*I learned about **preflighting** from this…*

Dipstick Woes

How an interrupted and rushed preflight had this pilot virtually flying blind, and returning to the runway, just minutes into the flight.

It was a great day for a jaunt to New Plymouth in the Cessna.

I had lunch in the town and was a little late getting back to the airfield for a scheduled 3 pm departure.

But after a quick preflight check and topping up the oil, I was in the cockpit in good time.

The Tower gave me a more complex clearance than I'd expected, with extra waypoints added in. That took a few minutes to enter in the GPS, but still I looked good for the 3 pm departure as long as I didn't mess around.

Looking up from the dash, I noticed the oil hatch on the cowling was open. "Bugger! How did I forget that?"

I hopped out and closed it quickly, then got back in and started up. The engine run-up and cockpit checks were all good, and by 3:01 pm, I was lined up and rolling down the runway. Great.

The instruments were looking good and the plane was accelerating nicely. I patted myself on the back for a well-compensated crosswind takeoff.

At 300 ft, I eased back on the power and set pitch and trim for the climb... and noticed an oily haze on the lower part of the windshield.

By 500 ft there was quite an oil slick, with a definite decrease in forward visibility.

This was a decision point. The engine instruments and performance remained good, but I didn't know why oil was spraying out of the engine, nor how long that could go on before the engine would stop.

I turned crosswind and called the Tower, requesting a circuit to land. I then turned downwind early and low (I didn't want to get any further away from that runway than I had to) and continued my climb on the downwind.

On most small aircraft engines, the oil dipstick and filler cap are a combined unit. It was about this time that it dawned on me that when I closed the hatch I hadn't checked that the dipstick/filler cap was firmly in place.

In fact, I hadn't checked it at all.

I had left it resting on the fueling step on the side of the cowling while I refilled the oil and hadn't put it back.

Stupid! But right now I had a plane to fly. There would be plenty of time to dwell on mistakes later...

Engine checks remained fine, downwind checks done. Now I had to think about landing. I kept the plane high until sure of

Photo: supplied

landing without power if necessary, then set full flap producing a slower steeper descent.

Even with this approach, my forward visibility wasn't great. The runway was a grey blur between green blurs, but I had some forward view, at least of the edge of the runway through the side of my now well-oiled windshield.

As I pulled into the final flare stage of the landing, I reflected that this was a bit like a night landing. I knew the runway was ahead, but I was judging height and round out by the relative aspect of the runway edge markers. My compensation for the crosswind was automatic.

The landing was probably best described as abrupt. I taxiied back to the fuel stands wondering what my chances were of finding a replacement dipstick.

According to my GPS watch, the whole flight took 4 min 12 sec.

Amazingly, when I got out of the plane the dipstick/filler cap was still sitting on the fueling step where I had left it!

I replaced the dipstick carefully and cleaned the plane up. Very little oil had been lost according to the dipstick, but it had still made a decent mess of the cowling and windshield.

About 20 minutes later I was back in the air on a flight home which was boringly pleasant and uneventful.

So what did I learn?

Decisions: In this case the decision to turn back rather than push on into uncertainty was a fairly easy one to make.

Checklists: We have them and we use them with the specific objective that we don't forget stuff. But you can't regulate for every possibility. I don't think that my preflight checklist includes "check that you've put the oil cap back on", and if it did, it would probably mean that the list was such an unwieldy volume that I would skip steps, or spend more time working through the checklist than on conducting the actual flight.

Probably more important is adhering to your routine check without interruption. For me, taking off at a controlled airport and having to get clearance prior to engine start put my routine out of whack.

On this occasion, the change in the flight plan route, and my desire to get away on time, were no doubt factors as well. I'm not making excuses – my point is that these are the times when it is particularly important to go back to the routine of the checklist and make sure that nothing has been missed.

Training: This whole flight was conducted in clear daylight, but I have no doubt that having been trained in both night and instrument flying made it easier. I didn't think about positioning the plane high and close to the runway, it was just a natural reflex after multiple engine failure practices, and while I was busy thinking about landing with decreased visibility, I compensated for the crosswind automatically.

Communication: I must thank ATC at New Plymouth. The controller was immediately on to it and was proactive in offering help. During the flight, there was nothing he could do other than clear me to get back on the ground as soon as possible, but it was immensely reassuring to have a friendly and helpful voice on the other end of the radio. ■

Initially, the pilot thought he hadn't pushed the dipstick in far enough after his preflight inspection. But he realised later, he'd not replaced it at all.