

The passing of Dave Ruth marks the end of an era for Reno pilots. Dave was, at least for me, the resident pilot and instructor who knew more about aviation than just about anyone.

I did not take primary or instrument training with Dave and did not take any check rides with him. I met him when we first bought a house in Reno in 1997. I then had about 700 hours in my logbook, and we were flying a Mooney.

I first flew with Dave to learn about mountain flying, and to learn about the Reno area. Most of my flying experience, until then, had been in relatively flat locations. I would later fly with Dave periodically, such as for flight reviews.

My understanding is that Dave's logbook contained tens of thousands of hours. Much of that was in Part 135 operations, but a disproportionate amount was in giving instruction in small airplanes, something that Dave loved to do. Dave was unusual in that he started flying relatively late in life but made up for lost time in so many little and big airplanes.

Dave imparted specific forms of knowledge that I was not likely to obtain elsewhere. For example, Dave taught me that when one can see the terrain beyond a mountain straight ahead, one will cross safely above that mountain. I have called this the "Dave Ruth Method", and it works not only in the mountains, but even in flat areas. One time, while we were flying in Florida, I used Dave's method to gauge whether we would pass above a cloud that was ahead of us.

As another example, Dave told me the story of his having worked the desk at an FBO in Nevada, and watched two different parties arrive, having flown essentially the same route at about the same time. One party was thoroughly worn out by the turbulence, but the other party reported a smooth ride. Dave's lesson was that when flying near the Sierra Nevada, a lateral displacement of one's flight path, by only a few miles, may make the difference between a pleasant ride and a very bumpy one.

Perhaps the most important lesson I learned from Dave came from something he noticed on our first flight together. He saw me over-controlling the airplane and emphasized the need to trim it and then let the airplane fly itself, to the extent reasonably possible. I have taken his admonition to heart, and I now understand that the best pilot is the one who, to an outside observer, appears to be doing almost nothing.

So, in a real sense, I am still flying under Dave's positive influence, and I think I am a better pilot for having known him.

I must admit that when I flew with Dave, I would usually make a fool of myself. I remember taking a flight review in the Baron, when, at altitude, he simulated the failure of one engine, and told me to set up for a single-engine landing. I immediately retracted the gear, and then concentrated so much on landing that if Dave had not intervened at the last moment, I would have certainly landed gear-up. I later suspected that Dave had planned it this way, knowing that I would need to retract the gear when he failed an engine. The valuable lesson for me was that, given the right set of distractions, even the most conscientious pilot can forget to lower the gear.

On the positive side, when I took my last flight review with Dave in 2016, when he was approaching age 82, I considered it a major accomplishment that I did not do anything stupid. In fact, Dave stayed relatively quiet, and I sensed that that was because I was not making as many mistakes.

I have flown with many flight instructors, but there are very few who have given me insights which I carry with me many years later. Dave Ruth was the exception, and I will certainly miss him.

Written by Bill Eilberg