



JEFF SKILES
COMMENTARY / CONTRAILS



Training Flight

Getting current in a 71-year-old bomber

BY JEFF SKILES

OUR FLIGHT ENGINEER, PHIL Pedron, who sits behind me facing backward, expertly conducts the time-consuming ritual of bringing the four massive radial engines to life. It's a complex process just to prepare for the start. The engineer first operates the pre-oil pump on all four engines for 30 seconds or so before rotating the props through a couple of complete rotations to check for hydraulic lock of the bottom cylinders. He begins with the No. 3 engine before moving on to 4, 2, and 1 in succession.

AWAKENING A GIANT

The start occurs in the same sequence. Phil switches the fuel boost pump on low, turns on the magneto, and cranks the engine while toggling the primer switch. The engine coughs twice and then fires off with a roar as Phil modulates the throttle and turns off the primer and boost pump while advancing the mixture. Oil and fuel pressure are checked, and he moves on to the next engine.

With all four running, Ben, our flight engineer instructor who has been carefully watching and giving encouragement from his position on the ramp, packs up his headset and interphone wire and climbs aboard via the ladder in the nose wheel well. He slams the big, heavy hatch down, and we are now secured in the aircraft. Outside, the fire guard drags the rather large fire extinguisher back to the hangar as

we wait for all oil temperatures to rise above 40°F for taxi.

CHECKRIDE

Both Phil and I are getting annual check-rides, and a successful completion will clear us to fly on tour with *FIFI* for another year. My check pilot is longtime CAF aircraft commander Bill Goeken. Bill is a tall, slow-spoken Texan. To say Bill is tall really doesn't describe the situation. Think Kareem Abdul-Jabbar tall, and he's just as thin. Bill flies both the B-24 Liberator and the B-29 for the CAF Dallas wing. He is a retired Delta Air Lines pilot and has such a calm, laid-back manner that nothing seems to attract more than casual notice in Bill's world. In the cockpit he has a way of voicing his criticisms with such polite southern charm that they are often easy to miss. "I like to make my approaches a little flatter; you might want to work on that a little bit." I get it. I was pretty high.

TAXIING ISN'T PRETTY

With the usual cacophony of squealing brakes and lurching progression I taxi on out to the runway. *FIFI* has old expander tube brakes and a nonsteerable, free-swiveling nose wheel. These two maladies together make taxiing the Superfortress as much of a challenge as flying it. I'm getting better with it each year, though, and I think my technique has vastly improved by the time we get to the end of the runway.

Phil accomplishes the lengthy run-up procedure before I continue onto the runway and line up with the centerline stripes. Braking to a stop I am careful to not cock that free-swiveling nose wheel to one side. Holding the brakes, I command, "Engineer, manifold 30." The power comes up, and once it sounds stabilized I release the brakes and we begin the takeoff roll. Initial steering is done entirely with differential thrust from the engines. Steering by jockeying the throttles is hard to get used to at first, but eventually it comes together. Once the rudder becomes effective I command, "Engineer's throttles, max power." That's the last time I will touch the throttles for this flight. Phil runs the power up to 44 inches of manifold pressure, and at our light weight we race down the runway. One hundred mph has come and gone before I lighten the nose, and at 125 mph the B-29 sort of levitates off the runway.

A squeeze of the brakes leads to the thump, thump of the wheels coming to a stop, and I call "Gear up" while pushing the yoke forward to climb out low and flat. Speed, not altitude, is what we seek. At 150 mph I command, "Flaps up, climb one," and begin a turn. Bill gets the flaps while the throttles are reduced to 40 inches of manifold pressure. At 190 mph, I call "Climb two, after-takeoff checklist." The power is further reduced to 35 inches and the propellers are reduced to 2300 rpm for the climb while Bill and Phil run through the checklist.

AIRBORNE

With all the drama in the past *FIFI* settles into a rather flat climb-out at 170 to 180 mph. The B-29 doesn't climb very fast even though we are well below gross weight. I wonder how long it took crews over the Pacific to get to cruise altitude on their way to the empire of Japan, probably the entire six- to seven-hour flight. According to my Boeing book, the Superfortress was flown at a wartime weight of up to 140,000 pounds. It's hard to imagine how the four twin-row Wrights and slender wings could even lift the airframe off the runways of Tinian at that weight much less fly the 1,475 miles on to Tokyo. For today's training flight we are at a mere 85,000 pounds, and the CAF operates *FIFI* at a maximum gross weight of only 110,000 pounds.

I point the glass nose northwest and climb to about 3,000 feet for air work. Reaching altitude, the call of "Cruise power, cruise check" brings the engines back to a low rumble as the 18-cylinder engines are further reduced to 28 inches and 1800 rpm. Bill asks for a steep turn in each direction followed by some slow flight. Steep turns are somewhat complicated, as is all flying in the B-29, by the complete lack of visual reference. The instruments are

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mounted well below your eye level, and there is no control panel or dash to give you reference against the horizon; large pitch changes are possible without a lot of visual perception to the pilot.

THREE TAKEOFFS AND LANDINGS

After the air work we head for Alliance airport in northwest Fort Worth for the requisite three takeoffs and landings for currency. I call for an “in range” checklist and do a quick briefing for the approach and landing while Phil reduces power for the descent. Obviously with the B-29 we accomplish a “bomber” pattern—high and wide. The goal is to get to a position opposite the numbers with the gear down and flaps 15. The B-29 doesn’t like to slow down in a descent, so pattern altitude is achieved first and then we bleed off airspeed in level flight.

Below 180 mph I call “Gear down,” and the electric motors whir to lower the main gear and nose wheel. Once the three green gear-down indicators illuminate, and the scanners get a chance to view the physical gear-down indicators, I call “Flaps 15, before-landing checklist.” This somewhat unusual sequence of lowering the gear before the flaps allows the scanners to see the main gear-down indicators before they are obscured by the flaps.

Opposite the runway numbers I call “Manifold 25” and begin a descent at 150 mph. Rounding base elicits a call of “Flaps 25,” and on

final “Flaps 35,” and then “Flaps 45” is called for. I shoot for an approach speed of no less than 125 mph, that being the minimum controllable speed with an outboard engine out.

From here on out I just call power settings to hopefully have us crossing the numbers at the proper spot; “Manifold 24,” “Manifold 22,” and “Ease ‘em off” as we flare to land.

On this flight I feel as if I have a good eye for the flare, and we touch down on the mains with the nose wheel still off the pavement. Landing three-point has been a problem for me in the past. The pitch attitude required in the flare seems unusually high to me.

MAKE IT A TOUCH AND GO

I stand up the throttles to keep our speed from decaying as Bill retracts the flaps and resets the trim. When Bill says okay, I call “Engineer, max power,” and we’re in the air almost immediately for another time around. After the third landing we taxi back in to the ramp with the brakes squealing away, and Bill signs my training sheet. I’m good to go for another year on tour. Checkride passed! *EAA*

Jeff Skiles, EAA Lifetime 336120, is an ATP and CFII-ME who has been an airline and light airplane pilot for almost 40 years. He owned a Cessna 140 and a Waco YOC and currently flies a Cessna 185. Jeff can be reached at JeffreyBSkiles@gmail.com.

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