



I learned about flying from that //

HORROR IN A HIRTENBERG

A seasoned flier looks back on a teenage flight that could have ended his life.

In 1954, I was very fortunate to be granted a Royal Air Force cadet force flying scholarship, which allowed me to get my private pilot licence at 17.

To keep in flying practice afterwards, I offered flights to anybody who would share the cost of transportation to the airport. So one Saturday morning, two of us fronted up to the Croydon Aero Club, south of London, to borrow a Tiger Moth, only to learn that we'd have to join the club and pay to fly.

I gave my companion the sad news. It was a perfect day for flying, others were preflighting Tiger Moths, Chipmunks, Miles Hawks, Percival Gulls, and a machine that I didn't recognise, which I approached curiously.

Somebody told us it was a 'Hirtenberg' – a wartime Luftwaffe light aircraft which, after Germany's surrender, went to the research body, the Royal Aircraft Establishment. The 'establishment' was set up to evaluate captured enemy aircraft and demonstrate their characteristics to RAF pilots.

It was then sold as war surplus to the local chapter of the Experimental Flying Group – about 30 private pilots, unable to afford aero club rates.

I mentioned to a member of the group that I'd just got my PPL, and could I fly the German aircraft? I was assured I'd need only a quick circuit to check me out.

He helped me into the rear cockpit and pointed out a few controls and instruments. »

“Throttle’s on your left, just like a Tiger. Oh, and the airspeed indicator’s in kilometres and the altimeter’s in metres. But don’t worry, we climb and descend at 90, and 300 metres is near enough to the circuit height of 1000 feet.

“Ignore all those German signs and funny instruments ‘coz none of us know what they are either.”

I looked at the bewildering array of strange dials and unintelligible notices while he chocked the wheels and positioned himself in front of the propeller.

“Ready to go?” he called, and I nodded.

“Switches off, fuel on?” he called.

“Dunno, which is on?”

“Oh sorry, ‘ein’ is ‘on’ and ‘aus’ is ‘off’.”

“OK, switches off, fuel on,” I chanted.

He pulled the propeller through several revolutions before calling, “Throttle set?”

“Throttle set.”

“Switches on. Contact!”

“Contact!” The engine started on the first attempt and he removed the chocks and clambered into the front cockpit.

Following his instructions, I taxied out and performed a full circuit and landing. The Hirtenberg handled just like a Tiger Moth, and my landing was smoother than many I’d done in Tigers.

“Very nice. OK, old chap, I’ve got her,” my instructor shouted over his shoulder, and we taxied back to the hangar to beckon my friend over.

“OK, she’s all yours,” the instructor shouted, once my passenger was secured. “Take her away and try a few turns, then come back and try a circuit once you feel confident enough.”

He waved me away and I taxied out to the grass runway.

After take-off, I climbed to 1000 metres. My passenger was ecstatic at being airborne and asked me to perform some aerobatics, which posed a problem because I’d never learned aerobatics, only spins and stalls.

So I levelled out and closed the throttle to demonstrate a stall. It proved similar to the Tiger’s – very gentle – which didn’t satisfy my fare-paying passenger, who demanded a bit more excitement for his money. So not wishing to upset him, I closed the throttle again and announced I would now demonstrate a spin.

He let out a *whoop* when the aircraft suddenly surprised us by flicking inverted before entering a fully developed spin.



Photo courtesy of John Parker, abpic.co.uk.

// My passenger and I were lucky to survive my stupidity. Tragically, the statistics show there are plenty of young pilots who have not. //

I allowed it to do three full turns to give him value for his money before initiating recovery action, which was when I encountered difficulty applying corrective rudder against the excessive air loads, so recovery took a lot longer than in the trusty Tiger Moth.

Then I nearly pulled back too hard on the stick on the pull out because the aircraft shuddered and tried to snap into a spin in the opposite direction. By now the German altimeter indicated less than 200 metres.

I decided this was enough aerobatics for one day and, with shaking hands, set course back to Croydon, despite the indignant protestations of my passenger.

After a cautious circuit and landing, I parked outside the Experimental Flying Group's hangar, and waited to stop trembling.

My instructor greeted me.

"How d'yer like her?" he enquired.

"Fantastic!" My passenger responded delightedly. "We did a spiral dive and a zoom. I loved it!"

"Actually it was a spin," I reassured the instructor. "I took her up to 1000 metres, then did a spin to the left."

I sensed sudden great interest, because several members of the Experimental Flying Group hurried over to stare at me. My instructor asked a few more questions, and became very attentive when I mentioned the excessive rudder loads and the tendency to snap in the opposite direction during recovery.

A small crowd pressed closer to hear my answers.

"Why is everybody so interested in my flight?" I enquired after 10 minutes of interrogation.

"Just building up information for the other members." My instructor pointed to a bold red sign in the centre of the instrument panel proclaiming 'spinnen verboten!'

"We think that means 'spinning prohibited,'" he confided conspiratorially.

"So, as you're the first person to spin the Hirtenberg, we're all very interested to hear how she handled."

Hirtenberg G-AGAK crashed at Butser Hill in Hampshire, in February 1958, while the pilot was practising spins.

I look back, knowing what I do now, and shudder at the litany of potentially lethal mistakes I made.

Among them, I:

- was in too much of a hurry to get airborne
- didn't familiarise myself with the aeroplane's handling characteristics and limitations
- performed manoeuvres prohibited in the flight manual
- allowed financial considerations to affect my judgement
- performed manoeuvres beyond my capability and experience
- had insufficient familiarisation with cockpit layout
- didn't brief my passenger or check his security (seat belt)
- allowed my passenger, who was totally ignorant of the danger I was putting us both in, to control things.

My passenger and I were lucky to survive my stupidity. Tragically, the statistics show there are plenty of young pilots who have not.

So, what would I teach today's teenage pilots to minimise the risk associated with a sense of being bulletproof, and an immature desire to please, and establish 'rep'?

I'd tell them to never hurry the preflight checks, and to comply, always, with their preflight briefing.

I'd tell them to familiarise themselves with all controls, switches, and instrument indications.

And I'd tell them to *never* attempt something they hadn't been taught. 🚫