

The 11th hour

BY RIC 'THE FIREMAN' ATTARD

AFTER Ric Exley of Heck Field took me for my first flight in his Airborne Outback 912 trike, I was hooked and focused on taking up the sport of microlight flying.

Flying so far has been both exciting and challenging, there's so much to learn and think about. However, I experienced a breakthrough recently I felt compelled to write about. It happened in my 11th hour of training.

I'm currently a student of Caboolture Microlights, endeavouring to earn my RA-Aus Pilot Certificate to fly a flex-wing trike. With each hour of training, preceded by a briefing on a white board, the incremental development has been accompanied by the discomfort normally associated with learning anything new. Although very exciting, each lesson has meant having to learn and cultivate a new skill while maintaining the skills taught in the prior lessons. For those not familiar with trikes, the aircraft type has a delta-shaped wing, beneath which is a 2-seat open cockpit and a rear mounted engine. The plane manoeuvres by weight-shift inputs applied by the pilot working a horizontal control bar. Sounds simple enough, but let me tell you what was going on in my head leading up to my 11th hour.

After the pre-flight checks, my instructor bravely positioned himself in the rear seat before I set myself on the seat in front. Then it was time for the first acronym.

I.M.S.A.F.E - Any Injury or illness? (Not yet); Any Medication? Any Stress? (Hell yes); Any Alcohol consumed in the last 8 hours? (No, but I could use a shot right now); Any Fatigue? (Imminent by the time I've taxied out); Have you had enough to Eat, drink... and have you emptied? (Not yet - stand by!).

I was already perspiring at this point. "Clear prop!"... (Oops revs too high, now too low, back the choke off, revs to 2,000rpm, check oil pressure, why is the plane moving?...oh yeah, brake!) "Sorry."

Ok, time to taxi to the appropriate runway. (Oh no...what number was it again?)

"Caboolture traffic, trike 4235 taxiing to the runway over there that I forgot the name of, Caboolture". Stop short for pre-take off checks and another acronym.

C.H.I.F.T.W.A.P. (Really? That's the best they can come up with?) it stands for Controls - full & free movement; Harness & helmet secure; Instruments set & working - Ignition checked; Fuel tap & cap on and sufficient; Throttle working & Trim set for take-off; Tips & Tabs secure; Wind direction and Strength, All clear for take-off, Power - full power available.

Ok, task completed.

"Caboolture traffic, trike 4235 entering and lining up runway three zero, circuits, Caboolture....Over." (Over? There's no 'Over'. You're not in a fire truck now, Bozo!). "Sorry".

Full power, rotate and best climb. I really enjoyed this part...for 10 seconds. Then it was all work. Keep it straight until the end of the runway, thermals, crosswinds, watch the height, look left, centre, right, turn shallow bank, level off, attitude first (not mine -the aircraft) then power down to cruise.

It took me ages before my foot found that sweet spot and maintained cruise speed...it drove me crazy. I even stopped using the cruise control in my car to help me get used to feeling the throttle again. Up in the air I made

a smooth revving 4-stroke sound like a child alternating the speed settings on a blender.

Downwind turn, line up the corner of the control bar with the runway...all good. Time to relax I thought.

Nope, acronym time again.

F.A.W.N.T.S. Fuel (twist your neck around and use x-ray vision to see the fuel level in the opaque tank. Yeah right. Say the word 'good', pretending you saw it and fantasising that the instructor thinks you did because he's no doubt rolling his eyes); Aircraft (have a good look around - "Nothing seen, nothing heard". "Oh really? What about the three broadcasts just transmitted?" Gulp! "Umm I didn't, umm" "Never mind, it's all clear...proceed". "Thanks...sorry."); Wind direction & strength (Where is that damn windsock?); Nose wheel straight (The nose wheel is off centre because I keep trying to turn the plane in the air by turning the nose wheel); Throttle off, trim set (Oops, the hand throttle, not the foot throttle...blender-revs again); Security - helmet and harness secure.

Far out! I was already at the end of the downwind leg! Then the instructor added, "Don't forget the base-turn radio call" (Say what?). "Caboolture traffic, trike 4235 turning base runway 30 full stop, Caboolture...over." "Sorry". Then more work. Look left, centre, right, attitude, power off, shallow bank.

"Where's your aiming point?" "I'm aiming at the earth! If I can get there, I'll be happy". "You mean safely?" (Whatever - just please get me to where I can end the stress of trying to remember a thousand things at once)

Ok, pull on some speed - get ready to flare & round out smoothly (Too much. Balloon. Bar back. Too much. Ease forward. Too late. Keep it flying, keep it flying, stop trying to land...the plane will land itself!).

Touch down. If the nose wheel wasn't straight by now I'd know about it.

As I taxied back to the hangar, the voice in my head told me, "Obviously you're not a pilot...you just haven't got it." Not true - I have got it, I will get it.

It was during my 11th hour of training when I broke the stress barrier and everything seemed to fall into place by itself. It was as though a psychological night-shift crew had visited my brain as I slept and arranged all the lessons and briefings into organised files. And as if by magic, during my 12th hour I was able to draw on the information I needed as though I'd been doing it for years...my mental, cognitive and fine-motor skills flew in formation and a first smile emerged behind the visor of my helmet.

Up until that point, when friends asked if I enjoyed flying, I'd respond with, "I don't even notice I am flying...all I do is think!" Now, however, I could answer with a resounding 'Yes'.

My aim in telling you this is to encourage student pilots who might be going through the information overload phase of their learning. You may find your own 11th hour in the first five hours or in 20 hours...it's different for everyone.

I once asked my other instructor, Mark Gentry, the following question, "How am I going...am I ahead or behind?" He responded, "What do you mean? There is no ahead or behind." ☺

