

CHECKS

I had a shaky start to my basic jet training in the RAF at Cranwell. We were supposed to memorise the checklists and it was frowned on if you did not have everything off 'by heart'. I've always had a mental block with learning things by 'rote' and I was often getting stuck with checklists in the early days. My primary instructor and I had what I can only describe as a 'personality clash'; as a result whenever we flew together I was often more anxious to improve my image in his eyes than anything else. On one of the early dual flights on a Jet Provost I forgot flaps in my pre-take-off checks. I knew something was wrong, but my mind refused to come up with the missing item... The instructor told me to put the pins back in the ejection seat (making the seat safe) and then made me climb out and walk back to the squadron – almost 2 miles in full view of a whole RAF station. I can remember it like it was yesterday - ashamed, furious, livid, defiant, angry and more. I'm not sure I learned anything constructive at the time, but it did get me thinking about checklists.



Eventually I overcame my mental block and related the check-list to the physical checks; moving around the cockpit in a logical way. Success came with practice, repetition and total focus on the job (& not the instructor ☺). I now have a set of checks developed over years seared into my brain - so deeply that I still involuntarily check 'Armament Master switches off' every time I taxi off a runway – even in a Cessna!

Checklists are vital in flying. Multi crew aircraft use a 'challenge and response' technique whereby both crew-members are involved and go through a printed checklist methodically for just about every action they do, every time they do it. Similarly for emergencies, they use the checklist every time. In the single pilot GA world I would say that we all need to remember some checks by heart – pre-take-off vital actions, pre-landing checks, and immediate actions for major emergencies like Fire and engine failure are essential to have in your head. Interestingly the RAF used to place great

emphasis on smoke and fumes drills, something we don't tend to emphasise much in General Aviation; however, I would say it is something we should all think about and have a plan for, it's a potentially serious situation.

Apart from missing an item, one of the problems with a checklist, whether memorised or followed from a page, is that it can become an end in itself. We simply run through the list – perhaps under pressure or distracted by other tasks, without thinking and without achieving the aim. A classic is doing the 'wrong' thing with a switch – something simple like a fuel pump can be switched 'off' instead of 'on'. More expensive and embarrassing is putting the wheels up instead of down – easily done... Or even saying '3 greens' when the lights are not actually on.



Every now and then I think we all need to have a think and remind ourselves of the importance of not getting complacent with checks. Familiarity breeds contempt, but in aviation the phrase 'win some lose some' is not good enough – you only lose once in flying. We never stop learning; the most vivid and lasting lessons come from personal experience, but in aviation there are too many lessons to learn them all that way. Checks represent the distillation of years of experience from cock-ups that happen over and over again. Treat checklists with respect, be familiar with them, and try to think of the logic involved. All aircraft you fly should have a checklist published; don't rely on a copy being always in the aircraft - have your own. If you fly different aircraft then develop a 'common' set.

One of my favourite movies is a comedy called 'As Good as it Gets' starring Jack Nicholson. Jack's character Melvin Udall is a writer with an obsessive compulsive disorder. He has routines for everything: eating, walking on pavements, locking his apartment door, putting on his slippers; his whole life revolves around doing the same thing in the same way every time. We pilots should all have a little of this in us; an obsessive compulsion to do the checks, and develop good habits around aircraft that we never depart from whatever the circumstances.

Some hard-won wisdom:

Never, ever, leave a tow-bar connected to an aeroplane.



Never touch a prop without treating it as live.

Do You
Feel
Lucky
Today?

