

SITTING ON THE GROUND,
WAITING ON THE WEATHER
BY
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A flight from New Orleans to Asheville, North Carolina takes four hours in our little Cessna. All systems are in place and up-to-date for conducting IFR flights in the bird. My partner Lyle and I are both instrument rated and current. We are, as they say, IFR equipped and qualified. We're both fairly experienced pilots, but since we are in our seventies, we count ourselves among the old, not the bold. This is the story of a potentially record-setting delay that may illustrate the difference between those two categories of pilots.

If you have not read my essay from 2/27/13 on setting and using personal minima to keep you alive and getting older, I invite you to look it up in Brian Capone's archive of articles that have appeared in this blog. To summarize part of that article, I've adopted some personal weather minima that help me with my go/no-go decisions. One of the rules I follow is that I will not fly in conditions forecast to be any worse than 1000 foot cloud bases and 3 miles visibility.

Now I can hear a bunch of you bold pilots scoffing at this idea. I know what you're thinking because, before I got old, I considered the only ceiling/visibility limitation on making a "go" decision to be whether or not I had enough fuel to shoot an approach at my desired destination, miss, then scoot over to my

way-above-minima alternate airport and land with at least 45 minutes of fuel left in my tanks. I won't rehash what led me to change my attitude on this subject, but if you're interested, look up the essay.

This story begins on the fifteenth of November, 2013. Lyle and I were planning to fly with our wives up to Asheville for a nine day get-away. The weather reports and forecasts on that morning were iffy. There were widespread areas of IFR and marginal VFR conditions all the way up there, along with another factor I liked even less, which was temperatures near, at, and slightly below freezing, combined with lots of visible moisture. The briefer told me that there was no icing below twelve thousand feet until you got slightly south of our intended path of flight, but he also read a report showing the freezing level to be very near the ground, as we approached the little mountains that surround Asheville.

When I called to compare notes with my partner, he expressed the opinion that he wasn't too crazy about flying that close to some yellow returns on the radar, let alone get right up under some icing conditions, let alone flying through clouds at temperatures within five degrees of freezing.

So we cancelled for that day. I think that's a decision many single-engine amateur pilots would have made, but I also know some other people who might have gone up to have a look.

Next day we had low IFR, forecast to pick up by noontime and stay above my 1000/3 minimum for most of the afternoon, returning to low clouds and high grass sometime around 9:00 that evening. If I had been going with my wife and nobody else, I might have had a look that day, but Lyle and his wife were not

excited about flying through precip, so we delayed our departure for another day. Never let it be said that I coerced anybody to fly in questionable weather.

An additional factor in this no-go decision was the prospect of arriving at our destination after dark. The land around Asheville is not very tall, compared with some real, sure enough mountains out west; but, as Lyle said, flying into little mountains will kill you just as dead as splatting against the big ones. Conducting IFR operations in the Smokies is a relatively benign affair, provided that one sticks to the prescribed altitudes for those kinds of operations. But the prospect of a forced landing in the hills at night might give one pause. Life's already pretty short, as we septuagenarians all know.

During my briefing of the third morning, the 17th of November, the briefer gave me some information on the big picture. He explained that there had been a dip in the jet stream that was holding all of this clag right where we didn't need it to be. Once again, starting around noon, the weather was up to marginal VFR which, I remind my readers, can be as good as 3000 foot ceilings and 5 miles visibilities. Again, there was the prospect of worse conditions, a fairly heavy line running northeast/southwest, parallel to our putative route of flight that could maybe move toward us during the four to five hours it would take to get to our destination. And once again, the 1000/3 minima were not expected at Lakefront in New Orleans until around noontime, so the third day came up a bust as well.

Our previous record for postponed departure because of weather was three days. My wife and I have been traveling together in small airplanes for over 40 years, and have seldom

been delayed for more than a day. Usually it's a matter of waiting for a front to get out of our way or something like that. We were at home, counting ourselves lucky to be weathered in in an interesting place like New Orleans on our third day of delay. We had brunch at one of the better New Orleans restaurants, enjoyed the company of our supercat, and sat in front of our T.V. enjoying the Saints game that afternoon.

When we're on the road, we usually try to find interesting places to strand ourselves, in case the forecast for the coming day looks marginal. Pensacola, Memphis, San Antonio, and El Paso are some of our favorites. In fact, the previous record was set in El Paso, not a bad place to spend a few unintended days on the ground. Oh yeah, there was also a time we were delayed for three days in Dayton, Ohio by a combination of weather, followed by a maintenance problem, followed by a case of laryngitis that made it impossible for yours truly to communicate with ATC. We spent two days at the Air Force museum and learned a whole lot more than we wanted to about the Wright Brothers. We scoped out some good restaurants and met some interesting people in Ohio. There was never a dull moment during that stopover.

I hope I'm not rambling too badly. I'm just trying to make the point that there are lots of worse things than being delayed on a cross-country flight, if you plan your intermediate destinations with some forethought. And sitting at a word processor waiting for the weather to clear, writing an essay about waiting for the weather to clear is not nearly as bad as getting ice on your wings or conducting controlled flight into rising terrain. If you think of get-there-itis as a potentially deadly disease, you can probably think of lots of therapeutic

alternatives to challenging questionable weather in your tiny little single-engine, no deice bug smasher with limited backup for your systems and probably a fairly limited fuel supply. It's a matter of perspective. Imagine yourself reading about your death by weather-related mishap and thinking how foolish you were in retrospect.

The next day was the first one when I heard thunder as I woke up in my own bed, sandwiched between a warm wife and a warm cat. I thought I'd just give the weather man a call, since I was already awake. He told me there were some remnant weather cells in the area, but that they had just recorded a wind shift at New Orleans International, an indication of frontal passage as we were speaking. The radar was telling a story of clear skies to the north of our originally planned route, and the briefer confirmed that visibilities were going up all over that northern route. We agreed that I'd call back in a couple of hours and see how things were going.

Being tentative can often be a good policy. We spent some time repacking some of our stuff and notified the cat sitter that her services might soon be needed. By the time we got back to the FSS guy, our ipad weather was looking very promising, and Lyle concurred that an IFR departure should carry us into VFR skies within half an hour of our departure.

So that's exactly what we ended up doing. By choosing a route a little to the north, we had a very smooth ride at 9000 feet and even caught a little tail wind. We all avoided the stress of sticking our noses into questionable conditions and kept on getting older at the rate of one day per day.