

# Checking Your Angst

## Dealing with check ride nerves and inflight mistakes

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**D**o you get nervous before a check ride? It's only natural. Have you ever made a mistake early during a check ride and then had to worry about it as you tried to concentrate during the rest of the flight? That's a natural reaction, too. But dealing with nerves before and during a check ride is a skill you can master.

I am writing this from a hotel room in West Lafayette, Indiana, on the day of my 40th year graduation reunion from Air Force ROTC here at Purdue University. My class includes an astronaut, three test pilots, two more with time in the SR-71, quite a few airline pilots, and me. It is, obviously, a time for reflection.

As we flew to Indianapolis in the back of an almost full regional jet, my wife took the occasion to reread my first book, *Flight Lessons 1*, to reflect on our days at Purdue and U.S. Air Force pilot training. As she got to the part about my first flight in the Cessna T-37 she asked, "Wasn't it exciting?" I said, "No, not particularly." We've been married for 45 years and she is used to that kind of stoicism, but still she said, "How can that be?" As we waited for our luggage after the flight, I checked my email and found a letter from a BCA reader who wanted to know how I dealt with check ride nerves, making mistakes during a check ride, and dealing with a check ride failure. I thought about that for a while and realized that my answer about excitement and dealing with the check ride questions were the same.

One of the many purposes of a check ride in Air Force undergraduate pilot training is to place the student under considerable stress so as to ensure they can deal with stress that is sure to come later in their military career. You might see some of that early on in an airline, too. But sooner or later the event becomes simply an exercise in ensuring the pilot being checked can achieve the standards set by those doing the training. The single most important fact in all of this for us is this: A check ride is more of an evaluation of the training program



The Purdue University Engineering Mall

JAMES ALBRIGHT

than of the student. If the trainers did a good job, the student will pass. If the student fails, the training department failed the student. So that being said, how can you temper any nervousness?

(1) Practice, practice, practice — Maximize your simulator practice and when that is done, try some "chair flying." (More about that shortly.)

(2) Study, study, study — Learn systems, procedures, checklists and callouts so they become automatic. Being able to recite an emergency procedure automatically is a great way to build confidence and eliminate any awkward pauses in the simulator. I'm not saying do everything as quickly as possible and without reference to checklists or taking advantage of the rest of the crew. But knowing procedures allows you to fly with confidence. As the engine is on fire after takeoff, novice pilots fret that they should be doing something, anything! An expert pilot realizes the best thing to do is fly the airplane, take care of any immediate action items, and then climb to the minimum altitude before taking the next steps.

(3) Arrive at the check ride well rested, and in good spirits. I used to counsel my students to simply relax. "Don't be nervous, and that's an order!"

As silly as that may sound, it is good advice. Stop the nerves by ordering yourself to stop being nervous. Give that a try; it works for me.

(4) Treat the evaluator as a human being — In those awkward moments before "fight's on," make small talk with the evaluator. This can be about the weather, the local area, hobbies or your favorite war stories. You might have more practical experience in type and a good "there I was" story is sure to get the evaluator's interest. Get the evaluator talking. This does a couple of things for you: It gets the evaluator to start thinking of you as human and it tells your subconscious that the person running the panel is no different from you.

### A Flashback to My First Check Ride

I was a 22-year-old second lieutenant and didn't have a pilot's license when I showed up for Air Force Undergraduate Pilot Training (UPT) at Williams Air Force Base, Arizona. My first instructor pilot was 24-year-old 1st Lt. David Clary, a magnificent instructor. He showed up at UPT two years earlier and was handed me and another second

lieutenant for his first try at being an instructor pilot. I say he was magnificent because he was. (He went on to become a major general.)

Like me, Clary was half Japanese, soft spoken, and an engineer by education. As I hoped to one day become, he was highly knowledgeable, unflappable under pressure, and never at a loss in any situation. My fellow student was Roger Jeeter (not his real name), a recent graduate from the Air Force Academy. Roger was very smart and had no problems flying the airplane with one exception: spin recovery. Once the airplane started spinning, Roger was a mess. Our first check rides were scheduled for the same day, Roger going first.

