



AFTER THE FLIGHT

Making Your Postflight a Priority

BY TOM HOFFMANN

You've done it. After a few "not-so-soft" soft field landings, you kept your Cessna 152 on a textbook approach — despite a nagging 12-knot crosswind — and greased the landing on your final try. A sense of relief flows over as you can only imagine your instructor nodding with approval out of the corner of your eye.

You run through your after-landing checklist, grinning from ear-to-ear, and cheerfully head back to base. At the flightline you secure the aircraft, jot down the 1.2 hours of solo time you've earned on the Hobbs meter, and eagerly head off to share all the details with your instructor. The almost joyous debrief with your instructor turns south quickly when the flight school manager interrupts to ask about an ELT signal that was recently activated. Suddenly you flash back to those less than stellar landings and recall that you did not check 121.5 on the radio before you shut down. Yikes.

Thankfully, the errant signal in this case is promptly identified and deactivated (yes, it was you), and no additional manpower was expended searching for a "missing" airplane. Although you took a bit of an ego-bruising from this experience, you can also take away an important lesson: never skimp on proper postflight procedures.

It's Not Over Until It's Over

For many pilots, mentally "checking out" from a flight after taxiing off the active runway is an all too

common occurrence, even among those flying heavy metal. Some might say it's easy to breeze through a postflight, thinking the hard part of the flight is well behind you. The truth is that no flight is 100-percent complete until you have taken proper care of the aircraft. Your actions (or inaction) during a postflight can directly affect the safety of the next pilot, which incidentally, may just be you! Many also might overlook the fact that postflight procedures are part of the Practical Test Standards and will be covered on the checkride for most pilot certificates. Learning to properly park, shut down, and secure your aircraft is as equally important as mastering any other phase of flight.

Check, Please!

A good place to start building sound postflight procedures is with good checklist habits. After you're clear of the runway, begin your after-landing checklist. This usually involves tasks designed to clean up the aircraft, e.g., retracting flaps, turning off unnecessary lights, and placing the transponder to standby mode.

Once you've arrived at your destination and positioned for parking, you're ready for the shutdown checklist. Keep in mind that sometimes the aircraft shutdown and securing checklists are combined into one, so it's easy to get out of a checklist mode and switch to performing tasks from memory once the engine is shut down. No matter how familiar the tasks

are, discipline yourself to keep the checklist in hand all the way to the last item. Forgetting to turn off the master switch or install a gust lock can have damaging effects to the aircraft, not to mention it can flat out ruin the day for the next pilot.

Finally, you may find that some manufacturer's checklists don't always include everything that might need attention during shutdown. On the Garmin G-1000 for example, some pilots may forget to switch off the standby power switch, which could deplete the unit's internal battery. There's also the example we used earlier on checking 121.5 for silence before shutdown. I have seen it on some, but certainly not all, checklists. Checking the frequency is a good way to cover yourself as well as report any other signals you might pick up. And while you might think earthquake-inducing landings that trigger an ELT are only a rookie pilot mistake, think again. It's a more common occurrence than it may seem. Incidental passenger contact with a remote activation switch may be yet another good reason to check for an ELT signal.

Parallel Parking All Over Again

Positioning and parking your aircraft may wind up being a low priority during flight training, but failing to learn the proper methods early on can come back to bite you. It's also a part of what you'll be tested on for a checkride. Here are a few things to consider that can help fine tune your parking and ramp maneuvering skills.

The first is obvious but critical: be mindful of other aircraft, vehicles, and people moving on the ramp. Spinning props aren't always easy to spot, so look for a flashing beacon light to alert of you of potential movement. Follow visual cues when available, like yellow taxi lines, tie down markers, and parking "T"s, which should help you steer safely clear of other wings and things.

Another good practice is to keep your hand on the throttle during any ramp maneuvering. That way it will be well-positioned to pull the mixture in case someone approaches unexpectedly near the propeller. It's also good to check the ground around and behind the propeller when giving it gas to make a tight turn — you don't want to blow rocks or debris toward another aircraft or have a fellow pilot take a bath in prop wash. Not fun.

When given a choice, park your aircraft into the wind. Note that on a parking "T" your main tires should be over the top part of the T and the tail directly over the lower part. If a tow bar is needed, be mindful of turn limits and ask for assistance if someone is available to help push while you steer. For those lucky enough to have covered parking, it's best to recruit the help of wing walkers when maneuvering in or out of a hangar.

