

**A translation of an article I wrote while being a member of the safety /advisory committee of the Norwegian paragliding association. This was back in 1995
Having non-powered flight in mind, many elements are still valid as guidelines for the beginning aviation student.**

Dreaming of free flight – from dream to reality

For as long as I can recall, everything that moves through the sky has been a deep passion for me. For many reasons, learning to build and fly model airplanes became my entry into the world of flying.

I still remember my very first plane; my father bought it to me when I was 10 years old. We (my dad) built it on the kitchen table. There were almost something “magical” about these pieces of balsa and plywood – could this really take to flight?

After some time and work, the bits and pieces started to look like a plane !’

At that time, there were no such thing as heat shrink covering – the tedious work of putting on paper and dope cover for the wings had to be done with great precision...

This kind of building technique thought me that accuracy and precision was important for a good end result.

Finally, the day of the maiden voyage came along! What a wonderful and exiting experience that was – the same that still lives deep inside of me, 25 years later.

And the plane flew just beautiful – I am never going to forget that moment, ever!

Our project had been most successful – having a goal is very important, to actually achieve it, is even better!

A passion for life had been founded – sometimes you just know that this is it...

I had a good start on my career, witch I think is of outmost importance.

As an instructor, I always try to follow this no. 1 rule – It should be fun!

In the following years, I spent a lot of time flying my planes. Desire to perform was always present, and all the time, I tried to get better on all things dealing with the matter.

Me and my friend Inge was always out flying – frequently crashing frequently making mistakes, big mistakes!

After a while, we started to learn from our mistakes

“ Cooperation is important – just don’t forget your own reasoning “

In the spring of 1986, I took the big step toward personal flight, attending Per Ivar’s hang glider class. He must have been a good instructor as I am still flying?

The spring of 1991, I converted my level 5 HG licence to a level 3 (now 5) paraglider licence. This was one of the very fist licences issued in the northern part of Norway.

Today, for me, a life without the silence and tranquillity among the clouds is a utopia.

Flying has brought me the most wonderful experiences.

I have seen the midnight sun over a silvery sea from 3000 ft over the mountains of home.

I have been the first to fly off countless summits with my paraglider.

I have conquered the most rigours XC routes, miles and miles of flying over desolate mountains.

I have experienced the forces of nature over the highest summits there is – at altitudes beyond any concept of “ normal “

I have done little flights like 2 minutes – 2 minutes of unforgettable beauty.

I have been up at the winner’s podium, representing Norway in international events – nothing tastes so sweet...

Flying has taken me all around the world, made me meet really remarkable people, learnt me so much more than just being in the air.

Experiencing both great success and defeat gives you new insight.

As an instructor, I know that the pleasures of flight sometimes seem hard to get to.

This article is meant as a guideline for the prospective pilot (and pilots !) on his / her way to true enjoyment of flight.

I really would like to share some of my experience, and thus possibly making the learning process a little less cumbersome.

Before Flight

Most people learn to fly through a flight school or a course held by the local club.

Be aware that the making of a pilot, is by no means an easy task – there will be made demands on your part of the deal!

In flight, you will be in a very “ democratic “ environment – no matter who you are: do a mistake and you will pay the consequences!

Believe me; the ground has not much cushion to offer ...

As a student, you will be faced with a seemingly overwhelming amount of required knowledge.

To be successful, you need a certain basic attitude towards the process of becoming a pilot.

Learning to fly is by no means a simple task!

Neither is it impossible – motivation works wonders!

Remember – if there is a will, there is a way.

Flying have nothing to do with being cool, macho, daring...

Your greatest mistake will be flying for expressing an image, doing so, you fly mostly for other people’s amusement – you forget yourself in the process.

The beauty of flight disappears, and as a result the very source of your motivation.

When the fun disappears – the driving force for being a pilot also vanishes.

If you look at the statistics, it is among the daredevils you find the ones having nasty accidents / those having rather short careers.

“ As a pilot, you are constantly evolving / learning – **put yourself in focus**, not other peoples demands or hunger for seeing you doing something stupid “

Do you have time to fly? Can you afford it?

Flying is a rather expensive activity, and be sure you have a reasonable knowledge of the costs involved. If you really want this, you probably have the funds – prioritising helps a lot!

Flying is something that should become a way of life – ideally.

Flying 3 weeks a year in your vacation only? , Forget about it! Your flying skills need to be constantly kept sharp. Accidents among low time pilots are alarmingly high!