“A check ride is like any other flight,” Clary explained. “You’ve already practiced every maneuver, every situation, every possible scenario. You are just duplicating what you already know. Don’t second guess yourself, don’t get wrapped up in little things that aren’t perfect. If you make a mistake, that is automatically history. Shift your brain to the next event and move on.”

Tom Wolfe’s brilliant book, *The Right Stuff*, was to come out later that year, followed by the movie four years later. But reflecting on Clary’s advice, I realize now the wisdom of his words back then. Wolfe describes the intense training pumped into early Mercury astronauts so that the space flights had already been practiced with such detail that the astronauts didn’t have time to contemplate fear, anxiety, excitement or any other type of emotion. They were simply duplicating their performances in training.

Our UPT experience was similar in many ways. Air Force pilot training is unlike civilian pilot training because of the time constraint. Back then you had 48 weeks and just under 200 hr. of flight time to learn every facet of aerobatics, formation, low level navigation and instrument flight in the T-37 and T-38. Half your time was solo. If you failed to measure up, you were history. My class of 77 students, for example, graduated only 44. So how do you make automatic everything needed for a flight when flight and simulator hours are limited? You introduce another concept of military aviation: “chair flying.”

When dealing with something new, you need to make it “un-new” and almost automatic. One of our earliest challenges was learning the overhead visual pattern. Once you had it down, you never gave it a second thought. But until then, it was filled with opportunities to have

an instructor in the other seat take the airplane away from you. Even solo, instructors on the ground stood ready with a radio call or a pyrotechnic flare to send you around. That’s how many of us students first became acquainted with the flight properties of our kitchen chairs.

Practicing the overhead pattern in my T-37 chair gave my wife an opportunity for a laugh or two and I am grateful she didn’t have a cellphone camera in 1979. You simply sit in the chair as if in your cockpit. (I’ve heard some pilots would do this wearing their flight helmets and Nomex gloves, but I didn’t take it to this extreme.) Then you placed your hands on an imaginary stick and throttles, and started talking your way through:

▶ “Set about 80% to hold 200 kt.” You visualized the indicators.

▶ “Fly over the runway at 1,000 ft. AGL.” You visualize the view outside the cockpit, trying to allow the time to elapse as it will in the airplane.

▶ “At the midfield break, roll 60 deg. bank left, pull back to maintain level flight.” You move the imaginary stick. If you have a tendency to do something wrong, you can articulate the corrective action.

▶ “Remember to give the stick a couple shots of back trim as the speed bleeds, roll wings level after 180 deg., extend the speed brake, and check that the runway is about halfway down your left wing.” I hear the Air Force gave up on these very tight patterns years later, but for us you could place the runway so that it intersected the midpoint of the wing and be spaced correctly.

▶ “Extend the flaps.” Your hand hits the imaginary flap handle.

▶ “Extend the gear.”

▶ “Look for the touchdown point over your left shoulder, roll 45 deg. of bank left, let the nose fall 15 deg., back pressure and trim.” Your hands move and you make your gear down call.

▶ “Hook 21, gear down, touch and go.”

▶ “Move the throttles until you just hear the thrust attenuators, keep 120 kt., check halfway through the turn that you’ve lost half the altitude.”

▶ At this point I had a tendency to lean in my chair and my wife had a tendency to laugh.

▶ “Adjust bank to roll out on centerline. Add power to keep 100 kt. The first bars on the runway should be halfway up the windshield.”

And so it went. I did that until I didn’t need to, when all of it became automatic. Clary would make us close our eyes at his desk and go through the procedures.

Sitting firmly on the ground, Roger seemed to get all the procedures just right, but he confessed to me the spin recovery often tripped him up in the airplane. I was certain he was going to “ace” the first check ride, but he didn’t.

Our check rides had three possible grades: Q1, Q2 or Q3. A Q1 meant you passed. A Q2 meant you passed but there were things that needed to be retrained and reevaluated. A Q3 meant it went so badly, the entire check ride had to be repeated. You got a total of three tries, but after that, you packed your bags and looked for a job in the Air Force that didn’t involve flying airplanes. We called the Q3 a “hook,” from the old vaudeville days where a bad act was dragged off the stage with a big, theatrical hook.

