

Philosophy of a Flight Examiner

Velta Benn's approach to check flight candidates combines safety concerns with human sensitivity

by GLADYS E. WISE / AOPA 269524

■ ■ Your last stop on the road to a new ticket—that final one-on-one encounter with a pilot examiner—is a highly personal experience. While pilot examiners as a group have much in common—certification standards, prescribed procedures, uncertain schedules and incomes—they are rarely judged as a group. Most often they are termed “good” or “bad” by the degree of personal concern they show for the human beings involved in their pass/fail decisions.

Velta Benn's (AOPA 212414) basic philosophy is that safety and sensitivity to the human equation are entirely

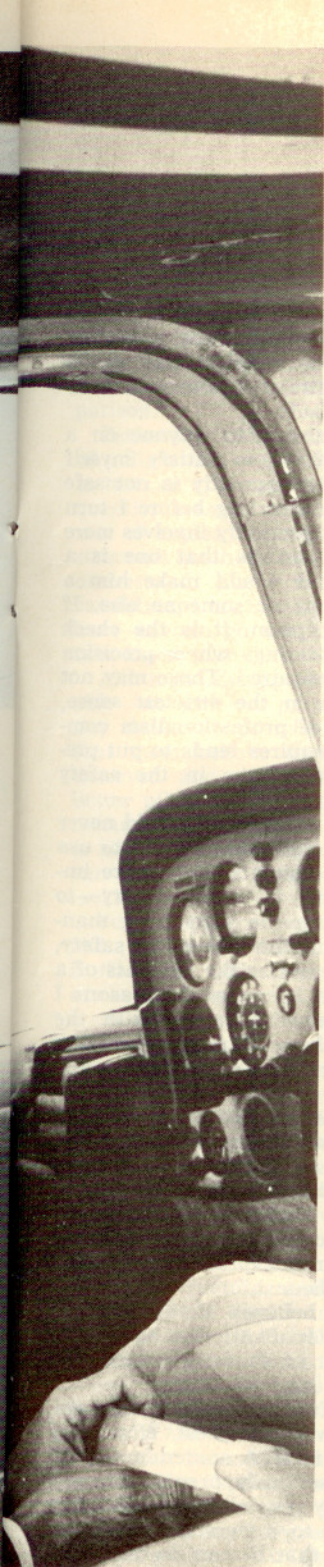
compatible considerations. She believes that tests should teach as well as judge. These views may be shared by a majority of the good pilot examiners around the country. But after 20 years, 25,000 flying hours, more than 1,000 “special” students and countless flight tests, Velta's testing techniques are uniquely her own.

To illustrate some of them, we condensed three checkrides to a single, composite schedule. The methods and dialogue described are typical. The im-

plied pass/fail ratio is not. On an annual basis, Velta dispenses pink slips at about the same 10% rate as the national average. We deliberately overstressed two unsuccessful candidates and we changed their names.

We assumed beautiful CAVU weather for our fictional day so that it could not be blamed for less than perfect performance. As it turned out, none of Velta's candidates would have needed the mitigation anyway. The first two never got past the orals.





Tim, a commercial candidate, arrived 45 minutes late. He was rumpled and red-eyed, but eager to get started. He dredged his and his airplane's credentials from an overfull briefcase and presented them for review. Ten minutes later he was on his way home. No pink slip. No new appointment. No charge. No ticket.

By contrast, the young private pilot candidate next up seemed well-prepared and confident. She flew in while Tim was there, refueled, tied down and sat

relaxed, waiting her turn. Her papers, as slickly bound as a salesman's brochure, contained all the essentials and they all checked out. When verbal questioning began, Jean looked like a shoo-in. But she, too, left without ever getting airborne. She netted a new appointment for the ride, a free lesson in bookwork and the unsought failing slip.

Explanation of these seeming inconsistencies helps to explain why Velta Benn is one of the most-sought after pilot examiners on the East Coast and why snaring her as a flight instructor is a coup comparable to discovering the mother lode. After all, few need or want explanations for passing. But reasons for failure are the bedrock of a pilot examiner's reputation.

Benn knew both candidates slightly. Tim trained at her airport. He never missed a blocktime without cause and he always traded friendly insults with his instructor about the contrast between his coat-and-tie formality and the instructor's casual outfits.

Tim's late and untidy arrival for a checkride was, at best, uncharacteristic. When Velta's efforts to put him at ease failed and he stumbled through the first simple answers, it was obvious to her that Tim's troubles went well beyond normal checkride jitters and she dismissed him without prejudice.

