

ON SEVERAL YEARS AS A PILOT EXAMINER

BY

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A designated examiner is an experienced pilot and flight instructor who conducts practical tests for various pilot ratings on behalf of the FAA. An examiner does not work directly for the FAA. He performs this work under the auspices of the local FAA facility, the Flight Standards District Office. The applicant pays the examiner a fee for rendering this service.

The DPE is the final quality control inspector who must review the skills of a pilot before he earns whatever certification he is being examined for. This evaluation is conducted on the basis of a document called the Practical Test Standards, a publication provided by the FAA for the use of instructors, students, and examiners.

The operational question the Designated Pilot Examiner must answer is not whether the DPE thinks the applicant is a good pilot, or even a good person. It has nothing to do with the DPE's judgment of the instructor or the training facility recommending a pilot for evaluation. The success of the applicant is exclusively based on whether or not he or she performs each item on the test to the standards of knowledge and skill prescribed in the PTS. For example, on most tests, the applicant is supposed to hold altitude within +/- 100 feet, airspeed within +/- 10 knots, and heading within +/- 10 degrees. The examiner is supposedly there only to report back to the FAA whether the applicant performed within the parameters defined

by the test or whether he or she did not. An applicant could presumably be tested by a mechanical simulator, which would duly record acceptable or unacceptable performance, without the need for a human observer. At least, that's the theory.

At the time I became an examiner, the Flight Standards District Office had to invite an individual to become a DPE. You couldn't ask to be asked, although I suspect that some politics might have been involved in this process, as happens in all functions of human society. In my case, I had been a full-time flight instructor for six years and had developed a good relationship with the local FAA inspectors, as well as with the designated pilot examiners in the area. Two of those examiners were about to retire, and both of them were kind enough to mention my name as a possible replacement.

Actually, one of the retirees specialized in private, commercial, and seaplane tests and the other one conducted practical tests exclusively for instrument and multiengine ratings. The latter gentleman had been my boss, as a matter of fact. He ran a flight school that operated a Beechcraft D18S, and that was the only type in which he was qualified to conduct tests. In other words, he was the guy who checked the work turned out by his own school in the areas of instrument and multiengine training.

In the early '70s, the FAA had decided to consolidate the functions of DPEs, and they were looking for instructors who might be qualified to administer the tests for all of the airplane ratings.

Another situation the FAA wished to change was that many of the examiners ran or worked for flight schools. Someone

noticed that there was an inherent conflict of interest in allowing people who had provided the training, to conduct the final examinations meant to evaluate that training. At least, the appearance of that conflict was easy to come by, however honest and trustworthy these examiners may have been. It was an example of the familiar case of appearance becoming reality.

I had just retired from full-time instructing when the FAA was starting to implement these changes. I had found that I could not support myself on the paltry wages I earned as a flight instructor, although I loved the work and thought I was pretty good at it. These were the days of double-digit inflation, and my wages were not keeping up with the rapid devaluation of the country's currency. I had decided to take a job as a classroom teacher, in order to *increase* my income!

I found myself in competition for the DPE job with another instructor, who was still employed by a flight school at Lakefront Airport. I got the nod, since I no longer had such an affiliation. Initially, I was given the job of testing applicants for Private, Commercial, and Instrument ratings in airplanes. A little later, the FAA folks added multiengine to my designation, on a type-by-type basis. This meant that I was required to take a qualification ride with an FAA inspector in each make and model of twin-engine airplane in which I was to administer tests. I also got a periodic reevaluation in one of the multiengine types listed on my designation.

At that time, I had several hundreds of hours instructing in a Cessna 310, but nobody in the area was conducting training in that type anymore. I found myself at the controls of a Piper Seneca, a type I had never flown; but I got my feet wet in the

Seneca very quickly, giving multiengine tests, and was soon comfortable in the type.

The FAA inspector who conducted my initial designation ride told me that the FAA would be reserving to itself the function of checking Certificated Flight Instructors. This gentleman said that someday, designated examiners might be conducting the biennial tests that all instructors are required to take to stay current, but that he doubted we would ever be doing initial CFI examinations.

Inside of two years, they had changed that policy, and I found myself qualified as a CFI examiner, in addition to my other DPE duties.

