



The Proficient Pilot

Volume 2



Barry Schiff

The Proficient Pilot, Volume 2
by Barry Schiff

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Contents

Foreword by Jay Apt

Section 1	More About the Dynamics of Flight	
Chapter 1	Power Loading and Wing Loading	5
Chapter 2	Ground Effect	13
Chapter 3	Cruise Control	21
Chapter 4	Flying in Turbulence	29
Chapter 5	How Does This Airplane Really Perform?	35
Chapter 6	Roll Control and Adverse Yaw	43
Section 2	More About Proficiency and Technique	
Chapter 7	Aborting a Takeoff	51
Chapter 8	Trimming	57
Chapter 9	Coping with Wind Shear	67
Chapter 10	The Go-Around	75
Chapter 11	Preventing Wheelbarrow Landings and Loss of Control	81
Chapter 12	Crash Landings	87
Chapter 13	To Spin or Not to Spin	93
Chapter 14	Desert Flying	101
Chapter 15	Stopping the Propeller	109
Section 3	Powerful Topics	
Chapter 16	Theory and Operation of Propellers	117
Chapter 17	Managing Engine Power	125
Chapter 18	Turbocharger Operations	133
Chapter 19	Starting the Hot Engine	141
Chapter 20	The In-Flight Engine Fire	147
Section 4	Instrument Pointers	
Chapter 21	How to Really Determine True Airspeed	155
Chapter 22	Coping with Altimeter and Airspeed Indicator Failures	163
Chapter 23	Coping with Vacuum System (Gyro) Failure	171

Chapter 24	The Turn Indicator Versus the Turn Coordinator	
	177	
Chapter 25	Swinging a Compass	183
Chapter 26	All About Time (Z, GMT, and UTC)	191
Section 5	Systems Management	
Chapter 27	Gear-Up Landings	197
Chapter 28	Operating the Pressurization System	203
Chapter 29	Electrical System Failure	211
Chapter 30	Flaps, Slats, and Slots	217
Section 6	Flying IFR	
Chapter 31	Time-Saving IFR Shortcuts	227
Chapter 32	Missed Approaches	233
Chapter 33	Two-Way Communications Failure	241
Chapter 34	Communicating for Survival	249
Chapter 35	Structural Icing	257
Section 7	Advanced Adventures	
Chapter 36	Fly to Europe—Yourself	263
Chapter 37	Ditching	271
Chapter 38	Formation Flying	279
Chapter 39	World Aviation Records and How to Set One	287
Section 8	Special Treats	
Chapter 40	Codename: Operation Peace Flight	297
Chapter 41	High Flight (in a Lockheed U-2)	303
Chapter 42	Flying the Space Shuttle	309
Chapter 43	Sentimental Journey	315
	Index by Robert Sacks	321

Chapter 1 **Power Loading and Wing Loading**

Being a proficient pilot is more than just developing the necessary piloting skills. It also is having some appreciation of the major factors involved in aircraft design because these ultimately determine performance and handling qualities.

When an aircraft is conceived, its designer must mentally wrestle with a variety of variables. These include airframe weight, fuel capacity, range, payload, takeoff and landing speeds, cruise and climb performance, power, manufacturing cost, and operating economy.

Juggling these factors is a frustrating business because optimizing one almost always has a detrimental effect on another. Consequently, a designer must sacrifice certain elements to achieve a goal. The result invariably is a compromise between desire and pragmatism. Not one airplane performs, behaves, and handles the way its designer would have preferred. Creating an acceptable mix of variables is the designer's art and probably is as much intuitive as scientific.

Before finalizing a specific configuration, a lightplane designer makes a performance forecast to verify that priorities have been satisfied. This is done by analyzing certain variables. The most significant of these include power loading, wing loading, aspect ratio, and wetted area.

The first item, power loading, helps determine if an airplane is underpowered or overpowered. Power loading is determined by dividing the maximum allowable takeoff weight by the total rated horsepower of all engines. (In the case of turboprops and turbojets, power loading is expressed as pounds of weight per pound of engine thrust.)

A Mooney 201, for instance, has a maximum gross weight of 2,740 pounds and is powered by a 200-hp engine. Its power loading, therefore, is 13.7 (pounds per horsepower). Figure 1 shows the range of power loadings for different classifications of general aviation airplanes.

Like other design variables, power loading seldom can be used in isolation to make valid performance predictions. Other factors need to be combined with it to obtain meaningful information. Generally, however, low power loading is associated with high performance.

Power loading can be used to determine initial takeoff acceleration. It is, after all, the inverse of the power-to-weight ratio used to calculate the acceleration of drag racers. Everything else being equal, the vehicle with the greatest power-to-weight ratio (or the lowest power loading) has the best acceleration.

Figure 1 shows that a Cessna 152, with a power loading of 15.2, has the highest power loading of the general aviation aircraft. Although it is no surprise that this aircraft has the poorest takeoff acceleration, this is not as negative a characteristic as it might appear. Because the 152 does not require a high liftoff speed, it does not necessarily need more takeoff distance than other singles do. The 36-hp Aeronca C-3 (known as the “Flying Bathtub”) had a power loading of 28 pounds per horsepower, but because it had to accelerate only to little more than jogging speed, takeoff distance was not excessive.