She learned later that one of his children had been involved in a serious accident that morning. Tim had assured himself of his son's well-being before setting out for his checkride, but he refused to acknowledge his own tension. Two weeks later he sailed through Velta's testing with barely a bobble. Now he has multi-engine and instrument ratings under his belt and seems to have taken Velta's "emotional stability" lecture to heart. He grounded himself for two weeks when his daughter ran off with a forbidden boyfriend.

Jean's problems were less apparent. She had been the fair-haired girl at a nearby airport—the well-coordinated, highly motivated one who soloed before her contemporaries, passed her written with high marks and always hit the bump at the end of a 360-degree turn. She was almost ready for private certification when she had to drop out of training. Now, nearly two years later, she had picked up where she quit, practiced diligently and crammed hard for this test. A small, but important oversight tripped her.

Her school owns five different models of the airplane she flew. Each has different performance parameters. Jean's rote response to the "best angle" and "best rate of climb" questions were

right for one model; wrong for the one she was flying that day. When similar questions evoked similarly slightly wrong answers, Velta asked her to look up the correct ones in the aircraft handbook. It was a trip to an alien land.

In her haste and eagerness to do well, Jean had spent hours memorizing answers her instructor had written down for the airplane she most often flew, but the handbook itself was as useless to her as a document published in Pushtu. As it turned out, so were the AIM, the logbooks and most of the other "pilot assistance" documents.

Velta covered these with her for the next hour, renewing knowledge Jean once had had and adding insight she had never encountered. On re-test she, too, passed with a near-perfect record.

Candidate number three that day was Commander Leonard L. Ahrnsbrak, who describes himself as an ecclesiastical bureaucrat—a Navy chaplain assigned to a desk job at the Pentagon. Benn had given him his phase check for a commercial rating, the check ride for that rating, and his phase check for the instrument rating for which he was now a candidate. As he and Benn recounted steps in his test (which had been completed earlier) it was obvious that theirs was a conversation between two professionals and that he probably had been sure to succeed from the outset.

Not so, according to Chaplain Ahrnsbrak. "The orals went well, but I was a little uptight and made a couple of dumb errors. My papers were all ready, though—the FCC radio license, commercial license, a fresh medical, written test results and my instructor's recommendation. Then we went over all the aircraft documents.

"I told Velta I had checked the logs and the aircraft was current, ready to go. When she asked, I also showed her the 100-hour inspection, the annual, and a date indicating that the static source check was not due again until next fall.

"I hadn't really expected so many questions about the aircraft documents, but it was all pretty informal. In between questions about airworthiness, registrations and operating limitations, she asked about my wife and daughter. Then she reviewed my log book and asked me to plan and file for a flight to Boston. She gave me 30 minutes to do it."

Velta Benn often uses the Washington to Boston trip for instrument candidates believing that it, like other routes in the Northeast corridor, gives



A neat, complete paperwork package indicates to Velta Benn that an applicant has made a professional effort to prepare for a rating test. Commander Leonard L. Ahrnsbrak begins what will end up as a successful four-hour instrument check.

VELTA BENN continued

good training and good testing. The route usually involves several clearance changes, holding patterns, work with three different centers and as many as eight controllers.

But after she is satisfied that the candidate can do the radio and enroute work, she often cancels the Boston clearance and heads for Baltimore or Wilmington. After the first approach to whatever IFR runway is in use, she then seeks permission for different type approaches and, weather permitting, a different runway. Missed approaches are standard fare.

Commander Ahrnsbrak devised his own slick flight planning form and, with his clearance copied on it and all the ground amenities done, he pronounced himself ready to go.

"That's when she got me. I checked all the flight instruments after the run-up—did everything and checked it twice—except setting the VORs. Velta grinned a little and suggested that it might be a good idea if I knew where I was going. After that, I settled down and did well enough for the remainder of the checkride—a very thorough one—that I got my ticket."

All told, this successful pilot examination, a typical Velta Benn IFR check, consumed about four hours. For Com-

mander Ahrnsbrak who trades his desk for a cockpit nearly every weekend, it fulfilled a childhood dream.

But why did Benn fail the private student? Why did she not fail Ahrnsbrak for forgetting to set VOR frequencies? What does she expect? Why the emphasis on paperwork? What may a pilot examiner ignore; what must be insisted on?

Benn has one answer to all those questions—safety.

