Getting Your Part 107 License Is Way Easier Than You Think

Getting certified as a commercial drone operator can seem like a difficult and time-consuming process, but it’s really much simpler than most people think.

To understand what it’s like to go through the test taking as someone without any aviation background, we talked to Propeller’s own Mike Scott about his experience getting certified last year.

What did you think the Part 107 license was going to be like before you started studying for it?

Since I don’t have a flight background, when I originally started thinking about it I figured it was going to be relatively difficult. But then I actually met with a customer who’d taken a couple project engineers and set ‘em loose—they found a really efficient way to get it done. It took a lot of the anxiety out of taking tests on stuff I didn’t know anything about.

Now that you’re a Part 107-certified drone pilot, can you explain what the test is for?

The Part 107 license is to ensure you have a basic understanding of what the rest of the folks in the airspace, who are not operating a drone, are doing. Everything you learn can be done on an app on site. But it’s understanding the basics just in case there’s an issue, or your phone’s not working, or you need to check what airspace you’re in.
Before we get into the specifics, what does the Part 107 certification allow you to do?

It lets me commercially operate drones beyond recreation, whether that’s flying for customers or getting paid to fly—I can do those legally in proper airspace.

For someone coming from a nonaviation background, where should they start looking for study resources?

I just started googling. What you end up with is a lot of classes you can attend. I’m not a class person. So I decided to work with those project engineers to see how they did it—they were working full-time jobs while studying. It ended up being YouTube for me.

Is the process of actually sitting down and taking the test going to suck up your life?

No. You’re given an hour for the test. It’s a total of sixty questions. You do have to take it at an FAA testing center. They’ll remove your phone, wallet, and make sure you have your ID on you. Then they put you in a testing room, just like if you were getting your private pilot’s licence. You’re monitored with cameras to make sure you’re not doing anything crazy. When you’re done, you know right away if you passed or failed. You only need a 70% to pass and it’s multiple choice.

Sixty multiple-choice test questions still sounds like a lot. How do you go about studying for that?

There are free practice tests online. The FAA also has their own. But the biggest thing to focus on when you’re studying are the keywords and understanding how to read a sectional chart. Or at least be able to narrow it down to a couple answers, and give it a shot. That was probably the hardest part—making sure you know your key terms and can read a sectional chart decently.

What is a sectional chart?

A sectional chart is an archaic way for pilots to navigate through different airspaces and hazardous terrain before phones and GPS were readily available. It’s really a map [image below].
You have to be able to look at that and understand what airspace is what and what the symbols mean.

**So key terms and sectional charts are super important. Is there another topic you should know?**

Yes, weather. Keywords are just general “400 feet” is your maximum altitude. The right distance from buildings, things like that. And then it’s weather—making sure you can understand METAR reports. Once you get those three components, you’re almost guaranteed to pass.

**How many times did it take you to pass?**

Once. I studied on a Monday and Tuesday, took the test on Wednesday, and passed. I got an 86%—you only need 70%. And that lasts for two years before I have to renew.

**Once you’ve passed are you immediately certified to fly?**

Not quite. You have to submit your scores to the actual FAA. It goes like this: you take the test at a testing center; they give the approval that you passed; you submit that to the FAA; and the FAA gives you a temporary license to fly starting that day, if you wanted. You receive
an official card in the mail soon after that. I got mine after a couple of weeks.

**From everything you were tested on, what do you actually use when actually flying a site?**

I’d say the keywords are the most important. Like knowing to fly 400 feet or lower. Knowing the difference between good airspace and bad. Actually understanding how close you can fly to buildings or how to report an accident are some of the most important things to know when operating day-to-day. It’s crucial to know practical stuff that only comes up in extreme situations, like when you can start flying after sunrise. Understanding the “rules of the road,” so to speak, so you don’t get in trouble.

**Would you say this test was easier or harder than getting your driver’s license?**

Because it’s a little harder on the written side, and it’s stuff we’re not using day-to-day, I’d say it’s a little harder than the driver’s test. Everyone drives a car. But the Part 107 isn’t something you should be overwhelmed by. Even for people who haven’t picked up a book in years can easily pass. I send them the study materials I used and they’re passing it in a week or two.

**With all the people you’ve worked with, what’s the biggest concern or fear about getting certified?**

I think it’s mostly the time. People are thinking, “when do I have time to study? It’s been forever since I’ve studied for anything.” And sometimes they have bad test anxiety. But they don’t need to be scared. The process is incredibly easy to do.

**Any last things you think drone surveying newbies should know about getting their Part 107 certification?**

When getting it for general surveying, you don’t have to get into the weeds of understanding every detail of the drone. The drones Propeller recommends fly themselves, they can land without help—you’re really there as a failsafe. So, yes, the Part 107 license is a necessary part of commercial drone operation, but don’t get overwhelmed by the false idea that we at Propeller, or the FAA, will be breathing down your neck about every detail of your flight. The FAA understands this is an emerging market, so if mistakes happen, just be sure that you
know how to report them properly.

Mike Scott is an enterprise sales rep at Propeller, based in the Denver office. He’s been a Part 107-certified drone pilot since December 2017.

Studying for your Part 107 exam? Download our free Part 107 Study Guide today.

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