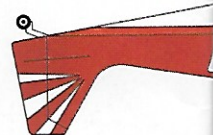
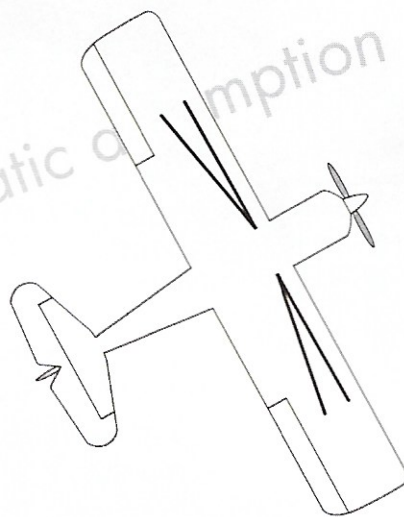
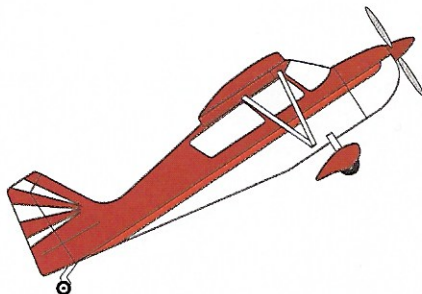
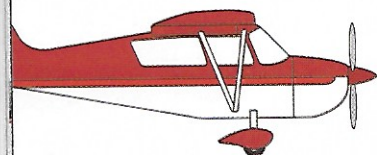




Aerobatic assumption

Name withheld by request



Just over a decade ago I was a Grade 2 instructor, working at a flying school in Canberra. I was approached by a gentleman who asked if he could do some aerobatic training in our Decathlon, and have me sign him off for a solo hire and fly. I'll call him Ron, because after all these years I honestly cannot remember his name. I asked Ron about his licensing, flight time etc. and discovered that he was a RAAF pilot, currently working in Russell Offices, and not particularly current. However, he had flown Winjeels, Macchis and Iroquois among others, and had nearly 3000 hours, so I felt pretty comfortable that we would be OK.

I briefed Ron on the general handling and speeds of the Decathlon, and then briefly discussed wingovers, loops and aileron rolls. He had no questions, so we signed out the keys, and walked to the aeroplane for the pre-flight walkaround. Ron was affable, and obviously keen to go solo in this little beastie, but tended to rush ahead a little of my instruction. I had to rein him in a little at times, and get him to work through the checklist more thoroughly.

I talked him through the take-off and climb. He was clearly rusty, as we were hardly ever in balance, and the airspeed varied 10 knots either side of the designated climb speed, but he was improving nicely by the time we arrived at the training area. I was pleased with his improvement, but beginning to wonder about his 3000 hours of experience! I had flown with some excellent military pilots and he wasn't reflecting their high calibre. Nevertheless, we continued with the sortie as planned. I demonstrated a wingover and loop, and then had Ron take over and try the same.

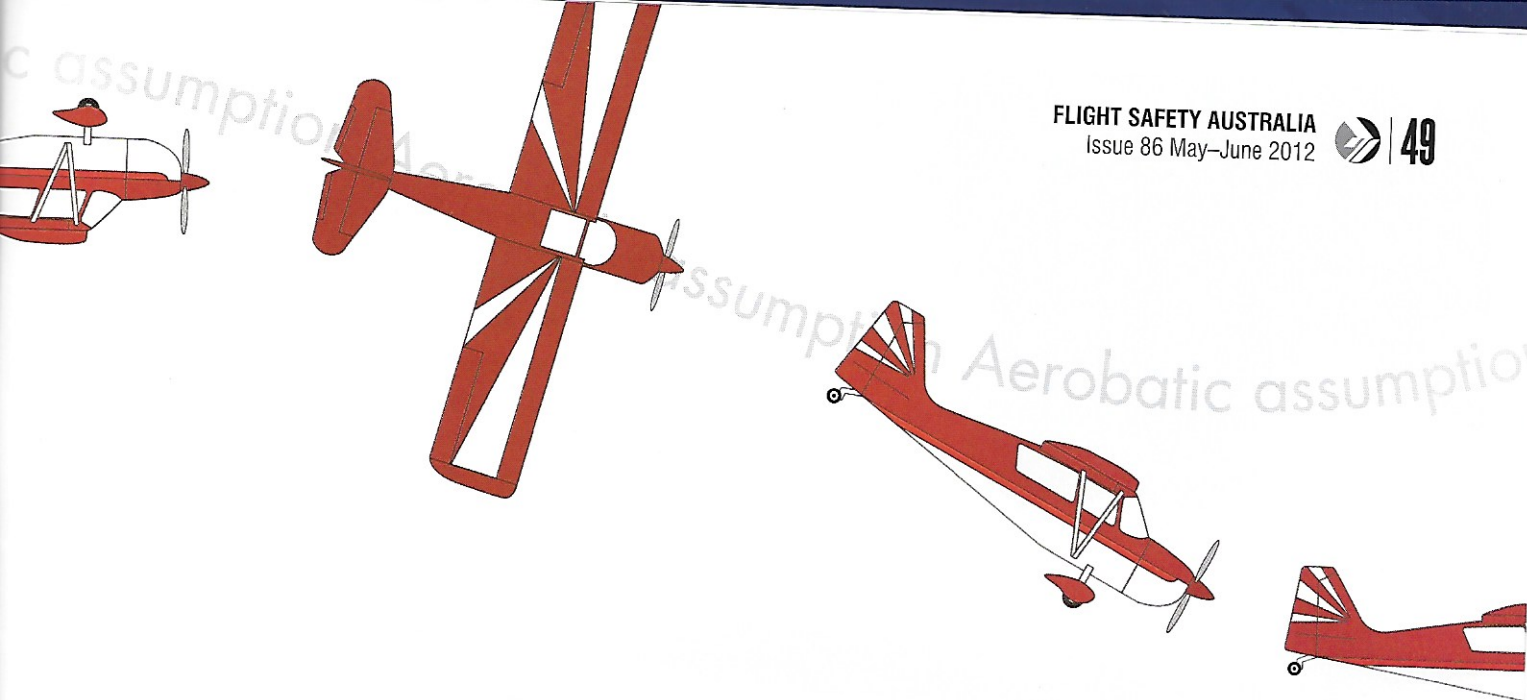
He rushed the wingover, taking the nose just a little short of the required attitude, and then diving too steeply for the loop entry. We were about to overspeed the prop, so I nudged the throttle back a little to keep the revs under the limit. As he pitched up—at nearly 5g—he rammed the throttle hard forward and we sailed over the top of the loop without any relaxation of backpressure. This was not particularly surprising, and I was really questioning those 3000 hours!