"You can nitpick things that have nothing to do with safety until your candidate—or your student—has no time to take care of the safety items. On instrument flights, for instance, there is a requirement to maintain altitude within 100 feet and heading within 10 degrees. I will completely ignore their getting to 120 feet and 12 degrees off if they are keeping ahead of the airplane and are *thinking*. When they are, they will quickly notice the discrepancy and correct it. When they are not, it can be a failing item.

"Commander Ahrnsbrak's failure to set VOR frequencies on the ground was not a safety item in itself, but it would have increased his workload once he got airborne and is a practice that should be followed. I approach every flight test with the set idea that the candidate will pass. Up to that point in his check, Commander Ahrnsbrak clearly had proven his competence and he

had earned a chance to prove it further in the air. He would have plenty of time to show me whether this was a nervous oversight or whether it indicated a serious fault.

"Besides, I rarely fail anyone on a single item. I have to satisfy myself that the candidate actually is not safe for that particular rating before I turn him down. That generally involves more than one item, unless that one is a safety factor that would make him a hazard to himself or someone else. If there is an exception, it is the check for commercial ratings where precision maneuvers are required. Those may not be safety items in the strictest sense, but the degree of professionalism commercial flying requires tends to put precision flying maneuvers in the safety category.

"Jean, on the other hand, could never be a safe pilot until she learned to use the airplane documents. It is more important—in fact, it is mandatory—to know how to use the supporting manuals published in the interest of safety, than it is to memorize the contents of a single one. That is one of the reasons I emphasize paperwork—along with the fact that all the documents, however cumbersome, are FAA-stipulated prerequisites.

If the papers are complete, current, and the candidate knows what they say, I really don't care if they present them to me in a bushel basket. But I have to admit that a neat, complete package indicates to me that the candidate has made a serious, professional effort to prepare for the test."

Velta Benn believes that, in flight checks, professionalism often equates to a simple matter of showing respect due another individual.

"Flying is a fun profession," she says, "and it deserves the best efforts of those involved in it. A student's responsibility is to seriously prepare himself for the test. My responsibility is to give him full due—to understand and put him at ease so that he can do his best."

Velta's technique for combating checkride fever often starts with small talk having nothing to do with flying. "We usually ease into the orals with the pilot never realizing he is underway."

Another favorite ploy is to talk about her own early apprehensions and shortcomings. Most don't believe it, but they are still diverted by hearing that this accomplished pilot was once too inhibited to ask how to read the compass in front of her. "Everyone has some complex they would prefer not to show. The fear of failing, or of being not quite so good as the next pilot, can be overwhelming. Men, particularly, often

tell me they would rather fly with me than with other men—maybe because they feel no competition, or no comparison.”

Benn also believes that the brief span of a flight test can contribute to, as well as test, an applicant's competence. “Frequently, a small correction, or another way of explaining, will reinforce an instructor's methods and help his student understand. Even if I have to fail a candidate, I try to help and try never to have anyone go away angry or uncertain about why they failed.

Although disappointment is inevitable—on both our parts—there is never any doubt about *why*. I like to think that most believe their pink slip was deserved and that they learned to be better pilots in the process. We always discuss the reasons at length and I try to have the instructor present so that he can help them work on areas found lacking.”

Velta Benn was born in North Platte, Neb., where her father broke horses for Buffalo Bill Cody. Her mother was one of the first women in Nebraska to drive a car and, until recently, she so enjoyed airplanes that she could almost qualify as an “airport bum.”

After Velta Benn learned to fly at College Park, Md., in 1941, she began to add to the family “firsts.” She was the first woman, so far as is known, to fly high-performance jets from a Navy aircraft carrier, the first woman flight instructor at AOPA flight clinics, a charter member of the National Association of Flight Instructors, and more. She has been AOPA's Flight Instructor of the Month, and FAA's D.C. area Flight Instructor of the Year. She is a Ninety-Nines' Amelia Earhart scholarship and flying achievement award winner. She was a WASP and is a charter pilot and chief pilot for a Washington area flight service. Her “special” students have included congressmen, judges, problem students referred by other instructors, foreign students like the French couple who came to the U.S. for their ratings, and special-request students referred by flying organizations who wanted to guarantee the best possible training.

If you are “prepping” for a flight test for a new rating, you may not be lucky enough to make a date with Velta Benn for the checkride. But you should take her tips to heart. Do your homework. Do your paperwork. Practice. Know the manuals. If you are a safe pilot, you will pass, as 90% of her candidates do. If you flunk, don't panic. You have learned something in the process that can only make you a better, safer pilot in the years ahead. □