



# Clouds on deck

The fast track to an instrument rating **BY JILL W. TALLMAN**

**C**onsistent flight training can be difficult to find in the best of circumstances. Throw in a fairly difficult objective such as the instrument rating that can drag on longer than you anticipated, and chances are good you'll wind up working with one or more CFIs—and one or more teaching methods. However, it doesn't have to be that way.

That's where accelerated training programs come in. Whether you're a fan or a foe of fast-paced learning, one of its main attractions is that you'll receive one-on-one instruction from a single CFI who won't hand you his walking papers midway through the program. And if you're a busy professional, the ability to get it done is worth the price of admission.

Busy professionals are the primary customers of outfits such as Accelerated Flight & Instrument Training (AFIT), in

Newport Beach, California. The typical customer owns his or her airplane and wants to use it for business and personal travel, but doesn't have the luxury of months-long training to get the instrument rating. AFIT's students include doctors, lawyers, and professional athletes, among others. I am not AFIT's typical customer; I don't own an airplane and am not a captain of industry, yet here I was on a May morning in the Midwest, going through the fire drill of an accelerated program all the same.

Aircraft ownership isn't a prerequisite. I could have reserved an airplane at my local FBO, and AFIT would have sent an instructor to me. That was tempting, but I have a family at home. I needed uninterrupted blocks of time in the evenings to study. So I chose to travel to my AFIT instruc-

tor, Mark Abend, who lives in O'Fallon, Illinois, just outside St. Louis.

We did all of our training at Sparta Community-Hunter Field (SAR) in Sparta, Illinois, about 40 miles west of O'Fallon, and I rented N9513C for the duration from Sparta Aero Services. N9513C is a 1977 Piper Archer, the older sister of the Archer III that I normally fly. But it was equipped with a Garmin GNS 430 GPS.

Abend is a retired U.S. Army captain who also did a stint with a local police force in Illinois. Since joining AFIT, he has helped more than 30 pilots earn their instrument ratings. By the time I boarded a Southwest flight to St. Louis, I had chatted with Abend several times by phone, exchanged e-mails, and even received a photo so that I'd know who was picking me up at the airport.

Before I left, I had passed the instrument knowledge test (an AFIT requirement)—I already had completed the 50 hours cross-country time as pilot in command needed to take the instrument checkride—and reviewed the training syllabus AFIT shipped to me. It's a structured program that provides roughly four hours of ground school and four hours of flying each day, but individual instructors can and do vary that as the need arises. AFIT says it can train pilots with no instrument time other than that required for the private pilot certificate, but I am not an aviation *wunderkind*, and so before booking my airline ticket I flew with a local CFII to refine a scan. (For other ways to



**AFIT instructor Mark Abend and the author go over the flight plan for the day, which means scrutinizing approaches and entries to holding patterns.**

maximize your accelerated program, see "Time is Money," below.)

The fire-drill process began once I arrived in St. Louis and met Abend. On our first day, Illinois had persistent drizzle and low overcast skies. To my surprise, Abend did not put me in the soup. Instead, we spread out approach plates, low altitude en route charts, and notepads in the cozy pilot lounge at Sparta Aero Services, which would be my base camp for the duration.

We drilled on holds, copying clearances, and the elements of an approach chart, among other tasks. In the afternoon, we plugged a battery cart

into the Archer and practiced loading approaches into the Garmin 430. We also "walked" holding pattern entries in the parking lot, where a cell phone served as a makeshift VOR. Abend did not want me to waste money by flying in weather that could overwhelm and intimidate me on that first day.

From time to time a lone airplane landed, and we queried each arrival about the weather conditions. But it never lifted enough to allow us to depart in visual conditions. By late afternoon we were ready to drive back to O'Fallon. On the way, Abend handed me his Jeppesen binder of approach plates, and we went from airport to airport, approach to approach, picking out the frequencies, minimums, initial approach fixes, and proper hold entries. He quizzed me on IFR currency requirements and airplane requirements. That night, my homework assignment was to bone up on the aircraft equipment requirements and read Chapter 7 of the *Aeronautical Information Manual*. I also watched three chapters of the King Schools' *Instrument Checkride Prep* DVD.

The first day in Sparta was the only day we didn't fly. On the second morning, the heavy overcast broke, and we filed and launched. Instrument approaches were followed by holds at Williamson County Regional (MWA), followed by more approaches and holds, then back to Sparta to do the GPS approach to Runway 18 numerous times. I logged my very first 1.5 hours of actual.

