

A photograph of a dog, likely a Cocker Spaniel, wearing a black harness and goggles. The dog is sitting on a large map spread out on a surface. A green headset with a microphone is also visible on the map next to the dog.

Secrets of the Airplane Whisperer

story and illustrations
by Susan Parson

Miss Marple does her preflight planning.

An airplane is a machine. It is not possible for it to be alive. Nor is it possible for it to wish or to hope or to hate or to love. There is no secret, no dark magic, there are no incantations said over any airplane in order to make it fly...yet there are a few airplane pilots who somehow want to believe that this machine is an animal, that it is alive.

- Richard Bach (*A Gift of Wings*)

Admit it. Your brain knows that an airplane is, as Richard Bach's essay notes, made of "steel, aluminum, nuts, and bolts"—or perhaps a high-class composite material, if you happen to

fly an airplane of more recent vintage. But somewhere in your heart, some part of you quietly and stubbornly believes that your airplane, like your dog, will reward the love and care you lavish upon it with love and loyal service in return.

You're not entirely wrong in thinking so. Over the years, since I first sat proudly (albeit nervously) at the controls of the sturdy little Cessna 152 that patiently carried me to pilot-hood, I have come to believe that those of us in the general aviation community would be much better—and much safer—pilots if we got to know and treat our planes with the same kind of care we lavish on our pets.

As you may have seen on television, people seeking to solve behavioral problems with their pets sometimes turn to an expert trainer—also known as the “dog whisperer”—to help them get on track. For pilots who want to establish a better working partnership with their planes, the equivalent of the dog whisperer is your favorite “airplane whisperer.” Known more formally as a certificated flight instructor, a qualified “airplane whisperer” can teach you the secrets of handling your airplane with the mastery and authority that befit a pilot in command.

Interestingly, pups and planes have quite a lot in common, and so



the secrets of a skilled dog whisperer are much like the secrets of a skilled airplane whisperer. Let's take a look.

Secret Number One: Provide the Basics

One thing that pups and planes have in common is that both have certain basic needs. A dog's basic needs include food and water, shelter, regular exercise, basic grooming, and periodic visits to the vet. A plane's basic needs include fuel and oil, hangar space or tiedowns, regular exercise, basic cleaning, and periodic visits to an A&P mechanic. To meet these basic needs, both the dog and the plane depend on the human.

The similarity doesn't end there. When a dog's basic needs are fulfilled, its owner gains a loyal, devoted, and predictable companion. In the case of airplanes, Richard Bach's essay on "Steel, Aluminum, Nuts, and Bolts" contends that:

"There is no sentence, no word, no hint in any technical manual ever printed that even remotely says that this machine's performance can possibly change because of a pilot's hopes or his dreams, or his kindness to his airplane...the airplane that you fly is a machine. If you love it and treat it well, it is (still) a machine."

Maybe so—but I still believe that a pilot who ensures that the plane is properly nourished with fuel and oil, regularly exercised, and periodically taken to the mechanic will, in all likelihood, be rewarded by many years of loyal, solid, and safe service.

Now consider a different case. A dog who is starved, beaten, tied down, and deprived of necessary trips to the vet may be slow to anger...dogs are, after all, renowned for their patience and willingness to forgive. Eventually, though, an abused or mistreated canine will bite—hard. An abused airplane is no different. It is a testament to strict certification standards and aeronautical engineering that even the most modest trainer can take a great deal of punishment without complaint. Sooner or later, however, an abused airplane will find a



way to bite its pilot—most likely at the least expected time and place. That's why you must heed your airplane whisperer's advice to take care of your airplane, so that it can take care of you.

Secret Number Two: Demand Obedience

If you have ever participated in obedience training for dogs, you know at least two important things. The first is that you must ensure that the dog does exactly what you want it to do. The second is that dog trainers often spend as much time and energy training the person as they do the pup—because it is, after all, the pet owner who will have to follow through on a

day-to-day basis.

The same concepts apply to flight training. When you first begin learning to fly, the focus is primarily on "obedience training" for the airplane—otherwise known as stick-and-rudder skills for basic airplane control. Obedience training for airplanes is all about making the airplane do exactly what you want it to do—beginning with the command to "STAAAAAY" straight and level (yes, at the same time). There's another interesting parallel here with canine obedience training: your CFI "airplane whisperer" is, of course, focused not on training the airplane, but rather on training you, the pilot, to consistently control the airplane with firmness, precision, and confidence.



One caution: it may be a good trick for your dog, but unless you're Bob Hoover, you probably do not want to ask your airplane to roll over and play dead.

Secret Number Three: Know the Breed

Nobody who knows dogs would say that all canines are alike: every breed has its own unique characteristics and behaviors. If you want to be a good dog whisperer, you have to put some real effort into learning as much as you can about the specific breed you're dealing with.

The same is true for anyone who hopes to be a good "airplane whisperer." All airplanes have wings, but a Piper *Cub* is very different from, say, a new *Lancair*.

You might think of the *Cub* as the aeronautical equivalent of a cocker spaniel: cute, affectionate family pet who is (mostly) docile and eager to please. The *Lancair*, on the other hand, is the airplane version of something like a Rottweiler: big, powerful, and potentially aggressive. You might get into more trouble more quickly with a *Lancair*, but as the old saying goes, any kind of flying is "terribly unforgiving of carelessness, incapacity, or neglect." Even a cocker spaniel can snap and growl, and even a cute *Cub* can be dangerous if the pilot doesn't take the time to learn its capability and its systems, inside and out.

Secret Number Four: Be the Leader

If you have ever watched people walk their dogs, it quickly becomes obvious who's in charge. As any dog trainer will stress, you never want to let the dog take you for a walk. You have to be the leader and final authority as to the pace, direction, and duration of

the exercise.

Similarly, any CFI "airplane whisperer" will no doubt remind you that you must never let the airplane take you for a ride – you are, after all, supposed to be the pilot in command, and not the "passenger in command" of the trip. As the regulations (Title 14 Code of Federal Regulations section 91.3) say, the pilot in command is the final authority as to the safe conduct of the flight and therefore you—not the airplane—must direct the pace, the direction, and the duration of the flight.

There are two keys to being a good leader for your airplane. The first, which is related to Airplane Whisperer Secret Three, is to make sure that the machine is a match for the mission. A cocker spaniel is a great family pet, but you might prefer a Rottweiler if your primary goal is home security. Similarly, a Piper *Cub* is a great airplane for flying low and slow, but a new Cessna 182 with glass cockpit and weather datalink is a far better choice for hauling your family and its bags to your beach vacation spot.

The second part of being the leader for your airplane is to look, think, and act ahead. When I walk my dog (who, by the way, happens to be

a cocker spaniel), I am always trying to spot and mitigate hazards to our mutual safety. It's my job to keep her clear of the cars zipping through the neighborhood and to steer her clear of unpleasant encounters with my neighbor's pit bull.

When I fly my airplane (which, by the way, happens to be a C182), it is up to me to spot and mitigate hazards to our mutual safety. It's my job to keep us clear of terrain, to avoid other airplanes, and to steer clear of weather and situations that the pilot/aircraft team does not have the training, experience, equipment, or performance to handle successfully.

So Now You Know...

"But such are the terms that flying lays down for pilots: Love me and know me and you shall be blessed with great joy. Love me not, know me not, and you are asking for real trouble."

— Richard Bach (*A Gift of Wings*)



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Bob completes the passenger briefing.

