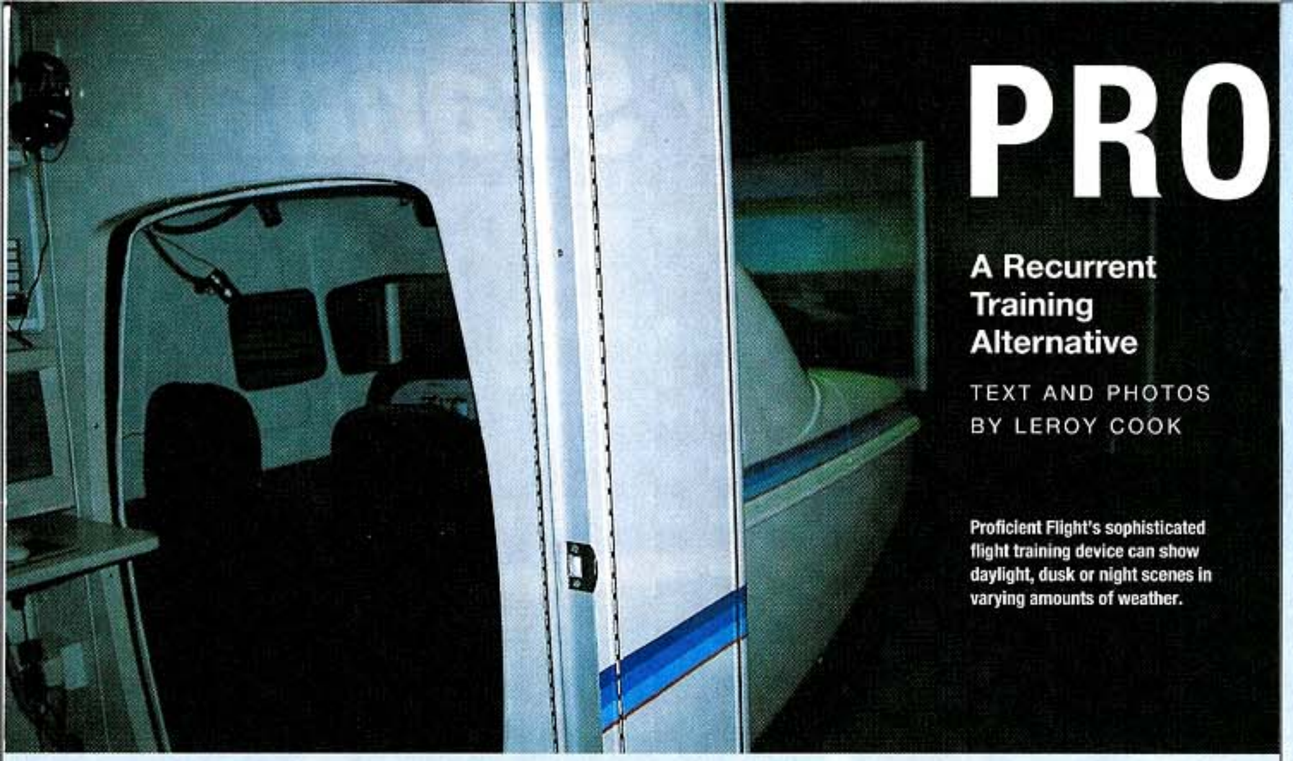


PROFICIENT FLIGHT

A Recurrent Training Alternative

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY LEROY COOK

Proficient Flight's sophisticated flight training device can show daylight, dusk or night scenes in varying amounts of weather.

GREG PLANTZ IS a man in love with his work. "I enjoy going to work each day," he says, "I'm doing what I really want to do." His recurrent training business keeps him actively involved with people from all walks of life who fly airplanes of every type in the IFR system, and he wants to make sure his clients come back next year to further their development.

Plantz started Proficient Flight because, as an active GA pilot, he couldn't find a suitable recurrent training alternative that fit his type of flying. The big type-specific simulation companies were too closely targeted to one make and model of aircraft, while the typical old "Slim," the local flight instructor, usually lacked experience in Plantz' airplane and equipment. He looked at all of the alternatives and found that most had deficiencies in one or more of the four criteria that needed to be met for a good training experience: The instructors had to be dedicated and capable, the facility had to be top notch, the equipment had to be the very best available and a good curriculum had to be established. Plantz determined to start his own school and offer the kind of training he wanted but couldn't find.