“Hooked it,” Roger said after his first check ride.

Clary didn’t have the details from the evaluator pilot before it was my turn, but he probably suspected and gave me some last-minute advice: “If you make any mistakes, don’t worry about it. Nobody flies a perfect airplane and I’ve never flown a perfect check ride. Remember each event is a separate event. Your grade depends on everything as a total.”

## Dealing With Mistakes

This may come as a surprise to new professional pilots, but there are three kinds of mistakes made during a check ride: those made by the examinee, those made by the examiner, and those made by the aircraft (or simulator). When you are in the “heat of battle” it is difficult to distinguish which is at fault. But even when you make the mistake, that isn’t the end of the check ride. In fact, how you deal with that can actually work in your favor.

(1) You made the mistake — Most mistakes are not critical and will not merit mention in the critique. Even those that do can be overridden by the rest of the flight. In fact, even when you know the mistake will result in a failure, doing well from that point on will lessen the impact. As an examiner, once I’ve witnessed such an event, I am looking for other things to either add to or subtract from the critique. I would rather say, “It was a flawless flight, except . . .” than, “Where do I begin?”

(2) The evaluator made the mistake — This was one of my greatest fears as an evaluator and when it happens, it places a great deal of stress on the evaluator. If you suspect your evaluator is the guilty party, try to press on and not make a big



Even wearing a flight suit, the evaluator is just another imperfect, human pilot.

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deal of it. The evaluator will be grateful and that makes the rest of the check ride, believe it or not, easier.

(3) The aircraft (or simulator) made the mistake — This is the best kind of mistake because you and the evaluator are off the hook. Try to laugh it off as one of those things. In a simulator environment, the evaluator will feel some responsibility, and this actually makes the rest of the ride easier for you.

## My First Check Ride

My first check ride seemed to be going very well. The only maneuver I really struggled with was a simple loop, but that went perfectly. In fact, I stole a look at the evaluator's kneeboard and saw the letters "EX" up and down against everything I had done thus far. "Show me a spin," he said. I did a few clearing turns and tucked my area map into my right leg flight suit pocket. "Loose items," I said. "Secured," he said.

The T-37 spin entry involves pointing the nose straight up with the throttles at a medium setting. Once the wings start to buffet you fed in rudder and when the airplane stalled it almost immediately wrapped itself into a spin. At that point you waited for the evaluator to say, "Recover" and that's what you did. The recovery involved six steps that ended up with the aircraft pointing straight down at zero G, after which the last step was, "recover from dive." Pointing straight down at the ground completely weightless usually kicked up decades of dust from all over the airplane and the cockpit was eerily quiet.

I got all the steps right and just as we went to zero G, an area chart appeared from beneath my ejection seat

and unfolded itself right in front of me. "Loose items stowed, huh?" the evaluator yelled as he grabbed the chart. It was a "hookable" offense. My long line of "EX" entries was interrupted with a "U" and I still had half the ride to go. Clary's words reminded me that the spin was one event. I had more to go.

Fortunately, the rest of the ride was filled with more "EX" events and maybe one or two "G" events. During the debrief the evaluator said as much. "You fly an excellent airplane, lieutenant. It is a damned shame I'm going to have to hook you." He held up the area chart, accentuating my failure.

"I understand, sir," I said. "I would have bet a month's pay that I zipped that map into my pocket." I reached down to my zipped pocket and felt something inside. I opened the pocket and pulled out my area chart. The evaluator looked at my chart and the one in his hand. "Well how about that," he said. "Good job then. Congratulations you just passed your first check ride."

There were congratulations all around the flight room. About half our class hooked that first check ride. As it turned out, Roger did very well during his flight until the spin. At that point he fell apart. "You would have gotten a Q2 if you performed to your normal level, Roger," Clary said. "And then you wouldn't have to recheck, you would just need to go up again with an instructor to demonstrate the spin. So, remember next time, push mistakes out of your head!" But Roger couldn't do that. He repeated his performance two more times and was gone a week later. I finished 20 years as an Air Force pilot with a clean record, not a single busted check ride in eight aircraft types. That isn't too common, but what

is even more rare is the fact I did bust a check ride that was "unbusted" in the end. And I think that episode teaches volumes on how to bust with style.

