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The First Fifty Hours
Laying the Foundation.

So, there you are, sitting in the FBO office. The flight examiner has just walked out the door and you feel just a little light headed: the still-drying examiner's signature on the piece of paper in your hand makes it official: you are now a pilot. Zowie! Then a thought invades your reverie. "Okay, so I'm a pilot. Now what?"

It was probably your daydreams of being able to disappear from sight while headed in any direction that got you into flying in the first place, but with that piece of paper in your hand, your daydreams are now a reality. And to some, this can be just a little unsettling. You're on your own. Every decision is yours and there's no one to back you up if your decision is questionable. The world is literally your oyster, but it is a very, very big oyster and you're a little intimidated. And this is as it should be.

As a newby, you intuitively know that in a fifty or a hundred hours you'll know much more than you do now. So, it helps if you look at that first fifty hours as a settling-in period where you're not only going to get comfortable in your role of nouveau aviator, but you'll work at ensuring that what you were taught has actually become instinctive and not a shallow skill of which you barely have command. As you're doing this, you'll be gradually working up to that long trip you've always wanted to make.

The easiest way to both get comfortable and hone your skills is to put what you've learned into action by getting to know what the airports that are scattered around your local area have to offer. If you intentionally make each of your local forays educational, you'll learn something that moves you closer to being ready for the "big trip" every time you leave the airport.

Before we do anything, however, we want to dedicate ten hours to a post graduate course in aviating: find your favorite, hard working CFI and you and he go out and find the nastiest crosswinds you can find. Then spend no less than four hours being deadly serious about overcoming aviation's bogeyman, the crosswind. Then spend three or four hours doing nothing but landing on the shortest strip you can find. 2000 feet would be maximum. Shorter would be better. That eight or ten hours of graduate work will be the most important in your flying career. Then it's time to start poking around outlying airports to see what we can see.

First of all, there's something about flying into a never-before-visited airport that makes us all feel like explorer's. It's someplace we've never been before and, besides being a new runway in a new location, each airport, especially small ones, have a distinct personality all their own. None is like the other and it's a little like a treasure hunt because we never know what we'll find. Soon, even when on an airliner, you'll look down and see airports you've never visited and wonder what there is to be found down there. There's no more pleasant way to spend a leisurely afternoon than exploring new airports and there are few ways better suited to improving your flying skill.

Since we're going to combine education with fun, we need to have specific goals we want to accomplish while we're satisfying our urge to see what's hiding in the next run-down hangar. The first of those goals is to become more comfortable landing on strange airports. Even though our PPL cross countries got us started on that goal, the more airports we land at, the better we'll be at handling different approaches, wind patterns that are affected by unusual topography or buildings, and runways of different sizes and configurations. For instance, there's something about turning final to a strange runway that has a severe drop-off at the approach end to make us apprehensive and tempts us to change our approach. The same thing holds for runways that aren't level: uphill and downhill runways demand slightly different techniques, all of which we'll learn by landing on them.

Another of our goals is to sharpen our cross-country skills by repeatedly leaving our home area (our comfort zone) and challenging ourselves to find the other airports. If, however, we have a lot of local airports to choose from, pick the closest ones for your first flights as a new PPL, simply because you'll know where they are and can deal with the "strange runway" syndrome without having to deal with the cross country aspect of finding them at the same time.

A side benefit to this kind of airport hopping is that we'll soon find airports that you like to visit simply because they have some sort of cool factor. Maybe it's the smell of a runway that's surrounded by pine forests, or a local pilot population that leans toward unusual airplanes, e.g. aerobatics, warbirds, antiques, etc. Maybe it has a great restaurant or you can walk to the beach from the ramp. All of the flights will be worthwhile, but some will terminate at someplace special.

Step One in getting your flights of discovery under way would be to identify and inventory the airports in the surrounding area. We could actually make a game out of this, if we wanted, by putting a sectional on a cork bulletin board. Then we draw concentric circles around our airport with 50, 100, and 150-mile radii. Yellow pushpins would be poked into each airport and, as we visit them, the yellow pin is replaced with a red one. There are bound to be some airports we can't drop into, the private, "circle-R" fields, but we can get into all the others.

