

Getting Back in the Game

Retracing Footprints Left in the Sky

BY TOM HOFFMANN

Photo by H. Dean Chamberlain

Maybe you're married, have kids, and consider 20 minutes of free time a vacation. Perhaps a recent operation or medical condition has you worried whether you're fit to fly. Or, maybe the dust on your logbook triggers anxious thoughts of policies and procedures that have changed and now must be relearned.

These are all understandable reasons for a pilot to hang up the headset for a while, but they don't have to mean a permanent grounding. If the flying flame still flickers within, the opportunity to soar once again is yours for the taking. You may be surprised how easy it can be to get started again. With a solid plan and determination, along with the benefits of some exciting developments, you can easily shake off that rust and get back to enjoying the freedom only flying can offer.

Your first question is likely: With so many changes to consider, how do I even get started? There's no doubt getting back into flying after a long break can be daunting. I know. Last September marked my first flight since...let's just say my sectionals still depicted a magenta-checked ARSA pattern around my home airport, Long Island

MacArthur Airport (ISP). Looking through my old flight bag made me feel like Rip Van Winkle waking up from a nap (thankfully, without the white hair). I had my work cut out for me, but I knew it would not be long before I could return to the skies.

A Personal Preflight Check

Whether it's been decades or just a couple of years, the best way to get back in the game is to start with a plan. Begin by exploring why you stopped flying. I highlighted a few reasons earlier, but among the most common relate to time, money, and medical issues.

Ask yourself what it is that's drawing you back. Are you returning to complete an unfinished rating? Maybe there are career or volunteer opportunities calling your name. Or, perhaps you simply would like to enjoy the freedom of flight once again. Depending on how long it's been since you've flown, you may be unaware of some changes that could make the prospect of returning to flight less overwhelming than you think. Let's take a look at some scenarios to see how they might apply to your situation.

Medical Policy Makeovers

The first step for many returning pilots is an assessment of personal health and fitness. According to Dr. Warren Silberman, manager of FAA's Aerospace Medical Certification Division, there have been many favorable changes in the last 15 years to help pilots retain a current medical certificate. "What may have been disqualifying 'show-stoppers' years earlier may now be acceptable with revised waiver and special-issuance guidelines," says Silberman.

Among the conditions that are no longer automatic disqualifiers are high blood pressure, cardiac conditions, as well as insulin-dependent diabetes. The FAA Office of Aerospace Medicine now permits special-issuance medical certificates for airmen who are being treated with certain anti-depressant medication. The impact of this change is substantial, as it could affect hundreds of thousands of pilots currently diagnosed with mild to moderate depression.

When meeting with your Aviation Medical Examiner (AME), be upfront and honest about any medications you are taking or any changes to your health. It's also a good idea to work with a physician before your medical to try to resolve any issues, as well as gather the necessary

Photo by Tom Hoffmann



Assessing your fitness is as important as assessing your aircraft's fitness.

documentation your AME will need to process your case. According to Dr. Silberman, only 0.1 percent of airmen have their applications denied. Of those, a majority of the denials are due to a lack of proper documentation. He says most applicants eventually go on to get a medical.

To get more information on disqualifying medical conditions, contact your local AME or go to the medical certification section of www.faa.gov.

Lighten Your Load

A big change that opened doors for more pilots to regain the freedom and fun of personal flying was the Sport Pilot/Light-Sport Aircraft (SP/LSA) rule, implemented in 2004. Under this rule, pilots may operate aircraft that fall within certain reduced weight and speed parameters, and are required only to have a valid U.S. driver's license to validate medical fitness. One caveat, however: If you previously held a medical certificate, your most recent certificate must not have been denied, revoked, or suspended.

One aspect of SP/LSA is that it offers those watching their pennies a more affordable option to return to flight. Many LSA aircraft, like the new Cessna *Skycatcher*, can be rented wet for under a \$100 an hour. You'll save on gas, too, as they typically burn 3-5 gallons per hour, much less gas



Photo courtesy of Mooney Airplane Company

than a standard single-engine trainer. If you already have a private-pilot certificate, you can legally fly an LSA provided you are current and it is in the same category you're checked out in. An important safety precaution: LSAs can have different handling characteristics so it's a good idea to get checked out with an instructor first.

Relearn Your ABCs

An important task for anyone returning to flying is getting up to speed on regulatory changes. "Whether

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you've been out for 20 years, or just two, you'll want to brush up on your airspace knowledge," says Tom Adams, chief flight instructor at Dulles Aviation, Inc., an FBO and flight school at Virginia's Manassas Regional Airport (KHEF). "Squawking 1200 in the wrong area may invite some unwanted guests." To avoid any visits from your local F-16 fighter squadron, be sure to study up on airspace changes, especially in areas like Washington, D.C. that have adopted a permanent Special Flight Rules

Area (SFRA) and Flight Restricted Zone (FRZ). An online training course on www.FAASafety.gov is now required to fly under VFR in the DC SFRA.

