

Decision Making: The Ultimate Decision

By John Morris

From the moment one entertains the idea of flying as Pilot-In-Command (PIC), either professionally or privately, decisions are being made. From gathering pre-flight weather information, through the flight and continuing after landing, the decision-making process will affect the outcome of the flight.

And then there is the Ultimate Decision: should I be flying solo PIC or should I have right seat support?

Receiving the approval to fly solo, as a student private pilot is a tremendous accomplishment, not only for the individual's confidence but also for the ego. Then when passing the Private and Instrument certification rides (along with possibly many more ratings) these further accomplishments boost the confidence and ego even more. As they should! But the ego now also needs to be held in check.

As a result of continued successful flying, the level of confidence built up over possibly decades can make it difficult, if not impossible, for self-determination (ego-check) of diminishing skills.

Since the individual pilot will most likely be unwilling to admit to possibly diminishing skills then it will be up to outside sources to help make the difficult decision for him or her. The obvious source would seem to be the FAA. Surprisingly, it is not, as it relates to solo PIC. The FAA, for commercial purposes, has regulations in place for annual skills and medical checks but when all else fails then it will default to age. And the age requirement may be more for work fairness and politics than for the pilot's well being. But the age regulation is for Part 121 operations, which require a two-person cockpit so solo PIC is not an issue. Part 135, however, allows for a single-pilot cockpit so the flight checks are done twice annually, with medical most likely done annually, with no age restriction.

As for the Part 135 (single-pilot) check rides, once past the initial check the FARs tend to focus on the certificate holder's particular areas of operation and therefore the pilot can be prepared for before each re-check. Of course if flying for a busy commercial enterprise then the currency checks generally pose no undue burden on the pilot for proving required skills. More than likely the amount of hours allowed by FARs will cause the single pilot to self "retire" due to burnout before diminishing skills becomes a factor.

Unless the reason to discontinue flying from the commercial sector is due to a loss of medical then the pilot can continue flying as solo PIC in the Part 91 world. When flying under Part 91, as far as FARs are concerned, unless the aircraft being flown requires a type rating, which requires annual recurrent training, a solo PIC can continue to fly for as long as the FAA medical can be retained (except sport/gliders or balloons) and the pilot maintains required currency. With the exception of the bi-annual Flight Review the solo PIC is self-regulating regarding currency, including instrument proficiency.

Who is going to help the solo PIC make the ultimate decision now? The primary source would be the aviation insurance industry. The aviation insurance industry has a fiduciary responsibility based on the policy underwritten for the value of the aircraft and the liability limits for its occupants. So to protect its interests the industry will require training that it considers sufficient for the aircraft underwritten. If the solo PIC is denied insurance then effectively he or she cannot fly solo, as it relates to liability coverage, not regulatory. The aviation insurance industry, like the FAA, uses age as a factor towards denying insurance coverage. But unlike the FAA it may not be age alone but a combination of factors, including type of policy underwritten and who the insurance and training providers are. But these requirements are not regulatory, and as long as the insurance and training providers approve the pilot then all is well.

An important component of this discussion is the pilot himself/herself. It assumes that the pilot is being honest, to themselves especially, about all aspects of their flying/medical currency and proficiency. Why? When doing the required training the solo PIC usually will have sufficient time to prepare for the “usual” training. The amount of actual flying done prior to training will probably determine how much prep may be needed. But what kind of flying was that? VFR/IFR, high /low altitude, long/short cross-country, day/night or a combination of all? Only the pilot knows what has been done between training cycles since flying Part 91 solo PIC, records are usually only kept by the individual and not required to be presented to anyone.

What does the training provider require? Current medical is all that is really required since at the completion of training an [FAR] Instrument Proficiency check and possible Flight Review sign-off are issued. But usually the provider will also request past flight currency times. Why do that? It will help the training instructor to assess some of the potential areas for more concentrated training. But this request assumes honesty (ego check) on the part of the pilot. And again, it is in the best interest of the pilot to then supply the necessary requested information for a successful training event.

Which takes us back to the “ultimate decision”. The training provider may never actually know how proficient/competent the solo PIC really is, since the job of the provider is to teach/train and refresh, not to fail, unless absolutely necessary. And in a training environment the instructor is not seeing the “whole” picture of how the solo PIC operates in the actual ATC environment. The whole picture consists of prior personal activities, including rest patterns, radio scan/communications during cross-country, etc. So unless the pilot self-assesses then who or what will help?

Increasing training cycles, three-in 24 months or twice a year certainly can help but I believe an equally useful tool to use by all Part 91 pilots, but specifically the solo PIC, is a Safety Management System (SMS). Originally developed due to safety issues with Part 121/135 incidents/accidents the tool has been adapted for general aviation use. There are several versions available and it is up to the individual to locate the best one for him or her self. Used correctly and consistently it is the best method to start facing the ultimate decision without waiting for an outside source to make the choice for you. SMS asks, through form fill-in, the questions that only the pilot can honestly answer. The SMS will then show whether you are safe to fly, take the day off or have assistance in the form of a copilot. The aviation insurance industry absolutely endorses the use of SMS by all factions but especially solo PIC. Of course the catch is that the industry only knows about the use of SMS if the pilot notifies them of said use.

No matter how you look at the choices listed, likely one of the most painful “hits” to the ego, is to be told that you cannot act as solo PIC. So the greatest, most important decision a pilot can make, is to make the “Ultimate Decision” for him or herself.

“A safe pilot is always learning”

John Morris - ACFT Services

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