

IFR FLIGHT AS Continuing Education ?

BY MICHAEL CHURCH

IT MAY HAVE occurred to you that those who haven't yet learned to fly have only a bit more than a year left to get the job done in the first 100 years. After that, what are people going to say?

"I wanted to wait at least a century to make sure it isn't just a fad." "I pride myself on being a slow and deliberate person." "Powered flight? No thanks! Let's wait and see just how safe it really is."

That brings us to this annual *PRIVATE PILOT* "Learn to Fly" issue—a great enterprise intended to spread the word that airplanes, gliders, balloons, parachutes and even space shuttles are so commonplace, so accessible and so much fun that everything else is just something to do while you make up your mind to get started flying.

But life isn't all roses. One difficulty I face on an annual basis is trying to think of an IFR column that has a "Learn to Fly" perspective. No matter what the FAA would like you to believe, IFR flight isn't really stuff for beginners—at least not in the "let's get started" scheme of things.

IFR operations are a sophisticated add-on not remotely suitable for beginning pilots and often completely irrelevant even to seasoned professionals.

Of course, I could just write one more IFR column with a "learning" angle, but that seems non-confrontational. Instead, it's intriguing to look at IFR training from the point of view of the beginner. The most obvious question that occurs to me is Should everybody get an instrument rating as part of their basic flight education? For me, the answer is no.

All Those in Favor...

In the positive camp, there will be a couple of predictable voices. One will come from those with a commercial interest: flight schools and manufacturers. Pursuit of the instrument rating extends "student" status for six to 12 months past the private certificate and guarantees an additional 90 to 100 hours of solo and instruction time for most enrollees. What could be better?

Another positive response will certainly come from the FAA. Here, the point of view is slightly more complex but can be boiled down to two main issues: control and safety. On the control side, instrument pilots are significantly more manageable for air traffic control (ATC) than their visual cousins. By fitting into the system from the start of every flight, IFR pilots are predictable and controllable—less likely to be the source of random activity and unexpected behavior.

On the safety side, you must appreciate the following significant statistic: A large number of GA accidents involve visual pilots attempting to fly in nonvisual conditions. Since the 1960s, the FAA has taken the position that the cure lies in getting everybody trained for nonvisual flight. The approach has merit; poor judgment and missing skills are best handled by increased education. Over the past 30 years, the steps taken to achieve this goal have included a heavy emphasis on instrument reference groups in modifications of instrument training standards and a significant decrease in the activity needed to retain instrument currency. During the same period, instrument ratings became mandatory for all CFIs.

Modern Flight Training

The official view that instrument flight is an essential element for safe piloting has slowly changed the way most flight schools and new pilots look at flight training. Originally a specialized tool needed only by advanced pilots, the instrument rating has evolved during the last 80 years into the "second phase" of primary flight training. Phase one is VFR; phase two is IFR. It isn't an exaggeration to say that most new pilots are encouraged to feel incomplete until they get an instrument rating, and as a result, basic pilot training has now expanded from a 40-hour endeavor into a program guaranteed to take at least 125 hours.

(This isn't cheap. If you were looking for a way to discourage flight training enrollment, you may have just found it.)

Those Against

Is universal instrument training the right way to go? The accident rate has improved somewhat, which suggests that the approach is working, but there are major problems. The most obvious is that after flying IFR for a brief period, most GA pilots don't continue to fly sufficient nonvisual hours to retain instrument currency. Once currency is lost, the ratings cease to have much practical application, suggesting for those pilots that there was no real need for the training in the first place.,'

But before abandoning IFR training completely, we should hear from pilots themselves. After all, instrument ratings aren't mandatory, and each pilot who makes the decision to earn one is acting for reasons that seem practical and worthwhile.

Who needs instrument training? Clearly, the answer should be pilots who anticipate a need to fly in the clouds, either for personal or professional reasons. However, this decision isn't always thoroughly thought out, and a large number of newly licensed private pilots fail to consider the physical limitations of the aircraft they'll be flying and the continued investment of time and effort needed to remain instrument current. As suggested already, many eventually conclude that the expense and bother of flying instruments every several months just to remain legal aren't worth the reward.

Obviously, those parts of the country with lots of IMC host more current IFR pilots than areas with few clouds, like Arizona and Southern California. Still, the majority of GA pilots I've met across the nation don't appear to keep their IFR status polished. Pilots who benefit from flying in the clouds sufficiently to retain instrument skills over a long period of time are in the minority.

That raises an interesting question. Why get an instrument rating at all if it will have no real practical application? Over time, I've found that the best answer to this is that most new private pilots have a general goal of becoming "better," and instrument training just naturally seems like the next step in that direction. It's "professional," and you get a graduation certificate from the U.S. government – a new line of type on your certificate.

This brings us back to the influence exercised by our government. Unless you decide to switch aircraft class or category, the next level of achievement recognized by the FAA after the private Certificate is an instrument rating. For pilots who wish to climb the rungs of advancement, instrument training often seems not just the best choice but the only one. Even if they don't really need it, even if they won't be able to put it to much practical application, even if they won't be disciplined enough in the future to retain currency, many pilots take instrument training simply because that's what's offered.

But Wait, There's More

At this stage, it might seem reasonable to come out with a broad recommendation against IFR training for the majority of GA pilots, were it not for three positives not directly related to flight in bad weather.

1) In a general way, any increase in knowledge is good, like going to college after high school. The difficulty with this argument is that 40 to 50 hours of flight instruction seem excessive merely to increase "background" knowledge.

2) IFR training can greatly increase communication and ATC-system skills. For pilots who initially train in quiet areas, the disciplines and techniques learned in controlled instrument flight may open up hundreds of airports they were previously unwilling to visit, regardless of weather. However, the same difficulty cited in number one applies: A full IFR rating is overkill if your only goal is increased communication and system ability.

3) Most important, even if pilots never file IFR, instrument training can increase the pleasure and rewards of VFR flight. For this last point of view, I'm grateful to the pilots I quizzed while thinking about this article. A common theme running through the thoughts of many was that the entire area of marginal-weather flying had been intimidating as long as they remained limited to VFR, much the way that spins and unusual attitudes appear dangerous to those with no aerobatic training.

The experience of earning an instrument rating proved invaluable to many of these pilots simply because they now worry less and enjoy more. As one pilot put it, even out of IFR currency, he's free to make trips and flights he would have previously avoided because he more thoroughly understands the

potentials and the available alternatives. He's better able to make rapid and accurate decisions as the flight progresses, decisions he might have made incorrectly before getting instrument training.

I'm not sure this is precisely what the FAA had in mind (noncurrent IFR pilots flying closer to marginal weather than they did before), but, as pointed out, the accident statistics have improved a bit, so the overall result appears to be positive. In the long run, the FAA has gone the right way. Instead of endorsing a position of avoidance, as it did a long time ago with spins, it has opted for confront and education.

Yes/No?

That ends the list of positives. On the negative side are those situations where instrument flight has proved to be dangerous: too much weather, too little pilot. There's no "recreational" IFR rating. The decision to fly in the clouds should be made with the understanding that weather and aircraft systems are both unpredictable. When things begin to go wrong in the nonvisual environment, it takes sure skills and practiced competence to remain alive.

Hundreds of accident reports involving inexperienced and incompetent pilots in IMC support this conclusion, and pilots whose future plans don't appear to promise lots of IFR activity should consider forgoing the training altogether. There are plenty of other ways to improve skill besides IFR: soaring, aerobatics, mountain-flying courses, precision flight contests, to name a few. All promise to be fun, expanding and free of the more serious overtones of IFR flight.