

How to prepare to return to flying

Imagine we are suddenly all cleared to fly again! Woohoo! I guess most of us would jump from their sofas, ditch the take-away fish and chips, frantically search for their flight bag, boots and the keys to the trailer and head out to whatever launch site there might be.

Ok, let's dream on for a while as this dream might not come true just yet, but we should be prepared. And there is a lot we can prepare and do – even during lockdown and restriction times. So why not take out some study books, look through your last notes and get your brain going again on aviation?

Laura Mayer, a 23-year-old fixed-wing flying instructor, gave a splendid online talk for members of the British Women Pilots' Association (see: www.bwpa.co.uk/online-activities-lockdown-life) reminding us of the importance of preparation to be safe and competent pilots. Flying may be fun, we might 'get away with things', but flying poses its risks, not only to us pilots or students, but also to the people we invite on board and/or the general public.

Many have joked over the years why Phil, Pete Bish and I did this crazy thing of trying to fly at least once a month for a minimum of a couple of minutes. But besides this having been a 39-year long challenge (which has sadly now fallen victim to the virus rather than unflyable weather), it is a great way of always staying in practice and current.

Many of us have not touched a burner since the autumn. This may amount to six to eight months and despite being granted all sorts of exemptions by the CAA, it doesn't mean we are 'fit to fly'. So, what can we do and what should we consider when the skies are suddenly open to us again? What can we do, even during lockdown, to prepare ourselves to be safe pilots?

Here are a few tips that I summed up using notes by Laura Mayer and also referring to a script by Dave Court, our BBAC Training officer. I hope they help us to 'get back into the saddle' safely.

I. Pre-flight preparations

- Study, inform yourself, talk to others.
- Remind yourself when you last flew, where you flew and how that flight went
- Check your licence and log book

for recency/currency – prepare for your revalidation briefing (see info in May *Pilots' Circular*)

- Check your medical and the alleviation exemption document.
- Check that your paper maps are all updated on the latest SAs.
- Check your digital maps and/or your flight apps. Are they still running? Have you forgotten to pay membership on some of them? Are they outdated?
- Look through your memberships: eg, Western Region, BBAC, launch site permits
- Has your car got the launch site permit attached?
- Think back to your PPL check flight and what you prepared for doing this
- Check Notams, limitations, practise RT, flight planning
- Check available Met information: Met Office website, local TAFs/METARs, various apps – compare the current weather situation to forecasts and assess the flying conditions

Have you got valid insurance? Did you reactivate it for flight risk? Are the annual inspection and ARC in date? Remember that Inspectors cannot suddenly inspect hundreds of balloons at the same time and that the ARC must be processed and paid for. Don't leave it until the last minute if your balloon is due for inspection. Contact your local inspector.

- Check your balloon documents.
- Have a look at your balloon, check the fan works, are the trailer tyres ok?
- Look through your flight bag. Does your striker still spark? How do your gloves look? Do you have maps? Are your instruments working? Do you have charged batteries, spares etc?

It takes more than five minutes on the first flyable morning slot to prepare for flight. You might want to consider a test inflation/tether before your first flight.

II. Think about how and with whom you want to fly

Ask yourself do you feel capable of flying solo. Do you feel safe enough to take your friends or family members? Would it be best to fly with someone more experienced than yourself? Someone who could give helpful instruction, advice and monitor your actions; someone who challenges your flying, but encourages

you to fly the best you can; someone who spends time after the flight to criticise and give a constructive debrief.

We all love to fly with our mates because, but on this first occasion think carefully. If you choose to fly with an instructor, tell them how you like to be taught. Do you know how you learn best? The better you know yourself, the easier your instructor will find it to relate to you. Use the time with an instructor/examiner/other pilot to ask questions, do something that you haven't felt confident in doing for a long time, practise landings, discuss emergencies, read a paper map (don't cheat with that moving map!), rehearse RT if flying in or near airspace.

Challenge yourself, challenge your instructor/co-pilot, but don't feel embarrassed. Your instructor/co-pilot will profit as much as you from this flight!

III. Preps and briefings before and after the flight

On the morning or evening of your first flight, plan lots of extra time so that you are not in a rush or under pressure to get airborne. You will need time to check your burner, equipment and instruments and to do a comprehensive briefing (points by Dave Court):

- Encourage the other pilot to add advice at any stage
- Give yourself more time than normal to rig and flight plan
- Fly in lighter winds than you normally would for your first few flights
- Carry more fuel than normal
- Fly more gently than normal
- Use your most experienced crew. Encourage them to comment at any stage
- In the air, encourage others in the basket to speak openly if they see anything that you may have missed.

Passenger briefing:

Check your notes and flight manuals and look up what a good concise passenger briefing should contain. It should be short, clear, mentioning the most important safety matters; no jokes, concentrate and make sure the passenger can see you and the equipment. Practise a briefing even when flying friends or family and start it by saying something along these lines:

"I have not flown for x months. Please check me and feel free to

comment at any stage if you feel I have missed anything. You will be helping me not criticising me."

Debriefing:

Discuss the flight with your instructor or co-pilot and make notes. Have you been calm or nervous? Have you really prepared everything that you needed for your flight? How was your overall performance and control of the balloon? Are you still confident in your RT? Have you considered all safety measures? Would you have had extra capacity in case of an emergency?

Did you mess up during the flight or landing? Don't panic and don't blame it on yourself or on coronavirus. It's fine, no damage done except to your own ego. Take the pointers on board, do not leave it too long before your next flight.

Did you do well? Get on out there! Fly again as soon as possible. This is best for confidence building. But don't now invite your entire family; they will add huge extra pressure. A little solo flight first might be the best, ease yourself back in, take every precaution you can.

And finally:

You will be RUSTY! There is no one who will be as good as they were before lockdown. Not even your instructor, examiner or PPL/CPL co-pilot. Approach your first flight with an open attitude.

BUILD YOUR CONFIDENCE
INCREASE YOUR CAPACITY
FLY CAUTIOUSLY
BE CAREFUL
BE SAFE

I hope to see you all in the skies soon.
Allie Dunnington, May 2020

Thanks to Laura Mayer for sharing her notes. You can find her on the ground or up in the air at Kemble airport. She is truly inspiring and a great role model. Check out her company profile: www.freedomaviation.co.uk/about-us

Thanks also to Kevin Meehan, Ian Chadwick, Dave Court, Paul Spellward and Phil Dunnington for their input.