied the examiner. "Density altitude is pressure altitude corrected for temperature." You can imagine how the remainder of that examination went.

I usually take a fatalistic view of the situation with my students. I advise them to go home the night before the test, have a couple of drinks, put their feet up, and relax. Maybe watch a couple of *I Love Lucy* reruns. They're either going to pass the test or they're going to flunk it, in which case, they'll know specifically what to work on, and they'll be the greatest living expert in whatever they got wrong, the next time around. Whatever happens, the world will go right on turning and the sun will rise in the east tomorrow morning. Think of the practical test as a minor pothole in the road you're traveling toward the destination you share with everyone else, and you'll probably do just fine.