

## Fresh Air Matters... with Capt. Yaw

Solo! Going solo is a key part of learning to fly. For those who do not have experience with the path pilots go through in order to get their valued licence, let me give you a mini-course, and some insight into what 'going solo' really means.

Most pilots start out with a 'trial' flight; a short flight of airborne discovery where they get bitten by the bug, or decide that they prefer the foot on the ground over the 'backside' in the air! The Francophone countries have a much better name for this experience: 'Baptême de l'air', or being baptised of the air. It has a 'spiritual' sound to it, and those who have done it understand the 'spiritual' context of it. Whether it reminds you of the mortality of your frail human form, or inspires you as to the majesty of a creator of the universe, one thing is for sure: it is a changing point in everybody's life when they take their first flight.

Over the next few lessons, the 'wannabe' pilot covers basic flying skills, ground school, straight-and-level, standard rate, steep turns, patterns work, take-offs, landings and emergencies, and a bit (a big bit) more... Then one day, the instructor says 'You can go solo!'. This does not mean that the student has achieved his/her licence – far from it. In learning to drive, you are not allowed to drive the car unaccompanied until you have a full licence. In aviation, we understand that there is a 'grey zone' and a 'discovery zone' which - if mishandled - can only lead to problems later in the handling of the vehicle.

If you can drive, think back to the first time you drove 'alone' or 'solo'. It was scary...it gave you a funny feeling...it made you feel happy or sick, or both at once. In the car, you can go slowly, take your time, pull over to the side, or simply hesitate a bit. When training my own son to drive, in the lead-up to his sitting his test, I took him to a disused airfield, put a two-way radio in the car and sent him around 'solo'. I then gave him instructions such as 'turn left, right, faster, slower and stop'. I believe that this built his confidence. This approach came from my aviation experience.

You see, the trainee pilot going solo is only a milestone, one about half-way to gaining his/her full licence. They will need to log about ten hours in that aircraft on their OWN, alone, nobody sitting next to them – only radio access to their instructor or the ATC if they want or need some advice or reassurance. But there is more to it than that.

On that first solo the aircraft changes. In a typical training aircraft, during 'dual-instruction', you have a ninety kilogram load next to you that talks, reassures and takes control in case you mess up a bit. Now, when that load (also known as an Instructor) removes its bulk from the small machine used in training, the aircraft becomes lighter and performs better. It will take off quicker, climb quicker, need less power for the same speed and not want to land so easily. Descents take more planning; the touch-down seems to never happen as you float along – light and responsive, waiting for the lift to dissipate enough for the wheels to touch. You *are* warned that it will be different – but, and most pilots agree - you can never describe or imbibe that feeling. Like eating chocolate cake or ice-cream for the first time, it has to be experienced; it must be lived first-hand and, for most, it will have more impact on your mind and being than the first flight (or 'Baptême de l'air') did earlier in your training.

It is highly probable that the next few flights will be with an instructor as you establish in your soul and psyche the events of that 'first solo' before you can 'solo' again. Then, once you are comfortable with repeated 'solo' operations

around the airfield, you get to do your first 'solo' cross-country. You will navigate using a map and a compass on your own, away from the airfield...probably on a first route that you did before with your instructor. If you get 'lost' now, you are the only one who can see where you are and what you are doing! You will see landmarks, reference points, etc that you feel comfortable with, and then be very relieved when you land back at your home airfield. You will then do more small 'solo' trips on routes that you are not so familiar with, and build confidence - learning to become the 'Captain', the 'Commander', the 'Pilot-in-Command' without any instant recourse to the 'comforter', 'counselor', 'friend', 'confidant' and properly-called 'flying instructor' next to you. The very absence of that person lets you know for one-hundred-and-twenty percent sure that you are 'in-control' and fully responsible for the craft.

Then comes, what I consider the landmark flight of your life: your Qualifying Cross Country – the QXC. This is the longest flight you will do on your own in training. You must do it solo, you must plan it all yourself, you will go far from the home airfield and to places you have never been with an instructor – you will discover yourself in a new way. You will be scared, you will be concentrated and you will be worried about getting it wrong. The chances are that you will make a mistake – or two, or three - and have to correct them – but that is the whole point. Flying solo teaches you that - even when things don't always go according to plan – you are still in control and have to deviate, adjust, plan and re-plan in order to make it happen, and come out safely at the other end; and you have to do it on your own. That QXC is probably the last time you will ever need to actually be in an aircraft alone. Of course, you can and will want to fly solo again because being up there alone is a 'spiritual' experience; leaving the planet and being at one with yourself and the world, seeing, experiencing and absorbing the cosmos as if in the solitude of a deep, relaxing and mentally-reviving dream.

After your ten hours' solo, including the QXC, you will normally only need to pass the General Flying Test – similar to a driving test. Then you can take a passenger, because you have passed the tests, proven that you can do it – even alone, and are worthy of the title 'Pilot'.

As parents and business people, I wonder if we are denying our children and staff that right of passage of a 'solo' and the QXC? Unless we encourage and allow, we will never pass on the necessary self-confidence to be able to sort it out and make it happen that is so necessary in life and in business, as much as it is in flying the plane!

Capt. Yaw is Chief Flying Instructor and Chief Engineer at WAASPS – The Best Flying Experience in West Africa ([www.waasps.com](http://www.waasps.com))