

Solo

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'Try to keep your hands still,' said my Instructor. 'Moving them about makes me nervous.' At sixty-two years of age I was in the cockpit of a Robinson-22 helicopter for the first time, enjoying the pleasures, and disciplines, of a trial lesson. Afterwards, asked what it was like, I'd said, 'Intense, beautiful, amazing, challenging.' Two months later, having just flown my first solos, I'm not inclined to change my mind about that first impression. Some bits have been ecstatic. Some days I thought of giving up. Too difficult. Pretension and vanity at my time of life to even think that I might be able to fly a helicopter, let alone actually do it. Yet I have done it. Four days after my initial solo, on a bright, clear, still December day, I had two of the happiest hours of my life flying circuits around Gloucester airfield.

Since a child, I'd always wanted to fly; perhaps to re-create some of the best dreams I'd ever had. Not whizzing about at a great rate from point A to point B. More to experience a different relationship with the landscape around me, a different kind of relationship with the fields, the hills, the clouds, the rivers, the slanting sunlight; that palette of colour and light. A purely aesthetic experience. Yet an aesthetic only to be gained through rigid adherence to specific disciplines of knowledge, of procedure, of process, of management of risk. What a paradox! What a commitment, but what a reward.

My Instructor had said that the first solo would be a major psychological milestone: the best flight of my life. Finally, after thirty plus hours instruction, I was ready for it. I'd thought I was ready for it a week previously, but my assessment flight with the Chief Flying Instructor had, gently and constructively, disabused me of that notion. Most of my circuits were ok, but I lacked consistency. My hovering was a bit too rough hewn. My movements with the cyclic and collective could still be stiff and awkward. Following that checking flight I had lots of intensive practice in smoothing my control of the controls, and in manoeuvring close to the ground. And it paid off. In the gathering gloom of a December afternoon I flew my first solo. Lift, hover, check. Clearing turn. Push forward on the cyclic, gain airspeed, gain height. And so through the solo. Downwind checks. Height. Speed. Approach. Hover. Land. Over far too quickly. I'd done it. Yet I wondered why it wasn't the life-changing experience, the loss of my Earthbound virginity, that I'd anticipated. The answer, I realised, was that I'd been well prepared. On the way round I'd heard my Instructors' voices in my head reminding me of where, and how, I should be. The journey to the solo had been hard, but the actual solo eased into place from all my training. The circuit was reassuringly predictable, recognisable.

I had been getting hung up on going solo. The idea of it played on my anxieties and self-doubts. Maybe I can't do this. Maybe it is too hard. I'd got through the first four of the exams ok, but a bad day of stiff, awkward and clumsy flying could throw me back to square one and questions about why on earth I'd been stupid enough to embark on this in the first place. Inside, though, I knew why I had. And that tiny flame kept me alive through the darkest moments of incompetence and poor performance.

Through the two months leading to my solo I had lots of time to reflect on my learning, or re-learning. I'm not afraid to ask stupid questions but I did re-learn that you can tell somebody something a number of times, yet until they're ready to learn it, to assimilate it into their evolving schema of understanding, you're almost certainly wasting your breath. To my surprise, though, I discovered that these are little depth charges, little mines of knowledge that lay waiting inside you until you're ready for them, when they flash into your understanding and you change, you've got them. I also visited, re-visited, the gap between understanding at some cerebral, conceptual level and the application of that new understanding. How come I could answer my Instructor's questions at the pre-flight briefing, yet entirely fail to implement this new knowledge effectively as we attempted autorotations? After a few goes I did get the hang of it, but why couldn't I get it first time?

I also had to learn, or was it re-learn, study skills I never thought I had. The last years of my 'professional' career had been about strategic stuff: synthesising, hypothesising, evaluating, inventing, persuading; none of these much use for the PPL(H) exams where there's really nowhere to hide: you either know it or you don't. At least when you learn French you've only got to deal with the vocabulary and the grammar. You may not know the words for 'cat', 'road', 'fork', 'bathroom', but at least you know what they are. You'd recognise one if you saw one. These exams took me into a place where not only was the vocabulary entirely new, but also the concepts they delineated were entirely unknown to me. After an initial sinking of the spirit at each new book, I evolved a kind of plan which seemed to stick. I'm just now trusting that this short-term abuse of my short-term memory will frack the new stuff into my deeper places. I can't pretend not to have a childlike pleasure at getting through the exams, yet I also sense the fragility of this new knowledge. The stuff that's really stuck is the stuff that I've used when I fly: the radio calls, the organisation of air traffic space, and the emergency drills. (And what a relief to dredge up some forgotten fragments from school biology for the 'human factors' paper!)

The hardest bit of my learning so far has undoubtedly been the feeling of utter incompetence when I've run out of brain cells. Not being able to speak when first learning to hover. Forgetting the first of the shut down drills after I'd been concentrating on my landing. Lurching through the HASEL checks. These have been buoyed, though, by a feeling of increasing competence as I've known, within myself, that, on a good day, I've been able to do things that previously I couldn't. Usually small things, tiny things, as I've comprehended more of the total surrounding situation. Being able to look outside the cockpit, check the dials and think ahead for the next stage. Add on to that sometimes even being able to pick up the radio calls from the Tower. Yes! Progress! That was what was so great, so nourishing, about my solo flights on the sunny December day. I had some spare capacity to evaluate my performance. I noted, and remembered, one particular error in each circuit so in the next circuit I'd try to pick it up and polish it. Gently on the cyclic. Attitude. Power. Trim. Aviate.

And so my progress to pilothood continues. Much more to learn. Many more mistakes to make. But I have ridden the magic carpet. I am no longer a creature of the dull earth. I fly. And, unlike the birds, I don't need to wave my arms about.