

# Tailwheel





# transition

A Cub helps an airline pilot  
rediscover his roots

**S**ome flying lessons we learn more than once. And every so often, we don't realize what we've forgotten until its absence stares us in the face. ■ These cosmic thoughts flashed through my mind one fall morning as I stood in my backyard, watching a yellow Piper J-3 Cub meander overhead. It was making slight progress against a stiff northwest wind. A cold front had passed through southern New Hampshire the night before, and the pilot and his passenger were eking out no more than 30 or 40 knots across the ground. They flew low enough that I was tempted to wave hello, and they answered with a wag of the wing. I was instantly jealous. In the few minutes it took for the Cub to pass overhead, I realized that I needed to be flying one too. Later that evening,

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PHOTOGRAPHY BY MIKE FIZER







I dug through my logbooks to find the last time that I had taken off and landed a taildragger. The answer was painfully clear: Too long ago. In fact, it had been 16 years earlier, almost to the day, that I flew a Douglas DC-3 for the final time, while working for a commuter airline. I had logged several hundred hours in the Douglas over a five-month period back then. In the intervening years, I had flown in a few other taildraggers, but I hadn't taken off or landed one for many years. I wasn't even sure that I remembered how it was done.

I ran through some of the basics in my mind. Unlike a tricycle-gear airplane, the main gear on a taildragger is ahead of the center of gravity (CG). A bounced landing causes the airplane to pitch up, and the resulting increased angle of attack makes it want to fly again. Just the opposite occurs in

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a tricycle-gear airplane, with its main wheels behind the CG. A firm landing tends to drive the nose down, decreasing lift. Taxiing, takeoffs, and landings are different too. A taildragger's aft CG tends to amplify any yawing moments, and too heavy or light a foot on rudders or brakes can easily cause the airplane to swap ends in a ground loop.

Clearly, some refresher training would be called for. The more I thought about it, however, the more obvious it seemed that a checkout in a flying machine as elemental as a Cub was just what I needed. It was the polar opposite of my workday life, the simple yin to the hustle-bustle yang of airline flying. It would be a chance to brush up on forgotten skills. Better yet, it was the kind of flying that I had done as a young boy with my father, back when the aviation bug had first grabbed hold of me. Long before I had ever heard of jet streams or long-range navigation, I had known Taylorcrafts and Cubs. I could recall watching the world pass below in that daydreaming way kids know intuitively and adults need vacations to remember. If flying a Cub couldn't bring me back to my roots, then there was simply no going back.



And so we started from the beginning. Beauchamp is the perfect instructor, long on experience and a gifted teacher to boot. Before I realized it, 45 minutes had breezed by as we discussed the nuances of the J-3. The one we would fly had recently been completely re-covered with new fabric. It had also been modified with the addition of the larger, wraparound aft window found on the military L-4 model. "Depending on who you ask, it is either a J-3 or a J-3/L-4 model," Beauchamp informed me. The Cub's yellow fuselage sported Air Force stars and bars to go with the new window, although it had never really seen military life. It was powered by a diminutive 65-horsepower Continental

engine, driving a fixed-pitch wooden climb propeller. (The J-3 first appeared in 1938 powered by an even smaller 40-hp engine, but by 1945 this had been upgraded to the larger Continental.) "With this prop it won't go much faster than about 75 mph in level flight," Beauchamp said, "but then again, you're probably not in a hurry if you're flying a Cub." In fact, I was in the opposite of hurry. I was beginning to think in Cub-time.

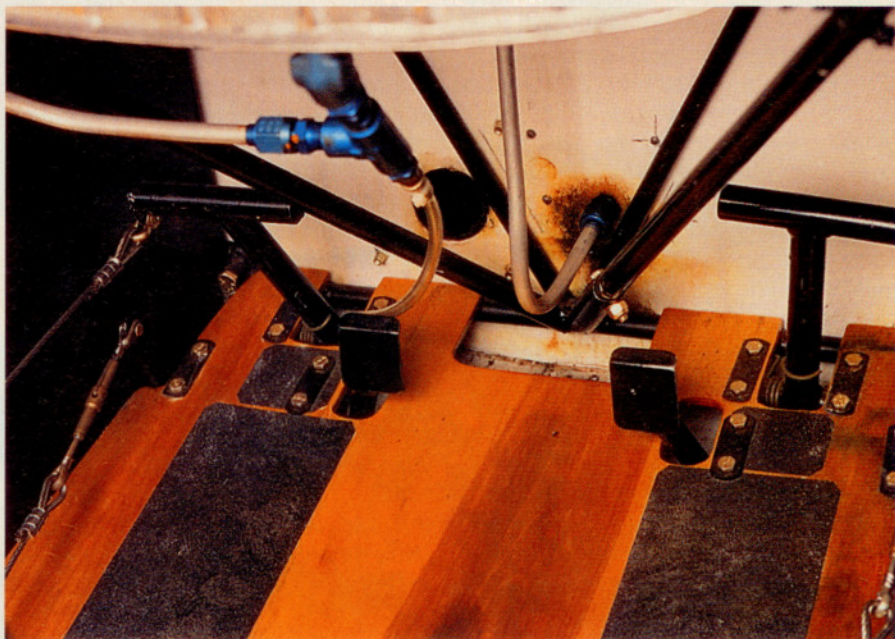
After a leisurely and straightforward preflight, I climbed aboard. Or rather, I inserted my six-foot, four-inch frame in the tight confines of the aft seat, having located the small metal exterior step needed to do so. I would need to develop a more elegant technique for getting



*Compared to a modern glass-cockpit jetliner, the taildragger Cub's cockpit and instrumentation are relatively simple. The light rudder pedals and tiny, sensitive heel brakes can cause the pilot to overcontrol, especially after too much time in a jet—and too little time in a Cub.*

Fortunately I didn't have to look very far to find one. Hampton Airfield (7B3), a 2,100-foot-long grass strip in the Seacoast region of New Hampshire, is just 20 minutes from my house. Piper Cub instruction is an institution there, having been offered continuously for more than five decades. I sometimes rent Cessna Skyhawks from the airfield's sole FBO, and I knew that it employed an excellent instructor, Bud Beauchamp.

