



**STEVE KROG**

COMMENTARY / THE CLASSIC INSTRUCTOR



# Crosswinds and Light Turbulence Cause Stomach Aches

A day in the life of a timid pilot

BY STEVE KROG

**WINTER IS NEARLY OVER** for those of us living in the upper Midwest, and many of us are thinking about the new flying season that will soon be here. We're envisioning beautiful sunny warm days filled with time at the airport, pleasure flying at sunset, and even taking in a few pancake breakfast and Taco Tuesday events in the area.

Much of your free time during the winter or nonflying months has been devoted to thinking about flying, reading aviation magazines, and looking at catalogs determining what new gadgets you might want or need for the upcoming flying season. Checking your emails, a number of surrounding airports are already promoting their summer flying events, which adds to the enthusiasm.

**Make a commitment to yourself saying you will do two crosswind landings before putting the airplane away. The feeling of satisfaction and the increased confidence will cause you to feel overwhelmingly positive.**

As the snow melts and the temperatures are in the 40s, you've even ventured to the airport to inspect your airplane. Clearing the dust off the wings, checking tire air pressure, retorquing the prop bolts (if you have a wood propeller), and possibly even running the engine and changing the oil in preparation for that first warm spring day have all been completed. You can't wait to make that first flight of the year.

You're so eager to get going that many times throughout the day you find yourself daydreaming about flying and where you might go. Time in the evening might find you at the kitchen table looking at sectional maps, tapping into ForeFlight, and mentally planning the flights and the fun you will have.

Then, finally, a beautiful sunny spring day arrives and you begin thinking about rushing to the airport and getting that first flight in as soon as you can get away. By noon you're really pumped and can think of nothing else but making that flight.

As the afternoon slowly drags on, you keep checking the weather. It still looks great, but the wind has picked up just a bit and it's a slight crosswind as well. "Oh well," you think, "it shouldn't be a

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problem provided it doesn't get much stronger." But there is a small pit that begins to form in your stomach.

When 5 p.m. arrives, you're out the door practically jogging to your car in anticipation of getting to the airport. En route, you check the current weather. The wind has picked up just a bit, but it's really not much of a concern. However, that pit in your stomach has grown just a bit more, and you begin to take notice. It's telling you that you are concerned about the wind and starting to have self-doubt about flying today.

Arriving at the airport, you make a quick stop at the local FBO where several of the local airport "bums" are having coffee and sharing tales of bravery. They welcome you after the winter layoff and quiz you about flying today. You mention you have plans to do so when one of the bums asks if you have looked at the windsock. He adds that he saw it stand straight out a while ago. You look out the window, and it shows light winds but no gusts. Not to be deterred, you head for your hangar.

After opening the hangar door, you begin a thorough preflight and hear the steel roofing sheets rattle a bit. The wind must be increasing. Completing the preflight, you push the airplane out of the hangar and admire it for a moment as the sun shines on it for the first time this flying season.

Now, it's time to make the commitment to fly. The engine pops off immediately and idles smoothly. Wait a moment. Did you just hear a slight engine miss? It must be your imagination. After snapping the seat belt together, you begin taxiing from the hangar to Runway 30.

While on the move you give a quick glance at the windsock and see that it is moving side to side indicating the wind direction is variable. That pit in your stomach that was noticed nearly an hour ago has again made its presence known. Now you are beginning to have self-doubt about flying today. Maybe it wasn't such a good idea after all.

Taking a deep breath and scanning the windsock once again, you decide to continue taxiing to the runway. After completing the pre-takeoff checklist, your airplane is ready to go — but are you?

As a flight instructor and a 9-10 hour per day airport "bum" myself, I've observed this situation many times. I've watched pilots taxi to the end of the runway, conduct the pre-takeoff checklist, and then sit there for two or three minutes trying to decide if it is a go-or-no-go flight today because the wind was causing them to question making the flight.

I also recall experiencing these same uncomfortable feelings when I was a more inexperienced pilot. Any pilot, if totally honest,

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can attest to having similar feelings and experiences as described. How we each dealt with the situation can be quite varied.

The method that I tried was this. Every late afternoon after work I would go directly to the airport, change clothes, preflight the airplane, and prepare to fly. Where I'm located, we have the luxury of two intersecting runways so I always had an out if the wind was causing great discomfort.

I would challenge myself and commit to making five takeoffs and landings on the runway with the most crosswind. If the first landing felt a bit uncomfortable, I would land on the other runway, regaining my confidence, and then go back to landing with a crosswind. I did this almost every late afternoon for a week. By week's end my level of confidence had grown, and I felt much more comfortable in the airplane.

The secret to this approach is to continue practicing one or two crosswind landings every time you decide to go fly. Make a commitment to yourself saying you will do two crosswind landings before putting the airplane away. The feeling of satisfaction and the increased confidence will cause you to feel overwhelmingly positive.

Once I reached this level of proficiency, I would try to do some flying when there was a bit more crosswind. By doing so, I expanded my level of experience and confidence.

Oftentimes I see individuals working at improved aircraft handling and self-confidence, but once that level of comfort is reached, it's never practiced again to maintain that level of proficiency. A good pilot will always strive to improve their skills. Why do you think the major air carriers require all their pilots to obtain recurrent training? After all, aren't they the most skilled pilots out there?

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Over the course of time, I've seen and chatted with pilots who came to the airport on an early Sunday morning with the plan of flying to a pancake breakfast at an airport within a reasonable distance. The airplane comes out of the hangar and is prepped to go. But then that nagging stomach knot takes over, and before long it has grown to the point where it has convinced you not to fly. What if the temperature increases and those big puffy white clouds begin to form, and I have to deal with turbulence? The wind might pick up, and I'm leery of having to make a crosswind landing at the breakfast location. I don't want to embarrass myself in front of several hundred of my peers. There might be a stiff crosswind when returning to my home airport.

I've heard many of these excuses and more, but I make it a point to never belittle the pilot who made the decision not to go. Rather, in some instances, I've quietly suggested that if the pilot is willing, I would be happy to ride along as an observer and safety pilot and do some crosswind landings.

Some of these individuals are more than capable of handling crosswind situations but just lack the confidence to do so. Three or four crosswind landings later, their self-confidence is restored, and they won't be staying on the ground next Sunday worried about the wind. Instead, they will make the flight to wherever for their plate of almost-cooked pancakes, runny eggs, semi-cooked sausage, and coffee that tastes like it was made in an empty 50-gallon oil drum. Darn, those breakfasts are fun but not necessarily good for your digestive system.

Get out there and do some practicing. Restore your level of proficiency and prevent a possible embarrassing situation this season. **EAA**

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