

New to instrument flying?

By Chris Hope, Master CFI

Looking back, I realize that my transition to becoming an instrument pilot was so much easier than what most of my students go through, and so much easier than for most new instrument pilots. When I attended USAF Undergraduate Pilot Training (UPT), I already had a Private Pilot's license. I received the same instrument training in the T-37 and T-38 that all USAF students received. And then I was assigned to an Air Force squadron to fly the Lockheed C-141 cargo aircraft.

I was not wild about the assignment. Like all new military pilots, I felt that I was the service's best fighter pilot. Or, at least I would be as soon as I finished my F-4 training. But even then I realized that I was not as good at instrument flying as I needed to be. And I knew that an assignment to the Pacific northwest, flying all over the world, would give me an opportunity to hone those skills.

And the opportunities came in the best possible way. In addition to the standard ILS that ended many of our flights, I flew ADF circling approaches into Navy and Marine bases tucked into little seaports. I flew radar approaches (GCA) to minimums. I flew ILS approaches, Category II and III to touchdown, both manually and fully coupled to the autopilot and auto-throttles. I made takeoffs where we could only see one set of runway lights. And the best part of this experience is that during my tenure as a copilot in this real-world flying, I had a pilot with me who had gone through all of this many times. So, whether he flew (it was always a "he" back then) and I co-piloted, or I flew and he co-piloted, I was secure in the knowledge that an experienced someone had my back.

So, let's compare that to the training and transition that most civilian instrument pilots receive. Part 61.65 requires 40 hours of instrument experience, including 15 hours of actual training. For most students, this becomes 40 hours of training, about nearly all with a hood, but maybe two or three hours in actual weather. And then, we instructors send our students off to a flight examiner who again puts a hood on them and watches and evaluates. And then, at the end of that ordeal, pronounces them fit to fly in the weather.

So, about a month later our new instrument pilot has an opportunity(?) to fly a cross country trip where the weather is less than VFR. Whether he or she is looking at an approach in Class B airspace or one to a small rural airport, the feeling is the same – near terror. "What have I gotten myself into? Can I really do this?"

Airline pilots and military pilots train and train, practice and practice. In addition to flying the paid mission about twenty days each month, they get to demonstrate their abilities several times each year to some senior flight examiner. And then, when anything slightly different is on the horizon, they are off to a simulator, or off

to find an instructor to practice the new technique. Us GA folk? We say, "I read about it in the magazine. I can do this." Professional pilots do not have the same attitude as us GA folks.

We general aviation pilots, however, are an odd lot. While the flying magazines would like to picture us as fully safe, measured, law-abiding citizens, we all seem to have a bit of a wild streak within us. We hate for the FAA or any other government agency to tell us how to fly our planes. In some cases I swear, just a like a teen-ager, we sometimes do just the opposite of what we know we should do just because we can

But let's be honest here. It isn't just that we are authority-adverse. We GA people are also generally holding full-time jobs, raising kids, going to school, and trying to find a few extra dollars to put toward training. There just are not enough dollars and hours to do everything we wish.

AOPA and the FAA have gone a long way with their on-site seminars and their on-line training topics, But sitting in an audience, or watching a video, no matter how well produced, just is not the same as talking to someone who has faced the same issues as us.

Radek Wyrzyowski (yes, that is spelled correctly) had that "what have I gotten myself into" experience when he made his first instrument flight in the New England area. He had just completed his instrument checkride, and headed for home. With weather deteriorating, he landed at an airport to wait out the weather. It was not improving.

The next day, with the weather solidly IFR, he decided that his one-day old instrument ticket gave him sufficient knowledge and experience to head for home. After all, home was not that far away.

He took off from a non-towered airport after calling Flight Service from a pay phone to get his IFR clearance. (Yes, for our younger pilots, it was not too long ago that we did not have cell phones, GPS systems, and moving maps.) The clearance he received was not what he was expecting. There was no "Cleared as filed. Climb and maintain, etc." Instead, he heard. "Cleared into controlled airspace direct to the XYZ VOR. Climb and maintain 3,000. Contact Boston Center for further clearance." Is that intimidating or what?

So he takes off, heads to the VOR, and contacts Boston Center on the assigned frequency. Savvy instrument pilots know what will come next. Radek was rated but definitely not savvy. He was not ready to hear "Piper 43243, radar contact, are you ready to copy your further clearance?" Had he been a savvy instrument pilot he would have pen and paper available. Or at least, he would have said, "Stand by. " But he wasn't, and he didn't. Instead he said, "Ready to copy, and

was grateful to get a very simple clearance direct to the final approach fix to his near-by destination.

The weather at his destination was a bit above non-precision minimums. And although he was returning to his home airport, and although he was flying a circling ADF approach that he had flown a dozen times before under the hood, this was the first time he had done this for real.

Now most of us, having lived through this experience, would have eventually turned it into a good hangar story. And I am sure that Radek did as well. But eventually, unlike many of us who said, "There has to be a better way than throwing pilots into the deep end," he actually thought of a better way. And then he did something about it.

I met Radek at Oshkosh this past year. And I was totally impressed with his solution. He created an atmosphere where new and experienced instrument-rated pilots could talk to each other, face to face, about their experiences. And thus, www.lmcclubs.org was born.



The idea behind IMC Clubs is simple. Instead of listening to a local pilot's story, how about having the opportunity to listen to a lot of pilots' stories, of actual situations? And then, instead of listening to one person's solution, how about experiencing an environment where we can share that experience with a roomful of instrument pilots, some with more and some with less experience, and discuss how the situation could have handled differently?

Radek and the IMC folks have taken these real stories and polished them into a professional video. Then, once a month, under the guidance of a local instrument flight instructor, the pilots can take a situation and talk about what options the pilot could have chosen at different points. And then, they can change the situation a bit and talk about how this affects their decisions.

Additionally, IMC Clubs have created a web-site that is truly member-driven. Members have asked for a lot of info, and a lot of info is available. Want to ask an instructor any question? If it is not already in the 'FAQ', just ask and a CFI-I will answer within a day. Looking for an on-line manual or training aid? Check this section out before you spend a lot of time with Google. (And if they don't have it, and you do find it on Google, drop them a note and ask that they post that link.

The price for all of this? \$3.00 per month. But not sure if you want to commit? Check to see if there is a club in your community. If so, find the time and place of the next meeting. In most local chapters, there is not charge to sit in on a meeting. No club in your community? Form one.

I'm convinced. I think that this is one great way for the serious instrument pilot to stay plugged into the world of IMC.

Don't just practice until you get right. Practice until you don't get it wrong

Chris Hope has taught fledgling and experienced pilots for more nearly 40 years, mostly in the Kansas City area. Chris holds flight instructor certificates for single engine land and sea airplanes and multi-engine land planes, as well as for instrument training. He holds ground instructor certificates for advanced and instrument training. Chris is an FAA Gold Seal Instructor and a Master Certified Flight Instructor. Chris serves as a member of the FAAS Team in the Kansas City area. His website is www.ChrisHopeFAAFlightInstructor.com