

Mark Grissinger

I spent a lot of time trying to come up with stories that included profound messages or hysterical events about Steve. It finally dawned on me that those things were not the essence of my relationship with him. He was simply a kindhearted, compassionate individual who had a sincere love for life and knowledge and a passion for flying and teaching people to fly. My most fond memories of Steve center on flying, more specifically, the methods he used to teach me to fly and to impress upon me certain valuable lessons and/or flying skills.

I had been jumping for a number of years but was just learning to fly. As usual, I had spent the weekend at Bill Decker's field with the Tennessee Falling Stars jump club. It was a beautiful summer evening probably an hour before sunset and I went up to Steve and mentioned it would be a great evening to go up for a spin. He agreed and we promptly untied the Cessna 150 and prepared for the ensuing lesson. We jumped in, took off and proceeded to climb to altitude, the whole time Steve was talking to me about different types of stalls, what caused them and most importantly, how to recover from them. During this time, I noticed that Steve had me climbing to an altitude higher than we normally climbed to for lessons. I started getting the feeling that he had something special in mind as he took over the controls and started talking about recovery from spins. After a short discussion, he asked me the question that he always asked: "Do you understand?" Sometime during this discussion I remember mentioning that the phrase "going up for a spin" was only a figure of speech. Shortly thereafter, Steve was proceeding to enter into a spin at which point he relinquished control of the plane back to me and said, "This aircraft is only rated for 3 revolutions so you need to recover before you complete the 3rd revolution". Then he sat back in the seat and crossed his arms. I know he was chuckling on the inside as I nervously recovered. Oddly enough, after two or three spins, I started to lose fear of being in a spin. To this day, however, I can still remember the feeling in my stomach as we entered the first one and he gave the controls back to me.

Steve always reminded me, as I was learning to fly, of the 3 most useless things to a pilot. During my tenure as a student pilot, Steve put me into situations in which I was able to experience all three. The three items are 1) The altitude above you 2) The runway behind you and 3) The fuel still in the ground.

Two of the three were experienced in one night. On occasions, Steve and I would meet at Greeneville airport after I got off work and we would fly to Knoxville's Downtown Island airport, have a cup of coffee and talk about flying the entire time. One night we flew to Knoxville and, as a novice pilot, I was not conscience of the tail wind on our way to Knoxville. After all, it was nighttime and I had no reference to the ground and Steve and I visited most of the way. Thinking back, I believe this was one of those events that Steve allowed me to get myself into in order to teach me a practical lesson. Prior to taking off, we discussed the need for additional fuel and he left the decision to me. Of

course, the strong head wind took its toll on our fuel consumption and ground speed. Before I realized it, we were running very low on fuel. In time, the conversation turned to the fuel in the ground and the altitude above us. As we could do nothing about the fuel, Steve had me begin a slow continuous climb for the remainder of the trip in order that we might gain as much altitude as possible in the event we did run out of fuel. The climb coupled with the reduction in power made the remainder of the trip agonizingly slow but the result was that by the time we spotted Greeneville airport, I believe we had enough altitude to glide all the way in if it had become necessary. With the relief of knowing I was within gliding distance of the runway, I was able to relax and realize that once again Steve had taught me not one but several valuable lessons by example.

Now it is time to deal with the "runway behind me" portion of the adage. Once again we were at Decker Field but this time Steve had asked me to follow him to Abingdon, Va. Bill Decker had apparently asked Steve to deliver his Colt for an annual and I was to follow and pick him up. I was looking forward to the day because Steve and I were going to leave Abingdon and fly down to Charlotte, N.C. and pick up some parts for Ed's Republic Seabee. We both arrived at Abingdon with nothing out of the routine having occurred. After dropping off the Colt, we checked out the 150, jumped in and headed for the end of the runway. Once there, we did the standard preflight checks and run up and announced our departure. Pulling out onto the runway, everything still seemed normal. Then as I applied full throttle, I noticed the manifold pressure was lower than normal and rather than making my own decision to abort the takeoff, I looked over to Steve who was sitting there with his arms crossed as usual. I told him that the plane felt sluggish and asked him what he wanted to do. To my surprise, he tapped on the manifold pressure gage and calmly said "keep going". I thought OK but I was starting to get that bad feeling in my stomach again. I pulled back on the yoke and the plane came off the runway but then settled back down. By this time it was getting to be too late to abort and I looked over at Steve and again he calmly said "keep going". Struggling just above stall speed, I managed to get the plane airborne but we were not climbing too well as you might imagine. Taking off in an easterly direction at Abingdon, there was a ridge a couple miles off the end of the runway with trees along the ridge. Normally the ridge is not even a concern but, considering our current state, I was very concerned about clearing the ridge and voiced my concern to Steve. Steve was his normally calm self still and agreed with my concern and started tampering with the mixture setting and the power setting in an attempt to increase power even just slightly. Well, to make a pains taking long story short, we did clear the ridge and gained enough altitude so as to allow us to get safely turned around for a down wind landing. I must say that the maneuver Steve used to get us headed in the right direction was as clever as it was timely. Steve returned control of the aircraft to me and picked up the mic to inform any traffic considering take off to please wait for a minute or two because we were only going to get one shot at the runway. Once again, we made it to within gliding distance of the runway and I was beginning to feel better when all of a sudden an aircraft began pulling onto the runway and preparing for takeoff. Finally Steve became excited. I could not make out all the words but whatever he said to the guy in the plane on the end of the runway made him stop dead in his tracks long enough that we were able to glide to a landing right over the top of him. I don't think Steve was too happy about that portion of

this whole event. We had the plane towed into the hanger and when we pulled the jug off, the piston fell out in at least a thousand pieces. Needless to say, we never made it to N.C. that day and Steve allowed me to fly Bill Decker's Colt back to Decker Field. On the way, Steve and I had a long conversation about being decisive as well as the runway behind you.

There are other great memories I have of Steve and nearly all of them center on flying. From shooting landings on Cherokee Lake in the Seabee to shutting down engines to simulate running out of fuel. Steve loved teaching by example and in my opinion, that made him the best. He was a great pilot and teacher but most importantly he was a great friend. His passion was flying and believe me, it showed.

Most of these Steve Stories probably fit the category of "you had to be there" but these and many more like them are fresh in my mind as the day they occurred.