Elephant in the Room

ADHD on the flight deck: an undiagnosed experience

John Davison · PACDEFF 2026

No such thing as ADHD

- Only associated with naughty children
- No real awareness
- Felt different compared to everyone else
- A wall I couldn't study through
- Army Reserves gave me structure
- Wasted potential

Early career in general aviation

In hindsight, a textbook example of undiagnosed ADHD

Learning

Struggled with retention

Failure

Used it to learn

Impostor syndrome

Felt I wasn't good enough

Delayed progression

Deliberately held myself back

Airline career: flying jets with my brain

The hard start

- Compressed training timeline
- Real-time focus in line training
- Failed my first check to line
- Retraining with the wrong fit

Finding my feet

- SOPs, flows and checklists
- Structure became my scaffolding
- Procedures became automatic
- 13 years on the B737 and A330

The Difference

Why did I keep pushing and make it?

Stubborn determination to be a pilot

ADHD motivation runs on interest and meaning

It got me the licence, but not the confidence

When the structure disappeared

The airline gave me

- Rosters
- SOPs and checklists
- Clear expectations
- Someone else set the schedule

Running a business needed

- Structure I built myself
- Constant prioritising
- Endless admin
- Deadlines no one enforced

Burnout: sleeping at 3 pm every day. My business partner saw the signs first.

Finally, a diagnosis

1

Business partner

“This looks like something specific”

2

GP

“I thought you knew you had ADHD”

3

Psychiatrist

High-level ADHD, January 2024

4

Treatment

Vyvanse changed my work and family life

“I don't know how you became a pilot.”

My psychiatrist, January 2024

What it looks like in the cockpit

Inconsistency, not constant poor performance

Attention

Drifts in quiet phases, tunnels in busy ones

Memory

Steps missed after an interruption

Impulsivity

Rushing and get-there-itis

Crew

Interrupting and emotional reactivity

Training

Strong flying, weak theory results

Health

Poor sleep and self-medicating

The hidden mental health toll

- **Anxiety**
- **Shame**
- **Impostor syndrome**
- **Depression**
- **Burnout**
- **Substance overuse**
- **Sleep problems**
- **Relationship strain**

Fear of losing the medical keeps pilots silent

The wider costs of going undiagnosed

Career

Admin

Medical

Family

Health

Safety

The upside of ADHD

Calm under pressure

Emergencies can bring out my best

Creative thinking

New options when the book runs out

Passion for flying

Aviation holds ADHD attention

Systems, not memory

Disciplined flows and checklists

Strengths grow when you understand how your brain works

Training that works for different brains

Training design

- Competency-based, not fixed hours
- Video, sim and chair-flying
- Short sessions, regular practice tests
- Written debrief summaries
- Right trainer after a failed check

Document design

- Clear sans-serif fonts
- Larger text, wider spacing
- No long text in capitals
- Bold, not italics or underlining
- Adjustable text on EFBs

This presentation follows these principles: Verdana, large text, bold for emphasis, soft background.

CASA's rules haven't caught up

CASA (2022)

- Full remission required
- No stimulant medication
- Adult diagnosis means grounding

New Zealand

- Medication possible for Class 2 and 3
- Set duty windows per drug
- Still no Class 1 pathway

USA (FAA, 2024)

- Easier for past ADHD history
- Current stimulants still excluded

We manage fatigue rather than ban tired pilots. ADHD can be managed the same way.

The elephant is already on the flight deck

Pilots

Talk to your GP, a DAME or peer support

Trainers and airlines

Look beyond attitude. Train for different brains.

CASA

Build a pathway. Manage it like fatigue.

Understood, supported and treated, or alone and in silence?