A couple more attempts, and we were beginning to get the idea, so I thought I'd introduce the aileron roll. Taking over, I patterned another wingover, and then demonstrated the roll. Ron said he understood what I was after, so I handed over to him to have a go—something I promptly regretted.

Ron's wingover was again too shallow, his pitch down too steep, and the airspeed definitely too high as we finally pitched up to start the roll. I should have taken over and stopped the manoeuvre before it got any worse, but I underestimated Ron's ability to frighten me.

He pitched the nose to the horizon—too low by about 10°—and then started to roll. By the time we were inverted, even Ron could see that he had messed it up. However, his fix was something to behold. Having slowed the roll rate to almost zero, Ron did the one thing he shouldn't—and I was sure he wouldn't—he pushed! Unfortunately, he was also a little more forceful than he should have been, and we both lost our headsets as the g-meter registered minus three! I was trying to take control, but because neither of us had our headset any longer, I was yelling, and trying to overpower Ron on the controls. The roll began again and we were beginning to recover. By the time we got to wings level, we were still nose low and the little Decathlon was beginning to accelerate.

I'm not certain which of us had initiated the roll, though I certainly had tried to, but now Ron sprang to life once more and pulled hard on the stick. This time we pulled 5g positive, and the poor, abused little Decathlon finally decided that enough was enough! The snap roll was something to behold, given that it occurred about 30kt faster than normal. I wasn't particularly surprised with the roll, but it totally fazed Ron, and he froze on the controls. This time, I punched his shoulder and yelled at the top of my voice, and he finally got the message and released the stick. I took over and recovered from the unusual attitude, then turned the nose of the aircraft back towards the airport.



We both found our headsets and donned them once again, but the trip back to the airport was made pretty much in silence, as we were both deep in thought. I had some serious doubts about Ron's experience, and I wasn't about to continue the sortie until the aeroplane had been checked out. I didn't think it was damaged in any way, but I wasn't certain that the Decathlon could handle another roller-coaster ride. I was also wondering just how I would go about the debrief. By the time we arrived in the circuit, I had calmed down somewhat and handed the aircraft back to Ron for the landing.

He was keen to try some circuits and I let him have a go, but to say that he didn't scare me more than a little would be a lie. At least we didn't break the undercarriage. Three circuits were enough for me though, and we finally went home. As we taxied clear of the runway, I was staggered when Ron suggested that he would only spend 30 minutes in the circuit! He expected to be going solo, in spite of all that had happened in the past 45 minutes. I had to break it to him that he wasn't going solo, and that we needed to talk.

I felt bad as I tried to explain his many mistakes, and remind him that he clearly hadn't understood my instructions whilst in the aircraft. The one question on my mind though, was just how many hours he really had, because it clearly wasn't what he had told me. It all made sense when he told me that he had last flown a fixed-wing aircraft over 15 years ago, and the majority of his 2600 hours had been in helicopters!

What did I learn from this experience? Well, for one, I learned not to simply

accept everything a student says. We all have an ego, and some of us find it difficult to admit a lack of experience, currency or ability. I should not have automatically assumed that Ron was up to the task, but instead should have given him a full brief on the principles and considerations of that particular sortie. Then, having spotted the first clue that things just weren't as described, I should have stopped the sortie immediately, and given more instructions, or even gone back to the airport for a thorough briefing. I should have noticed a number of clues in the first few manoeuvres, but I'd been misled by Ron's military background and assumed he would be like the other military pilots with whom I'd flown previously.

Subsequent inspection showed that the Decathlon had not suffered any damage, and was in every way serviceable. However, it has to be said, we were both very fortunate not to have broken the aeroplane, or killed ourselves. I don't know about Ron, but I certainly learned a worthwhile lesson that day. ▀

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