Parking on your home turf is probably a breeze, but if you're unfamiliar with where or how to park at a particular FBO, give them a call on the radio. They'll be more than willing to help. It might also help you to do some research ahead of your flight on the FBO you plan to use; some might use a discreet UNICOM frequency for parking and services.

It's All About the Birds and the Bees

While no one expects you to perform a full pre-flight-style inspection after landing, a thorough once-over of the airplane is highly recommended.

"Two things I always tell my students are to check for signs of obvious damage and unexplained fluids," says Jeffrey Smith, a certificated flight instructor and currently the manager of the Certification and Training branch in the FAA's General Aviation and Commercial Division. "A small trace of oil on a constant speed propeller hub may not be something that warrants grounding an aircraft during preflight, but be sure to check it again when the flight is over. A good postflight inspection will allow you to measure that delta and bring any areas of concern that may have been exacerbated during flight to a mechanic's attention," says Smith.

During your postflight inspection, check the condition of the tires while chocking them. Inspect the flight controls for any abnormalities or damage. Check the aircraft skin for any stains, tears, or punctures. It's also a good time to install any pitot tube covers, cowl plugs, and any other equipment your aircraft uses to prevent critters of the feathered variety from roosting in any of its warm and cozy crevices.

"I recommend closing any air vents as well to prevent insects from finding their way inside," says Smith.



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Photo by Tom Hoffmann

A basic cleaning during your postflight can help you discover an otherwise unnoticed area of concern or damage.

He speaks from experience. Smith can recount a harrowing flight with a student during which a hornet's nest dislodged from inside an air vent and fell in his lap — on takeoff mind you. Needless to say the hornets were not amused and caused a dangerous level of panic for both occupants. Thanks to cool heads and a makeshift flyswatter fashioned out of their sectional chart, safety prevailed.

If you do notice something peculiar on your post-flight inspection, be sure to call attention to it. Flight school and flying club aircraft usually have “squawk” books where you can write up any discrepancies. Be specific, and by all means, don't be afraid to write something up that doesn't sound or feel right to you.

Cleanliness is Next to ... Airworthiness

Whether it's your own aircraft, or a rental, take some time during the postflight to clean the aircraft. It may seem cosmetic and somewhat superficial to safety, but cleaning can improve cabin visibility and may even help you discover an otherwise unnoticed area of concern or damage. Besides, fresh bugs are much easier to remove than those that are baked and caked on. It's also considerate to tidy up any loose articles, like checklists and maps, and secure the seatbelts neatly. If there's a reflective sun shade, take the time to install it.

And, just like you hear in the typical airline debarkation announcement, “be sure to check your surrounding area for any personal belongings.” This is particularly important when you're in a rental. I, for one, have endured the scornful squinting eyes of my wife after leaving a brand new pair of Fossil shades on top of the instrument panel of a rental, never to be seen again. I recommend a quick scan under, behind, and in between the seats. Besides, any wayward quarters might come in handy for an ice cold post-flight soda!

Finally, before you leave the aircraft, ensure the windows are closed and the doors are latched and locked.

Wrapping it Up

Much like this magazine's Postflight department helps tie up each issue's main focus areas and explains their importance to readers in their own personal aviation endeavors, a good postflight briefing can provide similar benefits. If it's an instructional flight, be attentive and open to any constructive criticism you might receive. Most importantly, ask questions. Your instructor may not remember every part of the flight so press him or her on anything that you didn't understand or need repeated. If you're solo, you might draw some curious stares if you start debriefing yourself by the water cooler. Instead, do a mental review of the flight and seek an expert's opinion on anything you weren't quite sure of. If there's any one constant thing in aviation, it's change. So don't be afraid to speak up and ask if you have questions. Finally, be specific in the remarks section of your logbook for your flight. It's helpful to be able to look back and gauge your progress with a certain task or phase of flight challenge.

Oh, I almost forgot — one last “gotcha” item; did you close your flight plan? The folks at 1-800-WX-BRIEF will be glad to know you're safe and sound. ✈️

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Learn More

Airplane Flying Handbook, Chapter 2 – Ground Operations

<http://go.usa.gov/5rGQ>