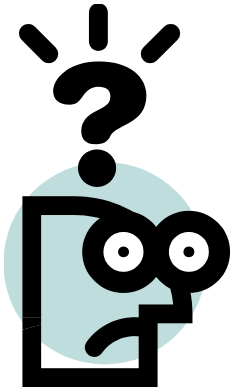

TO GO or NOT TO GO

Making the decision and what to assess if the outcome is not what we expected.

These days every flight test will have a tick box that will say “Assess situations and make decisions”.

This not only means assess the situation and decide whether to go or not, but also to be able to assess situations enroute and change your plans to accommodate new situations. This fits nicely into crew based countermeasures in threat and error management. So today we will be having a look hazards, risk and risk management, situational awareness and how we can recognise when the situation is turning pear shaped and what we need to do to get out of a sticky situation.

So you have got your pilots licence and have planned to take a trip with some friends to a remote country race meeting or you are taking a work colleague to a business meeting in Albury. Now either way that’s a long drive and the smart thing to do is hire a plane and fly. Why not?

If you have a “must arrive by” requirement then the go/no go decision must be made while there is still an option of alternative transport. “Get there itis” and “Get home itis” are the two major diseases that get VFR pilots into trouble. If you intend to fly for essential travel purposes then get and use an instrument rating. It is cheap life insurance.

So the weather looks OK. Not perfect but acceptable. We make the “go” decision. Let us now look at the hazards, the risks and how we are going to manage them. Bear in mind that life itself carries risk, there are hazards everywhere. There is probably a slight increase when we add height (defying gravity) and speed (defying inertia) to the mix. The four fundamental risks elements of flight are the pilot, the aircraft, the environment and the mission.

We are just going to concentrate on the first one.

The pilot. American research has dropped all of us pilots into three categories. And regardless of which category you fall into we are all human and we will ALL make mistakes. So if you make an error that is not the end of the world; we all do and we all will in future. It is how we manage our mistakes that are important. Most accidents occur as a result of a chain of errors that were not recognised and arrested. Remember the Swiss cheese and don't let all the holes line up. So let's have a look at the pilots and their limitations:

1. Less than 500 hours total time – lack of knowledge and experience.
2. 500 to 3000 hours –know it all. Have the skills and are "cocky". Potential risk takers.
3. 3000+ hours – complacency. This can lead to carelessness and a sense of invulnerability.

Poor decision making accounts for up to 80% of aviation accidents. So why do we, as normally sane and rational people, fall into the trap of making poor decisions. Taking out lack of knowledge and experience we need to recognise the limitations of our on board computer, our brain.

The most important aspect of managing any flight is maintaining situational awareness. What is "Situational Awareness"? Simply it is knowing what is going on around us. We do this by mentally absorbing and processing information and making decisions based on that data.

However when we find ourselves in a situation where the inflow of data exceeds the brains ability to process it all (called "channel capacity") then we have only two alternatives.

1. Shed the unimportant tasks or
2. Perform all the tasks at less than optimum.

Our brain will do this automatically unless we train it to do otherwise. The problem with allowing the brain to shed tasks automatically is that it will delete the most complex task, which will usually be the most important one. This can lead to a pilot taking care of some minor irrelevant task whilst a major task is being ignored. "Majoring in the minors".

The fix: We have to learn to recognise the signs of impending saturation (a sense of time compression and elevated stress) and learn to prioritise tasks from most important down to least important. In other words train ourselves to shed tasks manually and not allow our brain to do it automatically.

We can reduce the risk of task saturation by planning ahead and having prior knowledge of potential problems further along. For example maintaining a listening watch, and requesting information from ATC for weather conditions along our intended route. It is far better to know there is a SIGMET for our destination aerodrome than to arrive there totally unaware. We can then plan a diversion well before we get there if conditions are beyond our own personal limitations, of which we need to be aware. “Know thyself”.

In conclusion:

1. Remember the 7 P’s. Prior Preparation and Planning Prevents P#ss Poor Performance.
2. 3 P’s. Perceive, Process & Perform.
3. Practice and stay Proficient.

What a wet day it is. All those P’s.

Old Proverb: *“A man begins cutting his wisdom teeth the first time he bites off more than he can chew”*