

THE MANY RESPONSIBILITIES OF AN AIRCRAFT OWNER

It's a dream come true for many, owning your own aircraft. But that dream can turn into a bit of a nightmare if you don't understand your responsibilities.



Beware the lemon

The temptation in buying an aircraft is to focus on what excites – avionics, upholstery, or an impressive cruise speed.

The trap is ignoring what lurks out of sight: corrosion, pending but hidden maintenance tasks, an engine that has sat around for years, or poorly kept maintenance records.

Neil Morris, from Aviation Ltd at Kapiti, has seen the results of ignoring items like those. He says it's important to get a detailed pre-purchase inspection from a trusted maintenance provider.

“Ideally, the engineer who'll be maintaining your aircraft should complete the pre-purchase inspection – after all, it's in their interests to look after their future customer. But at least get a comprehensive report from an experienced engineer who's familiar with the aircraft type.

“I've seen buyers, relying on an aircraft's fresh 100-hr inspection and review of airworthiness, hit ‘buy now’, only to find thousands of dollars of due maintenance needed straight away,” says Neil.

He points out that the 100-hr inspection and review of airworthiness are just two of the 100 or so maintenance items due at various calendar times or flight hours.

“A potential purchaser needs to think about the other 98 items. What are they, when are they due, what do they cost? These are the questions you need to ask the engineer doing the pre-purchase inspection.

“Remember the costs of hidden and unexpected maintenance could have bought you a lot of rented flying hours.”

The ‘must-dos’ during the purchase period

The CAA's senior aircraft registrar, Julia Reed, says with the sale and purchase of an aircraft, its Certificate of Registration becomes void.

“While it's the joint obligation of both parties to notify the CAA, it's the vendor's responsibility to submit the paperwork and pay the transfer fee. They have 14 days to do that.”

It's in the seller's interests to do that because they're liable for any infringements or occurrences arising from the use of the aircraft while it's registered in their name.

“The purchaser must make sure the aircraft is registered to them and a new Certificate of Registration has been issued.

“When you get the new registration certificate,” says Julia, “check the details on it are correct, and keep it in a safe place so it can be produced on request.”

Annual registration and participation levies

Each year, on 1 July, the annual registration and participation levy is charged to all registered aircraft. If you buy your aircraft after this time make sure the invoice has been paid by the previous owner.

Julia says non-payment will result in deregistration of the aircraft.

“If your aircraft is not operational for three months or more, the participation levy may be deferred. Check the status of your new aircraft on the ‘Aircraft’ page of the CAA website. If it's deferred you cannot operate the aircraft.”



// Iain Anderson piloting ZK-EVE, his Tecnam P2002 Sierra Mk 2 Light Sport Aircraft, on the runway at Whakatane aerodrome.

Stay 'detail-current'

Next, keep your details up-to-date. Your correct details need to be on the Certificate of Registration, otherwise your certificate is invalid.

“Also, your Emergency Locator Transmitter is critical to any search and rescue operation,” says Julia. “So that needs to be registered with the Rescue Coordination Centre. The contact details also need to be kept updated.”

Maintenance – your responsibility

An area confusing many operators is where the responsibility lies for maintaining the aircraft.

Listen up: it lies with you – the operator.

“An aircraft owner is effectively their own maintenance controller,” says CAA Aviation Safety Advisor, John Keyzer.

“So apart from a passing familiarity with what’s going on under the cowl, owner/operators need to follow up any airworthiness directives and other instructions for continuing airworthiness with their maintainer, not the maintainer with the operator.”

Owners should also ensure their logbooks are current.

“The value of an aeroplane is in its records,” says Rex Kenny, Quality Assurance Manager for Flying NZ and an aircraft builder and owner for 20 years.

“The aeroplane itself is almost a representation of those records. Paperwork is king. It’s obviously in our interests as owners to make sure the records are being maintained properly.

“It’s our obligation as an owner, but it also makes good sense because it’s our investment.”

It’s going to cost

Apart from maintenance, an owner must be realistic about other costs.

Before his aviation career, CAA’s team leader of heli ops, Grant Twaddle, was in the financial world.

He says it’s best to break charges down into fixed and variable.

“Fixed overheads need to be paid no matter how little you fly – like hangar rent, insurance, and calendar-based maintenance. Variable costs include fuel and time-based maintenance.

“There’s expenses related to actually flying – flight planning charges, landing fees, and so on. There are long-term costs you should save for, like engine and propeller overhauls. Finally there’s the unexpected payout, due perhaps, to an occurrence.”

Someone who extends themselves to buy an aircraft may struggle to cope with the expenditure associated with flying it, turning their dream into a nightmare.

So it’s vital a potential buyer doesn’t lie to themselves about their ability to cope, financially. If you skimp on maintenance, you could put your life, and the lives of any passengers, at risk.

“If you don’t underestimate the cost of owning your own aircraft, it’s great to have the freedom to go where you want, when you want,” says CAA’s Chief Meteorological Officer and aircraft owner Peter Lechner.

“But in exchange for that privilege, you have to act quickly on all maintenance and operating matters. You have to do your bit to make sure everyone else in the sky and on the ground stays safe.” ✈