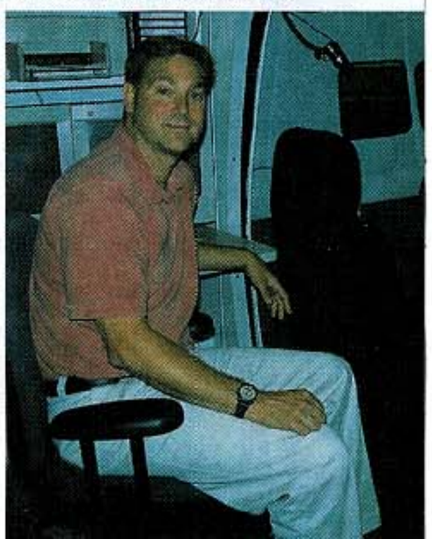
Proficient Flight opened for business in August of 2001, probably not the best timing, and initially concentrated on owners of high-performance singles and light twins. Plantz then expanded his offerings to the operators of cabin-class business airplanes, like Piper Navajos and Cessna 414/421s. He has approval to conduct recurrent training to meet most insurance underwriters' policy stipulations, even though his heavily modified Frasca 142 flight training device (FTD) presents a generic cockpit, rather than replicating a particular aircraft type.

Plantz does not offer initial qualification training, because he thinks that's best done in a course that emphasizes the type-specific teaching of aircraft systems and cockpit flows. On the other hand, he feels the annual recurrent training can just as well be done in a sophisticated FTD, as long as it's done with good instructors following a well-planned curriculum.

Our Walkaround

When we stopped in to visit him at his office in Waukesha, Wisconsin, near Milwaukee, Plantz had three products to offer. The first was a half-day VFR introductory course he has produced to help non-instrument pilots prepare for emergencies like a power loss on climbout and inadvertent VFR into IMC encounters, with three hours of simulator time and an hour of ground training. The second was a one-day IFR course that takes the client through an instrument proficiency check and beyond, with four hours of simulator and four hours of ground school. And the third is a two-day course, which allows the curriculum to be expanded to cover more systems and emergencies, over and above the basic IPC, like lost communications scenarios, for about eight hours of simulator time.

Greg Plantz at the instructor's console of the FTD; "I love coming to work," he says. Because he couldn't find a training alternative to meet his needs, he started his own company.



Because Proficient Flight provides simulator-based ground training, it was not necessary for it to be physically located on an airport; thus it's in an upscale office park about a mile from Waukesha County's Crites Field (KUES). Accommodations at the Radison and Comfort Suites hotels are within walking distance, so a car won't be needed. All training is done from 8 to 5, not in the wee hours of the night.

We wanted to see how all this worked, so we were ushered into the room where the simulator system was housed. Plantz looked at all the FTDs on the market and settled on the Frasca as best meeting his needs; because he wouldn't compromise, his budget was exceeded by several multiples, and he has a healthy six-figure amount invested in an FTD that does a lot more than just simulate "flight." It quickly changes from a single to a twin, it has four rear-projection displays for daylight, dusk and night scenery, and there's pneumatic control loading for realistic force feedback.

Plantz has added four video cameras to record the client's performance and instrument panel indications during his or her training, and the tape of the simulated flight is given to them to take home for further review. This is in addition to the recordings made by the Frasca 142 at the instructor's console.

After going over the objectives and order of training in the curriculum, we began with a VFR takeoff at Boise, Idaho, in a Cessna Turbo 210, a typical heavy single. The power controls are a very un-Cessna-like T-bar throttle and propeller/mixture quadrant, but that didn't seem to matter for training purposes. Removable plates cover the extra instruments and switches for single-engine work.

It didn't take long for the weather to come down, of course, and we wound up being vectored for an ILS to Boise. I didn't count on the disorientation from seeing a highway at breakout and wound up in a field off the end of the runway. Plantz quickly repositioned me outside the marker and I held out for the sequenced flashers on the second attempt. After some emergencies like a tumbled attitude indicator and an engine failure on climbout, we switched the FTD to emulate a Cessna Turbo 310. Plantz removed the single-engine power quadrant with a few fasteners, connected the twin-engine power controls to replace it, and removed the panels over the extra fuel selector, engine instruments and switches. After the operating system computer was reprogrammed, we were sitting at the end of the runway with two engines ready to start.

The simulator was "parked" at the end of the Boise, Idaho, runway for these photos. Note the complete Bendix/King Silver Crown package. The single-engine power quadrant exchanges in seconds for a twin quadrant and the cover plates, as seen on the EGT, are removed.

Multi-engine work in the Frasca 142 allows scenarios to be practiced that wouldn't be wise or possible in the actual aircraft, like circling under a low ceiling, losing an engine during a go-around and the loss of instruments, deicing, turbos and fuel boost pumps. I found myself with a "soft" engine failure during vectors-to-final, resulting in a single-engine ILS to minimums. The realistic sounds and limited yaw feel in the FTD gave us that multi-engine flavor as we struggled to bring the T-310 safely to earth.

Greg Plantz's mission seems to be well on its way to success at this point. He has 14 instructors who share his vision, each working one-on-one with a student for the desired course objective. Customers fly as diverse aircraft as a TBM-700 turboprop, a Cessna 182 and Cessna 421s; Proficient Flight's clients are about evenly split between singles and twins, Plantz says.

From our review of the training materials and facility, Proficient Flight seems to delivering exactly what Plantz promised. Recurrent training is important not just for insurance requirements but to give pilots the edge they need to handle unplanned flight situations. As Greg Plantz says, "We want you back next year."

For More Information

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