

## Student Pilot Problems

**Flight Instructor Log: Oct 1974, Van Nuys Airport, California.** Flight instructors always have stories about some of their students, especially the primary students working on their private license. Some of these stories are funny and some are really disconcerting and do qualify for the famous question – “why did you do that?” Here’s one of them.

One particular student named Steve was a very smart cookie regarding his chosen profession which was mechanical engineering. I know this because I hired him at the company where I worked and knew of his work and his performance reviews. But somehow his brainpower did not seem to translate well into the world of flying.

An example is when we went on his first dual cross-country. Steve had already soloed and could fly the plane sufficiently well. Steve laid out the flight plan requested and charted a course of 270 degrees from Van Nuys, California, the departure airport. After departing the pattern Steve settled on a course of 240 degrees and busily began to look for our first check point now less than 10 minutes away. I ask him what our course was and he replied, “ 270.” Humm.

The visibility was great and I could see the checkpoint slipping off to our right wing while Steve was peering over the cowling of the Cessna 150 directly ahead. He was 30 degrees off course. So I began my questioning hoping this would be a good teaching moment when he realized his error.

Steve directed my attention ahead and pronounced the first checkpoint as confirmed. Uhmmm... I let it go because I was interested in what he was going to tell me about the next checkpoint and when was he going to discover his 30-degree navigational error. We continued to get further and further off course. I asked him three times about his course and told him to “look around, get the big picture, not just directly ahead.” He never picked up on the problem or the fact he was following the wrong course. I wondered how long it would take for him to make the discovery. What was he thinking?

Another 10 minutes passed and Steve identified the second checkpoint and I challenged him. He could not show me where all three of the identifiers on the ground that would confirm his checkpoint. I waited. Nothing. No response. We trundled along in our trusty Cessna on 240 degrees drifting further and further from our intended course of 270 degrees. Finally, I could take it no more and ask him where the third check point was since it was a large lake and could be seen from a great distance even on a bad day. In fact, I had it in sight directly off our right wing some four or more miles away and could see the lake from the time we achieved our cruise altitude. Ole Stever seemed puzzled. He could not find any body of water over the nose of the aircraft where he thought it should be. I asked him why he was not looking around and only focusing on what was straight ahead. When he could not figure it out, I closely questioned him about his planned course and why he was following a different course. He could not figure out his dilemma. He was an engineer and knew how numbers worked, or so I thought!

Steve finally said he did not know why he was following 240 degrees. I directed his attention directly off our right wing and ask him what that great big body of water was doing over there when it was supposed to be right below us. I explained his navigational error and figured he was taking it all in and learning. But was he? Where was his head? This is a smart guy. What was he thinking while we were flying his first cross-country flight? Maybe he was trying to solve some mathematical equation in his selected profession back at the office. I don’t know but his math was sure off that day and he refused to look around. Even my questions did not seem to bring him back into the cockpit!

Ole Stever had no rebuttal, no questions, no comments...Steve sat there saying very little but did turn the airplane toward the lake and we got back on course.

That particular flight continued with the rest being routine once we got back on course. He passed the rest of my questions regarding the flight and did fine. The flight was over a triangular course of a hundred miles or so and the rest went according to plan. The story doesn't stop there; it was only the prelude to the greater mystery later on.

As Steve's flight training continued there were a number of small items that seemed to escape his attention, but we worked on it. He passed his private written exam, did all of the solo cross country flights satisfactorily and got back home all right. He performed his air work and maneuvers in good order and seemed to be learning well. This always makes a flight instructor feel good!

However sometimes during a lesson Steve didn't seem to quite have it together, but responded well to the instruction and was now doing everything by the book. Towards the end of five months working with Steve mainly on weekends, and enough flying hours for his license, the company was going to transfer him to another state. Steve wanted to take the check ride as soon as possible and get his private license. We doubled up on his lessons for a few weeks and I had to agree with him because it seemed like it was a now or never situation. Steve was leaving the state. I was a little nervous about the sign off but I could not figure out why. Steve had learned and now it was time for the big flight test with the FAA.