### **Time is money: Tips to maximize your accelerated training**

- 1. Fix those flaws.** Before you start, assess your piloting skills. Do you forget to use trim? Are you fuzzy on VORs? Get with an instructor and iron those out, or they'll come back to haunt you during instrument work.
- 2. Know the program's prerequisites.** The provider may require that you have completed the knowledge test, or that you have already fulfilled a certain number of cross-country hours. If you use your airplane, you'll get another list of requirements, such as adding your instructor to your insurance and making sure the airplane has had an annual inspection.
- 3. Know your airplane's power settings (particularly important for renter pilots).** Otherwise you'll spend time memorizing them while you're trying to grasp everything else.
- 4. Same goes for the nav/comm, GPS, and autopilot.** The CFII will gladly instruct you on how to use the equipment, but it'll add time to your program.
- 5. It's not a vacation.** If you travel to the instructor, don't expect to have time or energy to sightsee. Leave the family at home; you'll be too tired to see them and they might distract you.
- 6. Use it or lose it.** When you finish the program, don't let those new skills atrophy: Get out and fly. Fly in the system as much as you can. —JWT



**GPS Runway 36 approach into Sparta was one of the first approaches to come together. The spatial awareness afforded by the Garmin 430 moving map was a factor.**

Flying without visual references reminds me of a plate-spinner on the old *Ed Sullivan Show*. (Pilots of a certain age will remember this guy; he'd put a plate on top of a pole and keep it spinning while he set up more plates on more poles, and so on.) Let just one plate slow down and stop spinning, and it falls to the ground and crashes. Forget to monitor your vertical speed because you're staring too hard at the attitude indicator, and see what happens. My job was to keep all those plates spinning. But the mental workload was enormous, and I felt as though I didn't move quickly enough switching radio frequencies, loading approaches, or completing a prelanding checklist.

The succeeding days settled into a routine. Each morning's 48-mile drive to the airport was spent going over the FARs, weather, currency requirements. No minute of ground time was wasted. We would plan our destination airports, talk out the approaches and the holds associated with them, get a weather briefing, file, and depart before it got too warm and bumpy. Most

days we went out at least twice for two or three hours at a time, flying up to six approaches plus holding patterns on each jaunt; on one monumental day we flew three times with a short break in between.

We filed and worked within the air traffic control system as much as possible, to get me comfortable talking to ATC. The controllers were helpful, calm, and tolerant. Abend was less forgiving when I wandered above or below an assigned altitude or heading.

By the sixth day, I was officially sick of instrument flying. My brain wouldn't hold a single additional particle of information. My tendency to overcontrol the airplane at this stage of training was worrisome (I blame the thermals). I started drinking Red Bull during our afternoon break so that I could keep up the pace and fly another two hours.

Still, progress was being made. Since Sparta has a GPS approach, we practiced at least three GPS approaches each time we returned to the airport. Each entry and execution seemed simple compared to the ILS or VOR (no

#### **A quick hit on AFIT**

Accelerated Flight & Instrument Training (which, in spite of the name, does not offer accelerated primary training), in Newport Beach, California, was launched 15 years ago by Tony P. Montalte, president and general manager. Montalte said he saw an industrywide need for accelerated training "and it grew from there." Today, AFIT provides accelerated instrument, multiengine, and commercial training, as well as recurrent training. A Pilatus PC12 program has just been added. AFIT employs 46 flight instructors around the country, each of whom has a minimum of 8,000 hours of flight time with a minimum of 2,000 hours of IFR.

**Price tag for accelerated instrument instruction in your airplane: \$595 per day. The client is responsible for the instructor's airfare and a "clean and safe" accommodation.**

**For more information: [www.afit-info.com](http://www.afit-info.com); 866-270-8224.**

—JWT

procedure turns needed). Not surprisingly, the GPS was the first approach that came together. The ILS came after that, but VOR approaches were ragged, and I was still struggling with holding patterns.

Next came the long cross-country. By now I was filing all instrument flight plans, getting the weather briefings, and

doing 90 percent of the radio work. An ILS at Cape Girardeau; a VOR approach at St. Jacob, another VOR approach at Marion, and of course a GPS back into Sparta—the best of the bunch.

Time spent under the hood doesn't allow for many visual memories, with one exception. On a trek from Sparta to Centralia, Illinois (ENL), Abend proposed that we deviate our course to fly by the Arch in downtown St. Louis, and he let me go visual for about 20 minutes so that I could admire the gleaming structure. As we came up on the Mississippi River and turned north toward Centralia, he pointed out landmark after landmark—the Busch Stadium, the river itself studded with a couple of river-

boat gambling casinos. It broke up the trip nicely and took the pressure off, which I appreciated at this stage.

This is the point in the tale in which I would ordinarily tell you that I spent a day of checkride prep and took the practical test. However, another bout of prolonged severe weather and a malfunctioning instrument in the Archer made it pretty clear I wasn't going to accomplish this feat in the time allotted. I opted to come back to Frederick, Maryland, and get some additional training on the approaches into Frederick Municipal Airport before taking (and passing) the practical test on my own turf. Had I remained in Illinois, Abend would have scheduled the checkride with a local examiner.

One of the quibbles of accelerated training is that, having stuffed your brain so thoroughly in such a short period of time, you're likely to lose it that much faster. A colleague likens it to leaving a glass of milk on a counter top: Right now it's cold and fresh, but tomorrow it will have gone bad.

So yes, if you plan to do things on the fast track, make sure you back up all of that extensive and expensive training with a lot of practical flying as soon as you can. You'll reap the greatest rewards for your investment and get a lot of fun out of your new rating while you do it. **ACPA**

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Courtesy of *AOPA Pilot*