

Planning an out

Teach your students to plan for the no-go decision.

Don Lindsay

ALL OF US HAVE had to change plans because of the weather. A company picnic, the amusement park, or a scheduled student training flight, we've all been rained out. How many times did you have a backup plan?

Even if you've only been in aviation a short time, you're sure to have seen articles telling you to leave yourself an out during a cross-country flight. All you need to do is have another airport to go to or do the old reliable 180-degree turn when encountering a weather problem, and all will end happily.

If the pilot population at large is heeding this, why then does the accident rate for continued VFR flight into IMC remain at a relatively stable rate?

Perhaps we instructors, who have the responsibility to instill in our students a set of values, can better educate them to make safe decisions even when faced with undue pressure to begin or continue a flight.

It's possible that we, as instrument-rated pilots ourselves, incorrectly assume students will learn all about weather and will understand its hazards. Besides, we've given them enough instrument instruction to get them back to VFR conditions. But it's still up to them to make the right decision when the real test comes.

Scuba scenario: Suppose one of our students has completed training and is now sporting a private pilot licence. He or she is taking friends on a flight for a scuba diving excursion. The plan is to leave noon Thursday and arrive at dinnertime. The return flight is scheduled for Sunday afternoon in time for dinner at home.

It's too far to drive in the time given, so that's not an option, and no commercial service is available, so they'll have to fly both ways. Just to put more pressure on the new pilot, one of the passengers absolutely must be back on Monday morning for a very

important business meeting and another has to leave for Europe on a business trip at noon.

The flight to the destination is clear, and our quartet arrives on time. They have a great weekend, and, in just a few hours, they'll be home telling family and friends what fun it was.

However, a warm front sporting low visibility has moved itself into their path, and VFR flight through the area is not recommended, even though the forecast was for clear weather. Nonetheless, it should be clear by Monday afternoon.



The pilot is in a bad situation. The weather didn't develop as forecast, and the passengers will probably exert considerable pressure on the new pilot to make an uncomfortable decision. Since the weather is marginal VFR and his passengers must be at their appointments, the pilot would probably make a "go" decision.

Planning ahead would have alleviated much of the pressure. The pilot could have informed the passengers well before the flight that they may spend another night or two away from home, should weather be a factor. Then the flight could have been set for a time when getting back isn't so important.

What if the pilot made the decision to chance it? After all, the passengers have expressed great confidence in his abilities. The group takes-off and, midway into the

flight, visibility begins to deteriorate. At cruise speed in today's aeroplanes, it doesn't take long before the looking-bad-up-ahead stage turns into solid IMC.

The new pilot is in the soup for real with little or no experience in actual conditions. Only the pilot knows how perilous the situation has become. Try flying by instruments with this kind of pressure while trying to keep the sweat out of your eyes. This scenario is played for real over and over again in the real world when real people meet a disastrous end.

Armed to cope: We have the key to all three scenarios. We can send our students out armed with weapons to help them cope with these situations. We can teach them to plan ahead and avoid pressure situations.

A good time to cover this is when you introduce cross-country flying. Teach your students to expect to make a "no-go" decision and plan ahead for alternate transportation or activities. Teach them to have an out, even before approaching the aeroplane. If it's possible, expose them to real instrument conditions.

Select a dark but clear night, take your students to the darkest area you can find, and put the hood on. Allow them the opportunity to see what instrument flying is like. Ask them to tune radios, slow down, lower flaps, and other flight-critical tasks. Regardless of how they perform, remind them of the additional pressures involved in a real situation. Remind them the best course of action would have been not to put themselves in it in the first place.

Using these suggestions may keep your students from enjoying flying now and then. But it will also convince them to plan. And for my money, that sure beats becoming a statistic.

Reprinted with permission from the September 2001 NAFI Mentor.