There's also the matter of Temporary Flight Restrictions (TFR), which, since September 11, 2001, are used routinely to restrict airspace for 30 miles for presidential visits or world-leader meetings, such as the G8 Summit. TFRs can pop up unexpectedly so before any flight, be sure to research NOTAMs and check the FAA TFR list (<http://tfr.faa.gov/tfr2/list.html>) for updates.

Now, for those who recall Ronald Reagan or George H. W. Bush as being in office during your last flight, you'll need to take time to review the changes that resulted from the FAA's reclassification of the U.S. airspace system in 1993. The changes removed terms like TCAs and control zones, and replaced them with the ICAO-compliant titles that range from Class A to Class G airspace. For more information, see chapter 3 of the *Aeronautical Information Manual* (AIM) or chapter 14 of the *Pilot's Handbook of Aeronautical Knowledge*.

As far as regulations go, Title 14 Code of Federal Regulations (14 CFR) part 61 went through some significant changes as well over the years, including:

- Changes to duration of medical certificates for pilots under 40 (61.23)
- Tailwheel aircraft endorsement requirement (61.31)
- Logging of PIC time (61.51)
- Changes to instrument currency and rating requirements (61.57, 61.65)

Some proposed changes to 14 CFR part 61 to be on the lookout for include replacing the 10 hours of complex time required for a commercial certificate with 10 hours of advanced instrument training as well as allowing student pilots to train and apply for a private pilot certificate and instrument rating concurrently.

Fill the Right Seat with the Right Person

Successful reentry to flying requires the guidance of a good instructor; don't overlook this important step. Find an instructor who understands your situation and is willing to take extra time to help you get back in your game. Be clear about your intentions and work together to set attainable training goals. Since you may have a lot of ground to cover, don't be afraid to ask questions or request a review of any segments of flying you feel out of touch with, like stalls or steep turns.

When it's time to start flying, don't be too hard on yourself if you seem a bit out of form. My first landing after my long absence was a greaser, but on the next try, I bounced around worse than a bull rider. A few bumps can be hard to swallow, but that's to be expected when such a highly coordinated skill is put on hold for a while. The key: Remain patient and keep at it.

A good exercise to help get you primed before you even flick the master and turn the key is to spend some extra time with your pre-flight check. Follow your aircraft's checklist carefully. Spend some time in the left seat reviewing instrument and comm/nav switch locations, especially since some pilots might be in for quite a surprise once they climb in the cockpit.

This is because steadily replacing the classic "six pack" of basic instruments are shiny new glass-panel displays that host a suite of new features, which is made possible by the advent of GPS technology. If this is completely unfamiliar to you, consider getting your "air" legs before tackling a Garmin 1000.

Better yet, make unlocking the benefits of GPS a fun incentive for you to continue with your flying.

Flight Review and Done?

It's been said that a pilot certificate is a license to learn, and whether you're an active pilot or one on hiatus, this couldn't be more accurate. Much like a checkride for a new rating, a flight review shouldn't mark the end of your learning process.


"Don't be content with just passing your flight review," says Dan Williams,

a Maryland-area private pilot who is familiar with returning to flying after a few dry spells. "Make an effort to expand and test your knowledge in all areas. And, if you're not asked to do it on your check, ask for it to be reviewed. This will help you feel more confident when you're on your own again."

Staying proficient on the ground is important, too. This is where FAA's WINGS pilot proficiency program can help. Designed to help encourage a commitment to safety education, the program has attracted more than 48,000 airmen who can earn credits by completing online courses and attending safety seminars. Those who achieve the basic phase will get credit for the flight review requirements covered in 14 CFR part 61.

I'm in a Holding Pattern and Can't Get Out!

Was this article about you—with a burning desire to get back in the cockpit, but in a current holding pattern due to family and/or career commitments? That's okay. While the timing might not be ideal now, that could soon change. The key is to maintain the interest and enthusiasm in flying by keeping up with aviation news and training, whether through periodicals, like this one, and/or aviation Web sites, such as www.FAASafety.gov and www.aopa.org. You can also attend local air shows or fly-ins, perhaps to lend some time and expertise as a volunteer. Check with your state aviation authority for events in your area.

Staying involved and immersed in aviation in whatever capacity possible will be the next best thing to being airborne and it'll keep your engine primed for when you return. Don't worry, the sky is waiting! 

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Tom Hoffmann is associate editor of FAA Safety Briefing. He is a commercial pilot and holds an A&P certificate.