You have to put a lot of effort into this! Know that your efforts will pay off vastly in the long run!

To be a pilot is by no means a” human right! “

It is a fact that the increased workload of moving in three dimensions can be disqualifying for some people.

It has happened, and will happen again – students being asked to reconsider their desire to become pilots.

A good physical and psychological health, the appreciation of exiting, vivid adventure, will be your best guarantee of a long and safe career as a pilot.

During the training

This is my concept of a well-designed start of a career.

You will meet many new people during your training, and most of them are nice people!

Your instructor (s) will have the greatest influence on your progress as you go along.

The instructor is in charge, and is responsible for everything that happens during the training.

To become an instructor is by no means an easy task – the persons doing this job have gone through several difficult stages and rigorous training to be able to instruct.

Most instructors do this out of enthusiasm and idealism – they really enjoy teaching people to fly!

You can rest assured that your instructor knows his / her stuff, therefore put full and complete trust in their judgement and decisions.

During the training, your safety depends on your instructor – don’t make this job harder than necessary!

An instructors nightmare, is seeing the student wander off into manoeuvres / areas off limits.

This is not the environment to start expressing your own ideas – especially while in the air!

Always follow the instructions given!

During the first altitude flights, my pulse rate is as high as the students are!
I have seen a lot of “ weird stuff ”, and I tell you: please do not cause heart attacks on your instructors!

The sweetest moment and reward is seeing the level of joy and happiness a student radiates when the flight went well – A true and sincere feeling of doing something valuable.
You can actually hear the yells from several miles away – you on the mountain, and the student safe at the landing field.....

Takeoff !

Before we can start doing our long gracious flights, we need to get the thing airborne...
Unfortunately, takeoffs and landings are one of the rather difficult phases of flight.

“ We have to start with the difficult stuff, this is the sad truth learning to fly a hang glider or paraglider “

Don't be surprised if you find yourself “biting the dust” – that is normal during the first days of training.
I remember how my initial enthusiasm was somewhat “ cooled off “ after a few rather “ hard “ landings....
Dreaming of long, nice flights, I wasn't prepared for the “ blood and guts “ routine, learning how to start the “ f. “ thing. It is said that resistance makes strong...

For 2 days I kept working hard, and bit-by-bit there was progression made - made me happy again !

No rule says that you will have to struggle during initial training – just don't be disappointed / angry with yourself if that becomes the case...
Remember that there will always be differences in how fast students learn – nothing says that the fastest learner becomes the best pilot in the end!

Prejudice is a very real part of our busy society.

Let yourself go, empty your mind, and go to the task of learning to fly with an open mind.
By doing so, you won't have to fight your own impression of what flying means.

“ You will learn faster and better “

Prejudice means believing something without really knowing. In many cases, you will see that reality is somewhat more multifaceted than you thought...

“ Before you really know for sure, don't prejudice! “

Many of our various conflicts and problems arise as a cause of this.

FLY HIGH

Lot's of challenge initially, but take it step by step, be patient, and you will succeed!

Once you have learned the basics concerning start and landing, you will come to realise that flying this thing no longer seem impossible!

You will soon face the decisive moment: Your first altitude flight!
Start preparing yourself well in advance, mentally and physically. Discuss any uncertainty with your instructor; there is no such thing as a stupid question!

Flying alone at 2000 feet is so different than skimming the ground!

You will feel tense, you will feel nervous, the butterflies in your stomach, expectations soar.
This is the feeling of REALLY being alive. Your body perceives every little impression...
This true adventure will make you discover the passion for living, and true positive values.

You should feel exited – not afraid, but utterly focused!

Still after more than 3500 flights, I have never lost that wonderful feeling of taking to flight.
“ Making those final quick steps, feeling the air rush by, your wing gently lifting you off – a feeling not possible to describe ... “

The ground quickly disappearing, you soon reach high altitude, and for the first time, you are TRULY on your own...turn to the left, turn to the right, navigating, controlling airspeed, glide perception...
YOU are in charge – you decide – you act – you see the consequence.... The same second.
YOU have your life in your hands – no one can reach you up there.

Takeoffs are optional – Landings are mandatory. You have to finish what you started

In any other walk of life, you can reconsider – let other decide – change your mind.
Flying will enhance your self-confidence, make you independent - develop your character!
Be ready to find more than beautiful scenery and beauty of flight...
Try to relax while flying, slow deep breath, lower your shoulders. Have faith in yourself, and do what the instructor told you to do.

