

Kathan Dudhela – My Aviation Career Journey (so far!)



Kathan Duhela Career Interview December 2022, Elstree Aerodrome

Hello and thank you for taking the time out to read my article. My name is Kathan Dudhela, I am currently UK's Youngest Flight Instructor and the World's Youngest Flight Examiner.

My dream for aviation started when I was just three years old back in India when my father used to take me to a local airport now and again to drop relatives off. I used to sit in the balcony and watch the aeroplanes fly in and out of the airport, I found it fascinating and wondered how they managed to stay airborne and defy gravity. These small experiences were enough to confirm that I wanted to become a Commercial Pilot.

I moved to London in 2010 which is when I started primary school. During my school holidays, I used to go Heathrow airport and watch those jets depart and arrive as well as ask pilots when the opportunity arose as to how they got into commercial flying. Each story was unique and interesting.

At the age of 14, I joined the air cadets where I gained knowledge in what skills were required in flying as well as which paths are available to become a pilot, whether commercial or recreational. At 17, I started my Private Pilot License and passed my GCSEs. I studied hard and at the same time, I worked an early morning paper round to fund the flying training.

At the beginning of 2018, I passed my License Skills Test for my Private Pilot License, I was over the moon, all that hard work had paid off! The dream from young was complete and I was now a Pilot! :)

I wanted to continue my education and gain my A-Levels, unfortunately, there wasn't a school that would accept me, so I decided to do some work experience at Elstree

Aerodrome in Hertfordshire. The work involved moving aeroplanes in and out of hangers. I was also refuelling helicopters that flew in and out of Elstree.

Six months passed, I started looking for work locally and I wasn't successful with the jobs that I had applied for. I decided to continue looking for work, but this time at the airfield. Knowing fully well that my path was going to be in aviation so where better to work? After handing out plenty of CVs, one Flight Instructor named David Smith got in touch about a role as an Operations Manager. Wow! I thought, this is a great way into the business to learn about the business!

Whilst I didn't have any experience in managing a flight school, I accepted the job and started working the very next day. I had to manage bookings, schedule aeroplane maintenance, create trial lesson vouchers and had to deal with customers. This role was excellent, it allowed me to progress and develop myself in various areas.

Fortunately, I was able to continue flying and build my experience by ferrying aeroplanes planes for maintenance and fly with friends sharing the cost.

Summer was approaching and I had managed to fly 200 hours allowing me to commence a Flight Instructor rating. I embarked on the course in June 2019 and completed it by July 2019 - making me UK's Youngest Flight Instructor at the age of 19!

After flying 1000 instructional hours, I decided to also become a Flight Examiner and Ground Examiner. I'm currently working as a Flight Instructor / Flight Examiner at London Elstree Aerodrome looking forward to a warm summer of flying across the countryside teaching my students. I also ferry planes in and around UK / Europe.

I aspire to become a Commercial Pilot as well as get my aerobatics rating and compete in the Red Bull world championship. I also hope to compete in the handicap air racing in the UK.

The best part about my job is the joy of teaching others and watching my students progress throughout their training. It feels amazing to be the Youngest Flight Instructor and a Flight Examiner. However, that comes with its responsibilities. Most of my students are much older than me so when in the cockpit, I must make sure that the level of respect stays there whilst making sure they're learning with the highest standards. The hardest part about my job is when some students underestimate my flying abilities. Although they are much older in age, sometimes it creates the moment of tension of 'I'm being told what to do by someone who is in his twenties'. However, they do show respect and listen to me when they realise that they're paying more than two hundred pounds for one hour just to learn from me.

My journey has been challenging and fun, it has also shaped me to become a better person and influenced my personality in a positive way. I hope in the future I can achieve my goals and help the next generation of pilots achieve their dreams.

Elstree Aerodrome is a special place for me. Not because I learnt to fly at Elstree, but I have grown up at Elstree. From the time of taking a trial lesson in 2016 till now, I've reached at this stage because of the help and support from everyone on this airfield. Elstree feels like my second home, and I am very pleased to promote Elstree for our current and future aviators.

