



Angela Stevenson takes us through her first solo flight

“You think the books and the lessons and the umpteen circuits ... have prepared you for this moment. ... Even if I had read or heard everybody's first solo story, it wouldn't have made a difference. **You can't really prepare for it.**”

I wasn't prepared for my first solo. Hang on, no, that's not what I meant. I didn't mean I wasn't *prepared* well! My instructors were sick of me. Seriously sick of me. What I meant was, *I* wasn't prepared for my first solo.

Of course, I'd been briefed that the plane would fly differently; that it would take-off quickly and I would be at circuit height within a minute. The weight and control would feel different, the sound of the engine. And, I was told, in the minutes leading up to my first solo flight, that I was ready. It was time.

I'm not sure that anything can prepare you for the *feeling* of actually doing it. Like childbirth, you think you know what's coming. You think the books and the lessons and the umpteen circuits – *I am soooooo over circuits* – have prepared you for this moment. These few minutes in the sky, alone. Even if I had read or heard everybody's first solo story, it wouldn't have made a difference. You can't really prepare for it.

The morning of my not-eagerly-anticipated 49th birthday had arrived and it was clear, with a manageable cross wind. I was just excited to be going flying. Again. More emergency procedures, more glide approaches, and flapless landings ahead! So up we went. My instructor pulled the throttle on me on upwind, I turned the plane to the best paddock and got a good glide going. All good! Throttle up, circuit completed. Normal, flaps-down landing. Tick. Pretty happy with that.

Second circuit, at 1000 AGL, the instructor pulls the throttle on me again. So much more exciting! Turning toward the clubhouse and runway, feeling the Jabiru glide under guidance and full back trim at the requisite 70 knots, I maneuvered a decent-enough approach path, then flaps in one stage. So far, so good. Bit fast, bit slow, change attitude, bit better. Aiming for half way up the long 18 Right runway at Lilydale, everything feels good. Second stage of flap. 70 knots steady. Slow flare.

Ground effect. Wheels down. Tick. Pretty happy with that. Wrong part of 18 Right, more like 18 Just Left of Right, but, hey...we just survived a simulated emergency landing!



Jabiru 4929

Third circuit, flapless approach. Setting up the correct approach on 18 Right is always a bit of a challenge for me as the Jabiru runway, the one I am more used to using, is further away from my base turn, meaning I have more time to lose height. But this one's good. Angle? Happy. Speed? Happy. Carby heat off, check. The difference in control of the Jabiru in a flapless approach is really noticeable, and, happily, I grease it in, rolling to a full-stop. I tell my instructor “you gotta take the little wins” with a smile on my face.

And so we commence the long taxi back to the club house. Chat, chat, chat, what was good and what wasn't so good.

So then the instructor turns to me and says “do you want to go again?” ‘Sure’, I say, ‘If you want to.’ ‘No, on your own,’ comes the reply. I'm thinking, “Whoa? What? Now? ... OMG!”

But I say, ‘Sure.’

We pull up outside the clubhouse, the instructor having given me last minute reassurance and letting me know to

Pop quiz! (2)

What variations in the wind and temperature normally occur with the passage of a cold front?

- A. The wind backs and temperature falls
- B. The wind veers and temperature rises
- C. The wind veers and temperature falls
- D. The wind backs and temperature rises



You're on your own now!

use Runway 18 again. Locking the door across the empty seat beside me, I released the brake and began taxiing for Runway 36 (instead of 18!) with everyone watching. How embarrassment!

It's a long taxi out to your first solo flight. Bumping along, I was thinking 'keep calm, you don't have to do anything much different, Angela.'



It's a long taxi out to your first solo

And then the committee in my head starts up...

"Oh yes you are! It's going to take off so fast."

"It's different. Different... DIFFERENT!"

"Really? You think you can do this?"

"Who are you kidding?"

"You can't do this."

At pre-take-off checks, I had to give the committee a rather stern talking to, asking myself my tried-and-tested go-to question for fear.