Runway length requirements are determined by acceleration and by lift-off speed. If acceleration is constant, takeoff distance increases in proportion to the square of the liftoff speed. This means that every additional knot consumes more distance than the preceding knot. Stretching takeoff distance even farther is aircraft drag, which increases during the roll and reduces acceleration. This explains why manufacturers of STOL (short takeoff and landing) aircraft and modification kits rejoice with every knot that can be trimmed from the liftoff speed. A 5 percent speed reduction reduces takeoff distance by more than 10 percent.

Power loading also indicates how well (or how poorly) engine power can be relied upon to overcome aircraft inertia in flight. Everything else being equal, the airplane with the least power loading is best able to accelerate out of mushing flight and into a safe climb. This is perhaps best illustrated by referring to the power loadings of piston powered twin-engine airplanes.

Notice from Figure 1 that power loadings vary from 11 for a Partenavia Victor to 8.9 for a Beechcraft Duke. (This is a relatively narrow range, indicating that light-twin designs remain within established guidelines.) It is obvious that twins have a substantial power advantage when compared to singles. But look what happens to power loading when a twin loses half of its horsepower: Power loading doubles. It is apparent that the power loading of any twin with an inoperative piston engine exceeds that of a Cessna 152, which helps to explain why a crippled twin has such marginal performance.

Designers obviously prefer low power loadings but usually cannot justify the necessary sacrifices. Adding horsepower increases fuel consumption, inflates operating and manufacturing costs, and can decrease range and use-

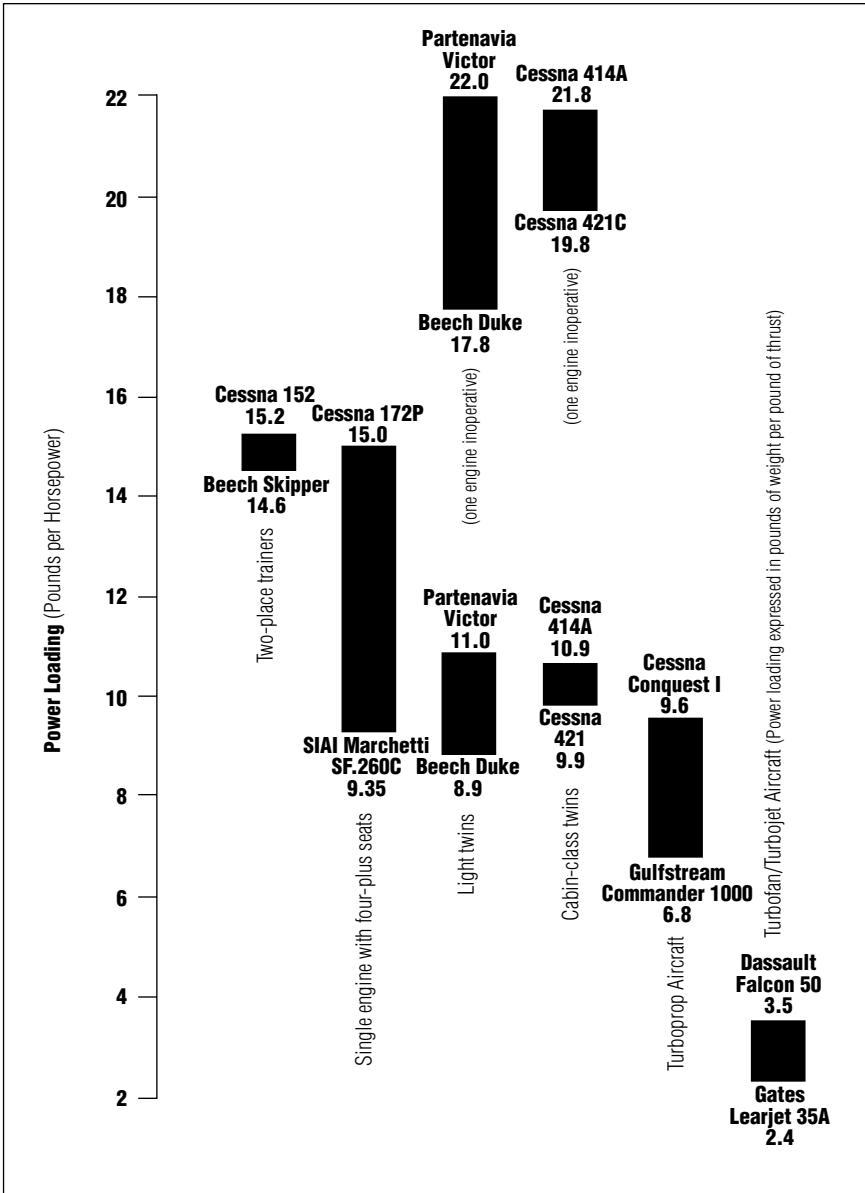


Figure 1. Ranges of power loading for various groupings of airplanes