

No, I Didn't Crash



One of the more interesting events in my life happened on May 3, 2011. That morning my parents announced that we were going to run some errands. After a long uneventful drive we turned into the parking lot of a nondescript building. As soon as the rest of the family in the other car had pulled up and gotten out my father told us that someone was going to fly an airplane that day. That someone turned out to be me.

What had been a rather dull morning changed rapidly as a flush of nervousness washed over me. This was not helped when my younger brother mentioned that he expected me to crash! Considering that the biggest thing that I had ever driven at any speed was an ATV, I feel that was justified. Still, bolstered by the countless hours spent playing combat flight simulators and air racing games, I didn't worry about it.

After a short drive we arrived at the small regional airport and sat down in the lobby to wait for the pilot who would take me up. When he arrived we all walked over to the airplane passing several hangers, aircraft, and fuel trucks.

The airplane was a red and white Cessna 152. When we all got to the airplane the pilot began telling us about it as he did his preflight check. He talked about how the wings, ailerons, flaps, elevator, and rudder worked, and how the nose wheel was mounted to the engine block and would be damaged if the pilot didn't land correctly. The plane was in good shape for something manufactured in the 1970s. Which was probably a testament of the care and maintenance these aircraft receive. A look in the gas tank showed that the fuel level was low but enough for a thirty minute flight.

With the preliminary check finished and nothing obviously wrong with the plane the pilot opened the engine compartment and pulled a cable that would drain any water that happened to be in the carburetor. I found this amusing because I do the same thing to the lawnmower when it doesn't start.

Finally, the time had come to take to the sky. The most difficult part of the day was actually getting in the tiny two-seater. After I had clambered in the pilot made sure to demonstrate that the correct way to do it was to put your leg in first and then swing your body in.

After a short introduction to the rudder pedals he coached me as I taxied the plane to the runway. Steering is mainly accomplished by alternately braking the right or left wheel and applying rudder. Because the nose wheel was controlled through a spring its response had a slight delay. When we got close to the end of the runway we stopped and asked the tower for permission to take off. When it was given I lined the plane on the end of the runway and gave it full power. As we quickly gained airspeed I worked the rudder to keep the plane going straight. Following the pilot's instructions I pulled back on the flight yoke and we jumped into the air! I then took the plane into a gradual ascent with the treetops just visible at the bottom of the windscreen.

When we had climbed to about three thousand feet the pilot demonstrated how to trim the airplane so it would remain in level flight by itself. Now it was my turn. After increasing the throttle I turned the trim wheel to return us to level flight. This can be confusing at first because the trim wheel needs to be turned in the opposite direction that you want the plane to go.

With the airplane retrimmed it was time for me to learn to turn with both aileron and rudder. When you turn an airplane using the aileron only the nose wants to go up. In order to keep the nose level you must apply rudder. The importance of the rudder was a surprise to me because I almost never use it in the flight simulations. Of course, when

you are actually inside the airplane proper flight technique becomes very important. As the pilot said, “The tail keeps flying long after the wings stop.”

After I made several turns it was time for another subject, stalls. A stall is when the angle of attack of the airplane gets too high and the wing stops producing lift. The Cessna we flew was equipped with a buzzer that squeals when the plane begins to stall. We did a few light stalls and I learned that the rudder must be applied during a stall to keep the plane level. To demonstrate this the pilot performed a stall without any rudder and the plane lurched down and to left. Suddenly falling sideways was exciting and was the most aerobatic maneuver we did that day.

One of the coolest things about the whole experience was the way the tiny Cessna shook with turbulence and the whole world turns sideways as you turn. A computer screen just cannot give you the awesome feeling of actually flying.

By then our time was running out and I turned the nose to the airport. As soon as we got close enough I turned parallel to the runway and began descending. Soon we passed the end of the runway and the pilot asked the tower for permission to land. When we got it he talked me through the final descent as I made a one hundred and eighty degree turn to align the plane with the runway. Before I fully realized it the plane had shuddered down on the runway and all that remained was to taxi back to the parking area. When we got there he lined the plane up to its parking space and turned off the engine. My flight over, we both got out and pushed the airplane backwards to its parking spot and chained it down.

As soon as I got back on the ground my family (who had been taking pictures of *another* airplane) asked me all kinds of questions about how I felt about it and what it was like. I find it kind of interesting that I really didn't feel anything. I spent the whole flight paying attention to the pilot and concentrating on flying the plane.

The time I spent in that airplane was very fun and exciting but I think that I would need more experience flying an airplane to truly enjoy it.