## Dealing With Check Ride Failure

Being told that you are "not good enough" in any endeavor hurts. If you ever get to the point where failing a check ride isn't a big deal, then you are doing it too often and perhaps it is time to look for another line of work. So, it isn't a good experience. But there is a right way to deal with it.

(1) Realize that the maxim, "On any given day the best pilot can fail and the worst pilot can pass," is true. I've seen this happen many times. When it happens to someone I respect, I am surprised, but it doesn't diminish my view of them.

(2) Realize you have been presented an opportunity to learn. No matter the cause of the failure, there are lessons to be learned.

(3) Realize your character is being tested and how you react says more about you than the check ride itself. You have something in common with the evaluator and every other pilot who will hear about the check ride. They have all been "under the gun" too and they will empathize with you. Reacting positively will do much to enhance your reputation and will make the re-check that much easier. Reacting negatively will subconsciously make your next efforts that much harder.

## A Painful Flashback

Years later, I was flying as a captain in rank and an aircraft commander in crew position, in an Air Force EC-135J (Boeing 707). My copilot was a first lieutenant and the navigator was a captain just a year junior to me. We were flying from March AFB (now Air Reserve Base), California (KRIV) back to our home base, Honolulu International Airport, Hawaii (PHNL) when an evaluator showed up and announced we were getting a route check ride. "Just do your normal good jobs and get us home," he said.

Our usual passengers were a U.S. Navy battle staff in charge of the Pacific nuclear submarine fleet. They quite often requested we delay our takeoff until the subs were in place so they could exercise our communications systems. That particular morning the call for a delay came after engine start and after we had begun our taxi. We negotiated



with tower and found a spot out of the way near the end of the runway to wait. It was a summer morning with an approaching weather system and rising temperatures. The copilot busied himself with updating the temperature and posting new takeoff performance data every few minutes. This involved about 10 min. of chasing lines on charts and producing about 10 different numbers, such as power settings and speeds to fly. The most important number was our decision speed, what we called “S-1” but is more commonly known as “V-1” to most civilians. If we had an engine failure during takeoff before S-1 we would abort, after S-1 we would continue the takeoff.

After the copilot dutifully posted new takeoff data, I would review the numbers and say, “OK.” For one of his efforts I said, “S-1 looks low.” He re-chased the charts and said, “No, it’s OK.”

After an hour of this the ceiling had come down and it started to rain just as the passengers announced they were ready. I waited patiently for the copilot to add the wet runway to his takeoff data and looked at the new numbers he scratched out in grease pencil. “Are you sure about S-1?” I asked. He showed me the applicable page and the wet runway correction. “I guess so,” I said. And we took off.

We disappeared into the muck at about 1,000 ft. and even though it was about noon, the world became dark. And then it became bright again with a crack of lightning right on the nose of the aircraft. My flight instruments froze and the cockpit went dark except for the copilot’s instruments, which had an emergency power system. “You got the airplane,” I said. He remained motionless. There is an old joke in the Air Force that goes, “All hell broke loose and my copilot turned into a zombie!” So, there I was. I flew the airplane cross-cockpit and started to formulate a plan when departure control added to our problems. “LA center has lost all radar; all aircraft revert to non-radar procedures.”

I looked down to the VOR needles on the copilot’s side of the aircraft and noticed they were split. Both VOR receivers were tuned to the correct frequency. “Nav, pilot,” I said over the interphone, “which VOR needle is right?” I heard nothing. I stole a look behind me and realized I now had two zombies in the cockpit. The evaluator, sitting in the jump seat, shrugged his shoulders. As I brought my eyes back forward I noticed a generator had dropped off line. I cycled the switch and my side of the cockpit came back to life. As the lights

returned my zombies came back to the living and center announced their radar was back. It was a nightmare that lasted less than 60 sec.

