

A Repeat Offender Gets Back Into the Sky



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By Mike Jones

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In last month's magazine, I reported on the adventures of an interesting gaggle of student pilots and their first solo flights. They all reported (and we all would agree) it's hard to get a pilot's license. There are hours of studying, mind-numbing tests, ground school white-boards, scary stalls, bumpy air, and grinding left-seat hours as an instructor screams in your right ear.

Now, imagine the difficulty of getting your license when you've been blown up a couple of times.

Allow me to introduce J.P. His story will curl your hair.¹

Background?

Growing up in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada mountains in pastoral California, J.P. found rural life both tedious and penurious. He skipped college and joined the Army. Not a guy to do something half-way, he chose Explosive Ordinance Disposal — the “bomb-squad” — as his specialty. He stayed in the army sixteen years and deployed to Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria and other charming locales ten different times.

J.P.'s enthusiasm for flying stems from his father. The Columbia Aerial Fire Base, located 90 miles southeast of Sacramento, was a massive forest-fire

¹ As with so many of our modern soldiers, they are very concerned about the security risks inherent with the internet and social media. J.P. asked me to not use his full name but allowed the use of the photos in this article.

fighting facility with every kind of plane. It's Father's Day fly-in was an annual highlight for J.P.'s whole family.



J.P. as a student pilot, and the Beech Sundowner in which he made his first solo. Since this photo was taken, J.P. has officially retired from the Army and become a dad.

“Everybody would jump in the car and go. We’d breakfast at a flapjack place where the pancakes covered the whole plate,” he laughs as he recalls the adventure. “We’d cruise around that airshow all day. Corsairs, P-51s, firefighting tankers, flour-bombing contests. Once they dropped a piano from a helicopter.”

On J.P.'s sixteenth birthday, his family was standing in a line at the

show and chatting with the guy behind them. When that fellow heard J.P. wanted to be a pilot, he pulled J.P. out of line and gave him a ride in his Stearman biplane.

“Imagine it — sixteen years old, flying over the Sierra Nevadas in an open-cockpit biplane with a complete stranger,” he recalls, still shaking his head. “We’re going around these mountains, corkscrews right down to the surface of the lake, an amazing solid ride. I wish I knew who that guy was. I’d love to shake his hand. That’s when I discovered what I wanted to do.”

A Year in Recovery

As for his bomb squad experience, “it’s not a big deal,” he said. He guesses that EOD probably freaks a lot of people out, but really it’s just another day in the office.

“They gave me all the training you can imagine. The training is about a year long, with an 85% fail rate. I was the ONLY guy of my class who made it all the way through. Kinda interesting,” he mused. “But if you know what you’re dealing with, you know how to handle the situation, it’s not a big deal.”

But it is a big deal, and Jon has the injuries to prove it. “I’m a repeat offender,” he says, laughing. “I was blown up the first time in 2005 but went back to work a year later. Eleven years later I got blown up again. A home-made claymore mine.” This event was extremely serious: he lost his right leg below the knee, some vertebrae and part of his hand. He still has shrapnel inside his body. Recovery took years, including twelve months as a patient at the Walter Reed Army Hospital.

During recovery, a transformative moment arrived when he desperately wanted to attend his best-friend’s retirement ceremony at Fort Bragg in North Carolina but, wheelchair-bound, he could not fly commercially. A group called the Veterans Airlift Command stepped in and offered transportation in a Baron.

“My wife rode shotgun, but I was in my wheelchair. That’s when I figured I needed to make this happen,” he said. “The return trip was with a guy named Slim Thompson, who just got out of the Army. We’re chatting and he says, when you come back, I’ll teach you.”

It turned out Thompson runs a flight school adjacent to Fort Bragg. With a team of über-experienced Army-trained pilots moonlighting as instructors and a grab-bag of Pipers, Cessnas and Beech trainers, Thompson had the perfect team to get J.P. into the sky.