One of the FAA's rules was that an examiner must have held any rating for which he was giving tests for at least two years. So I went over to Houston to go through a quickie ground school and finally passed the written exam for my ATP, the coveted Airline Transport Pilot certificate. For the first time in my flying career, being an examiner could give me some use for that rating, and that fact finally motivated me to jump through the hoops to qualify.

I thought I could pass the flight test for the ATP without any trouble. As an experienced instrument instructor, I had trained a number of ATPs, so I considered my flying skills to be up to snuff; but the written exam was based on the Boeing 727, a type I had no knowledge of or interest in. I could not imagine any circumstance in which I would find myself having to do the calculations of EPR for takeoff with or without the deice and/or air conditioning systems functioning, as was required to pass the test.

Motivation is the fuel of learning, just as gasoline is the fuel for a fine sports car. No matter how capable the student, he will not learn without motivation, any more than a Porche Boxster will run without gasoline. Up to that time, my ATP-seeking gas tank had been empty, and I had been working with a simple Commercial Pilot certificate. Now, for the first time, I had a reason to seek the ATP.

So one day I found myself with a slip showing that I had made a passing grade on the ATP written exam. Before I took the practical test, I decided to go up a couple of times with a buddy of mine whom I had trained to be an instrument instructor. I thought I might just run a few instrument approaches to get sharp before the test.

I'm very glad I did that. It took two sessions before I was able to execute an ILS approach while holding the localizer and glide slope needles within $\frac{1}{4}$ scale, the standard for the ATP practical test. By the time the dust had settled, I had gone through 10 hours of intensive instruction with this gentleman. Clearly, teaching a maneuver and performing it to ATP standards were very different propositions.

The week after I passed the practical test for the ATP, one of the local flight school operators asked me why I had done the test in a single-engine aircraft, giving me the rare privilege of holding a single-engine Airline Transport Pilot certificate.

I told him that I owned a single-engine airplane and didn't have access to a twin. He picked up the phone, made an appointment for the next week for me to go back and add the multiengine class rating to my ATP, and told me to take his Piper Seminole out and get some practice.

So it was that, on 8/8/88, I earned my multiengine ATP. The clock was now running on the two-year requirement for me to become an ATP examiner. I actually qualified for this designation during my next session with an FAA inspector, filling out my designation with all of the airplane/land ratings.

I functioned as a Designated Pilot Examiner for a total of 26 years. On my best two years, I gave 180 check rides, making me what they called a high activity examiner. The work fit well with my occupation of school teacher. During the seasons when the days were long, there would be enough daylight for me to give a practical test after school. I'd usually knock out a couple on weekends, and during the summer breaks, I'd keep myself busy and my bank account full.

Presently, the economy went into the tank and business slowed down. I turned 62 ½ and started drawing Social Security. I decided to retire from the DPE business. I went back to instructing, and have been doing that as a slightly lucrative hobby ever since. I love instructing, and would often feel frustrated, having to sit in the copilot seat watching an applicant make some mistake that I could easily have fixed, if I had been his instructor rather than his examiner. Instructors often evaluate, but evaluators are never supposed to instruct.

In future weeks I intend to address a few issues of which I became aware while working as a pilot examiner. Once in a while I would hear of criticisms of the DPE system, often from outsiders, even more often from non-pilots. So I intend to give an insider's impressions of a couple of these issues. I no longer work as a DPE, so I promise that I owe no allegiance to my former employers, and I intend to treat these issues frankly and

honestly. This is not to prepare you for an attack on the system. For the most part, I support the practice of using DPEs to give check rides. So there will be no severe criticism of the system on these pages. But, like any other system, the critics may, from time to time, be on to something.

To be more specific, I think I'd like to address two issues, that of an examiner testing his own students and the broader issue of examiner integrity. I intend to draw on my own experience in these two areas and to keep the discussion relatively general. But I think there are some misconceptions floating around about these two subjects, and I think I may have something relevant to add to the mix.

So, if the spirit moves you, look to this BLOG in the next couple of weeks for treatments of these two subjects. As David Brinkley said, everyone is entitled to my opinion. As always, I hope that you will get some information and some enjoyment from reading what I have to say.