The second step would be to investigate those airports via an airport guide such as AOPA's Airport Directory. The sectional will give us the basics: hard surface or grass/dirt, length and altitude, but the guide will let us know if it's unusually narrow, or has obstacles or has any other characteristics that might make us want to avoid it until we're a little more experienced. Those that appear to present too much of a challenge will be considered "B" airports and we'll visit them later.

One of the most important factors to come out of the paper investigations of the airports would be whether they have restaurant/café or not. This information might be redundant, however, because all we have to do is ask any pilot on our airport for the best local airport restaurants and they'll immediately give us book and verse on every hamburger joint within range.

Planning the flights may seem a little overkill for an airport that is nearly in sight from pattern altitude at our home airport. However, getting more proficient in both planning the flight and then flying the plan is one of the major goals of this endeavor. Ideally, we'll want to pick airports in all directions from our home field so we learn more about our area. Then we have to decide whether we're going to make round-robin flights involving two or more airports or whether we're going to make them simple out-and-back jaunts. The round-robins will teach more, but to keep the planning and sweat factor to a minimum, let's make the first few such flights out-and-back.

When planning the flights, we'll draw lines on the sectional, pick check points, develop compass headings, make up trip cards and do everything we'd do on a major trip. That's all part of the training. We won't just fire up the GPS and go.

Also, in the interest of keeping thing simple, we'll make the first few flights short enough that a single tank of gas gets us back home with at least a third of a tank left rather than fueling at the other end. We'll leave that until we're a further into this game.

When we finally do start flying the plan, we have to do it with the same mindset we'd have if we were flying to Aunt Edna's house a thousand miles away: we want to take the short flights seriously. Even though we're barely out of sight of home, we can get just as lost as we could a thousand miles away and lost is lost regardless of where we are at the time. Besides, we're trying to sharpen our cross-country skills.

If our destination airport is close, we'll know pretty much where it is, which is cheating, but we'll ignore that and concentrate on holding headings and reading the sectional on the way making believe we're on the first leg of a much longer flight. Learning to identify checkpoints is an important skill that experience helps develop and doing it on these short flights will go a long way toward keeping us from getting lost on the long ones. In truth, regardless of how long a cross country may be, it can be flown as a series of short ones that stretch only from check point to check point.

When we've found our airport, we have to figure out how to approach it. If it's a towered field, they'll obviously tell us what to do, but a small country field on the edges of the boondocks is a different matter. For one thing, in terms of traffic, the smaller fields can be more dangerous because they often don't have Unicom and they sometimes have a "relaxed" attitude about what constitutes a traffic pattern. Plus, since they often have a small volume of traffic it's easy for them, and us, to let our guard down.

If we can't raise anyone on Unicom then it's up to us to determine the wind direction and the active runway. So, we'll cross over the airport *at least* 500 feet above pattern altitude so we can get a good look at the sock. This will also give us a better view to see who else is in the pattern. Then we go back out away from the field to come back in on a forty-five to the downwind. Since no one is talking at small fields, it's a see and be seen situation and is really a good way to develop the awareness required for flying in general. If we used airplanes for nothing more than airport hopping, the effort would be with it.

The smaller airports in almost any part of the country are like thumb prints, with each one of them being highly individualized and a reflection of those who base there. It's really fun to land on a rural grass runway and find ourselves parked between a couple of Cubs while watching a Champ or a sailplane land.

One of the universal characteristics of rural airports in all parts of the country is a more laid back attitude in which the new birdman can expect to be warmly welcomed. It's not difficult to find yourself sitting in the sun in conversation with an aviation veteran where you pick up tidbits of information that you will use for the rest of your life.

Grassroots airports, which seem to circle every population center a respectful distance out, are also populated with a wider variety of airplanes than the bigger fields, so, while we're becoming comfortable with the concept of flying and developing our skills, we're also being exposed to a wider spectrum of aviation. It's through airport hopping that we realize aviation is much wider and more diverse than we ever imagined. The sooner we learn that simple fact, the sooner we will realize that this new skill we are developing opens doors into so many different areas that the long distance flight that we had dreamed about from the beginning becomes just one of many dreams.

It's during that first fifty hours after the check ride that we have the opportunity to stretch our legs, our interests and our skills and lay the foundation for the new life we are about to enter. It's an important time in a new pilot's life. Cherish it, as it only happens once.