

Avoiding First Flight of the Year Blues
by
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For the vast majority of us who fly gliders, we do so for pure sport, and are consequently inclined to fly only when conditions are favorable. For many, seasonal flying is the norm; meaning that we park our gliders for the endurance of long, cold Winter months, and which also means that come Spring time, goofy things tend to happen when we first venture out to fly once again. Sadly, some of those goofy things result in Undesirable Aircraft States (UAS's) which lead to incidents, and accidents.

I have personally avoided the above scenario with regard to gliders for the last 30 years by living where we can fly all year-round, not necessarily in good lift conditions, but able to consistently fly gliders nonetheless. So, what advice do I have for those who must endure periods of non flying when they resume the activity?

First, I think it safe to say that our personal composite of flying ability is a combination of head knowledge, and stick and rudder skills, both of which vary day by day. Over the course of many months of inactivity, I assert that it is the head knowledge that fades away first. (the older I get, the more convinced I am of this!) Our level of stick and rudder skills are a function of several things: currency, continuity, and total experience. In this discussion, currency refers to recency of experience, and continuity refers to consistency of experience. Both influence current ability, but most would agree that the greater the total experience, the less impact a lack of currency or continuity have.

Having defined terms, what can we do to prevent Spring time goofiness? Before I answer, let me share how I cope with a similar problem in my airline job. My current assignment is as a Captain on the B-757. Although based in Europe, my monthly schedule looks a lot a Southwest pilot's-short intra-European flights, and lots of takeoffs, approaches and landings. This makes for built-in currency and continuity, so no issues there. But, I also fly as Captain in the Orbis Flying Eye Hospital, which is a MD-10-30 equipped inside as a flying surgical suite and classroom. Since I only get to fly it once or twice a year as a volunteer pilot, both currency and continuity are a challenge. Fortunately, my many years of MD-10/11 international flying helps me offset my few hours flown annually for Orbis, and the simulator provides 90-day landing currency, and two Instrument Proficiency Check Rides per year. There are some issues of positive transfer that aid in minimizing the challenge of hopping into the MD-10 after a long absence, and those include the fact that both it and the 757 are transport category jets, both have modern, Flight Management System (FMS) based cockpit displays, and both employ a two-pilot crew. Negatives include the fact that the FMS systems are extremely different, (kind of like English compared to Chinese) the operating weights are quite different (757 at 150,000 lbs typical takeoff weight vs MD-10 at 580,000 lbs) and different manufacturers (Boeing vs McDonnell Douglas) that reflect different operating philosophies.

So how do I cope? First, as mentioned above, the simulator helps, but those events are relatively short, and comprise only 16 hours per year of stick and rudder time. What keeps me capable of flying both jets safely is my personal routine that I call "chair flying." I keep a notebook filled with MD-10 Ops Limits and Procedures at hand to study during off time. I built a "paper trainer" in my home office from MD-10 panel posters to be able to practice checklist flows while referring to actual (albeit small) cockpit surroundings. I find that practicing memory items and going through cockpit flows with my paper trainer makes the few moments of sim time available completely devoted to maintaining my MD-10 stick and rudder skills, so that when it is Check Ride time, my mind and hands are up to the challenge.

Seasonal glider pilots can do the same thing, but with some different tools. The challenge is to keep the mind smart in the absence of stick and rudder actuation. You, too, can chair fly—all it takes is a little imagination, perhaps aided by pictures or videos of different phases of flight: ground ops, takeoffs, aero-tows, patterns, and landings. Many of these and other web-based tools are available online at the SSF website. Depending on your cockpit nav displays, there are online tutorials for programming and using your GPS-based systems, which can readily be worked in to your chair flying. Finally, there are some PC-based simulations, like Condor, that can be a great tool for maintaining procedural proficiency. I have seen some that incorporate actual cockpit components to create a very "simulator-like" environment. While I do not recommend these tools for initial flight training, they are terrific for procedural practice, especially during times of long absence from the real cockpit. Finally, there is nothing like "hangar flying" (chair flying in groups!) to help keep mental cobwebs at bay, stay up to date with changes, and discuss current practices.

In conclusion, complying with the above will surely help prevent Spring goofiness and the resulting Undesired Aircraft States, especially if you follow the long-standing SSF recommendation of making your first flight after a long break with a CFI. Better yet, prepare in advance to make that first flight a Flight Review, to insure the inclusion of some meaningful ground training. After all, it is a lot more fun to hear your CFI sing your praises than to sing the Spring Goofiness Blues. . .