

Coaching Corner...

Light at the end of the tunnel?

David Cockburn, PCS Head of Training offers expert advice to take on board when the time comes for us to get back in the air...

Do not doubt we are all aware of the DfT's message on 2 March on how GA aligns with the Government's 'Roadmap for easing out of lockdown'. However, as with much of aviation regulation, there are likely to be some misunderstandings and myths being passed around about that message; so don't believe everything you are told unless it comes from an official source. Apart from anything else, as the DfT have said, the projected dates are 'indicative and subject to change'.

Just to remind ourselves, if all goes well, from 29 March the Government will allow us to fly solo or with members of our own 'bubble' (which for most of us I suppose means people we live with, although we can't carry passengers until we have flown at least three take-offs and landings within the previous 90 days). However, flights with others, including instructors, will not be possible until 12 April at the earliest. At least ORS 4 No 1471 now allows those holding an NPPL or UK PPL to fly up to 12 hours in EASA aeroplanes in order to revalidate their rating, subject to the conditions.

While the guidelines legally allow solo flying after 29 March, is it good sense for us to do so? Some of us may indeed have managed to retain our flying skills over the lockdown period, and may well consider ourselves safe to return to 'normal' flying. However, most of us will have been stuck on the ground (and indeed away from even discussing flying) for a long time and, as we know, our flying skills deteriorate over time. For a great many of us, just launching solo would NOT be a safe restart.

As always in flying, it is your decision to make, but if you feel nervous or unsure, it might make good sense to delay another few weeks and make a flight with a Coach or instructor.

Lack of proficiency

Many of us have probably been forced in the past to stay on the ground during the winter months anyway, so it is tempting to think that our flying skills won't have deteriorated much more than they have done after previous winters. We're used to the idea of reading up the manuals and thinking how we're going to manage these first flights. We are also used to having to take it easy for the first few trips, avoiding challenging conditions and fully loaded take-offs. Surely this year isn't going to be that much different?

Well, I don't really think it IS the same as before. I doubt if any of us flew as much last year as usual, even if we were able to maintain our ratings' validity. We had plenty of gaps in our flying last year, so we probably started the winter at a lower skill level than we started previous winters, which suggests that we shall be at a much lower standard now than at the beginning of previous flying seasons.

The lack of practice can affect us mentally as well, so beware that the desire to get back into the air doesn't overcome our common sense. We need to take even more care than previously, and it will come as no surprise to readers that I strongly suggest you take advantage of the services of an LAA Coach. Although we are able and very willing to offer advice over the phone, there is no substitute for practical guidance in your own aircraft.

Whether or not practical guidance is available, I suggest you have a look at *Returning to flying in the wake of COVID-19*, part of the GASCO website www.gasco.org.uk. Having done that, you might like to prepare and plan your return to flying in a sequence such as this:

- Read through your aircraft and pilot's handbooks, and remind yourself of how the aircraft systems work, what speeds you plan to fly at different stages of flight, and how much runway you are likely to use in various situations.
- Talk yourself through a simple flight, from pre-flight checks through engine start, taxi, run-up, take-off and climb, level off into cruise, descent, joining procedure, circuit, approach, go-around, another circuit and landing. Then do it again and consider what might go wrong at each stage and what you should do about it.
- Carry out the external pre-flight checks, then sit in the cockpit. Without actually selecting any switches, move your hands to the required places for that flight, including your response to the problems you considered. Practice the radio calls you expect to, or may have to, make and think about the replies you expect.
- Once you are able to go flying again, but *only* when conditions are all favourable, carry out that simple flight. Once levelled off into the cruise, I suggest you practise a couple of circuit patterns in the sky (remembering to keep a good lookout), including approaches and go-arounds at a safe height. Try and avoid returning to the airfield when it's busy, and once you do, make a couple of go-arounds again if you can. In any case,

always be ready to fly a go-around for real if things aren't working out well.

The guidelines have allowed most Coaches and instructors to keep themselves current during lockdown, and I am, of course, strongly advising you to use their services on that initial flight. He or she will almost certainly offer to extend the flight to give you more benefit, introducing items such as stall revision and practice forced landings. With a Coach available, it's probably worth carrying out more than one flight with them, especially if these can be counted as training flights towards rating revalidation.

Finally, I'm sure quite a few of us will have allowed our ratings to lapse, probably through no fault of our own. Renewing a rating will of course need the services of an examiner, but I suggest that you carry out an initial training flight to get back into practice before attempting a GST or LPC. There are a few Coaches who are also examiners, and the office can probably direct you to one nearby, but most examiners will be happy to assist by giving instruction on such an initial flight.

Signatures

It is always worthwhile obtaining appropriate certifying signatures in logbooks and licences, even if at the time they seem unnecessary.

Certified logbook entries should provide acceptable proof to the CAA that the particular flight took place, if we need to obtain a new licence, certificate or permission in the future. They can also demonstrate the same to foreign authorities if required.

When we had to obtain EASA licences to fly Part-21 aircraft, most of us were able to retain our UK licences, so now hold at least two pilot licences. It may have seemed logical that revalidating the ratings on one licence would allow us to exercise the privileges on both, but although the method of revalidation was the same for both, and the hours and flights counted for both, revalidations had to be signed within the specified time on each

Below Lockdowns and CAA concessions have made it difficult to know exactly where we are with paperwork currency, but ignorance of the law is no excuse. Make sure your Permit, biennial sign-off and medical are all up to date – assume nothing. And don't forget to upgrade the insurance if you have only had the aircraft on ground risks during lockdown.

licence to keep it valid. As some, who allowed their NPPL SSEA rating to lapse while keeping a LAPL current have discovered, in order to regain that lapsed rating they now have to pass a GST with an examiner, and if the rating has lapsed by more than five years, they need to pass an oral examination as part of that. Although, for most of us, the LAPL will still be quite sufficient, we may encounter circumstances when we cannot exercise its privileges, so we should try to keep all ratings valid.

Aircraft loading

It is a fact of life that members of the human race in more affluent countries such as ours (yes!) have 'expanded' since the 1940s – and appear to continue to do so. And by 'expanded' I mean in all dimensions, with a consequent increase in body mass. This means, for example, that the current occupants of an aircraft designed in the 1950s are likely to be a lot heavier than those the manufacturer advertised could be carried together with a full (or virtually full) fuel load. If we put these heavier individuals in our aircraft with the same fuel load, we can expect to be exceeding the aircraft's MTMA (maximum take-off mass authorised).

Pre-flight calculations of weight and balance may be seen as a chore, and the maths may seem daunting to some. However, as explained in the January and February issues, there are many computer programs and apps available which can calculate an aircraft's weight and balance, so we should take advantage of them.

However, after we find out what the weight and CofG position of our aircraft is for a particular flight, the most important thing is to check that they lie within the limits. If they do not, we need to change the load until they are! ■