"If you weren't afraid, would you do it anyway?" The answer is always, yes. So I did. I felt the fear, and I did it anyway.

After calling entering and rolling, part of my take-off routine is to say out loud 'let's get this baby in the air'; today was no different. So I did. Jabiru 4929 took off from runway 18 Right, with me as the Pilot-In-Command. She took off like a little rocket, as expected, way, way earlier than normal, even though I had purposely held her back a little.



Let's get this baby in the air

50 feet AGL, 100 feet AGL, 200 feet AGL, flaps away. Going up, as normal, just more quickly. 500 feet AGL, fuel pump off. As normal.

At 1000 feet AGL I check my surroundings to make sure no-one else is in the circuit before I turn crosswind. THIS is when it hits me. There's an empty seat beside me.

Oh. My. Goodness.

Oh well. No turning back now. It's all up to me.

Established in the circuit, I've trimmed it out, hoping for straight and level, and doing the CBUMFOH. All good. I check my altitude. Oh, for goodness' sake! The one time I don't have an instructor beside me, I have not lost a single foot of height doing my checks. Really? Eyeroll! I usually end up having to correct height a little, but sure, fine, not today then. OK. About quarter way downwind.



I allow myself the pleasure of a deep, tension-releasing breath, and a wiggle of the fingers, and a moment to quietly enjoy the view. It is so beautiful up here. And I am so alone. I love the way at 1000AGL, the ground seems to move at just the right speed, with just the right amount of perspective between horizon, sky, and hills. The Yarra Valley is a treat at this height. A real treat.



Jabiru 4929

All too quickly (I must have been distracted, I'm in a Jabiru and that doesn't go quickly anywhere), I'm at base turn.

I press the dumb-button (you might know it as the transmit button).

"Lilydale Airport. Jabiru 4929 turning right for base, um.. Runway,.. um 18...for circuit, I mean, full-stop. Lilydale." Well, that went well. Not! Oh, how embarrassment once more! They're all outside watching anyway. I hope no-one was in the club house listening.

80 knots, in the white arc. Flaps down. Check surroundings? All good.

Turning final. Flaps, fuel pump, carby heat in. Check, check, check. All good.

Tracking seems fine.

Oh for goodness sake, I'm too high. Throttle back. Attitude, attitude. Better.

Aiming for one-third up the runway as 18 Right is a long one and I'm in a Jabiru, and it doesn't like the bumps at the beginning of that runway. All seems well. But I'm still feeling a bit high. Carby heat off. Seems ok.

50 metres out from touch-point, I'm thinking I still

need to lose height! Check flaps down, yes! Tracking OK and angle seems ok, just the runway doesn't want to co-operate. Come on!

Finally, I get to flare height. Small flare, bit of a balloon. Then float, sink, stick back. Float. Float..... Float..... Floooooooat.

Still floating, I'm thinking..."Oh for goodness' sake, land already, will you?"

Finally, she runs out of puff and sinks to the ground with a bit more of a jolt than I've been used to lately. In fact, as far as I was concerned, it was a rubbish landing!

Suddenly, rolling along, I realise I've done it. I'm down. And I start laughing. Big, chest-opening laughs, with even a thigh slap! Holding her steady and straight I roll onto the taxi-way, call 'clear of all runways', correctly, I might add. Then I burst into tears.

Blubbering all the way back to the club-house, the enormity of this moment dawns on me. Not long ago I had not dared to imagine this day would come. In fact, after I'd done 30 hours training, I was almost ready to give up. It felt so unattainable. I was never going to get there. I was too old, too slow.

Actually, no. I'm not. I did this. In a Jabiru. And I was not, in any way, prepared for how it would feel. And it feels, well, if you haven't done it, it feels magnificent – and that doesn't begin to touch the sides of the sense of achievement, relief, awe and wonder, that you will never forget! But, if you have done it, well, you will know exactly what I mean!



Oh, what a feeling!

Postscript; unfortunately, everyone was listening, and someone even recorded that damn base call.