Chances are – you just had the experience of a lifetime. . From now on, there is no turning away from the ever present desire to be up there.
Only the lucky aviators know the feeling. Explaining is just impossible.

After your initial training

If you put some effort into the program, you will finish before you know it !
Even if you are the lucky holder of your first aviation licence, remember that your experience is still very limited.

This is a very critical phase of your career! Many promising students have lost it during the post-training phase. I hope that you left your training with a good “ gut feeling “ and really enjoy flying.

Be very aware of how easy it is to loose this growing feeling!

All it takes is one flight in too turbulent conditions – a bad takeoff or landing....
Any feeling of loosing control can make it all tumble.

- An unsecure feeling, uncertainty, you delay your next flight – more uneasiness – more delay. A promising career is at an end before it even started.

You have your whole life ahead of you – don’t risk your career for a flight you easily could have delayed.
The mountains and the wind will always be there!

During this time, it is of great importance to build your level of experience up to a level of experience that will take you over that critical phase after your initial training.

Fly a lot! Use every opportunity to expand and verify your growing skills.

When you fly, fly with pilots more experienced – ask questions, but remember:

Always try to develop your own decision-making.

On the journey towards becoming a proficient pilot, you will need to go long way.

Please walk the whole way, do not try to skip a step or two. This practice will leave holes in your knowledge – knowledge that will be needed eventually.

You can do this journey quickly or slowly – it’s all up to you, but remember to walk every stair on the way!

Little steps.....

Experience

Experience is a very widely abused word.

Most people tend to think of experience as a large number in the logbook – WHY?

I have spent many hours flying in loneliness. I was the only one who was that committed to becoming a good pilot. Most of my fellow club members had a more casual attitude towards their hobby, therefore mostly alone in the sky.

It soon came to my mind, that after a decent level had been reached – further progress became hard to achieve.

“ I was always on top of the ridge, always on top of the thermals, I had none to compare myself with (soon leaving my club mates behind in flying skill), I reasoned this being the main reason for the stagnating progress.

I spent a lot of time thinking about solutions (moving was hardly an option):

Experience is the same as truth – the same as information!

Next question: how to extract every tiny bit of NEW information from EVERY flight?

Where to go get this precious information?

- There is no new information gathered by soaring the same old ridge for hours and hours.

Once you have learned where the “hotspots” of lift is – then all the flying you do is recreation and fun, but no NEW information can be expected.

Therefore: off to new and unexplored territory, and this is how my passion for cross-country flights began. I remember with great pleasure these first years of trial and error. None really did this back home before I started.

It is incredible where you can land a hangglider if you have to.....every once in a while, I go back to some of the “ landing sites” just to see and remember those beautiful flights !

Doing this, the amount of information increased dramatically – now, how to sort all of this new knowledge?

If you fly and fly – you really have to take some time analysing and valuating what you learn.

Everything is just gathered in a ” mess “ back in your head. Like a computer without a operating system – the information is there, but the “ machine cannot interpret the information.

Imagine that you think of all the thermals flown – *now, what was the similarities surrounding the good ones, the not so good ones. What did the clouds look like, direction of wind, air pressure, the underlying terrain, and temperatures?*

Think of when you encountered heavy sink – strong headwinds, any similarities?

What you should be looking for, is patterns, events that seem to be common when you do good – or when you do not so good. Try to verify your previous experience.

If you think you see a pattern – Try it out! If this worked out, you have reinforced your experience!

ALWAYS have some kind of plan for every flight, don't just fly holes in the sky – Follow your plan, and see whether or not your experience could take you to new levels of learning.

The more you fly, the more you expand this growing wealth of knowledge.

Remember, everyone has their own way of thinking – only you can decide what is right for you.

When you have flown a lot, you will know more stuff – be prepared that more and more time will pass between every NEW experience, however, you will continusly keep verifying your previous experiences – thus making you more secure in your knowledge.

No matter your level of experience, this is a technique good for all pilots and levels of skill.

Summary

Remember to believe in what you experience – you **MUST** base your decisions on previous experience – it is your only way of real improvement.

If you just fly without any thought of what to do, you haven't learned anything!

The way I see it, a pilot with 50 hours can be much more experienced than a 200-hour pilot can!

..... Provoking thought for some, but still very true!

Your most valuable flight instrument!

No matter how good your glider or airplane, no matter how good your computerized “glass cockpit”, don't forget your most important source of aerial information.