No battle-plan survives the first contact with the enemy: while J.P.'s first formal lesson with Slim was in October 2017, he was still commuting back and forth to Walter Reed. It was not until 2019 that both the logistics and medical issues were sufficiently resolved that he was able to working on his flying skills. That's when bureaucracy gummed up the works.

We're Here to Help

In mid-2018 the FAA was giving J.P. difficulty about his medical. Considering he was missing a leg and part of a hand, that doesn't seem unreasonable. But the process was frustrating because the FAA only wants paperwork, not the person.

"Like, if you could go visit the doctor in Oklahoma, he could see I'm a functioning, walking, talking guy. I mean, I drive a six-speed manual-transmission in Washington, DC," he said. But things dragged out, as they so often do with Oklahoma City. It took a full year to get a temporary medical which allowed him to re-start training — but not to solo.

"To solo, I had to get a medical flight skills test," J.P. reports, a term nobody at the flight school had heard before. It turns out the process is most often used to evaluate current pilots who had been injured and returning to flight. The test normally is just a confirmation that the patient's recovery has been sufficient to allow them to get back in the cockpit safely.

But J.P. was not a former pilot; he had just six hours total flight time. He only had rudimentary radio skills. He had never flown in controlled airspace. Searching for clarity and common sense, J.P. called the FSDO in Greensboro, NC. There he found a very helpful FAA advisor who told J.P. his lack of training was not an issue. "No problem, we'll go up, fly to the practice area, and get this knocked out," she advised J.P. If only life was so simple.

It turns out before they could take their ride together, that advisor's certification expired. She passed J.P. off to another guy who disagreed and said the test was a full check ride. A check ride? With six hours of training? Not even Chuck Yeager could pass a full check ride in six hours. Plus, there were weather problems, then that guy's certification expired, then J.P.'s temporary medical expired, and Oklahoma City almost trashed his medical file.

It was panic time. But J.P.'s original FAA advisor in Greensboro called Oklahoma City on J.P.'s behalf. While it took six months he managed to get his temporary medical back. "Eventually I had my certs, they had theirs, and we scheduled a day in November 2019 to go up and fly."

J.P. recalls the excitement of that day. He and his instructor flew sixty miles to Greensboro, a medium-sized commercial airport in central North Carolina. "It was a lot of fun, talking to ATC, even taxiing at such a big airport," he said. "We pull up, park, walk into the office and go find this lady. It's great."

Amazingly, the actual check ride itself was uneventful. J.P. did both the take-off and the landing, all on his own, while the FAA advisor worked the radios. She was an excellent instructor. After they did a few basic maneuvers and returned to KGSO. "I felt like a rock star — one of my best landings," he said.

She announced she was confident his injuries would not prevent him from manipulating the controls safely. It took a few more months to get his paperwork but things smoothed out. Pretty soon J.P. was back in the air and, quite soon thereafter, Slim and his instructors agreed J.P. was ready to solo.

Crosswinds

With about 30 hours in his logbook, J.P. also believed he was ready. There's no better way to improve than by practicing and he had flown several times the week before. His skills were sharp.

His instructor at this point was a genial young giant named Dillon and they're working the pattern on a bright sunny Wednesday in J.P.'s favorite plane, a Beech Sundowner. "There was a little crosswind, lots of traffic, private jets blasting through the pattern, and other planes landing," he said. "My landings were not my best because of the gusts coming off the trees, but they weren't bad. I was handling it, and I knew I'd be ready to solo on Friday."

Suddenly, Dillon bounces out of the plane, announcing to J.P. that it was time to solo. "Dude, you just did eight landings. You're crushing them," he told J.P. "Just keep doing what you're doing."

Suddenly alone in the cockpit, to J.P. it seemed like "the longest taxi in the world." Nothing was different, but everything was different. Never had an airplane been so quiet. Even the pattern had emptied; not a single other plane was in the air.

