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FORUM

THE BLUE BOX: SOLO

Gary Heartsill

How far back in the training of pilots do we have to go to teach the modern crew concept of airplanes? Should we go back to nickel beer and put tail wheels back on the airplanes? This minority report suggests going back almost that far. What do you think?

An old Link Trainer with a blue fuselage and one yellow wing sits in the atrium of the SimuFlite Training Center at D/FW. The right wing has been removed to fit the trainer snug in the corner. The Link Trainer, as a static display, is tilted to the left with the door open and the hood up, so the single placed cockpit can be viewed. A small white light illuminates the primitive instrument panel. Perhaps you have seen this Link.

Perhaps you, like me, have flown the Link at one time or another in your career. Do you remember the red map lights, the creaking sounds, the sweat, and the vomit smell? Do you remember, while doing turns, the occasional outside light that would drift across the panel through a crack in the blue fabric hull? Ah, the longing for the true and the beautiful ... were those the good old days or not?

This may be a minority opinion, but that old blue Link Trainer was a better trainer than some of the PC tabletop, motionless stuff we have today. In a way, the old blue Link is superior to our present-day Level C and D simulators. For one thing, flying the old blue Link gave you a better instrument scan or crosscheck; it had to be better to keep the whirling blue box from falling off its precarious perch. For another, while in the Link you always knew where you were. Spatial awareness was a given: you didn't leave the chocks without it. Shooting ADF approaches in the Link, after a timed descent in the hold (the stack), was better training than using our forced, modern-day ATC radar vectors. Besides that, all the decisions were made by the pilot. There was no polling or assertiveness. When you were cleared for the approach, the problem-solving and flying was up to *just*

the pilot.

The appreciation for being solo, like a mail pilot, a crop duster, or a fighter pilot, comes out of the satisfaction of having done it by yourself. Flying the Link didn't have team building. Flying the Link didn't have leadership-followship. It was a one-man band. The competition pitted the pilot and the machine against the elements. *One learns how to fly when solo.*

This solo flying suggests that the confidence, the experience, and the seasoning gained while flying in the Link does more for being able to fly large, multi-crewed airplanes than some of us realize. This solo confidence adds to one's flying ability so the outcome is never in doubt. Solo confidence is the attitude expressed by our first supersonic hero when asked about the fragged outcome: "In doubt? Hell, there ain't no way I'm gonna screw this up."

We should go back to the Link Trainer. Pilots should have the Link Trainer first. They need to have the scan, the awareness, and the confidence *before* they fly as a crew. A pilot trained in a blue Link Trainer with yellow wings has the appreciation and the perception that are difficult to learn in a multi-crew environment. Every pilot should have the experience of flying the Link Trainer; indeed, it adds to the true and the beautiful.

We could start by cranking up that old blue Link Trainer on the first floor at SimuFlite, but before we call for our clearance, we need to replace that right yellow wing. □

The Blue Box: Solo

Gary Heartsill earned a Ph.D. from the University of North Texas. He is an Aeronautical Science adjunct assistant professor at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University and he is a Learjet instructor pilot for SimuFlite Training International at the D/FW airport.□