My Commercial Pilot Journey

by Charlie Thompson N902ES

It all started in Tucson around the 20th of May of this year. “Double Eagle” aviation advertised a 1-week Commercial Pilot training course for about $4100. Sounded good...let’s do it! So I made a $500 deposit and booked airline and hotel arrangements for KTUC...and off I go. What I learned was mastering 10+ Commercial maneuvers in 10 flight hours (which included taxi time at KTUC) allows for less than 1 hour of time to master all 10+ Commercial maneuvers. No...not realistic...I learned the hard way. I got up at 3:45am on Saturday May 25th to take my check ride after a week of hard training in the air and on the ground. Not exactly rested up...and probably not exactly ready.

Why up at 3:45am? Because we needed to get the IACRA paperwork and oral exam (which I aced) out of the way so we could fly before the Arizona desert heat took it’s toll. The morning was beautiful but the check ride started out with radio problems in the Piper Arrow I was flying...which set the tone for a bad check ride. Then altitude restrictions from KTUC tower. Then I forgot to do a clearing turn before my steep turns as requested by the DPE. Now for those of you who live in the flatlands of Texas you likely know a steep turn involves a 50 degree bank and tracking the nose of the airplane along the horizon to maintain altitude to Commercial check ride standards. Less easy to execute when surrounded by mountains on two sides. Altitude busted! Check ride over! Partial credit was given on my FAA notice of disapproval form. I now have a 60 day window to complete another check ride. I go home very disappointed after a week of hard work. Let’s call it a $4100 complex endorsement with 10 hours of complex logged.

FAA news flash! You can now conduct your Commercial check ride in the aircraft of your choice! Wish I had known that a few weeks earlier....Oops too late.....I had already started my training process at Double Eagle in Tucson, AZ. Really bad timing for me!

Fast forward a few weeks...I’m now back in my Cirrus SR20 where I’ve logged over 750 hours of flight time. Re-learning all the Commercial maneuvers. I learned how to slip the SR20 to nail my power-off 180 landings to ACS standards of minus 0 to +200 feet. Note to self: A Cirrus SR20 is a good glider.... A Piper Arrow glides like a refrigerator! After about a dozen tune-up flights I received a check ride endorsement from my local CFI and was ready for another check ride...in an aircraft I felt comfortable in!

OK...I’m off to the races again endorsement in hand...destination: check ride at KBMQ...cleared for takeoff KHYI RWY17. Here I go! As I’m about to leave the pattern my eye spots a brief flicker from my annunciator panel light...wait...what was that?....I fixate on the annunciator panel just in time to see the LOW VOLTS light reach full brightness. Darn....call ATC...land...call DPE and cancel check ride which was
only hours away. I hustle back to the hangar, hustle a brand new alternator for air freight overnight delivery, contact my A&P to schedule alternator install inspection and sign off. Boom! Done the next day and successful test flight. What the heck...might as well do one more tune up flight with my CFI. Check ride re-scheduled at Promark Aviation (thanks to Ken Wittekiend for being so flexible with your schedule). Now I’m really ready! I even practiced my power-off 180’s at KBMQ where the check ride was to begin.

On the morning of my newly scheduled check ride we are IMC at KHYI. No problem I’ll file IFR and bust through the scud and be on my way. Done...nice smooth ride....cool-ish temperatures and winds gently out of the south. When approaching KBMQ I do one more power-off 180 and nail it perfectly. Things are looking good. I’m awake, caffeinated, and tuned up!

As we settle in for the preliminary paper work in the DPE’s office we are just getting started when the FBO manager rushes in and says, “The DC-3 crashed!” Everyone, me, the DPE, FBO manager, everyone rushes out to see what happened. There on the south end of the taxiway sits a smoking Bluebonnet Belle. Thank goodness everyone egressed safely with no life threatening injuries. Here’s what I saw as I ran out of the FBO:

What a terrible scene! Thank God everyone is safe. We are all in shock. OK...that’s it...airport CLOSED.....emergency vehicles all over the south end of the runway at KBMQ. No check ride today. I’m stranded at the airport until the runway re-opens...which it did hours later. I go home rattled....and slightly in shock of what just happened. Still processing the next day.
OK...third time’s the charm right? Thanks to Promark Aviation for another schedule slot. So once again I get up in the morning...check the weather...no wait...YELLOW on the radar? At the end of July in central Texas?? You’ve got to be kidding!! Oh..and let’s throw in a fire fighting TFR while we’re at it. Ugh! I sit patiently and wait for the weather to dissipate...which it does in time.

OK..but..wait..the wind is out of the NORTH now..I practiced all my power-off 180’s at Burnet on RWY19 winds out of the SOUTH with left hand traffic! OK I’ll just get there early and practice power-off 180’s with a righthand pattern and tune myself up (again). Just as I’m turning short final a youngster (actually everyone is younger than me) in a Cessna decides to announce he’s back-taxiing to RWY01. I’d been calling from 14 miles out...lots of CTAF calls...thanks dude “Cirrus 902ES is going missed runway 01 remaining in the pattern”, I said in a mildly annoyed voice. Folks you need to talk AND listen on the CTAF ...in advance...OK? We will call that aborted landing practice. I then complete two nice power-off 180’s to ACS standards and land. I’m ready!
Third time really was the charm!... I remember everything I’m supposed to do...clearing turns in particular...and complete the check ride. Success!

Can you spot my 8’s on Pyons? 😊
One happy camper...finally!

-Charlie
Epilogue –

The day of my check ride I took this photo below of salvage and clean-up efforts on the Bluebonnet Belle. Sad to see her gone. 😞

Looking back on the previous two months of my life I felt un-lucky. Lots of negative forces at work holding me back. But as I look at the wreckage of the Bluebonnet Belle I think about how lucky we all are and how lucky I am in particular ....to be able to fly!