"I made my radio calls, turned onto the runway and said, well, no going back now!" J.P. said. Three take-offs, three landings, and he's a pilot.

For the first loop, he flew the pattern competently but not brilliantly. "My landing wasn't bad, a little bounce, but not horrible," he recalled. "But I want to be really good. I reconfigured the plane and took off again."

His second landing was better. Speeds and attitudes were nicely under control. He released his crosswind correction a moment too soon and the wing lifted but he reacted quickly. On the radio, Dillon commented it was a great landing except for the last ten feet. One more!

J.P. was starting to enjoy himself. His third trip through the pattern was his best yet. "I was on top of everything, it was just perfect, very stable and comfortable. I was right on the numbers, and then I touched down," he said.

As the wheels hit the tarmac, the plane made a little hop and suddenly pulled hard left. It “tried to rip me right off the runway,” J.P. recalls. He jumped on the brakes, pumping aggressively. With runway lights looming and “dollar bills flying through my mind” J.P. determined that he was not going to hit a runway light.

“I jammed on that right brake. I mean, I yanked that plane to the right. But as the plane slowed the left-pull got worse. I thought a brake had locked up or maybe a wheel-bearing. Just as I stopped, the left wheel rolled into the grass, like half-way off the runway.” Down safely, and he didn’t bend the plane. Or any runway lights. Three take-offs and landings, completed.

“They say you never forget your first solo,” J.P. remembers. “But you can be sure you never forget the first time you blow a tire!”

It turns out that on the third the left tire “blew the bead” and went flat. But as they say in basketball, no harm, no foul. J.P. flew the same plane again on Friday, and all went well.



The scene of J.P.'s flat tire. The recovery was a tricky operation because the airport's normal runway-clearing crane was out-of-action for maintenance. Slim Thompson, in the blue shirt, devised a plan where two tugs operated simultaneously. One tug lifted the flat tire off the pavement while the other tug moved the plane. Keeping their positions synchronized during turns was quite a ballet. Notice the author's red Bushcat taildragger on the taxiway, behind the Sundowner.

Two other airplanes were in the area when J.P. had his adventure. One was Henry, a grizzled, squinty-eyed old flyer with more years in the sky than J.P. has on the planet. He flies a bright blue Pitts biplane and was stuck in the air overhead while the runway was closed.

The other pilot was me, in my Bushcat taildragger. I actually had taxied past J.P.'s plane as he was shutting down the engine; I couldn't quite believe my eyes. I stopped right on the taxiway, radioed the FBO to announce the runway was closed, and raced over to see what had happened. My chin hit the floor to see a one-legged pilot climb out of the cockpit.

Quickly a gaggle of instructors and line guys materialized. Everybody was standing around, marveling at J.P.'s incredible bit of aviating. In less than thirty minutes the plane was tucked safely in the maintenance hangar.

Henry, the Pitts pilot, parked his bird and walked over, laconically looking at both the busted tire and the adrenaline-energized student pilot.

"So what happened?" Henry asked, and J.P. related the events: student pilot, first solo, crosswind, tire blown. He couldn't stop talking.

"You know what that is?" Henry asked.

"No, what is it?" J.P. was confused.

"Now, you got experience."

A License to Learn

"I love the freedom, the fun, seeing stuff from 1,000 feet," J.P. told me later. "If I could fly, maybe it would be flying for a veterans non-profit, like taking guys to a hunting camp. My pipedream is super-crazy and bonkers: flying a war-bird on the airshow circuit. But at the end of the day, just sitting in

a Cub cruising around the backcountry, that's not a bad way to live either.”
Whatever happens, we can be sure J.P. will be accumulating more experience.

About the Author



Dr. Mike Jones is an aviation writer based in Pinehurst, NC. Commercially-rated, he's logged over 3,000 hours in more than two dozen types of planes. Sequestered for the COVID crisis, he can't wait for the 2021 airshow season to get back into the air. You always can reach him at PilotMike2012@gmail.com.