I hope this article has inspired you in some way, know that no matter how difficult the journey maybe, it cannot last forever, after all I was refused jobs locally which was a blessing to get me to where I am now :)"

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Transcription from Kathan's talk at the Elstree Aerodrome Summer Open Day 2022

I am currently the UK's youngest Flight Instructor and Flight Examiner, based here at Elstree Aerodrome. I only got my driving licence a year ago, but I'm also qualified to teach and examine for Private Pilot's Licence.

Here's how I became a pilot...

I started here at Elstree Aerodrome on this very airfield on 3rd January 2017. This was the day of my first flying lesson - an hour trial lesson and I loved it. I'd saved everything up for that flight!



I used to go to Heathrow to stand there with my friend to catch pilots as soon as came out. We'd ask them 'How do you become a pilot?'. I think I asked about 1,000 pilots! Their main advice was to get a PPL (Private Pilot Licence), so that's what I did.

I funded my PPL by doing newspaper rounds in central London. I used to wake up at about 4am to deliver newspapers then come back home do the homework. Every week I could afford half a flying lesson, so I got one flying lesson every two weeks. My advice is to wait until after you've done your GCSEs - you need to focus on your education first.

Once I had my PPL, I knew I still wanted to stay around aeroplanes. I couldn't afford a flying lesson every week. It was getting a bit too expensive for me. So, I went to Elstree Aerodrome and started distributing my CV around. I printed about 20 copies and it didn't really have much on it, but I'll still printed them anyway. I spoke to the Airfield Manager, Mike, and he said I can do some work experience.

I used to help the ground crew move planes and helicopters in and out, and refill the helicopters when they fly in fly out - this was the best thing I've ever done in my life! I used to come to the airfield about 7am in the morning and leave here 9-10pm whenever I felt like it.

I now do Freight Flights. I could be assigned to deliver planes either for maintenance or for another owner. I used to do free flights, taking planes back and forth for maintenance and I built lots of flying hours just from that.

After building about 200 flying hours, I thought to myself, I can either go commercial or I can either become a Flight Instructor. If I went commercial, I wouldn't be guaranteed a job at the end. I'd still need to look around the market and may still be jobless.

At the same time, flight instructors were in demand so I knew I was guaranteed a role. So I got myself a Flight Instruction Rating. On the 29th July 2019, I qualified as a Flight Instructor!

I then got a call saying do you realise you're the youngest flight instructor?! They said do you mind if we send a news crew!

I remember I used to work seven days a week. I used to fly sometimes for about 6-7 hours. My max was 8-hours in one day and I was shattered by the end. I had to get my dad to come and pick me up.

After building up 1,000 flying hours I thought about an examiner course. The thing is, you have to be approved by the Civilian Aviation Authority (CAA) before you become an examiner. So, I got myself an Examiner's rating and then last year became a Flight Examiner.

This summer I finished my last eight PL exams (like a theory exam like you take when learning to drive). That's the last of 14 exams in total.

I am now focusing on getting my Commercial Licence in Spain by the end of this year (2022) while instructing, examining and doing everything I can to fly.

You can start flying at 14, so start building up your flying hours then. You can't go solo until 16 and get your licence at 17. For a commercial licence, it is 18.

I would say the reason I am where I am now is I asked experienced people for their advice to help me find the right pathway. Take their advice and learn from their mistakes. Don't just ask one person, ask about 10-15 people.

If you get an opportunity take it...and then learn how to do it! Now, don't get me wrong, you can't just take a key and then learn how to fly a plane. It has its limits, but I've experienced this myself. I got an interesting opportunity to work at Elstree Aerodrome to learn the skills I needed.

So, if you get an opportunity take it and then learn how to do it afterwards!

Why not follow my journey on Instagram www.instagram.com/pilot.kathan and come and spend some time at Elstree Aerodrome.