Getting back into it

by Judith Mole

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18 months ago I broke my arm in an accident whilst landing my hang glider at Lord's Seat in Derbyshire. During my recovery I had a lot of opportunity to think about flying and if I should continue – or give up altogether. I did get back into flying, but blew a launch five flights later… at this point my confidence hit rock bottom.

I wasn't an experienced pilot, having amassed 25 hours in a year and a half of flying, and was at that crucial stage between being a novice and becoming an intermediate pilot. Having done much soul searching and talking to others, I managed to get through the various stages of building up my confidence again. It was a slow process and required the support and encouragement of many of my flying friends.

Getting back into flying after the accident was difficult. What was once a pleasurable, exciting experience suddenly turned into a torment and I spent many days driving to sites just hoping it wouldn't be flyable. I'm now flying again, but there have been some valuable lessons I have learnt on the way…

Evaluate your accident

Almost all accidents are caused by pilot error. Although I was unlucky in the severity of the outcome of my accident, the actual cause was entirely my fault and was caused by my complacency in not learning to land my glider correctly. "If I don't injure myself or damage the glider it's a good landing." It was only a matter of time before I hurt myself but I also believed that accidents happened to others, not me. I have since become far more strict with myself and demand far more from myself as a pilot. If the launch and landing are not perfect as possible, then they are potential crashes. Knowing what I did wrong on the day of my crash helped me to honestly evaluate all of my flying and has improved me as a pilot.

Be more critical of your own performance

It's easy to find excuses for a bad launch, flight or landing, but always blaming the conditions means you are not learning from your mistakes. Conditions can influence the outcome of a flight, but it's questionable whether it is wise to launch in conditions that are beyond the pilot's experience, or to continue flying when conditions deteriorate. Looking at your own judgements and reactions first helps to build on good decisions and allows you to not make the same error twice.

Talk to more experienced pilots

I found that there were many other pilots who had similar accidents to mine, and talking to them was invaluable. I got tips on better recovery and advice on improving my flying generally. Those who continue to fly have been through similar confidence problems and can share their strategies for dealing with these.

I also talked to pilots about their motivation and their attitude towards flying. Even pilots with many hours can find flying very stressful and can be as nervous as anyone else. The difference that experience brings is being able to overcome the fear and be able to assess conditions more accurately. Knowing that my feelings and fears were quite natural made me feel a lot better.

Assess the risks

One of the things that troubled me the most was wondering if flying was worth the risks involved. I spent a long time looking at the dangers of flying, the probability of another accident, and how another crash would affect my life and career. I came to the conclusion that for me it was worth it, if I could make sure that I changed my attitude and minimised the risks where possible. I am not as gung-ho as I used to be, and I land earlier to make sure there is no risk of my judgement being impaired by fatigue. I treat each stage of my flight as a separate part and try to make sure that I give 100% to my launch, then to my flight and finally to my landing. I am stricter with the evaluation of my flight and try to learn something valuable each time I am in the air. All these things have reduced the risks involved, but at the end of the day, if it's not worth it to you it's better to do something else and come back to the sport later if you want to.

Go back to school

When I was trying to decide if flying was still for me, I had a tandem flight with a good friend. This allowed me to experience how it felt to be back in the air again without worrying about my launch and landing and without worrying how my arm would hold out. I also went back to a hang gliding school and practised my launch and landing technique. Going back to school as a pilot was a strange experience, since I wasn't used to ground skimming any more, but I learned a lot there. My instructor was far more critical of me and discussed each flight in detail and looked for ways to improve my technique. Other things I found useful were going back to basics, filling out my log book more comprehensively, going through my flight plan in my mind consciously and learning more about my glider and meteorology. A lot of these things can fall by the wayside once you have passed the exams, but knowing these things makes your decisions much better.

Take it easy

I really wanted to have a nice easy flight when I went for my first flight after the accident. I didn't want to have a challenging launch, followed by a short flight, which would force me to deal with the landing straight away. Instead, I wanted a bit of easy soaring, time to fly around and enjoy myself and give me enough time to decide if it was worth it after all. I certainly didn't want to fly the site where I had the accident.

It took some months to find the perfect site and conditions, but for me it was worth it and I was rewarded with a really nice flying experience. For some people I am sure it is the right thing to get back into the air as soon as possible, but I wanted to be sure that I would enjoy it. Having done one flight didn't mean that I had regained all my confidence, and I had a lot of experiences of backing off from flying and having days when I was just too scared to launch. Getting back into flying at my own pace worked for me although I had to work hard at convincing myself I should back off less and less and believe that I could fly competently more and more. At the end of the day I just realised that I had nothing to prove to anyone but myself.

Fly!

It's really easy to make decisions about flying from the comfort of your sitting room. The crunch comes when you are clipped into the glider and have to decide if you are going to launch. For me it was important to fly again at least once, just so I could make up my mind fully about continuing or giving up. I also wanted to make sure I conquered my fear rather than letting it conquer me.

I realised how much of flying is actually in your head, in that confidence in flying is always psychological. Being confident that you can do it, that you are prepared to accept the consequences of launching and you won't be hurt is all in your head. I'm a far more cautious pilot now, but a far better pilot for it. I also enjoy flying more now, although for different reasons. My accident taught me a lot – it was just a matter of accepting the lessons.