Steve could fly the airplane fine but something still bothered me. I could not put my finger on any specific problem other than what we have already talked about. His solo cross-country's worked out well so maybe I was not being realistic. I signed him off for his check ride with the FAA at Van Nuys in California just days before his move to the east coast. Steve should make it okay if he just stayed alert and kept his mind on what he was doing. That may have been too much to ask!

The FAA examiner was a woman and known to be hard on private check rides, but Steve was very smart—remember? He had his Bachelors in Mechanical Engineering. He had good performance reviews of his professional work and he could fly the airplane well. Steve would pull it off, but I did keep my fingers crossed.

The day came and Steve's oral exam went well and he did his cross-country flight plan satisfactorily. As the story goes, according to Steve, he stepped into the Cessna 150 and taxied out with the examiner and did the run up just fine. His flight plan called for a course of 270 degrees from the Van Nuys airport (remember the problems from before?). I even told Steve that the flight plan would probably take them west of the airport and away from the congested city until the Examiner felt the student was competent in cross country navigation. The beginning of the flight plan was the exact same as our very first cross country flight during his training. What could go wrong? Steve would be covering old ground...but it was not to be... it only got worse!

At any rate, ole Stever departed the pattern under the Examiner's close eye and took up a heading of 090 degrees instead of 270 degrees to begin his cross-country flight into the heavy traffic of Burbank Airport! Say what??? He established himself on the 090 radial and then made the discovery of his error within a minute or two, so he explained to the examiner that he was supposed to be going the opposite direction – 270 degrees as he had planned on the ground some 30 minutes earlier. He began the turn to 270 degrees and the examiner said, "Take us back to the airport." The check ride was over. Steve had flunked the test.

What's with Steve's brain? Guess he could not focus on only the flying problems at hand but had so much else on his mind with his job, the upcoming move to another state and the like. He

couldn't compartmentalize and think of the immediate problem at hand—like the course of 270 degrees! Maybe he was setting a course for the east coast where he was soon to move. What makes people do what ole Stever did? A dyslexic problem of some sort? Should he even be a pilot? I don't know but what I do know is that several days later Steve transferred to the east coast with the company and I no longer had to worry about signing him off to take his private pilot's flight test. Steve was gone, but not forgotten.

But wait, the story is not over. Guess what happened to ole Stever as reported to me by one of his good friends some months after his failed check ride?

Steve found another CFI back in upstate New York and continued his training. The new instructor signed him off for another solo cross-country back in the lush, green countryside of northern New York State in the early summer of that year. His instructor told him his destination airport had "... all green buildings and hangers and you will recognize it," or some words to that effect. Of course Steve will do fine!

Unfortunately, the instructor did not yet realize with whom he was dealing. On the surface, ole Stever put forth a good image and seemed competent. Something I already knew. Anyway, Steve got started and took off on his solo cross-country under a new flight instructor's sign off.

As Steve thought he was approaching the distant airport, he called the tower and reported five miles out with the current airport weather and information. The tower acknowledged Steve's call but stated that they did not have him in sight but cleared him to land since there was no other traffic. Then Steve thought to "confirm" the fact that the airport did contain a number of green buildings on its property! Really good information to confirm when you already had that information, but remember he was an engineer. I bet that may have been the first time that type of information had been requested from the tower. Anyway, they confirmed that fact for Steve. The airport had all green buildings. Good, no problem....yet!

As the story goes, Steve saw "green buildings" and setup his pattern for landing. As mentioned, Steve was given permission to land since there was no traffic at the airport but the tower told Steve that they still "did not have him in sight" when he reported approaching the field.

Steve landed very nicely in a farmer's field that had a barn and several other out buildings painted green! Steve shut down his engine and walked up to the farmer and asked him if this was the airport? This is a true story told to me second hand by one of Steve's very good friends. The farmer told him the airport was about five miles "that- a- way" and pointed the direction. The old farmer probably never knew what a real service he was providing for ole Steve--pointing the way that is. Really glad he did that otherwise Steve may have ended up somewhere else. Who knows what lurks in the minds of confused student pilots. I understood that Steve did get airborne again and completed the flight. Don't know what the tower said to him upon his actual arrival to their field.

I lost touch with Steve and not sure if he ever got his private license. If he did, I hope he just flies locally. Later I heard he moved to Texas so if ole Stever did get his license and you happen to live in Texas, watch out and try to help this lad find the airport, if he asks!

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