You have an instrument capable of solving the most complex of tasks, handling the most superficial and subtle information –

Your own intelligence! Your ability to make sound decisions.

This is where your success or failure is founded; this is where the perceptions are processed.

This is the where the decisions that will bring you to cloud base are made. The decisions that will bring you safely home!

This is not uncommon knowledge – many people are aware of these facts.

What is less known, is the power of the deeper mind, the unconscious self, the foundation of perseverance, willpower. The very source of aptitude.

No matter how many hours of training, the make and model of equipment, the decisive element is the incredible force of the deeper mind.

- *You are struggling low in weak conditions, your glider soars in a developing, turbulent thermal, you are close to the terrain and landing sites are sparse.*

At this stage, all pilots tell themselves “ I want to get up, I want to get up! “

Some pilots say “ I want go get up “, but they really don't believe in it...

Some pilots say the same thing – and they believe in it with all their heart and soul.

The result is very often given in advance.

NEVER give up on an opportunity for success; **NEVER** give up if you are in a threatening situation.

You can make a difference, no matter what the circumstances are.

This field, the deeper consciousness, is not well defined; only yourself knows what works for you.

A few basic guidelines apply:

- Work with yourself – try do do better all the time !
- Every day: Do something that requires some degree of courage!
- Be good to yourself, feeling good is the basis for a positive self-image!
- Remember: Worries are only a problem if you spend time thinking about them.
- Be open to all impressions, and pay attention to your intuitive sense – it is a valuable tool!
- Say to yourself: I ACCEPT THE FACT THAT I CAN DO A GOOD FLIGHT!

The hardest thing to learn

Norwegian nationals 1991 – easterly winds, 20 kt gusting to 30 kt. Strong thermals.

The very best of Norwegian hotshots are gathered to compete; most of them are worried about the turbulence and unstable conditions.

Except for one – NO.44 Lars Sletten, flying the new Rumour 14.5. Hot pilot – hot glider.....

What's all the whining about??? Get the wimps out of the way!

Soon I'm off into the thermals, struggling to catch the violent updrafts.

Turbulent? – YES, but not critical...Soon 300 ft over takeoff, the mind is strong.... Norwegian nationals, lot's at stake, honour and glory...

I see a bright flash of neon yellow sail tuck in front of me, the negative Gforce lifts me up into the frame, spinning blur of colours, the control bar are ripped out of my hands by incredible force, the airspeed is rapidly increasing,.....300 ft agl.... SHIT !

My life was saved by some divine intervention, as I dived inverted, doing around 70 kt, the glider suddenly self erected, pushed me back into the frame, and allowed me to regain control – about 50 ft agl....

I did a good landing, and the day was cancelled...

The next day, I finished off the competition as the winner, blasting through the course at record speed.

I was still alive, and had not lost my love for flight – Big thanks to who/whatever took the controls at that moment of potential tragedy.

A serious evaluation of my attitudes towards risk taking was needed.

We have an expression in Norway – **The mid stage syndrome.**

After the initial carefulness after the training, many new pilots start developing a “ no worries “ attitude – they feel invulnerable, and the self-confidence soars.

Learning to fly the thing is often fairly easy, after the initial hops, many pilots start thinking that flying is a “fun game “ – The flying skills are far in advance of the aeronautical experience gained.

As an instructor, the hardest thing to teach a student is how to develop the proper respect for the potential dangers of flight – Airmanship.

Simple rules on how to make your flights safer.

Humans tend to need a serious amount of pain before the consequences of our actions are perceived.

I flew a lot after my initial training. The flying skills increased fast, a lot faster than my knowledge.

I felt invulnerable, and you could tell by watching my flying.

I had a shitload of luck – many times!

I feel very lucky being in the position of learning from my mistakes – not everybody does that.

All it takes, it one moment of negligence – don't throw away your whole life on a single moment of impulsivity.

You should pursue your flying within the limits of your skills, by doing so; you can look ahead for a long and rewarding career as a pilot. Expand your skills and abilities! It has nothing to do with compromising safety – just do it in a slow and controlled manner.

In the end

All this years since I started – What a great time I have had since then, never a boring moment, always new challenges ahead.

I have turned down many opportunities just to be able to do what I love the most – being up there, all by myself. I can't wait to see what the future has in store!

To those who would like to take to flight : There is a world of amazing adventure waiting for you!
Just remember that all kinds of flying has its inherent dangers, so keep that in mind, and remember:

Little steps.....

Best of luck !

Lars Sletten. (Translated from an article I wrote back in 1995)