

feel the strings

BY ROB MC MILLAN

FLEDGLING

Rather than being a passive passenger squashed in the back of the aircraft, why not become an active learner and begin to appreciate what it takes to get you into the air? We depend on aircraft to get us to altitude and we spend many hours sitting and waiting in and out of them, so why don't you learn more?

Do you know what airspeed is necessary for takeoff, climbing, jump run and landing? How do you read the GPS? What do those dials tell the pilot about the aircraft? There is far too much to talk about in one page, though there is so much to learn by talking to your local pilot. Seeing and understanding is one thing, doing is completely another. Wanting to know more, I sought a lesson on how to apply my accumulated knowledge. In exchange we taught my teacher how to step out the door and fly. We both discovered that there are a lot of similarities.

Teaching the Teacher to Fly

I couldn't have found a better teacher than Tony Jones. He has around 20,000 hours flying mostly at night, no further than 400 feet above the ground. He may average 120kts no further than two feet above the ground. His job is to dust crops, fly over power lines, dodge trees then dust the next strip. He suggested that the most important point to remember when flying is where you are going and which way the wind is blowing. The lesson began...

Turning to a Heading

As a pilot, it is important to be able to turn to and maintain the correct heading for taxiing, navigation, for jump runs and more importantly for take offs and landings. After skidding all over the runway a few times both on takeoff and landing, Tony suggested that I practice turning to a heading.

As skydivers it is common practice to oversteer, particularly whilst landing. You may have noticed jumpers continually making small corrections on final approach. Such oversteering does little to help improve your landing. In fact it will hinder your airspeed as energy is being used to turn your parachute. Your descent rate will increase and your flare response will be less because you have slowed your airspeed.

To maximise your learning, you should practice your turns to a particular heading using either another canopy as a base or a ground reference such as the runway, a fence line or road as a heading. Ninety degree turns are a good starting point as this will help you to practice the turns necessary to fly a better landing circuit. You should repeat the same type of turn in a circuit pattern and continue to fly circuits as altitude and airspace permits e.g. Practice rear riser turns

Remember that it is not necessary to hold an input (harness, toggle or riser) for the entire turn. Depending upon which input you choose to use, you might only need to hold the input for half to two thirds the way through the arc of the turn. You should practice allowing the canopy to complete the turn without any major or

minor corrections. Slow the turn using minor harness corrections if necessary, rather than with toggles or risers. While turning you should endeavour to learn the feel and timing of the increase and decrease of speed both in a forward and vertical direction.

Returning to Earth

Getting the hang of landing a new craft is never easy, particularly when you aren't always able to land into wind on every landing. Regardless of the craft, there are three basic stages of flaring.

1. The Plane Out

When you begin to flare you will reach a point where the canopy begins to level or plane out. It feels like you are not descending any more. It is at this point where you should hold the flare, until you feel yourself begin to descend once more. Depending upon your speed and canopy type, this may take as little as a fraction of a second to a number of seconds.

2. Rounding Out

The round out stage of your flare is when you can either flare energetically and pop or float the canopy, which is useful when you are landing in unfamiliar terrain. Or keep the canopy flying in a straight line till it gets closer to the point at which it runs out of momentum. Just before your canopy runs out of momentum is about the time when the ground should meet your feet.

3. Touching Down

Whilst flying a canopy, you should always try to keep flying for as long as you can before putting your feet on the ground. The moment that you do, should be at a point where you have washed off enough speed during the round out to safely touch down so that you don't have to run excessively. If you have excessive speed, your legs will normally end up behind you causing your balance to tip forwards, resulting in an awkward landing. So always try to land with your feet slightly in front of your body. You should always be ready to PLR regardless of your experience. The more you fly the less you will need to rely upon your legs to bear the brunt of the touchdown.

Luckily, for the sake of my legs, I could rely upon the wheels for a cushioning effect. If I landed my canopy like I did the aircraft, I wouldn't be walking very far. After numerous attempts to land without bouncing and veering off the runway, Tony looked at me and jests *"It's just like jumping, you just have to look out towards the farthest end of the runway, land with your wings level, smile breathe and relax."* After rolling to a stop, all I needed was a snorkel to help me stop drowning in my sweat. Stage one is now complete, can't wait for stage two. Cheers Tony, I know that we've both learnt a lot.

Even with Tony's wealth of flying experience, it still took a while to get the hang of his new set of wings.