"Pretend I've never seen a taildragger," I told Beauchamp, a former Army helicopter pilot, on our first outing.





inside, considering the number of airplane watchers normally in attendance at the airport café. The next challenge was to find the miniscule heel brakes that my size-11 feet would have to reach when needed. These were located below and inboard of the somewhat more accessible rudder pedals. By trial and error, I found a workable, if awkward, method of controlling both. This too would improve with practice, I promised myself.

Engine start in a Cub is a simple matter of holding the brakes, cracking the throttle open a quarter-inch or so, and turning the magneto switch located on the upper left side wall to Both. There is no electric starter, so the engine must be hand-propped, something Beauchamp accomplished before getting aboard himself. With the two of us and nine gallons of fuel loaded, the aircraft was very near its 1,200-pound gross weight limit.

Taxiing to the run-up area required that I make periodic S-turns in order to see around the blind spot created by the raised nose. I reminded myself for the second or third time to feel the rudder, feel the rudder. And in case I had forgotten, I added a warning to not even think about being heavy on the brakes.

For our first takeoff, Beauchamp rec-

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ommended letting the airplane fly itself off the runway with minimal assist. The natural nose-high attitude of the airplane when parked on the ground is very nearly the same as that used for liftoff. I pushed the throttle forward, and the airplane started rolling. The tail began to lighten, and I eased back slightly on the stick to keep the tailwheel on the ground a tad longer. A few ever-so-gentle nudges on the rudder pedals and a bit of stick into the light crosswind, and voilà, the Cub was

airborne. A little more back-pressure and it settled into a comfortable 55-mph climb, albeit at a less-than-spectacular 400-fpm climb rate caused by our heavy takeoff weight.

Airplanes don't get much simpler than this. The outside world is the attitude indicator. The seat of one's pants is the turn coordinator. The changing sounds of the engine and slipstream are about all that's needed to know whether you're slow or fast or just right. As we headed toward the practice area, I realized the less-is-more truth about the Cub. It is flying as basic as flying can be, civilization stripped of everything but the *civil*. And pound for pound, a lot of fun.

Following some practice of slow flight and stalls (completely docile, as the Cub starts flying again with a mere hint of forward stick), we headed back to Hampton for our first landing. There are really two ways to land a taildragger, on the main gear first (called a *wheel landing*) or in a three-point attitude. I tried a three-pointer first, with marginal results. The touchdown was good, I thought, but we ballooned back into the air. If we had been in a Skyhawk, we would have stayed on the ground, I told myself. "Keep the stick coming back, and it won't want to start







flying again," preached Beauchamp as we taxied back for another go at it. My second landing was OK, my third was better. My rudder control was not yet as natural as I wanted it to be. The pedals were so much lighter in feel than what I was used to, and I was tending to overcontrol. A few more times around the pattern, though, and the light control touch demanded by the Cub began to feel more normal.

Our first hour passed in the blink of an eye. A couple of days later Beauchamp and I were back at it, this time working on wheel takeoffs and landings. To make a wheel takeoff, nudge the stick forward early in the takeoff roll to lift the tail and lower the aircraft's natural climb attitude. The rest of the takeoff is made on the main wheels. Once sufficient flying speed is reached, pull back lightly on the stick and the Cub becomes airborne.

The wheel landing involves adding a small amount of power just before touchdown to provide additional lift in ground effect. A slight push on the stick keeps the tail in the air as the mains settle to the runway. Then all power is

removed. Once speed slows sufficiently, the tail begins to drop to the runway, and the stick should be pulled back to keep it there, just as in the three-point landing. Wheel landings are the better choice in stiff crosswinds, since the rudder is presented more fully to the slipstream for better effectiveness. The downside is that they generally require more runway to accomplish. Except for the shortest of strips, however, runway length is generally not a big problem for a Cub.

The classic Piper was starting to take on that comfortable-pair-of-old-shoes feeling, but I wanted to spend one more outing with Beauchamp. The following week we flew to nearby Skyhaven Airport, a paved strip in Rochester, New Hampshire. The Cub is noticeably more sensitive to rudder inputs on a concrete surface. Extra care must be taken not to overcontrol it, especially in crosswind situations. Any lurking control problems that might have remained hidden on grass become obvious here.

The pattern work went well, and after an enjoyable hour we returned to

Hampton. I was feeling markedly better about my flying life. While I wouldn't say I had yet mastered the J-3, the two of us had become comfortably well-acquainted. Beauchamp agreed and endorsed my logbook, allowing me to rent the FBO's airplanes.

A few days later I was up in the Cub again, this time with my 10-year-old daughter, Lauren, riding front seat. She didn't say a lot during the flight, but I could tell just by her body language that she was enjoying herself. She saw her house, her school, and all the old and familiar places in town from a different perspective. Me, too. When the snow comes this winter, we're planning to add a new twist to our flying life—a Cub on skis. Now *there's* a cosmic thought. □

**i** Links to additional information about flying Piper Cubs may be found on AOPA Online ([www.aopa.org/pilot/links.shtml](http://www.aopa.org/pilot/links.shtml)). Vincent Czaplyski holds ATP and CFI certificates. He flies as a Boeing 757 captain for a major U.S. airline.