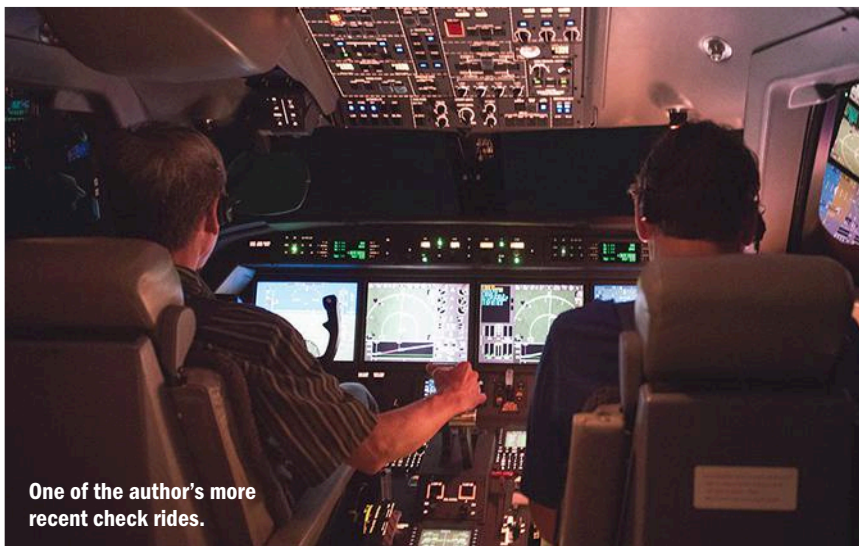
After we landed, the evaluator asked us to meet him in the squadron commander’s office, never a good sign. As we entered, the evaluator pulled me to one side and said, “I’m really sorry I have to do this.” He revealed that our S-1 was 5 kt. in error and the tolerance was only 2 kt. He lauded my performance after the lightning strike but lambasted the copilot and navigator. He busted both of us pilots because of the S-1 error and the navigator because of his zombie-like performance. The copilot and navigator immediately started to argue.

“Calm down you two,” I said. “We made mistakes and we are fortunate to have lived through those mistakes,

military evaluator pilot role with a few turns as a check airman. I have had to “hook” a few pilots in that time and must say it is a gut-wrenching experience. In one case the busted pilot took the company to court but lost. With each bust I think back to my flight with two zombies. Sometimes how you bust is as important as how you pass.

## Putting It All Together

Our reunion was great, and it was fun to trade “there I was” stories with classmates who had their own harrowing moments to relive and lessons learned over 40 years of defying gravity. I finally composed an answer to the *BCA* reader asking about check ride nerves. I think chair flying is a great technique to learn something new. I haven’t been to an initial course in 10 years and have only em-



One of the author’s more recent check rides.

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so we can learn from them. So, that’s what we have to do now.”

I was, of course, devastated. I had gone through seven years as an Air Force pilot with a perfect record. The evaluator, the squadron commander and everyone in the chain of command came to my defense, saying my reaction only solidified their confidence in me. I lived with this for about two months. The higher command reviewed the check ride and decided the evaluator made a mistake and ordered my evaluation results be changed to a pass. So, in a weird twist of fate, I didn’t bust a check ride, after all, but was rewarded for having reacted to a bust with style.

Part of my reward was an instant upgrade to instructor pilot and shortly thereafter, to evaluator pilot. In the many years since, I have reprised my

ployed the technique a few times when learning something new, such as landing using a forward-looking infrared system. But it is a technique worth considering.

I also reminded the reader about the need to look at each event in the check ride as a separate event. In 1st Lt. Clary’s words, “Shift your brain to the next event and move on.”

Finally, I reminded the reader that every check ride is like a training flight on steroids; they are opportunities to learn. No pilot is perfect, no flight is perfect, and no check ride is flown flawlessly. The evaluator is charged with certifying you on a laundry list of items to mark “EX,” “G” or “U.” Sometimes, the evaluator’s hands are tied, but sometimes he or she has a bit of latitude. Your grace under fire can determine how much of that latitude is used in your favor. **BCA**