



RICHARD JACKSON treats daughter Mary Katherine to a ride on his first flight as pilot in command after returning to the cockpit.

A PILOT AGAIN!

BACK IN THE COCKPIT AFTER NINE YEARS AWAY

What a kick, for Mary Katherine Jackson to experience her dad piloting an airplane. Sure, she knew his credentials, but their previous father-daughter flight was nearly beyond memory, when she was just 6 years old.

Richard Jackson crafts exhibit prints for fine-art photographers. The day we met, he was printing *National Geographic*'s iconic "Afghan Girl" cover photo for famed photographer Steve McCurry. Only when we later began working together did I learn of Richard's aviation background. As a U.S. Air Force combat photographer in Vietnam, he had documented military action from such legendary aircraft as the F-100 "Thud," C-130 Hercules, and Chinook and Huey helicopters.

Following his tour, Richard qualified as an instrument-rated commercial pilot. He'd accumulated 1,100 hours and was training for his CFI when personal and career pressures derailed his flying.

Then, two and a half years ago, Richard and I flew from Flagstaff to Phoenix to proof some prints. Remembering his piloting background, I offered the controls as

we taxied out. He never returned them. Seven years after his previous flight, Richard expertly took off, negotiated traffic and radar vectors to Sky Harbor International Airport, and landed, all from the right seat. Based on the joy in his eyes and his virtuoso performance, I urged him to get current again.

"One of these days, I will," he replied. While Richard's piloting passion and

skills had clearly survived, the requisite resources, motivation, and time had yet to converge. More concerning was something unspoken. Experience tells me the confidence to go back to piloting erodes long before the competence does. Flight proficiency usually returns quickly even after a long hiatus; the bigger obstacle is turning the key and driving to the airport. And the longer pilots are away from flying, the less likely they'll return to it.

To pave the way, I steered my friend to online pilot refresher resources and introduced him to local flight instructor Fred Gibbs. Although we often discussed flying, it was 18 months before Richard took the first step of renewing his medical certificate. I flew him to Prescott for the appointment, and on the way back he reciprocated as my safety pilot. Exposed for the first time to modern instrument flying, he expressed enthusiasm about mastering GPS approaches.

Still, Richard's a busy man, and his review progress was slow. I encouraged him to visit the airport for a kick-starter lesson. But my friend balked at going for a lesson "unprepared." He did, however, consult Fred for study guidance.

Eight more months passed before Richard felt ready to schedule his flight review. He called me for tips on anything he might have forgotten in preparing. Richard had seemingly covered everything. Then I phoned him back with an afterthought.

"You've got one of the new plastic pilot certificates, right?"

"What's that?" he asked. Upon learning that his well-worn paper license had been legally superseded, he got online and ordered a new shiny one.

As it turned out, powerful winds grounded Richard and Fred for their first flight-review session, so the two completed only the oral portion.

Time to get back in the sky?

If you or someone you know is thinking about getting back into flying, but aren't sure what will be needed to get there, AOPA's Rusty Pilots initiative can help.

Register to attend a free seminar and discover what you'll need to do to get current (www.rustypilots.org).

“After all this time, I guess a little longer won’t matter,” said my friend. A week later, Richard phoned me.

“I’m a pilot again!” he said. “Following a few maneuvers and landings at three airports, Fred said, ‘It’s pretty obvious you can fly this thing,’ and signed me off. He told me to call when I’m ready to get instrument current!” I asked Richard if there was anything he wished he’d further prepared for.

“No, it went really well. My only regret is not doing this sooner! I guess I was dragging my feet—probably similar to others considering going back to flying.” I explained how in my experience, disappointingly few inactive pilots ever muster the nerve and initiative to go back. And they regret it for a lifetime. So while it took Richard nine years to get recurrent, he’d done it...and that’s what counts.

“Who rides first with you back in the ‘captain’s seat?’” I asked.

“My daughter, Mary Katherine,” he boasted. “She’s really looking forward to flying.” I met them at the airport that day, armed with a loaner headset for Mary Katherine. “MK,” as she prefers to be called, is an exuberant and outgoing 15-year-old. She described her last flight with her dad as a young child, clearly excited to relive the experience. I photographed them in the cockpit and waved goodbye as they taxied out.

“Did MK enjoy the flight?” I asked Richard, afterward. They’d landed at Winslow and circled Meteor Crater.

“It was a bit windier and bumpier than I’d have liked,” Richard said, “but I think despite that MK had a good time. She took lots of cellphone pics, including some ‘selfies.’ Oh, and after landing she told me, ‘At least we didn’t die!’”

I asked if Mary Katherine will fly with him again.

“I think so,” he replied. “She told me driving home that her new career goal is to become a fighter pilot.” 🐕

Greg Brown is an aviation author, photographer, and former National Flight Instructor of the Year.

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