

# Misadventures of an Aerobatic Neophyte

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**STRAPS AND MORE STRAPS.** I wonder how many buckles I clicked or latched in a day when instructing aerobatics. I do know it became tiresome. We had the old military seat-type chutes. The wearer sits on the board-hard parachute pack where the soft seat cushion once was. In the beginning, we kept the parachutes in the flight-office and brought them down to the airplane for each lesson. Standing by the airplane, the student and I would strap on our packs and check each other's harness to make sure all the buckles were fastened and the straps properly tightened. Getting into the Decathlon with the bulky chute dangling behind wasn't easy. Eventually, it became easier to simply put the parachute in the plane first, crawl in, and then buckle up. This made for a lot of straps and buckles. First, the parachute straps, a buckle over the shoulders, across the chest, and then one for each leg, followed by the five-point seat belt harness. It had a strap over each shoulder, one for each side of the lap, and one that came up between the legs, all meeting in a quick release buckle at the navel. This made for nine straps in all, each one to be properly secured and tensioned with a tug on the loose ends.

I had already flown with a couple of students and running late when Dale arrived for his lesson. One of my better students, his flight consisted of polishing up on some of the basic maneuvers before I signed him off to fly the figures solo.

"The chutes are in the plane," I told Dale. "Go ahead and do a preflight; I'll be down in a few minutes."

Dale took the headsets from their hooks on the wall and disappeared down the stairs while I finished filling out the logbook of the previous student. By the time I got to the plane, Dale had finished the preflight and sat strapped in the front seat ready to go. I slipped into the back seat, buckled up, and flipped on the intercom.

"Take 'er up, Dale. Let's see how you do. It's a fine day for rolling around in the sky."

Easy duty at this point in Dale's training — I essentially rode as an observant passenger. Dale would do all the flying, and I would critique, make suggestions on how to improve a maneuver, or compliment him on a figure well done.

"Let's start out with a few lazy eights and a couple of loops," I instructed once we reached the practice area.

"Will do," Dale said as he lifted each wing to check the area for traffic before performing clearing turns. "Looks like the area is clear ... here we go."

Dale talked through each maneuver as he performed them. "Nose down—hundred and forty—smooth pull to level—stop—pull again to vertical—float over the top—check wings level—look up—start pull—three g's coming down—level off."

"Nicely done," I commended over the intercom. "Now let's try an Immelmann."

An Immelmann is a half-loop with a half-roll at the top. There, the pilot stops momentarily at the inverted position and then rolls the airplane upright.

"Nose down to one-forty," Dale's voice came over the intercom as he gained speed for the maneuver. "Level, then pull, vertical, float and push. ..."

I sat behind Dale, enjoying the ride, pleased with his performance as he pushed into inverted. The push put the plane in upside-down level flight, meaning no more centrifugal force to keep me in the seat, thus the need for a seat belt.

"What the ..." Unfortunately, I quickly discovered as my head hit the ceiling, I didn't have one ... seatbelt that is. My mind instantly rewound to getting into the airplane. "You didn't count the buckles you idiot!"

In my haste to get back on schedule, I only fastened the parachute straps, not the seatbelt harness. Sitting on the ground, the tight parachute straps made me feel as though I had successfully strapped into the airplane — obviously not the case.

As the airplane resumed the roll to complete the maneuver, I bounced from the ceiling to the side and back to my seat. Thankfully, it only took a couple of seconds for the plane to roll right side up again, but I was shaken.

"What did you say?" Dale's voice crackled over the intercom.

"Uh, nuthin'. Just talking to myself. Good-looking maneuver." Luckily, he couldn't see the shock on my face.

"Thanks. It felt good."

As I quickly dug for the seatbelt straps and buckled up, thoughts raced through my brain. What if I had been flying, or I had been tossed into Dale, or the force of my weight damaged the airplane? If Dale had remained inverted, I would be lying on the ceiling of the airplane. The dangling seat belt straps could have easily become jammed in the controls. What a stupid error.

Fortunately, Dale flew on, completely unaware of what took place behind him.

Everything turned out fine. No damage was done, except to my pride. I learned an important lesson the hard way. From then on, counting buckles became a high priority on every checklist, and parachutes were once again donned before getting in. **IACI**

