I thought my instructor, John, was testing me to see how I’d react. “Great down,” I called, and waited for the familiar “thunk” of the gear, finishing its extension. I was busy setting up a power-off, 180-degree approach and landing to a specific spot, which was one of the required maneuvers on the commercial pilot certificate checkpoint, now just days away. The wind was howling pretty good in St. George, Utah, and my hands were full with keeping the big, turbo Cessna 210 stable in the rolling turbulence. I didn’t hear the gear sound, and I noticed there was no “locked and down” gear light. My instructor wasn’t flashing his usual “let’s see what he’ll do now” smirk. He looked serious.

Leaving the pattern, we began troubleshooting, recycling and pumping the gear several times, but still couldn’t get it down and locked. Even consulting the manual proved fruitless. The wind got worse as we decided to head back to Cedar City airport to use their long runways and open approaches to our advantage while trying to fully extend the gear. But the airport had been closed. Trucks, equipment and men were scurrying about in the howling wind. We decided to continue north to Parowan (1L9), a slice of time out of the golden days of aviation, with a single 5,000-foot runway a derelict crash truck and a great mechanic—Dave Norwood at Parowan Aero Services.

The wind was almost 90 degrees across the nose as we considered killing the engine, trying to stop if the gear collapsed. Norwood walked outside and called us on his handheld, suggesting we make a low pass so he could inspect the situation. “Looks like the gear is in between its extension cycle,” he said in a calm and studied voice. “It never finished coming down, but it’ll probably be okay.” He had seen this kind of thing before in nearly 40 years’ experience with everything from gliders to airliners. “Most are building time to go elsewhere. We select instructors on weekends or maybe a few days here and there,” said Montalte. “It’s not unusual to get six hours of flying in a day, and the training is focused into a fixed number of hours. AFF will instruct in your airplane or through a network of prescribed FBOs around the country, I had done my instrument training with AFF and came back to the wonderful folks at Sphere One Aviation in Cedar City, Utah. I’d do the rating in their Cessna 210D.

Among a handful of respected accelerated schools, AFF differentiates itself with a single element: their instructors. Tony Montalte, AFF President, tells me their secret of is that he selects only seasoned instructors who want to instruct full time and do it because they enjoy it. “At a lot of schools, the instructor works on weekends or maybe a few days here and there,” said Montalte. “Most are building time to go elsewhere: We select instructors who want to instruct by choice and who have between 20 years’ experience or more.” AFF goes far and wide to find instructors that fit their stringent requirements, and while not all of them have grey hair, each has a depth of experience that’s hard to match.

Studies on learning reveal that the key to accelerated programs is to immediately use the skills learned once the training is over. The U.S. Military uses accelerated training for their pilots today, taking a student from zero time to fighter-jet pilot in 210 hours (90 hours in primary flight training and 120 hours in T-38 school). That’s astonishing. Will Fly For Money

The first question my pilot friends asked when learning about my planned commercial certificate was, “So, you want to fly for the airlines?” Most pilots only consider the commercial certificate as a gateway to corporate or air carrier operations. As a taildragger and biplane pilot, I’m still holding out for a gig flying a venerable Beech 18 or DC-3, but I have no desire to fly for an airline. I’m pursuing the rating to become a better pilot. Though getting paid to fly is now a possibility, the commercial ticket was a way for me to continue learning.

“What’s with the 40-degree bank angle?” Yoda asked as I cranked the 210 over, trying to stay tight on base leg. “As a commercial pilot you have to concentrate on making all your maneuvers smooth, gentle and easy.” That was one of the greatest lessons in my commercial training. Having been something of a lone wolf before, I never considered my bank angles or descent rates as long as they were what was called for on that approach. The commercial rating, it turns out, is about flying in a way that’s consistent and always stable. “You have to think about your workload.” Detractors of accelerated programs say that so much is thrown at you that you could never retain it all. They say the traditional approach of earning the rating over many months and flying a few days a week is better. The truth is that it depends on the student.

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want it without hesitation. It's like aerobatics, but in the opposite, gentler direction.

Dancing With A Pig
The turbo Cessna 210J Centurion is a heap of airplane. Designed with a laminar flow, cantilevered (no strut!), high-dihedral wing, the airplane loves speed and altitude, but hates mushing around slowly or being asked to make a lot of aerial changes quickly. It's made to go far, fast and high, and gives even today's Cirrus 170 knots in the flight levels, it's a performer. However, it's also a run for its (considerably more) money. With an easy cruise at 200 feet on base, then 300 feet on final. You want to almost brush the threshold lights. Though it felt awkward at first, the stabilized pattern was much more suited to the 210. Now, I can tailor the approach to the airplane more effectively than I would have before. The systematic approach is what works for commercial flying.

Flight planning is part of every commercial pilot's skill set. Smooth flying and consistent approaches are a hallmark of advanced training. Earning the commercial rating is in some ways more difficult than getting your private. You're starting at square one and relearning all the basics, but from a higher vantage point. At first, I was intimidated by the 340 hp, turbocharged monster. But, I quickly became comfortable with her and even grew to love the old gal. A superb airplane with crisp roll response and a roomy cabin, it shows that Cessna was an innovator even back in the '60s. I heard Cessna improved the elevator feel on later models, making a good airplane even better.

What It's Like
Earning the commercial rating is in some ways more difficult than the instrument, but in other ways, more fun. First, it's all VFR so you can set aside the instrument complexities for 20 hours or so. The idea is total mastery of your aircraft. What you're doing is refining your seat-of-the-pants stick-and-rudder skills. You're learning to fly the airplane with more positive control, so you don't become just a "systems operator" that can't handle a visual approach (as we saw with the Asaama crash last year). It's also a chance to root out and correct bad habits. During our many conversations, John had picked up that I fly high approaches in my biplane. My Great Lakes 2T-1A has the glide ratio of a Coke machine, and I can be 800 feet over the threshold and still make the first turnoff. John perceived this and changed how I flew the approach in the 210. "You want your first power reduction on downwind opposite the numbers," he said. "Then you want to lose 300 feet until your base turn, 200 feet on base, then 300 feet on final. You want to almost brush the threshold lights." Though it felt awkward at first, the stabilized pattern was much more suited to the 210. Now, I can tailor the approach to the airplane more effectively than I would have before. The systematic approach is what works for commercial flying.

AFIT knows how to get students ready not just for the checkride, but for real-world flying. After the gauntlet that John put me through, the checkride was almost playtime. I felt confident and sure as I talked through each maneuver, explaining what was happening, just like an instructor would. It's a thing John taught me, and helped me keep my "checkride-itis" at bay, though I thoroughly enjoy flying with this particular DPE, Dan Smith. As we finished the checkride and ambled back to the FBO, I wondered if I had demonstrated enough "mastery of the airplane." John and another pilot were waiting. "Say, do you know any professional pilots that could fly me and my buddy to Birmingham?" John joked.

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