

# Aviator flying high thanks to double knee replacement

Retired pilot David Fradley shares his story following surgery with leading consultant orthopaedic surgeon Mr Andrew Carrothers at Nuffield Health Cambridge Hospital.

An accomplished aviator all his life, David Fradley gained his private pilot's licence at the age of 17, having been awarded a flying scholarship by the Air Training Corps. This was followed by 21 years dedicated service as a Royal Air Force pilot, after which he became a commercial airline pilot, flying passengers to destinations around the world for a further 21 years.

When David's pilot's licence called for medical assessment in his early eighties, he was not about to be grounded by troublesome knees! This was when David turned to consultant orthopaedic surgeon Andrew Carrothers for the latest Mako robotic arm-assisted surgery at Nuffield Health Cambridge Hospital.

Thanks to his double knee replacement, David still flies today as a private pilot and takes to the skies in a vintage RAF Chipmunk aeroplane that he co-owns with 13 others – here is his story.

I felt the first twinges of pain in my left knee shortly after I retired from airline flying in 2000. At first I thought it was a cartilage problem and went to see my GP. I was sent for an X-ray, which revealed the first signs of arthritis, but it was not a huge problem so I decided to live with it.

As the years rolled by, I got used to the discomfort, although I was aware that it was getting worse and pain was also beginning in my right

knee. After pressure from my family to 'get something done about it' I went along once more to my GP whose first question was: "What pain relief are you on?" I explained that I wasn't taking any as I didn't want to become addicted to painkillers. "In that case, a surgeon wouldn't look at you," she concluded. That was the end of my consultation and I decided to soldier on.

It wasn't until two years ago, on returning from holiday in north Wales with my family, that I decided to take things into my own hands and seek help privately. There were two major factors that influenced my decision. The first was my increasing immobility and the fact that I was finding it more and more difficult to climb into my aeroplane. I could no longer step up onto the wing. My way around this was to kneel on the walkway at the wing root near the fuselage and crawl up the wing until abeam the front cockpit. I would then haul myself up into a standing position, using the side of the cockpit, before swinging each leg in turn into the cockpit itself – always hoping no one would ever see me doing this. The second factor was that I was now living on my own, my wife had died four years previously.

Having recently come out of the first lockdown, after spending several months of doing nothing and going nowhere, I had managed to accrue a fair bit of money so would



David Fradley is back flying again after surgery to replace both knees at Nuffield Health Cambridge Hospital  
Picture: Nuffield Health

be able to afford the treatment required privately. The only private hospital I knew was Nuffield Health Cambridge Hospital. My father-in-law had undergone two successful operations there and we were always most impressed by the place.

I contacted Nuffield Health Cambridge Hospital by telephone as soon as I got back from my holiday and within minutes they had emailed all the necessary information, including the requirement to get a letter of referral from my GP. They got in touch again the next day to say they had received the referral and could I choose my surgeon from the list provided. There was no waiting list. I chose Mr Andrew Carrothers simply because he had more letters behind his name – little did I know he is eminent in his field.

It was now September 2, 2020 and there were various things I needed to have done before the operation, including X-rays and a CT scan. Since I was paying £17,000 per knee, I decided to pay an extra £500 per knee for the Mako robotic arm-assisted surgery, and therefore the latest technology.

When I had my first consultation with Mr Carrothers we viewed my X-rays on screen and he said: "Both your knees are very bad, you should have had them done 10 years ago!" And after a pause he added: "On the other hand, you wouldn't then have been able to use the technology we have today."

I chose November 30 as the date for my first operation, on my left knee. I could have had it done earlier, but this would give me time to get everything prepared at home and make arrangements for my two miniature schnauzers.

My eldest daughter drove me to the hospital that day and on arrival I was immediately struck by the air of quiet efficiency, with everyone going about their business seemingly without any rush.

In no time at all, I was being led to

the operating theatre wearing a surgical gown. The last thing I remember was lying on the operating table chatting about aeroplanes with the anaesthetist. My next recollection was seeing the ceiling moving from behind my head towards my feet as I was trundled along the corridor back to my room. I was the owner of a new left knee!

Mr Carrothers put his head around the door to my room later, and with a smile on his face said: "It has all gone very well. Do you like the way I have straightened your leg?" I must say I'd hardly looked at my leg yet.

The next morning I was learning how to use a walking frame, the following day learning to walk on crutches, and on my final day, I was practising going up and down stairs using crutches. I was discharged from hospital at 1.30pm, when my eldest daughter came to collect me, and she stayed at home with me overnight for the next three nights, as recommended by the hospital.

After my daughter had left I paid a friend of mine, who also happened to be a carer, to come and walk my dogs, and do any heavy lifting jobs that were for the moment beyond my capabilities. After four weeks I was happy to do everything myself and I was driving after another two weeks – but would leave flying until I'd had my second knee replacement.

I had my right knee replaced on April 26, 2021, just under five months after the first. The successful routine was much the same, as was the recovery. When Mr Carrothers came to say goodbye we had a humorous chat before my discharge.

I saw Mr Carrothers for the last time once my course of physio appointments was complete. He had the before-and-after X-rays in front of him on a screen. I'd taken my iPad with me so asked him whether I could photograph the screen.

"Here, give me your iPad – I'll do it

for you." Then he said: "Could I possibly have a photo of you back in the cockpit of your aeroplane?" Happily, I was able to do this in early July when I got airborne once more.

It is now almost 18 months since my second operation and my life has been transformed. There is no pain in my knees and I can walk forever without any discomfort. I don't try to run, and I avoid any impact activity, but I get plenty of exercise and swim for half an hour on four mornings a week, and of course walk my dogs for an hour every day. My flying activities are back to where they were before my operations and I no longer have to crawl up the wing!

All in all I feel I have been given a new lease of life, and I intend to use every minute. Apart from flying, my other abiding passion is drawing and painting, and I now run a life drawing group in a nearby village hall. In short, I do everything I want to do. I feel fit and healthy, and I look forward to the next 20 years at least.

I would like to thank everyone at Nuffield Health Cambridge Hospital for the help and care they gave me, the opportunities I now have, and the pain-free wellbeing that I now enjoy. I would like to thank them too for their kindness and good humour as well as their quiet professionalism.

And strange though it may seem, I will look back at my two periods at the Nuffield Health Cambridge Hospital as two of the most pleasant experiences of my life, my feelings no doubt motivated by the total joy I felt at the outcome.

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Andrew Carrothers  
Picture: Carrothers  
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